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Every Tool is a Weapon if You Hold It Right: Solidarity, Civics Education, and Use-Oriented Politics

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In the immediate aftermath of the November 2016 election, Mark Lilla argued in the *New York Times* that to win, the Democratic party would need to replace identity politics with a unifying vision of citizenship. Becoming aware of and celebrating our differences was “a splendid principle of moral pedagogy,” Lilla claimed, “but disastrous as a foundation for democratic politics in our ideological age.” We need, Lilla argued, “a post-identity liberalism.” Education plays a prominent role in Lilla’s challenge, as he calls on teachers to “refocus attention on their main political responsibility in a democracy: to form committed citizens aware of their system of government and the major forces and events in our history.” He calls on the press to “begin educating itself about parts of the country that have been ignored” and “take seriously its responsibility to educate Americans about the major forces shaping world politics, especially their historical dimension.”²¹ Lilla’s article and the book-length version of his argument, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*, raise important questions about the means and ends of civic education and political strategy, the role of facts and imagination in citizens’ self-understandings, and the fraught relationship between rhetoric and justice. This paper grapples with the promises and perils of educating for “solidarities of identity” and “solidarities of citizenship,” the two poles of Lilla’s critique.

Lilla reminds readers that “identity politics” is a political technology. It is a rhetorical strategy that cultivates imaginaries of co-belonging, solidarities that can then be mobilized through collective action towards particular political ends. Furthermore, it is a technology susceptible to dual use. It has been used

effectively by both the KKK and the NAACP; by Donald Trump and transgender activists; for the sake of the most pernicious exclusions and the most rightful inclusions. Lilla suggests that identity politics, because of its orientation toward subgroup belonging rather than membership in the larger society, yields an inevitably exclusionary mode of conducting political business. Yet a liberal politics of citizenship such as Lilla proposes, one that would emphasize citizens' duties to one another and our mutual dedication to something bigger than our private lives, is *also* a rhetorical strategy, another imaginary, another solidarity-building technology. It, too, has been historically vulnerable to weaponization by the politics of exclusion.

Both identity politics and calls to citizenship, we suggest, are “dual use technologies.” This term, borrowed from the ethics of science, refers to technologies developed for positive ends that can also be used to do harm.² The concept assumes that the scientists developing the technology have positive intentions (to create tools), but that once the technologies are public knowledge, they are susceptible to being used differently, even nefariously (as weapons). Chemical fertilizer, for instance, was invented to increase crop yield. That it can also be used to create bombs makes it a case of dual use technology. The fact that technologies can also have *unintended* harmful effects, e.g. that fertilizer run-off from fields into local waterways has poisoned ecosystems, is a related but distinct ethical problem. Unlike unintended effects, the dual-use problem foregrounds human values and choices. Whether a technology is a tool or a weapon depends upon the particularities of its use, as well upon as the aims and values of its users. If identity politics and citizenship share this dual use capability, then arguments over to which *basis* of solidarity those who support a politics of inclusion should appeal are unwinnable. The problem is not the basis but the appeal, not the thing but the use.

Lilla accurately recognizes that educators and writers have a key role to play in the formation of these, or any other, solidarities. Educators' rhetoric, exercised through curriculum and instruction, shapes students' and readers' perceptions of who they are, to whom they have duties, with whom they need to find ways to live. Should we, then, aim to create solidarities of identity? Sol-

identities of citizenship? Or, as we argue in this paper, both, with caveats? And what, if anything, can educators do to keep these technologies functioning as tools in the hands of a politics of inclusion rather than weapons in the hands of a politics of exclusion? In the next section, we lay out Lilla's argument, alongside Richard Rorty's similar and eerily prescient critique of the Left's cultural politics. Following that, we consider these arguments' strengths and shortcomings, which hinge on what exactly is meant by "identity politics" and "shared citizenship." Finally, we consider the implications for civic education.

