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Losing Oneself and Manufacturing Bureaucracy in Contemporary Elite American Higher Education [A Review of *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite & the Way to a Meaningful Life*, by William Deresiewicz]

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William Deresiewicz. *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite & the Way to a Meaningful Life*. New York: Free Press, 2014.

Reviewed by Jesse G. Swan, “Losing Oneself and Manufacturing Bureaucracy in Contemporary Elite American Higher Education”

1. Commentary about higher education can seem confused and wrongheaded. There are many reasons for this, but a common problem is that the general topic is usually poorly specified. One of the great virtues of William Deresiewicz’s description of the defilement of American higher education and of his proposals for its purification is that Deresiewicz’s description and proposals are concentrated on his cogently specified topic: the effect of elite education, specifically traced to the admissions process of the most exclusive American universities, on the people subjected to it. Much flows from Deresiewicz’s humane consideration of the topic, including a discussion of the degrading effects that the adulteration of elite education has had on American society at large through, among other things, the effects such adulteration has had on American leadership, but all is always cogent, because of the masterful literary grounding of the topic.

2. There are four parts to the book. The first two parts describe the corruption of education in contrast to the proper function of education. The latter two parts describe the basic kinds of schools and the society produced by the education of the upper classes. If a reader were to consider single parts of the book separate from the other parts, it would be easy to take umbrage and to cavil. For example, in presenting the nation’s *crème de la crème* students or “*Sheep*,” as part 1 is titled, Deresiewicz describes

students who are smart and talented and driven, yes, but also anxious, timid, and lost, with little intellectual curiosity and a stunted sense of purpose: trapped in a bubble of privilege, heading meekly in the same direction, great at what they’re doing but with no idea why they’re doing it. (3)

As with the title of the book, *Excellent Sheep*, it can feel great to be called smart and talented – excellent – but not so much to be called timid and lacking in intellectual curiosity – sheep. It’s easy to be offended with this, just as one is with a backhanded compliment. Yet, he or she who thinks about the whole book comes to understand that the student is responsible for being a sheep, but so is the shepherd responsible for breeding the sheep. The shepherd breeding, in Deresiewicz’s argument, is the upper-most exclusive educational system manufacturing. “The system manufactures” the excellent sheep, and such manufacturing is more culpable if not necessarily more responsible for each student acting as he or she does (3). It’s the system Deresiewicz decries, even as he exhorts brilliant students and those who love them to act differently.

3. The system went wrong in the 1960s, according to Deresiewicz’s historiography. It’s not that the previous system was so noble – indeed, in being “the old aristocracy” (32), it possessed vulgar faults, faults “the new meritocracy” (32) aimed to rectify. The old system was unabashedly designed by and for WASPs, White Anglo Saxon Protestants, that is, the American aristocracy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The tradition of providing letters of recommendation or reference, which is something that strikes many people unconnected to American traditions of previous centuries as weird or as old nonsense, is said to have arisen as an obvious means of demonstrating your membership in the nepotism and cronyism of American aristocracy. The new meritocracy that took hold with resolution and effectiveness in 1965, although there were attempts at effecting it going back to the Depression, was instituted not for the sake of promoting talented and intellectual individuals unconnected to the WASP aristocracy, but for the sake of making sure that the American elite – the WASP aristocracy – would retain its position at the top of society. To maintain their position, they had to allow in others, but not all others, just those others who could help maintain the stratification of American society.

4. 1965 is used by Deresiewicz as a handy watershed date because it is this year that Kingman Brewster, president of Yale, one of the Big Three high-prestige universities of the time, achieved his revolution from exclusively aristocratic to additionally meritorious admission standards and procedures. Deresiewicz writes that by 1965,

Brewster had elevated academic promise to supremacy among admissions criteria, shunted aside the ideal of the well-rounded man in favor of the “brilliant specialist,” reduced the preferences for athletes and legacies, eliminated the checklist of physical characteristics that had played a role in the admissions process (resulting in a drop of nearly half an inch in the average height of the incoming class), ended the college’s cozy relationship with its feeder schools, removed the Jewish quota, and instituted need-blind admissions. Affirmative action was introduced by the last years of the decade. In 1969, the school became coed. (31)

The effect of this revolution was to assure that the old elite stayed at the top, but it did so at a steep price for everyone.

