Book Review

Lilla, M. *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017. ISBN: 978-0062697431

Williams, J. C. *White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America*. Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-1633693784

In the afterward to the second edition of his landmark book, *The End of Ideology* (1962),[1] Daniel Bell claimed that his thesis had been misunderstood. True, when the book was originally published, he did describe the end of a period of political struggle—after the 1950s—in which political formulas had been fused with passion, but he had never intended to signal the end of passionate politics per se; he only wanted to signal the end of class politics as it had been practiced throughout his lifetime—a period almost coeval with the life of the Soviet Union. The accuracy of his assessment speaks to the longevity and influence of his thesis, even among those who have never read or even heard of it.

Putting Bernie Sanders to the side for a moment, even among those who worry about economic inequality, the narratives they tend to employ to describe economic injustice are flat, superficial, unconvincing, disconnected from their deepest passions, and largely symbolic and/or idealistic. What serious challenges are on offer out there to the dominant practices of contemporary capitalism? Class politics and the image of ideology that it conjured did begin to pass from the scene just when Daniel Bell predicted, which is why it is so important to remember his work now. We have just seen the publication of two books published in the wake of the Trump victory in the 2016 presidential election that, taken together, might signal the end of ideology as Bell understood the concept.

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[1] Bell, D. (1962). *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

The first of these two milestone books is Mark Lilla's, *The Once and Future Liberal* (2017). The book is an extension of an op-ed[2] published in the New York Times on November 18th, published just 10 days after the election and must have been furiously penned. In that essay as in the book, Lilla attacks an orientation to politics that he calls "identity liberalism." Eschewing the progressive conventions that honor all forms of resistance as intersectional and mutually supportive, Lilla placed the blame for the Republican ascendancy in state, local and national politics squarely on the left and on its decades-long focus on difference in contrast to commonality—which he assumes would be a critical feature of any future Democratic Party electoral victory—and calls for a post-identity liberalism to replace the "identity-conscious wing" of the Democratic Party.

In many respects, the book length treatment of the subject offers little that was not contained already in the op-ed, and the challenge an argument like this faces is it tends more to inspire than convince. For those who have already been suspicious of the broader appeal of the various critiques of hegemonic privilege from the standpoint of race, gender, sexual orientation or gender identity, among others, Lilla's argument will ring true. However, those whom Lilla would describe as fixated on identity, will find little to appeal to them in the volume. This is because the book is more of a polemic than a sustained analysis, as were previous books that tackled this subject like *The Trouble with Diversity* (2006)[3] by Benn Michaels, or Todd Gitlin's, *Twilight of Common Dreams* (1995).[4] Lilla offers only his wit and insight (both considerable), adding no new data to the conversation, few new concepts, and presenting his argument in a tone that is sure to insult.

Having said that, I think this is a brilliant book that if nothing else will stand as a marker in the transition of the macro-narrative of American politics in the twenty-first century. Lilla knows that his adversary is not so much an argument but an ideology: what Bell described as "a reification, a frozen mimicry of reality, a hypostatization of terms that gives false life to categories;"[5] less an argument, and more of a faith, a faith in progress as social justice— the faith that progressive social change will result from consistent and militant focus of attention on abuses that derive from the hegemony of mainstream cultural practice.

When it comes down to it, Lilla does not appear to be trying to convince a reader of anything; he writes as if he suspects you already know that he is

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[2] Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html

[3] Michaels, W. B. (2016). *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*. New York: Picador.

[4] Gitlin, T. (1995). *The Twilight of Our Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars.* New York: Henry Holt & Co.

