

Book Review

Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt

The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure

New York, NY: Random House

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Public sector innovation involves at least four dimensions: a policy problem in apparent need of resolution, a political structure with the wit and the will to authorize constructive change, an administrative apparatus capable of introducing and implementing the change, and a public prepared to accept (if it has not already demanded) the change.

The Coddling of the American Mind relates to the public aspect of innovation. It concentrates on how the American school system—especially its colleges and universities—is failing to fulfill its task of helping young people to develop into responsible adults and to function as well-informed and actively engaged citizens in the twenty-first century. It deals with the allegedly fragile psyches of young people. It takes note of issues such as the softening of support for free speech and academic freedom. It expresses serious concerns about how contemporary education is contributing to or perhaps undermining civic competence.

The Clinical Assessment

Lukianoff and Haidt echo the mantras of “conservative” critics of higher education such as the notorious Dinesh D’Sousa, who won instant fame and short-lived glory for his book, *Illiberal Education* (1991)—one of the most effective weapons in the so-called “culture wars” that have plagued American education at least since the start of the Reagan administration. Bringing the critique up to date, they highlight additional difficulties in the contemporary American political culture. They fret about the future of American democracy in the absence of a responsible electorate. They criticise institutions of higher education not just for failing to educate students in terms of their civic duties, but also for creating and perpetuating a political culture in which the United States of America may not only have lost its “greatness,” but may also be losing the intellectual and psychological strength to restore it.

<p>Listen up, maggots! You are not special. You are not the beautiful or unique snowflake. You are the same decaying organic matter as everything else. We are the all-singing, all-dancing crap of the world. We are all part of the same compost heap.</p> <p>– Chuck Palahniuk, 1996</p>

The authors are especially concerned about the rise in “identity politics” based on sexism, racism, classism, ageism, ableism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia and intersectionality—the last being the claim that every kind of discrimination and oppression is connected to every other in an overall culture of dominance and submission. This allegedly and singularly unjust society is said to be guilty not only of all manner of overt injustices, but of an array of “microaggressions” as well. Many of these are further reclassified not as political or legal issues susceptible to correction through public policy and the judicial system, but as “medical” matters. So, rather than justifying censorship by claiming that a speaker or a book is offensive to public morals (obscenity) or criminal in content (“hate speech”) or intent (incitement to riot)—all of which are contestable in courts of law—young people need only say that they are being done psychological harm (made to “feel anxious”) by exposure to ideas that they do not like in order to justify imposing silence and punishing those who have disturbed their sense of well-being. In this view, a toxic brand of liberal guilt has led to an attitude of “blame America first” resulting in the decline of colleges and universities, and the potential fall of the republic.

Lukianoff and Haidt join in the familiar lament that the higher values of the American academy are weakened by a generation that seeks “safe spaces” and protection against the harm purportedly done by words and gestures as well as by deeds. In the extreme, they say, the American academic environment has become one in which accusations of making a person “feel uncomfortable” are tantamount to convictions for unacceptable and sometimes quasi-criminal behaviour. American students, they suggest, are eager to stifle contrarian voices—with or without due process, natural justice and the opportunity to confront and vigorously interrogate their accusers. Careers can and have been seriously and permanently harmed by such accusations. Penalties have been applied mainly through internal, administrative tribunals, the imposition of speech codes and, when the spirit moves them, protests against outside speakers with messages that the delicate students do not wish to hear.

“Harassment is making someone uncomfortable,” students began asserting some 20 years ago. “That makes me a harasser” I’d respond, “since I strive to make at least a few people uncomfortable every day.” – Wendy Kaminer, 2015

Postsecondary education in the United States, they conclude, reveals a set of social arrangements in which victimhood is celebrated. It harbours, in the lexicon of American conservatism, a population of “snowflakes.” Campus culture, they say, promotes a level of infantilism that makes students hypersensitive to insults, causes them to cower in the face of contrary opinions and renders them unable to engage in honest, robust discussions of the great issues of the day. Perhaps paradoxically, at certain tipping points, it can also turn them into ideological “social justice warriors,” who are susceptible to left-wing demagoguery, mass hysteria and mob violence.

