



# Library podcast

## **Kwame Anthony Appiah Discusses 'The Lies That Bind'**

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[00:00:35] Things event with Kwame Anthony Appiah presented in partnership with Elliot Bay Book Company. Thank you to our author series sponsor Gary Kunis and to the Seattle Times for generous promotional support of library programs. We are also grateful to the Seattle Public Library Foundation private gifts to the foundation from thousands of donors help the library provide free programs and services that touch the lives of everyone in our community. So to those of you who are foundation donors here with us tonight we say thank you very much for your support. Now without further ado I'd like to welcome Rick Simmonson and from Elliott Bay Book Company who will introduce tonight's speaker. Thank you Stesha.

[00:01:14] And thank you very much for being here. We are delighted to finally have in Kwame Anthony Appiah here tonight for his.

[00:01:23] He's someone whose work has been read and known for decades and for some of us it also was there was almost a there was a personal touch to this where I think I was around the time we were talking before when his is one of his major early works in my father's house about for Africa and philosophy but there was a gentleman that came in our bookstore and introduced himself as Dr. Joe happier. Me Antony's uncle and he said well we have to get him here. And tonight finally he is here. But the sad part of this is that Dr. Abdo Dr. Joe LaPierre just passed away about a month ago. So we acknowledge him here in in this evening happening as well because you would have been here in having comedy Anthony Appiah here we have someone who's here tonight with a new book that has has gotten good and significant attention of the lies that bind rethinking identity a book in which he works carefully and deftly and smartly through aspects of what we call identity of notions of religion race gender nationality class and does so as a philosopher but also just as just sort of there's this kind of common sense of are of weaving and sifting through all these things that people go round carrying themselves how that how they present themselves or comport themselves and what it does. So with a sense of the past but also the present day of representations of self that we have especially social media and like he's done this work really as a public philosopher for years he's one of his significant other books that he's well known for his book cosmopolitanism which talks which is also

something I guess that's being attacked is because that could also be considered globalist or contemporary political discourse.

[00:03:31] So tonight though he will he is travelling around actually he's teaching this fall at NYU where he's Professor of the philosophy and law department at New York University. And this is part of a trip that also has him in California before he gets back to teaching the other what are the other things tonight. You'll talk and discuss what he's doing with this book. But when we get to questions you can also query him on on this year's English language writing as eligible for the Booker as he was the chair of the Booker prize that just was awarded last week. So I think a week ago he was dressed up for this big ceremony in London that so he he's been reading a lot of fiction too so you can get good reading recommendations with that for both of the other public library and for all of us. Elliott Bay we thank you for being here. And now please join in welcoming me. Anthony Appiah

[00:04:37] So thank you very much for that kind introduction and thank you all for coming. I'm sad to be not. I'm glad to be in Seattle of it's sad that my uncle who lived here is no longer with us. He would have been here this evening and we would show he would have asked good questions challenging questions. So I'm sort of thinking about him because I think of him every time I think about Seattle. So I'm just going to talk about what's in the book some of what's in the book. And then we can have a conversation about your What's on your mind in relation to these questions. Can you hear me at the back. Is that OK.

[00:05:21] Is that better. OK. So I don't know what you think I look like but I seem to be taxi drivers find me difficult to identify. So all around the world I have these conversations with taxi drivers which go. So where were you born. That's not a very helpful question given what they actually want to know because the answer is I was born in London. And that isn't what they want to know. They did not want to know where I was born.

[00:05:57] What they want to know is what I am. And the reason they are puzzled by that I suppose and they're puzzled in different ways in different places in Sao Paolo.

[00:06:05] They're puzzled in one way and in Paris that puzzle that another is is that of course that well partly the combination of my appearance and my mode of speech that's a bit puzzling to some people but and the reason that it's puzzling is because I'm the product of an exciting piece of miscegenation that went on in the 1950s when my parents got married at a time when that was relatively unusual at least in Britain where they both happened to be at the time my mother my mother was English and my father was from Ghana and it was actually just that fact apparently was a big deal for people in England at the time and not just in England. And I think in fact I don't know if any of you have ever seen a movie called Guess Who's Coming to Dinner but the people who met the man who wrote the script that said that one of the inspirations for that movie was reading about my parents wedding which was widely covered in the press because it was unusual in the 1950s in England for the daughter of a cabinet minister to marry the nephew of an African king. And that's what my parents were. So it was a kind of interracial society wedding at a time when interracial ratings were relatively unusual in Britain. And it produced the kind of excitement in the world. It was discussed in the South

African parliament as you can imagine. They didn't think it was a very good thing. They thought it was a sign of the terminal decline of Britain that it that this wedding was even permitted on the other hand it was celebrated in an Ebony magazine by African-Americans who wanted to point out to two white Americans that it was actually possible for civilized white people to marry a civilized black people and for and for that to work out. So as I say I have my own dealing with identity begins with the fact that I come from two places my family comes from two places and my mother. There they met in London.

