



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

New York: Free Press (2014). 242 pp., \$16.98 (hardback).

---

*Reviewed by Steven P. Jones & Sariah E. Roberts, Missouri State University*

**Abstract**

*"Excellent sheep" is the best way to describe the students who seek to and actually attend our most elite colleges and universities, William Deresiewicz argues in his 2014 book, Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life. And Deresiewicz offers an equally scathing portrait of the elite colleges and universities that create these sheep-like students by means of ill-conceived admissions policies. A comprehensive review and critique of the book is offered.*

**Keywords:** elite, excellent, sheep, college, university, meaningful, education

Not everyone worries about what goes on in America's best colleges and universities—places like Williams, Cornell, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Stanford—and not everyone needs to. But we should all care that some people look into such things, as William Deresiewicz has done in *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (New York: Free Press, 2014). We should all hope that our best institutions offer their students the very best education. But, as the title of Deresiewicz's book suggests, he thinks this is far from the case. This readable, challenging, insightful and yet problematic book not only calls out the institutions for the education they are offering; it also calls out the rest of us. Too many of us—parents, teachers, students, and interested citizens alike—have our own limited and skewed vision of a college education.

**Overview of the Book**

The miseducation Deresiewicz worries about does not begin after students step on the coveted campuses of elite colleges and universities. Rather, that miseducation starts with parents and with educators in elite private and public K—12 schools—each of whom is all too aware of the strenuous, often outrageous, admissions processes put in place by elite schools. From a very young age children are thrown into a whirlwind of indefensibly high extracurricular participation, SAT and ACT prep classes, tutoring sessions, and advanced placement courses. Learning and experience are no longer ends in themselves, but simple means to achieving admission to the elite university the student dreams of attending. These are students, according to Deresiewicz, who have been taught that education means nothing more than “doing your homework, getting

the answers, acing the test.” They see no larger purpose. “They’ve learned to ‘be a student,’ not to use their minds” (p. 13).

If these young sheep manage to accumulate an adequate number of gold stars and survive the admissions process, the meaninglessness continues. Students are typically thrown into a deepening cycle of incoherent general education and elective courses under the guise that such courses will develop the students’ moral character on their way to settling on a major they (or their parents, peers, or social class) feel is best suited for them. Economics is the most popular major at elite colleges and universities, Deresiewicz reports, and finance and consulting have emerged as the most coveted careers (p. 16, 17).

Often it is inertia (p. 20) rather than greed that is the driving force behind choosing these majors and careers (although we might assume high beginning salaries would also have something to do with it). Rather than risking the loss of the praise that their psyches have, at this point, been conditioned to need, students lose themselves in the pack and follow a well-worn path. They play it safe (p. 20, 21). They feel almost forced to choose a career that isn’t “beneath” them (p. 25).

Everything our leading colleges and universities teach, Deresiewicz claims, is now vocational because of the spirit in which subjects are taught. “Elite schools like to boast that they teach their students how to think,” Deresiewicz claims, “but all they mean at this point is that they train them in the analytic and rhetorical skills that are necessary for success in business and the professions” (p. 63). Entering students may hear a speech or two along the way that encourages them to ask “the big questions,” but mostly they are taught how to answer the little questions central to specific fields (p. 64). Academic rigor is gone (p. 64) and college has become a business (pp. 67-70).

Can this be the education we should want for the exceedingly bright and capable students who are privileged to study at our best universities? Should the end or purpose of higher education be so narrowly utilitarian? Are college years spent at these schools supposed to be about acquiring vocational skills and establishing social relationships so these students can attain the status, wealth, and social recognition they (and their parents) believe they deserve—and so they can eventually give lots of money back to the universities that made all this possible?

Deresiewicz argues for something better, deeper, richer. The first thing college is for, he argues, is “to teach you to think,” especially to think “with rigor”—to think “precisely, patiently, responsibly, remorselessly” not just about ideas ingrained in us, but about all the new and wonderful ideas to which we should be introduced (p. 79, 81). The purpose of college “is to enable you to live more alertly, more responsibly, more freely: more fully” (p. 82). Or, as Deresiewicz puts it, the purpose of college is to “build a self.”

