

[Transcript] The Realignment / 409 | Yascha Mounk: The Identity Trap - Why New Group Identity & Social Justice Ideas Failed to Transform America

Marshall here, welcome back to The Re-alignment.

My guest today, Yasha Munk, is making a return appearance on The Re-alignment.

Last year he came on the show to discuss his book, The Great Experiment, why diverse democracies fall apart, and how they can endure.

Today, he's released a new book, it's called The Identity Trap, a story of ideas and power in our time.

In the book, Yasha explores the origin of a set of ideas described by supporters as either anti-racism or social justice, and by critics as critical race theory or wokeness that have transformed America over the past decade.

Ultimately, he argues that this set of ideas, which he decides to call the identity synthesis, will ultimately fail no matter how noble.

Yasha was born in Germany to Polish parents, and is one of the best-known academics in the populism and future of liberal democracy space, so he's perfectly equipped to have this conversation, especially in the good faith way, but it should be conducted, something that's kind of absent from a lot of the culture war dynamic issues.

He also answers the broader question of why this is a topic worth exploring in the first place, because as I point out to him, there are numerous listeners, especially this podcast would argue that social justice and culture war issues are actually impediments to broader focus on economic issues, so he gets to that question as well, too.

A huge thank you to the Foundation for American Innovation, supporting the work of this podcast.

I hope you all enjoy this conversation.

Yasha Mook, welcome back to The Re-alignment.

Thank you so much.

I really look forward to our conversation.

Yeah, we spoke last year and you are quite prolific, so you have a hefty back-to-back 2022, 2023, but obviously the category of topic you write on is very, very prescient and important right now, so this all makes sense.

So we're going to kick off with that.

And then there's not going to be a 2024, just to put people at their ease.

It's got to take a while for the next book to come out.

Yeah, and I think we'll get into what you're going to cover next at the end of the episode, but I think it's very important that we start this episode with a very basic question that a bunch of authors have failed earlier in the year, which is, what is wokeness?

And you will know the answer to this.

Explain to the audience why me just asking this very basic, seemingly easy question actually tripped up a lot of people on book tours earlier in the year.

Yeah, and part of that is just that there is a tendency among some people to call anything they don't like woke, right?

So if there's something that somehow seems left-wing or somehow seems progressive or somehow connected to racial justice or some are connected to people not wanting to be homophobic, we're going to call that woke and say it's a terrible thing.

And that obviously is unserious, it's intellectually unserious, and it's morally wrong.

Nevertheless, what I'm arguing in my new book and the identity trap is that there really

[Transcript] The Realignment / 409 | Yascha Mounk: The Identity Trap - Why New Group Identity & Social Justice Ideas Failed to Transform America

is a new ideology, a new set of ideas about race, gender, and sexual orientation that has become very prominent, first of all, in the university and academic settings.

And then over the course of the last decade in a lot of public life as well.

Now there's two different ways of thinking about it.

One is the main kind of themes of this ideology.

And that's what emerges for me in the first part of the book, in which I really talk about the intellectual roots of these ideas.

And I would say the main themes of these ideas have to do with a skepticism towards forms of neutral or absolute truths towards the kind of grand narratives that have historically structured our societies.

Another theme is the use of...

You give an example, what's a grand narrative that this ideology would be skeptical of?

Sure.

But if you want me to define the overall thing, perhaps it's easier for me to do the overall definition, then we can double click on any of those things, otherwise I think we'll get sidetracked.

But I'm happy to talk about any of these things in greater detail.

So the second theme, I'm just going to telegraph these points, and then we can discuss them in greater detail.

The second theme is the use of a sort of politicized form of discourse analysis, where a lot of our politics today is not fighting for particular kinds of legislation, but worrying about cultural representation and critiquing the way in which women or ethnic minorities or other kinds of groups are represented in the media and those kinds of things.

The third is an embrace of what some people have called a form of strategic essentialism, the idea that for things that raise our social construct for practical purposes, we should often treat them as for where we're real in order to facilitate resistance against forms of injustice and oppression.

The fourth theme, I would say, is a deep skepticism about universal rules, universal values and neutral rules in our society, that the real way to make progress is not to live up to the Bill of Rights or the Declaration of Independence or even the 14th Amendment of the United States Constitution.

It is to explicitly make how people are treated, depend on the kind of group of which we're from.

The fifth is a deep skepticism about the ability of our society to make progress on questions like racism and homophobia, the claim that America today is about as homophobic as it was 50 years ago, as racist as it was 100 years ago.

And then finally, there is a skepticism towards the ability of people who stand at different intersections of identity, who have different identity groups to actually understand each other and communicate.

So that's one way in which I make sense of this in my book.

I know I'm giving a very long answer, I promise not to filibuster the rest of the interview.

Another way of thinking about it is to really boil it down to what I think are the core philosophical proposition that helped to motivate those different themes I've been talking

about.

And those are to say, first of all, that the key prism to understand society, the key lens for which we should understand whether it's our interaction or a big political event like the election of Donald Trump or even things like political revolutions, is identity categories like race, gender and sexual orientation.

Secondly, that the true purpose, the true goal of universal values or neutral rules or things like the United States Constitution was to perpetuate forms of identity-based oppression and injustice.

And therefore, thirdly, that the only way to make progress, the only way to remedy them is to get rid of, to rip up those kind of universal values and rules and to make how people are treated more explicitly depend on the group of which they are a part.

