Reviews

The Danger of Too Much Safety

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The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure, by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt. *Penguin Press, 2018. 338 pp. $28.00*.

Soon after reading *The Coddling of the American Mind* I came across a "Dear Abby" column in which a woman asked how to deal with a neighbor who wanted her to withdraw her athletically talented son from a charity race lest he outperform the neighbor's not-so-talented son by "winning the race and boasting to the point where her child would feel like a loser and have more self-esteem issues." I read "Dear Abby" to keep my generally dim opinion of human nature intact, but this seemed a new low. Had I or almost any boy of my generation discovered his mother had made such a request, he would have put a sack over his head and run away from home in embarrassment—an option probably not available to the neighbor's son whose mother most likely won't let him cross the street by himself. In so far as she is typical, this mother is part of the problem analyzed in *The Coddling of the American Mind*—rather than encouraging her son to train better to run faster, she wants to reduce the competition, to make the challenge easier. The Dodo Bird in *Alice in Wonderland* may have spoken for this emerging ethos when he announced the results of the Caucus Race: "*Everybody* has won and all shall have prizes."

Greg Lukianoff, a lawyer, is the CEO of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (**FIRE**)—to which candor compels me to confess that I have been a long time contributor—and Jonathan Haidt is

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a social psychologist at New York University's Stern School of Business. In 2015 they published in *The Atlantic* an essay with the same title as the current book making essentially the same argument, but discovered in the subsequent years that the problem had grown greater and shifted in certain ways in the iGen generation (a name given to the post-millennials, the iPhone-Social Media generation), enough to warrant a reexamination and reappraisal. The illustration in *The Atlantic* essay—a photo of a child, about a second grader, sitting in a college desk, feet unable to reach the floor—captured perfectly the argument about the current infantilization of college students; but the new information that they adduce and develop demonstrates the iGen comes to college already infantilized—and demanding that they be kept that way. Speech codes, trigger warnings, safe spaces, microaggression call-outs, that whole panoply of "protections"—these are not so much imposed as insisted on.

The authors begin with an exemplum about peanuts and allergies. When Jon attends a meeting of parents enrolling their children in school, they are told no peanuts are allowed in school since some student might possibly be allergic to them—and by association no peanut butter, no other kind of nuts, and nothing processed in a factory that processes nuts, such as dried fruits and other snacks are allowed either. When Jon asks if any child in the school *is* allergic to peanuts, the question is dismissed as irrelevant: it's school policy. The facts were, however, that an allergy suffered by four out of a thousand kids in the 1990s had more than tripled, to fourteen in a thousand, by 2008, according to the same survey using the same methods—that is, when the peanut phobia, and resultant ban, were in full flourish. Studies cognizant of this phenomenon discovered that children exposed to moderate amounts of peanuts early on were much less likely to develop an allergy to them than the control group which had no exposure. "Among the children who had been 'protected' from peanuts, 17% had developed a peanut allergy. In the group that had been deliberately exposed to peanut products, only 3% had developed an allergy." As one researcher concluded, not only was the peanut phobia scientifically incorrect, it "may have contributed to the rise in peanut and other food allergies." And what is true in this one instance holds true generally: too little exposure to microbes leads immune systems to overreact to substances that they have no tolerance for—causing allergies. "In the same way," explains developmental psychologist Alison Gopnik, "by shielding children from every possible risk, *we may lead them to react with exaggerated fear to situations that aren't risky at all and isolate them from the adult skills that they may someday have to master*" (emphasis added by Lukianoff and Haidt). An obvious instance of the law of unintended consequences: efforts to do good can often lead to bad results.

