

Book Review

James Hoggan (with Grania Litwin)

I'm Right and You're an Idiot: The Toxic State of Public Discourse and How to Clean It Up.
Gabriola Island (British Columbia), Canada: New Society Publishers.

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

One of the many annoyances of living in the beginning of the twenty-first century is the frequency with which we are exposed to superlatives. Barack Obama is the greatest orator in American history! Hillary Clinton is the most corrupt presidential candidate in American history! Donald Trump is the greatest/worst [fill in the blank] in American history! Nor are Americans the only ones whose profound ignorance of history — American or any other — contributes to the willingness to indulge in sloganeering which turns unpleasant historical events into unprecedented tragedies and modest achievements into world historical triumphs.

Our overexposure to hyperbole makes it difficult to distinguish the merely good from the magnificent or the merely bad from the catastrophic. So it is that we are regularly exposed to claims that human relations from global politics to casual social contacts are fraught with ill-will, incivility and intolerance of opinions and interests other than our own.

There are a few profoundly evil people in the world, but if you think you're surrounded by them, you probably need to change your own psyche. – Roger Conner
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As though to compensate for our chronic bad manners and, of course, the genuinely loathsome rhetoric that demonizes this or that ethnicity, religion or political belief, we are beginning to see efforts made in our schools, workplaces and, of course, the pervasive and invasive social media to bring us back to attitudes a little closer to reason, reciprocity and mutual respect. It's about time.

We seem to have become almost immune to or, worse, excited by demagoguery that justifies everything from tribal-based terrorism to horrifying acts of recrimination and retribution against people who demonstrably intend to do us harm. And that's not even raising the fear-mongering, dissembling and attempts at character assassination that have become common in election campaigns in even the most stable Western liberal democracies!

Indeed, so distorted are our coffee shop and water cooler conversations (never mind the scripted boorishness of "talk radio) by impassioned and polarized opinions that, in response, I expect any day now to learn that some celebrity, civic organization or morality movement has declared a "war on hatred." After all, never before in human history have people displayed such venom and vitriol toward others ... at least, not since the last time.

I

Meanwhile, cooler heads, kinder hearts and soft-spoken advocates for constructive conversations are offering much needed advice. Prominent among them are academics and intellectuals including (mostly American) pragmatists and somewhat more esoteric European critical theorists—some of whom have touched up against both Marx Immanuel Kant and, not surprisingly, emerged the better for it. The lead hand in that particular idea factory is, of course, Jürgen Habermas (1971/2001; 1979; 2000).

Habermas’ analysis of how to have discussions that actually lead somewhere other than entrenching the prejudices of the participants has, alas, one fundamental flaw: it relies on people who are willing to engage in good faith dialogues/negotiations aimed at resolving disputes rationally, equitably, without coercion and in the common interest. Finding parties to such an ideal process seems unlikely in today’s political climate whether we are dealing with a subway extension in Toronto, a deployment of NATO forces to Latvia or, *in extremis*, a two-state solution to the Palestinian question.

Setting our sights somewhat lower, then, we come upon a new set of suggestions by James Hoggan that purports to suggest how we might get to the point where good will might be encouraged and genuine progress, especially toward addressing the overarching problem of environmental devastation might be made.

Accusing opponents of venal motives makes it easy to dismiss valid criticism ... where extremes define the issues, problems seem insoluble and citizens become alienated from the political process. – Deborah Tannen

James Hoggan is the president of an eponymous Vancouver public relations firm. He chairs the Board of the David Suzuki Foundation. He has served on Shell Global’s External Review Committee. He has authored two previous books, *Climate Cover-Up* (2009) and *Do the Right Thing* (2009). His main claim to public attention is his evident commitment to environmental issues. Indeed, while the book’s main substantive theme is the dysfunctional state of political discourse, book is especially concerned ecological sustainability. Hoggan is chiefly concerned with the question of how to bring government, private sector corporations and environmental groups together in a “green” reformist movement for constructive change. Like David Suzuki, he is convinced—unlike critics such as Naomi Klein (2014)—that such change must necessarily take place *within* the current system. He seems like an intriguing figure.