Joining together to oppose conservative thinkers and activists, students have shouted down and violently attacked guest speakers on college campuses whose views can in any way be labelled racist, sexist and so on. At their worst, they congeal into gangs of “antifa” rabble or crowds of “black bloc” anarchists prone to do harm to persons and to destroy property. When they form a critical mass of dissidents and find strength in numbers, they can become as thuggish as the bigots they wish to avoid.

As evidence, Lukianoff and Haidt rely upon sporadic reports of ugly episodes that have occurred over the past few years in a small number of widely publicized events at seemingly placid places from Middlebury College (Beinart, 2018; Gee, 2018) in Vermont, Evergreen College in Olympia, Washington and Reed College in Portland, Oregon (Bodenner, 2017; Moskowitz, 2018) to one of the last bastions of 1960s radicalism at the University of California at Berkeley (Wolin and Schaar, 1970; Marantz, 2018; Orenstein, 2018).

The irony that older generations of radical students found their cause in the “free speech movement” during the early years of America’s military engagement in the Vietnam conflict, but that their apparent ideological progeny now seem to reject that principle in some of the same campus locations is certainly not lost on Lukianoff and Haidt. They are distressed that “free speech” was once the primary demand of idealistic students in the “sixties” (some of whom became professors themselves), but now it seems that it and the closely related concept of “academic freedom” have both gone on sabbatical in the era of political correctness while US military engagement throughout North Africa, the Middle East and elsewhere seems barely to be noticed.

The Diagnosis

Our authors attribute this disturbing situation to a number of factors from cell-phone addiction to the child rearing strategies in upper-middle class families (Weigel, 2018). However one describes today’s student body—whether as a collection of simpering cry-babies destined for failure in the allegedly “real world” or as potential revolutionary cells blocking the appearance or chasing the likes of Ann Coulter, David Horowitz, Charles Murray, Richard Spencer, Milo Yiannopoulos and even the current US Education Secretary Betsy DeVos off the stage—Lukianoff and Haidt suggest that the kids are definitely *not* alright. They report that young people avoid difficult subjects by pleading for “trigger warnings” against reading and writing assignments and discussion topics might upset them. They describe student *angst* about grades (which, by the way, have been scandalously inflated to reduce the chance and the resulting agony of failure), job prospects, and general uncertainty in a rapidly changing political economy. They note that students’ display a lack of trust in the political process, experience sexual paranoia, are acutely aware of predictions that they will be denied the affluence and material security of their parents, and emerge poised for (or are in the midst of) a collective mental breakdown.

<p>We can’t expect students to value free speech or academic freedom if they’ve never been taught anything about the deep philosophy that undergirds those ideas. – Greg Lukianoff (in Jaschik, 2018)</p>

So, although many millions of dollars and countless hours of counselling time are invested in helping undergraduates cope with the increasingly modest academic demands in many college and university programs, and despite having whole departments of experts dedicated to providing guidance, peer mentorship, psychological accommodations and layers of administrative personnel trying to create a better college experience, Lukianoff and Haidt remind us that even comedians such as Chris Rock, Bill Maher and Jerry Seinfeld have reportedly stopped performing on college campuses because, as Caitlin Flanagan (2015) reports, the kids

“can’t take a joke.” So, they reckon, the elevation of sensitivities and feelings over knowledge and logic may well have put the very future of the American republic, if not the whole of Western Civilization (with which it is so often conflated) in peril.

The Coddling of the American Mind is, of course, about more than the perceived perils of political correctness. It is also an exercise in applied social science. It sincerely seeks to link controversies about how to manage controversial politics to general anxieties about the anxieties of a larger society embroiled in a kind of anti-social societal meltdown. In the schools themselves, hardly a week or even a day passes without some North American postsecondary institution announcing a new program or policy dedicated to relieving undergraduate (or postgraduate, faculty, staff or even parental) stress. The mental health of *all* the denizens of the academy—administrators included—has become one of the fastest growing sub-bureaucracies of the vastly expanding Human Resources enterprise.

