

CULTURE AND POLITICS

Liberties



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MARK LILLA

On Indifference

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*What blurt is this about virtue and about vice?
Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me, I stand indifferent,
My gait is no fault-finder's or rejecter's gait,
I moisten the roots of all that has grown.*

WALT WHITMAN

The Olympian gods are not our friends. Zeus would have destroyed us long ago had Prometheus not brought fire and other useful things down to us. Prometheus was not being benevolent, though. He was angry at Zeus for having locked away the Titans and then for turning on him after Prometheus

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helped secure his rule. We humans were just pawns in their game. The myths teach that we are here on sufferance, and that the best fate is to be ignored by these poor excuses for divinities. On their indifference depends our happiness. Fortunately we have only minimal duties towards them, so once the ashes from the sacrifices are swept away, the libations mopped up, the festival garlands recycled, we are free to set sail.

The Biblical God requires more attention. Though he is sometimes petulant, his providential hand is always at work for those who choose to be chosen. Providence comes at a price, though. We are obliged to fear the Lord, to obey his commandments, and to internalize the moral code he has blessed us with. For purists, this can mean that virtually every hour of every day is regulated. But that is not how the Bible's protagonists seem to live. They love, they fight, they rule kingdoms, they play the lyre, and only when they lust after a subject's wife and arrange for his death in battle does God stop the music and call them to account. And repentance done, the band strikes up again. The covenant limits human freedom, but it also self-limits God's. Our to-do list is not infinite. Once we have fulfilled our duties, we are left to explore the world. *We good here? Yeah, we're good.*

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Tut, tut child! Everything's got a moral, if only you can find it.

QUEEN OF HEARTS, *ALICE IN WONDERLAND*

But as a Christian my work is never done. I must have the vague *imitatio Christi* ideal before my eyes at all times and must try to answer the riddle, what would Jesus do?, in every situation — and bear the guilt of possibly getting the answer wrong. Kierkegaard was not exaggerating when he said that the task of

On Indifference

becoming a Christian is endless. It can be brutal, too. Jesus told his disciples they must be ready at any moment to drop everything if the call comes, adding, *if any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.*

Saint Paul's God has boundary issues. More busybody than Pied Piper, he is always looking into our hearts, parsing our intentions, and demanding we love him more than we love ourselves. That master of metaphor Augustine found a powerful one to describe the new regime: *Two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly city was created by self-love reaching the point of contempt for God, the Heavenly City by the love of God carried as far as contempt of self.* He hastened to add that the earthly city plays a necessary role in mortal life, offering peace and comfort in the best of times. But over the millennia — such is the power of metaphor over reason — zealots hedging their bets have concluded that if we are to err, it is better to fall into self-loathing than discover any trace of pride within. A moral scan will always turn up something. And so they lock themselves into panopticons where they serve as their own wardens and where nothing is a matter of spiritual indifference.

Subsequent Christian theologians raised doubts about this rigorist picture of the Christian moral life. In the Middle Ages they debated whether there might be such things as “indifferent acts,” that is, acts that have no moral or spiritual significance. Scratching one's beard was a common example used by the laxists. Aquinas conceded the point concerning beards, but otherwise declared that if an action at all involves rational deliberation it cannot be indifferent, since reason is always directed towards ends, which can only be good or evil. Q.E.D. And so the class of genuinely indifferent acts was left

quite small in official Catholic teaching. That sat just fine with a monastic and conventual elite already devoting their lives to self-abnegating spiritual exercises, accompanied by tormenting doubts about whether such exercises were prideful. But they were a class apart. Ordinary clerical functionaries led more lenient lives, which is how we got cardinals with concubines and with Titian portraits of themselves hanging over the fireplace. Vigilance was not their vocation.

In the Protestant view, that was precisely the problem. Protestantism, and Calvinism in particular, brought back moral rigorism and then democratized it. Now every burgher was expected to frisk himself while meditating on the terrifying mystery of predestination. The anxiety only increased when Protestants faced the choice among different and hostile denominations. Was there only one true church? Or were certain dogmatic disputes among denominations matters of indifference to God? Combatants in the Wars of Religion said no: true Christians must not only walk the right walk, they must talk the right talk. But, over time, as the denominations proliferated like tadpoles in a pond, and the doctrinal differences among them became more abstruse, the rigorist line became more difficult to maintain. Perhaps the Lord's house has many mansions after all.

