



The Identity Trap

'Among the most insightful
and important books
written in the last decade'

JONATHAN HAIDT

*A Story of Ideas and Power
in Our
Time*

Yascha Mounk

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THE IDENTITY TRAP

‘Yascha Mounk explains the intellectual roots of our current focus on identity, what’s wrong with it, and how we can get back to belief in a shared humanity in an erudite yet easy-to-read account’

Francis Fukuyama

‘A powerful, timely book, seeking to understand the origins and impact of the ideas that rightly or wrongly constitute “identity politics” – where they come from, what effect they have, where they could lead. His book is both an excellent analysis and an eloquent plea for the recovery of shared values, the ideas that link us instead of dividing us’

Anne Applebaum

‘Barack Obama’s favourite political thinker . . . Having thoroughly skewered right-wing populism and its brash demagogues in popular books, Mounk’s next target may surprise his considerable fanbase. *The Identity Trap* explains how dangerous styles of thinking developed in and once largely conned to the academy have now gone mainstream – and why we should all be worried . . . As a darling of the political left, Mounk’s criticisms of America’s elite universities will probably hit harder than the anti-woke rants to which institutions have become accustomed. His constructive tone, however, may help higher education institutions to play their part more effectively in a defence of democracy to which he has dedicated himself’ Matthew Reisz, *Times Higher Education*

‘Among the many achievements of Yascha Mounk’s *The Identity Trap* is that he unearths the roots of today’s ideology with the patience of an archaeologist. Mounk calls it the “identity synthesis” – he avoids the word woke, perhaps wisely – and does a superb job of showing how unstable and authoritarian the woke worldview was always going to be’

Nick Cohen, *Spectator*

‘Yascha Mounk is our most active contemporary defender of liberal democracy . . . [a] brave and important book’ Martin Wolf

‘*The Identity Trap* brings vital context to some of the most fraught and divisive debates of our time’ Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

‘The most comprehensive and reasonable story of this shift that has yet been attempted . . . Mounk has told the story of the Great Awakening better than any other writer who has attempted to make sense of it’

Oliver Traldi, *Washington Post*

‘Outstanding’ David Brooks, *The New York Times*

‘In *The Identity Trap*, Yascha Mounk explains how a few powerfully bad ideas, propelled through institutions by people with good intentions, are causing systemic dysfunction and dangerous polarization. This is among the most insightful and important books written in the last decade on American democracy and its current torments, because it also shows us a way out of the trap’ Jonathan Haidt

‘In his indispensable book, Yascha Mounk proposes an alternative to the ceaseless combat between “woke” and “anti-woke” extremes – one that takes seriously the enduring malignant legacy of systemic discrimination, yet correctly identifies that universal values, not group solidarity, offer the surest path to justice, fairness, and enduring social peace. *The Identity Trap* is necessary reading’ David French

‘Mounk’s analysis is nuanced and balanced. His goal is not merely to critique the identity synthesis, but to explain how leftists came to embrace its dead-end fixation on identity; and to offer ideas about how they can be returned to the path of liberalism’ *Quillette*

‘Yascha Mounk tackles one of the most consequential, controversial and – as he puts it – counterproductive contemporary debates with great seriousness as well as sensitivity. This book is brave, bold, erudite, and rich in detail. Monk is impressively thorough in his analysis of the theories and personalities, social developments, and demographic and technological changes that have brought us to an impasse in identity politics. This is a must read for anyone who wants to explore an alternative approach to framing public life and building coalitions to create a fair and equal society’ Fiona Hill, Distinguished Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yascha Mounk is a writer and academic known for his work on the rise of populism and the crisis of liberal democracy. Born in Germany to Polish parents, Mounk received his BA in history from Trinity College, University of Cambridge, and his PhD in government from Harvard University. He is now a professor of the Practice of International Affairs at Johns Hopkins University. Mounk is also a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, a contributing editor at *The Atlantic*, the founder of the online magazine *Persuasion* and a publisher of *Die Zeit*. He is the author of *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* and *The Great Experiment: Why Diverse Democracies Fall Apart and How They Can Endure*.

YASCHA MOUNK

The Identity Trap

A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time

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The Identity Trap

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Introduction

THE LURE AND THE TRAP

In the late summer of 2020, Kila Posey asked the principal of Mary Lin Elementary School, in the wealthy suburbs of Atlanta, whether she could request a specific teacher for her seven-year-old daughter. “No worries,” the principal responded at first. “Just send me the teacher’s name.” But when Posey emailed her request, the principal kept suggesting that a different teacher would be a better fit. Eventually, Posey, who is Black, demanded to know why her daughter couldn’t have her first choice. “Well,” the principal admitted, “that’s not the Black class.”

The story sounds depressingly familiar. It evokes the long and brutal history of segregation, conjuring up visions of white parents who are horrified at the prospect of their children having classmates who are Black. But there is a perverse twist: the principal, Sharyn Briscoe, is herself Black. As Posey told the *Atlanta Black Star*, she was left in “disbelief that I was having this conversation in 2020 with a person that looks just like me—a Black woman. It’s segregating classrooms. You cannot segregate classrooms. You can’t do it.”

The events at Mary Lin Elementary School, it turns out, are not the continuation of an old and familiar story; they are part of a new ideological trend. In a growing number of schools all across America, educators who believe themselves to be fighting for racial justice are separating children from each other on the basis of their skin color.

Some public schools have started segregating particular subjects. Evanston Township High School, in the suburbs of Chicago, now offers calculus classes reserved for students who “identify as Black.” Many more are embracing race-segregated “affinity groups.” A school district in Wellesley, Massachusetts, for example, recently hosted a “Healing Space for Asian and Asian American Students.” As an emailed invitation emphasized, “This is a safe space for our Asian/Asian-American and Students of Color, *not* for students who identify only as White.”

