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AMERICAN AWAKENING

Identity Politics and
Other Afflictions of Our Time

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Preface

If humanism were right in declaring that man is born to be happy, he would not be born to die. Since his body is doomed to die, his task on earth evidently must be of a more spiritual nature.¹

§1. This book is about three separable but ultimately related ailments from which we suffer immensely in America today: identity politics, bipolarity, and addiction. Should these three ailments be gathered together in one book? I think they should be, because although identity politics is the more immediate threat, our republic cannot be healthy if we do not also understand and address bipolarity and addiction. The latter two are generally treated as behind-the-scenes psychological or physiological problems about which only trained experts are authorized to write. I have no such authorization. I write as a political philosopher, attentive to what the great authors of the West have written about the human condition; and I write as an observer of, and in, our times. Because of my training, I will consider both bipolarity and addiction in an unorthodox, and I hope, more capacious way than our psychologists and medical experts generally allow. I will look at bipolarity and addiction as existential, political, social, and theological issues that the pharmacology recommended by experts cannot cure. All this, in due course. First, I will make a few observations about identity politics, to give some sense of its contours and of the danger that it poses. Unlike bipolarity and addiction, which seem to belong to our

1. Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, "A World Split Apart" (commencement address, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, June 8, 1978), <https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/a-world-split-apart>.

quiet private affairs, identity politics is a very loud public affair. Moreover, it is a loud public affair that is making constructive public life increasingly difficult if not impossible. That is why more than half of *American Awakening* is concerned with this affliction. To wrestle with the quiet, seemingly private problems we face, we must first take care of the loud public problem. To start our longer journey to recovery, let us start with what is right in front of our nose.

§2. By so many measures, life is getting better all the time. There have been no global wars in the last seven decades. Standards of living have increased nearly everywhere, well beyond anything imaginable at the end of World War II. Many diseases have been eradicated. Starvation is rarer. Drinking water is more readily available. Housing stock has multiplied and modern conveniences have grown exponentially. Travel by every means is safer. International communication is instantaneous and inexpensive. The computing power of a common smartphone exceeds the computing power the astronauts of Apollo 11 had at their disposal during the first manned landing on the moon in 1969.

§3. Alongside the visible material economy that has made these improvements possible lies another economy that is also concerned with weighing and measuring. In this economy, however, we do not weigh and measure empirical things like money, time, and materials. Rather, we seek to measure *transgression and innocence*—sometimes with a view to the mystery that no balance of payment between them is possible, and sometimes with a view to the demand that all accounts be settled. I will say more about both of these views in a moment. For now, I will say that this invisible economy is uncorrelated with the economic advances we make and, therefore, with the happiness and well-being that is supposed to be ours. Strangely enough, this invisible economy also seems to obtrude all the more as our standard of living increases. Perhaps this is because when we attempt to build a world in which the only things we weigh and measure are money, time, and materials, we

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momentarily deceive ourselves that this is the only economy in which we are involved. Then, because we can never escape its primordial tug, the invisible economy concerned with weighing and measuring transgression and innocence disrupts and mocks the well-measured world of money, time, and materials that we have constructed and demands our full attention. Alexis de Tocqueville, the great author of *Democracy in America*, seemed to think this twofold economy was always going to haunt us. In 1840, he wrote:

The soul has needs that must be satisfied. Whatever pains are taken to distract it from itself, it soon grows bored, restless, and anxious amid the pleasures of the senses. If ever the thoughts of the great majority of mankind came to be concentrated solely on the search for material blessings, one can anticipate that there would be a colossal reaction in the souls of men. They would distractedly launch out into the world of spirits for fear of being held too tightly bound by the body's fetters.²

In the United States, material prosperity was measured and loved more than anywhere else at that time. Because this was the case, there would be periodic and enthusiastic irruptions of the invisible economy. Religious enthusiasm—here understood as the acute awareness of our transgressions, and the frenetic search for the cover of innocence—goes with material opulence. From the vantage point of the material world, as many economists remind us, we should be happier by the day. But because the economy to which they point is not the only one in which we live, we are not happier. Man: the material being who knows the material world is not the only measure of who he is. Furnished with material advances that lift him to unimaginable heights, and haunted by unpaid or unpayable debt from his transgressions, which draw him into wretched darkness from which he cannot escape—that is man.

2. Alexis de Tocqueville, pt. 2, chap. 12 in *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, ed. J. P. Mayer (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 535.

