

Resenha do livro: LILLA, Mark. O progressista de ontem e o do amanhã: desafios da democracia liberal no mundo pós-políticas identitárias. (The Once and Future Liberal: after Identity Politics). Translation: Berilo Vargas. 1st ed. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2018.

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Resumo: *The Once and Future Liberal: after Identity Politics* de Mark Lilla examina a crise da esquerda nos Estados Unidos. Depois de repetidas derrotas, Lilla critica a profunda desconexão entre o Partido Democrata e o americano comum, resultando no infeliz triunfo de Donald Trump, de mãos dadas com o colapso do discurso dos direitos civis.

Palavras-chave: Democracia; esquerda; Partido Democrático

Abstract: *The Once and Future Liberal: after Identity Politics* by Mark Lilla examines the crisis of the left in the United States. After repeated defeats, Lilla criticizes the profound disconnection between the Democratic Party and the common American, resulting in the unfortunate triumph of Donald Trump, hand in hand with the collapse of the civil rights discourse.

Keywords: Democracy; left; Democratic Party

1 About the book

The Once and Future Liberal: after Identity Politics by Mark Lilla is a scathing and inquisitive critique, a lucid, severe, and provocative delivery written after the surprising victory of Donald Trump in the American presidential election (2016)

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The book originated from an article Lilla published in the New York Times – written in two afternoons – about how the Democratic Party emphasizes identity politics and has experienced constant (and bitter!) defeats in the United States.

Both the article – the most read in the New York Times in 2016 – and the book were the targets of visceral reactions. Though Lilla admits the book was controversial, he states there were no attacks on the arguments. Furthermore, his own colleagues at Columbia University kept a cover of silence.

The Financial Times considered Lilla’s book an important counterpoint to a hegemonic mindset. *The Once and Future Liberal: after Identity Politics* portrays – rationally and pragmatically – that when it comes to winning and losing ground, the most important game in politics is electoral.

In other words, in the long run, movements themselves are unable to obtain concrete objectives. This provoking work by Lilla reveals and reinforces the need for a strategic shift in the agenda of future liberals, whether they be moderates or progressives. The agenda of the future should be aligned with reassessing the importance of institutional politics and democratic persuasion.

2 At the heart of the book

The Once and Future Liberal: after Identity Politics, by Mark Lilla, is divided into an introduction, called The Abdication (p. 9- 20); chapter 1, Anti-politics (p. 21 – 48); chapter 2, Pseudo-politics (p. 49 – 78); and chapter 3, Politics (p. 79 – 113).

In the Introduction, Lilla states – categorically – that American liberalism³ is in crisis in the 21st century. He posits that liberals lack imagination and ambition, and that most Americans are hard pressed when handling speech, writing, arguments, a campaign, and the liberal form of government. These aspects were picked up on by the American right. With the gap that has set in between liberals and common voters, the American right has controlled the political agenda of the United States for two generations. Lilla proposes a question to be explored: “Why would those who claim to speak for the great American demos be so indifferent to stirring its feelings and gaining its trust?” (LILLA, 2018, p. 11). Lilla adopts the position of the frustrated American liberal and states that his frustration is not directed at Trump voters or those who

³ Contemporary American liberalism is the dominant branch of liberalism in the United States, marked by social liberalism, the defense of civil liberties, equality with social justice, and a mixed economy.

supported the “populist demagogue”. In fact, Lilla’s frustration is directed to liberal attitudes that have chosen to abdicate from the dispute for the American imaginary. For decades, liberals have not developed an ambitious view of the United States and have lost the allegiance of citizens of every social class in every region of the country. Liberals have thus not been able to propose an image of how our shared way of life could be, which is what the American right has managed to do since Reagan’s election.

Lilla evaluates that his book is the story of this abdication. According to the author, American politics in the 20th century can be divided into two “dispensations”. The first, the Roosevelt Dispensation, “stretched from the era of the New Deal to the era of the civil rights movement and the Great Society in the 1960s and then exhausted itself in the 1970s” (LILLA, 2018, p. 13). The second, “the Reagan Dispensation, began in 1980 and is now being brought to a close by an opportunistic, unprincipled populist” (LILLA. 2018. P. 13.)

According to Lilla, the watchwords evoked by the Roosevelt Dispensation were solidarity, opportunity, and public duty. In the Reagan Dispensation, the watchwords were self-reliance and minimal government. In other words, “the first dispensation was political; the second, anti-political” (LILLA, 2018, p. 13).

Lilla posits that the great liberal abdication began during the Reagan Era with the end of the Roosevelt Dispensation and the rise of a unified, ambitious right, as well as the lack of pragmatism on the part of American liberals who were unable to adapt to the new realities and expectations of American society. Lilla points out that the greatest mistake liberals made was to embrace identity politics. Lilla’s perspective is that liberals have retreated in their political praxis and discourse by adopting a “pseudo-politics of self-regard and self-definition.” Hence, Lilla concludes that today the “term liberalism has left so many Americans indifferent if not hostile”. (p. 10)

About the Author

Mark Lilla is an American essayist (he has been awarded by the New York Review of Books) and political scientist. He is one of the most admired political thinkers in the United States, author of the most read political article of the New York Times in 2016, and professor of the humanities at the University of Columbia. His works include *The Shipwrecked Mind*, *The Reckless Mind*, *The Stillborn God*, and *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin* (written with Ronald Dworkin and Robert B. Silvers.)