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Laina Farhat-Holzman, *How Do You Know That? A Guide to Critical Thinking About Global Issues*. The Civilization Press, 2011.

This book contains an enormous amount of learning in a deceptively simple format and fluidly written prose. Central to the book's thesis is the examination of applied epistemology and the related need for the organized critical thinking that arguably characterizes Western civilization.

The first great creation of fundamental and systematic epistemological tools resulted from Aristotle's formidable intellectual effort in fourth century B.C. Greece: the *Organon* (*Categories; On Interpretation; Posterior Analytics; Topics; On Sophistical Refutations*). Other cultures have offered sage traditions, folk narratives, individual instances of critical reflection, and in some cases even schools of philosophy with important critical insights. India is a good example of the latter.

But even India does not develop a logical tradition until the first century A.D. (here the possible influence of Greek philosophy via the earlier conquests of Alexander the Great has not been explored). Moreover, although it eventually had a theory of syllogism, Indian philosophy did not create formal logic, or examine in depth such fundamental issues for science as the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments and between contingent and necessary truths, and whether knowledge arises from reason or experience.

Only in the West were such indispensable epistemological tools developed in an organized way and, most crucially, only in the West did they become instrumental in the development not only of a science eventually adopted by nations everywhere, but of many practical applications that staved off such previously unresolved evils as epidemics and famine. This book calls attention to some of those applications, among them commercial agricultural techniques for mass food production and distribution.

Although the book does not use the words unintended consequences (an economic term), it examines the problem of unintended consequences in decision making with many examples, among them Global Warming. To the book's examples one could add the case of ethanol, once championed by many as a wonderful substitute for fossil fuels, but now considered by a growing number of experts detrimental to food production and more energy-consuming than fossil fuels.

Another important issue examined in the book is that of the explosion of data, a well known problem in the acquisition and use of existing knowledge. No one today, no

matter how intellectually gifted, can replicate the achievements of an Aristotle, who could make contributions to practically all the fields of knowledge that existed in his time.

However, this book offers a tool that can enable us to make the best possible decision within our present circumstances: critical thinking. This can be used not only to master some field of knowledge and become an expert within its confines, but also temporarily and conditionally to trust the opinions of experts in fields that we cannot possibly master ourselves. The entire book is in fact an application of critical thinking to the most varied fields: it places an impressive number of relevant cultural and historical problems under the probing light of critical thinking, showing the strengths and weaknesses that we should look for in even authoritative pronouncements by the experts.

The book's section on Conspiracy Theories is worth noticing. It accepts that conspiracies do exist and that some can be successful, such as the Marxist-Leninist coup against the Kerensky government of Russia in the early twentieth century, and that others can be unsuccessful, such as the coup attempt by Adolf Hitler's National Socialist Workers Party in Germany in the 1930's.

However, the book also points out that many so-called conspiracies are not real, but the inventions of the politically or culturally disaffected, not only ethnic minorities, but sometimes even intelligent and educated people. Examples of such conspiracies are those attributed to "the Catholics," "the Jews," "the CIA," and "the government." The book's examination of the conspiracy theories which have resulted in the persecution of Jews through the ages is particularly enlightening..

Sometimes it is avowedly difficult to sort out the false from the true conspiracies, among other things because those who prove their falseness may themselves be accused of being part of the conspiracy. At other times, a real conspiracy may be overlooked because those trying to uncover it overplay their hand. A case in point was the Marxist network of spies in the United States during the Cold War, a conspiracy overlooked because of the discredited actions of United States Senator Joseph McCarthy.

This conspiracy, which McCarthy stridently but ineffectually denounced, was proved real by the publication, after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, of a mass of (until then) secret documents, among them memos circulated among the head of Soviet secret intelligence, the Communist International (the Comintern), and the Communist Party of the United States. There were also testimonies of former CPUSA members on the party's involvement in espionage; and NKVD and KGB memos revealing the existence of American Communists working in United States agencies and passing materials to the CPUSA (which then sent them to Moscow), as well as the existence

of prominent Americans laundering money for the Comintern [see *The Secret World of American Communism* (Yale University Press, 1990) and *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (Yale University Press, 2000)].

Thus, the reality of conspiracies in the past makes plausible the existence of conspiracies in the present. How then to distinguish the real from the imaginary? At times the distinction will be difficult, but action can and must be taken on the basis of probability rather than possibility: is such and such a conspiracy probable? In tune with its general method, the book offers the “9/11” conspiracy theory as an example of how to apply the critical approach.

This conspiracy theory claims that the United States and/or Israel planned the coordinated destruction on September 11 2001 of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City and the crash of a commercial plane into the Pentagon in Washington D.C.

A critical approach would ask questions along the following lines: “Could the U.S. government conspire to kill 3,000 of its own people to set up a fascist state? Where is the precedent in U.S. history for such a conspiracy? And if they succeeded in setting up a fascist state, why are conspiracy theorists permitted to publish without any being locked up in prison or assassinated?”

