

Mark Lilla: My Students Are Consumed with Their Own Identities

The New Yorker, one of the last great literary publications still in existence, recently ran [a fascinating interview](#) with Mark Lilla.

For those unfamiliar with Lilla, he is a professor at Columbia who caused a bit of a fuss last November when he wrote [an article](#) for the *New York Times* imploring fellow liberals to abandon identity politics.

This suggestion is anathema to many of Lilla's fellow progressives, and evidence of this was found in the interview, which was conducted by journalist David Remnick.

At various points in the interview, Remnick seemed genuinely confounded that an intelligent academic could question the wisdom of identity politics or say things critical about Black Lives Matter. Here is one exchange:

Remnick: So what did Black Lives Matter do that you're, at best, ambivalent about—and very critical, really?

Lilla (reading from his book): "...there's no denying that the movement's decision to use this mistreatment to build a general indictment of American society and its law-enforcement institutions and to use [Mau Mau tactics](#) to put down dissent and demand a confession of sins and public penitence played into the hands of the Republican right."

Remnick: But, Mark. "Mau Mau tactics." Are you familiar with—

Lilla: Of course I remember it. What was that confrontation they had with Hillary Clinton, if not that? They were shouting down people at various venues. No, those were Mau

Mau tactics, sure.

Remnick: You're comfortable with that phrase?

Lilla: Sure...

To be clear, Lilla says he's against identity politics simply because they don't work. Republicans have made historic gains in the last eight, and Lilla says those gains stem directly from the Democratic Party's reliance on identity. (Remnick, on the other hand, seems to think Democrats just have to get better at employing identity politics.)

Lilla's arguments of utility notwithstanding, one senses that his aversion to identity politics is not based solely on pragmatism.

At one point Remnick suggests the whole identity politics phenomenon has been cooked up by Steven Bannon and Fox News, who blow these isolated instances out of proportion. Remnick asks Lilla what he sees from students on campus. Here is how he responded to Remnick's question:

*"I teach "Homer to Virginia Woolf" to eighteen-year-olds. If I don't send out signals that we're going to talk about identity, they don't. We talk about the books. **But I see them after they go out, after their first year, and I can see that many of them get absorbed in this.** They come into my office, and I just listen to them. I don't argue with them. ...*

What I see, essentially, is that, to the extent that they are political, their political interest is circumscribed by either how they see their own identity or what they think identity issues are. I'm struck by the lack of interest in military affairs, class structure, economics that's not economics in order to get into business school. There's a lack of interest in American religion. All of these subjects that might help you understand the country in a richer way.

They're very much drawn to classes that are about themselves."

Lilla's response suggests that his aversion to our culture's focus on identity is also visceral. One senses here not political despair, but a touch of intellectual scorn. Like Christopher Lasch before him, who saw in our culture a growing "narcissistic preoccupation with the self," Lilla appears troubled by a student body consumed with themselves.

If one reads between the lines, Lilla is saying identity politics is not just mean and destructive, it's shallow – an offense that is in some ways worse, at least to the enlightened mind.

Perhaps the most telling part of the entire conversation, however, can be found in Remnick's response to Lilla's concerns.

"But I can almost hear the listener questioning," he says to Lilla. "O.K., there are two white guys in a room discussing this."

Absorbing indeed.