

Review of  
*The Parasitic Mind:*  
*How Infectious Ideas Are Killing Common Sense*

**A spirited but disappointing screed against wokeness**

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Gad Saad, *The Parasitic Mind: How Infectious Ideas Are Killing Common Sense*.  
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I wasn't supposed to like this book — or perhaps even to read it.

The publisher is Regnery, a notorious American right-wing outfit that publishes titles like *¡Adios, America!: The Left's Plan to Turn Our Country into a Third World Hellhole*, *Culture of Corruption: Obama and His Team of Tax Cheats, Crooks, and Cronies*, and *Hide Your Children: Exposing the Marxists Behind the Attack on America's Kids*. Not to mention more austere titles like *Socialism Sucks*.

But let's not judge a book by its publisher.

And, truth be told, there are indeed many things about this book that I *don't* like — more on those later. But the surprise is that I liked anything at all. Maybe that's just because I am (perhaps unbeknownst to myself) a closet right-winger, as some unkind souls might claim. But even if that were the case, how would that affect the validity or invalidity of what I — or, more importantly, this book's author, Gad Saad — have to say? I would modestly suggest that we put aside *ad hominem* argument and guilt by association, and simply address the substance of the author's contentions.

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So let's start with the good parts (at least as I see them).

To begin with, it's hard not to be moved by the author's personal story. He was born in 1964 to a family of well-off and politically well-connected Lebanese Jews; despite this, they narrowly escaped with their lives at the outbreak of the barbarous civil war in 1975, settling in Montreal. After an injury precluded his intended career as a professional soccer player, he completed an undergraduate degree in mathematics and computer science, a masters in business administration, and a PhD focussing on the psychology of decision-making; he is now a Professor of Marketing at Concordia University in Montreal. It's fair to call him a polymath: though his main research focuses on the applications of evolutionary psychology to the study of consumer behavior and human decision-making, he has written widely on disparate scientific and social subjects; he also hosts a highly viewed podcast.

Saad's early life left him, he recounts, with two overriding ideals: freedom and truth. He chafed at the pressure to conform to religious dogma — refusing to attend a Jewish school as his three siblings did — and later at the academic pressures to hyper-specialize. Concomitantly, he has always had, he says, a “pathological commitment to honesty and probity” and a visceral negative reaction to “intellectual dishonesty and ideological dogma”, “akin to someone being punched in the face” (11–12). He insists that

The quest for truth should always supersede one's ego-defensive desire to be proven right. This is not an easy task because for most people it is difficult to admit to

being wrong. This is precisely why science is so liberating. It offers a framework for auto-correction because scientific knowledge is always provisional. An accepted scientific fact today might be refuted tomorrow. As such, the scientific method engenders epistemic humility. (12)

And in contrast to “individuals who cared only about signaling to the world that they knew more than you did about anything and everything”, Saad avers that he is

perfectly comfortable admitting to my undergraduate students that I do not know the answer to a posed question. This builds trust because students quickly learn that I care about the veracity of information that I share with them. On topics I know well, I lecture with confidence, on others, such as, say, the pros and cons of legalizing cannabis, I exhibit necessary humility. Confucius was correct: “To know what you know and what you do not know, that is true knowledge.” (13)

So Saad’s first admirable attribute is his overriding dedication to intellectual integrity: following the evidence wherever it leads, even if it conflicts with our preconceptions or our desires. The question will be whether he lives up to his own strictures.

Saad is strongest when he is discussing general conceptual and methodological issues. For example:

Scientific truths and natural laws exist independent of researchers’ identities. The distribution of prime numbers does not change as a function of whether the mathematician is a white heterosexual Christian man or a transgendered, Muslim, differently sized (obese) individual. The periodic table of elements is not dependent on whether a chemist is a Latinx queer or a cisnormative Hasidic Jew. . . . [S]cience is liberating precisely because it does not care about your identity. It is the epistemological means by which we seek to understand the world using evidentiary rules that are unbiased. There is no other game in town, no other way of knowing. (56)

It’s not a new observation, nor a particularly deep foray into the philosophy of science; but it is nevertheless clear and well said.

