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“In *Primal Screams*, Mary Eberstadt responds to the deepest cries of the wounded souls of our time. Read it and share it.”

—**Kathryn Jean Lopez**, National Review Institute

# PRIMAL SCREAMS



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HOW THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION  
CREATED IDENTITY POLITICS

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Mary Eberstadt



TEMPLETON PRESS

Templeton Press  
300 Conshohocken State Road, Suite 500  
West Conshohocken, PA 19428  
[www.templetonpress.org](http://www.templetonpress.org)

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Set in Janson Text by Pro Production Graphic Services

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019943501

ISBN: 978-1-59947-411-3 (cloth: alk. paper)

This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992  
(Permanence of Paper).

A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

19 20 21 22 23      10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America.

For Nick





“If a man has lost a leg or an eye, he knows he has lost a leg or an eye; but if he has lost a self—himself—he cannot know it, because he is no longer there to know it.”

—Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife  
for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales*



# Contents

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Introduction: The Myth of the Lone Wolf	1
<b>PART ONE: PRIMAL SCREAMS</b>	
1 The Conversation So Far, and Its Limitations	19
2 A New Theory: The Great Scattering	37
3 Supporting Evidence, I: Understanding the “Mine!” in Identity Politics	63
4 Supporting Evidence, II: Feminism as Survival Strategy	71
5 Supporting Evidence, III: Androgyny as Survival Strategy	77
6 Supporting Evidence, IV: How #MeToo Reveals the Breakdown of Social Learning	89

Conclusion: Thoughts on the Rediscovery of Self	103
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**PART TWO: COMMENTARY**

Rod Dreher	113
Mark Lilla	121
Peter Thiel	129
Afterword	133
Acknowledgments	139
Notes	143
Bibliography	165
About the Contributors	169
Index	171

# Introduction

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## THE MYTH OF THE LONE WOLF

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Once upon a time, a great many people held two common beliefs that science has now overruled.

One was that *Canis lupus*, Latin for wolf, commonly exists in isolation from other wolves—an assumption whose pedigree extends back centuries.<sup>1</sup> Another was that wolves roamed in “packs,” meaning more or less random assortments of their species. Today, thanks in part to a thirteen-year study of the wolves on Ellesmere Island in the Northwest Territories by wildlife biologist L. David Mech, we now know that neither of these suppositions is true.<sup>2</sup>

Wolves are, in fact, intensely familial animals. Temple Grandin, an autistic savant and a professor and preeminent authority on animal behavior, summarizes the scientific turnaround with co-author Catherine Johnson as follows:

Mech’s findings turn practically everything we think we know about wolves upside down. . . . Wolves live the way

people do, in families made up of a mom, a dad, and their children. Sometimes an unrelated wolf can be adopted into a pack, or one of the mom's or dad's relatives is part of the pack (the "maiden aunt"). . . . But mostly wolf packs are just a mom, a dad, and their pups.<sup>3</sup>

Such work documenting the mom-and-pop foundations of lupine life is one example of the ways in which new technologies and research are revealing just how social—in particular, how *familial*—animal life is. Ozzie and Harriet, a monogamous pair with offspring attached, is not always the norm. Surprisingly often, though, whether they mate for life or not, animals are now known to exist in kinship structures similar to those governing human beings from time immemorial, replete with mothers and fathers, siblings, extended family, and sometimes other female relatives, childless or otherwise, who help to raise the young.

New investigations into the social lives of animals also reveal this corollary: though many human beings might play today by the rules of the TV comedy *Modern Family*, according to which a "family" is whatever its self-appointed members say it is, other animals do not. Thus, by way of a few examples, what goes for wolves goes also for coyotes and many other mammals: they live in nuclear or extended biological families.<sup>4</sup> Orca offspring live with their parents all their lives.<sup>5</sup> Barring capture, female elephants stay with their mothers until one or the other dies, and baby elephants remain within some fifteen feet of their mothers for the first eight years of life.<sup>6</sup> Bottlenose dolphins can recognize related dolphins after being separated for twenty years.<sup>7</sup> And so on.