[00:08:20] My mother was basically from from the country in England she she grew up on a farm in Oxfordshire. My grandfather had a grandfather and grandmother.

[00:08:35] And so one of her pets. When my mother was a child was a pig. And perhaps for that reason that her name was Margaret and she was called Peggy. She was often called pig by the family. And that wasn't meant to be negative. Her brother was called bun after a rabbit. And cheek. She grew up in this village in Oxfordshire. And when the Second World War began she was about to go to college but instead she she did the obvious thing.

[00:09:09] She went to Moscow where her father was the British ambassador and spent the first part of the war in Russia and then from then on spent then as you will recall the Germans invaded. And so the Moscow embassy had to be evacuated. And so my mother travelled back right around the world going first into Persia and then around the world to come back home. And so she spent a fair amount of time in her young adulthood outside of Britain. And I think that that's one of the reasons why it's not so surprising that she when she came back to Britain and after the war she started working for an organisation that was called racial unity and racial unity was run by the very distinguished later to be a very distinguished British anthropologist Colin Turnbull who wrote two works of anthropology the forest people in the mountain people that are probably among the most widely read works of anthropology about Africa ever one about the booty that booty pygmies of Zaire and one about the EAC in northern Uganda.

[00:10:18] And. And he eventually so he ran racial unity and the end point of racial unity was to help students as they didn't say but as we would now say students of color from around the world who were studying in England and among those students was my father who was president of the West African Student's Union. And so they met through work and they the details get a bit murky here. My parents never exactly explained anything beyond that. So I don't know exactly when they match or how they met but they met and they became obviously fond of one another. And and and they decided to get married and my wise English grandmother then said to my mother well we're going to marry this guy maybe you should go and visit his country first and see see what that's like. So my mother went to Ghana which was then the British gold coast colony. She couldn't say why she was going because she wasn't getting engaged.

[00:11:17] And her father had been Minister of Finance Chats of the Exchequer. And so her movements were an object of journalistic interest. So they couldn't.

[00:11:30] Nobody could understand why this young Englishwoman was travelling around in Ghana spending time with the leaders of the independence movement in Ghana. But that was because my father was a representative of the independence movement in Ghana and in English which he couldn't mention that. Anyway she told me and my sisters that she got there. And on the first day she sat down and a government rest house. And she thought this is a this is where I want to live. So she spent more time in Ghana but she went back at the Gold Coast is there more she went back to England said to her mother yeah that was a good idea I went. It's a wonderful place. It's gonna be fine. And my English grandmother was a relatively conventional person. Nevertheless said OK then you know we're for it. And despite the fact that at the time a lot of upper middle class English people would have were fairly racist and I'd say that my grandmother's and my mother's family were on the whole not so. So they all came to the wedding and my father was finishing his law degree.

[00:12:35] So I was born in London as I said at the start and then we all went back to Ghana where all my sisters were born after my father qualified and again because of the sort of nature of my parents relationship and the fact that the wedding had been widely reported in the press my birth was widely reported in the press is that there was an item on the front page of The London Times about my birth the day afterwards and and I like to say that I was born famous and I've been getting less and less famous ever since. But one of the things that happened because of this discussion was that lots and lots of people kept saying that people wrote columns they would say things in them in private conversations I would say to my mother and my father. Aren't you worried about the children. What's going to happen to the children isn't it going to be difficult for the children.

[00:13:29] And I think that was the way that people express their anxiety of how the relationship was to was to projected onto the children and I must say that I don't know what my parents said to those people but I can report to you that my sisters and I had what I think of as a marvelous childhood back and forth between England and Ghana both families very warm and loving to us as is normal. No not I'm not saying that because it's unexpected.

[00:14:02] I'm saying it because of course this thing that everybody thought was so usual was in fact a normal wedding because it was a marriage between two people who loved each other.

[00:14:13] And this was possible of course not just because my mother's family went along with it but because my father's family went along with it too. And they they only question my father's family asked when he came to two he didn't need permission because he was head of the family. So if he'd had to ask anybody it would have been himself. But when he went to explain to them what he was doing they all said oh he said was there she'd come from a good family. And he said yes I think so. And so that was all right with him and so we grew up lovingly placed as it were between a gun and family and an English family.

[00:14:53] And it was as I say we had a lovely childhood. Part of the reason that we had fun in our childhood was that my father's father was the was the secretary and of some of the Santi.