Can the United States government, despite the existence in the country of a free-wheeling and prying media, which has uncovered many improper actions of government figures (Watergate, sex in the Oval Office during the Clinton administration, etc.) keep this sort of thing secret? Does the theory adequately dispose of the visual evidence of planes hitting the towers and of the engineering studies by several non-government experts, such as those of *Popular Mechanics*?

Are there contradictions in the theory, such as that between the proclaimed stupidity of the G.W. Bush administration and the presumed success of such a subtle conspiracy as “9/11”? Does the theory adequately deal with the fact that Muslim Arabs are both capable and motivated enough to carry out such a daring and well-planned attack by themselves, without non-Arab help or complicity? This sort of questioning will lead an observer to conclude that a “9/11” conspiracy, although possible, is rather improbable.

Among the most important applications of critical thinking examined in the book are the peer review of scientific papers and the reproducibility of scientific experiments. In the realm of science, this form of critical thinking has usually, though not always, led to the acceptance of sound discoveries and the rejection of false scientific breakthroughs.

Unfortunately, a similar combination of procedures to ascertain the truth of a proposition does not exist or can exist in the humanities because of their very nature. Reproducibility of experiments being inapplicable to the humanities, one is left only with peer review as a tool of critical thinking.

Peer review, however, sometimes proves to be an imperfect tool. The book illustrates the flaws of the peer review process by examining such recent cases as the hiring of Professor Ward Churchill at the University of Colorado and Professor Angela Davis at the University of California at Santa Cruz.

To the examples provided in the book one could add the famous “Sokal Hoax” and the cases studied in Paul R. Gross and Norman Levitt’s *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and its Quarrel with Science* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). The Sokal Hoax received wide publicity. Physicist Alan Sokal decided to test academic integrity in the hot field of post-modern cultural studies.

He chose a prestigious journal, *Social Text*, for his experiment. He sent an article, “Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity,” that pretended to apply contemporary Quantum Theory to the humanities, purposefully making statements which were nonsense from the scientific point of view, but which were dressed in the imposing trendy language characteristic of post-modern cultural studies and lit crit (literary theory): a pastiche, as Sokal later explained, of left-wing cant, fawning references, grandiose quotations, and outright nonsense....structured around the silliest quotations by [postmodernist academics] about mathematics and physics.

The article was accepted by the editors of *Social Text*, who later claimed that the piece did not go through the peer review process. But even more troubling than the acceptance of a worthless article full of nonsense was the determined if convoluted defense of that acceptance by the editors of the journal after Sokal publicly revealed his hoax: it illustrated the intentional and even proud disregard in a prestigious academic publication for the most elementary criteria normally used to ascertain the truth of a proposition (an example: the editors said that they had accepted the article based on the author’s academic standing and that [the article’s] status as parody does not alter our interest in the piece, itself) as a symptomatic document. These views are now widespread in the humanities, especially in such fields as literary criticism, legal studies, and even the history of science.

Just as serious are the problems of marginalization of those scholars in the humanities who do not share the points of view of a scholarly organization’s establishment, or even that of the majority of the rank and file. To the book’s examples one could add one pointed out by Irving Louis Horowitz (in *The Long Night of Dark Intent*): how

the influential Latin American Studies Association (LASA) enthusiastically brings to the United States academics from Cuba, while marginalizing Cuban-Americans who oppose the Marxist-Leninist regime.

Illustrating the problems besetting academic scholarship in the humanities, the book examines an issue that is very serious because it can affect the foreign policy of the United States: the situation of “Middle East Studies,” an academic field that covers Islam, its relationship with the West, “Arab” civilizations, and related issues. “Middle East Studies” has become problematic because of the pro-Islamic bias of its academic practitioners. This bias, the book indicates, can be traced to the European Enlightenment’s animus against Christianity, which required elevating its great enemy, Islam, in order to downgrade Christianity.

I would trace this bias even further back, to the Protestant Reformation, which in its animus against established Christianity, likewise elevated Islam in order to downplay not only Catholicism but also the Orthodox Faith: thus it was a Renaissance scholar who labeled the great Medieval enemy of Islam, the Greek Orthodox Roman Empire, with the name “Byzantine,” a linguistic trick to separate this Christian Empire from the prestige of Greek and Roman civilization.

The inhabitants of the empire would not have recognized themselves as “Byzantines,” a word that did not exist: they called themselves either Romans or Greeks, as did their enemies (the Quran calls them *Rum*, that is, Romans). Even today Greeks may refer to themselves not only as Greeks, but as *Romaioi*: hence the Greek concept of *Romioisini*.

Such pro-Islamic bias continues, reinforced by the widespread academic cultural enmity against the West and against its presumed Middle East “surrogate,” Israel, and by the self-interest of professors of “Middle East Studies,” whose work depends on their being able to visit Muslim countries, and who often receive generous research grants from Saudi Arabia.

This intelligently written book can be useful to scholars, the educated general reader, and students, as a source of critical approaches and debate materials. Even its more controversial statements on foreign policy can serve as points of departure for a thoughtful discussion on the difficult but necessary application of critical thinking to present-day historical events.

Dario Fernandez-Morera