Book Review

The Anxious Generation. Why Social Media is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness Among our Youth

Jonathan Haidt
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What would happen if an unknown billionaire selected your first-born daughter after her tenth birthday to be part of the first human settlement on Mars? Would you let her go after discovering that the absence of a magnetosphere on Mars would cause a massive rate of cellular lesions in the girl's tissues due to continuous exposure to solar wind, cosmic rays, and other sources of ionizing radiation and particle currents harmful to the girl's developmental processes and cellular and tissue differentiation? Would you agree, knowing that the low gravitational attraction would cause irreversible deformations in different physiological systems and in her anatomical structure (from the musculoskeletal system to the nervous, circulatory, or respiratory systems)?

This is the provocative thought experiment with which New York social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, begins his essay *The Anxious Generation*. It is an ambitious and highly committed attempt to identify the underlying causes at the base of the recent increase in the incidence of mental illness (mainly anxious-depressive disorders, but also addictive behaviors, eating disorders, personality disorders, schizophrenia, etc.) among members of Generation Z. While the *tsunami of suffering* among our youth seems to have reached runaway growth rates since the COVID 2019 pandemic, provoking in the process the deep—and deeply understandable—concern of parents and teachers who witness such disorders and their symptoms (anhedonia, self-injury, suicidal ideation, dyssomnia, etc.), Haidt's essay shows that the data available, at least for the United States, allow us to trace an upsurge in both internalized and externalized disorders since the beginning of the new millennium and mainly around the beginning of the 2010s. In his book, Haidt compiles the very descriptive testimonies of parents who watch the behavior changes and suffering of their children helplessly. Of course, we can and should empathize with their understandable concern but, in addition to confirming the seriousness of the problem, the author offers channels through which an etiological explanatory hypothesis could be constructed regarding the psychosocial conditions that have triggered both the increase in rates since the 2010s and their sharp spike over the past five years.

Simplifying things greatly, it could be said that the most essential part of Haidt's essay consists in adding a sort of *true cause* (in the Newtonian sense) to the figures related to the wave of psychological disorders observed in recent years. Namely: the

implementation and global boom of social networks developed by a group of Californian high-tech companies since 2010.

Put this way, one might think that the core of Haidt's book consists of a mere restatement, by a professional psychologist, of the impressionistic self-representation that many families seem to make about the roots of the problem. This self-representation would follow a well-trodden path: *the fault lies with screens and adolescents' abuse of the internet*. Undoubtedly, if this were all, Haidt's diagnosis would not rise above the phenomenological and somewhat folk scale—despite its interest—to which so many parents, relatives, and educators limit their opinions, as well as a good number of clinical psychologists and specialists in child and adolescent mental health who assist the young people of our days troubled by their uncontrolled negative emotions. But this is not the case. We believe that the most original and valuable aspect of Haidt's work consists in the construction, *salva veritate*, of an authentic and skillful causal reasoning in order to provide an intelligible reconstruction of the foundational nosographic phenomena along their essential lines.

The distribution of the different chapters of the book maps very accurately the channels of construction of this causal proposition. Indeed, a quick glance at the book's table of contents will reveal that *The Anxious Generation* offers to begin with a dramatic description of the rise of anxiety disorders and depression over the past decades, its first part being very emphatically entitled "A Tsunami". In this part, the available figures are conceptualized under the metaphorical rubric of a *tidal wave of suffering*. It is undoubtedly a set of salient phenomena (hence the term "*tidal wave*" or "*tsunami*"), from a statistical point of view, which constitute an *effect* to be explained, constructively, by etiological means.

Now, if we bring up here a polyadic philosophical analysis of the idea of causality such as that offered by the Spanish philosopher Gustavo Bueno (1988, 1992), we can see how every *effect* (for example, and to continue with the analogies used by Haidt, a tsunami in the case of the marine sciences) involves a rupture with a previous situation that Bueno typifies as a *material identity schema*. If we speak of a *tsunami*, this schema would consist, for example, in the fluid-dynamic displacement of ocean waves under the influence of wind and tides caused by the gravitational attraction of the sun or the moon. The rupture of the schema,

which, *caeteris paribus*, would presumably continue indefinitely, is due to a determining factor that we know as a *cause*, for example, an earthquake or a volcanic eruption that displaces a mass of water vertically transforming its potential energy into kinetic energy. In this sense, the second part of Haidt's book, entitled "Background", offers a panoramic view of two psycho-ethologically critical periods in the maturational development of human beings (and other higher animals): infancy and puberty. These are key periods in the psycho-biographical development in which, by virtue of neuro-plasticity and antifragility, the social learning mechanisms would allow, *sic rebus stantibus*, the adequate transition to adulthood. For this, according to the author's analysis, the establishment of opportunities for *free play* in environments not exhaustively controlled by adults is of particular importance, while the blocking of such a possibility in the name *of* excessive *safetyism* would operate as an inhibitor of maturation. This ends up causing emotional, social, and cognitive damage, hindering social attunement and learning, promoting damage to the development of the attachment system and exacerbating the *behavioral defense system* as opposed to the *behavioral activation system* that leads to the *discovery mode*.