Not everybody who is quote unquote woke subscribes to every single one of those themes, holds every single one of those beliefs, but I think between these themes and between the underlying principles that help to motivate them, you really have a description of a kind of ideology that has gained a lot of steam in the last decades.

Yeah, and I think the only one I want to really double click on to where we started is just what is just a grand narrative that a person who holds woke ideology, seriously, what would be a narrative that they would be skeptical of?

Yeah, so a lot of people who try to describe where these ideas come from, especially on the more conservative end, say this is a form of cultural Marxism.

I'm sure that everybody has heard this, right?

The idea is broadly that you take Marxist ideology, you take out things like social class, you stuff in things like race, gender, sexual orientation, and boom, you have what you have today.

And I just don't think that makes sense.

I don't think you get from there to here when you actually know what Marxist philosophy and ideology was, and when you compare to today, I don't think that's very sensible.

So in my intellectual history, I started with Michel Foucault.

And Foucault was a member of the French Communist Party from 1950 to 1953.

So he was a Marxist for a while, but he really rejected that.

He came to believe that this was a big mistake.

He came to bristle at the homophobia of a Communist Party.

He came to bristle at the Wayne, which had blamed Jews for the death of sort of Stalin, pretending that there was some kind of plot of Jewish doctors to kill him.

And he rejected what he called grand narratives.

And one of them was Marxism itself, the idea that we can really understand how economic classes move forward, history, and there will be eventually a Communist revolution.

And then you create a socialist state in which the proletariat is universal class.

That whole grand narrative, that whole way of structuring our understanding of a world and using it to make predictions about the future is wrong.

But Foucault also rejected a second grand narrative, and that's that of liberal democracy.

That is the idea that through enlightenment reason and rational principles and democratic values, we've been able to create a world that is more prosperous and more humane,

[Transcript] The Realignment / 409 | Yascha Mounk: The Identity Trap - Why New Group Identity & Social Justice Ideas Failed to Transform America

in which how we treat, for example, the mentally ill or people who've committed crimes is somehow more humane, more rational than it was in the 18th century.

And so he also rejects that kind of grand narrative.

Now, one of the interesting things is that in some ways, I think the sort of popularized, the more vulgarized version of the ideas I'm talking about have themselves become a grand narrative, right?

Have themselves become a grand theory about if only you agree with people like Robin D'Angelo and Ibra Max Kennedy, you can remake the world and finally, the sort of grand movement towards an anti-racist society as they understand and define it is going to come to fruition.

I think that's one of the reasons why the thinkers I look at and take seriously in the first part of my book have the resources to and often have explicitly criticized some of the ways in which ideas came to be applied later on.

I think the real question we keep throwing around the term woke ideology, but obviously woke ideology,

especially as used today in the podcasting and bookselling world, is obviously pejorative.

That is, I do not think there is a single, you know, obviously, like woke started on like the, you know, left,

but that was obviously reappropriated very explicitly by the right.

Like, how would you say someone who subscribes to the ideology we're describing today?

How would they describe this ideology as?

Like just like the title or like the label or whatever?

Yeah, you know, I think it's Freddie DeBoa who said something like, just just tell me what to call it, you know,

and I think he ends up calling it the thing, which is kind of a funny way of going.

It's actually kind of a good answer, but it's actually kind of conveys that conveys a lot, actually.

Right. So it's a weird thing, right?

Because there's other controversial political ideologies on which we have an agreement about what to call it

in a superficially neutral way, right?

There's some people who are proud socialists, there's some people who think socialism is terrible.

Both of them can agree to call that thing socialist.

The same is true for liberalism or for conservatism.

There's always some fights about how you define things and what counts as an instance of what.

But the basic idea that there are socialists in the world and that's a neutral description

and you yourself might dislike it, you might like it, but you'll be able to agree on that is just sort of there.

I think we're in a really weird situation where there's genuinely new ideology.

That is interesting and worth taking seriously.

It's obvious that I'm critical of it, but I enjoyed reading the authors that made up this tradition.

And I think it's important to actually think through this in a serious way.

But there's just no name you can use that people who like it and people who dislike it would rally around, right?

So people who like it might call it something like social justice or they might just call it, you know,

being a good person or something like that.

Disclaiming the idea that there's really an ideology here.

These other terms, some of which originated within the movement that have now become pejorative, awokeness, identity politics, I, for purposes of my book, call it the identity synthesis.

Because I think it's clear that these are ideas that revolve around notions and categories of identity.

And I argue in the book that there really is synthesis of these different

sets of sort of thoughts and these different intellectual traditions,

including postmodernism, postcolonialism, and then critical race theory.

I don't know whether the identity synthesis is going to catch on.

I don't particularly care that it will.

I just needed a term within the confines of my book to make it clear what I'm talking about in a way that is neutral, but it doesn't sound like I'm just an old man shouting at the clouds.

Yeah, and I'm also realizing another term that I think was catching on for a while,

but I think older we collapsed because to your point, a key feature of any successful label is that anyone, whether they agree or disagree, could use it.

It was really like anti-racist thought.

Like Abraham Kennedy was very explicit that this is anti-racist thought.

X, Y, and Z, my take is that that just isn't going to work as a label because even if it

basically means that if your thing is actually agreed to be anti-racist thought,

then by definition in an American Western liberal democracy, no one can disagree with you.

Therefore, no one is going to embrace that term because it just doesn't work.