[00:15:08] So we grew up in a town called Kumasi that's the capital of an old kingdom called Sante. And my father's father was the same as it were the prime minister the secretary of the Asante somebody called the Asante man council which is the sort of cabinet of the King.

[00:15:26] And and that was in part a piece of nepotism because he was the King's brother in law. And so we grew up in a city where my great great uncle was a king and then when he died he was succeeded by my uncle. And so again we grew up in a place in a situation of great privilege and I'm very conscious of that when I think about questions of identity. I'm very conscious that I come at them from a position of great great privilege.

[00:15:58] Having had very secure socially secure background on both sides. I am and the same in England like my you know that when I was an English lady with my grandmother in my grandmother's house the staff referred to her as your ladyship because he had a title.

[00:16:25] My aunt next door was also a ladyship and my uncle John was John and so on.

[00:16:31] So I think I'm very conscious of having come into the world in a position of great privilege and of having really two as we were taught in both my families that that means you sort of owe something back that if you are to come into the world with great privilege you owe something back. So anyway as a rambling way of saying that the reason why these taxi drivers have a hard time figuring out who I am is because I don't look like a gun n look like an English person a typical English person. And so and I don't talk like a typical gun I don't talk like a typical English person either I suppose.

[00:17:13] And so they are trying to figure out who I am and if I think some of what I've just been saying is the answer to the question that they mistakenly ask when they ask where were you born.

[00:17:24] And I think the book is full of family stories because I think all of us as it were start in thinking about who we are with our families.

[00:17:34] Not everybody has a happy family story. Not every family is as loving and supportive as my family was to us and I am again very conscious of the privilege of that but most people in fact are happy to live are happy in their families most of the time and that's true even if even if we have disagreements of my with our families my parents were both devout Christians I'm gay that I suppose was a bit of a challenge for them but but it didn't it didn't interfere with our relationship and so as I say I am very conscious of these these privileges but also of the peculiarity of of my situation and I don't think of myself as I am conscious of having spent a great deal of my time in my life with with in the company of people who didn't have family and actually I have family in every habitable continent I have Lebanese cousins I have Indian cousins I have American cousins my French cousins I have a region like my elder sister married in Norwegian so having three Norwegian nephews I have three Nigerian nephews my eldest Norwegian nephews marriage and maybe in his brother is married to a Russian.

[00:19:02] I'm aware that most people that live in a family like that but more and more people do feel that we as we've got there a little bit early but that the world is now full of all kinds of families that are in that way connected across cross cultures and societies. Bye bye love and procreation. But I understand that the world must look different to someone who comes from who who has a sense of having ancestry that's all sort of settled in a particular place and thinks of themselves as coming from say S.A. where I grew up and having a mother and a father from a Sante and a grandfather and a grandmother on both sides from a and great grandparents from his antique the world looks different.

[00:19:50] I suppose if you if that's your background or if you come from my mother's village in Oxfordshire and you think of yourself as having been there all along as indeed my mother's family did. I mean I can go and look at graveyards. Going back I can look at birth records actually going back to the to the 12th century in Oxfordshire. From my mother's family and until the 19th century they were all sort of stuck in that place and they married people from within a few miles and so on. So I am I'm conscious again of having coming at the world a slightly a slant perhaps but in a way that is more and more common and but that raises questions that say about how people should think about their identities so given this background and given as I said I'm gay. It's not surprising I suppose that I've spent a lot of my time thinking about these questions of identity and this book is about essentially six kinds of identity. It's first of all about gender because I read that you can think partly because of the work of feminist theorists and philosophers. A lot of our best thinking about identity is is a supply is modelled on the case of gender which is only one kind of identity but it's modelled very well.

[00:21:23] We have good theoretical understanding as it were of it so I use gender in the first chapter to talk about identity in general taking gender very broadly to include questions of gender identity sexual orientation as well as as well as as the as the body questions about the sexual body as it were.

[00:21:46] But in the next in the following chapters I talk about religion nationality race class and culture as sources of identity and I want to say something I think a very natural question about all of these things that we we naturally nowadays call social identities is why do we.

[00:22:07] They're all very different from each other right. Why do we call gender religion nationality race class cultural forms of identity.

[00:22:20] Some have to do gender and race seem to have very much to do with the body culture seems to have nothing to do with the body very much at least at least at first glance. Why do we think of them together. And I'll say something about that in a minute but I want to say first that the main thing I want to urge in the book is that in each of the cases of these kinds of identity I think we live with the legacies of ways of thinking about them that developed some in the late 18th but more generally in the 19th century and that and that we can do better than that we can we can think about them in better ways than the ways that were invented in the 19th century that we have the materials for thinking about them in new ways. And I think that in each case there are serious problems with the way in which we. That's that's why I say the lies that bind because I think not so much that people are intentionally misrepresenting them which would be what it would be strictly for them to be lies but that

that unintentionally we're sort of enmeshed in misunderstandings of each of these forms of identity that are worth trying to tease out and understand and escape from. So let's take that for example take religion. I think that I'm just gonna mention one mistake. I think we make about each of these identities before before going on to say answer the question that I said I'd answer in a bit which is what why they all things of the same kind or why do we think of things.

