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Review of *The Age of American Unreason in a Culture of Lies* by Susan Jacoby

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Susan Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason in a Culture of Lies*. Vintage (2019), 400 pages, \$17.00 (papercover).

Published originally in 2018, this book couldn't be timelier in view of the upcoming presidential election. It supplements an edition first published in 2008, documenting with critical insights our country's path toward a "post-truth culture." Describing Donald Trump as "a commercially generated image" (p. 324), the author provides a persuasive argument that American society has been on an ongoing path of intellectual decline, in which acceptance of the administration's post-truth doctrine is a logical consequence rather than primary cause.

Riffing on Richard Hofstadter's famous 1963 essay on American anti-intellectualism, Jacoby cites his work as a forewarning to the insidious influence of "mind pacifiers," such as television and social media. Highlighting Hofstadter's warning, she contends, "Start engaging in these pastimes a few hours a day, though, and you are well on your way into the world of thoughtlessness" (p. 324). The consequence of giving in to the pull of social media for entertainment, information, and social connection, is a general state of distraction that makes it difficult to distinguish fact from fiction, let alone promote substantive understanding of complex issues. Yet more than the familiar critique of our dependence on technology and ever-increasing forms of diversion, the book details cycles of anti-intellectualism and its sources at various points in American history.

Depicting the enduring tension between cultural ideals of Enlightenment reason and rugged individualism, Jacoby reminds us that anti-intellectual posturing is not unprecedented in American politics. What is unprecedented is the current dominance of social media, the 24-hour news cycle, and the increased prevalence of media-generated images and soundbites in place of thoughtful analysis and discourse. At the risk being called a modern Luddite, Jacoby's description of a multi-billion-dollar video industry for infants (despite research documenting detrimental effects in language acquisition and reading) clearly bolsters her argument.

Perhaps the most valuable of Jacoby's insights is how our media-saturated culture elevates extremism on both the right and left. When discourse is reduced to buzzwords intended to grab

attention, only the most extreme voices garner significant notice. Jacoby identifies this phenomenon as a primary source of political polarization. This suggests that we can't necessarily point the finger at boorish leaders and political pundits as the principal cause of our fragmented political state. On the contrary, Jacoby argues that anti-intellectualism and the decline in civil discourse has served to elevate the status of illiberal and proudly anti-intellectual leaders. Modifying this state of affairs requires challenging the ubiquitous presence of these sources of distraction, which have become so habitual they often go unrecognized.

What receives less attention in Jacoby's critique is the influence of neoliberal economic policies, and their effect on critical social systems and institutions such as higher education and the press. For example, the author notes the increased focus on pop culture in university course offerings and indicts faculty for their failure to defend academic freedom and gravitas. At the same time, Jacoby fails to address higher education's shift to a corporate university model, in which students are viewed as consumers, and the objectives for recruitment and retention compete with the goals of a liberal education. Within this model, members of the business community are often over-represented on university governing boards, bringing a hierarchical approach to academic governance. This relatively recent transformation not only undermines the traditional emphasis on shared governance in academe, but ultimately subverts the university as a unique space for critical thought and discourse.

Similarly, corporate consolidation has normalized a market-driven approach to the news media. The unfortunate result is a glut of consumer-driven news outlets designed to appeal to narrow ideological perspectives and to confirm existing biases. Reasoned debate on serious issues is replaced with simplistic sloganeering and cues to tribal alliance. Meanwhile, American elections appear to have turned into yet one more form of mass entertainment. This was made alarmingly clear by one network president's waxing enthusiasm over the ratings garnered by the circus-like atmosphere of the 2016 presidential election, reportedly saying "It may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS!"

Nevertheless, Jacoby suggests the future may not be completely dire and refers again to Hofstadter, who posited inevitable “cyclical fluctuations” in the struggle between reason and anti-intellectualism. As an example, she cites John McCain’s insistence that the economy was sound in the face of a collapsing housing market and devastating pension losses, which forced many Americans to seek the counsel of previously denigrated “experts” during the recession of 2008. Likewise, Jacoby points to the common association of intellectualism with anti-Americanism in the 1950s. She argues that this perception shifted to a renewed appreciation for science and technology following the successful launch of the Soviet satellite, Sputnik. The author suggests that history reveals the practical necessity for reason and knowledge, particularly in times of crisis. Accordingly, Jacoby contends that it is only a matter of when, not if, the current phase of American unreason is reversed by a critical event such as a major cyber-attack.

Perhaps the most valuable message of Jacoby’s detailed analysis is that our present age of American unreason is not a sudden cultural shift, but one in a series of historical cycles. Still, as Jacoby herself acknowledges, the unprecedented presence and influence of technology in contemporary culture, as well as an increasingly market-based conceptualization of social institutions and interactions, present unique challenges for affecting significant change. Toward this end, her admonishment to the academic community to be more assertive against the forces of anti-intellectualism is well taken. Educators have a responsibility to forcefully advocate for academic freedom and shared governance, drawing attention to its incompatibility with current trends in higher education toward bureaucratic and administrative bloat. Perhaps more importantly, rather than privileging a market-based, consumer-oriented approach to learning, educators must be willing to assert the value in the slow, often laborious process of knowledge building and intellectual growth.

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