§4. The twofold economy of ours, the one visible and the other invisible, is quite clearly on display these days, if we know where to look. I mentioned a moment ago that sometimes the invisible economy is understood in light of the mystery that no balance of payment is possible, and sometimes in the light of the belief that a full account can be given and the demand that all accounts be settled. The former understanding is inscribed into Christianity, and the latter is the viewpoint of identity politics. Consider the former first. A mass shooting occurs somewhere in America. Christians offer up their "thoughts and prayers." They do this because they understand that in the invisible spiritual economy, prayers for the deceased innocents are heard by God—and not just prayers for the recently dead but for the dead of ages past. That is why in the invisible spiritual economy, prayers for the recently deceased are as efficacious as are prayers for African slaves who died on their way to, or on, American soil hundreds of years ago. For those oriented only by the material economy, this is senseless gibberish. A transgression has occurred, and it must be paid for—say, by changing gun laws or, if it were 1865 and we could actually count the cost, by making reparations for slavery. Material suffering requires a material recompense. The balance of payments in the visible economy must be observed. In the invisible spiritual economy, on the contrary, payments never quite balance—at least not in our lifetimes. The innocent suffer, and we do not know why. Good people die, and bad people live. Christian prayer begins and ends with the incontrovertible fact of the imbalance of payments. Innocent people were gunned down. Where were the scales of justice? Innocent slaves died wretched deaths. Where were the scales of justice? The material economy promises much, but because of the incontrovertible fact of the imbalance of payments, the invisible spiritual economy can never be superseded by the visible economy. Money, time, and materials render a portion of our life visibly coherent and manageable, but not all of it. The justice of payment alone does not fully comprehend the world; uncompensated suffering and mercy, too, have their place on the in-

visible balance sheet of life that only God understands. So declares the Christian. We live within two economies. The one involves payments made and payments received; the other involves something deeper and more impenetrable—an economy within which we are to prayerfully abide, but which we cannot alter. The betrayal of Christ by Judas in the Gospel of Matthew illuminates the collision between these two economies. Judas, the treasurer for the disciples, the one who weighs and measures in the visible economy, is incensed that expensive ointment has been poured out on Jesus's head. The ointment could have been sold, and the proceeds given to the poor. Jesus replies: "The poor will always be with you"—which is to say there is an invisible economy in which the scales of justice do not balance in the way that Judas wants them to. Concluding that Jesus is not the revolutionary Judas had expected Him to be, he betrays Jesus for silver coin, which he presumably wants to use to help balance the scales of justice in the visible economy.³ For the Christian, man, try as he may, cannot resolve the imbalance of payments in the invisible economy. Only God can; and He will not do so until the end of history. A no less remarkable distinction between the two economies occurs at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke: "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that *all the world* should be taxed."⁴ Joseph and Mary go to Bethlehem to be counted and taxed—to be included in the bookkeeping of payments that "the world" records. The birth of Jesus does not happen at the Inn, however, but rather in a sheltering place for animals—probably a cave—where Mary lays Him in an animal food trough (a manger).⁵ Jesus is invisible to the world that payment records; He comes to give relief in the other economy that is beyond price, the economy that man cannot control.

3. The entire scene plays out in Matt. 26:7–15. Doubt is cast on Judas's deeper motive in John 12:6, where it is suggested that he is a thief.

4. Luke 2:1 (emphasis added).

5. See Luke 2:7.

§5. Identity politics is also concerned with the invisible spiritual economy that dwells alongside the visible economy. Much has been written about identity politics, but little of it comprehends identity politics as an attempted exposition, distorted though it may be, of the mysterious invisible economy that we cannot escape. Identity politics comprehends this invisible economy in terms of a relationship between transgression and innocence, between purportedly monovalent groups—white, heterosexual men, on the one hand; and blacks, women, persons who identify as LGBTQ, and persons who identify with still other identity groups, on the other. These groups are, of course, visible. This makes the calculus complicated. Identity politics is concerned with the invisible economy of transgression and innocence, but seeks to understand that invisible economy in terms of the relationship between visible groups. In the world that identity politics constructs, for example, it is axiomatic that the “systemic racism” of one visible group toward another runs so deep that it cannot even be measured. Although it is invisible, it is real. On the one hand, therefore, we are asked to ignore the visible economic relations between members of visible groups when, say, white, heterosexual men are considerably poorer than members of groups that identity politics declares to be among the innocents. On the other hand, when the economic relations are reversed, and white, heterosexual men are the economically wealthier group, identity politics declares that the deeper cause of the visible imbalance is the systemic racism in the invisible economy of transgression and innocence in which both groups are involved. Identity politics *always* maintains the purity of those it considers innocents and the stain of those it considers transgressors, regardless of any visible evidence to the contrary. White, heterosexual men, who are “the least among us,”⁶ are therefore invisible within the world identity politics constructs. That is why the devastation of the opioid crisis among whites in