[00:23:55] So in the case of religion I think the main one of the big mistakes we make is that we think of religion essentially being a matter of belief people believing thing and that's partly because Christianity which has been the dominant culture religious culture of Europe and North America for a long time is very preoccupied with questions of belief and creeds are one of the things that Christianity defined itself by. And the history of doctrine is an important part of Christian tradition not evidently. So in every case but even in the case of Christianity I want to argue that belief focusing on belief misses at least two other really important things about religions. One is that they are forms of identity that is they are bases for bringing people together under a label rubric and the other thing is that religions make people do things as much as they make people believe things and that if you want to understand how religions are working in the world you need to figure out what they are making people do as much as what they're making people say and leave and this I think is very important because it's one of the misunderstandings that leads to some of the great dangers of Islamophobia in the world today.

[00:25:18] People look at the Koran which indeed does say some things that one wishes it didn't say and assume that because because this is the Book of the Muslims it must every Muslim must believe all this stuff every Muslim must be committed to this.

[00:25:33] But if that were a good way of arguing then this country would practice either practice stoning for adultery which is recommended several times in the book that Christians call the Old Testament or would have.

[00:25:52] Or if they didn't. Because there is an argument that the New Testament cancels that though. It's a complicated argument because Jesus actually said he came to fulfill the law not to replace it but I don't want to get into the details.

[00:26:07] The point is if you just read that part of the Christian book and if you know the Christians are supposed to believe what's in this book you would think the Christians would be engaged in plan in stoning people revolt adultery. You'd also be convinced that Christians didn't eat lobsters or pork which are proscribed in Leviticus and numbers both of which are proscribed in the Christian book. So it's a bad way of arguing about Christianity. It turns out to be a bad way of arguing about Islam. It's a bad way of arguing about Buddhism. It's a bad way of arguing about Hinduism though all of these things are said about all of these religions because the real importance in the lives of most of the believers of these faiths isn't that they have to do everything that is commanded in the book or believe everything that's committed in the book even if they think it's important to say that they believe everything in the book which is has become a particular thing in Christian fundamentalism to say or you're a literal believer in the truth of the Bible but that can't be so. No serious reader of the Bible

could believe all of it. It's inconsistent in any way. A lot of it isn't even offered up for belief because it's poetry. Psalms of David.

[00:27:24] If you take the Psalms of David literally then we're sheep because it does say the Lord is my shepherd but no sane interpreter of the Bible even someone who's a Biblical literalist takes this to mean that we're sheep or that the Lord is literally wandering around with a crook looking after us. So so that's a mistake about

[00:27:46] Religion. There are mistakes about national national nationality about the state about political identities as well.

[00:27:54] I think one of the one of the Communists is to be gripped by the idea that what you need in order to hold a state and a nation together is some profound cultural commonality.

[00:28:11] But this is historical nonsense.

[00:28:16] Most of the states in the history of the world and certainly most modern states have in fact been multi linguistic multi religious multinational all the states of Europe where these theories were invented had if they were Catholic Protestant minorities if they were Protestant Catholic minorities and also Jews in many of them much of the time. And of course increasingly they have Muslim citizens all of them not in France in eighteen seventy five something like a third of the population didn't speak French. I'm talking about. I don't mean in the French Empire I mean come in in the thing across the channel for England hexagon of space and similarly most Germans didn't understand each other in the 80s 90s because they spoke dialects of genuine mutually unintelligible and in fact most people in England. In fact when I went to college in England I was a young man who like me was a medical student across the hall and for the first two weeks of college I couldn't understand a word he said he was English grown up in the north of England and Durham. He was the son of a miner and I couldn't understand where he I had to learn his dialect. The only reason he understood me was because I sound like the radio. So the idea that you have to be already the same in order to be successful citizens of the state is.

[00:29:35] If that were true that there's never been any successful states and there have been successful states and so that's them.

[00:29:41] There's a mistake about nation obviously I'm I think that race thinking has deep errors in it it has deep errors in biology it has deep errors of all sorts. I won't bang on about those because you're probably familiar with the arguments there. Suppose class goes which is a very important form of identity somewhat under reflected upon I think and understudied in this country. I think there are misunderstandings have to do with as it were both what class is and the meaning of class the significance of class and also I think we are inclined to over state the extent to which one of the reason we don't talk about it so much is because we actually overstate the extent to which it doesn't matter.

