

Terzian response to the great experiment

Yascha Mounk expresses the concern that many of us have about the future of our democracy. For him, central to the “great experiment” is learning how to manage diversity in the population. Population demographics in the United States point to the rapidly rising number of immigrants coming into this country starting around 1970. Added to this are roughly 14 million persons living in the country without citizenship. The pressure to diversify many of the countries around the world is partially the result of having roughly 100 million refugees in the world today. Included in this worldwide population are those refugees from Central and South America. For example, Venezuela, alone, has over 4 million refugees. Our southern borders are being overwhelmed by refugees seeking asylum in the United States. The point here is that Mounk’s perspective that we must find ways to manage diversity within a democratic system, else authoritarian forces will win favor from citizens whose fears of cultural change far outweigh their concerns about democracy. These facts raise the question of what kind of culture we can maintain to accommodate such changes.

Mounk proposes there are three ways diverse societies fail. The first of these is anarchy, where identity groups band together in opposition to other groups. He identifies Afghanistan as an example of this. And we are certainly seeing the seeds of this in our society. The second is domination by some groups over others. The concept of “whiteness” in our society is an example of soft domination. Being white credentials you to first class citizenry. The third is fragmentation. He gives the example of Lebanon which was organized around three main groups each having share of power. Unfortunately, they were unwilling to maintain this power-sharing and have fallen into chaos. He goes on to argue that the state has a responsibility for protecting minorities from persecutions by outside identity groups and by members of their own in-group.

Mounk proposes a better model for building a meaningful society, suggesting we have more empathy and deeper solidarity, place emphasis on mutual influence and inspiration against advocates of cultural purism, and focus on what we share. He encourages us to believe that demography is not destiny. He asks the question “will America and, eventually, other diverse democracies from France to Australia – really become majority minority in the sense so many pundits predicted? Are the most important political and cultural conflicts within diverse democracies going to pit different demographic groups against one another? And will changes help the great experiment succeed – or test it to its limits?”

Mounk outlines a number of policies that he believes can help such as; equity in school funding, eliminating affirmative action based on identity group rather than economic status, ending the filibuster in Congress, restoring the balance of power between the executive, legislative and judicial branches, supporting equal opportunity, re-envisioning human rights, to name a few. However, fair-minded people could well disagree with a number of these proposals. And they do not really address how you can get diverse identity groups to build a sense of shared destiny.

One could make the argument that it is not in the political and economic interests of powerful groups to have a harmonious society. The “news media” lives and dies based on the number of viewers that have. Conflict driven stories keep eyes on the screen and financial success. “Social media” benefit from the number of clicks they receive. The quality and accuracy of the information they’re brokering is of no importance to them. Politicians also benefit from narratives that help them get elected. The truth has become meaningless, especially when their constituents have their own biases confirmed. The consequence of this dystopian behavior is the emergence of two extreme narratives, one from the right

and the other from the left. One could cite a number of these “wedge issues” that get processed through the political and communication systems. These become black and white issues with no nuance. They are not reflections of ethnic diversity, rather they are the narratives of two political identity groups. In the Lee Druman book review, he points to a study highlighting the danger in a diverse society that comes when you have extremists thinking. And this is exactly what we are experiencing in America today. Ideological purism is a central feature of this growing extremism.

Monk’s notion of empathy and solidarity is a laudable goal for diverse democracies. There are many such fair-minded citizens who make up the majority in this country. However, a clear narrative is not been developed among them and there is a lack of strong leadership. We are in desperate need of a narrative to describe a more inclusive and caring country. Those of us who would support Mounk’s direction for an inclusive country need a voice and need leadership.