You can't be a center-left person at Boston University and accept the term anti-racist

thought because by definition, that would then mean any disagreements you have with Abraham Kennedy or anyone in that ideology are inherently racist.

So I think there's a reason why that isn't going to catch on.

Yeah, and I certainly think of myself as deeply anti-racist, a poor racism, and think that my own ideas are better able to fight racism than those by people within this tradition

that my new book is about. And in fact, one of the things that's striking to me

is that there's a long American political tradition which includes politicians of

many different races, but which also includes some of the most prominent African-American

thinkers and activists in the history of this country, from Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther

King Jr. too, I would argue in many ways Barack Obama. And their basic worldview is to say,

obviously, universal principles and neutral rules are not enough to assure that we have

justice in this country. Frederick Douglass, when he was invited to hold a speech celebrating

the 4th of July, said, how hypocritical is this? How can you be talking about these beautiful words that all man are born and created equal as long as slavery is actually a reality in this country?

But his answer to that was not to rip up those principles. It was to say, in a decent society,

we will make sure that everybody who lives here gets the protection of those values

and of those principles. That's what he asked for. He didn't say free speech is a bad idea because

it allows slavers to say terrible things. He said free speech is the dread of tyrants,

because when it was deeply unpopular, it allowed abolitionists to argue for their course.

In the same way Martin Luther King pointed out that many of the promissory notes written to

African-Americans had turned out to be fraudulent, but America had reneged on them. But he didn't

rip up those promissory notes. He said the bank of justice must honor them. And I think what's just key to understand is that the tradition of anti-racism from which people like Ibrahim Kendi is descended explicitly reject Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King and Barack Obama. Right? Derek Bell, the founder of Critical Race Theory, which is one of the traditions that make up the identity synthesis, explicitly says that we need to oppose what he calls the defunct racial equality ideology of a civil rights movement. He makes fun of the piety of things like we shall overcome. He says that in some key ways, Brown versus Board of Education, the key Supreme Court ruling that desegregated schools in the American South was a mistake. Kimberly Crenshaw, perhaps the second most important figure within that tradition, wrote briefly after Barack Obama was elected that Obama was fundamentally at odds with key tenets of Critical Race Theory. So in the same way in which there's confusion about what workiness is, I think there's this confusion about what Critical Race Theory is. And some people on the right say, if you want kids in public schools to learn about slavery, then that's Critical Race Theory. And that's obviously absurd and disgusting. But as a result, you know, a lot of more progressive people say, well, Critical Race Theory is just wanting to think critically about race in society. And you wouldn't want to do that, right? But when you look at the actual origin foundation of these ideas, the theorists who would make up this tradition explicitly see themselves in opposition to the sort of liberal political tradition, the liberal black political tradition that extends, you know, from Douglas through King to Obama. So here's what I'm really curious about, because once again, I find this book so impressive, because this is a serious effort. You always come down on one side rather than the other, but like you're seriously engaging with these ideas, and these thinkers, this is a very good faith, you've just given, I think, a very good faith articulation of wokeness, philosophy, identity, synthesis here. What do you, at a broad level, you could go as broad a narrative as you want, like what do you broadly agree with? And what do you broadly disagree with when it comes to the body of work? And frankly, just the results of the past 10 years. And we'll get into a little later why we're focusing on like 2014 onwards, but just for now, like, what's good? What are you disagreeing with? Where do you end up? Yeah, I think what's, so first of all, I think it's natural that in a free society and in a diverse society that contains people with origins, lots of different parts of the world, with people who have lots of different religious beliefs, and with people of lots of different ethnicities, there's going to be some form of quote unquote identity politics, right? And I don't think there's anything inherently problematic about people saying, hey, here, people who are more similar to me, you know, along some identity line, and we're going to organize together to make sure that when we're being mistreated, we have remedy for that. And that perhaps we can fight for some common interests. I don't have a problem with that. The other thing is that obviously, there are deep injustices in our society that persist. And it's very important to understand and to organize against them. Now, I would argue that, you know, thinkers within the liberal tradition have been able to recognize that for a very long time. I don't think that somebody like Martin Luther King was naive about the existence of those injustices. But I do think that the work of some of the people I've read in researching and preparing for this book can be helpful in that regard. I think in its original meaning, in its original meaning, Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality as recognizing that the kind

of injustices that black women might face, for example, is more than just the arithmetic sum of the injustices faced by either white women or black men is true. And this is a helpful way of thinking about these issues. Where I become critical and skeptical is in, first of all, the deep pessimism that pervades this tradition, the claim by people like Derek Bell that by as late as something like the year 2000, really, America was as racist as it had been in 1950 and as racist as it had been in 1850, that the form of racism might sort of shift shapes, but that we can never make progress. I think that's substantively wrong when you actually read what

