Mark Lilla. Credit: Nathan Dvir

Mark Lilla Wants to Wean U.S. Liberals Off Identity Politics

What the Democrats need to do to fill the ideological void created under Trump, according to political philosopher Mark Lilla

By **Gadi Taub** | Nov 23, 2017

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Immediately after it became apparent that Donald Trump had been elected president of the United States, the political philosopher Mark Lilla published an op-ed piece in The New York Times titled, "The End of Identity Liberalism." If liberalism aspires to become a

Shortly afterward, it turned out that Trump's campaign director and chief strategist, Steve Bannon, had planned that campaign with the same thoughts in mind. This is how he explained it on the Charlie Rose Show earlier this fall, in a segment cut from the broadcast episode, but which circulated on Facebook:

On the day he joined the Trump campaign Hillary Clinton delivered a speech in which she branded him and his whole camp racists and white supremacists. That evening, Bannon said, he knew they would win. The reason was simple, he explained: America is an immigrant society, and Americans know that they are not racists. If that's what the Democrats have against Trump, he said, then they don't have much.

In Mark Lilla's view, Bannon is a dangerous man. "A vector of deconstruction without a stopping point. A tendency without a destination," was how he described him when we sat in a neighborhood bar in Brooklyn. But when it comes to the price that identity politics has exacted from the American left, Lilla and Bannon agree. The obsession with identity, Lilla wrote in his Times piece, "has produced a generation of liberals and progressives narcissistically unaware of conditions outside their self-defined groups."

In this Sept. 25, 2017 photo, former presidential strategist Steve Bannon speaks at a rally for U.S. Senate hopeful Roy Moore, in Fairhope, Alabama. Credit: AP Photo/Brynn Anderson

They have become indifferent, he added, to the need to offer a common vision to all Americans. "By the time they reach college many assume that diversity discourse exhausts political discourse, and have shockingly little to say about such perennial questions as class, war, the economy and the common good." Almost overnight, the article became the most widely read Times op-ed piece of 2016.

Identity politics advocates may be fond of diversity in identity, but they don't allow any diversity of opinion. The current reigning orthodoxy tried to silence Lilla with an ugly wave of anger, which quickly reached the most extreme terms: "Racist!" they said.

That was also the term bandied about by a few demonstrators who showed up outside an event at which Lilla was scheduled to speak at Rutgers University, in New Jersey, last month. I accompanied him there. There was a touch of nostalgia to our trip: We'd met there before, a decade and a half ago.

Whatever one may think of Lilla's views, "racism" is probably the least appropriate term to describe them. But the furor that his op-ed unleashed persuaded him that his criticism was much needed. He sat down to elaborate upon it in a short book. "The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics" (Harper, 160 pages), was published last August. Besides analyzing how American liberals have lost both their appeal and their political power, it proposes a way to make liberalism relevant again. Because in Lilla's view, the only way to help the very people identity politics purports to speak for – as well as many others – is by abandoning identity politics.

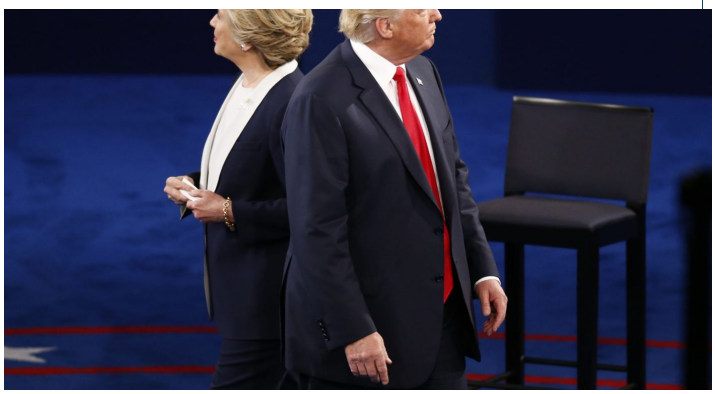
I won't pretend that I'm objective about the book or about its author. Not only do I share his opinions on many of these subjects, I've been a close friend of Mark's for the past two decades. And if that is not enough to make one partial, then I should mention that the book is also dedicated to me (along with his wife and daughter). That honor befell me – and I say this without the slightest irony: I was deeply moved – because, as Mark notes in his acknowledgments, I've been urging him for years to write about America.