LIBERALISM, ONCE AND FUTURE

Lilla argues that "identity politics," as a political strategy, has failed to attract a broad constituency and calls for a "fresh political vision of the country's shared destiny."³ An intellectual historian, Lilla associates the emergence of identity politics with a larger turn from what he calls the "Roosevelt dispensation" to the "Reagan dispensation" of democracy. Another writer might call this the emergence of "neoliberalism" as a worldview, but Lilla, significantly, eschews the familiar term – and thus the affiliations and stances on other liberalisms that it invokes. Using instead language borrowed from Christian theology, though in a secular sense, Lilla treats the history of the United States not as a continuous progression (as the evolution of liberalism into neoliberalism would imply) but, rather, as a series of discrete periods. In keeping with the idea of "dispensations," each period has its dominant grand narrative that calls on citizens to respond to national problems in terms of a specific set of guiding ideals. Each dispensation is a response to "social realities and historical experiences."⁴ Because social realities and historical experiences change over time, there is no going back to an earlier set of ideals; because experience is *real*, the ideals that political actors invoke to make demands of their fellow citizens are not arbitrary and create effects that are, also, *real*. Lilla's previous books treated Vico, Isaiah Berlin, and the rise of right-wing religious politics. He shares with Berlin a suspicion of millenarian projects, especially projects that rely on perfecting the human soul, as well as a recognition of the power ideals hold over human beings.

“Under FDR’s leadership,” Lilla asserts, “the experience of danger faced and overcome in the Great Depression and the Second World War bound the country together in a way it had never been bound before. It was this new social fact, not moral conversion, that allowed liberals to develop an inspiring catechism that was professed, or simply assumed, by most Americans for nearly half a century.”⁵ Inevitably, says Lilla, the catechism ran its course, became rigid, and was replaced. As the social reality of the 1930s and ‘40s was replaced by the reality of the ‘70s and ‘80s, the vision lost credibility as it failed to respond to current problems. Regrettably, in Lilla’s view, what replaced it was *not* a liberalism that called Americans to work together to solve those problems, but instead the Reagan dispensation, which promised “a morally undemanding life in a less political America.”⁶

The failure of the Left, in Lilla’s view, was adopting the Reagan dispensation’s anti-politics, but in a guise he calls “pseudo-politics.” Instead of seeking a genuinely political vision that would – again, the language of dispensation is important here – *call* a wide swathe of Americans to believe that more is demanded of them than self-satisfaction, Lilla contends, the current generation of young Americans have turned inward, becoming “spelunkers of their personal identities.”⁷ “Identity,” in Lilla’s words, “is Reaganism for lefties.” Within this undemanding individualism, identity has taken on the “sense of an inner thing, a homunculus that needs tending to”⁸. His issue is not with individualism as such but with its corruption; not with identity as such but with the anti-political ends to which it is put. He ties identity politics to a larger retreat from others, saying that “We have become a hyperindividualistic bourgeois society, materially and in our cultural dogmas.”⁹

Subdividing ourselves into elemental identities, and then exploring the uniqueness of our own experiences as it relates to these identitarian tokens of belonging, says Lilla, short-circuits the possibility of imagined co-belonging on which politics depends. As Lilla describes it, identity politics concerns itself with introspective preciousness and overbearing demands for recognition. For Lilla, this is a pragmatic failure. “In a democracy,” he says, “the only way to meaningfully defend [the vulnerable or marginalized] – and not just make

empty gestures of recognition and ‘celebration’ – is to win elections and exercise power in the long run.”¹⁰ While Lilla is not unaware of the imperfections and exclusions pervading the Roosevelt-dispensation period he discusses – the imperfections and exclusions to which identity politics emerged as a response – Lilla finds identity politics tragically limited as a social justice movement: its solipsism precludes the broader solidarity that democratic politics requires.

