

Book Review

Lukianoff, Greg, and Jonathan Haidt. *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*. New York: Penguin Press, 2018.

When *The Coddling of the American Mind* was published in 2018, Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt penned something more prescient than they could have imagined. For those bewildered by a sharp spike in “cancel culture” in the United States during 2020—an already unusual year by any standard, with a global pandemic and lockdowns, economic disruptions, racial-tension-fueled protests and riots, and another contentious U.S. Presidential election cycle—this book is a good place to seek understanding. No phenomenon emerges from the blue, nor does it usually have one simple explanation. Lukianoff and Haidt provide a six-fold causal analysis of disturbing educational, social, and political changes that were afoot in the early-to-mid 2010s. That juggernaut is picking up steam, making it imperative (especially for Americans) to grapple with their diagnosis and recommended prescriptions.

A sea change occurred in 2013, when Lukianoff (a First Amendment lawyer and President and CEO of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education) noticed that college students began calling for restricting, monitoring, and disallowing certain speech based on content (pp. 5-6). Their justification is that the ideas contained in the undesired speech make them “feel unsafe,” so they have to be protected against it with “trigger warnings” and “safe spaces” on campus (p. 6). They even equate such speech with violence or harm (e.g., “microaggressions”), making some feel justified in creating social media mobs to “call out” those whose ideas make them feel uncomfortable (now escalated to “cancel culture”¹), using the “heckler’s veto” to

¹ “Cancel culture” uses especially social media platforms to “call out” or shame rather than engage in discussion with individuals who hold or are accused of

disrupt classes or to shout down speakers who they were unsuccessful in getting “disinvited,” or even joining Antifa-led violence and riots to ramp up pressure to change college policy. A series of high-profile events occurred during 2016-2017 (at, e.g., University of California, Berkeley; Evergreen State College; Reed College; and Middlebury College) that variously illustrate these hostile actions (see chaps. 4-5). At the same time as all of this was going on, teen anxiety, depression, and suicide were rising at an alarming rate and overwhelming college mental health services (pp. 149-51).

What was going on during 2013-2017? Lukianoff and Haidt unravel this mystery by understanding those who came of age in 2013: known as iGen, they are those born in 1995 and after and who grew up in the age of smartphones and social media. In Chapters 1-3, Lukianoff and Haidt (a social psychologist) identify three bad ideas—which they call “Great Untruths”—pervasive among iGen that have led to intimidation, violence, and “witch hunts” in academia (documented in Chapters 4 and 5). The bulk of their study, in Chapters 6-11, is devoted to teasing out six interlocking causes to explain this recent trend. While expressing deep concern over what is going on with iGen, in Chapters 12 and 13 they offer constructive recommendations for parents and educators and conclude on a hopeful note.

What makes a belief rise to the level of a Great Untruth is that it clashes with ancient wisdom, conflicts with the findings of modern psychology on the nature of well-being, and harms those who embrace it (p. 4). The three Great Untruths ubiquitous among iGen and unleashing damage for themselves, across academia, and in the culture at large are: (1) the “Untruth of Fragility: What doesn’t kill you makes you weaker” (chap. 1), (2) the “Untruth of Emotional Reasoning:

holding disfavored ideas; see “Cancel Culture,” s.v. *Urban Dictionary*, accessed online at: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Cancel%20Culture>. This phenomenon has been escalated to include targeting those who are *silent*, on the ground that “silence is violence”; see, e.g., Baron Schwartz, “Silence Is Violence,” *Xaprb Blog* (February 23, 2019), accessed online at: <https://www.xaprb.com/blog/silence-is-violence/>, and Mick Hume, “No, Silence Is Not Violence,” *Spiked* (June 16, 2020), accessed online at: <https://www.spiked-online.com/2020/06/16/no-silence-is-not-violence/>.