That thought is exactly what Catholic critics of the Reformation, worried about. If we concede that there are many Christian paths to salvation, people will ask whether there are also non-Christian religious paths. If we concede that there are, they will then ask whether there are decent and admirable non-religious paths to moral perfection. And if we concede that there are — here is the crucial leap — they will be tempted to ask whether there might also be decent and admirable ways of life that do not revolve around moral

perfection. The danger would not be that people would abandon morality altogether; no self-declared anti-moralist, not even Nietzsche, has ever renounced the words *must* and *ought*. It would be that they would start considering morality to be just one dimension of life among others, each deserving its due. It would mean the end of morality's claim to be the final arbiter of what constitutes a life well lived.

The gradient on this slope of questioning is steep. Montaigne slid to the bottom of it while the Wars of Religion were still raging and has been dragging unsuspecting readers along with him ever since. He did not openly state the case against the imperialism of conscience; a *bon vivant*, he was in no rush to become a *bon mourant*. Instead he wrote seemingly lighthearted essays full of anecdotes that subtly held up the rigorist life to ridicule or revulsion, implying that there must be a better way to live, without specifying exactly what that might be. He only pointed to himself as a genial, indeed irresistible, exemplar of tolerant, urbane contentment.

Pascal, Montaigne's greatest reader, immediately discerned the threat that the *Essays* posed to the Christian moral edifice: Montaigne inspires indifference about salvation, without fear and without repentance. Atheism is refutable, but indifference is not. The scholastic debate over indifferent acts had presumed a desire to get our moral houses in order. The Reformation and Counter-Reformation debates over justification presumed a desire to get our theological houses in order. Montaigne's indifferentism, as it came to be called, made all well-ordered houses look menacing or faintly ridiculous. That is why indifferentism was denounced along with liberalism as modern "pests" by Pope Pius IX in his Syllabus of Errors of 1864. He understood that there is nothing more devastating to dogma than a shrug of the shoulders.

It is nonsense and an antiquated notion that the many can do wrong. What the many do is God's will. Before this wisdom all people have had to this day bowed down — kings, emperors, and excellencies. Up to now all our cattle have received encouragement through this wisdom. So God is damned well going to have to learn how to bow down too.

KIERKEGAARD

Americans' relation to democracy has never been an indifferent one — or a reasoned one. For us it is a matter of dogmatic faith, and therefore a matter of the passions. *We hold these truths to be self-evident*: has ever a more debatable and consequential assertion been made since the Sermon on the Mount? But for Americans it is not a thesis one might subject to examination and emendation; even American atheists skip over the *endowed by their Creator* bit in reverent silence. We are in the thrall of a foundation myth as solid and imposing as an ancient temple, which we take turns purifying like so many vestals. We freely discuss how the *mysterium tremendum* should be interpreted and which rituals it imposes on us. But the oracle has spoken and is taking no further questions.

Which is largely a good thing. Not long ago there was breezy talk of a world-historical transition to democracy, as if that were the easiest and most natural thing in the world to achieve. Establish a democratic *pays légal*, the thinking went, and a democratic *pays réel* will spontaneously sprout up within its boundaries. Today, when temples to cruel local deities are being built all over the globe, we are being reminded just how rare a democratic society is. So let us appreciate Americans' unreasoned, dogmatic attachment to their own. Not everything unreasoned is unwise.

But neither are all good things entirely good. This is what

the dogmatic mind has trouble grasping. If some end — the rule of the saints, say, or the dictatorship of the proletariat — is deemed to be worth pursuing, the dogmatist needs to believe it is the only and perfect good, carrying no inherent disadvantages. Blemishes must be ignored so as not to distract the team. But once problems become impossible to ignore, as inevitably they will be, they must be explained. And so they will be attributed either to alien, retrograde forces that have infiltrated paradise, or to insufficient zeal among believers in pursuing the good. The dogmatic mind is haunted by two specters: the different and the indifferent.

