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# Re-Educating the Elite

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**William Deresiewicz**, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (New York: Free Press, A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2014).

Part social commentary, part self-help guide, this book written by former Yale professor William Deresiewicz attempts to identify the essential elements missing from the elite education provided by the Ivy League schools and a handful of other top-tier American universities today. Knowing these schools from the inside, both as student and professor, Deresiewicz laments the universities' loss of a true focus on the liberal arts and learning for its own sake. Rediscovering the real purpose of a liberal arts education, he suggests, is precisely what will help the students now wandering aimlessly through the halls of these institutions. More broadly, his book is an indictment of the ever-widening gap—educational, economic, political—in American society. If the elite schools only continue to become more elite, the gap will become a gulf.

Deresiewicz traces the history of the Ivies' evolution from privileged, WASP old-boys' clubs to select training grounds of the new meritocracy. Gone are the last century's entrance requirements based upon family name, race, creed (Catholic or Jew need not apply), or prep school diploma. A new list of requirements has ensured its own modern edition of stratified sifting:  $x + 1$  extracurricular activities, AP class upon AP class, near-perfect GPAs and SAT scores, foreign and exotic "service" trips, sporting accomplishments (no copy-and-paste water polo photographs though, please). At a certain point, one wonders how it is all humanly possible. College admissions scandals (the latest of which post-date the publication of his book) prove that at least a few very desperate housewives have resorted to lying and buying their child's way to elite privilege. This, however, is still not the norm.

Many of the students *do* have a formidable list of accomplishments under their respective belts, black or otherwise. Ushered into this marathon early by their doting parents (who enrolled them in premier preschools), the one thing these students have not faced is the possibility of failure. Many observations are made about this new breed of super-student—bright, sufficiently curious, and doggedly determined—yet all this accompanied by record levels of student depression and crippling anxiety. Deresiewicz does not even address the newer phenomena of trigger warnings and safe spaces. Herein lies his real critique, directed at the helicopter parents who have orchestrated it all. Fragile students are the ones herded and essentially crippled by the current system of their parents' expectations. They often live as extensions of the parents themselves. He notes that having a student admitted to Harvard is equivalent to receiving an A in parenting.

Despite the students' incredible achievements, many come to college in a zombie-like state, even catatonic. College is simply the next line to add to an eventual resume. Deresiewicz wants to challenge students to begin asking non-utilitarian questions. Is studying something that can be truly loved for its

own sake worthwhile? Are the liberal arts truly just a waste of time compared to medicine, law, finance and consulting—or do they offer something more?

College should be the atmosphere in which this deeper questioning can happen—but here the elite schools fail miserably. Has everything become soulless, having been subjected to the utilitarian ends of “success” and careerism? Students’ entire value is derived from their grades, their achievements—what Deresiewicz terms “credentialism.” These accomplishments are the sum of the students’ identity and value as human beings—hence their inability to actually face reality, which will include its share of suffering. True learning, according to Deresiewicz, involves risk—risking one’s self. This is not possible if high-achievers will require safe spaces for every trigger life will throw at them. One’s entire life cannot be built around the pursuit of absolute personal perfection. Yet this is the framework offered by today’s most prestigious institutions.

According to Deresiewicz, today’s elite education requires everything to be offered on the altar of “getting ahead,” including actually *learning* something about life. Graduates are successful, but are they happy? Has their education allowed them to reflect on life’s larger questions or do they only resemble sheep led to the slaughter of success? Do they know what they truly desire? Are they even able to consider if it is ever noble or noteworthy to do anything that won’t enable them to remain in the world (or rat race?) of the privileged—for instance becoming a nurse, a social worker, a public school teacher, or in the author’s own case, a writer?

Deresiewicz’s honest observations of the symptoms that ail elite students and their prestigious institutions make for illuminating social commentary, but what of his prescriptions? Here is the self-help part of the book: the true value of a liberal arts education. The liberal arts awaken the student to change—first of all himself, then society. For him, finding purpose is still “doing something, not ‘being’ something” (99). A true education will not lull you into accepting the ever-widening injustices of a stratified society.

There are of course the Great Books, he notes, but one should seek any great book. The point is not a canon but changing oneself. If a student is seeking, he will find something more. Essentially, making a difference by challenging the status quo—this is what the truly educated student can offer. Deresiewicz refers to the “meaning of life,” asks “what are people for,” encourages students to think about what *they* really want, not just what their parents or their elite institutions expect of them. While he bemoans the loss of the liberal arts, his own definition of the “ends” of the liberal arts are reduced to “a healthy dose of skepticism.” According to him, the liberal arts make one critical of everything, aware of bias. They give the tools required to throw off tradition and make one’s own identity in the world. If done correctly, a liberal arts education is “like giving birth to yourself” (84). It is a project of “building a self” (83). It is true that the last thing a college-age student needs is a helicopter parent, but is becoming, as he proposes, the equivalent of an intellectual orphan a significantly better option? Deresiewicz does not seem to consider the enormous burden this self-building places on a student. Is not his critique of endless career options made worse by a liberal arts curriculum that frees one from absolutely everything—tradition, history, family?

Perhaps his ideal is less utilitarian than simply accumulating material success for oneself, but is it still too individualistic, becoming an adult by, “creating a rich inner life for yourself” (87)? He notes that, though not religious, he finds only religious language does justice to some of these themes. It is good that he longs for ideals and meaning and a bigger picture for life, yet if the purpose of self-knowledge is to invent your life, we are still falling woefully short of understanding the *meaning* of life at a metaphysical level. The furthest his version of liberal arts can take the student is this place of endless

skepticism. For him, scientific knowledge is external and objective, while the knowledge we gain from the humanities is internal and subjective. Truth is reduced to each person's subjective experience of reality. For Deresiewicz, religion has been replaced by the humanities. Our academic and cultural institutions are now the legitimate places to seek meaning. Professor has replaced priest. It does not appear that truly substantial answers are on his horizon. While he notes that many smaller institutions—those that fly far under the radar of the Ivy League—have done a much better job at preserving the true purpose of a liberal arts education, he does not seem to consider that some of these schools are ones that have remained rooted in a tradition.

Deresiewicz rightly notes that the modern university simply takes a technocratic approach to any and all problems. Hence, there is no room for ideals, as he puts it. Yet he refers to a liberal arts education itself as, “that most powerful of instructional technologies” (149). *The* question asked in the humanities for him is: “Is it true *for me?*” (160). Ironically, he notes that his religious students seem to be more sure of themselves and their purpose in life. Perhaps he should reexamine his requirement of throwing off the past in order to be truly educated. Waxing poetic about the meaning of life and an education leading one to reflect about life's larger questions sounds appealing, but if the liberal arts can only lead a student to skepticism, it is likely that Deresiewicz's longing for a liberal arts cure will not deliver all that he hopes for the students, or for society.

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