America looked like in 1950 or looked like in 1850. I just think it's very, very hard to maintain that claim. And I think it's politically wrong because it gives wrong implication. It suggests that we have to rip up our institutions rather than to continue to fight as hard we can for that hard one and incremental but very real progress. I also worry about the prescription that this ideology makes for how we should live together and how we should educate our children. So I'm very concerned about a form of what I call progressive separatism, which goes far beyond the natural forms of identity politics we'll have in society and goes far beyond freedom of association, which we, of course, have to recognize in liberal societies, to doing things like teachers in many elite private schools in the country going into classrooms in first grade and second grade and telling kids if you're black, you go over there. If you're Latino, you go over there. If you're Asian American, you go over there. If you're white, you go over there. One of the most influential educational consultancies now is called embrace race. And many of these schools make clear that they think a good education should encourage people to conceive of themselves as racial beings. I think that's a mistake for how to build a thriving diverse democracy in general. It's particularly a mistake when it comes to the white kids. And my concern here is not that white kids are going to be uncomfortable. I don't mind people sometimes being uncomfortable as part of education. I didn't think that's a huge problem. But what's actually going to happen to these six or seven-year-olds when you tell them

embrace your whiteness, embrace the European origins, that's what defines you. Well, a few of them might become quote-unquote anti-racist, but I think many more would become white supremacists

if that's the kind of message we send. At the highest level, I told you about the sort of free basic views that I think in a kind of rational reconstruction, a philosophical term, you can boil the tradition down to. There's three answers to that that philosophical liberals should give. So the first is, yes, yes, of course, race, gender, and sexual orientation are important to understanding our society and most societies or any society. And they continue to structure injustices. But they're not the only prison to see or understand the world. There are other things that are important from social class, to religion, to people's individual actions and intentions, to all kinds of other things. And to understand reality, we have to look at this broad set of things, allowing each situation to teach us how to respond to, how to understand it, rather than imposing this one view. The second is in keeping with that tradition I've been speaking about actually demanding inclusion under these universal values has been a great motor for progress. It's not been something that's perpetuated racism. It's what's allowed us to make significant if incomplete progress towards battling and overcoming racism. And so finally,

what we need to do is to live up to those values rather than to rip them up. You know, something I'm really curious to ask you is, to what degree do these identity, culture, war, inclusion issues, how much, how much do they matter? Because the key thing for context, a lot of people who are attracted to the realignment and breaking points, especially when we came into the shows around 2020, we're attracted to this message we have, which is very much like, hey, because all this like division, but ultimately, and this isn't quite Marxist, this is Marxist adjacent, but like ultimately, they're always like big economic issues that we need to focus on. And the culture war is a distraction from those issues. What is kind of your response to people who fall into that camp? Yeah, well, I think it is important for a number of reasons. You know, the first is that in some of these contexts, mistakes are real. And in the book, you know, I could have filled the whole book with stories of cancellations and Twitter beefs and so on. And I've been really disciplined in, I think really not using any of those examples in the book, because I wanted to show that there's real stakes here for how people live and what our society looks like. You know, I spoke to a woman called Kyla Posey, who's African American educator in the suburbs of Atlanta, who requested, you know, wanted to request a particular teacher for her elementary school daughter. And the principal said, first sure, of course, which teacher would you prefer? And then when she sent in the name, the principal kept deferring and saying, well, you know, isn't that another teacher that might work well, or couldn't you go to this other class? And eventually Kyla Posey said, well, hang on a second, what's going on here? Why can't I have the classroom that I prefer for my daughter? And the principal said, well, that's not the black class. Now, at first, when I heard the story, I thought this is some kind of, you know, quote unquote, old fashioned sub and racism. But actually, that principal is herself a black woman who thinks of herself as progressive and is trying to impose these new pedagogical approaches, which are saying that it's not okay for a black girl to be in a class that's predominantly people from other ethnicities. She has to be around a lot of other black kids. And so therefore, even if her own mother thinks that it's not the right path, she has to go to quote, unquote, the black class. I think that is high stakes. That is about how we educate our children, what message we send to her. So we send to them. I have another example in the book about the way in which we rolled out vaccines in the United States. Now, virtually every country in the world prioritized the elderly, because it's just the extent to which you are more likely to die from COVID is so heavily dependent on age, that that's what made sense. And so most countries made some allowances for hospital staff and stuff and so on. But then basically said, look, you know, first go over the ones who are over 85, and then once we're over 80 and so on. And that also makes it easier to communicate to the public. The key advisory council to the CDC, those tasked with creating suggested guidelines, said we can't do that, because an over proportional number of old people in the United States are white. And so even for our own model says that deviating from prioritizing the elderly is going to increase the number of people who die by between 0.5 and 6.5%. We should prioritize the category of essential workers instead. Now, you know, A was immediately running for who counted as essential workers, right? So you had, you know, movie people be counted, you had finance executives be counted. I counted as a professor in the state of Maryland, even though I wasn't allowed to teach in person. And then what happened is you had, you know, a huge number of people eligible, but very few spots. So who got those spots? Well,

the people like me who could hit refresh on a website for two hours a day, who could drive far away to some rural pharmacy where there was less demand and get an appointment earlier that way.

And in the end, I think it probably killed more non-white people. Because if you give a vaccine to 225-year-old black Uber drivers rather than 180-year-old black retiree, more black people are going to die. And so the stakes can be real in those kinds of circumstances. And then finally, perhaps, because one more point is, you know, it's a distraction from those other issues, right? If you care about social class, and if you care about some of the economic injustices in this country, and we allow the only language that we can speak to be about what out of red junior calls racial disparities, to be about, you know, disparities between ethnic groups in such a way that, you know, we can believe the society is going to be just if only, you know, 13% of billionaires in the United States one day will be black and, you know, 20% of, you know, billionaires are going to be Latino and so on, then we don't have the language to actually oppose inequality. And then finally, I think that this stuff actually helps the kind of far-right politicians who I continue to regard as the most serious danger to our democratic institutions and to the values that I care about. You know, in some ideological terms, the identity synthesis and these ideas are perhaps opposites, but politically and strategically, one is the end to the other side. Trump's election is part of what helped these ideas gain such hegemony in left-leaning spaces. And I think it's the whole that these ideas now have with the so many institutions which help to explain in part why Trump is still running head-to-head with Biden in polls for 2024. Again, we'll actually get to that in a bit on a personal level. My answer to the significance question is once again rooted in my own personal lived experience once again, which I actually think despite the parody jokes is actually an important concept. So back in 2013, I was at the University of Oregon and I was involved in student government. And I went to like a student government