Americans' dogmatism about democracy strengthens their attachment to it, but it weakens their understanding of it. The hardest thing for us is to establish enough intellectual distance from modern democracy to see it in historical perspective. (While virtually every American university has courses on "democratic values," I am unaware of any that offers one on "undemocratic values," despite the fact that almost all societies from the dawn of time to the present have been governed by them.) The Framers had experience with monarchy and had studied the failed republics of the European past. They looked upon democracy as one political form among others, a means to particular ends, with strengths and weakness like any other political arrangement. But once Americans in later generations came to know nothing but democratic life, democracy became the end itself, the *summum bonum* from which all discussion and debate about means must flow. When Americans ask *how can we make our democracy better?* what they are really asking is *how can we make our democracy more democratic?* — a subtle but profound difference.

Our dogmatism shows up in other ways, too. Spend some time abroad and you start to notice that Americans rarely

express mixed feelings about their country as other peoples do about theirs. We oscillate humorlessly between defensive boosterism and self-flagellation, especially the latter over the past half century. Today there is nothing more American than condemning American democracy or declaring ourselves alienated from it. Yet the only charge we can think of leveling against it is that of failing to be democratic enough. No one appreciates the irony except the alert foreign observer with a sense of humor, like the divine Mrs. Trollope. Foreign anti-Americanism is always, at some level, anti-democratic, which is what can make it enlightening, and useful to us. American anti-Americanism is hyper-American and earnest as dust. We find it virtually impossible to get outside ourselves. We breed no Tocquevilles, we must import them.

Other countries claim to revere democracy, and many do. But few think of democracy as a never-ending moral project, a world-historical epic. And none have considered it their divine duty to bring democracy to the unbaptized. The Protestant stamp on the American mind is so deep that collectively we take on the mantle of the Pilgrim Church marching towards a redemption in which all things will be made new. For much of our history the sacred individual task of becoming a more Christian Christian ran parallel to the sacred collective task of becoming a more democratic democracy. Note that I do not say *liberal* democracy. For there is nothing liberal about Americans when they are on the march. Which is why when conscription begins, the indifferent, who for whatever reason do not feel like marching just now or have other destinations in mind, beat a retreat. Some have sought refuge in rural solitude, some in the American metropolis, some in foreign capitals. Anywhere where they might be free of the unremitting imperative to become a better person or a

better American. Anywhere where they could simply become themselves.

The thesis that huge quantities of soap testify to our greater cleanliness need not apply to the moral life, where the more recent principle seems more accurate, that a strong compulsion to wash suggests a dubious state of moral hygiene.

ROBERT MUSIL

A hand goes up in the audience: *But we are no longer a Protestant country! We are a secular one that has gotten over religious conformism. What on earth are you talking about?*

Thank you for that question. In one decisive respect we have indeed moved beyond Protestantism: we no longer believe we are fallen, sinful creatures. The Protestant divine was severe with his flock and occasionally with his country, but he was also severe with himself. He was a busybody because his God was a busybody who put everyone, including the clergy, under divine scrutiny. *There is none righteous, no, not one*, says Saint Paul. What a terrible way to start the day.

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But in other respects we have retained vestiges of our Protestant heritage and even exaggerated them. Hegel foresaw this. Considering the moral and religious psychodynamics of his time, he observed that the Dialectic has a sense of humor: toss Calvin out the front door and Kant sneaks in through the back. No sooner had the empiricism and skepticism of the Enlightenment disenchanted nature, draining it of moral purpose, than German idealism surreptitiously reestablished the principles of Christian morality on abstract philosophical grounds. And no sooner had Kant midwived that rebirth than the moral impulse floated free of his universalist strictures

and became more subjective, less subtle, more excitable, less grounded in ordinary existence. In a word, it became Romantic. The saints are dead; long live the “beautiful souls.”