This dynamic proves central to the social phenomenon examined in *Coddling*: the creation of a generation of increasingly fragile youngsters, emotionally and intellectually. The book sets out to disprove three Great Untruths: 1. The Untruth of Fragility: *What doesn't kill you makes you weaker;* 2. The Untruth of Emotional Reasoning: *Always trust your feelings*; and 3. The Untruth of Us Versus Them: *Life is a battle between good people and evil people*. I could do without the capitalized abstraction and the somewhat awkward attempt at parallelism, but under these three rubrics, the authors meld a large number of differing factors into a consistent and persuasive argument. The foci are so many and varied, in fact, and often so interrelated and interdependent, that touching on all of them in a brief review will be impossible; but I'll deal with some that seem most salient.

Take the argument, often heard among violent protesters and their apologists, that some words are themselves forms of violence and hearing them uttered justifies a physically violent response. This argument exemplifies what the authors call concept-creep. "If words can cause stress," writes one academic psychologist—almost all the bad ideas in the book are supplied by academics—"and if prolonged stress can cause physical harm, then it seems that speech . . . can be a form of violence." And students must be protected from violence. This is a logical error. The implicit syllogism that if A can cause B and B can cause C, then A can cause C is invalid. The authors suggest rerunning the syllogism substituting "breaking up with your girl/boy friend." A breakup can produce stress (often a lot) and stress can cause harm; but that doesn't mean breaking up is an act of violence. Such shoddy and emotionally hysterical reasoning, however, explains the reactions of some groups on some campuses to having controversial speakers appear there—thus the spate of disinvitations and threats of protest vetoes. An instance at Brown both amuses and shocks. A debate was proposed between two feminists on whether America is a rape culture, but stiff resistance soon arose that anyone would be allowed to argue no. Such a speaker, one Brown student explained, "could serve to invalidate people's experiences" and thus "damage" them by making them feel "unsafe." The debate went on—with the usual limp-wristed equivocation from the administration—but the vulnerable were offered a "safe space" for the duration of the debate. The year was 2005 and *The New York Times* account brought that term into general currency. "The room was equipped with cookies, coloring books, bubbles, Play-Doh, calming music, pillows, blankets and a video of frolicking puppies, along with students and staff members purportedly trained to deal with traumas." This at a major university in our era says, unfortunately, all too much. The little boy sitting in the college desk illustrating Lukinoff and Haidt's original essay might be

thought a better candidate for this "safe place," but frankly he looks too normal to need it.

The traditional liberal justification of academic freedom—that all sides on a controversial issue should be voiced and by the actual partisans, as Mill argues so compellingly in *On Liberty*—thus seems under attack in the very venues where it should be held most valuable. Of all the memorable defenses of free speech from Voltaire's to Thurgood Marshall's, my favorite is George Orwell's: freedom of speech is allowing people to say what you don't want to hear. To claim that such speech "damages" you, that the speakers of it are guilty of "violence" against you—and that you need to run to a "safe room" to watch a video of puppies playing—is completely to misunderstand what a university education ought to be about. What about listening to what you don't want to hear, evaluating it, and learning how to rebut it—or even acknowledging some truth in it? Isn't that what education should involve? The authors quote the progressive activist Van Jones giving the perfect response to those who want to maintain a fugitive and cloistered virtue by not listening: "I don't want you to be safe *ideologically*. I don't want you to be safe *emotionally*. I want you to be strong. . . . I'm not going to pave the jungle for you. Put on some boots, and learn how to deal with adversity. I'm not going to take all the weights out of the gym; that's the point of the gym. This is the gym."

I contribute to Lukianoff's **FIRE** because it provides me a continuing *sottisier* of academic inanity, depressingly plentiful. Most university administrators, I have long believed, belong to a type Germans refer to as *Radfahrernaturen*, the bicyclist personality who bows above and kicks below. That is, they kowtow to the powers above them—regents, legislators, alumni blocs—and diss those below, much of the faculty, most of the students. One other development, however, that Lukianoff and Haidt detect in academic dynamics involves a shift in power *towards* the fragile, vulnerable student, the much mocked snowflake, who has devised a way to weaponize his/her vulnerability. The weapon is the concept of microaggression, an idea concocted by academics that holds that small incidents—a word, a gesture, an omission—can reveal otherwise unobservable hostile, negative attitudes and beliefs of the perpetrator, regardless of his intent. I recall a dean at my university who came in for a world of grief for stating that engineering was not a discipline to which minorities "flock." Presumably that one word discovered him a racist bigot. Several lines of argument the authors are making come together in exploring microaggressions. The identity politics that depend on an enemy to insure unity and that are always on the lookout for grievance inevitably construe any microaggression in the most negative way, no matter what may have consciously been meant. *Life is a battle between good people and evil people*: a microaggressor is one of the

evil people, at least in so far as he microaggresses.