“The only way out of this conundrum,” says Lilla, “is to appeal to something that as Americans we all share but which has nothing to do with our identities, without denying the existence and importance of the latter.”¹¹ Lilla proposes that “citizenship” is uniquely capable of supplying this need, being this “something” that can provide “a political language for speaking about a solidarity that transcends identity attachments.”¹² It allows us to establish “some sort of identification between the privileged and the disadvantaged.”¹³ It is in light of this understanding of citizenship that Lilla analyzes the (Roosevelt dispensation) victories of the gay rights and civil rights movements – case studies, for him, of how the shame that prompts social change is a shame at having failed to realize practical equality commensurate with the equality that to which we believe all citizens are entitled. Duty to address injustices springs from a sense that “these are our fellow citizens who deserve to be fully enfranchised. That is all any other American should need to know – and all we should have to appeal to.”¹⁴

Lilla’s argument that citizenship provides a language for political solidarity across differences, and to that extent points the way toward successful progressive politics, echoes a similar argument made by Richard Rorty two decades ago. “National pride,” claimed Rorty, “is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement. Too much national pride can produce bellicosity and imperialism ... [but] insufficient national pride makes energetic and effective debate about national policy unlikely.” In *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty invokes Whitman and Dewey to make the case – implicit but understated in Lilla’s book – that “[t]hose who hope to persuade a nation to exert itself need to remind their country of what it can take pride in as well as what it should be ashamed of.”¹⁵ Like Lilla, Rorty argues that in taking a cultural turn, the American Left has hobbled itself. Also, like Lilla, Rorty has

no illusions about the limitations of early progressive politics, which he calls out for ignoring what he considers “the sadistic humiliation of black Americans,” as well as the sadism of homophobia and sexism.

Rorty’s accuracy in predicting the politics of recent years gives his arguments, and therefore, to the extent that he echoes them, Lilla’s, a strong claim to our serious consideration. Tempting though it is to dismiss both Lilla and Rorty as grouchy codgers, Rorty was, at least in certain respects, *right*. Sooner or later, he predicted,

members of labor unions, and unorganized unskilled workers, will ... realize that their government is not even trying to prevent wages from sinking or to prevent jobs from being exported. Around the same time, they will realize that suburban white-collar workers –themselves desperately afraid of being downsized – are not going to let themselves be taxed to provide social benefits for anyone else. At that point, something will crack. The nonsuburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking around for a strongman to vote for – someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen and postmodernist professors will no longer be calling the shots.¹⁶

Under this strongman, Rorty predicts, “the gains made in the past forty years by black and brown Americans, and by homosexuals, will be wiped out. Jocular contempt for women will come back into fashion ... All the sadism which the academic Left has tried to make unacceptable to its students will come flooding back.”¹⁷ Those gains are indeed under siege, and open sadism has made a quick comeback. Instead of providing a bulwark against the sadism Rorty warned us about, identity politics, wielded as a weapon by the Right, are actively involved in this resurgence.

IDENTITY AND CITIZENSHIP IN THE SUBJUNCTIVE MOOD

Lilla draws fresh attention to the persistently thorny question of how—and under what vision—Americans ought to conceive of coming together in pursuit of our national ideals. The value of his answer, to call upon citizenship rather than identity, hangs on how one reads Lilla’s charge to “to appeal to something [citizenship] that as Americans we all share.” If “that we all share” is read in the indicative mood, i.e. as implying that equal shared citizenship is factual, Lilla’s claim becomes patently false, even obtuse, as it ignores differences in how citizenship is embodied and experienced. A reading that leans on the word “appeal,” however, puts the subsequent “that we all share” into the subjunctive mood and thus renders equal citizenship a shared aspiration to be achieved through politics. We agree with Lilla that a transformation in the political imagination of the American Left is necessary; we are less confident that “citizenship,” left as a thin term, will do the work he requires of it. Without a politics of difference – distinct from “identity politics,” as we discuss shortly – pressuring dominant groups to substantiate the promise of equal citizenship for all, citizenship as an appeal in the subjunctive slides too easily into unequal citizenship in the indicative. In a strange way, a politics predicated on an absolute identity in (thinly interpreted) citizenship status proves as weaponizable as the “identity politics,” grounded in unbridgeable difference, that Lilla disdains. The subjunctive appeal, however, constructs political belonging across differences as a human labor rather than as the mechanical result of possessing some particular identity.