What is a beautiful soul? For Schiller, who coined the term, it was a person in whom the age-old tension between moral law and human instinct had been overcome. *In a beautiful soul*, he wrote, *individual deeds are not what is moral. Rather, the entire character is...The beautiful soul has no other merit, than that it is.* Schiller imagined individuals who so fully incarnate the moral law that they have no need of moral reasoning and who experience no struggle to surmount the passions. This beautiful soul does not really act morally, it simply behaves instinctively — and such behaving is good. (Ring a bell? *And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.*) A disciple of Kant, Schiller took the moral law to be by definition universal. What he did not anticipate was that the notion of a beautiful soul could inspire a radical impudence in anyone convinced of his or her own inner beauty. Who would not want to be crowned a moral *Roi Soleil*, absolved in advance of guilt, self-doubt, repentance, and expressions of humility? Who would not want to learn that the definition of righteousness is self-righteousness?

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So, in answer to the question, yes, in one sense America is a post-Protestant nation. The uptight Bible-thumping humbug of yore has been shamed off the public square — but only to make room for networks of self-righteous beautiful souls pronouncing sentence from the cathedras of their inner Vaticans. What no one seems to recognize is that they are an atavism, a blast from the past, not a breeze from a progressive future. Like their ancestors, they are prone to schisms and enter civil wars with the giddiness of Knights Templar descending on Palestine. Yet they are bound together by an

unshakeable old belief that when it comes to making the world a better place there are no indifferent acts, no indifferent words, no indifferent thoughts, and no rest for the virtuous. Our beautiful souls are Marrano Christians as radical as old Saint Paul. They just don't know it. Yes, the Dialectic really does have a sense of humor.

"Ah," Miss Gostrey sighed, "the name of the good American is as easily given as taken away! What is it, to begin with, to be one? And what's the extraordinary hurry?"

HENRY JAMES

America is working on itself. It is almost always working on itself because Americans believe that life is a project, for individuals and nations. No other people believes this quite the way we do. There is no Belgian project, no Kenyan project, no Ecuadoran project, no Filipino project, no Canadian project. But there is an American project — or rather a black box for projects that change over time. We are always tearing out the walls of our collective house, adding additions, building decks, jackhammering the driveway and pouring new asphalt. We are seldom still and never quiet. And when we set to work we expect everyone to pitch in. And that means *you*.

Which can put *you* in an awkward position. Let's say you are unhappy with the project of the moment. Or you approve of it but think it should be handled differently. Or you appreciate the way it is handled but don't feel particularly inclined to participate right now. Or you even want to participate but resent being dragooned into it or learning that others are being punished for not joining in. Or say that you simply want to be left alone. In any other country these would be

considered entirely reasonable sentiments. But not in America when it is at work on itself.

The projects of our moment may sound radical, but they are just extensions of the old principles of liberty, equality, and justice. That certainly speaks in their favor. What is new, thanks to our beautiful souls, is that the task of making this a better America has now been conflated with that of making *you* a better person. In the Protestant age, the promotion of Christian virtue ran parallel to the promotion of democracy but usually could be distinguished from it. Bringing you to accept Jesus as your personal savior had nothing necessarily to do with bringing you to accept William Howard Taft as your national savior. The first concerned your person, the second concerned your country.

In the age of the beautiful soul our evangelical passions have survived and been transferred to the national project, personalizing it. Beautiful souls believe that one's politics emanate from an inner moral state, not from a process of reasoning and dialogue with others. Given that assumption, they reasonably conclude that establishing a better politics depends on working an inner transformation on others, or on ostracizing them. And thanks to the wonders of technology, the scanning of other people's souls has never seemed easier.