[00:30:25] We pretend that we're a meritocracy. We pretend that the way you get on in our culture and I'm talking about Europeans as well as North Americans is simply by being talented and hard working and that your background whether it's the financial background of your family whether it's their cultural background the cultural capital that you get from from the kind of elite educations that I'm sure most of you had going to college and so on or the social connections that you get the social connections that mean that you can get internships unpaid internships. That's not about money. It's about connections and that's all of these things are hugely important and I think we under under rate they're important make me so. And the result of that is we did we under under estimate the significance of class in our society. I should say by the way that we're not a meritocracy.

[00:31:20] I think it's overwhelming evidence of that so I don't think it would be good if we were not because I think that the kind of unfairness on the basis of cultural and social and financial capital that I was talking about is a good thing. But because we don't. What we really need to aim for is a society in which class positions are allocated fairly but in which we tried to get away from the whole idea of people being dumped into classes where people up here and looked out people down there because they're more talented or

[00:31:54] Clever or more highly paid.

[00:31:56] I think we need to move towards a society of equals a society where we look each other in the eye as equals and that would be. That's a that's a way of saying that if meritocratic meritocracy is just to say we want a class system but we want it to be the result of fair systems of class assignment then I'm against it.

[00:32:18] I think we shouldn't be unfair but we shouldn't have a system in which people are sort of raised and lowered in relation to one another at all. However however it's done it's no better to do it by something called merit than it is to do it by feudal systems of class inheritance.

[00:32:37] We should be a society of equals and that I'm not saying precisely because I don't think class is just about money. I'm not saying everybody should have the same income. There's reasons for having different incomes we need to incentivize people to do things in one way we do that is by having different rewards for different tasks but I do think of course that everybody should have an adequate income. Whatever that whatever they're doing and I think that whatever your income you should be entitled to equal to a kind of social respect.

[00:33:08] All right.

[00:33:10] Quickly to end let me just say something about the answer to the question What will all. Why do all these things belong together. Why are they all identities. I think it's because they have three things in common that are very important for the way they operate in our lives.

[00:33:27] The first is that they're social in the sense that they're the product of practices of labeling people the labels are really important to identity.

[00:33:37] And what happens when you label people is that you divide people into groups and and you have criteria for doing that skin color for race sexual body for gender and so on. And those those labels can be contested the boundaries can be argued about trans people have persuaded us or at least persuaded me that the way the old gender system work was very unhappy for them. They've asked us to change it. I'm happy to go along with that. I think many people are I'm glad to say that most of my students seem to think it's obvious that we should go along with that and I'm glad for that.

[00:34:14] But that but that's not uncontroversial controversy. There's controversy about who Americans are American is a label record label for them to me I became an American voluntarily. I'm glad to be an American I'm proud of the good things our country does. But but this contest about who's American our people who are here who've been here all their lives but don't have the documents are they Americans.

[00:34:38] We have controversies about these questions so that's the first point taken point identities matters of people being people think of them as grounds for doing things. If you're not trans your cis person you make your clothing choices mostly by going to a part of the store that's marked for your agenda and and you would feel uncomfortable dressed. Especially the men would feel uncomfortable dressed in clothing that was marked off for for women. And that's just a simple example but I just mentioned another one that matters very much to me that I'm an American. It matters to me that it flows from the fact that I'm American and my understanding that I have obligations that I must vote I must care about what happens to other Americans even if I disagree with them they're my fellow citizens.

[00:35:43] That's the second point.

[00:35:45] And the third point is so that's a matter of identity mattering to the people who have them. But the third point is that they matter all the people how I get treated. Depends on how people label me how they think about me. People if they. And that's why the taxi drivers want to know what I am. They want to know how they should treat me for example very often they want to know how they treat me because they're from South Asia and I think I might be South Asian. They'd like to be able to treat me as a fellow South Asian if that's what I am.

[00:36:12] Right now I'm not. So that doesn't go very far.

[00:36:17] And but it's but it's a it's a friendly gesture. It's meant in a in a friendly way. But it's it's a matter of responding to my identity. And that means if these labels matter to us and they matter to other people and how they treat us they're bound to affect our lives.

[00:36:33] And that's the thing they have in common.

[00:36:36] They affect our lives by making giving us reasons to do things and by giving people reasons to do things to us unless they shape our lives. And since making a life is the main thing that every human being is doing.

[00:36:50] That's they matter to the most important thing we're doing which is making making our lives good.

[00:37:08] So I'm told that I should ask you to ask questions and then I will repeat them.

[00:37:13] It says there's a big printed block Qantas says Please repeat question because because of the way the acoustics work in this room though I may be able to hear you. Not everybody else in the room will be able to. I'll repeat it out. So that means it shouldn't be too long because I'll forget it. I won't be able to repeat it. Well. So the question is do the taxi drivers think I'm from India. The answer is some of them do.