5. The greatest price was the loss of the self. As with the experience of a backhanded compliment, the experience of being told that you have lost your “self” can feel at once not good

– who wants to lose anything that is hers? – and amorphous – what in the world is a “self,” one asks, using the quotation marks he may typically hate, when others use them. The self, which is covered in Part 2 of the book, is a quality everyone has, yet it is a quality of a human being that must be built up, if the human being is to realize his or her distinct individuality. Distinct individuality is an experience “of strength, security, autonomy, creativity, play” (86). In Deresiewicz’s view, the development of this experience and each person’s individuality is the answer to the question that is the title of chapter 5, “What Is College For?” But Deresiewicz knows that, for the society produced by the new meritocracy, this is not the purpose of college. The new meritocracy is for keeping the most privileged people securely so, in a stratified society. The price of this security of status is the elimination of the individual and the manufacturing of workers or, less frequently but just as reductively, citizens. Here is some of how Deresiewicz expresses it:

Far from only training workers to contribute to the GDP, or even citizens to play a role within the public sphere, a true education, like a true religion, enables you to stand apart, and if necessary, against, the claims that others make upon you. . . . The idea that we should take the first four years of young adulthood and devote them to career preparation alone, neglecting every other part of life, is nothing short of an obscenity. (86-87)

6. Deresiewicz is able to speak so plainly and forcefully because of his cogently specified topic. He is not talking about everyone and all college and university settings, although some others think that everyone should at least have access to the true education Deresiewicz advances. Deresiewicz is talking about the elite, those who have the resources and power to decide for themselves what they will do. While Deresiewicz is talking about the elite, he is also talking to those who might be fortunate enough to have access to elite educational conditions, for themselves or for those they love. It is for these people – the elite and those others fortunate enough to have access to elite educational conditions – that Deresiewicz offers his advice on what to do to develop your self and to select the best place for you to do so.

7. To develop your self requires cultivating what Deresiewicz calls “moral imagination . . . [that] having to do with the making of choices in the broadest sense . . . the capacity to envision new alternatives for how to live” (91). The biggest impediment to developing one’s moral imagination is that it is risky and, indeed, potentially very dangerous. The danger isn’t so much with the outcome, since Deresiewicz doesn’t concern himself with the end of the self’s life as much as with the duration of the life of the self, but, rather, the danger is with the tough times the person developing her self will have and will create for others. Here is how Deresiewicz explains the major dangers:

But there is also failure in a larger sense, and you need to be prepared for that, as well. I mean the kind that Dorothea suffers in *Middlemarch*: big mistakes, existential mistakes. “I am not afraid to make a mistake,” Stephen says in *Portrait of the Artist*, “even a great mistake, a lifelong mistake, and perhaps as long as eternity too.” Those are powerful and moving words, and they have long inspired me, but we need to take them at their full weight. The wager paid off for Joyce (though we don’t know if it

did for Stephen), but that doesn't mean it will for you. For every person who takes the risk of going their own way and ends up accomplishing remarkable things – for every George Eliot or Steve Jobs – there are very many who fall short. The reason to try, the reason to invent your life – whether you aim at remarkable things or only at your own thing – is so that it will be *your* life, *your* choice, *your* mistakes. As a colleague of mine once said, if kids got off the treadmill that takes them to Wall Street, they would still make mistakes, but at least they wouldn't all make the same mistake. Of course you'll make mistakes, and some will be hard to endure. But life is finally a long process of learning how you ought to have lived in the first place. Or it is if you do it right. (109)

This is part of what is involved in finding yourself. “The problem is not that we believe in finding yourself and following your dreams,” Deresiewicz further explains, cognizant of the dangers and consequences of failure, “the problem is that we aren't equipping our children to do it, and that maybe we're not sure we want them to” (100). Sheep are safe, and excellent sheep are very safe.