These wonders have also landed us in a virtual, and global, panopticon. It has no physical presence, it exists solely in our minds. But that is sufficient to maintain a subtle pressure to demonstrate that we are all fully with the newest American projects. In periods of Christian enthusiasm in the past, elites would make ostentatious gestures of faith in order to ward off scrutiny. They would fund a Crusade, commission an altarpiece, make a pilgrimage, join a confraternity, or sponsor a work of theological apologetics. Virtue-signaling

is an old human practice. Today the required gestures are of a political rather than spiritual nature. We have all, individuals and institutions, learned how to make them by adapting how we speak, how we write, how we present ourselves to the world, and — most insidiously — how we present the world to ourselves. By now we hardly notice that we are making such gestures. Yet we certainly notice when the codes are violated, even inadvertently; the reaction is swift and merciless. Such inadvertence, even due to temperament or sensibility, is read as indifference to building a more democratic America, which ranks very high on the new Syllabus of Errors.

It is of vital importance to art that those who are made its messengers should not only keep their message uncorrupted, but should present themselves before their fellow men in the most unquestionable garb.

THE CRAYON (1855)

Aristocracies are aloof and serene. American democracy is needy and anxious. It wants to be loved. It is like a young puppy that can never get enough petting and treats. *Who's a good boy? Who's a very good boy?* And if you repeat this often enough, eventually the dog will lick your face, as if to say, *and you're a good boy too!* The rewards for satisfying this neediness, and the penalties for failing to satisfy it, are powerful incentives to conform in just about every sphere of American life, no more consequentially than in intellectual and artistic matters. Every society, every religion, every form of government offers such incentives. Since ancient times worldly intellectuals and artists have understood that they are never entirely free from the obligation to genuflect

occasionally, and the clever ones learn how to wink subtly at their audiences to signal when they are doing just that. *L'art vaut une messe*. Romanticism in the nineteenth century was the first movement to fuel the fantasy of complete autonomy from society, only to itself become a dogma that all thinkers and artists were expected to profess.

It is one thing, though, to self-consciously genuflect when necessary — and then, just as self-consciously, to stand up when mass is over and return to your workplace. It is quite another to convince yourself that kneeling is standing. Or that you must turn your workplace into a chapel. What Tocqueville meant by the “tyranny of the majority” was exactly this infiltration of public judgment into individual consciousness, changing our perceptions of and assumptions about the world. It is not really “false consciousness,” which is the holding of false beliefs that enhance the power of those who dominate others. Rather it is a kind of group consciousness that morphs and re-morphs arbitrarily like cumulus clouds. False consciousness obscures precise class interests. The tyranny of the majority obscures the interests, feelings, thoughts, and imagination of the self.

What is so striking about the present cultural moment is how many Americans who occupy themselves with ideas and the imagination — writers, editors, scholars, journalists, filmmakers, artists, curators — seem to be suffering from Stockholm Syndrome. Rerouted from their personal destinations toward a more moral and democratic America, they are losing the instinct to set their own course. They no doubt believe in what they are doing; the question is whether they are in touch enough with themselves to feel any healthy tension between their presumed political obligations and whatever other drives and inclinations they might have.

Talk to creative young people today and prepare yourself for the patter celebrating the new collective journey, which they have no trouble linking to their personal journeys, however short those still are. The rhetoric of identity is very useful here because it has both individual-psychological and political meaning, blurring the distinction between self-expression and collective moral progress. That is also why identity-talk has become the *lingua franca* of all grant-making and prize-giving bodies in the United States. The committees are much more comfortable exercising judgment based on someone's physical characteristics and personal story than exercising aesthetic and intellectual judgment based on the work. Little do the well-meaning young people drawn into this game suspect that they are not advancing into a more progressive twenty-first century. They have simply been rerouted back to the nineteenth century, where they must now satisfy a newer, hipper class of Babbits. Or, worse, become their own Babbits, convincing themselves that their creative journeys really are and ought to be part of a collective moral journey.

This is not to say that art has nothing to do with morality. Morality in the broadest sense, the fate of having to choose among conflicting ends and questionable means, is one of art's great subjects, particularly the literary arts. But the art of the novelist is not to render categorical moral judgments on human action — that's the prophet's job. It is to cast them into shadow, to explore all the ruses of moral reasoning. Literature and art are not sustenance for the long march toward national redemption. They have nothing whatsoever to do with "giving voice" or "telling our stories" or "celebrating" anyone's or any group's achievements. That is to confuse art with advertising copy. The contribution of literature and art to morality is indirect. They have the power to remind us of the truth that

we are mysteries to ourselves, as Augustine put it. Literature is not for simpletons. *Billy Budd* was not written for Billy Budds. It was written for grown-ups, or those who would become one. Which is why the status of literature and the other arts has never been terribly secure in the land of *puer aeternus*.

