

Motivating Action: Attending to Pride and Solidarity in Civic Education

Paula McAvoy

North Carolina State University

The central question of Shuffelton and Gottlieb’s provocative article is, “Should we [civic educators] aim to create solidarities of identity? Solidarities of citizenship? Or, as they argue, both, with caveats?” They go on to ask, “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?”

They come to these questions in response to Mark Lilla’s op-ed and book in which he asserts that the lesson the left should learn from the 2016 election is that, “the age of identity liberalism must be brought to an end.”¹ Schools, he believes, are implicated in our national demise though a “fixation on diversity” and the distortion of history in which identity politics has replaced learning about our common ideals—an argument that harkens back to Arthur Schlesinger Jr’s (1991), *The Disuniting of America*.²

I first came across the op-ed when it appeared in my email inbox in November, 2016. My mother-in-law sent it with the following message: “I’d love to hear what you think of this piece. I found it spot on.” My response was to turn to my spouse (her son) who received the same email to say, “*You* should respond to your mother.” My reaction was in part based on what I find to be a lot of wild empirical claims that Lilla makes about the causes of political polarization, the state of civic education, and the political attitudes of young people that are simplistic and sometimes just wrong. I am going to resist the urge to engage in a debate about the evidence. Instead, Shuffelton and Gottlieb invite us to consider Lilla’s normative claims that something called identity politics is bad for democracy, bad political strategy, and bad civic education. The authors grant that what Lilla labels “solidarities of identity” can be misused—even

weaponized—but so can Lilla’s preferred civic aim, “solidarities of citizenship.” What is needed, they claim, is clarity about the proper use of each.

In my response, I’d like to insert into the discussion a definition of identity politics and argue that there is good reason to hold onto this political strategy outside and inside of schools.

While I was seeking out a definition of identity politics, I came upon a 2006 NYT book review written by sociologist Orlando Patterson about Tommie Shelby’s, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundation of Black Solidarity*.³ In the review, Patterson offers this definition of identify politics:

It emerged as an emancipatory mode of political action and thinking based on the shared experience of injustice by particular groups -- notably blacks, women, gays, Latinos and American Indians. It is a movement born in a double negation: the rejection of rejection, through the proud, self-conscious union of those who have been defined as belonging to an excluded group.⁴

His use of passive voice is important here. “Those who have been defined” signals that the identity is put on the group in order to justify exclusion. The exclusion is not simply a structural injustice as in, “excluding women from voting is wrong.” Embedded in the exclusion are the justifications that undercut the self-worth of members of the excluded group: women are not smart enough to vote, not cut out for politics, they don’t have the right dispositions. Patterson claims that learning to be “proud” and form a “self-conscious union” is necessary to reject the rejection and become political. Patterson goes on to observe that:

It is precisely this focus on a particular group ... that disturbs many, on the left and right, and in the center. The traditional left is uncomfortable with conceptions of solidarity not based on class. The right has little patience with the radical reordering of what it views as natural, God-given relations and identities. Meanwhile, the individualism of the mainstream center, and its insistence that rights and redress apply equally

to all citizens, is clearly at odds with notions of collective solidarity.⁵

Enter Mark Lilla, who is making one of these centrist critiques of identity politics.

Even with this more precise and narrow definition offered by Patterson, there are many forms that identity politics can take. It can, as Tommie Shelby identifies in his book, look more like black nationalism that embraces some essentialism or a civil rights approach that seeks to right wrongs in the way that Lilla appreciates.⁶ What identity politics cannot be, in my mind, is white supremacy, because white supremacy does not aim to rectify an injustice. They cannot claim a rejection that is not there. Lilla might respond, however, that the assertion of a collective identity by marginalized groups allows every other oppressed and non-oppressed group to say, “If you claim something for your group, then I get to claim something for mine.” This opens the door for everyone to play what Lilla calls “the identity game,” and democracy is the loser. More specifically, he argues, this is a losing strategy for the left, and so everyone should move to the center.

My first point is to say that if there is value in the original appeal to justice within identity politics, then we should be careful about saying that Jim Crow laws or other acts of white supremacy are identity politics misused and instead say, “No, what *you* [white supremacists] are communicating is something altogether different.” This means that the message of Black Lives Matter is fundamentally different than All Lives Matter; the first has rhetorical and political power and the second washes all of it away. These rhetorical debates need to get worked out in the public sphere, and win or lose, that’s just what democracy is.

Of course, democracy in the United States and in many other countries is in trouble, and for better or worse this makes people turn to schools and civic education as a potential solution. The authors successfully argue that Lilla’s solution to the “dual-use problem,” which recommends teaching students facts and foundational values, is not sufficient for creating the solidarity of citizenship, or what Sigal Ben-Porath has labeled “shared fate” citizenship.⁷ Instead, the authors advocate for an education that treats democracy as a work-in-progress.

To that end, civic educators ought to prepare students for the labor it takes to maintain and improve the system we have. Further, they need to be given the opportunity to reinterpret the facts of the past and make meaning for themselves about how we ought to live together.

I am sympathetic to the aims that they describe, but I was left wondering about the place of identity in this prescription. Have we ended up in a centrist position that crowds out an important role for identity? Shuffelton and Gottlieb have positioned identity as a legitimate claim for recognition and belonging, which requires an accounting of the facts of injustice and taking an honest look at our history. This is no doubt important. But from the position of a marginalized group, does this approach lose the political power of a “proud and self-conscious union” among members of an excluded group?

Lilla is truly annoyed by multicultural education and the celebration of difference, but in its best versions teaching students to appreciate their own cultural heritage, to see value in the contribution of others, and to see themselves in the curriculum all aim to create pride, or at the very least not undermine it. If educators, at a minimum, grant that there are structural injustices, then preparing young people for democratic life should also be attentive to the psychic harms associated with living in such a society. Pride and solidarity motivate political action and that more than anything is necessary for the health of a democracy.

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

2 Arthur Meier Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998).

3 Tommie Shelby, *We Who are Dark: The Philosophical Foundation of Black Solidarity* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press: Harvard University Press, 2007).

4 Orlando Patterson, “Being and Blackness,” *The New York Times* (January 2006), <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/08/books/review/being-and-blackness.html>

5 Ibid.

6 Tommie Shelby, *We Who are Dark: The Philosophical Foundation of Black Solidarity* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press: Harvard University Press, 2007).

7 Sigal R. Ben-Porath, *Citizenship Under Fire: Democratic Education in Times of Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).