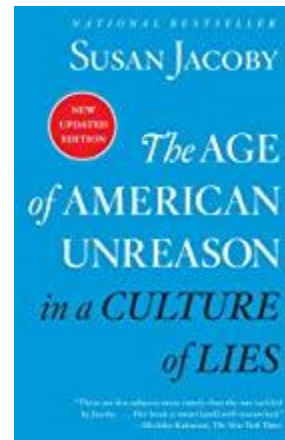


**“Anti-intellectualism vs Anti-reason”**  
A Review by Dick Burkhart of  
**“The Age of American Unreason  
In a Culture of Lies”**  
By Susan Jacoby (2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 2018)



This history-conscious book was recently updated from the original 2008 edition to take into account the Trump phenomenon. Senior journalist and public intellectual Jacoby delves deeply into the religious roots of anti-intellectualism and unreason as expressed by fundamentalist religion from the 19<sup>th</sup> century “Great Awakening”, through the 1920s Scopes trial, to the revival of fundamentalist / political / racial populism since 1970. However she seems less aware of how all this has been rooted in economic inequality, especially the escalating inequality since 1980.

In addition, the focus on fundamentalism blurs the distinction between anti-intellectualism and unreason. For example, there are aspects of Catholicism, going back to Aquinas and the Jesuits, which are strongly intellectual but still dogmatic. The same phenomenon occurs with ideologies. For example, Marxism has some highly intellectual aspects (scientific and dialectical materialism, etc.) while also being dogmatic on certain doctrines, e.g., “labor theory of value”. Similarly neoclassical economic theory is highly intellectual but based on false doctrines – the greedy “economic man”, mechanistic rather than complexity-based models, etc. And today’s “Critical Theories” combine extreme intellectualism with dogmatic assertions of certain unscientific doctrines of race, gender, etc.

It is clear that the human mind has two contradictory tendencies: (1) a strong liking for simplistic explanations and (2) a willingness to embrace elaborate theories to justify those explanations when they come up short. These tendencies are resolved by the scientific method, which looks for the simplest explanations (mathematical models) consistent with the evidence. Thus arguments over beliefs are replaced by arguments over evidence, and ambiguous theorizing is replaced by logic and calculation, combining into requirements for testability or falsifiability of assertions. Not being a scientist, Jacoby comes up short on the need to refocus general education on understanding and practicing the scientific method, not just facts, for civic, not just vocational, reasons.

However, with considerable historical justification, Jacoby sees that “American anti-intellectualism represented the flip side of American democratic impulses in religion and education” (p xix). That is, “One of the most remarkable characteristics of America’s revolutionary generation was the presence and influence of so many genuine intellectuals” (p. xvii), yet they fostered democracy, not aristocracy, hence the most simple-minded forms of religion and education for the masses. What she fails to note is that this transition to anti-intellectualism in politics has been the norm for post-colonial societies. In fact the high-minded leaders of any successful endeavor or movement are often followed by more corrupt leaders until a new cycle of reform or innovation begins.

Jacoby also notes that simplistic fundamentalist-type thinking on both the left and the right helps explain today’s extreme cultural and political polarization: “intellectuals and non-intellectuals alike, whether on the left or the right, tend to tune out any voice that is not an echo” (p xxviii), pointing out that Trump’s anti-intellectualism was preceded by Sarah Palin’s and that Obama was criticized for his intellectualism, such as his love of Shakespeare. However, Jacoby did not anticipate today’s growing backlash against anti-intellectualism and unreason, especially conspiracy theories and the like, by principled leaders across the political spectrum. That is, voices from the Enlightenment are once again echoing, even as the true believers dig in.

Jacoby is an avowed atheist, hence not afraid to take on any religion, which, as Thomas Jefferson said, “picks my pocket” or “breaks my leg”. Thus religious justifications for outlawing all, or most, abortions should be rejected as they would needlessly cause financial or physical harm to some women. How about religious rejections of biological evolution in favor of the Genesis story? Here the consequences are less directly personal, but how could anyone who denies evolution comprehend the evidence for global climate change and its consequences for earth’s ecosystems? Thus religious beliefs could easily lead to societal, even civilizational harm. But Jacoby is not calling for the policing of religions but for open dialogue on the civic consequences of certain religious beliefs that have entered the political arena.