6. Luke 9:48 and Matt. 25:40.

America has not captured the attention of those who live within the world identity politics constructs, and why Hillary Clinton ignored or castigated a vast swath of the American electorate and lost the 2016 presidential election. Adherents of identity politics are untroubled by the necessity of oscillating back and forth between ignoring the visible evidence, in the case of poorer white, heterosexual men, and singularly fixing on it, in the case of richer white, heterosexual men. In the world identity politics constructs, the visible economy either tells us nothing or is invested with a significance that the visible facts do not warrant. That is one of the consequences of attempting to render an invisible economy of transgression and innocence in terms of the relationships between visible groups. White, heterosexual men are either invisible or they are the hidden cause of every visible transgression in the world. The Democratic Party cannot win national elections if its candidates continue to think this way.

§6. This paradox and its political implications aside, the identity politics fixation on the invisible spiritual economy has not received the attention it deserves. The predominant account of identity politics today treats identity as if it pertains to differing *kinds* of people. This sort of analysis misses much. It has been long understood—as early as the 1830s, when Tocqueville wrote about it—that as we become more disconnected and our lives get smaller in the democratic age, the temptation to make distinctions between others and ourselves grows. When we are lost in the lonely crowd, we look for ways to distinguish ourselves. Our imagination wanders, and our pride demands more than numbing anonymity. Surely, we are more than a flickering soliloquy that emerges out of nothing and returns to the dust. To escape this fate, is it any wonder that so many Americans today turn to genetic-testing services like 23andMe in the hope of discovering who they really are? We do not want anonymity; we want to be somebody. Services like 23andMe tells us who we are. We are a little of this *kind* and a little of that *kind*.

§7. This need to have something that defines us and distinguishes us from the crowd is an important development, and certainly contributes to the fracturing of our politics. Loneliness and anonymity, however, are not the only reasons for the popularity of services like 23andMe. In addition to telling us about the larger kind of which we are an instance, we also want the assurance that some marker of our inheritance provides immutable proof that in the invisible economy from which we cannot escape, we can be counted among the innocents rather than among the transgressors.⁷ The need, so amply documented since the 1960s, to stand out from the lonely crowd,⁸ to express our individuality, is today intermixed with—if not eclipsed by—another need: the need to be counted as a member of an innocent group within the invisible economy of transgression and innocence on which identity politics fixes. Identity politics is not about who we are as individuals; it is about the stain and purity associated with who we are as members of a group.

§8. Identity politics is not satisfied with the Christian account that there will always be an imbalance of payments that only God can redress through His infinite mercy. Identity politics demands a complete accounting, so that the score can be settled once and for all—or, if it cannot be settled, then held over the head of transgressors like a guillotine, in perpetuity. That is why establishing what one group owes another is central to the identity politics enterprise. The complete accounting that is needed requires ongoing investigations that clarify just how stained the transgressors are, and how pure the innocents are. This now seems to be the singular task of our colleges and universities, which have thoroughly renounced their ancient charge,

7. See "Holiday Special," YouTube video, 1:11, posted by South Park Studios, September 25, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKxtXzAgGew>.

8. See David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963).

dating from the founding of Plato's Academy in 387 BC, of assisting students in ascending from mere opinion to knowledge and wisdom. Once many of our American colleges and universities were Christian. Increasingly embarrassed by this, over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they adopted the Greek ideal of knowledge and wisdom. Now in the twenty-first century, they have returned to the Christian fixation on transgression and innocence.⁹ The new version of this Christian fixation, however, makes no allowance for the long-standing Christian way of understanding either transgression or innocence—namely, as a relationship first and foremost between God and man. God is nowhere to be found in the identity-politics accounting scheme. Neither is forgiveness, which would erase the score altogether, and leave us with no scores to settle. Defenders of identity politics often claim to be egalitarians concerned about existing inequalities; yet who among them, I wonder, could actually endure the radical equality that would result if we were to erase the debt and innocence points that we are now told, in the most precise terms,¹⁰ we owe or are owed, and meet one another unencumbered, face to face? Perhaps Christians who actually understand the fantastic claim that regardless of their kind, they are all equally *adopted sons and daughters of God* could do that.¹¹ Identity politics, notwithstand-

9. See Steven B. Gerrard, "The Rise of the Comfort College: At American Universities, Personal Grievances Are What Everyone's Talking About," Bloomberg, "Opinion," September 9, 2019, https://www.bloomberg.com/amp/opinion/articles/2019-09-09/free-speech-is-no-longer-safe-speech-at-today-s-elite-colleges?_twitter_impression=true.