Always trust your feelings” (chap. 2), and (3) the “Untruth of Us Versus Them: Life is a battle between good people and evil people” (chap. 3). Lukianoff and Haidt counter each of these Great Untruths with conclusions based on their own experience as well as on research conducted by Haidt and other prominent social scientists. Along with Nassim Taleb,² they argue that humans are “antifragile” and thus “need physical and mental challenges and stressors” (p. 22), else our capacities for resilience and growth will become diminished and atrophy. Emotional reasoning takes many forms (e.g., catastrophizing, overgeneralizing, mind reading, etc.), causing cognitive distortions that lead to crippling self-doubt and fear of “the Other.” In order to break this vicious cycle, the authors lean on Aaron Beck’s cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)³ (which literally saved Lukianoff’s life, when he was suicidal [pp. 143-44]). CBT involves practicing a “talking back” process whereby one pauses when experiencing emotional reasoning, raises questions about the source and grounds of the emotions and the beliefs they give rise to, changes one’s interpretation in light of evidence, which then changes one’s subsequent emotions, thinking, etc. (pp.36-40). Lukianoff and Haidt see the Untruth of Us Versus Them as driven in part by a sociobiological theory that the “human mind is prepared for tribalism” (p. 58)⁴ and by a Marxist/Marcusean “common-enemy identity politics” that sees the social world in terms of a zero-sum struggle for power (pp. 62-71). They advocate, instead, “common-humanity identity politics” as the most effective way to rise above tribalism and to strive for durable conditions of justice and equality (pp. 60-62 and 74-76).

Driving these damaging Untruths, explain Lukianoff and Haidt, is a six-fold causal explanation:

² See esp. Nassim Taleb, *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder* (New York: Random House, 2012).

³ See, e.g., Aaron Beck, *Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders* (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1975).

⁴ This view is defended by Jonathan Haidt in his *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012).

(1) The polarization cycle (chap. 6): The wider U.S. society has become increasingly polarized, with “the left and the right locked into a game of mutual provocation and reciprocal outrage” (p. 127). The acrimonious 2016 Presidential election cycle was the first one in which iGen could vote, which provided many occasions for tensions to escalate on campuses across the country. The callout culture and “echo chambers” of social media platforms served to concentrate the vitriol and pour gasoline on these fires.

(2) Anxiety and depression (chap. 7): They summarize Jean Twenge’s multifaceted research behind the data on rising rates (especially among girls) of anxiety, depression, and suicide.⁵ A combination of “helicopter parenting,” an increase in screen time on smart phones you can carry at all times in your pocket, the deleterious effects of addictive social media, and a decrease in physical activity has stunted the emotional and psychological growth of American children. Girls have become especially prone to mental health problems due to their being more “relationally aggressive” than boys and hence more vulnerable to the “fear of being left out” that social media exacerbates (pp. 146-56).

(3) Paranoid parenting (chap. 8): Although iGen lives in a safer U.S. than their parents did, many parents believe that the world is a hostile place that they need to protect their children from. High-profile cases in the 1980s of child abduction and murder (e.g., Etan Patz and Adam Walsh) scared primarily middle-class parents into “helicoptering” over their children’s every step. Researchers such as Lenore Skenazy and Erika Christakis argue that these modern parenting strategies are “preventing kids from growing strong and independent” (p. 165).⁶

(4) The decline of play (chap. 9): As if fears of violent crime against children weren’t enough, parents increasingly dominated their

⁵ Jean Twenge, *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us* (New York: Atria Books, 2017).

⁶ Lenore Skenazy launched the Free-Range Kids movement (and hosts a blog by that name at: <https://www.freerangekids.com/>); Erika Christakis is author of *The Importance of Being Little: What Young Children Really Need from Grownups* (New York: Viking, 2016).

children's outside-of-school time with test prep and extracurricular activities calculated to position them for spots in Ivy League colleges (pp. 186-91). As researcher Peter Gray bemoans, the "free play" so necessary for healthy human development has all but vanished for many children, as schools have shifted to follow parents' concerns (pp. 183-86).

(5) The bureaucracy of "safetyism" (chap. 10): Factors (1)-(4) have created iGen's demand, beginning around 2013, to "feel emotionally safe" on college campuses. Consequently, and in conjunction with the explosive growth in the number and size of universities, the bloated administrative structures of universities have pandered to their customers' (i.e., students' and their parents') desire to be protected from anything uncomfortable—including ideas they don't like. Higher education's fears of bad publicity and threats of litigation have led to university speech-code policies such as those Lukianoff and Haidt identify in Chapters 4 and 5. Those in turn have a "chilling effect" on speech and cause self-censorship in the places most damaged by it (pp. 200-206).

(6) The quest for justice (chap. 11): News media's sensationalist journalism is also complicit in creating "safetyism" on campus, as many young people are influenced by such sources in their developing "sense of justice" (pp. 214-17). Such media have reflected not only the increasingly divisive American political climate, but also social justice activists' shift from seeking "equal access" to "equal outcomes." The latter requires constant monitoring and "adjustment" in order to satisfy the demands of justice, regardless of what actually causes such inequality (pp. 224-30).

No one of these causes would have been sufficient to unleash the "perfect storm" that hit the U.S. with such fury. Together, their damage is still being felt.

