

The Culture of Critique

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Notes: *My review of The Culture of Critique* March 8th, 2003

- *Introduction*

In the March 10, 2003 issue of *The American Conservative*, I published a review of Kevin MacDonald's book *The Culture of Critique*. This brought me a huge volume of e-mail, and regular mail too, and was the occasion of much comment in Internet discussion groups and elsewhere.

Rather than repeat myself, I have posted some of the commoner remarks here, with my responses to them.

For my 3/10/03 *The American Conservative* review of *The Culture of Critique*, see [here](#).

Kevin MacDonald tells me he will post his own review of my review on his personal website [here](#). He has already sent me a copy, which was the basis for some of my comments below.

For my 8/21/00 *National Review Online* article "Is Antisemitism Dead?" see [here](#).

For my 4/10/01 *National Review Online* article "The Jews and I," see [here](#). (Note: Kevin refers to this article in his review of my review.)

- *Responses to common remarks*

Argument. Having admitted in "The Jews and I" that I do not understand the theory of "group evolutionary strategy," on which *The Culture of Critique* rests, I have no standing to pass an opinion on the book.

Response. Kevin MacDonald is an academic. He spends his life preparing papers for publication in learned journals, or for presentation at scholarly gatherings, where his academic peers can discuss and criticize them. That is the main thing that academics do.

Occasionally, however, an academic feels the urge to write a book for the general public. When he does so, he exposes himself to the attentions of lay reviewers, and he must take his chances with them. Part of the system for bringing new books into the world is the giving of them to decently well educated but non-specialist drudges, to read and pass an opinion on for a fee of (usually) a few hundred dollars.

Now, this is an unsatisfactory system in all sorts of ways, especially for academics. Bertrand Russell said: "I would rather be reviewed by my worst enemy among philosophers than by a friend ignorant of philosophy." I sympathize. However, this system, as unsatisfactory as it may be, has been going along for 300 years now, during which time nobody has been able to think of a better one. Academics who are seriously unhappy with it have the choice to stay comfortably ensconced in the world of peer review. Nobody is going to force them to publish for a general market, or to expose themselves to the attentions of ink-stained ignoramuses who read books for (gasp!) money.

The fact that academics frequently *do* venture into the general book market is not a mark of their folly or unworldliness. Rather the contrary: they know that even wrong-headed or uncomprehending reviews — even *bad* reviews — generate interest, create sales, and make money. An academic can, in fact, get considerably rich from bad and stupid reviews — ask Charles Murray. In conversation with Kevin MacDonald, I have never heard him complain about bad reviews. What he complains about, constantly, is that *nobody reviews his books*. With that, I really do sympathize. Kevin has interesting things to say, based on years of study and reflection. He ought to be heard.

Argument. MacDonald is an antisemite. You should not pay attention to people like that. It only encourages them.

Response. I have an open mind about whether Kevin is an antisemite, and am not much interested in the matter. *The Culture of Critique* is a solid book, dense with arguments, references, and examples. Faced with a book of that type, the question a reviewer should tackle is not: "Why did the guy write this book?" The question is: "Does he make the case he has set out to make?" People write books from all sorts of motives, some of them disreputable. (Vanity and greed predominate.) A book that has obviously been written with great care, after long research, deserves to be taken on its own terms, as an extended argument. Does the author prove his case? That is the main question a reviewer should try to answer.

As strongly as I believe in anything, I believe in free enquiry and open debate. I believe in the

marketplace of ideas. I believe that "sunlight is the best disinfectant." I don't like the idea that there are certain things we should not talk about. The influence of Jews on 20th-century society, particularly American society, is an interesting topic. I have often found myself thinking about it. Kevin has a lot to say about it. *The Culture of Critique* is an *interesting* book. (It is also, by the way, better-written than most books by academics — though this is not a very extraordinary achievement.)

Argument. Er, wait a minute. You just said you "have an open mind about whether Kevin is an antisemite." Yet in your review you say that *The Culture of Critique* "is, after all, in the dictionary definition of the term, an antisemitic book." If Kevin's book is antisemitic, how can he not be an antisemite?