Deresiewicz thinks all freshmen need to hear what freshmen at Columbia were told on the first day of class by the “legendary” Columbia professor, Edward Taylor: “You’re here to build a self,” he apparently told them (p. 83). That’s a serious business for Deresiewicz, and he borrows Keat’s phrase “a vale of Soul-making” (p. 83) to indicate what is at stake in the effort. “Everyone is born with a mind,” Deresiewicz writes,

but it is only through this act of introspection, of self-examination, of establishing communication between the mind and the heart, the mind and experience, that you become an individual, a unique being—a soul. And that is what it means to develop a self. (p. 84)

Deresiewicz wants students to make themselves interesting, and what makes someone interesting, he says, “is reading, thinking, slowing down, having long conversations, and creating a rich inner life for yourself” (p. 86, 87). Deresiewicz challenges students to “invent” their lives. That involves, among other things, finding a vocation or meaningful work, having ideals, embracing risk, challenging the ideas of parents and others, taking a “gap” year to explore life options, serving others, and taking leadership roles.

Formerly a professor of English at Yale, Deresiewicz certainly believes the humanities—and Great Books in particular—should play a central role in helping students “build selves.” “The humanities—history, philosophy, religious studies, above all, literature and the other arts—are the record of the ways that people have come to terms with being human.” The humanities investigate “[q]uestions of love, death, family, morality, time, truth, God, and everything else within the wide, starred universe of human experience” (p. 156). The arts give particular help in the search for the self and are especially valued by Deresiewicz. When thinking about a poem, a sculpture, or a piece of music we ask “Is it true *for me*?” (p. 160, italics in the original). “Is it true for me,” Deresiewicz writes, then, “Does it make sense, not to me but of me.” The essential experience of art is in this “That’s me!” moment—as we see ourselves in the other and the other in ourselves (p. 161). But, he says, we ought not to look for something like “Truth” in the humanities, especially in art. Truth has been multiple and personal, not settled and dogmatic, since the work of science and the critique of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (p. 156).

But an education in the humanities is lost in our elite colleges and universities to the vast majority of students committed to setting themselves up for a socially and economically secure and even privileged future.

In the final chapters Deresiewicz offers solutions to the problems he’s outlined throughout the book, many of which are attainable. He wants colleges and universities to change their admissions process so more and different students can be admitted—so not just the excellent sheep who collect the most gold stars get to attend our elite colleges and universities. He wants a weighting of SAT scores that accounts for socioeconomic status. He wants to revisit an idea that was proposed in the 1990s—that affirmative action policies should be based on class rather than race. Deresiewicz wants colleges and universities to eliminate admissions preference for legacies and athletes—a change, he argues, that would do much to counteract a self-perpetuation of the elite (p. 235).

Still, these changes are not enough. According to Deresiewicz, “it is time for the hereditary meritocracy...the elite as a whole...to start to undertake its own self-overcoming.” The elite must finally admit that the system no longer works and gather the courage to create a different system altogether (p. 235). Universal higher education is necessary to provide all individuals a first-rate education, and the elite must be willing to make sacrifices for the greater good (pp. 237-239). Universal higher education isn’t cheap, of course, but Deresiewicz believes that the money is there if we only stop spending it on the wrong things. We must be willing to “tame the \$700 billion gorilla of defense, defeat the prison lobby in the states, and raise a lot more money” (p. 240). Raising more money, not surprisingly, means raising taxes. He suggests that “[i]f businesses want workers who are better trained, they’re going to have to help the rest of us pay for them” (p. 240). And the families who have the means to send their children to elite schools are going to have to contribute, too—and not just families of the “one percent” that everybody likes to talk about, but also upper middle class families who also rig the economic system for their own good and the good of their children. We give lip service to equal opportunity, Deresiewicz

claims, but we “all know, in our heart of hearts, that social mobility is a zero-sum game. For every person who climbs up the income distribution, someone else falls down” (p. 241). Privileged families are not too worried about all the hoops their children have to go through in order for them to gain admission to elite colleges. These hoops are expensive, and the expense eliminates competition from below. That this prep work comes at some cost to the happiness of these children may be regrettable, but also necessary.

Deresiewicz wants all this reformed. “If we are to create a decent society,” he writes, “a just society, a wise and prosperous society, a society where children can learn for the love of learning and people can work for the love of work,” then we must be willing to promote a system of equal opportunity. “We don’t have to love our neighbors as ourselves,” he writes, “but we need to love our neighbor’s children as our own” (p. 242). And we’re not even close to doing that.