retreat during the summer before school started. And that was the first time I was introduced to the idea of gender pronouns. So they were kind of just going around the room, like they brought in like, you know, a 20-something organizer is saying, hey, actually, here's your gender pronouns. When

it got to me, once again, never having heard of these 2013, right? So I never, you have always a little ahead of like, I think the rest of the country on this stuff. I said, I'm Marshall. I guess I'm he, him, his, but honestly, I don't really care. Call me whatever. The 20-something organizer got very angry, was very aggressive, because once again, like within ideology synthesis, me saying, I don't really care. That's very cisgender privilege. That's like insert various like privileges, like very obvious, the violations I committed. And it just on a personal level, it was kind of like wild to react to me negatively in the sense that like, this dude just figured out these ideas literally 30 seconds ago, and you're going this aggressive. And the reason why this anecdote really matters is because the reason why the guy was so aggressive is because he had total hegemonic control over the academic institution. Like this is an institution at the University of Oregon, like in a deeply blue state in a college town, where like, if I've been like, yeah, I'm good, man, I'm just not going to say anything. I obviously wouldn't have gotten in trouble, wouldn't have really worked. So I think we've really had 10 years straight of up and coming, smart, young center left to left young people who have been in a cultural

[Transcript] The Realignment / 409 | Yascha Mounk: The Identity Trap - Why New Group Identity & Social Justice Ideas Failed to Transform America

academic and intellectual milieu where they actually have not had to learn how to articulate, defend, you think of like the Latinx debate. The reason why I think a lot of folks ran into a buzzsaw of the culture to say, we're going to reject Latinx is because they were able just to wake up from 18 on and say, yeah, we're just going to say Latinx. Now, you try bringing that to the rest of American society, where you do not have that level of control. They have no ability, even I think of their own merits, I think to successfully argue or understand how a democracy works and how you may think that Latino is fine, but I think this, here's why you should believe what I think. I consistently, even when I'm being very good faith, find young people who've been through these culturally owned institutions just incredibly weak at the democratic part of this. That's my personal version. I'm curious if, once again, you work in academia. I'm curious what your response to that is. No, I agree with this. One thing I'm struck by is that I spend some time in France as well. That's a society that, if anything, perhaps pays too little attention to some of these things. In the United States, we often have social science studies that don't have any kind of class variable, and then they ascribe everything to race, even for part of it is clearly driven by class. In France, it's often the inverse where people ascribe everything to class because they don't have a race variable, and they're sort of a little bit blind to that. But as a result, I find it interesting to speak with people in France who are quote unquote woke, and because they are in a much more hostile environment where people's default is to disagree with them and where they're the ones breaking the social norm a little bit. They often end up being so much more subtle and so much more persuasive and so much more rhetorically skilled than the people who hold similar kinds of positions in the United States because they have this daily trial of actually having to hear the objections and engage with them and speak with them. In the United States, many of my friends who've been asked to be part of debates about these ideas who have views that are more in the center left or in some cases more heterodox, those debates never happen because the most prominent people who hold the views of the popularized form of the identity synthesis just will not engage in those debates because they think if you disagree with me, you're not just somebody who has a different set of views, you're somehow unacceptable. You're beyond the pale and I'm not going to go and share the platform with you with some notable and noble exceptions. The other thing is that when it comes to something like the debate on free speech, it ends up really maturing because those debates have been held so much in the context of progressive hegemony that people think, well, of course, the census at whatever college you were at in Oregon or at Smith College or at wherever else are going to be on my side. Of course, they're going to be these progressive people who would never punish anybody who calls for whatever the socialist revolution but the moment that somebody says, Tronan's not important to me, they're going to come down on them. But when you think about what limits on free speech would actually look like at a more systemic level, it is hugely naive to think that it would in any kind of way systematically benefit progressive views rather than conservative views or centrist views or far-right views. Who is going to be a member of the Federal Census Bureau or more likely the speech facilitation committee at some Silicon Valley company? Well, by definition, it's not going to be the marginalized, it's going to be people who have a lot of power and influence in society. I think the left's thinking on issues like free speech has been really undermined by the fact

