



## Golden Fleeces

A Review of

*Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*

by William Deresiewicz

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Reviewed by

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Many families participate in what has become a new rite of passage in the United States: the college tour. As the father of two bright, ambitious daughters, I traveled along this well-worn path twice, working through most of the Ivy League and the non-Ivy equivalents. After a few repetitions, we became accustomed to the ritual, which does not vary much from place to place. First comes the guided tour, led by a student adept at speaking in full paragraphs while walking backward. Then, parents and students (most of whom we also saw at the last school we visited) gather in an auditorium to hear a presentation by a senior member of the admissions staff. These admissions staff members play an odd, schizophrenic role because they are both sales people and gate keepers. Their goal, baldly stated, is to encourage as many students as possible to apply so that they have more to reject—in some cases, as many as 95% of all applicants. The more selective the school, the higher its perceived prestige, and therefore the more desperate families will be to get their aspiring college students in.

It didn't take many of these visits before my daughters had worked up a pretty good parody of the admissions talk. What the admissions officers invariably said was: "We are looking for a diverse group of students who can show us that they have real intellectual vitality; that they have challenged themselves in their course of study; and that they show a passion for something to which they've really dedicated themselves." My daughters' version of this speech was: "After we finish admitting the children of our biggest donors and (in some cases) all the athletes we need to fill up our teams, we'll have a few places left for some bright students who can show real intellectual vitality (in 750 words or less—we won't read essays longer than that); who have challenged themselves (but have never, ever failed at anything); and who've shown real passion for something (but not without also spreading themselves over dozens of school clubs and community service projects). Oh, and by the way, for every one of you who meets these criteria there are 100 others just like you competing for every spot, so good luck with that."

The wanderers along the college admissions trail are latter-day Argonauts, undergoing an arduous journey in search of a magic sheepskin that conveys power and prestige to whomever holds it. William Deresiewicz makes a rather different use of the ovine metaphor to describe the end result of this process in his book *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*. Instead of seeing the frenzy around admission to elite universities merely as the upper middle-class version of Black Friday sales at Best Buy, Deresiewicz argues that it is a pernicious process that produces “toxic levels of fear, anxiety, and depression, of emptiness and aimlessness and isolation” (p. 8) among the students who successfully navigate it. Golden wool or not, a herd of sheep is still a herd of sheep.

Deresiewicz’s book is based on an essay he published in the *American Scholar* in 2008 that “went viral.” He draws on his experience as a professor and sometime member of the admissions committee at Yale University. The latter role seems to have unsettled him. He reveals that the selection process is about as reflective as sorting the mail at the central post office, with screening heuristics used to quickly eliminate the vast majority of hopefuls on the basis of split-second assessments and crude classifications. As the culling continues, the decision criteria change from consideration of individual merit to the necessities of “shaping” a class; a term of art that involves trying to get a good distribution of interests and demographics.

That this process is rife with bias, unspoken quotas, and unreliable metrics should surprise no one, but it does seem to have jolted Deresiewicz out of his academic idealism. Indeed, it is this revelatory quality that gives *Excellent Sheep* its sense of urgency and which, I expect, contributes to the extraordinary amount of attention it has received. Few issues arouse as much anxiety in certain social circles as that of admission to elite colleges and universities. Among some parents and students, preparing for the admissions game is a long-term, life-shaping process, and insider information is invaluable. Meanwhile, many other families view elite education as an unattainable goal and surely regard stories about how the sausage is made with a certain amount of *Schadenfreude*. For both groups, college-status mania is a deeply emotional issue.