Lilla claims that identity politics, because it is inherently divisive, ensures electoral defeat. However, the politics of identity have been massively successful in the United States since at least the Louisiana Purchase.¹⁸ Granted, earlier forms of identity politics were wielded by white populations to exclude non-white peoples from voting rights and legislative representation.¹⁹ The Redemption – the return of explicit Southern white supremacy in the wake of Reconstruction that established the Jim Crow legal regime – is nothing if not a triumph of identity politics. Indeed, the *liberal* articulation of race-based identity politics, emerging especially in Thurgood Marshall’s NAACP litigation strategy, set out

to turn a particular ideological technology to the goal of combatting rather than enforcing exclusion, exemplifying the dual-use nature of indicative-mood facts.²⁰ Identity politics, therefore, has a long record of success – of achieving political power for both the Right and the Left. That said, if anything accomplished by identity politics can be undone by an equal and opposite identity politics, their *use*, and the telos that such use seeks, remains the salient issue.

Iris Marion Young makes the case for understanding the politics of difference in a way that constructs them to function as better tools than weapons, antihistamines rather than crystal meth if you will. She distinguishes a politics based on “structural group difference” from “identity politics,” treating the first as a necessary component of any inclusive democracy and the latter as an ontological error.²¹ “Those who reduce group difference to identity,” Young contends, “implicitly use a logic of substance to conceptualize groups.”²² Yet there is no substance to identity; only ongoing relations in the context of particular social structures that enable individuals to define themselves along multiple axes. The effect is that an essentialist understanding of identity takes on primary importance as either fully constitutive of or fully fatal to mutual belonging. “Essentialist modes of asserting group identity,” Young notes, can be found “in the behavior and discourse of some people speaking out of movements,” but the “primary claims” of these movements, “those that deserve to be taken the most seriously, have been claims for political equality, inclusion, and appeals to justice directed at a wider public which they claim that public ought to accept.”²³ And a politics of difference, in Young’s account, is necessary because without it, social groups cannot even correctly identify the problems that need to be solved. Replacing “identity politics” with a “politics of difference” such as Young describes shifts the solidarity appealed to into the subjunctive – into the domain of something wished for and striven for politically.²⁴

As for citizenship as the grounds of solidarity, Lilla characterizes citizenship as “a *political* status, nothing less and nothing more,” in virtue of which it has “great democratic—and Democratic—potential.” Specifically, “it provides a political language for speaking about a solidarity that transcends identity attachments.” Unlike the kinds of identities that undergird the politics he opposes,

citizenship is a “status that is extendable and its meaning expandable.”²⁵ On an indicative-mood reading, Lilla’s suggestion that the Left use a language of *inclusion* based upon something that we all share is the positive, mirror image of his complaint against identity politics, which mobilizes a negative language of *exclusion* based upon something that we all *cannot* share. In such a reading, the extent of one’s political belonging is predicated upon the demonstrable *having* of some feature that *places* a person either inside or outside of a political body. More specifically, if the labor of locating a person with respect to a polity is imagined to be *fully borne*, and perfectly exercised, by this feature or token, that labor can be turned to either inclusion or exclusion.