Of course there are deep reasons why animals have evolved to behave in such familial ways. In the matter of their need to "know" their own relatives from others, elemental forces are in play. One is the exigency to avoid inbreeding, which is inimical

to long-term survival of the species, and against which animal life has accordingly devised strategies.<sup>8</sup> Another is that there is strength in numbers and cooperation for both predator and prey. In sum:

Most complex animal societies are actually families in which group members are related and therefore share a high proportion of their genes. The cooperative and often complex collective action that arises from such family groups is a product of the interaction of individuals seeking to maximize their own evolutionary fitness.<sup>9</sup>

Other recent groundbreaking research has revealed that animals are *social learners* on a scale hitherto unknown.<sup>10</sup> Many of their cardinal lessons in life, those crucial to survival, are learned by observing and interacting with others of their kind—especially mothers and siblings. During the past decade, several species have been newly detected “teaching” their young, among them rock ants, meerkats, and southern pied babblers.<sup>11</sup> At the outermost edge of such learning, some birds even appear to learn their song in utero.<sup>12</sup>

Not surprisingly, our improved understanding of the social sophistication of fellow creatures is reverberating beyond animal science. New insight into the extraordinary characteristics of elephants is one reason why they’re no longer found in circuses.<sup>13</sup> California has banned orca shows and breeding, SeaWorld is phasing them out, and other governing bodies are debating similar measures aimed at protecting these socially complex mammals.<sup>14</sup> Mexico City has outlawed dolphin performances and dolphinariums, and other sites engaging in such animal displays might follow suit.<sup>15</sup> Whatever else it brings, tomorrow seems destined to include more solicitude for animals than we’ve often seen

in the past, thanks in large part to advancing empirical understandings of their complicated communal lives.

Why did anyone believe in the myth of the “lone wolf” in the first place? Temple Grandin and Catherine Johnson theorize that people missed the truth initially because most research on wolves was done on animals in captivity. Animals in captivity—typically separated from their families and surrounded by nonrelated animals in an unnatural setting—exhibit behaviors markedly dissimilar from those left in nature. These effects range from heightened anxieties and aggression to the development of “stereotypies,” or compulsive repetitive tics, and other self-destructive habits that do not arise in the animal’s native ecosystem.<sup>16</sup> Animals can indeed live in “forced packs” (i.e., among unrelated members of their kind). But it is in forced packs that problems of dominance and hierarchies become accentuated, as animals deprived of familial order must then develop new strategies for competition. Wolves living in families, explain Grandin and Johnson, do not have dominance fights.<sup>17</sup>

Of course the invocation of research into animal behavior for a book about identity and human beings is intrinsically limited. Thus, nothing in the pages ahead depends on the latest empirical leaps into understanding our fellow life-forms, though examples irresistible for purposes of illustration will appear here and there. All the same, and at no risk of “anthropomorphizing the animals” or “zoo-morphizing” the people, we might meditate for starters on the irony that science now puts before us.

The more human beings learn about the fantastically intricate social workings of nonhuman beings, the more some want to spare those fellow creatures suffering. This includes the pain of familial and habitat separation, and the dysfunctions associated



with that dislocation: anxiety, repetitive behaviors, shorter life spans, self-harm.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, we live in an age when young people inside and outside the United States show a marked rise in anxiety and repetitive behaviors;<sup>19</sup> when American life expectancy has fallen four years in a row for the first time in recorded history in what has been called “a stunning reversal for a developed nation”;<sup>20</sup> and when self-harm among the young is also on the rise—dramatically so.<sup>21</sup>

Does the surging human understanding of other species extend to our own?

This book is about some of the consequences—in particular, the political consequences—that have been visited on *Homo sapiens* since we made ourselves exceptions to rules that are part and parcel of the survival strategy of fellow creatures.

There are two propositions that the divided precincts of America can agree on—and these may be the only two such propositions. They are that the polity is divided, at times viciously, as never before in peacetime, and that identity politics is among the most potent political forces of our time.