10. See "Intersectionality Resources," Intersectionality Score Calculator, n.d., <https://intersectionalityscore.com/learn>. The site states: "We encourage you to learn more about the growing movement of intersectionality and how to use it in your daily lives. It is also important to teach our young people how to categorize people quickly by their intersectionality. This way, they won't become racist, homophobic, Islamophobic, sexist, or have other undesirable thoughts."

11. See John 1:12; Gal. 4:4–5; Eph. 1:15; and Heb. 2:10–13.

ing its debt to Christianity and its surface profession of faith both in equality and in the sanctity of the individual, wants only a hierarchy of transgression and innocence. Here is the tribalism that awaits us, based on our purportedly permanent inheritance of stain and purity. Christian radical equality—hoped for but not yet implemented on Earth—is, through its identity politics stepchild, currently being supplanted by a strange sort of antiegalitarian *spiritual eugenics*, according to which the pure and innocent groups must ascend and the stained transgressor groups must be purged.

§9. Other religions also use the language of purity and stain, of transgression and innocence, but our long familiarity with Christianity in America means that the invocation of these categories within identity politics derives from Christianity, and from Protestantism in particular. Most of this book is concerned with the deeply deformed relationship between identity politics and Protestant Christianity. Surveys may indicate that Americans have lost or are losing their religion; however, the fever of identity politics that now sweeps the nation suggests these surveys are looking in the wrong place and asking the wrong questions. Americans have not lost their religion. Americans have relocated their religion to the realm of politics.¹² The institutional separation of church and state may be largely intact, but the separation between religion and politics has largely collapsed. More precisely, with respect to the matter of presumption of guilt and innocence, they have traded places. Once, because of the doctrine of original sin, there was a presumption of guilt in the churches, and because of our legal history, a presumption of innocence in the realm of

12. An excellent treatment of the way in which American Protestant culture has not disappeared but rather taken up residence elsewhere can be found in Joseph Bottum, *An Anxious Age: The Post-Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America* (New York: Random House, 2014). See also James A. Morone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

politics. Today, the abandonment of the doctrine of original sin has had the curious effect of lifting the burden of guilt in the churches—and of shifting it to politics. Whatever the law may say about our innocence, the presumption of identity politics is that man—or rather the white, heterosexual man—is guilty.¹³ This is a dangerous reversal of legal norms that in the Anglo-American world took centuries to develop and take hold.

§10. The “identity politics of innocence,” as I call it throughout this book, has transformed politics. It has turned politics into a religious venue of sacrificial offering. Ponder for a moment the Christian understanding of sacrificial offering. Without the sacrifice of Christ, the Innocent Lamb of God, there would be no Christianity. Christ, the Scapegoat, renders the impure pure—by taking upon Himself “the sins of the world.” In purging the Divine Scapegoat, those for whom He is the sacrificial offering are purified. Identity politics is a political version of this cleansing, for groups rather than for individual persons. The scapegoat identity politics offers up for sacrifice is the white, heterosexual man. If he is purged, its adherents imagine, the world itself, along with the remaining groups in it, will be cleansed of stain. Without exception, every major action item of the Democratic Party today is traceable to this supposition. The Democratic Party pushback against national borders; its unwavering insistence that fundamental political and economic transformations are necessary to address climate change; its disgust with “dirty” fossil

13. See Wesley Yang, “America’s New Sex Bureaucracy,” *Tablet*, September 24, 2019, <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/291105/americas-new-sex-bureaucracy>: “[We have before us today an] ideology [that] is a successor to liberalism. It brandishes terms that superficially resemble normative liberalism—terms like *diversity* and *inclusion*—but in fact seeks to supplant it. This new regime, in which administrative power has been fashioned into a blunt instrument of deterrence, marks off a crucial distinction—between the liberal rule of law, and the punitive system of surveillance rooted in identity politics known as ‘social justice.’”

fuels; its demand for wealth redistribution; and its resolve that every mediating institution in which citizens gather must be altered so as to become "inclusive"—all of these have at their root the supposition that the nation-state, market commerce, the petrochemicals that fuel it, the conventional generative family, our civic institutions, and our religious institutions are unclean or obsolete because of the hand white, heterosexual man has had in building and maintaining them.