The Old World and the New

Lilla, who's now at the eye of the tempest over his book, is a singular figure on the contemporary American intellectual scene. His colleagues haven't always known how to classify him. Nor has Lilla helped them in this endeavor. His essays in The New York Review of Books created the impression that the writer is a detached European intellectual who had been washed, by a cruel twist of fate, onto the shores of the New World, where he was left under the harsh, too-bright light of a shallow, rooted culture.

It's always morning in America, and there's the rub: Morning dispels shadows, hues and nuances, and when you don't see these, you may not realize what dangers lurk under philosophical veils. Lilla's interest lay exactly in attending to such dangers, to which American optimism has developed little immunity.

Well versed in Europe's languages and cultures, he wrote his NYRB essays with erudition and a subtly ironic tone. They dealt primarily with the Old World, to which many Americans still look with provincial envy: It is there that the "true" culture resides. And Lilla looked like its representative – if not authentic, at least authoritative.



Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump on stage during the second U.S. presidential debate at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, Oct. 9, 2016. Credit: Andrew Harrer/Bloomberg

Lilla never denied being an American, of course. But nothing in the tone or content of his writing betrayed the fact that the writer came from a working class, Catholic Detroit family, with Polish roots. Mark once remarked – only half humorously, I think – that all his articles in that prestigious publication can be summed up in three words: Curb your enthusiasm. There is an American tendency to be swept away all too easily by European intellectual fashions, and Lilla sought to balance it with counterweights of tradition, context and erudition. The NYRB essays, as well as his books, addressed a wide range of philosophical, literary and cultural controversies, diverse political issues and different intellectual circles: German existentialists, French post-structuralists, flamboyant Russian exiles, moderate English liberals, mystical Jewish theologians, Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment figures. Most received the same slightly detached treatment.

I therefore expected, back then at the end of the previous millennium, to meet the distinguished, detached person I imagined from the tone of the essays, when I showed up without an invitation during Prof. Lilla's office hours at NYU. I came in order to ask his permission to translate a particularly sarcastic essay of his, "The Politics of Jacques Derrida," for a journal that I co-edited at the time with Nissim Calderon. I was then a doctoral student in the history of the United States at Rutgers.

That first meeting with Mark did not entirely dissipate the impression that his articles conjured. He had round spectacles in the interwar European style, a serious expression, and a small-book packed office furnished with an orderly archive with many little drawers. He made no effort to create the illusion of instant friendliness – so much so that in the American context, at the time it seemed to me positively defiant. It made me feel I should talk to the point and not waste this man's time. I was therefore surprised by his intense curiosity. He wanted to know more about our journal. Mostly he was intrigued by the controversy over post-Zionism that then raged among Israel's intellectuals.

In Lilla's view, the only way to help the very people identity politics purports to speak for – as well as many others – is by abandoning identity politics.

To my surprise, he asked me to write him something short about the subject for a small, elegant publication called "Correspondence,"

We had a few more polite exchanges, and some interesting conversations, none of which prepared me for the sudden departure from American social protocol: He called me to say he was getting divorced. Would I join him on a trip to IKEA to help him carry stuff to his new apartment. That was so un-American that it was almost – well – Israeli. In the individualistic, Protestant culture of the United States, particularly in the North, there are huge distances between individuals, there is a code of self-reliance, and there is a deep respect for privacy. This is what makes Israelis who move to America breathe with relief at first, then pine for Israel later.

So it happened that we spent long hours lugging Billy bookshelves, as they're called in the IKEA catalog – an endless number of these heavy chipboard units – to the apartment Mark had moved to in the Stuyvesant Town neighborhood of Manhattan, east of First Avenue. We then spent many more hours assembling them. We had time to talk about many things ranging from the personal to the political, including the American thinkers that my doctoral thesis dealt with, in whom no one around me, other than my supervisor, took a genuine interest: from Charles Sanders Peirce down through John Dewey and Richard Rorty.

Mark had interesting things to say about America, a domain his writing had never systematically dealt with. This was the first time, I think, that I wondered aloud why he never wrote about his own country.

In this new book, he finally does. And there is nothing in it of his "curb your enthusiasm" tone. It's brimming with urgency, passion, open empathy, anger and a call to action. We argued about that tone after I'd read a draft of the book – I thought it wasn't scathing enough in its critique of the "identity" crowd. Not like his articles and his previous books. Mark thought that this new tone was important now. "I want to get those guys into rehab, not drive them away," he told me.