In the American grain it is gregariousness, suspicion of privacy, a therapeutic distaste in the face of personal apartness and self-exile, which are dominant. In the new Eden, God's creatures move in herds.

GEORGE STEINER

For some, art and reflection have always served as a refuge from the world. In America, the world more often serves as a refuge from art and reflection. We are only too happy when the conversation turns from such matters to those thought to be more practical, more pedagogical, more ethically uplifting, or more therapeutic. The history of anti-intellectualism in America is less one of efforts to extinguish the life of the mind than to divert it toward extraneous ends. (See *On the Usefulness of the Humanities for Electrical Engineering*, 3 vols.) Such efforts reflect a perverse sublimation of the *eros* behind all creative activity, redirecting it from the inner life of the creative person toward some activity that can be judged in public by committees. The result, in intellectual and artistic terms, is either propaganda or kitsch. And we are drowning in both.

Censorship in America comes and goes. Self-censorship does too, depending on the public mood at any particular time. The most persistent threat to arts and letters in America is amnesia, the forgetting of just what it is to cultivate an individual vision or point of view in a place where thinking,

writing, and making are judged to be necessarily directed toward some external end. The barriers to becoming an individual in individualistic America should never be underestimated. Tocqueville's deepest insight was into the anxieties of democratic life brought on by the promise and reality of autonomy. Freedom is an abyss; the urge to turn from it is strong. The tyranny of the majority is less a violent imposition than a psychologically comprehensible form of voluntary servitude.

In such an environment, maintaining a state of inner indifference is an achievement. Indifference is not apathy. Not at all. It is the fruit of an instinct *to moisten the roots of all that has grown*, as Whitman put it, and experience one's self and the world intensely without filters, without having to consider what ends are being served beyond that experience. It is an instinct to hit the mute button, to block out whatever claims are being made on one's attention and concern, confident that heaven can wait. It is an instinct for privacy, far from the prying eyes and wagging tongues of beautiful gods and beautiful souls. It is a liberal instinct, not a democratic one.

Liberalism, Judith Shklar once wrote, is monogamously, faithfully, and permanently married to democracy — but it is a marriage of convenience. That is exactly right. The liberal indifference of Montaigne was a declaration of independence from the religious zealots of his time. But zealotry is zealotry, and democracy has its own zealots. We may look more kindly on their aims but they are no less a potential threat to inner freedom than our homegrown messiahs are. The indifferent appreciate democracy to the extent that it guarantees that freedom; they distrust and resist it the moment they are invited down to the panopticon for a little chat. They are not anti-democratic or anti-justice or reactionary. They

understand that a liberal democracy requires solidarity and sacrifice, and reforms, sometimes radical ones. They wish to be good citizens but feel no obligation to cast down their nets and join the redemptive pilgrimage. Their kingdom is not of this continent.

It is a paradox of our time that the more Americans learn to tolerate difference, the less they are able to tolerate indifference. But it is precisely the right to indifference that we must assert now. The right to choose one's own battles, to find one's own balance between the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. The right to resist any creeping *Gleichhaltung* that would bring a thinker's thoughts or a writer's words or an artist's or filmmaker's work into alignment with a catechism. Dr. Bowdler be damned.

America is working on itself. Let it work, and may some good come of it. But the indifferent will politely decline the invitation to shake pom-poms on the sidelines or join a Battle for The American Soul just now. Why now? Because the illiberal passions of the moment threaten their autonomy and their self-cultivation, and have formed a generation that fails to see the value of those possessions. That is the saddest part. Perhaps a later one will again find it inspiring to learn what the early modernist writers and artists who fled the country believed: that America's claim on us is never greater than our claim on ourselves. That democracy is not everything. That morality is not everything. That nothing is everything.



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