

Addressing the Crisis in Liberal Education -- Too Liberally

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - August 30, 2014

In 1951, William F. Buckley Jr. argued in *God and Man at Yale* that his alma mater unofficially but resolutely promoted statism and atheism. This jump-started an on-again, off-again national conversation which has been led, and to a significant extent dominated, by conservatives on the multifaceted troubles plaguing liberal education.

In a new book, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite & the Way to a Meaningful Life*, a former professor of English literature at Yale, William Deresiewicz—who is not a conservative—picks up the baton and takes his place among our preeminent guides to the crisis in the academy. It's one that has been well-documented along the way.

Thirty-six years after Bill Buckley's opening salvo, Allan Bloom penned a broader critique. In *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. Bloom contended that a thoughtless moral relativism had impelled faculty to abandon the great books and the conversation spurred by them, which serve as indispensable sources of knowledge about the civilization that has formed us and as irreplaceable goads to the intellect and imagination.

In the early 1990s, Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* and Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Higher Education* argued that the dogma of moral relativism was paradoxically accompanied by a dogmatic moralism that sought to convert scholarship, the classroom, and campus social life into instruments for the inculcation of progressive ideas.

Conservatives have not been alone in perceiving the crisis, which is reassuring since safeguarding liberal education transcends partisan differences—or ought to. In the early 1990s, Camille Paglia, a professor at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia who flaunted her left-wing political views, burst to prominence with a bravura performance in *Arion*, an obscure academic journal. Her essay “Junk Bonds and Corporate Raiders: Academe in the Hour of the Wolf,” eviscerated the contempt for learning and the enthrallment to incoherent theorizing that gripped the humanities.

Around the same time, in *Politics by Other Means: Higher Education and Group Thinking*, Yale literature professor and *Dissent* magazine editorial board member David Bromwich stringently criticized both those on the left and the right who sought to wield the curriculum for partisan ends. Taking special aim at the speech codes universities ostensibly instituted to

ensure civility, Bromwich maintained that the regulations policed thought and imposed ideological conformity, thereby undermining liberal education's goal of forming independent minds.

In the last decade, two distinguished professors who rose to high positions in university administration—Harry Lewis served as Harvard's dean of the college and Anthony Kronman was dean of Yale Law School—provided grim portraits of the condition of liberal education. Lewis's *Excellence Without a Soul: Does Liberal Education Have a Future*, and Kronman's *Education's End: Why our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* examine the widening gap between liberal education's soaring promise and the dispiriting reality.

In *Excellent Sheep*, Deresiewicz exposes the long years of pre-college training that prepare talented students to accept without demur the slapdash education offered by the elite universities to which they doggedly seek admission and for which their families pay about a quarter of a million dollars and rising. He eloquently extolls the quest for self-knowledge and self-formation to which liberal education ought to be devoted.

Deresiewicz made a stir in 2009 shortly after he left New Haven with "The Disadvantages of an Elite Education," an essay published in the highbrow journal the American Scholar. Last month, he created waves in advance of his book's publication with a New Republic essay, "Don't Send Your Kid to the Ivy League."

Don't be fooled by the sensationalism of Deresiewicz's titles or the attention-grabbing hyperbole. His affirmation that the typical product of elite education is "an out-of-touch, entitled little shit" is foolish, but his disillusionment stems from a broken heart. Like his predecessors, Deresiewicz loves liberal education and loves students (he was a devoted and greatly admired teacher). Distraught by the perversion of liberal education, his intention is not to condemn today's undergraduates but rather to offer them an alternative by articulating the forgotten ideal.

In the race to win one of the coveted slots at the top universities, the miseducation of American elites begins early in places like New York City and Palo Alto, where highly competitive pre-nursery school educational programs interview—and screen out—2-year-olds.

"The system manufactures 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," Deresiewicz writes. "They are 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."

The system, moreover, "cultivates a monumental cynicism." In the old WASP world, observes Deresiewicz, athletics were prized for building character, the arts for fostering culture, and leadership for preparing military officers and statesmen. In contrast, today's students

understand that the importance of all three lies in their resume-enhancing power. Course work is cushioned by grade inflation, subject to few requirements and little guidance, and presided over by a disengaged faculty, all of which fortifies the cynicism.

Deresiewicz sees nothing less at stake in the crisis of liberal education than “our ability to remain fully human.” College, he exhorts, should teach us how to challenge our convictions and to think patiently and rigorously. It should “launch the work of self-discovery.” Using religious terms to convey the importance of a secular undertaking, Deresiewicz declares that college is meant to be “the beginning of a pilgrimage” where students wrestle with ideas that become “instruments of salvation.”

Liberal education should awaken students' moral imagination to the variety of careers beyond law, medicine, finance, and consulting. It should teach that freedom is a “gift and a burden.” And through the study of the great books with dedicated teachers, liberal education should encourage students to fashion their selves in light of “justice, beauty, goodness, truth.”

All of this, Deresiewicz laments, is alien to the self-dealing pseudo-meritocracy that controls higher education. Impatient with reform, he wants “to plot our exit to another form of leadership, another kind of society, altogether.”

His solutions are a mixed bag of mostly progressive bromides: eliminate preferences for children of alumni and athletes; weight SAT scores for socio-economic advantage; limit the number of extracurricular activities high school students may list on their resumes; place greater emphasis in the admissions process on self-reliance and the willingness to take risks; and raise taxes across the board to provide a first-rate public college education that would surpass Ivy League education.

Despite his evocative descriptions of liberal education's true mission, Deresiewicz's uninspired proposals ignore a root cause of the crisis—our colleges and universities near total disregard of the principles of political and economic freedom that sustain, and are sustained by, liberal education.

Contrary to Deresiewicz, liberal education is not, in the spirit of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, primarily about learning to break free from the bonds of convention. It is at least as much about rediscovering and preserving the wisdom embodied in tradition. And he is mistaken to suggest that the American Revolution is to be especially cherished because it “overthrew existing modes of thought.” Its lasting significance, rather, consists in the founders' translation of universal principles of freedom into an enduring constitutional order.

Study of the principles of political and economic freedom is far from a distraction from the most elevated concerns of liberal education. “It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government,” wrote James

Madison in Federalist No. 51 of the complex institutional arrangements that secure liberty by making government limited, energetic within its domain, and ultimately accountable to the people. “But,” he continued, “what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature?”

By shunting to the sidelines—when not banishing altogether—study of the tradition of political and economic freedom, colleges deprive students not only of the chance to study humanity in its fullness but also to understand their rights, opportunities, and obligations as citizens in a free society. Reforming liberal education, therefore, is hardly an academic matter.

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