Any inferred “Madmen” ambiance aside, Hoggan certainly seems to have his heart in the right places. Co-founder of the DeSmogBlog (<http://www.desmogblog.com/>), the self-described “world’s number one source for accurate, fact based information regarding global warming misinformation campaigns,” he is a model of citizen activism in the aid of environmental sustainability and social justice. He also knows his way around private business, the corporate sector and at least the shadows of the corridors of power.

II

James Hoggan's latest book is a compendium of diverse and mostly erudite opinions on the issue of persuasion as it relates to his overall theme of world-saving. The book was prompted by some blunt questions raised by his friend and comrade, David Suzuki. "Why," Suzuki asked him upon his initial appointment to the Suzuki Foundation's board, "aren't people paying more attention? There is enough evidence we are destroying the planet, Why aren't people out on the streets? How do we motivate the people to demand action?"

I'm Right and You're an Idiot is Hoggan's formal response. It is based on a series of interviews Hoggan had with a bevy of well-placed people over the course of a lengthy journey — temporally, geographically and intellectually. It is his hope that the perspectives and outlooks he cites will help mobilize mass support of ecologically responsible initiatives and innovations in order to tilt policies and practices in the direction of planetary redemption.

Hoggan, however, is most definitely not interested in any sort of political revolution. He operates wholly within the traditions of liberalism, capitalism and political pluralism. He is patient, pragmatic and preternaturally ill-disposed to extreme means to achieve even modest ends. He is convinced that divisive talk, rigid thought and adversarial communications strategies are not only impolite, but are also ineffective and most likely counterproductive. Hoggan wants to make a *real* difference, and that means winning over not just the general public, but also established leaders in government, business and industry.

If you want the truth to stand clear before you, never be for or against, The struggle between "for" and "against" is the mind's worst disease." - Sengcan
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I'm right and you're an idiot is well worth the read, especially by the audience to which it is primarily addressed — mainly well-meaning and well-informed people of substance who understand something of the ecological degradation of our planet and who have an expressed interest in promoting the public good. The book contains brief introductions to twenty-three well-placed people (far from the total number he interviewed). Their wisdom is captured in narrative form as Hoggan contextualizes and summarizes his dialogues with a range of experts from business executives, lawyers and political lobbyists to psychologists, philosophers and spiritual leaders. He does not supply even edited transcripts, but tells us in his own words and judiciously selected quotations what his informants told him.

Hoggan's book is divided into two parts: "The Polluted Public Square," which diagnoses our civic disorder and "the toxic state of public discourse"; and "Speak the Truth, But Not to Punish," which sets out his preferred therapy or, as he puts it, "how to clean it up." A main theme in the first part is nothing less than the nature of our species and our innate disposition to defend our friends, defeat our enemies, blind ourselves with self-righteousness, and invite our own indoctrination by preferring to believe whatever conforms to the perceptions and ideas that bind us to others (it's called "confirmation bias"). Easily and willingly misled, we are told, our beliefs betray our emotions, not our reason. I will make no attempt to summarize all twenty vignettes (three of his interviews involve two people). Their range is too broad and, in any case,

they are mostly separated into chewable chunks of about seven easily digested pages (including the introductions to the various savants). Instead, I will focus on a very few who, I think, represent some of the essential elements of the enterprise.

III

First, let me attend to Hoggan's consideration of our species-nature. He invokes social psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2012), who contributes the notion that we are neurologically programmed to divide up into teams and built solidarity/exclusivity based on precisely six sources of intuition and emotion that bind us to others like ourselves and cognitive scientist George Lakoff (justly famous for his theory of the predominance of interpretive "frames") who locates our moral impulses in our emotions, not our reason.