The Fourteenth Amendment and the Supreme Court’s landmark ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* establish narrow limits on the extent to which state institutions can discriminate between citizens on the basis of their skin color. As a result, the adoption of racially segregated classrooms and safe spaces at public schools has inspired legal challenges and even a federal investigation. But what happened in Atlanta, Evanston, and Wellesley has long since become common practice in private schools, which are subject to less stringent restrictions.

At some of America’s most elite schools, from Boston to Los Angeles, teachers now routinely divide students into different groups based on their race or ethnicity. In many cases, such groups are effectively mandatory. In some, students are so young that their teachers need to tell them which group to join. At Gordon, a storied private school in Rhode Island, teachers start to divide children into affinity groups—which meet every week and are divided by race—in kindergarten. “A play-based curriculum that explicitly affirms racial identity,” wrote Julie Parsons, a longtime teacher at Gordon, which was recently honored for its efforts at diversity, equity, and inclusion by the National Association of Independent Schools, is especially important “for the youngest learners.”

Dalton, a prestigious school on New York’s Upper East Side that educates the children of the city’s elite, has gone out of its way to explain the pedagogical goals that animate such practices. According to statements and outside resources hosted on Dalton’s website, antiracist institutions must help their students achieve the right racial identity. A conversation between experts convened by a prominent organization that has worked closely with the school and is fittingly called EmbraceRace points out that

when students are young, “even a person of color or Black person might say: I don’t see myself as a racial being. I’m just human.” The task of a good education is to change that attitude: “We are racial beings.” And the first step toward that goal is to reject the “color-blind idea” that our commonalities are more important than our differences.

Of late, some schools have even started to encourage their white students to define themselves in racial terms. Bank Street School for Children, on New York’s Upper West Side, for example, is one of the most renowned early education institutions in the country. Proud to be at the vanguard of progressive pedagogy, it serves both as a K–8 school and as a training college that educates hundreds of future teachers every year. Recently, Bank Street has started dividing its students into a “Kids of Color Affinity Group” and an (all-white) “Advocacy Group.” The goal of the white group, a slide from the school explains, is to “raise awareness of the prevalence of Whiteness and privilege,” encouraging students to “own” their “European ancestry.”

It is this new approach to pedagogy that inspired Sharyn Briscoe, the principal of Mary Lin Elementary School, to create a “Black class.” Briscoe grew up in the suburbs of Philadelphia, attending a predominantly white private school in which she often felt isolated. When she earned a degree in education at Spelman College, she imbibed a new set of ideas that was meant to save children from the fate she herself had suffered. As Beverly Daniel Tatum, a renowned education scholar and former president of Spelman, asks in a highly influential book, “If a young person has found a niche among a circle of White friends, is it really necessary to establish a Black peer group?” Answering in the affirmative, Tatum recommends that schools ensure that all students make friends within their own racial group “by separating the Black students” for at least some portion of every week.

Kila Posey strongly disagrees with this idea. An educator herself, she believes that “putting my daughters in a class with a whole bunch of people who look like them isn’t necessarily going to give them community.” Picking and choosing which classmates her two daughters should make friends with on the basis of their skin color, she told Briscoe in one of their first encounters, “is not your job.”

When I interviewed Posey about her multiyear battle with Atlanta's school district, she spoke with great composure, recalling facts and figures with the precision of somebody who has become consumed by a righteous cause. Only when I asked her to describe what hopes she harbors for her daughters' futures did her voice betray her emotions. "For my girls, the sky is the limit. They can do and be whatever they want," she said with a suppressed tremor in her voice. After her daughters watched Kamala Harris's inauguration as vice president of the United States, they grew determined to follow in her footsteps. But whatever they might ultimately choose to do, Posey insisted, "they're going to be at the table. And they need to be able to get along with everybody."

The profound disagreement between Kila Posey and Sharyn Briscoe is just one small skirmish in a much larger battle of ideas. In the place of universalism, parts of the American mainstream are quickly adopting a form of progressive separatism. Schools and universities, foundations and some corporations seem to believe that they should actively encourage people to conceive of themselves as "racial beings." Increasingly, they are also applying the same framework to other forms of identity, encouraging people to think of their gender, their cultural origin, or their sexual orientation as their defining attribute. And of late, many institutions have taken yet another step: they have concluded that it is their duty to make how they treat people depend on the groups to which they belong—even when it comes to such existential decisions as whom to prioritize for lifesaving drugs.

THE STAKES ARE HIGH

In late December 2021, a doctor in New York City wrote an urgent prescription for a patient who had just tested positive for COVID. It was for a new drug, called Paxlovid, that promised to decimate the likelihood of dying from the disease. Before filling the prescription, the pharmacist sent back a question. What, she inquired, is the patient's race? The doctor was flabbergasted. "In my 30 years of being a physician," he said, "I have never been asked that question when I have prescribed any treatment."

By the fall of the second year of the pandemic, vaccines were widely available. High-quality treatment options were being shipped to hospitals and doctors' offices for the first time. The end of the pandemic finally seemed in sight. Just then, the rapid spread of the Omicron variant led to a perilous surge in infections. Doctors faced stark choices about how to allocate scarce resources: Who should get priority for new lifesaving drugs like Paxlovid and antibody treatments like Sotrovimab until they could be produced in sufficiently great numbers for all patients to gain access?

Long-standing principles about triage suggested that medical authorities should pursue a simple goal in formulating their answer: saving the greatest possible number of lives. During the pandemic, most countries outside the United States duly followed some version of this maxim. Hoping to channel drugs to the patients they were most likely to save, public health officials looked to factors like advanced age or the presence of pre-existing conditions that are known to make COVID much more deadly. But for the past decade, some influential doctors, activists, and experts have been pushing to make triage decisions on the basis of a different consideration: racial equity.