Pastiche vision

Another prominent figure who has grasped the damage done by identity politics is Bernie Sanders. For him, the question was and remains class-based. Yes. Again: "It's the economy, stupid." That's what's worrying working Americans. Many of these people ultimately voted for Trump. They did so not because Barack Obama is black and they are racists, but because they felt that Obama left them behind. The president who extricated Wall Street from the collapse of the real estate bubble at the start of his term (as, indeed, he should have), is also the president who allowed the Wall Street barons to give themselves fat bonuses, instead of sending them to jail. The approximately nine million people who lost their homes were unable to forgive him for that, even if they acquired health insurance. Presidents look after millionaires, and afterward become millionaires themselves. And President Obama, black or not black, didn't look to them like the representative of the oppressed. He looked like a movie star.

Former president Barack Obama speaks during a rally for New Jersey Democratic Gubernatorial candidate Jim Murphy in Newark, New Jersey, U.S. October 19, 2017. Credit: REUTERS/Mark Makela

Every movie star who had his photo taken with Hillary Clinton highlighted the party's elitist image. Every donation from Wall Street heightened the fury. And the whole politically correct discourse that takes care to avoid "hetero-normative" phrases, that dances cautiously around the connection between radical Islam and terrorism, and that is preoccupied with finding the right bathroom to fit each person's conception of gender identity, does not seem to most Americans like a genuine concern with the actual margins of society. It looks like an elite's obsession with its own self-image. Which, of course, it is. Against this background, populism becomes attractive. Sen. Sanders on one side, Trump on the other. And sometimes people who voted for Sanders in the Democratic primaries afterward leapfrogged to the other extremity and voted Trump.

Lilla: "But it's not only anti-elitism. Sanders understood a basic thing that his party did not: that the public yearns for a unifying message. His problem, like most progressives in America today, is that their economic ideas haven't changed since the 1970s."

What has to change in their outlook, and what sort of economic policy should they propose?

"Before we even get to policies, progressives need to recognize some basic facts: our dependence on world markets in a globalized age – hence the need for trade treaties; the central role of finance in those markets, which means we need bankers; and the permanent disappearance of manufacturing jobs, which means retraining, or a huge population on the dole. They need to relearn the inescapability of basic math: 2+2=4. No amount of organizing or revival of unions is going to change that. A no-bullshit progressivism would recognize those facts as facts – and then start thinking about responses."

Why do you think that Sanders voters in the primaries switched to Trump in the elections?

"That was an anti-institutional vote."

That the Democratic Party is not offering a unifying vision, that it's "hooked" on identity politics, is evident from its website, Lilla says. Instead of a unifying message, you have balkanization. Because that's what identity politics does – obviates any possibility of forming coalitions. The party's homepage contains 17 different messages for 17 identity groups. Click on your group and get the message aimed at you and your friends. But "those who play the identity game in America," Lilla says, "had better not leave anyone

nationalist racist to ask yourself if the Democratic Party isn't supposed to appeal to whites, too.

'Sanders understood a basic thing that his party did not: That the public yearns for a unifying message.'

But the solution, according to Lilla, is not to add "whites" or "Baptists" to the list of groups; the solution is to shake off the obsession with difference and look for a unifying vision.

The last time America had such a unifying vision, Lilla writes in the book, it came from the right wing. The power of that vision has now faded, as demonstrated by Trump's rise. What passed for the Republican Party's "vision" turned out to be a flimsy scaffolding that collapsed with barely a sound. Trump, according to Lilla, is not only a cause, but also a symptom: He's a force of destruction, incapable of construction. He offers a pastiche of a vision, not a vision. There is no content behind his empty slogan about making America great again.

The implication is that there is an ideological void now. And therefore, Lilla believes, there is an opportunity. Liberals can fill that void if they do two things. First, they must propose a unifying vision, not a divisive one. They need to go back and teach themselves to say "we" as in the Constitution's "We the people" – "we" in the all-inclusive, comprehensive civil sense. And second, they must leave the politics of protest and movement and return to the politics of parties and institutions.

Reagan's apparatchiks

According to Lilla, America had two great unifying visions in the 20th century. He calls them "dispensations," and accords them, deliberately, a quasi-religious aura. The first dispensation, he writes, which was shaped by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "pictured an America where citizens were involved in a collective enterprise to guard one another against risk, hardship, and the denial of fundamental rights. Its watchwords were solidarity, opportunity, and public duty." That dispensation, or paradigm, had its origin in the 1930s New Deal, but also formed the basis for the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. It lost its force in the 1970s, but was so powerful that it compelled the rival Republican Party to work within it too. Even the Nixon administration spoke in its language and accepted its basic vision.