### Our Problems with the Book

Readers will have to choose for themselves if they think Deresiewicz’s political and economic solutions are either appropriate or possible. Long-standing and closely-held political values will help determine how one feels about his final chapter. Current political stalemates and continuing arguments over such things as the Affordable Care Act suggest something of the reception Deresiewicz’s ideas are likely to receive. Policy makers and the elite as a whole—those Deresiewicz deems “brilliant, gifted, energetic, yes, but also anxious, greedy, bland, and risk-averse, with no courage and no vision” and lacking in “beliefs, values, and principles” (p. 228, 229)—are the same individuals he now expects will courageously envision a new system built on the beliefs, values, and principles they lack. Unless the elect undergo a sudden change of heart, this contradictory solution is rendered improbable at best. This contradiction might only get resolved gradually, when solutions that can be enacted within the higher education system, discussed above, begin to change some attitudes—if elite institutions can produce a new privileged graduate capable of greater vision and more sympathetic values.

In other ways, however Deresiewicz’s book should be well received. Excellent sheep don’t just go to Harvard, Yale, Cornell, and other elite colleges and universities—they go to *every* college and university. It may well be that good numbers of the *best* of these sheep go to the best colleges and universities, but every honors program or scholarship program at every college and university is full of those students who have lost the purpose of education in their mad attempts to earn enough gold stars to be admitted to a preferred college and gain a scholarship. We’ll bet that every reader of Deresiewicz’s book who is at all familiar with how things work in college admissions and scholarship decision-making will appreciate his description of these students and the admissions and scholarship criteria that require the sheep-like behavior of applicants. And we’ll bet that most will approve of his desire for students to worry more about self-building than future-building that is limited to a vision of financial security and worries about social status. Certainly we resonated with his concerns.

We also appreciated his writing in more general ways, save for his decision to switch, on occasion, to a 2<sup>nd</sup> person almost letter-writing style addressed to the young people he worries about so much—a switch these two readers found puzzling and a little annoying. And shame on Deresiewicz and Free Press, the publishing company, for how they handled—or didn’t handle—footnotes in the book, especially given Deresiewicz’s penchant for quoting other authors. No footnotes, endnotes, or list of references appears in the back of the book—only a final line that

states readers should go to a website for source notes and suggestions for further reading. The website is only minimally helpful. Readers interested in the particular quotes used by Deresiewicz will have to search entire books or articles as neither Deresiewicz nor his publishers felt the need to provide page numbers or other clues to the exact location of quotes.

Maybe this kind of sloppiness happened because Deresiewicz didn't understand himself to be writing an "academic" book—a book that conducts a sustained argument that develops, unwinds, or critiques the arguments of others—but, instead, a more popular book, a conversation-starter, a book that challenges those working in elite institutions, or a book that speaks personally to young people wanting to attend such schools. This may be why Deresiewicz slides so easily—too easily, we would maintain—around ideas like "self-building" and its relation to the soul, to truth (or Truth), and to "the tradition" as he makes his argument about the kinds of things our best institutions should provide their students. But we are afraid Deresiewicz's haste costs him a better argument about the best kind of education our best institutions might offer their students.

Much of what happens in college often gets described as an effort of students to "find themselves"—to try new things, to envision new possibilities, to study new areas—to find out what they're good at, interested in, or passionate about. Deresiewicz is right to worry that students from privileged families who come to school already having chosen an economics major and a banking future miss all this self-discovery. That's why he spends so many pages challenging students, in his 2<sup>nd</sup> person style, to "invent" their lives—to choose a meaningful life, have "ideals," embrace risk, challenge the ideas of parents, serve others, etc.

To read books—especially Great Books understood to be part of "the tradition"—is part of this self-discovery. There is a "That's me!" moment of recognition that can happen, and often does happen, in the reading of a great novel, poem, or play—and it can happen, though less often and in a less direct way, in the reading of a great work of philosophy or religion. The Great Books reading Deresiewicz encourages addresses the perennial "Who am I?" question that is at the heart of the kind of self-discovery so important to college students.