Lukianoff and Haidt spend the vast majority of *The Coddling of the American Mind* getting to the bottom of the problem, but they offer a couple of brief chapters in which they prescribe some practical solutions. They encourage parents to "prepare the child for the road, not

the road for the child” by providing their children with “the gift of experience” through unsupervised “free play” (p. 237). This will allow children to develop antifragility by learning how to assess risk, navigate conflict, and calibrate their emotions in relation to evidence. They urge educators to endorse the 2015 “Chicago Statement on Principles of Free Expression” (pp. 255 and 279-81); stay true to the “telos [i.e., purpose] of a university,” which is to seek truth and transmit knowledge; and to resist forces that would hijack that telos in service to “progress, change, or making the world a better place” (pp. 253-54). The educational process “is easily corrupted,” when scholars and students are discouraged from “ask[ing] the wrong questions” or discovering “inconvenient facts” that don’t fit the narrative upheld by social justice activists (p. 254). Lukianoff and Haidt end on a hopeful note by pointing to Steven Pinker’s and Matt Ridley’s views that things are getting better, progress marches on, and we have every reason for optimism.⁷ They even see a few “green shoots” of positive change: some social media giants are trying to rein in the monsters they have created, Utah passed a “free-range parenting” bill, some scholars are challenging common-enemy identity politics, and some universities are endorsing the Chicago Statement (pp. 265-68).

There is much to commend in Lukianoff and Haidt’s *The Coddling of the American Mind*, which all parents and educators would do well to read. I will focus on what I regard as the three most valuable contributions they make to understanding iGen’s impact on the American higher-education landscape: explaining (1) the role that “concept creep” plays in shifting speech codes, (2) how social justice activism and common-enemy identity politics have undermined the purpose of the university, and (3) how helicopter parenting has devastated child development.

Lukianoff and Haidt rely on Nick Haslam’s work⁸ to analyze several ways in which concepts such as “safety” (pp. 24-27),

⁷ See Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Viking, 2017), and Matt Ridley, *The Rational Optimist: How Prosperity Evolves* (New York: Harper, 2010).

⁸ Nick Haslam, “Concept Creep: Psychology’s Expanding Concepts of Harm and Pathology,” *Psychological Inquiry* 27, no. 1 (2016), pp. 1-17.

“aggression” (pp. 40-46), and “violence” (pp. 84-86) (among many others) have been subject to “concept creep” in the academic context. This occurs when a concept’s “scope has expanded in two directions . . . ‘downward’, to apply to less severe situations, and ‘outward’, to encompass new but conceptually related phenomena” (p. 25). The Orwellian equivocation of speech with violence, of making safety about emotional comfort rather than physical security, and of ignoring the role of intent in determining whether someone has uttered aggressive or threatening language have radically changed campus speech codes for the worse. Despite the best of intentions and without a malevolent bone in their bodies, students and teachers alike can be called out and even expelled or fired if what they say or write makes someone else “feel unsafe.” It’s no wonder that many who attend or work at universities report that they self-censor, feel like they are “walking on eggshells,” or retreat into silence (see pp. 71-73 and the research cited therein). Such attitudes and behavior belie the purpose of education, which brings me to the next point.

Educational institutions *are* supposed to be safe spaces, that is, spaces in which it is safe for individuals to flex and develop their intellectual muscles as they read, try out, scrutinize, and reject or adopt newly encountered ideas. Discourse and research need room to be expressed and pursued fearlessly within the bounds of civility and according to the most rigorous, objective standards of evidence-based reasoning. Reality, not feelings, is the ultimate arbiter of whether claims are true or false. Given how difficult it is to achieve knowledge, that each individual must achieve knowledge for one’s self, and that there are many ways in which we each can fall into cognitive error, it is vital that all claims be on the table for open discussion. Privileging the conclusions of social justice activists or allowing the purpose of an educational institution to play second fiddle to larger social issues perverts the very process by which any such conclusions could be justified. Individual students, teachers, and staff are free to believe what they wish and pursue whatever conception of justice they endorse outside of the educational setting. However, within the walls of “the ivory tower,” every individual mind is sacred. Respecting that requires maintaining epistemological conditions of intellectual freedom and promoting ideological diversity.