Franklin D. Roosevelt. Credit: AP

Then, when the Roosevelt Dispensation lost its force, Reagan offered a new one. Like its predecessor, it, too, was powerful enough to impose the terms of the debate on Democratic administrations. "The Reagan Dispensation," Lilla writes, "pictured a more individualistic America where families and small communities and businesses would flourish once freed from the shackles of the state. Its watchwords were self-reliance and minimal government." Contrary to the Roosevelt Dispensation, however, Reagan's was "anti-political."

According to Lilla, identity politics is a capitulation of the left to the right's conceptual universe. "The politics of identity is nothing new, certainly on the American right," he observes in the book. A long history of separation based on identity also underlay slavery and segregation, of course. "What was astonishing during the Reagan Dispensation was the development of a left-wing version of it [among liberals] that became the de facto creed of two generations" of the left-wing intelligentsia. This was not a historical accident. For the fascination, and then obsession, with identity did not challenge the fundamental principle of Reaganism." All its talk about groups notwithstanding, identity politics is an expansion, not a contraction of the individualist thrust.

This is an important perception, because there is something misleading about the politics of identity. It looks like an insistence on "we" in opposition to an insistence on "I," but in practice, its beating heart is that of radical individualism. This is the reason why within every group there will be subgroups or individuals who will say that, for instance, feminism is actually white or straight, or that black feminism still excludes lesbians, or that lesbian feminism excludes Hispanic or obese women. Or that the letters "LGBT" exclude queers, asexuals and a seemingly endless number of others, each of whom believes that none of those letters describes their private case with sufficient precision. Because the principle behind all this is the prohibition on every attempt to define "me" from the outside, and so every attempt to find what two individuals have in common denies their singular self-definition.

It follows that there are not, and cannot be, stable coalitions in these circles. Within a short time they start to accuse one another of oppression. And as the impulse here is ultimately an individualistic one, it's also clear why there was no genuine alternative to Reaganism here.

with the hippies and the “radicals,” if not Students for a Democratic Society.

Ronald Reagan. Credit: AP

Lilla: “It happened on both sides in the 1970s, and bore fruit in the 1980s. The New Left had many strands; some were still stuck with Marxism.”

While the 1960s were exploding all around, Mark Lilla was a junior-high school student in Detroit. He belonged to a group of Catholic “Jesus freaks,” fashioned himself a T-shirt with the inscription “Property of Jesus” and wore a large leather cross around his neck. He sang Gospel music, accompanying himself on the guitar. He held passionate arguments with his classmates and tried to make them see the religious light.

Lilla’s religiosity gradually waned as he matured and started college at Wayne State University. Now he saw himself as a left-winger in the old sense of the word. He joined a group that advocated radical economic politics. From there he went on to the University of Michigan to finish his B.A., on the way to Harvard.

To get from Wayne State to Harvard is no easy task for a boy whose parents had no money. In the U.S., the high school you attended generally determines the level of the college that will accept you, and this, in turn, will determine your economic future. But this particular boy held three jobs in order to finance his studies at the University of Michigan, where he would rub shoulders with the upper middle class. He drove a garbage truck. He was a stockkeeper for stores. He gave private guitar lessons. And he slept very little.

It was only natural that the young Lilla didn’t like the idea of “tanned middle class students” lecturing him on the working class. Nor was he pleased to hear professors who purported to speak in the name of the lower classes “talk condescendingly about the actual beliefs and opinions of actual working class people.” After all, he knew these people. His father was an assembly-line worker and then a draftsman in the Detroit automotive industry. His mother was a nurse.

Mark thus found himself drawn to the neoconservatives, who seemed to him then to be the “responsible adults” on the scene. They did not advocate utopian dreams, but rather articulated realistic, concrete improvements, based on an awareness of the

He started to read their periodicals, and then, when his scholarly achievements landed him in Harvard, also to write in them. Armed with a master's in public policy from the John F. Kennedy School of Government, he was appointed editor of the journal The Public Interest, before returning to Harvard to pursue his doctorate in public policy with sociologist Daniel Bell. It was Bell who told him about the three good reasons to prefer academia to journalism: June, July and August.

