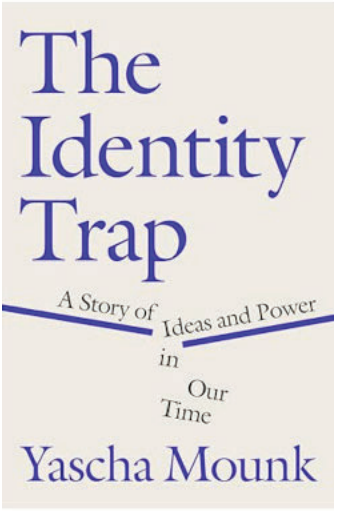
Book Review



The Identity Trap: A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time, by Yascha Mounk. 416 pages. Penguin Books Ltd., 2023.

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If life can be said to have a purpose, that purpose would appear to be development. Indeed, the Bahá'í writings affirm that "every atom in existence" serves a developmental or pedagogical function. But there are also obstacles that render human development, in particular, a great challenge. Among the most formidable of these obstacles are the notions of human identity that animate our approach to human development—for we cannot become what we are capable of becoming unless we have a clear and visionary understanding of what we human beings are and can be.

The late educator and developmental psychologist, Daniel Jordan, captures this problem in a simple story about a man who lives in the country and is thus isolated from the benefits of modern technology. Such a man learns shortly after he gets electricity and a radio that he has won a refrigerator from one of the nearby radio stations. When the refrigerator is delivered to his door, the new owner instructs that it be placed on the porch, whereupon he brings out his hats, overalls and shoes and fills it. And while a refrigerator can certainly be used to store these things, use of it in this way betrays a lack of understanding of the full identity and nature of a refrigerator.

Confusion about the nature of human identity, of course, carries vastly more serious consequences than the story suggests: it has been at the root of some of the world's most destructive ideologies. In point of fact, such confusion has fueled nearly all of the human rights abuses of the twentieth century.

We may, for example, become trapped in notions of identity that conceptualize human persons as "nothing but animals." Or we may be limited in our development by conceptualizations of identity that reduce us to our social address—our economic class, our gender, our nationality, or the color of our skin. Indeed, much of the suffering that we have endured, and much of the development that has been squandered, has been a result of inadequate conceptualizations of human identity. Yascha Mounk has written thoughtfully about the contemporary expression of this problem in his recent book, *The Identity Trap: A Story of Ideas and Power in*

Our Time. And although at times and in various places throughout his book Mounk appears to underestimate the importance of the space that identity politics has opened up for many millions of Black, Indigenous and people of color who have been suffocating at the margins (let us not so quickly forget Mr. George Floyd), his exposure of the narrative that underlies some aspects of the discourse on human identity merits careful consideration.

In describing the contemporary nature of the identity trap, Mounk invokes the work of many influential liberal scholars who came to recognize that so much of the injustice that people endure around the world is due to the socially constructed identities that have been imposed upon them by powerful stake holders who have exercised much control over access to the resources that are needed if people are to be able to realize their full potential as human beings.

Mounk begins his critique by examining the work of influential liberal thinkers like Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard, who, after the failings of the Soviet Union and exposure of some of the pernicious aspects of the doctrine of Marxism to which so many of their friends and colleagues had been loyal, began to reject, not only Marxism, but all "grand narratives" that have a hold on the human imagination. Reflecting upon these thinkers, Mounk writes: "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 genuinely make progress toward building a better society" (29). The form of critique marshalled by Foucault and Lyotard saw power in people's ability to construct narratives and forms of discourse that are to their advantage and to the advantage of those with whom they share a vested interest. This turn in scholarly discourse, Mounk notes, would cast doubt on the historical mission of the left, which "consisted in expanding the circle of human sympathy across boundaries of family, tribe, religion, and ethnicity." For "to be on the left," he continued, "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" (25–26).

Mounk argues that the loss of faith in meta or grand narratives that presumed the perfectibility of the social order would lead to the belief in the permanence of racism in the minds of many western intellectuals over the course of the twentieth century. If racism is an inevitable feature of American consciousness, writes Mounk, "[t]o win any kind of durable progress, it would take explicit group rights that favor the historically marginalized, such as the policies and practices that, in an effort

to achieve 'racial equality,' explicitly make the treatment citizens receive from state institutions depend on the color of their skin" (59). In this way, he argues, the liberal left began, perhaps unwittingly, to abandon the universalist, all embracing values that had once defined liberalism in the west. One might argue that Mounk's analysis fails, to some degree, to appreciate how many liberal thinkers might at once acknowledge the endemic, pernicious, and ongoing impact of racism without concluding that, therefore, nothing can be done about it. To the contrary, much of what has been done about racism has been done by those who suffer its impact most directly while continuing to nurture confidence in our ability to overcome it. No effort will be made, however, to develop an adequate critique of Mounk on this point here.

Mounk goes further to argue that intellectual life on American college campuses has, over the last half century, been fundamentally reshaped by the ascendency of what he calls the "identity synthesis." The identity synthesis, he notes, is characterized by a widespread adherence to seven fundamental propositions: 1) a deep skepticism about objective truth; 2) the use of a form of discourse analysis for explicitly political ends; 3) an embrace of essentialist categories of identity; 4) a proud pessimism about the state of Western societies; 5) a preference for public policies that explicitly make how someone is treated depend on the group to which they belong; 6) an embrace of intersectional logic for political activism; and 7) a deep-seated skepticism about the ability of members of different identity groups to understand each other (Mounk 65–72). Mounk pins each of these developments on the work of a particular twentieth century scholar.