There are good reasons for doctors to take disparities between different demographic groups seriously. A host of studies has shown that historically marginalized communities, like African Americans in the United States and some groups of British Asians in the United Kingdom, have worse health outcomes. But instead of remedying those underlying injustices by ensuring that all patients receive the same quality of care irrespective of their race, large parts of the medical profession have concluded that they should explicitly set out to treat members of different ethnic groups differently.

In an influential series of articles, two prominent physicians at Brigham and Women's, one of the world's leading hospitals, described how they are putting this idea into practice. Bram Wispelwey and Michelle Morse demonstrated that nonwhite patients had, in the past, been discriminated against when decisions were made about whom to admit to the hospital's overstretched cardiology unit. But rather than making up for these injustices by taking the necessary measures to ensure that the hospital would

treat white and Black patients equally in the future, their “implementation measure to achieve equity” consisted of “a preferential admission option for Black and Latinx heart failure patients.”

Some leading academics have even suggested that we should prioritize racial equity over the imperative to save patients’ lives. As Lori Bruce, the associate director of the Center for Bioethics at Yale University, recently argued in the *Journal of Medical Ethics*, protocols for whom to prioritize when medical goods are scarce “should be assessed by a broader lens than merely the simplistic measure of the number of lives saved.” Instead, physicians should try to lessen disparities between different demographic groups by implementing “a racially equitable triage protocol,” paying special attention to such questions as whether “families will remember being denied treatment or being included.”

These ideas and practices help to explain how officials approached key decisions during the pandemic. When public health authorities in the United States were tasked with figuring out whom to prioritize for scarce COVID treatments, they too rejected “race-neutral” frameworks that would only take risk factors like age or preexisting conditions into account. The State of New York, for example, committed itself to adopting medical policies that would advance “racial equity and social justice” in 2021, explicitly noting that this would “not mean simply treating everyone equally.” Guided by these goals, the New York State Department of Health suggested that doctors could prescribe scarce drugs like Paxlovid to members of ethnic minority groups even if they were under the age of sixty-five and did not suffer from preexisting conditions. Otherwise identical New Yorkers who are white, the guidelines made clear, should not be considered a priority.

The guidelines adopted by the State of New York are part of a wider trend. Earlier in 2021, when vaccines were first being rolled out, Vermont encouraged young, nonwhite patients without preexisting conditions to get shots before allowing otherwise identical white patients to do so. And even though its own models showed that such a course of action would likely result in a higher number of deaths, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) urged states to give essential workers access to the vaccine ahead of

the elderly on the grounds that older Americans are disproportionately white. When a lawsuit tried to put an end to such practices, two dozen prominent institutions, including the American Public Health Association, the American College of Physicians, and the American Medical Association, filed an amicus brief defending them.

The new paradigm also applies far afield from race or medicine. State institutions have started to embrace a similar turn away from neutral rules that aim to treat all citizens equally irrespective of the identity groups to which they belong in a wide variety of contexts. They now explicitly make the receipt of a number of key government benefits depend on such factors as gender and sexual orientation as well as race.

When the federal government made emergency funds available to small businesses that were in danger of going bankrupt because of revenue loss caused by the pandemic, for example, it explicitly favored those owned by women over those owned by men. Meanwhile, the City of San Francisco recently announced a basic income scheme that would provide low-income residents with \$1,200 a month. The only catch is that eligibility for the program is restricted to members of one group: those who identify as trans.

Concerns about the role that identity now plays in countries from the United Kingdom to the United States are often ridiculed as an unhealthy obsession with culture war battles on social media. There is an element of truth to this. Twitter and Facebook really do serve up their daily dose of outrage to an increasingly polarized public. And some people who have engaged in deeply reprehensible behavior really do pretend to be the victims of a “cancel mob.” But the fact that some of the complaints about these recent transformations are insincere does not make the underlying phenomenon any less real.

A new way of thinking about identity has gained tremendous influence in Canada, Great Britain, and the United States. Fundamental assumptions about justice, the value of equality, and the significance of identity have changed in deeply consequential ways. And while it would be premature to conclude that this ideology has won a full victory, it already shapes the actions of mainstream institutions from the Associated Press to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, from the American Civil

Liberties Union to the Coca-Cola Company, and from Britain's National Health Service to Canada's National Arts Centre. What is at stake is no more or less than the basic rules, principles, and background assumptions that will structure our societies in the coming decades. Instead of pretending that these changes are irrelevant or imaginary, we need to analyze and assess them in a serious manner.

THE IDENTITY SYNTHESIS

The roots of the new ideology that is changing the key rules and norms of mainstream institutions lie in the transformation of the core commitments of many self-described progressives. The left has historically been characterized by its universalist aspirations. To be on the left was to insist that human beings are not defined by their religion or their skin color, by their upbringing or their sexual orientation. A key goal of politics was to create a world in which we collectively realize that the things we share across identity lines are more important than the things that divide us, allowing us to overcome the many forms of oppression that have marked the cruel history of humanity. But over the past six decades, the left's thinking on identity has—for reasons that are in many ways understandable—undergone a profound change.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a growing number of leftists argued that a theoretical commitment to universalism all too often existed alongside serious discrimination on racial or religious grounds. They also pointed out that many left-wing movements had long been inhospitable to ethnic and sexual minorities. As awareness and understanding of the historical oppression of various identity groups grew, some parts of the left came to embrace the idea that the solution must lie in encouraging new forms of activism and group pride. If some people have suffered serious disadvantages because they were gay or Black, then it made sense to encourage gay or Black individuals to identify with these marginalized groups—and fight for their collective liberation.

Over time, this perceived strategic imperative to double down on identity has morphed into new ideas about the end goals for which the left

should strive. Big parts of the progressive movement started to dismiss as naive kitsch the aspiration for a more harmonious future in which “little black boys and girls will be holding hands with little white boys and girls,” as Martin Luther King Jr. put it at the climax of his most famous speech. In its stead, they increasingly embraced a vision of the future in which society would forever be profoundly defined by its division into distinct identity groups. If we are to ensure that each ethnic, religious, or sexual community enjoys a proportionate share of income and wealth, they argued, both private actors and public institutions must make the way they treat people depend on the groups to which they belong. A new ideology was born.