that the debate has just taken place in these spaces dominated by progressives. And so they're very naive about once that becomes the default mode of how you interact, state universities in Republican-controlled places are not going to be very hospitable to some of the ideas that I also care about but I also think are important either because the right or just because they should be part of the debate. Yeah, and I think the key issue here that you really identified is that because obviously there's a lot of especially in activist circles comparisons to, like I say, the 1960s and I think to a certain degree. And I'll just say this is cost-playing, but I think a lot of young activists want to embody that tradition they see them coming from. But what the critical difference here in this matter strategically is that for good or for ill, if you're operating on a college campus in the 1960s, you are actually deeply revolutionary in regards to the establishment. If you go to University of Oregon, shout out, go ducks. The way the campus is actually designed is in a way to propel riots so the National Guard could come in. There's very specific designs of the avenues and all those different features. That's a revolutionary moment, but now we're in a situation where you're chaining yourself to the columns of the president's office. The president is more likely than not going to aesthetically agree with you on most things. So that dynamic has, there has to be a tactical shift and that just goes to your point. If you're woke in France, you are deeply revolutionary in a way that's going to shift your approach and your tactics and those dynamics. So here's something I want to hear from you. The reason why I was telling the anecdote beyond me having beef with this dude 10 years later, I forget who he was, was that happened in 2013. And you and your book identify 2013, 2014 as a particularly important moment. And the more you step back, you're kind of like, that's kind of weird that was the moment. I mean, obviously, you had Ferguson, but like Barack Obama beat one of the widest presidential candidates of easily, probably Mitt Romney will probably be the widest presidential candidate of the 21st century. I'm going to make that call very, very, very early in this century. He gets reelected, Joe Biden, Mike jumps the gun, gay marriages endorsed, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Kind of a weird time for that to be the revolutionary moment, like what happens? Yeah, that's a great question. So I think there's all these different structural factors that help to explain why these ideas that are kind of incubated in academia for a long time then start to break out from academia. And part of that is to do with the fact that these ideas have just gained a certain kind of dominance and parts of the university that they hadn't before the time. The role of administrators within universities became much more important than administrators we know from various surveys and not just much more far left, but specifically much more anti free speech, much more anti some of those basic liberal values than the average faculty member. And they came to just have a much bigger role to play. And so that helps to explain this a little bit. I think that's a very important story about social media, both in terms of encouraging people to see themselves in identitarian terms, in terms of encouraging new forms of identities. So platforms like Tumblr are really where new forms of sexual orientation like demisexual or new forms of gender identity like Libra gender are invented. The newspaper content that people consume starts to shift. It used to be that most people got most of the content from landing pages of websites, right? So you would go to nrytimes.com or vox.com and click on whatever was there because of the rise of Twitter and Facebook.

By about those years you're talking about people get a lot of their content through social media networks and their people are often connected to people of similar identity categories. And so suddenly there's a much bigger incentive to push these identity based forms of content, much more first person content and much more far left content in certain ways. I think all of that matters.

I wonder whether there's sort of two political shocks, right? Like one is that Obama elicits these great hopes, right? In part because he is, I think, a rare political talent, in part because structurally, first like president, something we didn't think would happen, didn't think would be possible. And so I think there's all of these hopes that people put in Obama when he's elected in 2008. It's going to solve so many problems in the country is never going to look the same. And obviously the actual ability of a president to change the country is limited. There is a backlash against Obama, much of it is quite nasty. And so I think there is starting to be this disappointment, especially in many more left-leaning and activist circles of, well, if Obama can't change stuff, and that's not the path to progress, then perhaps we have to reject the system. Then perhaps the people who've always been more radical, more extreme were right all along. So that, I think, is an important political shock. And when the second political shock happens a little bit later, it does postdate this first shock and a lot of this sort of embrace of the vocabulary of the identity synthesis in the Washington Post, in the New York Times, actually happens before 2016. But then, of course, once Trump gets elected, that's the second big shock. And that makes it much harder, as explained in the book, to criticize your own side of a political spectrum. That's the moment when suddenly, if you speak up against some of those things, you'll be seen as a traitor who's running secret interference for Donald Trump.

And that helps these ideas to gain hegemony.

You know, in these last few minutes here, a couple quicker questions. So something I'm just curious about, and this goes to your point around describing revolutionary changes in the 2010s. There's this growing literature, Freddie DeBauer's in this category, Vincent Bevin's as a new book coming out on this topic, this whole debate around, if you looked at America post-2008 financial crisis, and post-Brockerman's election, I think it would be more reasonable to bet that, oh, America is going to continue to, like, racially improve. It's really the economic side of things. You're going to have a broader revolution as response to the failures of capitalism. This, then, is enhanced with Bernie Sanders' overperformance in 2016, and then all of the social democracy stuff, AOC, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. We all know the sort of data points there. But very clearly, it's the cultural side where the revolution occurred, not the economic one. What's your answer to the problem of the leftist? Because this is a problem that leftists, that, like, anti-woke leftists. This is basically the anti-woke leftist critique. How would you diagnose their situation? So it's the question of why is it that at a moment when you would expect there to be a lot of course of economic redistribution and so on, what happens is candy-style anti-racism instead. And what explains that?

Yeah. Because kind of what the economic, the kind of anti-woke leftist argument is that, like, the establishment basically appropriates woke politics, identity synthesis to, once again, push down class identity and focus on race instead. I'm curious what you think about their kind of critique of how the 2010s went in that context.