[00:37:44] And some of them get very cross with me when I say I'm not because I think it's they think I must be and they think I'm passing for something else but that said that's that's that's the thing that happens in New York.

[00:37:59] It happened actually since this book has come out has happened twice in New York to me once with a Sikh and then once with actually not with someone who thought I was South Asian. A taxi driver who said are you from Egypt. Because he wanted to be able to greet me as a fellow Egyptian. He wanted to be and he came from. I said Oh because of the way he looked. I guess that I said you probably come from upper Egypt. He said How did you know that I said yes. Probably somewhere near Swan. How do you know about a swan. I was delighted that I knew that much about him. Then I had to admit that I didn't have any connection with Egypt. He lost interest. So that's usually what they're after.

[00:38:37] It's its identity as a bond so it's it's usually sort of brown skinned taxi drivers because they are hoping that my answer will give us something in common but in Brazil that might lead them to think. I mean also I might be Brazilian so they is often just taxi drivers.

[00:39:04] You want to interact with passengers you're driving people around all day. It's more interesting if you can interact with people figuring out who they are can help you decide how to interact with them.

[00:39:15] I think that's my theory of why I get asked this question. Somebody else. Yes ma'am.

[00:39:39] Yes.

[00:39:41] Yes.

[00:39:49] So the question is the question I heard someone on the radio USA say that in the past in this society many people didn't want their children to marry someone of another race or religion. Now that's less so and it's now. However come to be the case that people really don't want to marry their children to marry someone of the other party the Democrats don't want the children to marry Republicans Republicans don't want their children to marry Democrats and actually conservatives they want their children marry liberals and liberals that want to marry. So it doesn't have to be it's a political identity it doesn't have to be a partisan political agenda but people feel very strongly about this and this is new and it's and it's one of the ways in which I didn't write about political identities in the book but it's one of the ways in which partisan identities have become like these others. That is to say tribal essentialist that is people think oh if you're a Republican I know everything about you. I know what you are I know what you think about everything. If you're a Democrat I know what you are. I know what you think about everything. The evidence is that that as with all these other things that is false. Actually there's a very wide range of opinion. If you if you if you don't ask people for their partisan identity first but you ask them their views about policy. Turns out the Democrats and Republicans are not as unlike as you might have thought. There are certain touchstone issues but they're important because they're symbols of membership in the group not because look.

[00:41:24] So uh second amendment right. It's a big tribal thing. The liberal tribe thinks it's obvious that the Constitution has been hijacked to interpret the Second Amendment in an absurdly extreme way. The permits too little regulation of what are after all very dangerous possessions.

[00:41:48] And you know what the other view is. And so on.

[00:41:52] I think this is true and I think it's a problem but it's sort of but you have to identify correctly what the problem is because the problem isn't that everybody isn't working through by themselves exactly what they think about every policy question and putting together their own portfolio of views and then checking candidates against them. That can't be the problem. A Because I don't have the time to do that. I have a life to leave lead so I and I imagine most of you have things to be doing as well. So figuring out whether one should be in favor of the of a Pacific trade pact that would that's a serious question but it would take serious study to come to your own view of it. So what do we do. We we are we have a representative system of government we pick people to decide these things for us.

[00:42:50] So it can't be wrong that I don't have detailed arguments about why I support generally speaking of free trade which is currently an unusual position on the left but I know you are. I do.

[00:43:07] That can't be right any more than it can't be right that most Democrats couldn't explain to you what the evidence is that there's anthropogenic global warming.

[00:43:18] And most Republicans couldn't explain why they think there isn't. Those are very difficult questions you have to have degrees and geochemistry and things like that in order to have sensible views about them or you have to talk to people who have those degrees. So that can't be the problem the problem can't be that we're where we're taking our views like that. And that allows me to make a general point about these identities. We need them because we're doing things together with other

people. And the only way to do that is to accept sort of packages and we end and the sensible thing is to try and identify a package someone who might be putting out what you think may be the right package and then to support them. What's bad about it I think isn't that that's just an essential feature of democratic life in a society with complex policy questions facing it. What's bad is the intensity of the animus the tribal hatred that goes with these identities the fact that people won't contemplate marrying into a family that's on the other side or that people take pleasure in this in the losses of the other side.

[00:44:29] People are people are glad that it upsets liberals that Kavanaugh is on the Supreme Court as an associate justice.

[00:44:39] Now maybe we can agree or disagree about whether he should be there but taking pleasure in the fact that some of your fellow citizens don't want him to be there. That's not good. That can't be good.