Ten years ago, newspaper articles that discussed the rise of this new ideology often talked about “identity politics.” As recently as five years ago, many of the people who embraced it would proudly describe themselves as “woke.” But the use of both terms has since become deeply polarizing. Nowadays, anybody who talks about identity politics or describes an activist as woke is liable to be perceived as an old man yelling at the clouds. No generally accepted term has so far come to take the place of these earlier labels.

That is a problem. It is hard to have a productive debate about an ideology when you can’t even agree on what to call it. So it would be helpful to settle on a name that is acceptable both to its supporters and to its critics. I have a suggestion. This body of ideas draws on a broad variety of intellectual traditions and is centrally concerned with the role that identity categories like race, gender, and sexual orientation play in the world. So I will, for the most part, refer to it as the “identity synthesis.”

The identity synthesis is concerned with many different kinds of groups, including (but not limited to) those based on race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and disability. It is the product of a rich set of intellectual influences, including postmodernism, postcolonialism, and critical race theory. It can be pressed into the service of diverse political causes from a radical rejection of capitalism to a tacit alliance with corporate America.

All of that makes it tempting to assume that the identity synthesis lacks coherence, or even to dismiss the whole thing as a vague cultural “vibe”

that will eventually dissipate. Indeed, virtually everything that has been written about this topic so far falls into one of two camps. Either it uncritically celebrates the core ideas of the identity synthesis as a necessary tonic to the injustices of the world, or it summarily dismisses them as a fad that need not be taken seriously from an intellectual point of view. But on closer examination, the ideology that dare not speak its name turns out to have a nature that is all too real. It is time to dissect it in a serious manner. And to do that, we must first understand why it has proven so appealing.

THE LURE

Many advocates of the identity synthesis are driven by a noble ambition: to remedy the serious injustices that continue to characterize every country in the world, including the United States. These injustices are undoubtedly real. Members of marginalized groups have historically suffered terrible forms of discrimination. Even today, women suffer serious disadvantages in the workplace. People with disabilities are sometimes mocked and often marginalized. Ethnic minorities face open vitriol or subtle forms of exclusion. Violent hatred of homosexuals and trans people persists.

Groups that suffered the most extreme injustices in the past are especially likely to continue suffering from the most intractable disadvantages today. The situation of Black Americans has significantly improved over the course of the past half century. Explicit restrictions on their ability to vote or to use public facilities, to start businesses or to marry someone of a different race, have been abolished. A large Black middle class has formed, and African Americans are now represented in the highest echelons of every field of endeavor. But the shadow of the past has not yet lifted. On average, Black Americans continue to earn less and to own much less than white Americans. They are more likely to attend an underfunded school, to live in a deeply disadvantaged neighborhood, to spend time behind bars, and to become the victim of murders and police shootings. The promise of full equality has proved elusive.

Even highly successful members of historically marginalized groups

are sometimes made to feel like outsiders. Schools and universities, corporations and civic associations have become vastly more inclusive over the course of the past few decades. But members of groups that continue to be underrepresented in prestigious organizations like Ivy League universities or the executive floors of Fortune 500 companies often have good reason to feel that exclusion has merely morphed into more subtle forms. They field backhanded compliments from older colleagues or face structural obstacles, like unpaid internships, that make it harder for first-generation college students to break into influential fields from politics to the arts.

It is possible to recognize these injustices and fight against them without subscribing to the identity synthesis. Anybody who knows that their country does not live up to universalist ideals like tolerance and nondiscrimination should advocate for the cultural changes and the political reforms that are needed to fix these shortcomings. Pointing out that members of minority groups are at times treated unfairly and suggesting ways to address such injustices does not in itself make anyone “woke,” in any sense of the word.

But even though social movements and legislative reforms can help to address real injustices, they rarely do so as quickly or as comprehensively as hoped. Democratic politics, the sociologist Max Weber famously wrote, is the “strong and slow boring of hard boards.” And so some of those who are rightfully exercised by the persistence of injustice conclude that we need a much more radical break with the status quo.

The appeal of the identity synthesis stems from promising just that. It claims to lay the conceptual groundwork for remaking the world by overcoming the reverence for long-standing principles that supposedly constrains our ability to achieve true equality. It seeks to do so by moving beyond—or outright discarding—the traditional rules and norms of democracies like Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Advocates of the identity synthesis reject universal values and neutral rules like free speech and equal opportunity as mere distractions that aim to occlude and perpetuate the marginalization of minority groups. Trying to make progress toward a more just society by redoubling efforts to live up to such ideals, its advocates claim, is a fool’s errand. That is why they insist on

making forms of group identity much more central, both to our understanding of the world and to our sense of how to act within it.

The first step in overcoming the supposed shortcomings of a universalist outlook, they argue, is to recognize that we can only understand the world by seeing it first and foremost through the prism of identity categories like race, gender, and sexual orientation. In this view, even situations that seemingly have nothing to do with identity, like a run-of-the-mill dispute between two friends, need to be analyzed through the lens of the relative social power each of them enjoys by virtue of the respective identity groups to which they belong. Because of this focus on identity as a way of interpreting social reality, parts of the left are now more likely to invoke new concepts like “microaggressions” and “implicit bias” than they are to invoke older concepts like social class.

In a second step, the rejection of universal values and neutral rules also implies a very different set of views about how to fix persistent injustices. Because neutral rules like nondiscrimination laws are supposedly insufficient to make a difference, the advocates of the identity synthesis insist that we need social norms and public policies that explicitly make how the state treats its citizens—and how we all treat each other—depend on the identity group to which they belong. If we are to overcome the long legacy of discrimination, they claim, it is imperative that members of marginalized groups be treated with special consideration.

