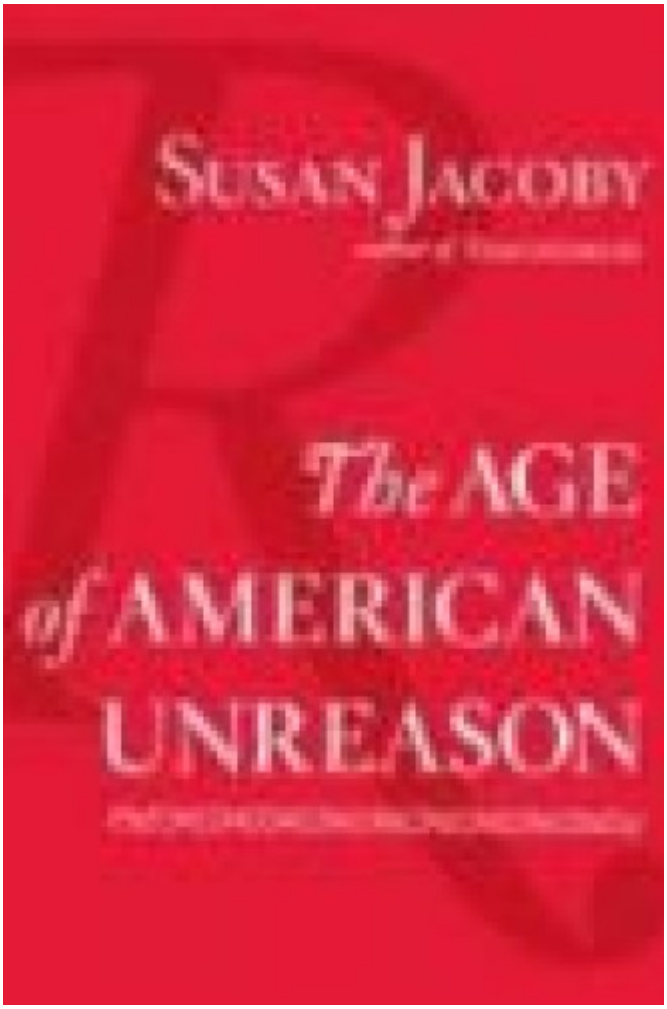
Absence of thought

By Walter Brueggemann in the December 2, 2008 issue

In Review



The Age of American Unreason

Susan Jacoby
Pantheon

Susan Jacoby is a formidable social critic who writes from a progressive stance and in an accessible style. I first learned of her work through her book *Wild Justice*: *The*

Evolution of Revenge (Harper & Row, 1983), in which she argues that when the civic system of justice does not mete out serious consequences to criminals (or does not appear to), folks take justice into their own hands in the form of acts of vengeance. In her latest book Jacoby reflects on the dumbing down of U.S. society and the loss of a capacity for critical thought. Drawing on a good bit of careful research, she thoughtfully explores this thesis from a variety of angles.

Jacoby's reflections take off from the classic study by Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. She argues that U.S. society is currently driven by political pejoratives and "an absence of curiosity about other points of view." This premise parallels Al Gore's argument in *The Assault on Reason*.

At the outset Jacoby identifies two major forces that have led us to this sorry state. First, the pervasiveness of mindless television contributes to "the spread of invincible ignorance throughout the public square" (hat tip to Neil Postman). Second, and much more important for her argument, fundamentalist religion produces "willed ignorance." Her focus is particularly on creationism and on religious resistance to scientific arguments about evolution.

Beginning with that premise, Jacoby offers a series of more or less discrete discussions that seem to proceed almost by way of free association. As a historical backdrop she celebrates the Enlightenment's intellectual contribution in the earlier days of American democracy, embodied by "men of science" and represented by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who championed "Man Thinking" and saw that democracy depends on an educated citizenry. Jacoby's account of the contest between free-thinking Enlightenment leaders and the obscurantism of much evangelical faith parallels the recent analysis of Garry Wills in *Head and Heart*: *American Christianities*, though it seems evident that Jacoby does not have enough patience with religious thought to sort out matters with discerning nuance. She too easily contrasts book readers in Boston with those in the South, who "rode and hunted" and resisted the popular forums of public discussion. Such a caricature fails to recognize the evangelicals who were clear and disciplined thinkers and who themselves resisted obscurantism.

Jacoby's historical survey traces the interpretive conflict that led to the contemporary culture wars. She targets William Jennings Bryan, not appreciating that Bryan's populism created the environment for Franklin Roosevelt's soon-to-follow New Deal. She attacks Herbert Spencer, not aware that recent study has

shown that Spencer was no advocate of Social Darwinism even though that connection is commonly assumed. Her argument at some important points is based on the repetition of popular judgments that lead to a facile division between good guys and bad guys. In her severe critique of Social Darwinism she seems overly intent on linking the theory to religious interpretation, even though it was rooted in rugged individualism and its main sponsoring force was not religious but economic.

In a later chapter Jacoby details the Red Scare after World War I, assigning major fault for it to Bryan. She offers a helpful analysis of intellectuals' attraction to Marxism, then traces their division into Marxian and non-Marxian trajectories. This deep conflict over Marx and communism led to McCarthyism and a general scare that discredited intellectuals, jeopardizing their work and encouraging the know-nothing resistance that came to dominate political discourse. Jacoby's illuminating account of McCarthyism details the ways in which intellectuals betrayed each other and groveled before congressional panels.

In the midst of this exposé of the bad religion that has produced toxic public discourse, Jacoby reports on her own foray into the works of Thomas Aquinas at the age of 11 and her pursuit of "explanations of some of the nuns' teachings that had begun to strike me as utter nonsense." She concludes: "I am sure that I would have gotten around to doubt and atheism eventually, but reading a handy chunk of the *Summa* hastened the day."

It seems Jacoby's personal experience of obscurantist, authoritarian religion has caused her to give excessive weight to religious factors in explaining the current loss of critical thought. I have no need to defend such religion, and I am sure that it does carry a broad hostility to critical thought. The examples she cites are so extreme, however, as to be outside the mainstream of public discussion; they should not be given so much credit for shaping the current climate of discussion.

Jacoby offers a critique of the 1960s from the left that echoes Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, a book she cites with disapproval. Because the left of the 1960s postured itself as anti-intellectual, extreme conservative ideologues were able to counter such anti-intellectualism; such figures as Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz offered a "counter counterculture" that claimed to be the only reputable intellectualism in town, but was in fact driven by an unreasoning ideology. Jacoby shrewdly lines out how this reaction developed in the 1970s in a way that intensified the culture wars.

Jacoby's commentary on the youth culture and celebrity culture of the 1970s—she observes that the lefties were readily co-opted by market ideology—offers a counterpoint to her excessive focus on the impact of religion. But she has very little to say about market ideology and the rush toward consumerism that depends on the loss of critical thought. The advertising game is in the service of thin commodity values. Shopping is a substitute for critical reflection (including theological reflection), and the shopping industry does not want people thinking. I wish Jacoby had been less preoccupied with religion and better able to analyze economic ideology. She finishes with a strong and compelling case concerning "junk thought," "chick lit" and the decline in the kind of conversation that is at the core of democracy.

Although Jacoby presents an array of rich and suggestive arguments, the book's lack of coherence left me less positive in my assessment than I expected to be. Nonetheless, her thesis is an important one. Both authoritarian religion and one-dimensional consumerism reduce human options and lead toward fascism. It isn't easy to find a place between such religion and consumerism for responsible advocacy, thought and action, but Jacoby's lively argument and rich recital of data provide important entry points for seeking one.