Lilla recognizes but does not linger on the susceptibility of citizenship status to this dual-use dynamic. Lilla notes that the “American Right uses the term *citizenship* as a tool of exclusion, but liberals have traditionally seen it as a generous term of inclusion.”²⁶ While Lilla seems to refer here to the American Right *excluding* marginal people from the official benefits and privileges that go with citizenship, he scants the longstanding American practice of emptying out the rights attached to the category of citizenship in direct proportion to that category’s increasing inclusiveness.²⁷ There is a citizenship that we all may share, but some citizens are more fully enfranchised than others. While Lilla says, correctly, that “citizenship” is “extendable and its meaning expandable,” it is certainly not changeable in *only* the one direction. Agamben has done the most work on governmental “denationalization” programs under fascism, which stripped “undesirables” of their citizenship,²⁸ showing plainly that citizenship is contractible as well extendable. By similar dynamics, its meaning can narrow even in a liberal democracy.

Read in the subjunctive, however, as that to which *we* must *appeal* (constituting *ourselves* through that appeal), Lilla’s “shared citizenship” is related to both Young’s critique and also to Stanley Cavell’s substitution of an activity – “finding” – for a kind of substance, or foundation, that would simply, in itself, *found* our mutual belonging. On this view, we cultivate citizenship not by pointing to the fact that I have element *A* and you have element *A* and therefore we *share* something, but by reconceiving *sharing* as a present-continuous verb, an ongoing

project. This takes work; Cavell frames Young's ontological error as the result of a certain "disappointment" with human existence, which "evidently has to do with the idea of, and the instability of, finding and maintaining a communal life." This disappointment has to do with the fact that maintaining a communal life requires our labor; we are *led* to make the ontological error by attempting to disown our responsibilities through "opting for false totalities, theories of our lives."²⁹ The Reagan dispensation's "morally undemanding life in a less political America" will not do. There is indeed something to be tended, but it is not an inner homunculus, as Lilla characterizes the identity-politics project; it is the shared nation itself: "our country," yet to be achieved, just as Rorty's title portrays it.

This version of things gets around both the idea that we need a perfect a substantial ideal to do the work for us and also the idea that *we* need to perfect or purify ourselves as a first step toward undertaking the work. While keeping our eye on the project of national ideals, it's as decidedly works-in-progress that we take up the labor. If this is what Lilla means, we agree – but if so, more is needed in civics education than the presentation of an inclusive national history and a description of our government's structure.

A VITAL CIVICS EDUCATION

The difficult aspect of building solidarity happens in *the lodging of the demand for recognition*, the appeal. The particular grounds on which that recognition is claimed is not simply a variable that, if chosen correctly, can be plugged into an algorithm to get a desired result. Therefore, a revitalized mode of civics education will take seriously an emerging domain of thought that Mathew Abbott calls "political ontology."³⁰ In Abbott's terms, by revealing that none of the proposed *facts* that we suppose might ensure our mutual belonging *necessarily* do so, we are "undermining the idea that we could find or establish an ontological foundation for human life."³¹ But this should not be understood as destroying the possibility of belonging together. "This critique," says Abbott, "is not designed to show that we really lack something that we (sometimes) think

we have, but rather that we do not need something that we (sometimes) think we lack.”³² Relocating our intellectual energy at the making and answering of claims to belong, rather than the supposedly necessary facts grounding those claims, might help to cultivate the solidarity that Lilla desires, the solidarity that identity politics originally aimed at achieving.

An approach to civics education oriented to the dynamics of claiming one’s belonging and responding to such claims, in addition to the standard facts about the structure and ideals of American governance, offers a way of owning up to the indissoluble ontological bond between facts and values. When Lilla discusses civics education in his book, in fact, he implies this bond between facts and values in a way that extends beyond the limits of his own ontological commitments. In praising the sixties generation as “patriots,” Lilla characterizes this designation in terms of the way “they cared about what happened to their fellow citizens and cared when they felt America’s democratic principles had been violated.”³³ He notes that “the fact that they had taken civics classes taught by high school teachers tapping the blackboard with pointers may have had something to do with it.”³⁴