Since the election of Donald Trump in 2016, so many books and articles have been written about both these transformations that hand-wringing has become a national cottage industry. From pundits and politicians to everyday bystanders, many inside and outside the United States intuit that the country has had a great fall. The arguments about its cause(s) are ever more rancorous. And no one seems to know how to fix what’s broken, in large part because “what’s broken” is itself a subject of acrimonious dispute.

Premonitions of social and political catastrophe abound. “In America, Talk Turns to Something Not Spoken of for 150 Years: Civil War,” warned a 2019 headline in the *Washington Post*.<sup>22</sup>

Citing a “hyper-partisan atmosphere” and “a crumbling of confidence in the country’s democratic institutions and its paralyzed federal government,” the piece went on to quote forbidding forecasts of serious unrest by leading politicians and pundits. Similar grim assessments ricochet throughout the media. The *Atlantic* has foretold “the end of the American order.”<sup>23</sup> *New York* magazine has described the United States as “ripe for tyranny.”<sup>24</sup> *Project Syndicate* speaks of “Apocalypse Trump”<sup>25</sup> and is not alone.

This book takes note of the omnipresent foreboding of our time, and of the increasingly furious fights over politics, particularly identity politics. Rather than join those existing conversations, though, I wish to start a different one in the hope of engaging people across the political and cultural spectrums. It begins with a simple question: How has the matter of “identity” come to be emotional and political ground zero for so many in the first place?

First, a summary of the current scene.

As everyone knows, sexual identity, racial identity, ethnic identity, and the rest of the pack have become essential to leftist politics—so much so that imagining today’s progressivism without these group identities or their agendas is an exercise in futility. The outcome of the next presidential election will be shaped like all other races on variables seen and unseen as of now; the renaissance of socialism, for one, looms especially large. But it will also depend in large part on the struggle—already titanic within the liberal-left—between those who believe they can ride identity politics into victory, and those who demur.

Meanwhile, outside of national politics, ideologies of identity continue their spread into one cultural institution after another. Campuses across the Western world have become proscenia for the enactment of identity panic, complete with “safe spaces,” “trigger warnings,” “appropriation” conflicts, and other intriguing linguistic innovations that will be analyzed ahead. The

shouting down of speakers with unwanted views has become routine, shakedowns in the form of demands for extra “security” funding for supposedly controversial guests are so common as to be unremarkable, and speech on the quad and elsewhere is policed down to the pronoun for transgressions offensive to one or another inflamed subset.

As the campuses go, so do other flagships, from vaunted cultural spaces like museums<sup>26</sup> to essential academic fields including science, technology, engineering, and math.<sup>27</sup> The human resources departments of corporations now operate in part as weaponized hall monitors, patrolling their bureaucracies and employees’ social media accounts for transgressions against identitarian codes.<sup>28</sup> Fashion runways, Halloween, public bathrooms, libraries: it’s hard to think of a quotidian venue that *hasn’t* run afoul lately of prefix Puritans or “appropriation” scouts.

To acknowledge the ubiquity of identity politics today is not to suggest moral equivalence—or *immoral* equivalence—among any particular groups. Neither is it to suggest a monocausal theory of what unites them; as we shall see, the social forces in play are legion. But *pace* suggestions that identity politics is business as usual, it represents a tectonic shift. For many Americans and other citizens, political desires and political agendas have become indistinguishable from the desires and agendas of the particular aggrieved faction with which they most “identify”—and the human beings outside those chosen factions are treated more and more not as fellow citizens, but as enemies to be eliminated by shame, intimidation, and, where possible, legal punishment. That is something new.

Another fact familiar by now is that many other people deplore this unexpected and often incendiary new world.

The conservative-right side of the political spectrum, as

opposed to the minuscule alt-right, is nearly unanimous in opposing identity politics—at least as a matter of theory, if not always in practice. “Identity politics,” says Fox News host Tucker Carlson by way of example, “will destroy this country faster than any foreign invasion.”<sup>29</sup> University of Toronto psychologist Jordan B. Peterson calls identity politics “reprehensible.”<sup>30</sup> Rod Dreher, author of *The Benedict Option*, describes it vividly as “the kind of thing that convinces a black female Yale student from a privileged background that she is a victim because of the color of her skin, and that some toothless white Appalachian man on disability is an oppressor, because of his.”<sup>31</sup> According to the conservative critique, the unrelenting focus on identity infantilizes the polity, substitutes victimhood for citizenship, and subverts responsible self-government by turning *E pluribus unum* on its head, making many out of one.