And so Dr. Lilla turned to teaching and writing about what would occupy him most of all: political philosophy. He taught at NYU and then at the University of Chicago. Now he has an independent appointment at Columbia University, in New York. During all those years, the American intelligentsia would get to know him mostly through his NYRB essays. Now, after the new book, they and he are getting reacquainted.

The whole politically correct discourse does not seem to most Americans like a genuine concern with the actual margins of society.

Halfhearted disruption

Besides a unifying vision, Lilla would like to see the energy that the election of Trump released directed into institutional politics. "In America," he told the students who came to hear him at Rutgers last month, "the only way to protect the weak is by holding political power. Institutional power. On all levels of the federal government." As I mentioned, I went with Mark to that event, which was sponsored by the left-wing online magazine Spiked. The magazine has launched a series of events titled "Unsafe Spaces" with the aim of liberating the discourse from the tyranny of political correctness.

The previous time we'd met at Rutgers was when Mark served as a member of my doctoral dissertation committee. As the only representative of a different university, he was given the opportunity to ask the first question. I still remember it. "Look," he said, with a stone-dead poker face, "I'm not sure I understand what this dissertation is about." That's one of the reasons we've gotten along so well together for so long, I suppose; Americans don't do things like that. Israelis do. I suspect that I found it less funny at the time, though.

At the recent Rutgers event, "Identity Politics: The New Racialism on Campus," Lilla, cast in the role of elder statesman, spoke last. Also on the panel were Kmele Foster, a black advocate of prison reform, and Sarah Haider, a human rights activist, atheist and cofounder of Ex-Muslims of North America, an organization that helps people who leave Islam overcome pressures from their community of origin. Their ethnic affiliation and skin color naturally played a part in the by now ritualized drama that would be played out here. Also on the panel was Bryan Stascavage, who has dared to give advice to Black Lives Matter, even though he's white, and of course immediately became an enemy in the eyes of that organization. Stascavage refused to retract his criticism despite the attacks. He's seen harsher things; he was an army intelligence officer in Iraq.

Mark Lilla, right, and Gadi Taub. Credit: Nathan Dvir

If the vehemence of the PC thought police on the West Coast, at Berkeley, was the tragedy version, then here at Rutgers, on the East Coast, history repeated itself as comedy, thought it was more pathetic than funny. Outside the hall were four-and-a-half ideologically confused identity scramblers, along with a young adjunct, serious and frozen-faced, projecting the pain of an East European dissident from the communist period. He held a small sign denouncing the event. With a little effort, one could imagine him standing like that, erect and tense, in the snow outside the Kremlin. But the Kremlin isn't here; this was a student center and it was a pleasant fall evening in New Jersey.

The demonstrators maintained that this was a "racist" event and that freedom of speech is not intended to protect racists. I tried to talk to a lesbian wearing a knitted, rainbow-hued skullcap, for whom a rainbow flag served as a kind of Superwoman cape. She pointed me to the leader of the group, a young student who vehemently flaunted the fact that he comes from a family of illegal migrants from South America. He explained to me that Lilla should be banished to the right, where he belongs. As far as the student was concerned, there's no difference between Mark Lilla and Donald Trump, and he will stand firm against both of them. Obviously, another coalition-builder from the school of politics as performance and therapy.

Inside the hall, people from Black Lives Matter milled around. It didn't take a genius to figure out what they were planning.

First to speak on the panel was Foster, who claimed that Black Lives supporters aren't dealing with the real and urgent problems facing the black community, but are, rather, diverting attention to statistically insignificant problems. No one here, he said, thinks that black lives do not matter. The Black Lives Matter activists must have felt that the time wasn't ripe, or maybe they thought a black speaker did not provide the right backdrop for disruption.

Foster was followed by Haider. When Ex-Muslims of North America was established, she said, she thought it would come under attack largely from conservative Muslims. To her surprise, the fiercest condemnations came from the extreme left, which, again to her surprise, sought to silence her criticism of Islam's attitude toward women, for example. You guessed it: They branded her an "Islamophobe."

Mark began his remarks by saying that he is less interested in freedom of speech and more in the power of politics. For the past 30 years, he said, American politics have been dominated by an ever-

civil rights movement. They are rolling back the achievements of feminism, and the rights of same-sex couples. And none of this is decided at the federal level of the presidency. It is happening at the state and city levels. The Republicans have taken control of two-thirds of the state legislatures and two-thirds of the governorships. That's where the real battles are being fought. Battles over implementation of laws, over public education, over access to abortion, over the ability to exercise the right to vote. Anyone who wants to help weak minority groups has to take the fight to these places, to secure power at the local level.