But there is another version of the "Who am I?" question that points less to self-recognition than to critical reflection. Allan Bloom writes the following in his 1987 book *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*:

Despite all the efforts to pervert it...the question that every young person asks, "Who am I?," the powerful urge to follow the Delphic command, "Know thyself," which is born in each of us, means in the first place "What is man?" And in our chronic lack of certainty, this comes down to knowing the alternative answers and thinking about them. (p. 21)

A liberal education, in this reading, is less about the "Ah ha!" moment of discovery than it is about a sustained search—a sustained search, we might say, for the truth of things. But to say the "T" word—capitalized or not—is to open up the biggest and most controversial can of worms, and Deresiewicz, like most moderns, doesn't want to go there. Science and the Enlightenment, Deresiewicz has told us, should have taken care of any crazy notions we might have had about absolute truth.

The "What is man?" question can take us anywhere. Socrates spent his life discussing with other men and with himself opinions about what virtue is, what love is, what justice is, what piety is, and more—that is, Socrates spent his whole life trying to discover the "truth" about

these things (See Bloom, 1987, p. 179). And that's what the "tradition" does, too. The "tradition" is nothing more or less than a sustained argument conducted by the best and clearest thinkers in our history about what is true about us, our lives, and our world. A liberal education in places that take this tradition seriously—places like the University of Chicago and St. John's College—is an initiation into these ideas and the manner of thinking about such things. What it isn't is an easy way into self-discovery that stops with moments of self-recognition.

Finding vocation, creating ideals, challenging authority, and the joy of self-discovery—all that can and should happen in the serious reading of books central to the tradition. But that's never the *reason* to read these books or to view art carefully—never the reason to study a particular text or work of art and talk with others about it. What matters most is the truth these works contain. What matters most is the passion the student has for seeking the truth in a particular work—sometimes even a fear that the truth of the work will elude the seeker, that he or she will miss it, or misunderstand it, or not fully comprehend it, or not be able to connect it to the larger dialogue in the tradition. What matters is the sometimes desperate "I have to have this" grasping of the student—the sense the student has that if he or she doesn't grasp the truth of this piece that he or she will have missed something that would have profoundly changed his or her life. This is never really a desire that celebrates too long over moments of self-recognition. Gratefulness is the more usual response: Why do I deserve the privilege of receiving this wisdom that has the power to correct my understanding and right my life?

"[L]onging for completeness is the longing for education," Bloom (1987) writes, "and the study of it is education" (p. 133). Bloom means more, in saying this, than what Deresiewicz intends when he proposes that the purpose of education is to build a self. Deresiewicz would surely disagree and would likely point to passages where he argues that college should prepare students for the living of serious, thoughtful lives. But, for Bloom, "longing for completion" means realizing the highest possible ends for man. That requires an unceasing desire to know these ends—and that's the subject and purpose of education. That requires a life of seeking, the shape and direction for which must be given during the college years. Deresiewicz never quite honors or describes "completeness" as the end of education, nor does he capture the power or madness of the longing—that erotic power that consumes the seeker and demands satisfaction. Yes, every student has a "self" they want to realize. Bloom (1987) is as aware of this as anyone and explains the emergence of the concept of the self in the modern world (p. 173-179). But there is something higher to seek with one's life. Socrates didn't have time to seek self-realization. He was after the truth of things.

Certainly the excellent sheep who want to attend elite colleges and universities, major in economics, and become financial planners to the wealthy may have corrupted their longing for completeness. In fact, there is no "may have" about it: the *eros* Bloom talks about, or the divine madness of Socrates, or what we have described just above as the desperate grasping of students for the truth of things—all this is corrupted in these students. But our very best colleges and universities don't need to stand for this, even if they want to keep their prestigious law schools, medical schools, and business schools at the graduate level. Our best colleges and universities should not be places where undergraduate students go only to invent their lives; neither should they be places students go in order to secure their place in the social and economic order. They need to be places where seekers go to find people, books, art, academic disciplines, and experiences that help them complete themselves in the truest and deepest ways possible.

### References

Bloom, A. (1987). *The closing of the American mind: How higher education has failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today's students*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Deresiewicz, W. (2014). *Excellent sheep: The miseducation of the American elite and the way to a meaningful life*. New York: Free Press.

**Steven P. Jones** is a Professor in the College of Education at Missouri State University and Director of the Academy for Educational Studies.

**Sariah E. Roberts** is a senior at Missouri State University, majoring in Elementary Education.