§II. We can and should talk about the pressing issues before us. Self-government requires nothing less. Substantive deliberation cannot occur, however, if adherents of identity politics are animated by the angry need for *catharsis*, as the desire to scapegoat always involves. Calling someone a "racist," "misogynist," "homophobe," "transphobe," "Islamophobe," "fascist," "Nazi," "hater," "denier," or any such name *is* cathartic. These words carry with them the power to banish and to exile. Once they have been uttered, the comportment of both the accuser and the accused visibly changes. The accuser beams with the iridescent light of discharged rage; the accused slinks into the darkness, shamed by the leprosy of his irredeemable stain. An unbridgeable chasm between the two has opened; they now stand on opposite sides of an impenetrable border wall within a community they were both members of a few short minutes ago. Identity politics adherents declare that *visible* borders between nations should be abolished. There will always be borders, however; abolish them in one place and they will emerge in another. Identity politics erects *invisible* borders between the pure and the stained. Too many of the political declarations we hear today intend only to banish fellow citizens. Neither conversations about nor actions taken in response to our pressing problems are possible if the deeper purpose of a political program—perhaps even more important than the political program itself, *which is but a pretext*—is to purge a group or humiliate its members into silence. However enfeebled today, Christianity has burned itself into the soul of Western man and, for

now at least, holds us back from the real impetus beneath identity politics, which is actual group purgation. We will see what the future brings. Christianity's deepest insight, perennially violated by Christians themselves, is that no mortal group can cover over the sins of another group. Historically understood, this insight is a staggering breakthrough, so rare as to be exceptional, since most of human history bears witness to the conviction that the catharsis of group scapegoating *does* restore the cleanliness of the community. Writing nearly a century before Tocqueville, Jean-Jacques Rousseau noted in 1759 that prior to the advent of Christianity,

political war was also theological war: the dominion of the gods were, so to speak, determined by the boundaries of nations. . . . Far from men fighting for gods, it was, as in Homer, the gods who fought for men.¹⁴

By this, Rousseau meant to give some indication of the rage that scapegoating another nation once involved. So cathartic was its ecstatic revelry that gods had to be invoked as a cause. Christianity, he mournfully declared, put an end to that, and had diminished politics ever since. Perhaps Rousseau was premature in his assessment that the ancient gods have died away.¹⁵

§12. We find ourselves at a remarkable impasse. Identity politics wishes to return us to the unexceptional condition, the pre-Christian condition: One group—in its current formulation, the white, heterosexual man—is avowed to be *the* transgressor. All others—women, blacks, Hispanics, LGBTQ persons—have their sins of omission and

14. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, bk. 4, "The Social Contract," chap. 8 in *The Major Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, trans. and ed. John T. Scott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 264–65.

15. See R. R. Reno, *Return of the Strong Gods: Nationalism, Populism, and the Future of the West* (New York: Gateway Editions, 2019).

commission covered over by scapegoating this group. Set against this is the exceptional Christian understanding that man's transgression, his "sin," is "original." This means it is always-already-there *before* any lineage or inheritance constitutes him as a *kind*, and therefore that group scapegoating cannot absolve him of his impurity. Hide quietly behind your "identity" if you wish; your anxiety about your own transgressions will not dissipate. Displace your anxiety by relentlessly aiming the arrow of accusation outward at other groups; the haunting specter of transgression will not disappear. Its source is deeper than identity politics comprehends.

§13. The arrangement that identity politics specifies has placed the scapegoated white, heterosexual man in a curious position, indeed. In order to escape cathartic rage, he must prove his innocence by virtue-signaling¹⁶—or more accurately, by *innocence*-signaling—his support for various social justice causes, so that he, like other groups of innocents, can be covered with righteousness. Only when covered in this way does the cathartic rage that brings social death *pass over* him and settle elsewhere, as it must. The Hebrews of ancient times were told by God that death would pass over their houses, and no one in their households would die, if they marked their front doors with the innocent blood of a slain lamb.¹⁷ Today in America, the white, heterosexual man must reenact a version of that innocence-signaling liturgy if social death is to pass over him. Jews in America celebrate Passover once a year; if cathartic rage is to pass over the white, heterosexual man, he must celebrate the identity politics version of that liturgy daily, by displaying signs of inno-

16. The term "virtue-signaling" does not capture what is really occurring. The task within identity politics is not to demonstrate virtue but to demonstrate innocence. Virtue is a category of Greek origin; innocence is a category of biblical origin.

17. See Exod. 12:13: "And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where ye are: and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt."

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cence on his front door—or, more likely, his office door—for all to see. If you doubt this, wander through the university and college buildings in America that house the offices of our professors. You will soon discover ample evidence of this strange identity politics Passover ritual. Decals that declare, “This office is Green”; pictures of Foucault; dated posters announcing Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebrations; an announcement about upcoming “Diversity Training”; yet another *New York Times* article taped to a professor’s office door that thinly masks its hatred of President Trump—if you display these symbols of your innocence, or of your sympathy with the innocents, social death will surely pass you by. The displays on the office doors of corporate America are no different.