[5] Bell (1962), p. 444.

right and you only lack the courage to trust your intuition. The book is full of claims to self-evidence. As he writes:

> You might have thought that, faced with a novel anti-political picture of the nation, liberals would have countered with an imaginative, hopeful vision of what we share as Americans and what we might accomplish together. Instead, they lost themselves in the thickets of identity politics and developed a resentful, disuniting rhetoric of difference to match it. (p. 59)

Lilla's diagnosis of the problem takes up the largest part of the book, but the most interesting aspects of his argument are his brief and perhaps confusing flirtations with Karl Marx. At two points in the book, Lilla draws attention to Marx with a section header—much as Thomas Piketty did with the title of his instant classic *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2013)[6]—and seems to be preparing the reader to accept that the decline of identity politics will demand a return to class politics, i.e. to a critical discourse of the need to counter economic injustices. But it is just a head fake. That is not where he takes his argument at all. In fact, he makes it clear that it is not possible to turn back to what he calls the Roosevelt Dispensation (a secular faith associated with Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal), because, as he asserts, "class consciousness has far less effect on the human mind—and certainly on the American mind—than those of a Marxist bent like to think" (p. 125). In other words, America is and remains exceptional with respect to socialism.

His claim for a better candidate for a new dispensation would be something more like the classical liberalism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, along with its cult of civic virtue, modified to better fit our own times. Lilla must suspect that many sympathetic readers will expect him to argue that class politics must follow identity politics much as identity followed class in Daniel Bell's era, but Lilla argues instead that this would be a big mistake. The class option is not viable because it "does nothing to convince the well-off that they have a permanent duty to the worse-off" (p. 125). He counsels that we should endeavor to establish "some sort of identification between the privileged and the disadvantaged" (p. 126) that would encourage shared sacrifice. In his future liberalism, the elites of both class and status domains will be shamed into sacrifice of their competitive advantage and recognition by virtue of their common participation in the project of the nation, which will be supported by a system of higher education that embraces the new/old rhetoric of citizenship. In other words, to twist a line from Martin Luther King Jr., social change will result from an appeal to conscience and will be 'voluntarily given by the oppressor,' not 'demanded by the oppressed.'

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[6] Piketty, T. (2017). *Capital in the Twenty-first Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Although the appeal of the consensual aspects of Lilla's arguments is clear, relying as they do on classical principles of human rights (that it is our universal and common nature to enjoy equality before the law in every respect), progressives of all stripes are likely to wonder why the goods (either property or recognition) will be given up without a struggle. It is as if Lilla has recognized the likely direction of the tectonic shift in our political macro-narrative only to stand athwart history yelling stop. Mark Lilla insists that he is no conservative, and I have no reason to doubt his claim, but his version of liberalism seems rather immune from the ideological innovations of the twentieth-century and will almost surely be read, however unfairly, as a form of reactionism.

Joan C. Williams, author of the second book, *White Working Class: Overcoming Cluelessness in America* (2017), on the other hand, engages the challenge of coming to terms with the political limits of the identity root narrative, but in a way that is more likely to appeal to any potential progressive alliance in the United States. Her book emerged as a direct result of a viral essay[7] written at roughly the same time as Lilla's, but for the Harvard Business Review rather than the New York Times. A product of the transformative narrative of second wave feminism, her prose carries none of the tragic tones of 'the god that failed' attitude that most liberals—including Lilla—adopt towards the various critiques of capitalism. Her appeal to 'overcome class cluelessness in America' is directed just as precisely to the ranks of the liberal establishment, but in a way that avoids both the neoliberal cultural reductionism of a book like J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016)[8] and the progressive malaise of Lilla's work. Williams knows that the woes of the Democratic Party have everything to do with a tendency of its leaders to misunderstand the great mass of the white population that enjoys neither high net worth nor a cultivated resume of advanced degrees. However, she places this critique of political culture in relation to a macro-narrative for economic change in a tone manages not to offend, as she avoids shaming cultural progressives in the way that Lilla does.

How she navigates this critique is both refreshing and clever, pointing toward a new dispensation, while demonstrating why the Democrats are in such a bind with the now tired version of identity politics that has dominated liberal ideology for the past half century. The key to her success is the central concept of inclusion. In contrast to Lilla, Williams pivots around the concept of inclusion rather than confronting it, claiming that "politics is always about identity." Her move is to craft a meta-narrative that embraces both status and class politics through which new stories can be told, including working class perspectives and self-understandings. This is no mean feat, and Williams takes time with each new chapter to wean the professional progressive of her dismissiveness

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[7] Available at: https://hbr.org/2016/11/what-so-many-people-dont-get-about-the-u-s-working-class

[8] Vance, J. D. (2016). *Hillbilly Elegy*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

and contempt for those kinds of views that once stifled the development of the now old 'new social movements.'