8. By way of the new meritocracy, Deresiewicz elaborates, we are equipping the children who become students and then graduates for participating not in democracy, much less in a moral life, but in the new technocracy. The old aristocracy displaced the academic identity of the university that preceded it “by dispelling their bookish image . . . [and putting in] extracurriculars – especially athletics, and most especially the ‘manly’ sport of football, which was invented in its current form at elite schools at exactly this time” (29). This took hold, so that the elite university culture of the Gilded Age became characterized by the feeling that

Academics were out – something only “drips” or “grinds” would bother with. Parties, pranks, and snobbery were in, as social life was taken over by the prep school crowd, which came to dominate numerically, as well. The Big Three, as they were baptized in the 1880s, became “iconic institutions,” in the words of Jerome Karabel, setting the fashion for campuses across the country. (29)

While this may not sound very conducive to cultivating a moral imagination and way of living, it seems to be much more effective at fostering such than the new meritocracy which has replaced it. In part, this is because the old aristocracy was founded on values of good and bad – “grinds” are, to the American aristocrat, bad, while snobbery is good – and demanded considerable imagination and even judgment – the most original prank was applauded most enthusiastically. The new meritocracy, by contrast, quells imagination, certainly any imagination that might produce any sort of disruption to another person or to the environment, and it stifles the expression of any moral exhortations, especially if they encourage anyone to depart from the prescribed protocols of excellence and success.

9. But the new meritocracy retards the development of moral imagination and the self in more pernicious and systemic ways, Deresiewicz explains. The new meritocracy concentrates on the admissions process, for which “the fattest resumes and the most anorexic acceptance rates” are prized, and this is what encourages students and parents to act as they do (39). The admissions process, however, has also become bureaucratic in the new meritocracy. To eschew moral

development, the process has eschewed moral judgment. While this at least is said to decrease the use of nepotism and cronyism, it definitely increases the “‘resume arms race,’ as it is invariably called” (39). The admissions process does not look for a well-rounded individual in the old or moral sense, since it now looks for the brilliant specialist, who also provides evidence of additional accomplishments and potential. Deresiewicz describes the use of the concept of “well-rounded” in the new meritocracy:

Now the colleges talk about assembling a well-rounded *class* by bringing together a variety of “well-lopsided” students: a junior journalist, a budding astronomer, a future diplomat, a language whiz. Those ten extracurricular activities that a typical admitted student has will not all go in ten different directions. Three or four or five will represent a special area of focus: math or art or student government. You have to be great at one or two things – but you also have to be really, really good at everything else: “well” as well as “lopsided.” You may already know that you aren’t going to be a scientist or anything else that involves advanced mathematics, but you still have to sign up for calculus (“good rig”), and you still have to ace it (class rank, GPA). You might be one of those “passionate weirdos” who’d rather spend his time writing poetry or computer code, but you have to play your instruments and do your sports and join (or better yet, start) your clubs and rush around from thing to thing. You have, in other words, to do it all: get A’s in all your classes, compete for leadership positions, pile up the extracurriculars – be a Super Person. (38-39)

10. In the maelstrom of activities each brilliant specialist student must undertake in a suitably documentary way, especially in activities meant to document “leadership” qualities, the new meritocracy does its most productive work in maintaining and promoting itself. This system of maintenance and promotion is also the most damaging assault on cultivating moral imagination and living. This is because the new meritocracy requires technocratic minds to operate the new bureaucracy. To have a specific mind requires education, and this is why the new system drives “the kind of technocratic education students get today” (140). The main part of the “education” is the high-stakes quality of every event and activity of a person’s life, leading up to the admissions process. If, in the pre-meritocratic days of the old aristocracy (or the previous age of academics), you failed at something or some course, perhaps even out of the malevolence of an authority, such as a bigoted administrator or coach or teacher, you nonetheless could develop and move ahead in the system. Not so in the bureaucracy of the new meritocracy, which is why every class and every activity must be both apparently challenging and entirely achievable at the superlative documentary level. Anything otherwise, even once, excludes an applicant from advancing in the admissions process, and everyone knows this.

11. Even after the select people are past the admissions process and finally “in,” nothing changes for them, since they have already been shaped and they are now in “the Club” (205), a socio-cultural effect Deresiewicz details in Part 4, “The Society.” The worst part of the technocratic ethic that admitted elite students have internalized is the practical, pragmatic sense that the best thing to do is to “[w]ork within the system” (140). As many teachers from the days of Socrates onward have known, what you teach combined with how you teach it effects – that is, brings

about – a certain kind of self or soul or mind or technocrat (or worker or citizen). Today, we typically call the values and feelings and commitments people operate from “ideologies,” and it is exactly the ideology of bureaucracy and the technocratic operator that elite people have been taught and that they, because they are elite, have access to critiquing and transforming, if they were to develop their moral imagination, says Deresiewicz. In this line of thought, Deresiewicz uses the current expectation that each student will perform service as part of his or her leadership training. Criticizing the products of technocratic thinking about service – the sort of thinking that produces bureaucratically concentrated and measurable projects such as those to provide “clean technologies, improved access to drinking water, more effective schools” – Deresiewicz provides a series of questions. The questions expose the problematic quality of such concentrated projects and of such a technocratic ideal of accomplishment and leadership:

Tackling such issues is both valuable and admirable. But is it enough? That system that you want to work within: what if it *is* the problem? Can we fix our schools without addressing inequality? Can we help to lift developing countries out of poverty without reforming global trade? Can we deal with climate change by altering consumer behavior, or is the source of our environmental crisis not consumerism itself? And underneath these questions, what’s our vision of the world toward which we’re working in the first place? Is it just a slightly better version of the one we have today? What values are we operating from, before we get to the solutions that express them? You can banish talk of ideologies and governing ideas, but not the things themselves. The only question is whether you are conscious of your own. If not, you’ve probably just adopted those that happen to be fashionable now, and you almost certainly aren’t aware of how they shape the way you think and act. (140-141)

As the series of questions is to indicate, and as Deresiewicz says overtly, “the first thing that you need to do – the thing that college ought to teach you to do – is think” (144). Just like everyone has a self that must be developed in order to be actualized, everyone has to be taught to think in order to engage the activity according to its own potential. To think well is to become intelligent, according to Deresiewicz, and intelligence “is not an aptitude. It’s an activity – and an ethical activity, to boot” (144).

12. The best way to develop intelligence is to think in an environment that fosters a multitude of thoughts and admires those who can think several alternative possibilities simultaneously, exercise judgment about the several and often competing thoughts in relation to specific circumstances, and articulate cogent because nuanced and contingent conclusions. This is not what students get at the upper echelons of American universities today, Deresiewicz makes clear. In addition to detailing what needs to be done to cultivate intelligence in students – most importantly, colleges and universities must put teaching “at the center of their mission” and understand that teaching “is itself a complex craft that can’t be scaled or automated” (188, 176) – Deresiewicz helps students and those who love them think about the best places to go to benefit from the sort of teaching and environment most conducive to developing moral intelligence. This is what is covered in part three, which has the following three chapters: “Great Books,” “Spirit Guides,” and “Your Guide to the Rankings.”

13. The spirit guides are mostly proper teachers in a wholesome academic environment, an environment free from technocracy. These guides teach substantive knowledge historically, something often referred to as “great books” curriculum and pedagogy. Such great knowledge includes everything, even science, yet it includes everything in its best and appropriate form, not in its adulterated forms, such as, in the case of science, scientism. Scientism is the adoption of manners and modes appropriate for the scientific study of material phenomena to the study of immaterial phenomena and to the manners of relations outside of scientific study. Scientism is what eliminates moral cultivation, science doesn’t, and great books curriculum and pedagogy fosters the appreciation of the fact as it repels the major beneficiary of scientism, technocracy. In this, actual science education is realized at very high levels, as is every kind of education of intelligent thought and responsible, knowledgeable, ethical decision making. In “Your Guide to the Rankings,” then, Deresiewicz details why brilliant students with access to elite educational conditions should choose colleges and universities other than the Ivy League or those that imitate it. Although he does discuss specific colleges and universities as good places for each individual to consider – including UCLA, Montana State University, Wesleyan University and Reed, Kenyon, Sewanee, and Mount Holyoke colleges – he does so as a way of detailing the pros and cons of state universities and liberal arts colleges, so that each reader can think about the factors in relationship to him or herself or the student he or she loves. Deresiewicz also discusses the current “fad” of “skipping college altogether” (199). Unless “you’re a computer genius. . . . it’s pretty stupid” (199), Deresiewicz declares.

14. I’ve quoted rather extensively in this review because, second only to the support his cogently specified topic brings, Deresiewicz’s style supports the substance of his arguments so well as to make the experience of persuasion at once easy and pleasant. Deresiewicz has achieved such a handsome composition notwithstanding his own extensive experience in education at the most elite universities. Despite the “Ivy Retardation” (227) that he describes having taken hold of so many, including the leadership class of the nation, a discussion of which he uses to conclude the book, he has been well educated and he has chosen to move forward in the deliberate development of his moral imagination. This book is a notable exercise in Deresiewicz’s continued development of his self, and as an instrument of great potential help to brilliant people and those who love them, it is a very humane accomplishment.



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