Try as he may, however, the circumstance that the white, heterosexual man can never alter is this: because of his permanent transgressive status, he begins with a deficit of “innocence points,” and must fight his way back to a zero balance, which is as far as he can ever advance. In the Garden of Eden, Adam hid behind a fig leaf. In identity politics, the white, heterosexual man can attempt to hide behind the fig leaf of social justice to find temporary reprieve; but the leaf is see-through, and his nakedness is always visible for all to see. In the Garden of Eden, God could see Adam’s nakedness. So, too, can members of groups that identity politics counts among the innocents see the nakedness of the white, heterosexual man. Like God, they also declare his irredeemable guilt.

§14. By alerting the reader to the theological perversity of replacing the Divine Scapegoat of Christianity with the all-too-mortal white, heterosexual man as the scapegoat, I am *not* saying that the white, heterosexual man is innocent, as many who claim they are on the Alt-Right declare. Far from it. If anything, as the careful reader has already discovered, I wish to save the category of transgression, in all its depth, and I fear that both identity politics and the Alt-Right will end up stripping the category of its profound Christian significance,

which will deprive us of hope. On the contrary, I am saying that in the world that identity politics constructs, the white, heterosexual man becomes more than who he really is. He becomes a member of a scapegoated group that takes away the sins of the world, rather than being a mortal of mixed inheritance, like everyone else, involved in transgression and searching for redemption. The deepest mystery of transgression and innocence cannot be understood by focusing our attention on groups. That is the Christian claim. That was Martin Luther King Jr.'s claim. That is the claim made in this book as well. No one group is unequivocally pure or stained; and without the ability to establish such purity, just who the transgressors are and who the innocents are is impossible to determine. Identity politics stands or falls on the claim that groups are unities of transgressors or innocents; and that the invisible spiritual economy from which we cannot escape can be understood in terms of the purity or stain that inheres in each visible group.

§15. Throughout this book, I contrast the identity politics of innocence with "the liberal politics of competence." Over the years, my colleagues at Georgetown and elsewhere have reminded me that the term "liberal" now belongs to the political left; and that the only political alternative to the Left in America today is captured by the term "conservative." I stubbornly refuse to heed their admonitions because I think retrieving the liberal alternative to the identity politics of the Left and to the conservative politics of the Right can provide the only way out of our current morass. Since the French Revolution in 1789, the Left has wished to start over; hence its relentless attack on *inheritance*, broadly understood. Identity politics is the latest version of that attack. Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) is the founding text of the conservative movement in America, precisely because of its compelling defense of inheritance. There is much to recommend in Burke, his book, and the conservative moment. Contrary to the claims of the Left, we cannot live without our inheritance.

Something is missing, however, in setting the French Revolution against Burke, and leaving it at that. Are these the only two alternatives: either an infinitely plastic world that has no necessary continuity and that man shapes in the image of his dreams (and his nightmares), or a fixed and identifiable inheritance from which man can securely build a durable world and which is free enough from fault that he can sleep well at night? Before the French Revolution prompted Burke to give the self-conscious defense of inheritance that is today the basis of conservatism, there was a nascent body of liberal thought that had a more mysterious and providential view of human affairs. In this view, historical development and inheritance are not so adamantly opposed. Here, man sees his past, present, and future "through a glass darkly."¹⁸ He does not have the power or authority to shape history according to his will, nor can he fully understand the mixed inheritance that binds him. On this view, we build *from* our mixed inheritance *toward* a historical culmination we can neither wholly understand nor control. This humility about what we can know and what we can do has important liberal institutional implications. Because the institutions of society are the places where our inheritance is both fortified and challenged, the power of the state should intervene rarely, as its interventions are invariably heavy handed and clumsy, even when undertaken with the best of intentions. In the institutions of society, citizens develop the competence they need to fortify those societal institutions and to modify them. Our mixed inherited past and any number of possible futures converge in the deliberations and actions of competent liberal citizens, who build a world together. When the state steps in too often or too strongly, it undermines or destroys the liberal competence that we today so earnestly need.

§16. Many writers in the last half century have seen the danger that the administrative welfare state poses to liberal competence. They

18. 1 Cor. 13:12.

have proposed political and legal remedies to address it: free markets, small government conservatism, a return to federalism, a judiciary steeped in an understanding of the original intent of the Founders, and so forth. My approach stands apart in that it reckons that there is no expressly political or legal remedy to our problem. Identity politics reflects a confusion in our understanding about where the categories of transgression and innocence may properly be worked through. The identity politics of innocence is a wager that these categories belong in politics, and that the liberal politics of competence, now over three centuries in development and possibly at its end, which would attend to merit and developed competences alone, has conscience against it. How such a conclusion has been reached, and the implications of that conclusion, not least for black Americans, who are betrayed by it, occupy a significant portion of this book. This sort of investigation, more than prescriptive political or legal remedies, is the antidote needed to overcome the immense temptation of identity politics today. When our understanding changes, our politics will change.