Haidt goes on to say that neither conservatives (strong on individual responsibility and high on "winners") nor liberals (eager to promote diversity and compassionate toward "losers") have a clean record regarding science, but he is particularly critical of the "left" which, he claims, was deeply in denial about the "science about race and gender," but was "pulled back to sanity" by Bill Clinton who encouraged them to become "more pro-business, which you have to be if you want to govern in the US."

People on the left are unwilling to say marriage is good or necessary because they don't want to risk offending feminists, African-Americans or gay people. So the left is effectively blind to the issue. If you hitch your environmentalism to a polarizing issue, you can pretty much guarantee that you're painting it with a cloak of invisibility." – Jonathan Haidt

I am left wondering what exactly Haidt means by "science about race and gender," but I will not pursue the matter here; suffice to say that I am not alone in my scepticism about his analysis of the origins and evolution of morality. As Massimo Pigliucci (2011) unflatteringly puts it, Haidt has a tendency to begin with "a mix of ... sloppy evolutionary biology and sociology and end up [in] moral philosophy territory where he predictably blunders." Just let me stipulate that Haidt's belief that morality is "pre-programmed" and that "conservatives" paint with a full palate, whereas "liberals lack the full range of moral instincts" (Moll, 2012) is not one that I find congenial. Haidt isn't a full-blown determinist, of course, but he cautions that our choices are limited and that nature (genetics, evolutionary psychology, call it what you will) provides a basic template and that changes are difficult to make and maintain.

Given our inborn attributes, some of Hoggan's other sources of inspiration seem to treat civility mainly as a tactic in the struggle for survival. If we are not careful, our efforts to overcome harmful habits of mind and damaging patterns of behaviour will not succeed. So, he exposes us early on to the theme that "smashing heads doesn't open minds." The basic idea, presented from several points of view, is that, in order to alter someone's attitudes and actions, about the last thing that's helpful is a logical, evidence-based argument. Here he relies on linguist and cognitive scientist George Lakoff.

In Lakoff's view (2001; 2008), so-called "progressives" may be their own worst enemies. He claims that when "conservatives want to go into politics they study business, marketing and what makes people tick." In the alternative, progressives don't study cognitive science, neurology or how the brain works. [So,] they learn a false view of reason ... that says reason is conscious, logical and unemotional." They foolishly assume "that giving people more information and evidence would ensure they made better decisions." It ain't necessarily so. What people need are appeals to their emotions. Incidentally, the equally self-confident and even more prolific cognitive scientist Steven Pinker (2006), perhaps upset by Lakoff's efforts in attempting to rebuild the electoral success of the Democratic Party post-2004, has castigated him for his alleged "relativism which," he contends, turns "mathematics, science and philosophy [into] beauty contests." Lakoff demurs. The debate continues.

Get clear on your values, and start using the language of values. Drop the language on policy. People do not necessarily vote their self-interest. They vote their identity – George Lakoff

At base, Lakoff argues against confronting an opponent with logic and fact. He insists, instead, that it is folly even to deal with opposing arguments. "The way to respond," he says, "is to not mention the other frame. Only mention yours. Always start with your frame and stay in it. Always be on the offensive; never act defensively." This, I respectfully submit is not exactly consistent with the overall "frame" of avoiding "adversarial communications strategies," for little could be more insulting than to completely ignore the other side; but, perhaps consistency is not to be expected. Despite his preoccupation with civility, Hoggan is presenting a sort of strategic kaleidoscope albeit through the single lens of public discourse on environmental issues. Or, perhaps, Hoggan's pundits might better be described as contrasting but nonetheless complementary ingredients in a tactical tossed salad.

Hoggan, himself, does not always fully agree with his interlocutors. Before inviting us to consider topics such as "Power and Love" (with the assistance of "facilitator" and "scenario planner" Adam Kahane), the "Golden Rule" (with religious scholar Karen Armstrong), and "warmheartedness" (with Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama), he stops by for a chat with Noam Chomsky. Up until this point in the book, the emphasis has been mostly on matters of human nature, individual psychology, the relationship between reason and emotion, and the constant "failure to communicate." Despite other disputes, by the way, Lakoff concurs with both Pinker (2002) and Chomsky (1957; 1967) on the matter of inherited characteristics and firmly holds (against many traditional liberals from John Locke on) that we are not born as "blank slates." With Chomsky, however, it is politics rather than natural philosophy that bring Hoggan up short.