Once the *identity schema* concerning the *normal* psychological development of children and adolescents has been traversed, the third part of Haidt's book—"The Great Reconfiguration"— skillfully delineates, though not without a certain conceptual oversimplification, the etiological contours of the causal determinant that would have disrupted this development in statistically very significant numbers of *Generation Z* individuals. In addition to the overprotection of young people in the *real world* sphere due to the tendencies towards *safetyism* characteristic of the current style of parenting (the somewhat paranoid parenting of what are known as *helicopter parents*), there is frankly insufficient protection in the new digital environments composed of social networks based on negotiations of personal and social prestige through the diplomacy of the *like*. This is a digital environment with very powerful distorting effects on basic psychological processes such as motivation or attention. This is because social networks operate by co-opting the dopamine reward circuits of the mesolimbic pathway of the brain. This occurs through an old and extraordinarily powerful mechanism of learning psychology known since the days of classical Skinnerian behaviorism: *intermittent reinforcement schedules*.

Haidt's explanatory approach unfolds in this sense in a double direction when it comes to accounting for the causal power of social media: not only does it provoke *positive effects* (or rather, *positively harmful effects*), albeit differential in boys and girls, but it also has a deleterious *negative* impact on development through the displacement of free play activities in childhood and early adolescence. Thus, in chapter 5 of the third part, Haidt spells out what he considers to be the *four fundamental prejudices of the new digital environment*: social deprivation, lack of sleep, fragmentation of attention, and addiction. Finally, the fourth and last part, discounting the final conclusion that completes the volume, represents a proposed solution by Haidt consisting of the outlines of a multilevel collective action by a variety of actors (family, teachers, educational departments of government bodies) aimed at establishing a sort of *digital moratorium* for young people. The goal would be to somehow reverse the current situation by reconstructing the lost identity schema (a childhood based on

play). We believe that this propositional part, which of course goes beyond the strict limits of the causal construction outlined in the previous chapters, appears to be the least accomplished part of the book. This is primarily because the supposed "solutions" that are tried out adopt a logically flawed structure through tautology. It is a tautology that by way of a solution proposes a *return* to the starting situation while bypassing the action of the causal determinant without explaining through what non-idealistic or purely magical means such a reversion could take place. Haidt's approach at this point would resonate in a way very similar to this: *in the face of the problems caused by social media, let us proceed to a digital blackout that will lead to the normal situation from which our young people have deviated*. And this is when Haidt does not venture into even more epistemically murky terrain, perhaps metaphysical or "philosophical" (not to say purely mythological) but certainly in no way positively psychological or scientific. This happens when he suggests a reconnection with our transcendent dimensions, the practices of shared spirituality, or a return to reverential awe before nature.

Haidt's book has been criticized (Odgers, 2024) for the degree to which the narrative clarity of his argument hides an overly simplistic mono-causal reasoning that would obscure the real reasons for the growing incidence and prevalence of anxious-depressive disorders in young people today. From this critical perspective, the main weakness of the argument contained in this work, as well as paradoxically the most prominent reason for its best-selling success among its readers, seems to consist in the hyper-simplification of a very complex situation that resists mono-causal analyses tending towards a certain more or less *apocalyptic* (in the sense of the classic study by U. Eco) techno-phobia which appears to underpin the logical articulation of its storytelling. For our part, we would not entirely dismiss Odgers' criticisms, at least insofar as mono-causal reductionism constitutes on many occasions (Ongay, 2024) a frankly expeditious path towards heuristic sterility, particularly in the face of complex bio-psycho-social phenomena such as the one at hand.

Nevertheless, we believe that doing justice to Haidt's argument requires acknowledging that the author himself acknowledges in his essay that the psychosocial impact of social media is by no means proposed as a singular cause *existentially separate* from other factors and determinants involved in the process being explained. In this regard, it is to the credit of the author of this essay to have very clearly delimited the essential contours of an etiological determinant that undoubtedly operates in complex conjunction with others, through probable causal feedback loops, both positive and negative.

Perhaps a more far-reaching theoretical reworking of the materials that Haidt composes in the causal circuit threaded in his book would make it necessary to explain how to delineate the different etiological threads in such a dense network of factors. This network should at least include social, parental, psychosocial, and even biological and epigenetic changes. For example, we believe that conceptual tools from current theoretical biology— such as the niche construction theory and the correlative phenomenon of ecological inheritance (Odling-Smee et al, 2003, Laland et al, 2016)—would shed light on the extent to which the *great reconfiguration* to which this essay alludes actually involves, seen now from a more general perspective, the interactive

readjustment of organisms adapting to a new environment of socialization. This, of course, produces psychological and behavioral effects in a broad sense that are sometimes socially undesirable (and for good reasons from the perspective of societal public health). Now, if this is so, we wonder, on the other hand, to what extent Haidt's causal construction would not prove, *malgré lui*, that the psycho-behavioral changes highlighted in this book—however deleterious they may be and however serious the *tantum* of discomfort they produce—appear, like many other *psych disorders*, more as characteristics of an adaptive readjustment to new *social stressors* in the digital environment than as *pathologies* equivalent to paradigmatic biomedical disorders (Pérez Álvarez 2023). This question is indeed anticipated by Ian Hacking's ideas such as those of the loop effect in the relationships between patients and the categorizations of psychiatric nosology (Hacking, 1995), without which no psychology or philosophy of psychology critically aware of epistemological and ontological risks (as well as practical clinical risks) can proceed. These include biologistic reductionism and the medicalization of "mental illnesses," which Haidt's book—perhaps despite its author's intentions—compels us to reconsider in a highly relevant way.

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