Saad also gives lucid explanations of ideas from his own field of evolutionary psychology. For instance, he explains several sources of evidence — from anthropology, primatology and endocrinology, among other fields — that sex differences in toy preferences among infants and children are at least in part biologically based (147–150), that there are clear sex differences in human mating strategies (150–156), and that “the most dangerous person in a woman’s life [statistically speaking] is her male partner” (139). He stresses that

evolutionary psychology, a discipline viscerally despised by many progressives, is expressly anti-racist in that it recognizes that underneath many of our surface differences, human minds were borne of the same evolutionary forces irrespective of our racial or ethnic backgrounds. (60)

But he doesn’t address the deeper debates around the scientific status of evolutionary psychology.

Saad also argues that

it is wrongheaded to create a false tension between our reasoning faculty and our emotions. We are both a thinking and a feeling animal. . . . The problem arises when domains that should be reserved for the intellect are hijacked by feelings. (xii, 27)

He laments that “across all our institutions — from universities to the media to the judicial system to the political arena — truth is increasingly taking a back seat to feelings” (27), and he cites “an extraordinarily chilling and instructive example of this dreadful trend [that] occurred in the Netherlands in 2010” (27):

Geert Wilders, a Dutch parliamentarian, was charged with a slew of crimes [including “group insult” and “inciting hatred”] for having the temerity to criticize [rather intemperately, one should admit – A.S.] Islam and its growing influence in his country. . . . As part of his defense strategy, Mr. Wilders sought to call on expert witnesses to validate the veracity of his stated public positions. The response from the prosecutor’s office (*Openbaar ministerie*) was truly breathtaking: “It is irrelevant whether Wilders’s witnesses might prove Wilders’s observations to be correct. What’s relevant is that his observations are illegal.” (27–28)

As Saad justly comments,

in a free society, people should have the right to criticize a religion; . . . and of course their criticisms are themselves open to criticism; that is the essence of freedom of speech and thought. In this case, the prosecution was beyond Orwellian, stating flatly that *telling the truth could be illegal*. (28, emphasis in the original)

(Unfortunately, Wilders himself does not live up to this liberal philosophy: in 2007 he called for the Quran to be banned. The prosecutors ultimately argued that Wilders should be acquitted, and in 2011 he was.)

So there are quite a few matters of general principle on which I can agree with Saad; each reader can of course judge for himself or herself. But Saad is less convincing, in my view, when it comes to contentious social and political issues. Let me explain.

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The main target of Saad’s polemic is a series of what he calls “parasitic pathogens of the human mind”, which are

composed of thought patterns, belief systems, attitudes, and mindsets that parasitize one’s ability to think properly and accurately. Once these mind viruses take hold of one’s neuronal circuitry, the afflicted victim loses the ability to use reason, logic, and science to navigate the world. Instead, one sinks into an abyss of infinite lunacy best defined by a dogged and proud departure from reality, common sense, and truth. (17)

The analogy is with biological pathogens — of which he gives several gruesome examples — that infect an animal’s brain and “take advantage of their hosts in the furtherance of their [own] evolutionary objectives” (18). It’s a variant on Richard Dawkins’ idea of “viruses of the mind”; and though it is arguable that the analogy between biological organisms and cultural memes is sound and fruitful, it is far from obvious.

Saad starts his book with a preemptive response to potential detractors. Though his critique of misguided reasoning patterns is in principle apolitical and can be directed at adherents of any political tendency (or none at all), in practice his book is a diatribe against the contemporary “left”, as he admits candidly at the outset:

People expect that I should dispense my ire and cast my critical eye on the right in equal measure as I do the left. [But] I inhabit the world of academia. This is an ecosystem that has been dominated by leftist thinking for many decades and certainly for the entirety of my professional career. The idea pathogens that I discuss in this book stem largely if not totally from leftist academics. . . . I don’t need to critique both sides of the political aisle with equal alacrity under the misguided desire to appear impartial. (xiv–xv)

Though one may take issue with Saad’s assessment that “today it is [only? mostly?] the left’s pathogenic ideas that are leading us to an abyss of infinite, irrational darkness” (xv) and with his unstated implication that the ideas he is criticising are representative of the entire left — heterodox leftists make no appearance in his book — the one-sidedness of his critique does not render it wrong; at most it renders it incomplete. As he says,

I fight against a particular class of mind viruses. This does not imply that I should address all issues under the sun with equal zeal. . . . Intellectual consistency does not require that I critique the full universe of idiotic ideas. (xv–xvi)

Fair enough.