The identity synthesis calls attention to real injustices. It gives people who feel marginalized or mistreated a language in which to express their experiences. And it affords its followers the sense of being part of a grand historical movement that will make the world a better place. All of this helps to explain why it is so alluring, especially to the young and idealistic.

But sadly, the identity synthesis will ultimately prove counterproductive. Despite the good intentions of its proponents, it undermines progress toward genuine equality between members of different groups. In the process, it also subverts other goals we all have reasons to care about, like the stability of diverse democracies. Despite its allure, the identity synthesis turns out to be a trap.

THE TRAP

It would be a mistake to dismiss the identity synthesis as incoherent, much less to vilify those who advocate for it as immoral. The new focus on categories of group identity like race, gender, and sexual orientation is motivated by disappointment and anger at the persistence of real injustices. Most of the people who embrace it genuinely aspire to make the world a better place.

And yet I have grown convinced that the identity synthesis will prove deeply counterproductive. The reasons for its rise may be understandable, the motives of its advocates impeccable. But even the best of people can inadvertently do real damage—and the actual influence of this new ideology is likely to make us stray from, not guide us toward, the kind of society to which we all have reason to aspire.

As social psychologists have demonstrated again and again, drawing lines between different groups seems to come naturally to members of our species. We are capable of great courage and altruism when called upon to assist members of our own group, but also of terrifying disregard and cruelty when confronted with people whom we think of as members of another group. Any decent ideology must have an account of how to attenuate the ill effects of such conflicts. One key problem with the identity synthesis is that it fails to do so.

While humans will always retain a tendency to draw distinctions between “us” and “them,” the criteria for who is included in the in-group, and how members of the out-group are treated, are deeply dependent on context. When I encounter somebody who stems from a different ethnic group, was born into a different religious community, and lives in a different part of the country, I can think of her as having nothing in common with me. But I can also recognize that we are compatriots, agree on important political ideals, and share the fact of our humanity. Only if most people choose the latter path will diverse societies be able to sustain enough solidarity to treat all of their members with respect and consideration.

Far-right ideologies are so dangerous because they discourage people

from widening their circle of sympathy in this manner. Placing specific ethnic or cultural identities on a pedestal, they encourage their followers to value their group over the rights of outsiders or the claims of universal human solidarity. My concern about the identity synthesis is that, in its own way, it too makes it harder for people to broaden their allegiances beyond a particular identity in a way that can sustain stability, solidarity, and social justice.

Pedagogical approaches like the fashionable exhortation to “embrace race” encourage young people to define themselves in terms of the distinct racial, religious, and sexual groups into which they are born. Meanwhile, public policies like the “race-sensitive” protocols for medical triage give citizens a strong incentive to fight for the collective interests of their own groups. Taken together, these kinds of norms and policies are likely to create a society composed of warring tribes rather than cooperating compatriots, with each group engaged in a zero-sum competition with every other group.

The identity synthesis is a political trap, making it harder to sustain diverse societies whose citizens trust and respect each other. It is also a personal trap, one that makes misleading promises about how to gain the sense of belonging and social recognition that most humans naturally seek. In a society composed of rigid ethnic, gender, and sexual communities, the pressure for people to define themselves by virtue of the identity group to which they supposedly belong will be enormous. But the promise of recognition will prove illusory for a great number of people.

A society that encourages all of us to see the world through the ever-present prism of identity will make it especially hard for people who don't neatly fit into one ethnic or cultural group to develop a sense of belonging. The rapidly growing number of mixed-race people in the United States, the United Kingdom, and many other democracies, for example, may find that none of the communities from which they descend consider them “real” or “authentic” members.

Others will chafe under the expectations of such a society because they do not wish to make their membership in some group they did not choose so central to their self-conception. They might, for example, define them-

selves in terms of their individual tastes and temperaments, their artistic predilections, or their sense of moral duty toward all humanity. People with a wide variety of personal beliefs and religious convictions are likely to feel alienated in a society that most prizes a form of self-conscious identification with some group into which they were born.

Others still are going to take up the call to conceive of themselves, first and foremost, as members of some ethnic, gender, or sexual group with great enthusiasm, hoping that this will allow them to be recognized and appreciated for who they truly are. But since all of us are much more than the matrix of our particular group identities, many are likely to find themselves disappointed. For a culture that thinks of people primarily in relation to some collective is incapable of seeing and affirming its members in all of their glorious individuality. It is surely necessary for a society to communicate respect for all of its members, irrespective of their race or origin, for them to feel a sense of belonging and social recognition. But it does not follow that most people will succeed in gaining such a sense of belonging and social recognition by making their membership in these kinds of identity groups central to their personal sense of self.

The identity synthesis has come to exert tremendous influence over a stunningly short span of time. As a result, the most common criticisms of it center on its excesses. Many people are enraged by an increasingly censorious culture that stifles our ability to have serious debates about urgent social and cultural issues. Accusations on social media are shared by millions of people before anybody has the time to ascertain their veracity. Especially when people run afoul of the “right” way of talking about group identities—including gender, disability, and sexual orientation as well as race—they can find themselves shamed or fired with little regard to whether their actions were terrible or trivial, deliberate or inadvertent. And though the stories that garner attention from major media outlets usually involve celebrities, most victims are ordinary people who never set out to court controversy.

I share these worries. But at the most fundamental level, my concern about the identity synthesis is not about the ways in which it has “gone too far.” Rather, it is that the identity synthesis is, even at its best, likely to lead

to a society that fundamentally violates my most fundamental values and my most ardent aspirations for the future. The lure that attracts so many people to the identity synthesis is a desire to overcome persistent injustices and create a society of genuine equals. But the likely outcome of implementing this ideology is a society in which an unremitting emphasis on our differences pits rigid identity groups against each other in a zero-sum battle for resources and recognition—a society in which all of us are, whether we want to or not, forced to define ourselves by the groups into which we happen to be born. That’s what makes the identity synthesis a trap.