Response. By being a scientist. Science is "cold." That is, it doesn't care about the researcher's feelings. Kepler was a Ptolemian in astronomy: he believed the planets moved in epicycles. After calculating and re-calculating, he slowly came to accept that this could not be so, that the planets move in ellipses. He only accepted this with extreme reluctance, though. I'm not sure you could ever say that he stopped being a Ptolemian and became a full Keplerian. That's what science is like. It has no respect for the feelings of the scientist. Now, Kevin MacDonald claims to be doing cold, objective social science, and I have taken him at his word on that, not knowing any grounds for supposing otherwise. A researcher doing cold, objective social science on the history and sociology of the Jews might come to the conclusion, as Kevin has, that they practice a "group evolutionary strategy," one of whose 20th-century manifestations was a campaign to destroy Gentile culture. This researcher might come to this conclusion very reluctantly, like Kepler. He might be a philosemite, or even a Jew. A man and a book are two different things. A man who is not an antisemite might do research that led to antisemitic conclusions. If he set them out in a book, that would of course be an antisemitic book.

Is this actually the case with Kevin MacDonald? Just as I said, I have an open mind on the issue, and don't find it very interesting. I reviewed Kevin's book in the spirit I have already described, trying to assess whether his arguments prove his conclusions. Those conclusions are antisemitic. They say that the Jews are up to no good. That is antisemitic. What else is it?

Argument. You have done a complete one-eighty, having said you found MacDonald's arguments "persuasive" in "The Jews and I," then pooh-poohing them in this review.

Response. Here is the only reference to Kevin in "The Jews and I" (for the full text, see the

link I have provided above):

- I also find the theories of Kevin Macdonald (*The Culture of Critique*) about the partly malign influence of Jews on modern American culture very persuasive — though this is not an endorsement of Macdonald's theory of "group evolutionary strategies," which I do not understand.

Now, here I am in my *American Conservative* review:

- These Jewish-inspired pseudoscientific phenomena that *The Culture of Critique* is concerned with — Boasian anthropology, psychoanalysis, the Frankfurt School and so on — were they a net negative for America? Yes, I agree with MacDonald, they were.

I don't myself see a lot of daylight between these two remarks. Now, I certainly do contradict myself sometimes. In calendar year 2002 I published over 194,000 words of commentary and review on a wide array of topics. That is considerably more words than there are in the New Testament. (And that was a slack year for my journalism, as I also produced a 400-page book.) *You* try writing 194,000 words of commentary without contradicting yourself. I am generally unembarrassed about contradictions. In this particular case, though, I don't see it.

Argument. It is insulting to call MacDonald "the Marx of the antisemites."

Response. I'm not sure that it is. In any case, whether it is or not, I am not responsible. The titles of magazine pieces are mostly thought up by editors and sub-editors. So it was in this case. I submitted the review under the title "The Jew Thing." If you don't like the published title, take it up with the editors of *The American Conservative*.

Argument. It is insulting, and borderline antisemitic, of you to describe traditional Talmudic scholarship as "content-free" and "meaningless esoterica." The Talmud is chock full of content and very meaningful.

Response. Is it? Then I can only say that I am surprised how little actual good has come out of all those centuries of intensive study. A person who has devoted his life to the study of Judaic texts ought, if those texts have meaningful content, to be wiser, better equipped to live in the world, *better*, than a person who hasn't. Is this actually the case?

Possibly it is. I didn't mean to insult anyone, and in fact I confess to a slight regret over this remark. By way of excusing myself, let me say that my own early training — my first degree, in fact — was in mathematics. Now, studying math at the higher levels makes you a terrible

intellectual snob. No other discipline has the standards of rigor required in mathematics. Of course, none really *can* have, so this is a very unfair point of view. It is, though, one that mathematicians find hard to avoid. "When you've worked on a farm, nothing else ever seems like work," said J.K. Galbraith. Similarly, when you've studied higher math, nothing else really seems like study. For this reason, I approach all the human sciences with an opening attitude of deep skepticism — though I am always willing to be convinced. I guess this attitude shows in my review.