What has also emerged during the past few years is that more than a few liberals agree with that analysis. Ethologist and evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins has called identity politics “one of the great evils of our age.”<sup>32</sup> Columbia University professor Mark Lilla, author of the anti-identitarian manifesto *The Once and Future Liberal*, argues that the ideology “fetishizes our individual and group attachments, applauds self-absorption, and casts a shadow of suspicion over any invocation of a universal democratic *we*.”<sup>33</sup> Psychologist and professor Steven Pinker, another liberal critic, says that when identity politics “spreads beyond the target of combatting discrimination and oppression, it is an enemy of reason and Enlightenment values.”<sup>34</sup>

In sum, the parties to the debate, pro and con, are evident enough. What has not yet been illuminated, however, is the wider story of which they are all part. Whichever way one looks—to the left or to the right, to culture or to politics, across the United States or across the pond—a remarkable fact appears: the question *Who am I?* is now one of the most fraught of our time. It has

become like a second skin—something that can't be sloughed off, or even scratched, without excruciating pain to the subject.

Why?

That is the question posed by this book.

As the subtitle implies, and as the evidence to come bears out, the modern clamor over identity cannot be understood without simultaneously grasping a cause that has been overlooked: the massive, radical, and largely unacknowledged communal dislocations incurred by *Homo sapiens*, especially though not only across societies of the United States and Europe, since the 1960s. That phenomenon is dubbed here the Great Scattering: the unprecedented familial dispersion, now sixty-plus years in the making with no end in sight. The engine of this transformation is the sexual revolution, meaning the widespread social changes that followed the technological shock of the birth control pill and related devices delivering reliable contraception en masse for the first time. Not only in the United States, but around many parts of the world, the revolution has included the de-stigmatization of nonmarital sex in all its varieties, and a sharp rise in behaviors that were formerly rare or stigmatized or both. That list of particulars includes but is not limited to rising and sometimes skyrocketing rates of abortion, fatherless homes, family shrinkage, family breakup, and other phenomena that have become commonplace in the world since the 1960s.

Many people, back then and now, have believed in good faith that these familial mutations amount to a net plus for humanity, and that their own lives have been immeasurably enhanced by the freedoms that only the revolution could have brought. This book makes a different case, also in good faith: that these same changes have simultaneously rained down destruction on

the natural habitat of the human animal, with radical results that we are only beginning to understand. Its argument is not about individual choices, but about the collective environmental impact of many millions of them, taken over the course of many years.

Decades into the unintended and potent experiment of the sexual revolution, a great many human beings now live as if we are not the intensely communal creatures that we always have been; and systemic consequences of that profound shift are now emerging. These include our increasingly surreal politics. To study the timeline is to see that identity politics has grown in tandem with the spread of the sexual revolution—and not only in the United States, but across every society rooted in Western civilization. In postrevolutionary societies, the old ways of knowing *who I am* and *what I'm for* (i.e., by reference to family, extended family, and real-life larger communities) are growing weaker for many people and no longer exist at all for some. For different reasons of modernity and postmodernity, all of these collective identities have deteriorated. In his landmark 2000 book *Bowling Alone*, political scientist Robert D. Putnam mapped the dislocations of declining communities and associations.<sup>35</sup> The analysis that follows examines the decline of the first among equals of these: the primary community of the family.

Outside of wartime or other catastrophe, the organic connections of this unit have been sundered as never before. Vague talk of “family change,” of the kind that has become commonplace, does not do justice to the enormity of this reality. Empirical evidence, such as that presented in chapter 2, makes a start. Systemwide familial dislocations are now having repercussions at every stage of human life, as shown by new data about the steep rise in psychiatric problems among American teenagers and young adults; decades of empirical evidence about the harms of fatherless homes (a literature as well-known as it is stoutly ignored); the “loneliness studies” now proliferating in sociology, spotlighting

the increasing isolation of the elderly in every Western nation; and troubling new evidence of the human costs of new techniques for making babies, such as anonymous sperm donation.