A trap has three key attributes. It usually contains some kind of lure. It is usually capable of ensnaring people even if they are smart or noble. And it usually subverts the goals of those who get caught up in it, making it impossible for them to accomplish what they set out to do.

The new ideas about identity share all three attributes. They are so alluring because they promise to fight injustice. They ensnare smart people who are full of good intentions. And yet they are likely to make the world a worse place—both for members of historically dominant and for members of historically marginalized groups.

WHY THE IDENTITY TRAP IS WORTH WORRYING (AND WRITING) ABOUT

The most striking political development of the past decade has been the rise of the illiberal right. As I chronicled in my last two books, *The People vs. Democracy* and *The Great Experiment*, right-wing parties that once paid allegiance to basic rules and norms of constitutional democracies have gradually embraced a form of authoritarian populism that presents an acute danger to the survival of our political system. Today, dangerous demagogues continue to pose an existential threat to democracies from India to Hungary and the United States.

Why, then, should anybody care about the spread of a well-meaning ideology, like the identity synthesis, that has as its stated goal the fight against injustices that are all too real? Doesn’t the subject of this book pale in comparison to the urgency of fighting demagogues like Narendra Modi

and Donald Trump? And might warnings about the dangers of the identity trap not give succor to those who pose a much greater threat, especially because many of them already exploit fears about “woke activists”? These are important questions, and I thought about them seriously before embarking on this project. And yet four reasons convinced me of the urgency of writing *The Identity Trap*.

For a long time, the rise of the far right was widely overlooked. But since 2016, it has come to stand at the very center of public discourse across Western democracies. Over the past decade, there has been a deluge of scholarly and journalistic work about every aspect of right-wing populism. I myself have devoted a radio documentary, two books, a dozen academic articles and policy reports, about a hundred episodes of my podcast, and well over a thousand op-eds, reported articles, keynote speeches, and television interviews to the topic. Though far from defeated, the phenomenon is, by now, reasonably well understood. The identity synthesis, by contrast, remains oddly unexplored territory. There is a lot of shouting about it on social media and cable news. But so far, there is surprisingly little work that tells the story of its rise, explains the reasons for its appeal, and seriously assesses the effect it is having on the world. The aspiration to change that was my first impetus to write this book.

Second, the issues raised by the debate over the identity synthesis matter in and of themselves. It makes a big difference whether the prevailing intellectual framework for understanding the world sheds light or sows confusion. It is important how children who belong to one identity group are taught to perceive those who belong to other identity groups. And it is hardly trivial whether, in the middle of a once-in-a-century pandemic, the state prioritizes adherence to the strictures of a new and untested ideology over the saving of lives.

Third, the identity synthesis is likely to prove counterproductive to many of the causes about which its advocates have good reason to care. An atmosphere of misplaced reverence for the core claims of this new ideology makes it hard for well-meaning critics to point out instances when its suggested solutions cause real damage—whether directly, because the policies it encourages are liable to worsen the fate of the most disadvantaged,

or indirectly, because the confrontational framing it encourages makes it hard to sustain public support for policies that actually do improve people's lives.

And finally, right-wing populism and the identity trap feed on each other. The widespread horror at the election of Donald Trump accelerated the takeover of the identity synthesis in many elite institutions. But demagogues thrive when societies are deeply polarized and decision makers are out of touch with the views of average citizens. While the advocates of the identity synthesis often point to serious problems that do urgently need to be remedied, the principles they champion and the solutions they offer are likely to drive more voters into the arms of extremists.

Both the demagogues who have won a lot of political power over the past decade and the advocates of the identity synthesis who have gained a lot of cultural power are going for an all-out victory. But it is unlikely that far-right populists will ever wrest control of universities, major foundations, or movie studios. And it is equally unlikely that fervent proponents of the identity synthesis will win a majority in parliament or be elected to the White House. And so the growing dominance of the identity synthesis in the cultural institutions of developed democracies is likely to go hand in hand with the growing strength of dangerous demagogues in electoral politics.

Right-wing populists and the advocates of the identity synthesis see each other as mortal enemies. In truth, each is the yin to the other's yang. The best way to beat one is to oppose the other—and that's why everyone who cares about the survival of free societies should vow to fight both.

THE GREAT ESCAPE

Once you are caught in a trap, it becomes difficult to get out. Thankfully, the identity trap has not yet snapped shut. While the ideas and the assumptions of the identity synthesis have started to influence mainstream institutions, many people remain deeply skeptical of them. There is enough time to make an escape. My goal in this book is to explain the nature of the

identity trap, to set out why it is so urgent for us to make that escape, and to show how we can do so.

In the first part of the book, I tell the curious story of how a set of seemingly disparate ideas came to form a new ideology that by around 2010 would prove highly influential in leading universities. Many critics of so-called wokeness have argued that it is a form of “cultural Marxism.” But the true history of the identity synthesis turns out to be more surprising. It features the rejection of grand narratives, including both liberalism and Marxism, by postmodern thinkers such as Michel Foucault; an embrace of the need for intellectuals to speak on behalf of oppressed groups by adopting a form of “strategic essentialism” by postcolonial thinkers such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; and the rejection of the key values of the civil rights movement, including the goal of racial integration, by critical race theorists such as Derrick Bell.