Chomsky (2016), now perhaps more well known for his political dissent from the American Empire (he has produced 96 books to date on politics) than the ground-breaking linguistic theories he developed well over a half-century ago, implicitly challenges Hoggan's entire project. According to Chomsky, the military-industrial-financial-commercial-ideological-governmental complex of advanced capitalism—also known by its more vociferous as "cancer capitalism" (McMurtry, (2013), "casino capitalism" (Strange, 1986), "disaster capitalism" (Klein, 2007), "zombie capitalism" (Harman, 2010), or just plain "late capitalism" (Jameson, 1991; Mandel, 1999)—has landed us in something akin to "a totalitarian state" (Wolin, 2008). This is the direct result of the predominance of market mechanisms which, Chomsky believes,

are “designed to create lethal catastrophes” and the pervasive neoliberal ideology that helps sustain them.

The durability of neoliberalism as the dominant doctrine is now being questioned, even by some more-or-less orthodox, neoclassical economists such as Joseph Stiglitz (Martin, 2016) and the gurus at the International Monetary Fund (Udland, 2016), but it would be premature to assess the emerging controversy at least until it has significant effects on the policy decisions of major world leaders and institutions. Meanwhile in Chomsky’s mind, changing the minds of corporate and political leaders (by fair means or foul) won’t help at all. “The government,” he insists, “is not our government. It is not a government of the people,” he says. “It’s a government of the overwhelmingly rich, of the corporations ... And so it does what they want.” According to Chomsky, the military-industrial-financial-commercial-ideological-governmental complex has landed us in something like “a totalitarian state.” This is the direct result of market capitalism which is “designed to create lethal catastrophes.” Changing the minds of corporate and political leaders (by fair means or foul) won’t help at all. Hoggan is to be given credit for including this contrarian opinion in his collection; but he also must demur.

Not only have we created [the corporation] in the image of a psychopathic human being, but we’ve actually given it immense power to govern every aspect of our lives – Joel Bakan

Here, then, is what I see as the chief dilemma in Hoggan’s approach. One of his contributors, “lobbyist, litigator and consensus builder” Roger Conner warns of falling into the “advocacy trap.” Solutions to problems, he says, come from “peacemakers” (among whom he lists Martin Luther King) and “people who are less theoretical and more practical.” With this infinitely conciliatory “frame of mind” (so to speak), all bets are on communications skills, compromise and, perhaps, what Canada’s newly minted Prime Minister Justin Trudeau called “sunny ways,” a boreal northern version of Barack Obama’s equally vacuous promise of “change we can believe in.”

The question is whether it is at all realistic, practical and pragmatic to imagine that the combined skills of the public relations expert, the marketing genius and the evolutionary psychologist can succeed in changing the beliefs and behaviour of the ruling classes by effectively communicating better ideas, appealing to primal emotions and deploying messages about higher values. Are the dominant institutions and the hegemonic social forces that so obviously control national policies and practices in both the private and the public sectors open to changes that will (at least in the short run) put their power and profits at apparent risk?

IV

There is much to be said in reluctant support of the arguments put forward by pessimists and cynics who will dismiss Hoggan’s project as either naïve or self-serving.

On the one hand, the idea that massive global corporations can be swayed by good intentions, good arguments and good evidence seems to run counter to the strong record that various industries have established in running well-funded campaigns to demean and to demonize those who have claimed, for example, that tobacco and asbestos are injurious to human

health, that insecticides from DDT to Roundup have toxic environmental consequences, that reliance on fossil fuel is both unsustainable and ecologically hazardous, that global warming is both real and androgenic seems counter-intuitive; corporate interests have appeared willing to go to any length to mock and to marginalize those hardy souls who insist upon putting people ahead of profits.