Deresiewicz’s disillusionment began on the Yale admissions committee; in his book he develops a much larger critique of the social conventions that shape and are shaped by elite universities. His most pressing concern is with a loss of creativity and individuality, which, he argues, is sacrificed in the pursuit of careers and material success. This begins with the admissions process because, above all, it rewards students who have demonstrated manic intensity for success that can be conveyed in a college application. That manic intensity continues in elite universities, Deresiewicz contends, because their culture continues to encourage the pursuit of external validations of accomplishment: good grades, honors and awards, a long resume, and a great first job. Given the strength of this culture, it is the rare student who engages in serious contemplation during college, much less makes the courageous decision to major in the humanities or arts. This is not an accident, Deresiewicz argues, but rather it is built into the very fabric of the elite schools:

The fact is that elite schools have strong incentives *not* to produce too many seekers and thinkers, too many poets, teachers, ministers, public-interest lawyers, nonprofit workers, or even professors—too much selflessness, creativity, intellectuality, or

idealism. . .They do nothing. . .to challenge the values of a society that equates virtue, dignity, and happiness with material success. (p. 71)

Deresiewicz contends that the reason elite universities dissuade students from pursuing these more idealistic pursuits is partly because they depend on alumni to turn into wealthy donors, and because the presence of those alumni on Wall Street, in Washington, and in corporate boardrooms around the world reinforces their reputations as the indispensable gateways to success, power, and prestige.

The final indictment of this system is that the elite schools cater disproportionately to the wealthy and therefore reinforce social inequality. This section of the book is almost the mirror image of another book that received a great deal of attention earlier this year, Susanne Mettler's (2014) *Degrees of Inequality: How the Politics of Higher Education Sabotaged the American Dream* (reviewed in *PsycCRITIQUES* [Cox, 2014]). Mettler blamed the for-profit higher education industry for duping low-income students into buying worthless degrees and running up ruinous levels of debt. Deresiewicz says that elite schools also contribute to the problem. "Claims to the contrary notwithstanding, selective schools give no admissions advantage to lower-income students, but they do give quite an advantage to other groups, most of whom are drawn disproportionately from the upper end of the income scale" (p. 208). Thus, it would appear that both ends of the higher education spectrum conspire to exacerbate growing inequality.

For all of its stridency, Deresiewicz's book belongs to a genre of nostalgic educational romantics. He is one of a number of authors who urge us to protect the college years as a precious retreat from life, a time to quite literally invent a self by encountering and engaging with new ideas. Another recent example of this genre is Michael S. Roth's (2014) *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters* (reviewed in *PsycCRITIQUES* [McGovern, 2015]). The challenge these writers face is two-fold. First, they must offer evidence that their idealistic notions of college ever really existed. That is not an easy case to make if one really looks at the history objectively. Recall Henry Adams's (1907/2008) comment about his alma mater: "Any other education would have required a serious effort, but no one took Harvard College seriously. All went there because their friends went there, and the College was their ideal of social self-respect" (p. 41). College has always, to some extent, been wasted on the young, who seldom appreciate the opportunity it affords for exploration. For most of their histories, the elite universities have played pretty much the same role that Deresiewicz describes today, with education being only a part of the social capital they help develop among their privileged students.

The second challenge the romantics face is that the kind of college experience Deresiewicz longs for—lazy afternoons on a sunlit quad, long bull sessions in the dormitories, hours of endless browsing in the library stacks—is no longer a reality for the vast majority of students. For many years, the U.S. Department of Education has reported that upwards of 70% of students in American higher education are attending part-time, commuting, holding down one or more jobs, and often caring for families. Such students do not often have the luxury of losing themselves in contemplation. That we still call this new majority of students "nontraditional" only goes to show how hard the romantic view of college dies.

Deresiewicz has looked at elite education from the inside out, and doesn't like what he sees. But he is short on prescriptions for improvement. He does not advise students to forego the opportunity to attend an elite school, and he does not have specific recommendations for

universities or the policy makers who influence them. To the extent that he advocates for change, it is to increase support for public institutions that are presumably less prone to becoming the property of the elite. But of course we *have* an extraordinary system of public higher education that, in fact, educates the majority of American students. If the claim is that we pay too little attention to these institutions, and persist in the mistaken notion that the Ivy League is representative of higher education in general, I agree with Deresiewicz. This does not necessarily mean tearing down the elites, but simply making sure that there are plenty of good alternatives for the rest of us.

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