In 2010, the identity synthesis held significant sway in universities but had no more than marginal importance in mainstream culture. By 2020, it had reshaped some of the most powerful institutions in the country. In part II, I tell the story of how a seemingly niche academic theory could gain so much influence over the course of a single decade. The growth of social media inspired the rise of a popularized version of the identity synthesis that transformed the ideas of serious thinkers into simplistic memes and slogans. The incentives created by new forms of distribution turned legacy media outlets into loudspeakers for this new ideology. College graduates deeply steeped in its ideals spread the identity synthesis to some of the world’s most powerful institutions as part of a “short march through the institutions.” And finally, the election of Donald Trump supercharged well-founded concerns about threats to minority groups, making it seem disloyal for progressives to criticize any ideas associated with the left and rendering criticisms of the identity synthesis taboo in many milieus.

As the popularized form of the identity synthesis conquered the mainstream, its proponents have begun to push for radical changes in key areas of public life. They argue that members of different identity groups can never fully understand each other. They are suspicious when members of

one group are inspired by the culture of another group, decrying such instances as a harmful form of “cultural appropriation.” They are deeply skeptical of long-standing principles such as free speech, insinuating that those who defend its importance must be motivated by a desire to denigrate minority groups. They embrace a form of progressive separatism, favoring the creation of social spaces in which members of different communities remain apart from each other. And they champion public policies that explicitly make the way the state treats people depend on categories of group identity like race, gender, and sexual orientation. In part III, I argue that these applications of the identity synthesis are likely to prove counterproductive, eroding the values that make possible a society in which all people can live in free pursuit of their best selves. Subjecting each of these claims to careful philosophical analysis, I argue that there are better ways to deal with the concerns that motivate them.

Many advocates of the identity synthesis feel righteous anger at genuine injustices. But their central precepts amount to a radical attack on the long-standing principles that animate democracies around the world. Thankfully, there is a principled alternative. In part IV, I make the case for the core principles of philosophical liberalism. Those of us who believe in universal values and neutral rules can formulate a trenchant critique of historical oppression and persistent injustice in our own terms. In fact, our convictions have, over the course of the past fifty years, already helped to bring about enormous progress. They now animate the core institutions of societies that, for all of their persistent flaws, do a better job at avoiding sectarian violence and extreme cruelty than any other in history. The key to an aspirational politics that can actually build a better world lies in living up to, not in abandoning, universal values and neutral rules.

The fight over the future of the identity synthesis will be one of the defining intellectual struggles of the coming decades. Thankfully, individuals and organizations that have understood the dangers it poses can make a real difference in pushing back against it. In the conclusion, I assess the likely future of the identity trap and show how principled opponents of the ideology can stand up to it without risking their own careers and reputations.

Naturally, I hope that you will read this book in its entirety. Taken together, its component parts explain both the nature of the identity trap and how to escape it. But I also recognize that you may be more interested in some parts than in others. To those who want to understand the intellectual history of the identity synthesis, part I will be of greatest interest. To those who want to understand the political, sociological, and technological reasons that led this ideology to escape campus and conquer the mainstream, part II will be of greatest interest. To those who want to understand why the ways in which these ideas have been applied to topics from free speech to cultural appropriation are likely to prove counterproductive, part III will be of greatest interest. And to those who are searching for a coherent alternative to the identity trap, part IV can serve as a guide.

There are good reasons why the identity trap has proven so alluring. The right response to the rise of this new ideology is neither to dismiss it wholesale nor to adopt its key premises without serious reflection. It is to subject the identity synthesis to a serious critique—one that is open to taking its most useful contributions on board, but ultimately insists on striving for a more ambitious and optimistic vision of the future.

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PART I

The Origins of the Identity Synthesis

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All four of my grandparents were sent to prison for their communist beliefs during the 1920s or 1930s. All four decided to stay in Central Europe after most of their family members were murdered in the Holocaust because they were convinced that new, leftist governments would make the world a better place—managing to overcome the prejudices and tribal hatreds that had, during their lifetimes, twice set the world aflame.

By the time I was growing up, in the 1980s and 1990s, their political views had fundamentally changed. They had belatedly come to recognize the cruelty of Soviet communism. Instead of the revolutionary Marxism of their youth, they were now committed to a reformist creed of social democracy that attempted to humanize capitalism by admixing a strong welfare state to it.

But one commitment remained unwavering through those tragic and turbulent decades. As in their youth, they believed that the historical mission of the left consisted in expanding the circle of human sympathy across the boundaries of family, tribe, religion, and ethnicity. To be on the left was to believe that humans matter equally, irrespective of the group to which they belong; that we should aim for forms of political solidarity that

transcend group identities rooted in race or religion; and that we can make common cause in pursuit of universal ideals like justice and equality.

That is the universalist leftism with which I was raised. It is the universalist leftism that, despite my disagreement with the communist views my grandparents held when they were young, continues to inspire me. But it is no longer the dominant strain of leftism today.

Instead, it has, over the past five decades, become a mark of many left-wing movements that they reject the existence of objective truth or the hope for a more harmonious society that once inspired them; that they proudly embrace the call of ethnicity and religion where they were once skeptical of the destructive force that such group identities might have in the world; and even that they reject the very possibility that people from different countries and cultures could ever truly come to understand each other.

In part I, I set out to discover the story behind this remarkable transformation. Why did the left jettison its universalism? And how did it come to embrace a new form of tribalism that seems diametrically opposed to its historical core? Along the way, I try to debunk some of the most sensationalist claims that are now being made about the nature of the left's identitarian turn—such as the idea that it is simply a form of “cultural Marxism”—and to provide the groundwork for a more profound critique of it.

Chapter 1

POSTWAR PARIS AND THE TRIAL OF TRUTH

The end of World War II left Europe in a precarious state. It was far from clear whether formerly fascist countries like Italy and Germany would succeed in building stable democracies. The Soviet Union was imposing communist satellite regimes on most nations in Central and Eastern Europe. Weakened colonial powers from Belgium to Great Britain were waging brutal battles to keep control of their overseas dominions. The future looked highly uncertain.