Lukianoff and Haidt adduce numerous examples of this phenomenon, but I want to single out one that became a fairly widespread news item. Erika Christakis, a lecturer at the Yale Child Study Center and associate master of one of the residential colleges, wrote an email questioning the wisdom of Yale administrators' declaring what kind of Halloween costumes were appropriate for Yalies and which not. She expressed concern about the institutional "exercise of implied control over college students" and opined that this was a matter that students could decide for themselves. One would have thought hers was a position that students would welcome—and, who knows? probably most did; but not all. A group of 150 students staged a protest outside her home, accusing her of being "racist" and "stripping people of their humanity" and "creating an unsafe space" and enabling "violence": the usual arsenal of fragilist slings and arrows. And demanded, of course, that she and her professor husband who defended her be fired. The actions of the micro-mob are not the most depressing element—victims, after all, will be victims, noisily—but the inaction of the administration and faculty is. The president of the university sent out an email acknowledging the students' "pain" and committing to "take actions that will make us better." One dreads to imagine what that will be and Lukianoff and Haidt provide no additional information (I'd like to know). Christakis revealed later that many professors supported her privately, but were afraid to do so publicly for fear of retribution—a not unfounded fear, as other evidence in *Coddling* shows. Erica resigned and her husband went on sabbatical. This episode exemplifies the shift of power *toward* the fragile, who have learned how to deploy their fragility against irresolute and easily panicked administrations, shown throughout the book, in various situations, to be essentially spineless. We are learning the advantages of victimhood.

The microaggression crusade arises out of and constitutes a subset of identity politics, the kind that divides people into special interest groups by race, gender, sexual orientation, class, physical disability—the blind, the deaf, the crippled, etc.—and trauma; and depends on having a common enemy to unite against in protest. The authors acknowledge this kind of identity politics—endemic now in academia—but propose a different kind which they term common-humanity identity politics. This orientation stresses not what divides, but what unites people, what makes them feel responsible for one another and seek solutions to problems for the common good. Their exemplar here is Martin Luther King and his approach to the problem of racism in America. The image is not an unfamiliar one, but they sum up his goal for the civil rights movement: "Even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. A

dream that is deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'" King's words here, his approach in general, speak to all people of good will, despite their differences, who aspire to a common good. Unfortunately that's not everyone, perhaps not even most, but the authors' real argument here is that universities ought to be teaching, ought to be encouraging common-humanity identity politics, not those of division and enmity.

An admirable goal, truly, but probably pretty much a lost cause. While commencement speakers and such might express the high ideals of common-humanity politics, down in the trenches, where the nitty-gritty pedagogy goes on, the ethos and policies of common-enemy identity politics prevails. Whole programs, probably whole departments, depend on and promote it. The authors of *Coddling* never mention the postmodernism that prevails in most social science and humanities departments, so I'll follow suit, except to say that the common-humanity *anything* is anathema there: they react to the idea of a universal truth the way Dracula reacts to a cross—or garlic.

