

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript
Lynn Thoman
(<https://www.3takeaways.com/>)

Ep. 164: Why The Use Of Group Identity To Pursue Social Justice May Fail To Achieve Its Noble Goals

This transcript was auto-generated. Please forgive any errors.

INTRO male voice: Welcome to the 3 Takeaways podcast, which features short, memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers. And now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

Lynn Thoman: Hi everyone, it's Lynn Thoman. Welcome to another 3 Takeaways episode. Today I'm excited to be with Yascha Mounk, who is one of the world's leading experts on identity and the crisis of democracy. Yascha is a German-born political scientist who is now a professor at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, DC. He's also the author of five wonderful books, including *The Great Experiment* and *The People Versus Democracy*, which was a Financial Times Best Book of The Year. His new book is *The Identity Trap*. I'm excited to find out how he sees identity, democracy and the rise of populism. Welcome, Yascha, and thanks so much for joining 3 Takeaways today.

Yascha Mounk: Thanks for having me on.

LT: It is my pleasure. Let's start by talking about groups. Do humans have a natural tendency to form groups?

YM: I think they do. I have a simple game I play with my students when I teach, which is I ask them whether a hot dog is a sandwich. At first, they're kind of confused by why in a science class we're talking about that, but then they get into the spirit of the thing. And after five or ten minutes, I have them play a distribution game in which they need to decide who to give how many resources to. And they tend to give people who agree with them about whether a hotdog is a sandwich much more. And, in fact, they're willing to take home less themselves to make sure that those who disagree with them about this get even less than they do. So, I think we can take a few simple lessons from the research on this and some of these applied ways of showing, of demonstrating it. Humans over the course of history have formed groups in lots and lots of different ways. What makes somebody a member of your ingroup and what makes somebody a member of your outgroup has really varied tremendously over time, and it's easy to get groups off the ground, surprisingly easy. And the second is that once you've classified somebody as a member of your ingroup or somebody else as a member of an outgroup, you're likely to favor those who are members of your group. And sometimes to treat unfairly in certain historical situations, even cruelly or violently, those who are not members of the group.

LT: Where do we see groups?

YM: Where do we see group? Well, we see groups all the time in politics or in everyday life. The

United States is a kind of group. NATO is a kind of group. Group structure is the very basic foundations of our politics. But if you walk to the closest school to you, to the closest high school or middle school or elementary school, you will see groups as well. Some schools have very strong norms, but if you're in a particular year, you have to sit in a particular area of a school during lunch. But within that, there'll be cliques. There'll be a table dominated by a group of six friends. And if somebody who they think of as less popular or somehow different from them comes and wants to sit at the table, they're going to say, there's no place for you. Right. So, groups are omnipresent, both in personal and in political life.

LT: And have groups and diversity traditionally been a stumbling block to democracy or a strength?

YM: Humans groupish instinct is such a fundamental part of how we operate that it's hard to say we probably wouldn't have politics, we wouldn't have democracy without some form of group. But at the same time, the differences between ethnic, religious, cultural groups have often led to extreme and violent conflict. And I do think that that has in many situations made it harder to build and sustain diverse societies and diverse democracies. And that's why when we look to the historical record, we see them going wrong and evolving into violent wars or civil wars again and again. It's something that the founding fathers were very, very worried about. When they set out to found the American Republic, they looked back at previous forms of self-government, and the diagnosis was that all of them were felled by what they called factions, which is to say by groups of people who are united in the pursuit of one particular interest rather than the shared good. And so, a lot of the basic institutions they set up were trying to deal with the problem of groupishness in the form of what we call factions and factionalism.

LT: And where have diverse societies been successful?

YM: I don't think there is one example to go to. Some things work better in some countries than in others, but there isn't the one shining example. Having said that, I do think that contemporary liberal democracies are some of the most tolerant and inclusive places that we've seen in the history of the world. There are serious and significant forms of discrimination, of racism and sexism and other forms of marginalization that persist in a country like the United States or country like France or Germany today. But they are much preferable to non-democratic regimes on a whole series of characteristics, including how tolerant they are towards minority groups. And they have come a significant way in overcoming the much more extreme injustices that have characterized their own histories.

LT: What do you see as the main challenges facing diverse democracies and the ways that these diverse societies have come apart?