Yeah. I think the critique is fair. I think there's sort of, you know, there's a weird thing where if you are more economically radical, you think of wokeness as being in alliance with

corporate America. And then if you are more on the center left or even the center right, then you think of wokeness as more sort of economically revolutionary and naturally aligned with socialism or communism or something like that. And in truth, I think it's generally a two by two. I think there's, and again, I don't like using the term woke, but for, you know, as a shortcut right now, I will, I think there's woke center left, which is the kind of corporate NGOs, foundations. Yeah. The Pepsi ad, you know, those kinds of things. I think there is a sort of woke far left on many college spaces and so on that does sort of combine a call for economic revolution with that form of anti-racism. I mean, I think on the anti-work side, that's the same as well. I think there's people who are just sort of like, you know, moderate normies who are like, I don't want economic revolution and also some of the stuff that happens at these colleges seems a little bit off. And then I think that's the sort of tradition, like, like Rita, I mentioned earlier, right, of more socialist or far left on the economy, who think that these cultural concerns are a distraction to the kinds of politics that really kind of need, right? Now, you know, why is it that these cultural concerns want to out in, in, you know, to this extent, I think partially there's a 40-year horizon, a 50-year horizon there, which is that, you know, class politics, for better or worse, had a kind of home in the confrontation between two different economic systems. And we will follow the Soviet Union, that form of left on politics just became discredited and that allowed the sort of, in any case, slowly rising identity-based leftist movements to fill that void and fill that space starting in the 1990s. I think that is part of the reason. I think social media is part of the reason, you know, it's easy to organize economically without social media, because those are very broad identity categories, right? Like, are you a worker? Are you a proletarian? What exactly that means in 2023? That's something you don't really need social media for. I think the kind of like, oh, like everybody has their own boutique identity, and then we have to have some politics or coalition between those boutique identities, I think technologically social media lends itself more easily to that than earlier forms of technology. And then third, there's an interesting argument that a political scientist called Peter Hall and some colleagues at Harvard have recently made, where they show that actually on the economy, people's views have moved closer together. So it used to be that a conservative and a liberal really had very, very different views about economic issues. But in part because of the, you know, lower attraction for broadly neoliberal policies and both sides of a political spectrum, you know, a lot of people are now in favor of some more redistribution, some expansion of a welfare state and so on, right? On identity issues, everybody has also moved to the left, but the professional class and the managerial class have moved very rapidly and very significantly to the left, whereas other kind of parts of the occupational hierarchy have moved a little bit to the left, but less so. And so suddenly it's easier to polarize around those issues, because the gap between the standard views in, you know, the C-suite in America and the standard view of the worker working with that company is just way bigger than it used to be, not because there's this reactionary drift among workers, but because they haven't gone as far left as quickly as the member of the C-suite. Here's like the big last final question or two. I'm curious. My quick take on this is just that identity synthesis slash wokeness really overreached in 2020. It overestimated both its control over, it overestimated its ability, sorry,

it overestimated the salience of the fact that it controlled most cultural academic political institutions and they thought that would matter more. I come from a very like center left space. I was sort of like, man, you guys are going to really like over, you're going to overrun the base that you need to bring along for you, especially if Donald Trump loses re-election. You know, a Joe Biden presidency was not going to be a presidency that was going to like help like the woke drift of American politics, but that said, so it would be easy for us to kind of have this episode be like, oh, it's peak wokeness, it's all over like whatever, whatever. But my other take is just that look like if Donald Trump wins election next year, wokeness is obviously going to get, actually that's up for debate. Would a Donald Trump re-election, because the last thing of this kind of like grant, because I have a bunch of like Republican friends who think, no, no, no, like if Donald Trump wins re-election, woke people are going to understand that it's their fault and they are going to dial things back even more. I just, I know people, I think the center left will lose its mind. If Donald Trump loses re, if Donald Trump wins, the center left loses mind. And it's basically 2018 all over again. What's your take, what's your closing take on how this could play out? No, I think we're aligned on this. I mean, I wrote a piece a week or two before the 2020 election saying if you hate wokeness but for Joe Biden, not obviously because Joe Biden or some of the people he appointed would be less sympathetic to these ideas than the second

Trump presidency. Many of them would be more sympathetic to those ideas and in certain ways they've really inscribed it at the heart of a federal bureaucracy. But because thermostatically, you know, people would move away from it, right? But if you have, you know, part of the hold of these ideas from 2016 to 2020 was that the claim that America is this, you know, irredeemably racist country that, you know, that we need to just completely reinvent our institutions, that, you know, all the worst things you could possibly say about the nation are true will make much more plausible by the fact that Donald Trump was in the White House, right? And the difficulty of arguing against these ideas was in large part motivated by this, both by the understandable fear of what Trump might do to the country and by this feeling of impotence that gave people. There's a great anthropological paper from a 90s side of this government doing work for the book, which says, no, how come the enemy of humanity is always in the office down the hall? And the answer to that is because you have some power of the man in the office down the hall. You don't have any power over Donald Trump. And so for all of those reasons, I agree with you that if Trump got reelected in 2024, all of this stuff would just come surging right back. And people would try even more to impose that moral purity over the institutions, the environments that they have control over while facing this sort of genuine threat from Trump. I'll say something else as well. I, like you, I think that some of the most extreme exorcists of this ideology have been rode back over the course of the last year or so. I think the most absurd claims have less traction. And I think the ability to engage in a serious way with these ideas without being vilified has improved. I've been able to go on a number of left-leaning shows and podcasts and so on and talking about this book in a way that I think a year or two years ago I would not have been able to. Having said that, I think these ideas continue to hold a tremendous amount of cultural power. And when I look at the students I teach, who are very smart, thoughtful people who really want to engage with these ideas, who are grateful to have an opportunity to actually think through these things in a serious and open-minded way,