Without undertaking the kind of massive empirical study that would require a huge research budget and untold hours of computer time to crank out statistical analyses unfathomable to all but the elect and colourful but misleading pie-charts for everyone else, Lukianoff and Haidt make a sincere effort to untangle the story of the enormous growth of mental torments and clinical disorders on campus, and to make what connections they can to the overall political culture of the United States. To these ends, they take note of political polarization, the routinization of children’s play and the regimentation of recreational activities, the much discussed phenomenon (sometimes labelled the “addiction”) of social media, the plethora of rules of respectful speech and codes of proper conduct, and the overall corporatization in both theory and practice of the contemporary academy. “These,” said Lukianoff in an informative interview in *Inside Higher Education* (Jaschik, 2018), “are the crucial themes of the book, and it’s why our original title for the book was *Disempowered*. We believe,” he went on, “we have unwittingly taught a generation of students the mental habits of anxious, depressed, polarized people, and we need to rethink how we do everything from parenting in K-12, through, of course, higher education.”

<p>It seems to me that—at least in our scientific theories of behavior—we have failed to accept the simple fact that human relations are inherently fraught with difficulties and that to make them even relatively harmonious requires much patience and hard work.</p> <p>– Thomas Szasz, 1960, p. 117</p>
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As self-described liberals, Lukianoff and Haidt have taken upon themselves the dual obligations of diagnosticians and therapists. It is work, they believe, that needs to be done. The issue of “free speech on campus” is vital, and the prospect of an entire generation of young adults with unrealistic expectations, inflated senses of entitlement, next to no capacity to engage, much less to prevail, in authentic battles of wits or struggles with moral quandaries, and a deficiency of realistic strategies for personal success and an absence of effective tactics to enhance the common good is indeed daunting—though sceptics like myself wonder if the vulnerabilities of young people aren’t at least partly encouraged and partly caused by expansive and intrusive administrative authorities who, perhaps in an opportunistic and maybe even in a predatory fashion, find the apparent epidemic of mental health issues and expressed needs for protections and accommodations to be an fine way to build mini-empires and vast, invasive

mechanisms of social control. It is also, of course, a means to “individualize,” psychologize, medicalize, and thereby trivialize what may be portents of more *serious* problems of ethics, ecology and political economy that can be finessed by locating existential social challenges in the category of personal personality problems.

Audiences and Implications

The Coddling of the American Mind has a number of easily anticipated audiences. It appeals to thoughtful conservatives. This is so because it provides a balance to the large number of books and blogs that specialize in explaining the several mental diseases and disorders hypothesized throughout the long history of right-wing ideology. Earlier pioneering work such as *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al., 1950) and *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (Hofstadter, 1964) set the tone for a recent spate of contributions stimulated by the emerging divisiveness and hyper-partisanship of American politics (DeLuca and Yanos, 2015). It has been capped off by arrival of the current president of the United States and the bizarre events of the past two years—some of which has led to a robust debate in the American Psychiatric Association about the ethical problems of trying to diagnosing depravity at a distance (American Psychiatric Association, 2018; Lee, 2018).

For readers of this journal, the importance of *The Coddling of the American Mind* relates to the imminent problems that await us when the current student generation, sooner rather than later, takes up its place as a significant demographic in the body politic. What is to become of them when they assume the obligations of citizenship, take their right to vote more seriously than they do now and, of course, become interested in public policy as taxpayers? How will their attitudes and actions fit into the civic culture? What are the implications for public policy development and implementation if, as Lukianoff and Haidt contend, they relate to institutions of government substantially differently from their parents and previous generations. Are we to be complacent or worried and frightened? And if the latter, what would an appropriate response be for those of us who remain committed to liberal democratic traditions?