Volumes could—and have been—written about how problematic, however well intentioned, helicopter parenting is. Lukianoff and Haidt cite throughout their book a number of recent studies on how children can develop resilience, grit, and antifragility only through feedback loops provided by direct experience with life’s many risks (within age-appropriate limits).⁹ They take their analysis a step further by integrating Steve Horwitz’s insight about the implications helicopter parenting has for politics: “parenting strategies and laws that make it harder for kids to play on their own pose a serious threat to liberal societies by flipping our default setting from ‘figure out how to solve this conflict on your own’ to ‘invoke force and/or third parties whenever conflict arises’” (p. 192).¹⁰ While they don’t put it this way, helicopter parenting is a pathway to popular demand not only for a “safe” university, but also for “the nanny state” and socialist political policies.

Despite this book’s many virtues, I have a few concerns. First, while I am sympathetic with much of the research that Lukianoff and Haidt draw on from Twenge (and others) to explain social media’s role in the teen mental health crisis, some of it falls short. For example, they argue that what may account for girls being more adversely affected than boys by social media is that social media provides more occasions for girls—who are allegedly more “relationally aggressive”—to draw negative comparisons between themselves and the “curated” lives and “filtered” photos of their friends, leading to feelings of low self-esteem and “fear of being left out” (pp. 154-55). This fails to explain, though, *why* it is that viewing others on social media causes such feelings. Those with healthy self-esteem and a strong sense of self would not care what

⁹ As Maria Montessori put it nearly a century earlier, “the child is the father of the man.” A child’s confidence in his ability to live in the world without adults or the state leaping in to “solve” his every problem comes from the knowledge and character achieved by him through the “work” he does to understand himself and how the world works. See, e.g., Maria Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, trans. Joseph Costelloe (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972 [1936]).

¹⁰ Citing Steve Horwitz, “Cooperation over Coercion: The Importance of Unsupervised Childhood Play for Democracy and Liberalism,” *Cosmos + Taxis* (2015), pp. 3-16; quotation at p. 10.

anyone else looks like, so perhaps it is previous low self-esteem that causes increases in anxiety and depression—and *that* is what needs a deeper explanation. Also, this research (at least as presented here) does not take into account how many boys make negative comparisons between themselves and other males, such as is explored in *The Adonis Complex*.¹¹ Whether it is girls or boys who are experiencing increasing rates of anxiety or depression, the underlying culprit may be something very different from what these researchers point to.

My second concern is that Lukianoff and Haidt might overestimate how much influence teachers have over children and underestimate the power of parental example. They spill much ink on suggestions for parents to get their children in the right educational setting and to let them experience more unsupervised “free play.” This is no doubt good advice. However, there is far more power in something they mention in passing than the space they devote to it suggests, namely, modeling and encouraging “productive disagreement.” They mention that Adam Grant notes how “most creative people grew up in homes full of arguments, yet few parents today teach their children how to argue productively” (p. 240). Seeing and experiencing firsthand at home from a young age the give-and-take of constructive criticism without taking it personally would instill and reinforce epistemic virtues that children could carry with them to other settings.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, I think that Lukianoff and Haidt overlook a likely contributing cause to iGen’s troubles: mass public education. Since widespread public education has been expanding in the U.S. for nearly a century, it is easy to have a blindspot here. However, lurking behind several of the causes that they point to—such as increasing test anxiety, decreasing free play, invidious social comparison, etc.—is the fact that these detrimental trends are entrenched in the public school system, with its state-controlled, cookie-cutter curriculum; age-segregated classrooms; and teaching-to-the test, soul-killing pedagogy. Many of those who support Skenazy’s Free-Range Kids movement reject this system and are ardent defenders of alternative

¹¹ Harrison Pope, Katharine Phillips, and Roberto Olivardia, *The Adonis Complex: How to Identify, Treat, and Prevent Body Obsession in Men and Boys* (New York: Free Press, 2000).

education models, such as homeschooling, unschooling, Montessori, etc. They seek out these small-scale, agency-centered approaches to learning precisely because they believe them to be effective in providing the conditions children need to create flourishing lives for themselves rather turning into coddled and fearful adults unable to face life.

The key message of this book suggests an alternate title: *Safetyism Isn't Safe*. Unsafe for whom and for what purpose? For children, students, and citizens who aspire to be healthy, independent, free-thinking humans living under conditions of freedom and prosperity. Safetyism is also unsafe for schools and universities that aspire to uphold the purpose of education, namely, to create and foster the conditions necessary for seeking truth and achieving knowledge. Lukianoff and Haidt have provided some hard-earned gems of wisdom that all individuals can benefit from, but—in keeping with their deeper analysis—those insights are really gained by each of us while facing challenges in the rough-and-tumble of life.

Carrie-Ann Biondi
Higher Ground Education