the starting assumptions they come to the classroom with, the things that they've been taught at this point throughout their school education are deeply part of the identity synthesis. And so I think that this is going to be a 20-year, 25-year contestation. I think it's going to be a genuine ideological set of debates about how useful and helpful these ideas are. And to engage in that debate, I think we need to understand those ideas in a serious way. And that was the goal that I had in writing the identity trap. I want to do two things. The first is to improve the level of arguments of people who already dislike those ideas, who already feel that there's something fishy about them. And I want them to understand these ideas and be able to master better, smarter, more fair, but also more convincing arguments against them. And the second is to speak to people who do feel on the fence. We feel, well, of course, there's real racism in America. Of course, there's all of these real problems. And these ideologies seem to be able to explain why and how and what to do about it. But I also see that in these institutions, I'm a part of this stuff has often gone wrong. And some of this stuff seems really doctrinaire. And so how do I sort this out? And I want to be a fair broker that is obviously critical of these ideas, but that helps people sort out their thoughts about it. So here's just the closing question for you. Obviously, I think this is a good book to read at any point, you're taking a break for 2024. But I think given the conversation we just had, the most important time for anyone to read this book would really be in December 2024 of Trump's re-election. I do not want to do 2020 over again. So what would you basically say to someone? Like I said, I'd say the whole wokeness, this ideology feels like it's at its weakest moment right now. Democrats are incredibly scared. Joe Biden's normalcy is easily the strongest aspect of his presidency. So it's weak. If it's going to be strong again in 2024, what are your closing thoughts that you would kind of say? Like what's the closing pitch for someone who's thinking about these ideas? And are faced with like, I guess America is shitty if Trump literally came back again. Like what would you say to them? What would I say to him now? What would I say in 2024? If someone's listening back to this in December 2024, when the woke arguments are going to feel a lot stronger, then they feel when Trump's polling 50-50. That once again, this is the weakest the side you're opposed to is going to be. When it's stronger, like can you just give a quick, what would you just say up front? I don't know. The first thing I'll say is send me an email and we'll go get really drunk somewhere because I just I don't think I can emotionally deal with really envisaging another Trump president to Jesus. I have a cold chiver running down my spine. It's just be so damn exhausting in every possible way. But secondly, what I would say is first of all, that the threat of these forms of authoritarian populism is not a specifically American one. A lot of my work for the last 10 years has been to warn about the threat that these forms of politics pose to democratic institutions. I'd like to say my democracy crisis hipster was worried about the rise of these authoritarian powers before it was cool. They've been able to win election in different incarnations and shapes in countries from Brazil to Argentina to India to Turkey to Hungary. So this is not a specifically American thing and it's not a specifically white thing. And if Trump wins again in 2024, unlike unless the polls really change between now and then, when the reason will have been that he is able to attract a lot of support from non-white voters. In 2020, Trump was competitive because he significantly increased his share of a vote among African Americans and especially Latinos and Asian Americans compared to 2016. And Biden won because he significantly boosted his share of a vote among white voters. Well,

[Transcript] The Realignment / 409 | Yascha Mounk: The Identity Trap - Why New Group Identity & Social Justice Ideas Failed to Transform America

over the last three years, that trend has continued to accelerate. If I know what race you are, that gives me much less information about who you're voting for today than it would have done in 2016. And actually, according to a recent analysis of the New York Times, about 9 or 10 percent of Republican voters, a small portion of Republican voters, but a very important one, electorally, are people who used to vote for Democrats who are disproportionately non-white, who disproportionately for Republican voters think of themselves as left-leaning or as moderate and who really, really hate work. Who really think that this ideology has become a problem. So if Trump wins, it's not just because white supremacy rules America, because that doesn't explain why similar candidates have been able to win in Turkey or India or elsewhere in the world. And in fact, it's not just because this sort of white declining majority desperately wants to hold on to power. It's because this form of politics is appealing to people across races in important ways. And so I think to understand that, to analyze that, you precisely have to resist some of the pitfalls of the identity synthesis. To understand Trump's enduring appeal, you can't. You have to think about the role of race, gender, and sexual orientation in American politics. You can't just think about the role of those things. Otherwise, you're not going to understand speaking in a year's time how Trump could win again or speaking from today's perspective where that outcome, thankfully, isn't certain yet why it is, but he's running neck to neck in polls against Joe Biden. That is just the perfect closing answer because I think it gives a political analyst of the left of the center of the right frame, which is if we reduce this, which several authors are doing, I think rather unhelpfully to look ultimately, we should understand Trump as a rebellion against a diversifying different new emerging America in the 2050s. It entirely does not explain the phenomenon you just described and reducing this to ultimately the forces of racism defeated anti-racism. Well, then I don't know, but then there's nothing to do. And it's actually utterly unhelpful and it completely excuses you from doing the really hard work of finding a center left to left response to the broader authoritarianism populism they were referring to. So that is the perfect place to leave. We're both in academia, so we gave people some homework. Great place to end things. Yasha, I really appreciate you for coming back on. And when you have your next book in 2025 plus, we'd love to do that again as well too. Thank you so much, Marshall. And happy honeymoon. I don't know if you want to save us on the air or not, but you can cut that. Yeah, folks, this is the last thing I'm recording before I peace off to Arizona. So that's actually a sign of how much I wanted to speak to Yasha. And actually, this is good. I'll say this, guys, read Yasha's book. I did this with a slight hangover because this is actually an important book and would love to have this out on Publication Day. Thank you for joining us on The Real Life. Hope you enjoyed this episode. If you learned something like this sort of mission or want to access our subscriber exclusive Q&A, bonus episodes and more, go to realignment.supercast.com and subscribe to our \$5 a month, \$50 a year, or \$500 for lifetime membership rates. See you all next time.