[00:44:53] So I think we're in deep trouble around those things and I think it has gotten worse. I've lived in this country. I've been a citizen for what 20 something years and I've lived here for a long time.

[00:45:05] It does seem worse to me. And I think it seems worse to lots of people. And I think we should be figuring out what to do about it because we're unless we want to we want to break the union we're stuck with each other and we have to manage it together. We're a democracy. Citizens have to run the ship of state together.

[00:45:27] And you can't do that if you're conduit productively together. If you're taking pleasure in the fact when the other side doesn't get doesn't get its way. Because that means you'll never compromise. And democracy requires compromise and it requires compromise and permits compromise. If we respect one another across these political divides which sometimes we can. But at the moment. And you know I frankly think that the president has some. Responsibility here for having made it worse. It made the atmosphere worse in these respects. But it was it was already degenerating before he came to power. And I think it began degenerating a long time ago actually having these two as far back as the time when Newt Gingrich was speaker of the house when he deliberately stopped socializing between members of the Democratic and Republican parties congressional picnics and things like that. I think in order to stop people doing the thing that actually in democracy we have to do which is getting to know each other like each other and so sort things out by compromise. You know I think I think you'll agree with the professor you heard on the radio saying that I think it's a real problem and it's a problem that has to do with the nature of these tribal identities that we very easily. I mean one reason why politicians use them in this way is because the one of the easiest ways to get us together is to pick them and to demonize them. Unfortunately that's one of the ways in which we are tribal creatures and responsible politicians know that that's a dangerous thing to do. And try to avoid doing it more than they need to in order to get elected and responsible politicians know this because once you set that up it may get you into power.

[00:47:24] But it then makes it impossible to govern because you can't govern a democracy if you've got half half the population or something you know 45 percent population hating Fifty five percent that's in charge so yeah we got a problem there and it's a problem that arises out of the nature of identities.

[00:47:44] We have this essentialist tendency to think that everybody who's a Republican or a Democrat must have must be exactly like every other and preposterous anyway preposterous or not it's not true. Also as I say we're tribal so where we're taking pleasure in the othering these people of these other identities these US look there are serious things to disagree about. I don't mean to deny any of that but the only way to do something about them is to make deals compromise and to say this worth and for that purpose we need to be not just Republicans and Democrats but Americans. So when you see a T-shirt which I had I saw and I wrote about this in the Washington Post which said I'd rather be a Russian than a Democrat. Right. That's a joke. It wasn't meant seriously that the person wearing that T-shirt didn't actually prefer wouldn't actually prefer to be Russian than Democrat. The very fact that Joe could be made by someone shows that things have gotten out of hand. I think I'm not so I'm not saying that I thought this person actually thought that the fact that they were we're pretending to think that that they thought that was funny is a sign that we're in trouble.

[00:49:01] Yes ma'am.

[00:49:10] So the question is in some religious traditions. Has our consciousness develops ways we sort of separate from our identity separate from the I.

[00:49:21] Right. And is there a case for doing that with these identities. So other ways of doing that.

[00:49:38] Right. Right.

[00:49:41] Right. So and I'll be not seeing this already for example in the case of gender with people who say they agenda fluid. Well yes I mean they are but but in a way I would say they're making a move in the identity game they're not really escaping from the identity agenda fluid. They're reshaping they're trying to get us to reshape the gender system but they're not actually

[00:50:05] I mean if they have the ambition for getting rid of it they're in for a lot of resistance.

[00:50:11] So I think you can you can ask to be allowed yourself to have to do to be freed from the from the constraints of the existing gender system you can ask other people to do that for you. But I don't think there's much chance of everybody agreeing to do it themselves. One reason why I think we have to interpret the talk of gender fluidity as a move in the gender game rather than as an attempt to abolish gender is that the gender system belongs to all of us. It does not belong just to assist people just the trans people to just the men just the women just the fluid gender fluid people it belongs to all of us. And it has to work for all of us.

[00:50:58] And so we need just as we need political negotiation or in the state government sphere in the sphere of these kinds of identity we need a willingness to listen to one another to hear one another to make arguments one another and to see if we can reshape the system so it works better for everybody. Acknowledging that

[00:51:21] The system as it now is feels fine to lots of people. All right and so you're asking them to change something that they don't think is broke. So you got to persuade them that it's broke and you've got to persuade them that in putting it right you know doing any harm to what they want to do with the gender system even if you are changing it.

[00:51:43] So I think and I mean so the general point I think is that there may be forms of identity that that it would be better to do without altogether but of the ones that I mentioned I don't think we can do without any of them now.