§17. Upon completing what would have been a short, dense book on the inner logic of identity politics, it became apparent that merely proclaiming the need to return to the liberal politics of competence would not be enough. Identity politics is a formidable impediment to the return of liberal competence; but even if the fervor and enthusiasm of identity politics were to dissipate tomorrow, and Americans were to wake up and discover that they had been deceived by it, they would not return to health. Two immense obstacles would remain. Here, too, there is no expressly political or legal remedy for these obstacles. Citizens themselves are going to have to awaken to the challenges these obstacles pose—or not.

§18. The first obstacle that stands in the way of the return to liberal competence is what our psychologists and medical experts call “bipolarity.” In the twentieth century, it was known as “manic de-

pression." Long before the invention of the field of psychology at the end of the nineteenth century, or before medical science concluded that man can be understood in terms of his brain chemistry, there were other ways of understanding the problem. I will say more about them later in the book. For reasons I will explain, I consider man's bipolarity within the framework of what I call "management society and selfie man." Liberal competence is undermined by the former because of its presumption that all our problems are too big for man to solve with his neighbors, and must be handed over to the global managers of his fate. In such moments, man feels small, impotent, and worthless. Liberal competence is undermined by the latter because selfie man has no neighbors with whom he *needs* to solve his problems. He is unfettered and alone. In moments like these, he feels grand, indefatigable, immune from harm, and so invincible that he is reckless in what he says to and about others. This, too, is a threat to liberal competence, which can only be developed with others, in real time. The configuration of management society and selfie man presumes that such competence is not necessary for man's health and well-being. Management society and selfie man is an arrangement, anticipated by Tocqueville long ago, in which democratic citizens feel themselves to be "greater than kings and less than men."¹⁹ This bipolar arrangement—in which, in exchange for the freedom we gain through social media to become selfie man, we renounce our liberty to address problems with our fellow citizens—is one of the defining characteristics of the post-1989 experiment. An entire generation of young Americans has grown up oscillating back and forth between feelings of extraordinary grandeur and utter impotence. One minute they make plans to "change the world" or "save the planet." The next minute they are overwhelmed by a world so frightening and difficult to negotiate that they text message their friends rather than call them—in fear that an unscheduled call will

19. Tocqueville, pt. 4, chap. 6 in *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, 694.

be too much for either party to endure. This bipolar arrangement, increasingly lived out by the young and old alike, can be ameliorated only by face-to-face, real-time relations between citizens in the institutions of society. Drugs that treat bipolar disease or manic depression or whatever our healthcare professionals will call it next can mask the symptom, but they cannot cure the disease. We do not have a brain chemistry problem; we have a problem of human association. Pharmacology can offer supplements that help us begin to confront the disease, but we go too far when we believe that pharmacological remedies can substitute for a cure. "Pharmacological substitutism," to coin a phrase, was the world Aldous Huxley gave us in his 1931 novel, *Brave New World*.²⁰ We would do well to go back and reread the book. Citizens enthralled by management society and selfie man, however, will likely see the real antidote they need—building a world of liberal competence together with their fellow citizens—as a poison from which they must flee. When we are ill, we are seldom drawn to the antidote that cures us, and instead seek palliatives that keep us alive without really bringing us back to life. This is a problem with no straightforward remedy.

§19. The second obstacle that stands in the way of the return to liberal competence is addiction. Here, too, I will sidestep the assessments offered by our psychologists and medical experts and treat this illness as more ancient and venerable authors did—as what I will call, "the problem of supplements becoming substitutes." No recent writers have written about this as a general problem, though very many have written about its myriad, seemingly unrelated manifestations. These include: the opioid epidemic that is ravaging America; the exponential explosion in the number of empty plastic water bottles that will soon overwhelm us; the uptick in global obesity rates; declining birth rates and the increasing attentiveness to sexual

20. See Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2013).

substitutes for the generative family; the empty promise of social media; the demolition of brick-and-mortar retailers by Amazon; the dubious value of online education; our fixation with Google Maps and driverless cars; the claim that the digital world can fully supplant the analog world; the empty hope that government alone can heal the wound of slavery and its aftermath, can guide the relations between the sexes with Title IX legislation, and can supplant citizen stewardship with environmental regulations; the dreamy view that national borders need no longer be observed; the belief that fiat currency does not invite staggering debt; and the misplaced longing to become global citizens. Every one of these developments, and more, should be understood as an instance in which a supplement has been turned into a substitute, an *addiction* in a more capacious sense. There is an immense temptation to turn supplements into substitutes, which cannot be overstated. When we succumb to this temptation, liberal competence is lost or degraded. Here, too, there is no political or legal remedy that will cure the general problem or its specific manifestations. The cure requires the sober recognition that when citizens turn supplements into substitutes, our immediate, ecstatic, addictive satisfaction is soon met—as the opioid addict well understands—with an emptiness that always follows. There are no shortcuts. Political and legal action may temporarily block us from taking them, but without getting to the root of the problem, closing off one shortcut will be followed by taking another.