And what are the identity politics advocates offering us? Not a struggle for political power, but protest politics. Not solidarity, but insularity of ever-smaller groups in their separate caves. More and more of a focus on more and more differences. And they're doing it here, in the universities, where it is easy. Elsewhere, Lilla has said he's ready to pay the travel expenses for anyone who will go "there" – to the red states, to build a political force that will serve the Democratic Party.

The Black Lives Matter people decided that now was the time. As had apparently been agreed in advance, a lean young black man got up and stood in the aisle to protest. You're ignoring the racial oppression, he said. The moderator asked him to wait for the question-and-answer period. But that's clearly not what he and his friends came to do.

The moderator then took a different approach, and asked for the young man to be given a microphone. A moment of confusion, followed by a flash of clarity. His instinct was to push away the hand offering him the microphone. Of course! How could he go on feeling like an oppressed opposition if he used the organizer's mic? The illusion of a battle was over procedure, not content. The enemy was not in this room, and these were theatrics, not politics.

The evening wore on lamely, with the Black Lives group continuing to crash through a door that kept opening up for them. It was a dialogue of the deaf. The panelists talked about social problems, the disrupters insisted on the validity of the way their feelings. Later, their representative told the Rutgers local paper, The Daily Targum, that the panelists "literally didn't answer any questions that we asked." They were "just answering things based on statistics." There didn't seem to be even a trace of irony in the comment.

Lilla, it seems, is right to identify all this as apolitical. And he's perhaps not being harsh enough when he says that the means of such groups don't serve their goals. Because the identity-politics

to talk about the predicament of Muslim women or the problems of single parent households in poor black neighborhoods, how will you ever get around to fixing them? You won't. Because the people of Black Lives Matter are not really dealing with social problems. They are dealing in guilt feelings, which they know how to elicit from those already on their side. And like all forms of PC, they are fixing the mirror, not the face. And the mirror then conceals the problems of the face. The price, of course, is the dismantlement of coalitions.

'Time for rehab'

On a national scale, the shift to identity politics dismantled the New Deal coalition of minorities, in particular the alliance between Jews and blacks. We can pinpoint the time and the place. The year was 1966. The left version of identity politics had just been born under its first name: Black Power. That was the year in which Stokely Carmichael took control of SNCC, the black students' organization. He immediately expelled all the whites from it. Many of them were Jews. Many others within the civil rights movement adopted a paradigm that we now identify as postcolonial, and started calling Zionism "racist." To the chagrin of Jewish progressive, the rift just kept growing.

The tendency to dismantle alliances is not a regrettable byproduct of identity politics. It is its essence. If anyone needs a reminder of this, the controversy last spring over Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till at the Whitney Museum provided it. Shutz painted Till, who was lynched in Mississippi in the summer of 1955. This was most obviously an expression of sympathy for the victims of the black struggle for equality. But then came black artist Hannah Black and demanded the removal of the painting. A white artist, she said, has no right to appropriate black suffering in order to promote herself.

Your book seems to assume that that advocates of identity politics are just using the wrong means for the right ends

Lilla: "The right end is helping the worst off, and identity politics can't do that. We need to channel that energy into work that will."

On the assumption that liberals are still interested in these goals, and haven't become completely hooked on what you call "narcissism."

"This is the time for rehab. And I think the Trump victory energized a lot of liberals and brought them back to real politics. That's why I think it's an opportunity."

Mark Lilla's book could become a harbinger of the awakening of the American intelligentsia from almost half a century of narcissism. Or it might remain a lone voice in the wilderness. Perhaps years will pass before the postmodern decay that eats at the foundations of academia start receding, and the work of rehabilitation will begin. In the meantime, there's little to take heart from. The majority of the educated classes in the United States are busy cursing Trump and his voters, and seem little interested in asking themselves how they contributed to the defeat of their own party. In which case they will not necessarily want to hear about the the soul-searching that Lilla is suggesting.

But a book is a book. You never know where it will pop up or who will read it. It's getting much attention. While I was working on this article, Mark sent a group of friends a screenshot of a picture from

college crowd, but the king of art rock has my back."

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Gadi Taub
Haaretz Contributor

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