I should not leave the impression that Lukianoff and Haidt are unsympathetic to the fragile, whom, in fact, they want to help grow out of that condition. They of the iGen are the product of—and arrive at college already shaped by—a culture of "safetyism." Some of their most fascinating and informative chapters deal with the development and results of this culture of the overprotected, underexposed child. Childhood is a much more fearful condition today than it was when I was growing up: parents have come to believe—and act on the belief—that the world is a dangerous place from which their children must be sheltered. We may prefer free-range chicken, but not free-range children. The parent who lets one take off on his or her own to try something new and exciting will be socially condemned, if not arrested. (No exaggeration!) My wife and I remember that we walked to and from elementary school every day, several blocks (my wife says a mile), alone or maybe with a friend. Now we live near an elementary school and at 8:45 every morning—just when we'd like to be able to back out of our driveway—a platoon of SUVs arrives, disgorging one or two kids whose parent then walks them the one block to school. Seeing a kid walking alone to school would be like seeing a dog off leash, a cause for concern and maybe a call to the authorities.

Play dates?—who ever heard of play dates? In my day—I know how old fogeyish this sounds—we just went out, found some other kids and played. Apparently today even play has to be regulated and supervised by adults; better yet it ought to involve some "enriching" activity that will look good on the tyke's application for a good pre-school. The authors make clear that the culture of

safetyism is primarily an upper middle class phenomenon, the purview of those with the time and money to engage in it; but this stratum of society provides most of the fragile students of the elite schools who demand protection from "harms"—like controversial speakers. Indeed, the very competition for entry into the best schools itself accounts for much of the overprotected, the overregulated, coddled and infantilized nature of their childhood. What additional stresses result from the adolescent *Sturm und Drang* of social media addiction remain to be seen, but depression and suicide among this population is on the increase.

The lack of free play registers, in fact, as an inhibitor of normal adolescent development. Chapter 9 of *Coddling*, one of the most interesting and revealing in the book, deals with this in detail, which I can only limn here. Studies have shown that anxious children elicit increasing overprotection from adults, which in turn increases the child's sense of danger and anxiety, reveals one such study and suggests more stimulating environments rather than hampering their development by swaddling. Vigorous outdoor free play with other kids is crucial to their developing personality. "It also happens to be the kind of play kids generally say they like most." This researcher notes that children introduce danger and risk into their play, like climbing walls or trees or skateboarding down stairs. "They seem to be dosing themselves with moderate degrees of fear, as if deliberately learning how to deal with both the physical and emotional challenges of the moderately dangerous conditions they generate . . . . All such activities are fun to the degree that they are moderately frightening." They develop, that is, by challenging themselves to do new things with uncertain outcomes: that's what growing up means. The decline of free play, therefore, signals a significant social warp away from a healthy, normally developing citizenry able to deal with conflict and challenge. I remember a few years ago perusing a painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder called *Children's Games* in which numerous children are exuberantly engaged in purportedly eighty different activities, many quite strenuous, some risky looking; and thinking, sadly, most of those would not be allowed to children today—this even before reading *Coddling*.

Lest my account makes it seem that Lukainoff and Haidt provide an entirely pessimistic analysis of this complex of problems, I should add that they don't. Both believe in the efficacy of cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) to reduce anxiety and depression; Greg himself employed this therapy in his own bouts with this malady. CBT teaches one to recognize, confront and reverse negative ways of thinking (my apologies if that is overly simplistic); but ironically the "safetyism" policies of universities *increase* these negativities. Students' "beliefs about their own and others' fragility in the face of ideas they dislike would

become self-fulfilling prophecies," they write. "Not only would students come to *believe* that they can't handle such things, but if they acted on that belief and avoided exposure, eventually they would *become* less able to do so. If students succeeded in creating bubbles of intellectual 'safety' in college, they would set themselves up for even greater anxiety and conflict after graduation." The cure for such fragility is not to coddle it but confront it: the cure for agoraphobia is not to lock yourself in the house. The authors thus end with a series of optimistic recommendations, based on CBT, for countering the coddling—for strengthening—the American mind. There's hope, maybe.

In some reviews you realize that you will say too much and too little and still fail to convey the full import of the book. That's the case here. I feel that I have not touched on all its facets or intricacies, maybe not done it justice at all, though I meant to. Let me revert then to my high school days when every oral book review in my English class seemed to end with the same peroration: this is a good book and you should read it. So in that spirit: this is a good book and you should read it.