Chapter 3 moves on to other evidence suggesting the familial origins of today's existential panic, including the infantilized vernacular of identity politics itself. Chapters 4 and 5 show that postrevolutionary havoc has given rise to new social survival strategies, as people unmoored from kinship identity seek substitutes that will do what organic families exist to do (i.e., protect the individuals included in them).

If Western men and women are indeed more atomized and estranged from their own than ever before, then we would also expect to see evidence of a serious breakdown in one of the family's primary functions: social learning. Chapter 6 argues that the #MeToo movement still reverberating across the Western world is a case in point. Nonmarital sex is now less consequential and less stigmatized than ever before. But the shrinkage and implosion of the family has meanwhile crushed the petri dish through which previous generations learned about the opposite sex. The ironic result is that the most sexually *practiced* generation of humanity may also be the most sexually *illiterate*—a paradox that the example of #MeToo, with its incoherent Rashomon stories, bears out.

In short, the argument of this book is that today's clamor over identity—the authentic scream by so many for answers to questions about where they belong in the world—did not spring from nowhere. It is a squalling creature unique to our time, born of familial liquidation.<sup>36</sup>

To zero in on under-examined parts of the record is not to say that the effects of the revolution are distributed equally, or that they are equally injurious for all. Evolutionary winners have emerged

alongside the ranks of the damaged, as will be considered in the book's conclusion. Neither is it to suggest that future renorming is impossible. To the contrary, there may be nascent signs of social turnaround here and there already, as we'll also see.

But if the United States, and the societies to which it is most closely related, are in as parlous shape as many people now believe, there will be no way out unless we call things by their correct names. The rote left/right memes of the times concerning "tribes" and "resistance," "intersectionality" and "elites" may be useful shorthand for punditry. But they do not strike to the root of what ails us. Informed analysis of the sexual revolution and its deleterious consequences does.

Some readers will object to putting our radically individualized familial order on center stage. Their reluctance is common. In fact, one reason why the sexual revolution is among the most challenging intellectual puzzles of our time is precisely because of the psychological resistance that its mere mention tends to generate—including and even especially among people who otherwise regard themselves as open-minded. This book appeals to all readers to put reflexive dismissal aside, and focus on the evidence. For purposes of this argument, it does not matter whether you lean left or right, progressive or conservative, apolitical or activist. What matters is only the desire to understand the massively altered habitat of our species, and how that transformation is reshaping Western society and politics.

The sexual revolution and its fallout are fair analytical game, because individual decisions multiplied by many millions continue to have massive public consequences. To name just two far-reaching examples beyond the purview of this book, these include the expansion of the Western welfare state, as it has been forced to become the substitute parent in broken homes; and the crisis of immigration in Europe, as governments in countries with fewer



and fewer young workers due to demographic collapse have come to justify the importing of millions more as an economic necessity. Both trends are among the most momentous in the contemporary Western world, and neither can be understood apart from the role played by the sexual revolution in each.

Other readers may have a different reflexive reaction to the argument that is also familiar: fearing that what's afoot is a stealth attempt to "turn back the clock," "go back to the fifties," "put the genie back in the bottle," or otherwise engage in reactionary skullduggery. I would note, first, that the sheer number of clichés we have developed to describe such an action tells us something—namely, that a great many postrevolutionary people resist even a whiff of revisionism about *laissez-faire* sex. Second, to the extent that this book's argument might accurately be called "revisionist," it is also theoretical. This is an argument about ideas, not policies. Activists can make of it what they will. What is paramount, first, is the diagnosis.