Now, pure mathematics is a very peculiar thing. Consider the man I have just written a book about, for example, the 19th-century German mathematician Bernhard Riemann. On June 10, 1854, Riemann delivered a paper to the faculty of Göttingen University. In that paper he laid out the fundamental ideas of Riemannian geometry, a challenging and very beautiful branch of pure mathematics which he thought up entirely out of his own head. Riemann's ideas were pure intellection, rooted in some philosophical ideas about the nature of space. They had no conceivable practical application. It was sixty years before Albert Einstein picked them up and used them as the basis for the General Theory of Relativity.

The kind of pure intellection that Talmudic scholars immerse themselves in is as abstract and, from a worldly point of view, useless as Riemannian geometry... *but there is never an Einstein*. Talmudic concepts never have any real fruit in the world of men. Talmudic scholarship consists (it seems to me) of racing the engine of the brain without engaging the gears.

Another influence on the way I think about this is my own studies of Chinese history and culture. Candidates for the Imperial examinations in old China had to engage in the same kind of years-long concentrated study of huge masses of accumulated written material that Talmudic scholars have to master. At the end of their studies, for the Imperial examinations, the Chinese scholars had to write an "eight-legged essay" — that is, one conforming to certain traditional patterns of style and presentation. You can find translations of prize-winning "eight-legged essays" in books about Chinese culture. I have one here. It is gibberish. It is content-free. However, if you passed the exam, you got a lifetime job as a Mandarin, a guaranteed income, and a choice of breeding partners.

The attitude of the Chinese themselves to the material these scholars had to master is encapsulated in the old proverb: "Learning is like a brick, which you can use to break down a door. When you have broken down the door, you can throw away the brick!"

Comment. "A scathing *ad hominem* attack on Kevin MacDonald."

Response. If you think my review was "a scathing *ad hominem* attack," you don't get out much. I can do "scathing *ad hominem*" stuff when I feel like it. See [here](#), for example. In the case of *The Culture of Critique*, I did not feel like it, because (a) I believe Kevin MacDonald is an honest man, and (b) I don't feel sure enough about my understanding of his theories to attack them with real confidence. I therefore dealt with the book respectfully, and gave the author the benefit of most doubts. The entire *ad hominem* content of the review is at the very end, where I express the opinion that Kevin is "prickly" and "unworldly." If you think that is "scathing," well, as I said, you really should try to get out of the house more.

Since the *ad hominem* issue has been raised, here is what I really think about Kevin MacDonald: I think he is a reactionary. There's nothing much wrong with that. Some of my personal heroes were reactionaries. Chesterton was a reactionary; Evelyn Waugh was certainly a reactionary. George Orwell was a reactionary, though of a subtle and contradictory kind. "In love with 1910," said one of his friends. Kevin MacDonald is in love with 1950. As I said in my review (and as he confirms in his response to my review), Kevin would like to restore the white-Gentile ethnic dominance of American society, as it was fifty years ago. I don't (again, as I said in my review) find this particularly objectionable. I just think it's a fantasy — ain't gonna happen. Kevin's entitled to his dreams, though; and he is certainly entitled to argue that the social arrangements of fifty years ago were superior to those of today. In some respects, I agree with him about this.

Comment. You ask rhetorically: "Was Spain better off, or worse off, before the 1492 expulsions?" Of course she was worse off. The 16th century was Spain's golden age!

Response. Nonsense. The Inquisition, the Counter-Reformation, and the flood of silver from the New World were disasters for Spain. The first and second led to the stifling of intellectual life; the third to chronic inflation, the impoverishment of the peasantry, the sapping of commercial energy, and rule by an arrogant plutocracy of nobles, with the *cortes* (parliament) sidelined. Spain sank into a long stagnation, from which she did not really recover until the latter 20th century. Do I really need to argue the downside of despotic imperialism to readers of *The American Conservative*? Spain should have kept her Jews. England re-admitted hers in the 1640s. Two hundred years later, she was the greatest commercial power in the world.

For further insight into this topic, you might go [here](#), and try clicking first on the maps of France, Britain, and Germany, then on Spain's. Of course, all sorts of reasons might be adduced for this curious case of national creative failure, but in my own mind I am clear about the most important reason: Not enough Jews!

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