In addition to religious beliefs, “is the issue of pseudoscience, which Americans on both the left and the right continue to imbibe as a means of rendering their social theories impervious to evidence based challenges” (p 83). Her prime examples are Marxism and Social Darwinism, but she also notes several powerful counter movements, such as the popular lyceum lectures of the early 1800s and the astounding success of H.G. Wells’ “Outline of History” in 1920, fueling “middlebrow culture” – more secular, in depth, and worldly expositions of recent discoveries. Think National Geographic magazine and now the proliferation of documentaries based on modern scholarship, historical novels and films too.

Jacoby contrasts these with pseudoscientific fads in psychology, social theory, spirituality, self-help, career success, etc.

I found Jacoby's analysis of the 1960s counter-culture and the generation gap to be particularly interesting. She sees the WW II generation as, not great, but "grateful" – for victory, the GI Bill, plentiful jobs, and the rapid spread middle class lifestyles. But their children – we baby boomers - who took such progress for granted, demanded more. Not just material success, but a moral rectitude to match it - the civil rights, anti-war, and back-to-nature movements. This came across as "ungrateful" to many of their parents, who were also afraid of the consequences of revolutionary fervor.

The result was an escalating political and cultural polarization, since many were left behind: "liberals and conservatives were no more interested in talking to one another on campuses during the 60s than they are today...One of the most reprehensible results of this abdication of responsibility was the ghettoization of African-American, women's, and ethnic studies" (p 148). Meanwhile fundamentalist anti-intellectualism extended to "a new disdain for scientific as well as scholarly elites" combined with "hatred of liberal trends within churches themselves" (p 155). The Southern Baptists split off and became more fundamentalist, while the "Crusade for Christ" went sought to create a new youth movement, along with an expanding network of colleges and revivalist ministries and media. It was an era of ideological battlegrounds, such as Pope John XXIII versus Billy Graham, also of realignments, such as of fundamentalists with conservative Catholics and Jews, and liberal Protestants with liberal Catholics and Jews.

Classical pseudoscience, like "intelligent design", has now been overtaken by "junk thought", like the claim that the MMR vaccine causes autism, despite massive studies that have found no correlation, let alone causal mechanism. In this case it happens that the MMR vaccine is given at about the same age that babies begin to show signs of autism, and the anti-vax activists are disregarding the basic scientific principle that "correlation is not causation". Jacoby also cites "fat studies", where objections to obesity are regarded as discriminatory, despite massive studies demonstrating negative health impacts from obesity. In this case, there is not only correlation but there are numerous causal mechanisms, although their may be uncertainty as to how those mechanisms operate in particular individuals. There have even been studies where certain health benefits are correlated with being slightly overweight, so Jacoby would be better off emphasizing the ongoing development of medical knowledge rather than simplistic attacks for or against fat.

However, Jacoby jumps right into the mine fields of the gender wars, where controversial theories and studies abound. For example, she describes how some

law students and faculty “have turned feminism upside-down by insisting that rape law not be part of the required curriculum because it would be too unsettling to too many female students” (p 242). Or that “new theories about the ‘boy brain, girl brain’ dichotomy cross political and cultural boundaries, extending from liberal academics to religious fundamentalists upholding the concept of divinely ordained separate spheres of responsibility for men and women” (p 233).

Jacoby wraps up her critique by citing the “dumbing down” of public life. She suggests that “styles of presidential leadership are shaped by public knowledge – and lack of knowledge” (p 289) more than the personality of the president, with Trump’s twitter style being the perfect fit for all too many Americans. Or “public ignorance and anti-intellectualism are not identical, of course, but they are certainly kissing cousins” (p 290). The intellectual contrast between John Kennedy and Donald Trump seems to say it all, except that the public hold of the corresponding conspiracy theories (Kennedy assassination vs purported election fraud) shows that the situation today is far worse.

Yet Jacoby is confident that at some point “unassailable reality will challenge the delusions and shatter the illusions of Americans in the post-truth era that provided the soil for Trumpism” (p 308). Meanwhile she assigns us the mission of “cultural conservation...the urgent task at this dismal epoch in American intellectual history. What can be saved, and how can it be saved, until the return of sanity in a post-post-truth era?” (p 316). But what form will this reality check take? She suggests cultural backlash, but for fundamental change, I’d look deeper, into climate disasters, geopolitical defeats, economic crises, pandemics, resource or ecosystem shocks, and more.