To say that post-1960s levels of fatherlessness, divorce, shrinking families, and abortion, among other trends, have become major impediments to the understanding of self is not to say these are the *only* phenomena propelling identity politics. This brings us to a critical moral stipulation: that real crimes and injustices have been committed against real sexual and racial and other minorities—wrongs that have naturally driven many people to group identities in the hopes of preventing more wounds. Nothing in the argument of this book diminishes or sugarcoats that fact, or the sufferings behind it.

To illustrate by way of prominent example, the August 11, 2017, "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia—in which one woman was killed and dozens of others were injured in the ensuing riot—shocked the country with the knowledge that some fraction of Americans, however small in number compared

to everyone else, has embraced white nationalism. This tragedy joined other frightening examples of racism inside and outside the country's borders.<sup>37</sup> There is no doubt that America's original sin still coils and strikes, and not only in America. There never has been.

To say that the phenomenon of identity politics has more than one cause is not to minimize the importance of others. And just as family meltdown is not the only reason for identitarianism, so are there multiple causes behind other phenomena that play major roles in our national division quite aside from identity politics.

Consider the growth of populism within red states, whose causes identity-firsters seem not to understand. In parts of the country like the Rust Belt, apprehension abounds that illegal immigration might further reduce scarce working-class jobs. There and elsewhere, the opioid epidemic has carried off many loved ones and economic insecurity and other forms of hardship are rife—but many in blue America seem not to notice, except to denigrate the wounded, as President Barack Obama did, for “clinging” to guns and religion.<sup>38</sup> And quite apart from such class division, there is also legitimate fear in other precincts that rising antireligious prejudice is stifling freedom of religion and speech for those whom coastal progressives deem retrograde.<sup>39</sup> To write off as bigots and “deplorables” these millions of fellow citizens with authentic concerns of their own has added gratuitous insult to what is already, for many, the social injury of globalization.

As Douglas Murray has pointed out in *The Strange Death of Europe*, his sweeping analysis of the unprecedented recent immigration into countries across the Continent, many people there, mainly from the lower classes, resisted such extensive social change with little to no empathy from their leaders in government.<sup>40</sup> Arguments over immigration are not the same in Europe and the United States. But while both do share a link to the sexual

revolution—the Western labor shortage, real and perceived—they also spring from other deep sources and questions, including what it means to be a nation and a citizen in a globalized world.

To name other forces ancillary but still salient to this book's thesis, globalization contributes to the crisis of identity too—in part because it also increases familial dislocation. So does the immediacy of the Internet, which throws gasoline on the burning question of identity in several ways: by showing the have-nots what the haves enjoy in a more up close and personal way than ever before, by handing the angry and discontented a new power of convening, by making solipsistic “silos” a go-to, and, above all, by delivering simulacrum of “groups” and “friends” to a world in which many postrevolutionary souls are already lacking the real-life version of both.

Even so, the simultaneous phenomena of globalization and the Internet amount to comorbidities under which another, deeper malady has already steadily depleted our species' immune system. What most ails great swaths of the country and the West today is something more fundamental than income disparity or a Gini coefficient, and more primordial than any digital act of bonding.

In sum, the fact of a multiplicity of influences on our politics and culture does not negate the truth that some are better understood than others. The fact that racism and sexism exist does not make the crackup of the Western family any less integral to the post-1960s human story. To argue by way of analogy, there are causes of lung cancer besides smoking tobacco, but that did not make the crusaders against tobacco in the twentieth century wrong in drawing attention to its dangers. There were other sources of childhood harm during the Industrial Revolution besides exploitative

employment, but that did not make the early Victorian reformers wrong to argue against, and eventually abolish, child labor.

Many voices, both supportive of and opposed to identity politics, have discussed what this new code of conduct within the polity is *doing to us*. This book asks a different question, which is what the nonstop obsession with identity is *telling us*—about ourselves, our society, our civilization, and how our radical new way of living is transforming all of the above. My purpose is not to excoriate identity politics, as other writers, left and right, already have. It is rather to put forward a new theory of why so many people seem to have lost their very selves, with the result that Western polities and societies now resound with languages of loss, fury, and rancor.

The question before us is not the political one, as in, *What are we to do about identity politics?* It is instead anthropological: *Why can't Narcissus stop looking for himself?*