§20. In the course of writing *American Awakening: Identity Politics and Other Afflictions of Our Time*, the one image that has illuminated the whole is that of *homo, ex ingenio celeritas quaesitor*: “the creature man, who always looks for shortcuts.” This problem had already been identified in the Hebrew Bible.²¹ Readers of Plato’s *Republic* may also recall that Socrates tells his impatient interlocutors that there is no

21. See Exod. 13:17.

shortcut to the Good.²² We only get to where we really need to go by taking the longer way. Eight hundred years after Plato, St. Augustine, one of the great Christian fathers, noted that because of his transgression, man could not by himself return to God—but that through Christ Incarnate, man was granted a shortcut back to God the Father.²³ In a historical irony befitting the creature man, who always looks for shortcuts, identity politics finds the Christian shortcut *too difficult to endure*, for it demands that man be hard on himself and admit both his stain and his inability to remove it without Divine assistance. The various shortcuts identity politics offers do not require that man be hard on himself; they only require that the white, heterosexual man be hard on himself.²⁴ The rest are innocents, who find a shortcut to purity by scapegoating him. Alas, once he has been purged, someone else—a former innocent—*must* take his place.

That is not the end of the matter, however. Management society and selfie man is a shortcut as well. The difficult labor of liberal citizenship can only be performed in community with others—not the

22. See Plato, bk. 6, 504b, 504c, and 533a in *The Republic*, trans. Richard W. Sterling and William C. Scott (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985).

23. See St. Augustine, bk. 9, chap. 15 in *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 361.

24. White, heterosexual men of the Left, who manage to feign guilt but expect others to pay the price, are the exception to this requirement. See William Voegeli, "Their Sin, Your Penance," *American Mind*, April 22, 2019, <https://americanmind.org/features/justice-that-aint-it-chief/their-sin-your-penance/>: "There are no known examples of any white liberal giving up a tenured professorship or syndicated column so that the vacancy may be filled by a member of an oppressed, under-represented minority group. Though tormented by complicity in the oppression of victims, white liberals reliably devise penances that will be performed by other people. Their ferocity in denouncing housing discrimination, for example, is matched by their resourcefulness in keeping low-income housing out of liberal enclaves like Marin County, California." See also Zach Goldberg, "America's White Saviors," *Tablet*, June 5, 2019, <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/284875/americas-white-saviors>.

abstract universal community that is effortless to join, but the everyday community in which we actually live. The thoughts, words, and deeds we undertake in our actual communities offer ample evidence that we are less pure and more stained than we would like to imagine. The shortcut offered by management society and selfie man allows us to avoid that demoralizing realization. Through this shortcut, we achieve repose not by the hard work of building a world with others, but by bypassing that difficult labor altogether.

By turning supplements into substitutes, we find a shortcut, too. The problem of replacing supplements with substitutes, we will discover, is akin to the problem of replacing the meal with vitamins. We can take the latter to supplement the meal, but not as a substitute for it. We always must return to the meal, to the hard work of developing competence—whether it be the literal competence of cooking for and with our family or the development of competence beyond the confines of the household.

That we hunger for this meal is beyond question. Liberal competence alone can provide the meal and sate the hunger. The vexing question is why we nevertheless continue to opt for the hollow, addictive satisfactions associated with turning supplements into substitutes.

§21. Readers of *American Awakening: Identity Politics and Other Afflictions of Our Time* may wonder if I despair of the future after writing a book declaring not only that America is in the midst of an identity politics religious fervor that imperils it, but also that even if identity politics died down tomorrow, two immense obstacles would remain. To despair would be to admit that liberal competence is irretrievably lost. If I despaired, I would not have written this book in the first place. The title, *American Awakening*, in fact, carries a double meaning. On the one hand, it suggests that we are in the midst of a faux religious revival that can no more cure our illness than our exponentially increasing dependence on drugs can cure us of bipolarity and addiction. On the other hand, it suggests that we may be on the

verge of awakening from the slumber into which we have fallen as a result of identity politics, bipolarity, and addiction, and retrieving the satisfactions of liberal competence toward which I have pointed in these pages. I am hopeful—indeed, expectant—that the latter possibility is the real state of things.