So which are the “mind viruses” that he attacks? The principal ones are

postmodernism, radical feminism, and social constructivism, all of which largely flourish within one infected ecosystem: the university. While each mind virus constitutes a different strain of lunacy, they are all bound by the full rejection of reality and common sense (postmodernism rejects the existence of objective truths; radical feminism scoffs at the idea of innate biologically-based sex differences; and social constructivism posits that the human mind starts off as an empty slate largely void of biological blueprints). (18)

And here is where things get controversial. Even if one assents in principle to all three critiques — and I do — the devil will be in the details. So let’s look at those.

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Here, for starters, is one big problem: Although Saad is right that “intellectual consistency does not require that [he] critique the full universe of idiotic ideas”, intellectual consistency does at least require that he apply the same standards of logic and evidence to left and right. And sometimes he fails miserably to do that.

For instance, Saad rightly lambastes liberals who “possess no theory of mind that might allow them to place themselves in the shoes of the nearly 63 million Americans who voted for Trump” (31) — regarding them instead as a mere “basket of deplorables . . . They’re racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic”, as one ill-fated American politician famously put it — rather than as choosing Trump on the basis of rational, albeit highly controversial, policy preferences. But in the very same paragraph Saad commits an identical error in the opposite direction, referring to “the unhinged ‘progressives’ [who] . . . are irrevocably and perpetually outraged by [Trump]. They are viscerally disgusted” (31) and to the “hysterical anti-Trump voters [who] begin with a visceral emotional hatred of the man” (26) because “his mannerisms disgust [them]” (25) — failing to see that not only liberals and leftists, but also honest conservatives, can have sound reasons, concerning both policy and moral character, for opposing Trump and indeed for viewing him as dangerous.

Along similar lines, Saad delights in quoting some of the loonier things written by self-described “progressive” academics, as well as by sundry celebrities, politicians and organisations. And some of his anecdotes are indeed amusing. For instance,

In the first Democratic debate for the party’s 2020 presidential nomination, Julian Castro stated that biological males who are now transgender women should be guaranteed abortion rights. In a subsequent tweet, Castro issued a correction . . . (74)

Not to be outdone,

the Canadian Cancer Society released an ad campaign with the photo of a trans woman (biological male) to represent a demographic group at risk for cervical cancer . . . (74)

— despite not having a cervix. As Saad mordantly but aptly remarks, “delusional departures from reality can indeed be confusing.”

As an example of “anti-science lunacy” among academics, Saad quotes two paragraphs from an article in the prestigious *Journal of Consumer Research* bearing the pompous title “The self-manipulation of my pervasive, perceived vital energy through product use: An introspective-praxis perspective” — which he calls

an outlandish exercise of the postmodern methodology of autoethnography (a fancy way of saying he wrote a “dear diary” entry couched in pseudo-intellectual drivel) . . . wherein he shares an “academic” take on his erection and orgasm.

. . .

Houston, we have a problem. (14–15)

A reader of Saad’s book may, of course, reasonably wonder whether he has perhaps treated the author of this article unfairly by taking those two paragraphs out of context. So do take a look at the whole article, if you can get behind the paywall: in my humble opinion it’s even worse than the two paragraphs that Saad quoted.

But Saad fails to tell us whether the academics he has chosen to quote are truly influential or are simply minor figures that he has plucked out of obscurity for derision.

He might have been on stronger ground had he chosen to criticise Judith Butler, Homi Bhabha or Donna Haraway. But even if he had, mockery — however justifiable — is no substitute for the concrete discussion of ideas. Nor does an accumulation of anecdotes amount to an argument. So let's look, instead, at what Saad has to say about his three declared main targets: postmodernism, social constructivism, and radical feminism.