[00:51:57] So even racial identities about which I'm pretty skeptical have developed in ways that have been very useful over the last half century for example in combating racism. I think I think black solidarity has been a useful way of combating racism that may seem paradoxical to some people. I think it's obviously true. So

[00:52:16] Asking black people to saying to black people OK you don't like racism why don't we give out racial identities is the miss while racial identities have done for black people and why black people and other people of color have found them useful while Hispanics have found the category hispanic useful even though that was just invented in the 1960s by the Census Bureau.

[00:52:37] What we need is to be willing to negotiate about the meanings of these things. And I think some people should be I mean some black people and many white people are entitled to say I'm not very invested in the race system. I would rather I don't want to have racial reasons for doing things I'd rather not.

[00:52:59] And that's a fine thing to say provided you recognize that the racial system is there and that it will do things for you whether you ask it to or not right. So that. And that's because of the double stubbornness of identity right. It's not just doesn't just matter to the people who have the identity. It matters to people who see your identity and respond to it.

[00:53:23] So you can't you aren't in charge all the time whether you get something from your from your racial identity.

[00:53:53] So the question says that she understands that some of these identities are sort of reactions to things that need to be reacted to and so they're useful right now but shouldn't we aim in the long run to to sort of move beyond identity. I mean that's a perfectly natural thought given the harm that many of these identities have done in the world. I think let's see if we can have the ambition of living away from them and maybe that's a reasonable ambition in relation to long term ambition. I think in relation to race maybe. I mean as I argue in the book. This form of racial identity was invented

in the 18th century was largely invented I think in the context of the slave trade in order to frankly rationalize racial oppression.

[00:54:40] We are trying to get rid of racial oppression maybe eventually we'll be able to get rid of racial identities but from the fact that you can get rid of a particular identity perhaps because it has some pleasant features or a bad history it doesn't follow that you want that you want to get rid of identities altogether after all after all just given. Well here's our circumstance our human circumstance today we live in a hundred and ninety three nations they're very big in population. The biggest of them have one and a half billion people.

[00:55:15] But even the smallest of them are too many people for everybody's and everybody. That's true even in Liechtenstein so we need imaginative IDs with other people in order to do anything in a world like that. And that's what identities are that way that they're possible bases for imaginative identification with other people. I am hopeful about our American identity that we can use it for good. We have

[00:55:43] In the past it was as Americans that people worked together to solve the problems created by the world economic crisis of the nineteen twenties and thirties.

[00:55:54] It was as them as Americans that we that people did the work of the civil rights movement and the Voting Rights Act.

[00:56:01] Those were votes for Americans that they were trying to secure and they didn't wasn't just black people white people all kinds of people Jews and Gentiles Catholics and Protestants work together as Americans to put that right without that kind of imaginative identification. I don't think we can do things like that and we need to do things like that. And by the way I think that sometimes we can use the largest scale which is our human humanity our shared humanity to do the same work some things we need to do because we we care about people not about Americans not about Seattle is not about Washingtonians but about people. And we can work in all these different levels. Recognizing however that just as people are incredibly diverse. So Seattle's so are women so are gay people.

[00:56:57] So are black people so are white people. They're all complex and diverse but we can use these identities to bring us together though we can also ruin the world by using them to divide us.

[00:57:16] Oh sorry ma'am. One more question.

[00:57:47] So did everybody hear that because it was. Yes sir. Yeah but it's the acoustics not the volume but

[00:57:56] Yes. No no I was just making I. Yes yes.

[00:58:03] So do I think identity matters. Well I've spent 30 years thinking about it and thinking that it matters and thinking about it. So yes I think it matters. Do I think. And you're right that all these identity labels as I said are contested so that a label that some people feel happy with like gay or I don't mind being called homosexual I'm like I mean I'm Go ahead. If it if it pleases you. But some people don't want to be called homosexual. Some people think that that's not that's not a good name for them. That's true. People can be sensitive about these things that's because the labels matter to people as I said that's what it is for there to be an identity is to have a label that people care about. So yes they matter. And. The president's proposal to define trans people out of legal existence is a based on a misunderstanding of certain facts of biology.

[00:59:01] B I think an act of hostility towards people who are trying to find a place in the world that is comfortable for them. And if we care about each other we should want to shape the world in such a way that it's comfortable for the maximum number of people. And the president is doing this in order to appeal to people who are profoundly prejudiced against trans people who are transphobia as we say. He does a lot of that. He does a lot of appealing to phobias of one sort or another to racism and sexism and so on in order to create Solidarity's as I said that's one of the things that you can do with identities and that's a bad thing to do in the context of our politics and as I said I think responsible leadership tries to avoid using the. The bringing us together by demonizing them mechanism though it works.

[00:59:57] It does work it's just.

[01:00:00] So yes they matter. Yes it works.

[01:00:03] This demonizing mechanism and responsible leaders don't do it. Thank you

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