

# After election debacle, Democrats debate identity politics

**Niles Niemuth****15 December 2016**

In the aftermath of the victory of Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton, a heated debate has been raging in Democratic Party circles over the efficacy of identity politics and its role in the party's electoral debacle.

Some figures within the party and its periphery have raised concerns that the overriding focus on racial and gender politics has prevented the Democrats from making an effective appeal to broader segments of society beyond those in better-off and more privileged layers of the middle class.

In a November 18 *New York Times* op-ed column titled "The End of Identity Liberalism," Columbia University humanities professor Mark Lilla, seeking to draw the lessons of Clinton's loss to Trump, writes: "In recent years American liberalism has slipped into a kind of moral panic about racial, gender and sexual identity that has distorted liberalism's message and prevented it from becoming a unifying force capable of governing."

While Clinton was "at her best and most uplifting when she spoke about American interests in world affairs and how they related to our understanding of democracy," he asserts, "when it came to life at home, she tended on the campaign trail to lose that large vision and slip into the rhetoric of diversity, calling out explicitly to African-American, Latino, LGBT and women voters at every stop."

This focus on identity was a "strategic mistake," Lilla writes. He calls instead for a "post-identity" liberalism that places a greater emphasis on civic duty and a new nationalism, drawing inspiration, in part, from Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.

Lilla's column corresponds to remarks made by Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders following the election. Sanders campaigned for Clinton after failing in his bid to win the Democratic nomination, but now he is implicitly criticizing her focus on racial and gender politics. "It is not good enough for somebody to say, 'I'm a woman,

vote for me!'" he said in a recent speech. "What we need is a woman who has the guts to stand up to Wall Street, to the insurance companies, to the drug companies, to the fossil fuel industry."

The actual content of Sanders' proposals is reactionary. In the name of "taking on the corporations" he advocates an aggressive economic nationalism that echoes the "America-first" trade war program of Trump. Nor does Lilla propose any serious program to challenge the interests of the corporate elite. In his commentary he makes a vague reference to the Democrats' long-abandoned policies of social reform, but he does so to advocate not a struggle against the corporate elite, but rather a new, "left" form of American nationalism. His "post-identity liberalism" would "speak to the nation as a nation of citizens who are in this together and must help one another."

What is most striking, however, is the hysterical response such muted criticisms have evoked. The most vociferous attack on Lilla's article has come from Columbia University law professor Katherine M. Franke, who equates Lilla with the former head of the Ku Klux Klan, David Duke, in a blog post published by the *Los Angeles Review of Books* on November 21.

"In the new political climate we now inhabit, Duke and Lilla were contributing to the same ideological project, the former cloaked in a KKK hood, the latter in an academic gown," Franke writes. "Both men are underwriting the whitening of American nationalism, and the re-centering of white lives as lives that matter most in the US. Duke is happy to own the white supremacy of his statements, while Lilla's op-ed does the more nefarious background work of making white supremacy respectable. Again."

For Franke, any move away from a politics based on racial and gender identity is equivalent to the promotion of racism and misogyny. "Let me be blunt: this kind of

liberalism is a liberalism of white supremacy,” she declares. “It is a liberalism that regards the efforts of people of color and women to call out forms of power that sustain white supremacy and patriarchy as a distraction. It is a liberalism that figures the lives and interests of white men as the neutral, unmarked terrain around which a politics of ‘common interest’ can and should be built.”

These remarks are echoed by *Guardian* columnist Hadley Freeman, who denounces criticism of identity politics as the “primal scream of the straight white male.” She argues that those who want to “emphasise what we have in common instead of focusing on the differences” have a “delightfully kumbaya view of the world.”

Journalist Tasneem Raja, in a commentary published on National Public Radio’s Code Switch blog, which is dedicated to racial and identity politics, rejects Lilla’s criticisms as support for white supremacy. She accuses Lilla of being “keen on pulling the plug on conversations about multiculturalism and diversity” and thereby unconsciously playing “right into the hands of the newly emboldened neo-Nazis who helped put Trump in office...”

The unhinged response to Lilla’s column reflects entrenched social interests. Franke speaks on behalf of a layer of American academics for whom the politics of identity is a central mechanism for accessing positions of affluence and privilege.

Identity politics has become an entrenched industry. Many of its professional proponents have high-paying academic positions in black and gender studies. Such institutions are funded to the tune of billions of dollars and politically tied to the Democratic Party and corporate America.

According to her university biography, Franke’s research is focused on feminist, queer and critical race theory. She is the director of Columbia University’s Center for Gender and Sexuality Law, a member of the Executive Committee for the Institute for Research on Women, Gender and Sexuality, and a member of the Steering Committee for the Center for the Study of Social Difference.

The relationship of the Democratic Party--and bourgeois politics as a whole--to identity politics is not accidental or secondary. The fixation on the politics of race and gender is inextricably bound up with the protracted shift of the Democratic Party to the right, in line with the drive by the ruling class to claw back all of the gains that workers won through bitter struggle, particularly in the 1930s and the decades following the Second World War.

For the past half century, as it abandoned any

commitment to social reform, the Democratic Party adopted identity politics and programs such as Affirmative Action as its modus operandi, building up around it a privileged layer of the upper-middle class on this basis. This period has at the same time seen a historic growth in social inequality, including, and especially, within minority groups and among women.

Between 2005 and 2013, black households earning more than \$75,000 were the fastest growing income group in the country, while the top one percent possessed more than 200 percent the wealth of the average black family. Despite the enrichment of this small but substantial and influential layer, the vast majority of African Americans remain deeply impoverished. Half of black households, nearly 7 million people, have little to no household worth.

At the same time, large parts of the country populated by supposedly privileged white workers, particularly in the so called Rust Belt states where Trump defeated Clinton, have been devastated economically by deindustrialization.

Identity politics found its consummate expression in the Clinton campaign, which was based on an alliance of Wall Street, the military-intelligence apparatus and the right-wing purveyors of racial and gender politics.

The proponents of identity politics such as Franke are opposed to economic and social equality. They regard any orientation to working people on a class basis as a threat to their own racial- or gender-based privileges. They are deeply hostile to the working class—black and Latino as well as white.

The anger that these forces direct toward Lilla will be turned with even greater intensity against a politically independent movement of the working class.



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