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Saad's first target is postmodernism, which he defines as “posit[ing] that all knowledge is relative (no objective truths) while generating obscure and impenetrable prose that is tantamount to random gibberish” (69). That sentence is not wrong; but it is, unfortunately, the full extent of Saad's analysis. He provides no detailed exposition of postmodernist ideas, or critique of postmodernist thinkers — just scattershot invective. Readers interested in understanding the origins and content of postmodernist thought and its influence on contemporary Critical Social Justice doctrines will have to look elsewhere: for instance, to Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay's pioneering book *Cynical Theories*.

Alas, the discussion of social constructivism is hardly more substantial. Saad uses the term, a bit idiosyncratically but nonetheless coherently, to mean “the belief that our preferences, choices, and behaviors are largely shaped by socialization” (15; also 69) and that “the human mind starts off as an empty slate largely void of biological blueprints” (18) — that is, as the antithesis of the evolutionary approach that he favors. But once again, there is no substantive discussion of the arguments pro and con, except for the exposition of some evolutionary-psychology ideas that was mentioned earlier (147–156). Readers interested in this debate would do better to consult Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate*.

Radical feminism gets a slightly more extensive treatment, though not one that is truly more satisfactory. For starters, Saad never clearly defines what he means by “radical feminism”, nor does he distinguish it from other feminist currents such as liberal feminism, socialist feminism, and postmodernist feminism. He says only that “radical feminism scoffs at the idea of innate biologically-based sex differences” (18) and that it “asserts that these [culturally imposed] gender roles are due to the nebulous and nefarious forces of the patriarchy” (69). The latter claim is a huge distortion of a theory that is historical and structural in nature, not conspiratorial; and in neither claim does Saad explain what radical feminists actually *do* contend about history and society.

But Saad is correct in pointing out that feminism since the 1960s — and not only, in fact, its radical-feminist current — has been in general averse to biologically-based explanations of observed *psychological* or *social* sex differences. (By contrast, *physical* sex differences in reproduction play a central role in radical-feminist thought.) The reason is not surprising: having discovered that many supposedly “natural” sex differences are in fact historically and culturally variable — consider, for instance, the huge changes over the last 75 years in the sex ratios of many occupations — feminists tended to be wary of *any* claims of biologically-based sex differences, even when it was emphasised that these differences concern *statistical distributions* and are not absolute rules. This premature rejection of biological sex differences was a grave mistake, and some feminists

have begun in recent years to take biological arguments seriously. For instance, Louise Perry’s *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution* draws explicitly on ideas from evolutionary psychology; already in the early 2000s, psychologist Anne Campbell argued for integrating evolutionary insights into feminism; and as early as 1994, Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge devoted an entire chapter of their book *Professing Feminism: Cautionary Tales from the Strange World of Women’s Studies* to what they call “biodenial”. Unfortunately, Saad does not mention any of this, even though the Patai–Koertge book appears in his endnotes (196n12).

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So I am sadly obliged to say that I found this book provocative but ultimately disappointing. Saad’s writing is sometimes entertaining, sometimes irritating, but in my view only intermittently illuminating. Saad does provide some very interesting analyses of specific issues — Brett Kavanaugh (32–34), Alessandro Strumia (35–37), “indigenization of the curriculum” (57–59), immigration (126–129), and evolutionary sex differences (147–156), to name a few — but these do not redeem, at least by my lights, the too-superficial treatment of the book’s three declared principal targets. Perhaps in a future book Saad will provide a more detailed analysis. In the meantime, readers can learn more about all three topics elsewhere. Instructive critiques of this book have also been given by Néstor de Buen and Matthew McManus.

I have one final criticism of Saad’s book, though it is only stylistic and not substantive. Saad frequently quotes from his own satirical postings on Twitter — some of which strike me as mordantly apropos (52), while others strike me as needlessly nasty (184) even when they are basically right (80, 82, 83). And there is, I guess, nothing wrong with an author quoting his own past writings, whenever they are relevant to the topic at hand. But Saad goes farther, observing that

At times, my satire is so powerful that it fools even those who have followed me on Twitter for a while. (52)

and

As I have often remarked on social media, my sarcasm and satire are sharper than a surgeon’s scalpel in slicing through entrenched deposits of nonsensical bullshit. (80)

All that might be so; but even if it is, it’s probably not a smart idea to boast about it so openly.

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