Among the most important audiences, however, are the political operatives and opinion leaders who go about the task of influencing public beliefs and behaviour. If Lukianoff and Haidt are right in their analysis and explanation of political attitude formation, then their work should have direct implications for campaign strategies and the outcomes of future democratic competitions for the people’s vote. *The Coddling of the American Mind* is not, after all, a moralistic tract, but the potential basis of a practical Machiavellian guide to winning power. It can be read not only as a commentary on the character and quality of the current cohort of young people, but as a deft prologue for a complete “how-to” manual for manipulating public opinion and achieving electoral success.

The Coddling of the American Mind provides insights for politics, governance, and public policy creation and administration that revolve around a central theme. This is it: in political debates, emotion trumps (so to speak) reason every time; appeals to the heart are bound to be more successful than appeals to the brain. These insights, of course, are of interest throughout the public sector as they affect citizen involvement in policy innovation and administration.

The Therapists

I have no difficulty believing that Lukianoff and Haidt are other than what they claim to be—good-hearted and earnest investigators with the well-being of their species, their civilizations, their countries and their communities atop their priority list. They intend their work to be helpful in promoting the public good. They want to assist in making us better. If that requires a certain amount of “realism” and some scaling back of our self-congratulatory, but overly optimistic expectations about the future of our society, it would surely be better that we learn about it now. They seem sincerely to believe that we will be all be better off when we acknowledge that we’re not as smart as we think we are, that our rational choices may merely be glosses on or by-products of internal, irrational, emotional urges, and that, while we all may believe we are good at being rational, we’re even better at rationalization. Once taken, that cold shower may compel us to admit how deeply rooted our choices are in the more primitive parts of our brains. We would then become more modest, more alert and more able to admit who and what we are. We might then be able to find advantage in being more true to ourselves. We could also be in a position to repair the damage being done by an educational system that Lukianoff and Haidt urge us to understand is a bit of a mess. It is accepting, if not actively promoting, mental habits that will render the current and future generations incapable of understanding, never mind responding well to, whatever problems the future holds. If those problems—environmental degradation, overpopulation, mass migration, chronic democratic deficits and so on—are as acute as many people think they may be, then we will need intelligent, quick-witted, critical thinkers as citizens, not people whose reaction to adversity is either a pre-emptive cringe or a resort to uncontrolled anger.

The first lesson ... for liberal centrism, if it wishes to survive, is that it needs an emotional narrative with an inspirational core offer... The ‘fear of the future’ [among] supporters of the nationalist right is, for many of them, rational.

– Paul Mason, 2018

Lukianoff and Haidt are deeply interested in the methods of political persuasion. They are especially concerned with the way in which official education is socially constructing not *what* people think, but rather *how* people think about public issues. They want to explore what makes people willing to accept change and sometimes either to change their minds or to intensify their already existing prejudices so that their attitudes become actionable. Such knowledge has obvious benefits for manufacturers and merchants wanting to sell commercial products. It is also potentially useful for people eager to champion political parties, to build social movements or to cultivate support for, or compliance with, public policy innovations.

For his part, Jonathan Haidt has already earned an excellent reputation as a political “coach.” His immensely popular book, *The Righteous Mind* (2012) promoted the notion that political decision making is mainly emotional and not rational. Building on David Hume’s quip (2008, p. 188) that “reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them,” Haidt went on to collate a sizable store of intellectual support for his distrust of human reason. Drawing on anthropology as well as evolutionary and experimental psychology, he induced his readers to accept a conclusion that can have a happy ending only if humanity is naturally possessed of innate moral sentiments that are

essentially good—an axiom that is not immediately self-evident. William Saletan (2012) summed up the idea admirably:

We compete for social status, and the key advantage in this struggle is the ability to influence others. Reason, in this view, evolved to help us spin, not to help us learn. So if you want to change people's minds ... don't appeal to their reason. Appeal to reason's boss: the underlying moral intuitions whose conclusions reason defends.

