

POLITICAL ECONOMY IN THE CAROLINAS

THE CODDLING OF THE AMERICAN MIND: HOW GOOD INTENTIONS AND BAD IDEAS ARE SETTING UP A GENERATION FOR FAILURE

*Greg Lukianoff and
Jonathan Haidt*
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Book Review by:
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It is fashionable for wizened Baby Boomers and Gen Xers to characterize college students as “snowflakes.” Ensconced in the protections afforded by today’s luxurious campuses, these young people wish to avoid any intellectual conflict. Their professors indulge them. Course syllabi come with “trigger warnings” cautioning students they might find material discomfiting. A large, intrusive, and increasingly emboldened university bureaucracy—much of which is housed in burgeoning diversity, campus-housing, and student-affairs units—“educates” about micro-aggressions and behavior it contortedly interprets as racist, sexist, homophobic, or guilty of any of numerous other sins. It polices the community’s language down to the pronouns people can use when addressing friends and colleagues. Official administrators staff “incident-response teams” to chase down any trace of bias, whatever they mean by that. They prohibit outside speakers who might challenge the orthodoxy. Dissenters who somehow secure a platform are intimidated and frequently silenced. The student mind is apparently so fragile that even seemingly innocuous stimulation or disturbance injures it.

“Coddling” is the adjective Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt give the development. It is very real, they argue. Lukianoff, the president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), and Haidt, a prominent psychologist and founder of Heterodox Academy, identify beliefs pervasive on campus, and indeed prominent in broader society, that have turned students into a collection of attention-seeking, offense-taking, conflict-averse neurotics.

This is not really the students’ fault. Social and

technological developments and a new generation of parents are partly to blame. Well before their arrival on college campuses, students become captives of electronic devices such as iPads and video games. Parents fill their lives with scheduled and organized activities, such as soccer, violin, and Chinese lessons. All manner of safety devices, from rubberized playgrounds to new forms of psychological counseling, protect them from physical and emotional harm. Children are led to believe a strange man might abduct them at any moment. Gone are the days when American youngsters climbed trees or played baseball outside with friends until the sun set or their mothers called them in to eat dinner.

The result is widespread anxiety and depression. Teenagers are subject to “the fear of being left out”—what Deborah Tannen calls FOBLO—when they see pictures on Instagram of friends having fun without them. They get caught up in “the resume arms race” and go to pieces if they get a single bad grade. There are sometimes devastating consequences. The suicide rate among high school and college students, particularly females, has increased markedly over the past decade.

Once on campus, college administrators and faculty only make matters worse of course. Professors and academic administrators believe students are emotionally brittle and deserving of a self-centered customized experience to ready them for a world in which they will be doing good and fighting evil. Students are treated like customers, so college is now therapeutic. Libraries, gyms, classrooms, and dorms have state-of-the-art equipment. Cafeterias serve up gourmet food. Psychological comfort is as important as physical comfort. Professors protect their students from ideas they find disconcerting and work they might find too onerous. Administrators hawk “social justice” because it is fashionable in their circles and assuages guilt. There is no serious intellectual

treatment of what it means. Good grades are an entitlement, not the mark of accomplished scholarship. To the extent education occurs, it is of the training, not liberal, variety. Higher education is now emotive rather than intellectual, a means of self-validation and not transformational and enriching. Today, education controls the mind; it does not liberate it.

The authors offer a catalog of remedies, all of which are likely to improve the situation, even if many of them are a little unrealistic. They call for parents to get their children off electronic devices and outside to play. They want to encourage more risk-taking and independence in childhood. They ask us to give people the benefit of the doubt and be more empathetic. They encourage students to undertake a year of public service before entering college.

Among their recommendations specific to higher education, the authors list reforms central to the ethos of the organizations they lead. Lukianoff’s FIRE is committed to free speech on campus. It has had tremendous success with its “spotlight” program, which grades institutions on a three-point scale from red to green. (After an interminable journey through university bureaucracy, I recently helped get my institution, North Carolina State, to change speech policies and earn a green light.) Haidt’s Heterodox Academy promotes intellectual diversity on campus. It has the more formidable challenge. The university grows more liberal, and the politics of faculty hiring and tenure mean leftist professors propagate. Their domination of editorial boards and the process of reviewing research and scholarship result in further marginalization of alternative, mainly conservative or libertarian, views and the professors who hold them. The authors call for heterogeneity of viewpoint to be included in institutions’ diversity policies. Good luck with that.

I think the authors exaggerate the pace at which

the transformation occurred. This helps their argument and provides dramatic effect; the thesis hinges on events such as the bloody Berkeley riot in response to the visit of Milo Yiannopoulos and the anarchy that enveloped Evergreen State University. But the process has been underway since the 1990s. This is when a huge cohort of leftist professors adhering to the agenda of identity politics began to succeed their academic “parents,” a generation more interested in Marx and American Cold War imperialism than the ideas of bell hooks and intersectionality. The developments the book describes are not sudden or surprising.

I have heard numerous commentators claim the future of Western civilization is at stake in the political conflicts that rage within the academy. Lukianoff and Haidt are more guarded. They are nevertheless despondent. Without robust protections for free speech and a genuinely wide-ranging and energetic discussion of diverse ideas, American college campuses are, at the very least, atrophying intellectually. They are losing broad public support, and their teaching of the humanities and social sciences is becoming increasingly irrelevant in the wake of accelerating change. We need to support traditional liberal education and faculty need to devote themselves to its premise of critical and independent thought taught within a coherent course of study guided by the ancients, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment. This is not an antiquated philosophy, regardless of the educational establishment’s remonstrations. The authors write in measured tone, but none of us can say after reading *The Coddling of the American Mind* that we were not warned.