YM: There's a number of sort of pitfalls that have historically recurred, which include forms of either explicit or implicit domination. One of the most extreme was chattel slavery in the United States. You have the danger of a fragmentation in which you sort of divide up the entire society and the entire cultural sphere, so that how you're treated no longer depends on being a citizen of the state, but which particular subgroup you are a part of, which makes it very hard for members of these different groups to actually cooperate, to collaborate, to have friendships, certainly to have romantic relationships or marriages. You see that in a country like Lebanon, for example, where it's very difficult for Lebanese citizens to marry each other across religious and sectional lines, and in

which the kinds of laws that apply to you in terms of your education, your marriage, your divorce, your inheritance depend very strongly on the subgroup of which you are part.

YM: And you see it in some places where the competition between different groups has made it difficult to build a state in the first place. So those are places of what I call structured anarchy. In places like Somalia, for example, where the distrust between different groups has made it impossible to actually build governments and the kind of public goods, roads and hospitals and so on that come with it.

LT: Can you tell us about the vision of America, of Frederick Douglass who lived during Abraham Lincoln's presidency and that of Martin Luther King? And if that vision is still being embraced or how it's changed?

YM: Frederick Douglass is a really fascinating and inspiring figure in American history. Being born into slavery, fought at the forefront for the emancipation of slaves, became the most famous and celebrated Black writer of his time. And when he was invited to give an address for the July celebrations, he pointed out the hypocrisy of this at a time when slavery was still the reality of the country. He said, you may celebrate freedom, I must mourn because people of my racial group continue to be enslaved in this country. But even though he called out the hypocrisy of celebrating the values of the Constitution at a time when America has flagrantly failed to live up to them, he did not reject the Constitution. On the contrary, he demanded that all people living in America should have access to the basic promises and protections of the Constitution. He didn't want to rip up the Bill of Rights.

YM: He wanted Black Americans to come into the enjoyment of those basic rights. And that set up a tradition of Black liberals, which has continued with Martin Luther King, and I would argue with Barack Obama. King during the civil rights movement, said the check that America has written to Black people turned out to be fraudulent, turned out to be black, but he didn't want to rip up the check. He wanted America to cash that check to actually live up to its promises, to its people. I'm concerned about the fact that parts of the left are now rejecting that understanding, that reading of, how to make progress in a democracy. They increasingly want to say no, and instead of trying to live up to those universal principles, we should give up on them since they have not been fully realized. And since there can be hypocrisy in these promises, rather than invoking them to do better, we should say they were always just meant to pull wool over people's eyes. And the kind of society we should create would quite explicitly, quite openly treat people differently depending on the group to which they belong. That is the only way to make progress. I think that's a fundamental misreading of the fort of people like Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King. And I think it's a fundamental misreading of how America has been able to make significant progress on these matters in the last centuries.

LT: How do you see it as a trap?

YM: Well, it's a trap for two reasons. First is political. I think we've seen over the last years that a lot of the time the kind of prescriptions that come with this ideology don't actually improve the lives of people. I tell the story, for example, of schools in which teachers come into first or second grade classrooms to people who are six or seven or eight years old and say, we are going to put in place these affinity groups in which if you're Black, you have to go over there and if you're brown, you have to go over over there. And if you are Asian American, you have to go over there. And then

they try to instill the sort of positive racial identification in people because they think that's what's going to lead to political progress. But there's a basic problem, which is what do you do with the white kids in that scenario?

YM: And a lot of the time, the answer is they want the white people, the white kids to embrace their whiteness as well, to have a stronger self-identification as white. And the hope is that that's going to lead them to recognize white privilege and become sort of committed anti-racist activists. But when you prime somebody to say the most important thing about you is that you're white, that is your group. Well, what's going to happen? All this human groupishness is going to come back to the fore and you're going to prioritize the interest of your ingroup over that of the outgroup. So, I think that the idea that this is a pedagogically smart way to form citizens who are going to fight for justice is sadly naive. It's likely to backfire. And we've seen this backfiring in politics. I've worried very strongly about the rise of far-right populism for the last 10 years.

YM: And yet we are incapable of building broader majorities against them. And at some point, I think we need to look in the mirror about why that is in a serious way. It's also a problem at a personal level. And so, it's not just a political trap, it's a personal trap. And what I mean by a personal trap is that the idea that you will find recognition by emphasizing the various group identities to which you belong, and the particular intersection of identities at which you stand has become a standard message we now send to young people from school to university and beyond. But ultimately, I think people only feel seen, only find true recognition when we're seen as individuals, as well as members of groups, when we're recognized for their personal achievements, their taste, their idiosyncratic preferences. And so, I think to send people the message that what's going to make you feel seen in the society, what's going to make you feel as an equal is sort of emphasizing the various identical groups to which we belong, sets them up for failure.