It’s not the particular information on the board that these pointers are tapping that cements the link between civics education and caring about one’s democracy and one’s fellow citizens; it’s the space that is given to these kinds of facts, facts about the political relations among and between citizens. Noting the way that values always accompany the facts being taught, William A. Johnson says, “Individually we as teachers work toward creating the disposition that a particular text ... is meaningful and relevant ... These group dynamics—the construction of the attitude that Plato is *important*, that Plato *should be interesting*—are fundamental to education, and fundamental to high intellectual experience.”³⁵ By mere curricular inclusion, on the one hand, the value of the content of a civics course is at least partially expressed. But Johnson alludes to the pedagogical work that makes such value *stand out*: he calls it working to create a disposition toward certain facts or principles as important, even *foundational*. On this understanding, it is not the facts themselves that do this work; it is an ongoing labor, related to building, reforming, and maintaining a certain value

disposition, one that manifests publicly, in what Johnson calls “group dynamics.”

A civics education that pursues these ends will acknowledge that the foundation of American democracy, American society, lies not in any abstract facts or essence – about persons or ideals or history – but in a continued willingness to wrangle over the interpretation of these facts with others, a process that values both the facts and the others involved. “Foundation,” as Cavell says, “reaches no farther than each issue of finding.”³⁶ Abbott describes such a commitment to *finding* as a matter of “comporting [ourselves] such that one very particular fact is lived as valuable.”³⁷ A civics education that pursues these ends will avoid accidentally inculcating Young’s ontological error precisely by seeing itself as bequeathing an “ontological task,” which Abbott characterizes as “attending to something rather than learning or coming to know it” such that “responding rightly means finding – again and again, though each time differently – the right way of living.”³⁸

Where Lilla condemns the way that identity politics lends itself to homunculus-tending, an ontological tweak refocuses the aim of tending and attention from something inner and essential to the relations among one’s fellows themselves, directly. This is to suggest that what constitutes our belonging together is *internal* to that belonging, and so the constitution of our belonging together is inseparable from our *reconstitution*. A civics education that emphasizes the importance of *finding* ever-evolving ways of belonging together rather than the facts that supposedly *found* our mutual belonging is an education not *exclusive* of facts but rather *inclusive* of obligations and values there for the living.

1 Mark Lilla, “The End of Identity Liberalism,” *New York Times*, November 19, 2016. Accessed 10/30/2018 at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html>

2 Thanks to Howard Curzer for this term.

3 Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 8.

4 *Ibid.*, 33.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*, 43.

- 7 Ibid., 60.
- 8 Ibid., 61.
- 9 Ibid., 28.
- 10 Ibid., 12.
- 11 Ibid., 120.
- 12 Ibid., 122.
- 13 Ibid., 123.
- 14 Ibid., 126.
- 15 Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 3.
- 16 Ibid., 90.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Paul Frymer, *Building an American Empire: The Era of Territorial and Political Expansion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).
- 19 Sam Erman, "Meanings of Citizenship in the US Empire: Puerto Rico, Isabel Gonzalez, and the Supreme Court, 1898 to 1905," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 27, no. 4 (2008): 5-33.
- 20 Laura Weinrib, *The Taming of Free Speech* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).
- 21 Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 98.
- 22 Ibid., 87.
- 23 Ibid., 86.
- 24 Ibid., 82.
- 25 Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 121-2.
- 26 Ibid., 120.
- 27 Sam Erman, *Almost Citizens: Puerto Rico, the U.S. Constitution, and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
- 28 Giorgio Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer* (Stanford University Press, 2016), 109-111.
- 29 Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 124.
- 30 Mathew Abbott, *The Figure of This World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).
- 31 Ibid., 8.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 138.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 William A. Johnson, "Reading cultures and education," in *Reading between the Lines: Perspectives on Foreign Language Literacy*, ed. Peter C. Patrikis (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 9-23.
- 36 Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 114.
- 37 Abbott, *Figure of This World*, 159.
- 38 Ibid.