

Nichols Response to The great experiment

*This is really just a distillation of what I gleaned from the readings and listening to discussions between Mounk with Andrew Yang and the NYTimes interviewer.*

“Is it possible to keep humanity’s instincts towards groupishness in check?”

Mounk asserts that there is nothing wrong with being in groups, per se. But it’s not enough to expect that mere proximity or contact between groups is enough to create tolerance and improve how they perceive one another. There must be equal status within the context of intergroup contact, and they must be part of the same team working toward a common goal or on a common project, rather than maybe in the same league but in competition with each other.

Mounk talks about our need for two freedoms at the same time - one is freedom from oppression by the “outside group” – that is, protection of individuals in a group from state oppression, allowing for criticism of the state without repercussion. The second is freedom from oppression from the “in group” – that is, the state must protect individuals from oppression that comes from within their own group that is contrary to our common law and values.

He asserts that in order to promote a strong common identity, we must invest in civic and cultural patriotism by emphasizing what we share. We should recognize that even though what we are trying to do in the US is very difficult – that is treat everyone equally within a deeply diverse society – that we are not really doing that badly.

Even looking at immigration, he asserts that the process of assimilation for current immigrants is actually happening about as fast or slow as it took immigrants in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to assimilate (i.e. Italians, Irish). Mounk asserts that the “melting pot” idea asks way too much of us by expecting that we must all adopt the same culture in the end. The “salad bowl” or “mosaic” idea is too fragmented, wanting us to be near to each other but not really fully in contact. Both assume a commonality of purpose that might not exist. The “public park” metaphor is his middle ground.

Fareed Zakaria has stated that Americans don’t dislike or resent immigrants – what they don’t like is the chaos and mismanagement of the border and immigration policy. Immigrants who came here legally do have some resentment of those they perceive as gaming the system by seeking asylum to circumvent our failed immigration system. (However the problem is not just too many immigrants at the border – one cannot ignore the devastating economic, political and social effects of US economic policies that support corrupt regimes in Central and Latin America and the Caribbean and that have fueled the need for folks to flee their countries - a blind spot in many discussions about immigration).

We are stuck in the myth that “demography is destiny” and our perception that America is irredeemably racist prevents us from focusing on the positive things that have happened.

Yes it's true there are many long-term effects of our past history of racial domination, but the extreme pessimism of both the far right and far left produces false narratives from both sides. And he points out that many African Americans are far more optimistic about the future than many white Americans.

Mouk posits that we are stuck in a culture war between the elites of both sides – the top echelon of the right and left really hate each other. And the disdain of the elites is a real problem, but we should appeal to our own better angels and learn how to respect people's allegiances and still get them to cooperate. If we look at our society as a whole, we are much more reasonable with regard to how we see and interact with each other.

The constant drumbeat of fear, doom and negativity coming from each side is impeding our perception of what is good and positive and prevents us from seeing what our commonalities are.

Mouk poses the question: ***“Is the deeply polarized elite going to manage to generalize its conflict and turn the whole country into a pitched battle, or is the bulk of the population going to be able to resist this imposition?”***