On the other hand, there are surely plenty of perks to be won in “green” advertising, not to mention opportunities to schmooze with the likes of David Suzuki, Jonathan Haidt and the Dalai Lama.

Unfortunately, the despair and political impotence that seem to be unavoidable consequence of rejecting Hoggan’s implicit shout of “Yes, we can!” begs the classic question emerges: What is to be done? Surely, it can be argued, doing something is better than doing nothing. Surely even the wealthy and powerful can be made to see that they (and their progeny) must also inhabit a planet at risk. And, if this is all that’s left, at least an argument can be made that there is as much money to be made out of a green economy as through non-renewable resource dependency.

Stuck on the horns of this dilemma, I am deeply suspicious of Hoggan’s optimism. Well-publicized international summits yielding empty promises and unachieved (and unachievable) goals, at least within our current systems are not promising. Remember Gro Harlem Brundland’s World Commission on Environment and Development (1987)? Remember the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (1992)? Remember the Kyoto Protocol (1997), which former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper contemptuously dismissed as a “socialist scheme” to plunder the wealth of advanced countries? Remember the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in 2009 and the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris in 2015? Together, they add up to an effusion of good will and an inventory of failure. So, even now, US Vice-presidential candidate Donald Trump continues to call a trick “created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive” (Jacobson, 2016).

At the same time, I must question whether there is no recourse other than, as Suzuki originally mused, “taking to the streets.” Can Chris Hedges be right to abandon not only efforts to enlist the support of business executives, advertising agencies, mass media outlets, and friendly politicians from all political parties in a non-partisan movement for ecological alternatives? Are people justified in raising objections to participating in what they believe to be a fatally flawed governmental and economic process? Have our core social institutions experienced what Habermas (1975) calls a “legitimation crisis” and, if so, can they salvage any credibility as positive agents of necessary change?

Environmental critics may be right to question the sincerity of corporate commitment to a sustainable future. Citizens may be right to question the commitment of political leaders to making the “tough decisions” that are needed if we are to navigate successfully through imminent environmental hazards. But, at the same time, Hoggan’s congenial cheerfulness must not be wholly disdained and dismissed. It must, however, be seen as a hopeful sign that some financial, commercial and industrial leaders are beginning to “get it.” An increasingly desperate planet and the desperate people it already fails to maintain in basic dignity and health requires no less than the most Hoggan offers; in fact it demands much more. So, it would be churlish to

discount his dedication; but, if world changers like Hoggan will depend on whether mass support for even his most limited aspirations to be met—probably despite ideational conversions among corporate CEOs rather than because of them.

Coda

I mentioned that Hoggan’s narrative includes encounters with twenty-three people. There is, however, another chapter that’s worth discussing. It is called a “case study.” It deals with the controversial practice of extracting bitumen from the Alberta tar sands. Unattributed to others and therefore presumably written by Hoggan himself, it features a topic close to his heart and one that’s been a focus of sometimes bitter dispute. In his treatment of the issue, he mocks the efforts of the industry and the Harper government to distort the politics and misrepresent the science about the process. He is not kind to those who came up with the misleading name for an organization of tar sands apologists (Ethicaloil.org). He calls one of its representatives “slightly unhinged” and “desperate.” He criticizes a Conservative Senator’s claim that dissenters are “foreign-funded radicals” who are “audaciously treading on our domestic affairs and on Canadian sovereignty and he accuses the Harper government of targeting environmental groups for tax audits. “The Harper government,” he says, “had marked its enemies.” He is quite right of course, and his critique is very effective. All I ask about his treatment of this topic is this: “Where is the love?” Or, is Hoggan implicitly and unconsciously acknowledging that a certain measure of conflict is a precondition for an eventual consensus?

About the Author:

Howard A. Doughty teaches Cultural Anthropology and Modern Political Thought at Seneca College in Toronto, Canada. He can be reached at howard_doughty@post.com

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