Ruminations on the essential goodness or badness of our species have been occupying the time of sages and ordinary citizens since long before our invention of the written word. Recorded inquiries into conscious human thought have been going on since before Plato. Scientific inquiries into unconscious human thought have been ongoing at least since Freud. Inquiries into political influence have been weaving in and out of the narratives composed by political philosophers and political theorists throughout. What, if anything are we to ascribe to Lukianoff's and Haidt's contributions?

First, we should acknowledge (and a seemly diffidence would force them to agree) that Lukianoff and Haidt are neither the first nor necessarily the most profound thinkers on the subject of human nature; but they are not small and shallow either and—earnest talk about their main interest in the techniques of crafting political messages to appeal to pre-existing emotional dispositions notwithstanding—we should recognize that they *do* have political agendas.

To begin, Greg Lukianoff is neither a social scientist nor a politician. He is a lawyer. He has been President and CEO of FIRE (the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education) since 2006. He has been called some unpleasant names and, perhaps unfairly, been associated with elements of the rigid right, though he insists that he caters neither to the right or the left. In his telling, he simply advocates for individual freedom of thought and speech—regardless of the thinker and speaker or the thought and speech. He says that he is politically fixated exclusively on the principle of “free speech.” That he and Haidt cuttently find a greater tendency among “liberals” than “conservatives” to repress freedom of thought is something I find curious (my experience has been precisely the opposite), but I am prepared provisionally to accept the sincerity if not the accuracy of this description and the possibility that my judgement might unduly reflect my location in Canada rather than his in the more heated and increasingly hot political atmosphere in the United States. I do, in any case, commend him for his explicit commitment (Lukianoff, 2015) to the notion that “universities excel when they are governed by the authority of ideas rather than the idea of authority.”

Lukianoff (2014; 2015) has written forcefully on the primacy of free speech; however, it is perhaps noteworthy that his chief publisher is Encounter Books. It is the main remaining part of the legacy of *Encounter* magazine, the “flagship” and most successful of over thirty intellectual journals funded by the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) during most of the “cold war.” *Encounter* was published regularly from 1953 to 2001. What may be made of that link is a matter for others to determine. It should not, however, go unnoticed. After all, until *Ramparts* magazine's intrepid investigative reporting disclosed that, unknown to its readers, most of its writers and maybe even some of its editors, the CCF was funded by the American

Central Intelligence Agency. Creator of skillful collages of erudite articles on politics and the arts, it was firmly anti-communist, but otherwise attractive to progressive readers. Included among its contributors were celebrity writers and editors such as Kingsley Amis, W. H. Auden, Isaiah Berlin, Albert Camus, John Kenneth Galbraith, Sidney Hook, Melvin Lasky, Dwight Macdonald, Bertrand Russell, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., C. P. Snow, Stephen Spender, Hugh Trevor-Roper, A. J. P. Taylor, Lionel Trilling, Evelyn Waugh, and Edmund Wilson, as were such Russian poets as Andrei Voznesensky and Yevgeny Yevtushenko and, tellingly, Russian author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn—some of whom had impeccable leftist credentials. As the notable author and former editor of *The New Republic* Franklin Foer succinctly put it, “it was the best money the CIA ever spent” (FIRE, 2018). Dwight Macdonald (1974), by the way, told his version of events in “Confessions of an Unwitty CIA Agent” [Full disclosure: I was a happy subscriber for several years in the mid-1960s.]

The Therapy

Like D’Sousa’s quarter-century-old treatise on “illiberal education” (1991), *The Coddling of the American Mind* started life as an article in the increasingly “conservative” magazine, *The Atlantic*. The article went viral. Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) took advantage of the opportunity. The decision to expand from a magazine article to a book-length manuscript has certainly paid off!

