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December 2, 2017: The Criticism of Mark Lilla They Don't Want You to See

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Title: The Criticism of Mark Lilla They Don't Want You to See

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12/2/2017--I have been frustrated in trying to get my criticisms of Mark Lilla's attacks on liberal identity politics out to the public. Here my latest failed example in a proposed letter to the Editor that the New York Review of Books did not publish.

To the Editor:

Jonathan Rauch wrote a fair and restrained review of Mark Lilla's book, the *Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (NYR November 9) about how identity politics have hurt the Democrats politically. But neither the review nor the book actually have much to do with why Hillary Clinton is not the President today, nor with the primary way that Democrats lost touch with ordinary people. Donald Trump was elected with the overwhelming support of religious believers. For years, the Democrats have been associated with a relentless attack on religion in general and on religious believers in particular. Rauch does not mention religion at all and it is obviously not a focus of Lilla's analysis of what is wrong with identity politics.

The most dramatic symbol of Democratic hostility to religion was a suggestion in oral argument in the Obergefell same-sex marriage case that religious institutions might lose their tax exempt status if they failed to adapt to a judicial decision constitutionalizing same sex marriage. When I visited Regent Law School before the election, that comment had turned the 2016 election into almost a last stand for religious believers and had overcome the enormous distaste that many believers had for Donald Trump. In the *Washington Post*, David Bernstein called this The Supreme Court Oral Argument that Cost Democrats the Presidency, and in a narrow loss, that is exactly what it was.

There is a reason that Lilla cannot raise the issue of attacks on religion as a reason Democrats have lost touch with ordinary people. Lilla himself was one of the New Atheists who attacked the role of religion in political life. His 2007 book, *The Stillborn God*, argued that religion was an irrational force that was best kept out of public life. Lilla shared the hostility toward religion that has cost Democrats so dearly.

But Lilla's attack on religion demonstrates an even deeper flaw in his current analysis of identity politics. In 2007, Lilla was attacking not just religion, but any conception of the common good in public life. In order to ward off irrational and dangerous political movements, politics should be truncated and restricted to individualistic competition for limited goods. He wrote, "[W]e have chosen to limit our politics to protecting individuals from the worst harms they can inflict on one another, to securing fundamental liberties and providing for their basic welfare... ." This is a basically anti-political stance and demonstrates Lilla's narrow conception of the public good.

The New Atheists who argued that all values were merely individual choices never could conceive of a robust politics, which must involve competing conceptions of the good life, rationally promoted. They thought that kind of politics was impossible and dangerous. But Lilla should not now complain that this shrunken view of political life leads to an over emphasis on group identity. In the absence of a conception of the common good, what is left to a person who is dissatisfied with Lilla's individualism but group politics?

The New Atheists, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Lilla, and all the rest, never admitted their responsibility for the decline of American public life. Their relentless attacks not just on religion but on the whole notion of the good, and of a meaningful universe, left us with nothing but a politics of zero sum games between hostile groups. They led us here.

A different kind of politics used to be possible. When Martin Luther King, Jr. engaged in what might be called identity politics, he did so in the name of all of us. He said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." That justice for one group was a common good that benefited all people—even the racist would benefit in the end. That is the kind of identity politics that can bind rather than divide. But, as in King's case, it requires a commitment to a moral universe that is totally beyond Lilla's conception. Here is where a political rejuvenation of America is possible.