In describing some unintended consequences of the identity synthesis, Mounk offers a few insights that deserve to be quoted at length. The identity synthesis, he notes, "is a political trap, making it harder to sustain diverse societies whose citizens trust and respect each other." He continues:

> 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.
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> 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 themselves in terms of their individual tastes and temperaments, their artistic predilections, or their sense of moral duty toward all humanity.

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 (14–16).[1]

Insofar as a review of this length cannot treat adequately the many complex issues that animate Mounk's work, the remainder of this review will focus on what I regard as the most important contribution that this book makes to our understanding of the challenges associated with thinking about and acting upon conceptualizations of human identity—and that is Mounk's claim that the identity synthesis embodies a deep-seated skepticism about the ability of members of different identity groups to understand each other. I take this as the most important of Mounk's concerns because it is our ability to come to an understanding of one another as human persons with shared concerns, aspirations, capacities, and responsibilities that the success of the humanizing project requires.

'Abdu'l-Bahá has noted that "[m]an can withstand anything except that which is divinely intended and indicated for the age and its requirements" (*Promulgation* 48). In proclaiming the divine intent that social reality should come to reflect the truth of the oneness of humanity, the Bahá'í Faith affirms the truth that the peoples of the world constitute an interdependent, interconnected whole. Humanitarian thinkers have, for well over a century, written and spoken of

1 For a carefully constructed Bahá'í-inspired essay on this theme, see Shahrzad Sabet's "The Crisis of Identity" in the *The Bahá'í World*.

this same truth as an idea whose time has come. Notwithstanding the beauty and excellence of our diversity, we are one. Much suffering has had to be endured for us to approach even a dim awareness of the profound implications of this truth for life on earth. Mounk argues that such a perspective must be kept alive and nurtured if we are to sustain commitment to those hard-won universal principles and values that are among the finest fruit of the twentieth century.

What threatens the viability of this insight, notes Mounk, are the narrow spaces dug out by identity groups for themselves and others, spaces that have rendered racial, cultural, religious, and national identities the primary lenses through which the complex, bedeviling social, political, environmental and economic problems of the world are viewed. Mounk shares stories to illustrate the pervasive and stifling nature of this problem:

> In the spring of 2019, a public school in Florida hosted a kind of cultural show-and-tell.
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> The school's students were encouraged to wear an item of clothing, bring in a cultural dish, or display some symbol from their ancestral culture that they found personally meaningful.
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> One of the teachers at the school, an immigrant from Nigeria, had an idea for how best to showcase his own culture. He asked a few of his favorite students, two of whom were white, whether they would be willing to wear the ceremonial garb of his ancestral tribe. They enthusiastically said yes.
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> When the two white students came to school dressed in the clothes their teacher had given them, they were met with instant hostility. Classmates told them they were committing "cultural appropriation." Some teachers accused them of mocking African culture. They were hauled to the principal's office.
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> The students' teacher did his best to intercede on their behalf. It had been his idea, he assured the principal. The clothes were part of his own culture. If he was honored by his students wearing them, why should anyone who isn't even part of his tribe have a reason to be offended on his behalf?
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> The principal disagreed. For white students to wear traditional African clothing, he declared, is an offensive form of cultural appropriation. Even though their teacher had encouraged them to do so, they should have known better. She suspended the students. (129–30)

Mounk deploys this story and many others in order to illuminate the degree to which the identity synthesis is transforming mainstream society, "from neighborhoods and schools all the way to government offices."

While I am not comfortable with all aspects of either the content or rhetorical tone of Mounk's critique, I share

his concern about the ways in which various forms of stress and oppression can cause well-meaning advocates of social change to abandon or overlook important ethical principles and social values. Chronic exposure to injustice can also cause us to neglect the role of practical wisdom in forging our way forward and induce us to replace such wisdom with what we perceive as expedient. For example, the effort to overcome oppressive systems and unjust processes can induce social actors to think of the pursuit of justice as essentially a power struggle between opposing forces. Insofar as the struggle for power over others—even if these "others" are acting in oppressive ways—is apt to awaken and sustain reactionary forces that perpetuate injustice, it seems important that we learn how to deploy more subtle forms of power that have the capacity to impact the human heart in meaningful and enduring ways. For it may well be that many forms of enduring change take place because there has been a great leap forward in either human understanding or the recesses of the heart where our deepest aspirations, spiritual longings, and humanitarian visions find expression. Mounk is thus wise to remind us that we cannot hope to be successful in bringing about social change if our approaches to social change are not in harmony with the values and principles that we hope to see when social change has been realized.

What might be required is a profound alteration of thought that is rooted in an appreciation of the important role that moral and spiritual principles and processes must play in helping us to bring into being the kind of world that we wish to live in. Indeed, we must somehow become the kind of people that the world needs if it is going to be capable of addressing the myriad of complex problems that it now has. Karl Jaspers captured this idea succinctly when he noted that at various times in its history, humanity must think itself free. In *The Identity Trap*, Mounk has made a noteworthy contribution to this effort.

Works Cited

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