Framing the threat posed by the “coddling” of US undergraduates more as a psychological problem in child-rearing than a philosophical, pedagogical, socio-cultural or political problem, they look to cognitive behavioural therapy for an answer. They claim that “student demands for social justice are expressions of ‘cognitive distortions’ that CBT can correct” (Leahy, Holland, and McGinn, 2011; Weigel, 2018). Although their subtitle suggests a larger socio-cultural analysis, writes Moira Weigel, Lukianoff and Haidt are flying under something of a false flag: “the checklists and worksheets distributed throughout this book,” she says, “make clear that its genre is self-help.”

How can a conservative not feel sympathy with the outrage of the new left against the emptiness and dehumanization that this society produces.

George Grant, 1966, p. 123

Lukianoff and Haidt leave little room for historical, political, economic or any other kind of analysis that would permit us to take seriously the social complaints and the political concerns of the young. They ignore entirely the corporatization of higher education, the drastic reduction in public funding, the commodification of curriculum, the commercialization of research, the adoption of the discount department store model of educational service delivery and the dominance of vocationalism in orientation and the primacy of programs that emphasize training over education in the effort to disseminate “employability skills” in the interest of creating “job-ready products” (formerly known as students). Perhaps contemporary undergraduates have good reason to complain, even if they lack the political awareness to know exactly what’s wrong or the personal understanding to know what they could do about it. Maybe they have more in common with their 1960s counterparts than they know.

Whatever we may think about the state of education, however, the implications of this book for the larger society is even more distressing. If we take Lukianoff and Haidt at their word and believe that they are basically right in thinking that our political choices are more the product of our amygdalas than our analyses, we have some serious thinking to do about the promises of democratic politics. We must come to grips with the thought that the only way to achieve worthwhile public policy might be to engage not in rational, evidence-based discourse, but to learn how to excite the passions of the voting public. This, it should be apparent to all, is something that the rising “populist” right has already learned.

Lukianoff and Haidt are not alone in their belief. Less coy in his public statements, for example, is George Lakoff, who is a frequent adviser to American politicians in the Democratic Party, states (almost admiringly) that “fear . . . is the emotion at the heart of Trump and the GOP. Fear of immigrants. Fear of people of color. Fear of equality for women and LGBT people. Fear of religions other than Christianity. Fear of non-existent conspiracies. Fear of the media. Fear of social progress.” If such politicians are to be defeated, he more than implies, their opponents need to mimic their methods.

Following work done in the United Kingdom and elsewhere (Barber, 2011), John Bargh, one of Lakoff’s “heroes,” adds that “brain imaging studies have even shown that the fear center of the brain, the amygdala, is actually larger in conservatives than in liberals. And many other laboratory studies have found that when adult liberals experienced physical threat, their political and social attitudes became more conservative (temporarily, of course). But no one had ever turned conservatives into liberals” (Bargh, 2017).

<p>To the question many people ask about politics — Why doesn’t the other side listen to reason? Haidt replies: — We were never designed to listen to reason. — William Saletan, 2012</p>

So, Lakoff does not urge that Democrats combat paranoia—whether genetically inherited or acquired in childhood—with facts and logic that undermine the beliefs of the right-wing mind. Like Lukianoff and Haidt, he suggests buying in to the “science,” acknowledging that we are creatures of our emotions, passions, drives and desires and cater to them, just as right-wing politicians thrive upon exposing us to threatening images and portraying themselves as our protectors. Fanciers of liberal democracy, it seems, must learn about their own unconscious political topography and learn to take advantage of it in others.

Electoral tacticians must devise ways to discover and to press “other” buttons. We must all lower our sights, take the average voters as we find them as uninformed, disconnected and hapless creatures bereft of the habits of thoughtful, reflective living and do the best we can. The “best,” I imagine, is that we all will become incrementally aware of our vulnerabilities to advertisers’ tricks, become more alert to our own emotional structures, grow more attentive and alert when out buttons are being pushed and maybe learn to “push back.”

In time, I suppose, this can lead to general improvements in “media literacy” and an awakening to the ways in which we are manipulated, the ways in which we can manipulate others and become better at exploring out internal emotional landscapes. Perhaps such a process

will help us and others *eventually* to haul ourselves a few steps up the evolutionary ladder and one day aspire realistically to develop into the rational, civic-minded citizens classical theorists of democracy once envisioned and aspired to become.