Amid that sense of chaos, the leading intellectuals of the period fell back on a faith that had long inspired the left. They believed that capitalism was irrevocably doomed; that parliamentary democracy was but a smoke screen that distracts the people from the oppression they suffer; that the proletariat would eventually fulfill its historical mission of staging violent revolutions; and that the rightful goal of every politically responsible writer was to hasten the advent of communism. As Tony Judt summarized the intellectual currents of those years in his magisterial history of postwar Europe, “When it came to changing the world there was still only one grand theory purporting to relate an interpretation of the world to an all-embracing project of change, only one Master Narrative offering to make sense of everything while leaving open a place for human initiative: the political project of Marxism.”

The appeal of that master narrative was felt especially strongly in France. *La Grande Nation* had suffered grievously under Nazi occupation. Much of the country's political leadership had collaborated with the Third Reich. And though a relatively low-ranking army officer by the name of Charles de Gaulle had managed to turn himself into the leader of Free France by an act of sheer will, eventually saving the country's honor in the eyes of the world, he could not rescue the legitimacy of its establishment in the minds of its intellectuals. To them, the ethos on which the country should build after its liberation was that of the heroic resistance movement, which had counted many communists among its ranks.

Virtually all of the leading French intellectuals of the late 1940s and the 1950s, from Simone de Beauvoir to Louis Althusser, had strong communist sympathies. Jean-Paul Sartre, the most famous and the most influential, was an especially fervent foot soldier. Marxism, he avowed in 1960, was "the unsurpassable philosophy of our time."

But a small cohort of French philosophers and social scientists soon began to have serious doubts. As the turmoil of the postwar years died down, it became increasingly obvious that the promised revolutions had, once again, failed to materialize in Western Europe. With every passing year, the faith that scientific Marxism had invested in the supposedly inevitable process by which capitalism would founder on its internal contradictions looked increasingly anachronistic.

The violent oppression with which the leaders of the Soviet Union safeguarded their power, both within the country and throughout its neighboring nations, was also becoming difficult to ignore. Three years after the death of Joseph Stalin, in 1953, his successor revealed the extent to which purges had decimated the party's ranks in a shocking speech. "Of the 139 members and candidates of the Central Committee who were elected at the 17th Congress," which had taken place in 1934, Nikita Khrushchev announced, "98 persons, i.e. 70 percent, were arrested and shot." When leaked transcripts of the speech were published in Western newspapers, tens of thousands of members abandoned communist parties from France to the United States.

In the heart of Paris, a small band of intellectuals started to wonder

where they had gone wrong. Why, even as others finally woke up to the failings of the Soviet Union, were so many of their friends and colleagues continuing to be unquestioningly loyal to the Kremlin? And how could they themselves have been committed to the intoxicating promise of a violent revolution for so long?

The answer that a rising generation of intellectuals like Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard came up with over the course of the following decades went far beyond a distrust of orthodox Marxism; it rejected the hold that all “grand narratives” have over the human imagination. The true lesson of gulags and show trials, they claimed, was to distrust any ideology that offered a sweeping account of what makes the world tick and how to improve it. They set out to critique any set of ideas which assumed that there are universal truths; that some values are objectively superior to others; or that we can make genuine progress toward building a better society.

THE FALSE PROMISE OF PROGRESS

Michel Foucault was a deeply unhappy child. Born into a well-to-do home in the city of Poitiers in 1926, he was too young to fight the Nazis but too old to remain ignorant about the horrors of war. At home, he struggled to come to terms with his homosexuality and clashed with his stern father, who expected his son to follow family tradition by becoming a doctor. At school, he was lonely, suffering “in fierce and lofty isolation.” One of the few surviving photographs from his teenage years shows his classmates at the Collège Saint-Stanislas, the strict Catholic school his father sent him to in hopes that it would teach him discipline: “The students pose against a rock face in two comradely ranks, above which, his body twisted as if recoiling from the camera, his gaze inquisitorially querulous beneath pent brows, utterly alone and strange, stands the future author of *Madness and Civilization*.”

Foucault’s years at university were equally miserable. He enrolled in Henri IV, a famed preparatory school, and was duly admitted to the École Normale Supérieure, France’s most prestigious institute of higher learning.

He began to spend his evenings exploring the gay sex scene in Paris but seemed to have few other social contacts. Unpopular among his peers, he once chased a classmate down the hall of his dorm with a dagger, and repeatedly attempted suicide.

Intellectually, Foucault was at first shaped by the fashionable grand narratives of the time. When he studied with Jean Hyppolite, a follower of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, he imbibed the idea that history should be understood as the progressive realization of freedom in the world. And when he went on to study with Althusser, who espoused an orthodox reading of Marx's work and passionately defended the Soviet Union against its critics, he embraced the hope that the proletariat was finally about to stage a worldwide revolution. In 1950, Foucault joined the French Communist Party, which was unquestioningly loyal to Joseph Stalin.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Foucault quickly chafed at the intellectual orthodoxy required to remain in good standing with his comrades. When Soviet papers blamed an imaginary plot of Jewish doctors for Stalin's illness in 1953, inspiring a vile anti-Semitic campaign both in the Soviet Union and in the French Communist Party, Foucault found that he could no longer toe the line. "Over anyone who pretended to be on the left," he would later complain, the party "laid down the law. One was either for or against; an ally or an adversary." Henceforth, he would be an adversary.

Foucault remained a committed leftist until his death. Many of the stances he embraced in his later life—from a petition to abolish the age of consent to complimentary comments about Ayatollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran—are horrifying. But the nature of his activism was always more idiosyncratic than that of his contemporaries. Unlike most of them, for example, he enthusiastically supported opposition movements within the Eastern bloc, including the independent trade union that fatally wounded Poland's communist regime in the 1980s.

This combination of a deep commitment to leftist ideals and an abiding mistrust of power in all its guises also constitutes the core of Foucault's work, which started to come into its own over the course of the 1960s. In