

# Liberals' woes run deep, but the way out is murky

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By Arlie Russell Hochschild

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*Arlie Russell Hochschild's latest book is "Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right," a finalist for the National Book Award.*

The country confronts an extraordinary challenge from the right. President Trump's budget proposes to cut funding for the Environmental Protection Agency by 31 percent, the Department of Education by 13.5 percent and the State Department by 30 percent, while boosting the military by 10 percent. Former adviser Stephen Bannon, a hero of the alt-right (a small, far-right movement that seeks a whites-only state), had whispered in the presidential ear about dismantling the "administrative state," and a White House rhetorical campaign continues to delegitimize an independent judiciary and press. But are liberals in any shape to offer a compelling alternative vision? Can the myriad groups under the Democratic tent even work together? These questions have driven Mark Lilla to write his latest book, "The Once and Future Liberal."

A professor of humanities at Columbia, and the author of five books on political philosophy including "The Shipwrecked Mind: On Political Reaction," Lilla in his new book issues an important, passionate and highly critical wake-up call to liberals who, he believes, are stuck in the mud. In its early stages, his argument is illuminating but then veers seriously off course before ending up focusing on the right goal. First, he contends, the Democrats have been whipped bigly, as Trump might say, at every level of electoral politics. Second, Lilla believes that liberals haven't learned from their failure to appeal to voters. Third, they now have a window of opportunity. But, fourth, though liberals believe they are seizing the moment, they are not, because they are not focusing on elections. "If the steady advance of a radicalized Republican Party, over many years and in every branch and at every level of government, should teach liberals anything," Lilla writes, "it is the absolute priority of winning elections today."

Resistance isn't enough, Lilla says. Liberals need to join in support of a common set of ideals and policies. Lilla compares the [Republican Party's website](#) — which features "Principles of American Renewal" — with that of the [Democratic Party](#), one of whose topic areas is "People." In that category are women; Hispanics; the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community; the Jewish community, Native Americans — in all, 17 separate groups, each with a unique message. Republicans reach out, make coalitions, focus on electoral office, and that's proved successful, Lilla says. If "we want to protect black motorists from police abuse, or gay and lesbian couples from harassment on the street," Lilla writes, "we need state attorneys general willing to prosecute such cases, and state judges willing to enforce the law. And the only way to make sure we get them is to elect liberal Democratic governors and state legislators who will make the appointments." So far, so good.

Lilla then describes liberalism's double-edged legacy from the New Left of the 1960s. As he puts it, the left "spawned identity-based social movements — for affirmative action and diversity, feminism, gay liberation — that have made this country a more tolerant, more just and more inclusive place than it was fifty years ago." But it also unwittingly "shifted the focus of American liberalism . . . from commonality to difference." He adds, all too briefly, that what's missing is a cogent analysis of the painful class split in America that was abundantly revealed in our recent election. Again, so far, so good.

Then Lilla wades into stormy waters. Identity politics has launched liberals into a "victimhood Olympics," he asserts. Sure, I'd say, we have some of that. But, he concludes, "given the Republicans' rage for destruction, [winning elections] is the *only* way to guarantee that newly won protections for African-Americans, other minorities, women and gay Americans remain in place. Workshops and university seminars will not do it. Online mobilizing and flash mobs will not do it. Protesting, acting up and acting out will not do it. The age of movement politics is over, at least for now. We need no more marchers. We need more mayors. And governors, and state legislators, and members of Congress." Here I say, wait a minute. Whoa!

What Lilla isn't seeing is that we come to electoral politics in many different ways. Some people come to it through a desire for public service, bypassing social movements altogether. Others join social movements, get stuck in identity silos and ignore elections. This book is for them. But many others — like myself — were drawn to politics by participating in social movements. When I was in high school, politics seemed very much a male realm. It was through feminism that I learned that I, too, had a voice, could join the conversation, advocate, petition, vote. Again, it was as a civil rights worker in the South that I got a frightening look at the link between race and electoral politics.

We need social movements, and we need to move outward from them. I'm reminded of a conversation I had with a young black man who approached me after a talk I gave at the University of California at Berkeley. He referred to a June front-page photo in the New York Times of black Harvard graduate students in caps and gowns at their own black graduation ceremony. On the same page, he saw a photo of a white man above a headline reading "Fringe Groups Revel as Protests Turn Violent," whom he guessed not to be a college graduate. "I wish some of the black graduates from the top picture could tell the white guy from the bottom picture, 'Hey, we're not leaving you out.'" Then he added, "But if I drive three hours north from Berkeley, I don't feel safe as a black man." The young man felt both a need for a movement and a determination to reach common ground with others beyond it. This view is echoed by leaders such as the Rev. William Barber II, a pastor who spoke at New York's Riverside Morning Church on the anniversary of Martin Luther King's Vietnam speech and who has launched an ecumenical "Repairers of the Breach" movement. In 2013, he led peaceful Moral Mondays demonstrations at the North Carolina General Assembly to protest restrictions on voting.

Lilla's message to liberals is timely and welcome. But he might better advise them: Go on your march. Join the marches of other groups, too. And continue to protest, above all. Then come home and organize that

fundraiser for your favorite candidate for governor, the state legislature or Congress.

## **THE ONCE AND FUTURE LIBERAL**

### **After Identity Politics**

By Mark Lilla

Harper. 143 pp. \$24.99

 **3 Comments**

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