For their part, Lukianoff and Haidt display confidence in the proposition that we can become more conscious of our internal psychological workings. We can work hard to base our opinions on facts, not messages that merely reinforce our prejudices. To do so, however, our children and presumably their children will have to toughen up. The culture of colleges and universities will have to become a little more open to confrontation and to the honest exchange of opinions.

My concern, however, is that the corporate ideology depends too much on a compliant, uncritical mass of electors to allow very much “critical thinking.” As long as issues of identity can be raised without absolutely unacceptable resort to violations of civility—whether on the part of students reacting to right-wing and racist provocateurs, or radical right respondents with tiki torches and Nazi flags—they may be precisely the ones that will be encouraged in order for the pretence of democracy to be perpetuated as a form of what Herbert Marcuse famously called “repressive tolerance.” So, even if Lukianoff and Haidt are right to think that at least some of our more educated progeny can be taught to control their emotions rather than letting their emotions control them, the dominant ideas in our society may be immune to critical interrogation since they have been inculcated ever since birth in social arrangements in which technologically mediated information and constant reinforcement through every available electronic medium have already “programmed” young people before they get anywhere near higher education. Reacting with fear and loathing to opinions which are inconsistent with the naïve liberalism they been exposed to from birth may be the only final gasp of independence they can make.

Nobody really believes in anything anymore and everyone spends his life in frenzied work and frenzied play so as not to face the fact, not to look into the abyss. – Allan Bloom, 1987

We still enthuse over everything from nanotechnology, robotics, genetically modified organisms (including, perhaps, our grandchildren) to the prospect of inserting artificial intelligence chips into human brains at birth. Although government with the informed consent of the governed is the defining element of enlightened politics, we seem to be taking it less and less seriously. We appear to be especially vulnerable to instruments of mass persuasion, demagoguery and the learned helplessness that comes through schools of subservience in all aspects of our daily lives (Freedom House, 2018; IDEA, 2018). And, essential to the loss of democratic confidence, is the scepticism we display toward our own ability to reason. The reason why this is the case and the proper approach to re-establishing faith in classical democracy (or something even better) may have less to do with psychology than Lukianoff and Haidt would have us believe.

However the debate about education, the balance between reason and emotions in human decision making and the quality of the democratic process works out, it will not be resolved easily or soon. Meanwhile, opinions about whether we can still rely on a responsible electorate

(Key, 1966) or a roiling mass of consumer/taxpayers will have enormous effects on how public sector innovators go about their tasks and whether they will succeed.

About the Author:

Howard A. Doughty teaches in the Faculty of Communication, Art and Design at Seneca College in Toronto, Canada. He has been the Book Review Editor at *The Innovation Journal* since 1998. His most recent publications include: “The Ethical Implications of the Academic Labour Process in Technologically Enhanced Learning,” in A. Blackburn, I. L. Chen & R. Pfeffer, eds., *Emerging Trends in Cyber Ethics and Distance Education* (IGI Global, 2018); “From Critical Theory to Critical Practice: The Case of a Singular College Strike,” in H. C. X. Wang, ed., *Critical Theory and Transformative Learning* (IGI Global, 2018); “Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy in an Era of ‘Permanent Crisis’ in Postsecondary Education,” in B. Campbell, B. Hunter & L. McNutt, eds., *Postsecondary Education in Transition* (Dublin Institute of Technology, 2017); “The Novelist as Anthropologist,” in M. Tuzi, ed., *Canadian Writers Series: Nino Ricci* (Guernica Editions, 2016); and “Canadian Responses to Terrorism: Attitudes and Actions,” in T. Fleming & P. O’Reilly, eds., *Violence in Canadian Society: An Anthology of Readings* (de Sitter Press, 2016). He can be reached at howard_doughty@post.com

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