The chapters in which Williams dispels Manichean illusions about the white working class are the most palatable fare of the book, and she serves it up early, explaining who the working class is, why its members are not truly poor and yet both fear and resent poverty, what explains their admiration for the rich, and why it is so hard to climb out of precarity into stable and future-oriented professions. This is much like what others have already pointed out, even if her style is more confident and convincing.

What makes Williams different is that she never confuses the power of the professional and entrepreneurial classes, especially their men, with that of corresponding members of the working class. Williams sees through the bluster and bravado of struggling white men, recognizing that their relative vulnerability poses as strength. This opens her to a kind of compassion for middle America that others reserve for members of persecuted minorities, inducing her to imagine storylines capable of crossing class boundaries. Her deft hand is best revealed at those points at which the two master genres of structural political vision come into conflict: when class meets status.

One of the most striking moments of the book comes from a note written to Williams after the publication of her Harvard Business Review essay from a person she describes as a 'class migrant'—someone who was born to working class parents, but moved into a professional career. His note explores the roots of the obnoxious attitudes of working class men toward women and minorities and settles on the dispositive role played by fear: of brown skin, of losing their home, of global economics, of losing their faith, of sexually empowered women, and of science. The complex brew of fears is easy for more comfortable people to dismiss, but Williams recognizes how this pervasive sense of insecurity was easy for Donald Trump to channel into grudging support for his campaign. She says of the letter writer, "What his family needs is not a lecture about racism, but a conversation about fear" (p. 65).

Not only does she call for a conversation about working class fear, so easily linked to militarism and cultural conformity, but she models key features of it for us. In fact, the whole book is written in a style that Williams invites us to adopt. She thinks it will work; a narrative style that is straightforward, unapologetic, thick-skinned, and above all, optimistic. This optimism is the key to what she calls the counter-narrative,

> I have devoted my life to gender and race issues; I'm not
> suggesting that we abandon the social history curriculum
> completely. But we need to make sure all Americans know not
> only the ways our system has failed but also the ways it's

succeeded—if progressives want to keep the social gains we've made in the past 50 years. (p. 106)

This is the core of her counter-narrative, employing a both/and rather than an either/or approach to class and culture cleavages. These concerns may strike the contemporary progressive as easy to finesse with some sort of appeal to intersectionality, but Williams recognizes that because identity and class worldviews are so expansive and fertile, they crowd each other out in practice. To move from one root narrative to the other appears as a binary choice: the beginning of one leading to end of another. But what Williams demonstrates, along with other leading feminist scholars like Nancy Fraser, is that justice is a concept bigger than any of its distinctive aspects. Williams' goal is not to displace all concern for abuses of cultural status, but to build on older models of civic repair that placed the accent on redistribution or liberty in league with recognition in order to fashion the new counter-narrative: as she says, "because if we have none, well, then there's no counter-narrative" (p. 104).

Taken together, the recent books of Mark Lilla and Joan Williams mark a point of macro-narrative inflection in not only national politics, but in global politics as well. The forces driving the politics of identity and of class struggle are not confined to any nation or locality. They are global forces that create global problems, demanding solutions on a similar scale. We all grew up in the era of the last narrative dispensation. Central to that era were the struggles against racial segregation, colonialism, cultural conformity and all forms of bigotry. After Trump, these concerns remain, perhaps in more cutting form, but their context has shifted. The specter of economic injustice haunts our politics. Both of the authors discussed here encourage us to remember the ideological themes of prior centuries, for Lilla the virtues of the classical liberalism of the nineteenth century, and for Williams the class-sensitive progressivism of the early part of the twentieth. Neither recommends a simple or nostalgic return, but both are confident that just as the world has shifted, so too must the stories we tell about it.

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