YM: In that way, it'll always feel a little bit unsatisfying in the end. Of course, we have to respect everybody, right? We can't discriminate against people based on the group to which they belong. But I think to send a pedagogical message, but that is how you're going to be seen in your uniqueness, is a misunderstanding of how human psychology works and how people actually find meaningful belonging.

LT: What lessons does this hold for diverse democracies and how can they be more successful in the future?

YM: One of the lessons is that we need to build a society in which we overcome many of the injustices that face minority groups and that face marginalized groups. But one in which how you're treated and what opportunities you have in life and how you see each other comes to be less rather than more dependent on the kind of identity group into which you are born. And part of that is to defend many of the traditional principles that have inspired the best in liberal democracies in the past. Principles like free speech, which Frederick Douglass called the dread of tyrants. Principles, like the idea of it, that there's something positive, something inspiring about members of different cultural groups, collaborating with each other, learning from each other, inspiring each other, rather than putting all forms of so-called cultural appropriation under a general pall of suspicion. Practices like real political solidarity, which is based in listening to each other and understanding each other, and therefore coming to fight for a common political cause. Rather than asking people to say, I can't understand you anyway, so I'm going to defer to your judgment. I think that is an impoverished vision of how you make political change.

LT: If I ask you to summarize, what are your most important findings about groups and democracy?

YM: Contemporary democracies are hugely diverse, and that's one of the wonderful things about them. It's one of the things I love about living in New York City, for example. But we have to manage that diversity in a proactive way. And part of how to manage it is to have an inspiring vision of a society in which members of most groups, most members of all groups would actually want to live, in which they would be able to see each other, and which we say that would be an inspiring country. It is to respect and recognize the differences between us, which will always persist. There will never be the new American man in the kind of way that people might have imagined 120 years ago, and which after the melting pot, we are all basically the same. That is not an attractive vision nor a realistic vision of the future, but precisely because that groupishness comes naturally to humans, precisely 'cause it's easy to, identify with our own tribe, with our own religion, with our own ethnic background.

YM: The main institutions of society should really try and encourage people recognizing what they have in common, getting into contact with each other, coming to have more in common with each other. That is the goal of our basic democratic institutions, and that is the goal of other kinds of institutions, from corporations to nonprofits to educational institutions like schools and universities.

LT: Yascha, what are the three takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today?

YM: I think the first takeaway is that humans are groupish and that many wonderful things come from that ethnic, religious, and other forms of diversity, but that this is something that societies have often found hard to deal with. And so, you have to think very very carefully about the kind of institutions you need to inspire enough commonality to be able to sustain these societies. The second takeaway is that this new set of ideas, which has really become incredibly influential in the mainstream, is ultimately misguided, but it comes from a good place. It's full of good intentions in many ways, but it's really important to understand the nature of these ideas, to think through them, and ultimately to defend many of the longstanding principles, from free speech to vulnerability of being open to different kinds of cultural influences, that this tradition denies. And finally, I would say it's a cautious optimism.

YM: Looking around the world and looking to history can make you scared because the project we embarked on is a difficult one, and when it goes wrong, the consequences can be very very detrimental. But that same thing also allows us to see, that we have made significant progress and that for all of its significant flaws which we have to continue to fight against, our societies are actually achieving something quite remarkable, which is a large degree of not just tolerance, but civic friendship between people who hail from very, very different groups. And so, what we should do is to live up to, rather than to dismiss the basic principles which are written in the United States Constitution, but are also embraced by people from Frederick Douglas to Barack Obama.

LT: Thank you, Yascha. This has been fascinating. I really enjoyed your book, *The Identity Trap*.

YM: Thank you so much.

OUTRO male voice: If you enjoyed today's episode and would like to receive the show notes or

get new fresh weekly episodes, be sure to sign up for our newsletter at <https://www.3takeaways.com/> or follow us on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#). Note that 3Takeaways.com is with the number 3, 3 is not spelled out. See you soon at 3Takeaways.com (<https://www.3takeaways.com/>)

This transcript was auto-generated. Please forgive any errors.