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“They are intellectually underpowered and full of themselves, because they’ve been told their whole life how wonderful they are”

Salon Q&A: William Deresiewicz on millennials, the meritocracy, student loans and what's wrong with the Ivy League

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(Credit: AP/Jessica Hill)

In the spring of 2008, William Deresiewicz taught his last class at Yale. In the summer of 2008, he published an essay explaining how an Ivy League education had messed up his life, and the lives of his students.

Elite schools, Deresiewicz argued, give their students an inflated sense of self-worth. They reward perfectionism and punish rebelliousness. They funnel timid students into a handful of jobs, mostly in consulting and investment banking (and now Teach for America). For a real education, he went on to suggest, you might want to head to one of the wonkier liberal arts colleges, or to a state school.

For those sensitive to the advantages of Deresiewicz’s pedigree (a B.A. and Ph.D. from Columbia, followed by 10 years on Yale’s English faculty), this might sound like a rarefied form of whining. But Deresiewicz’s essay took off. Then an undergraduate at Yale, I remember reading it with a quiet mix of amazement and horror. A former professor could *say* this stuff? About *us*?

In his new book, “Excellent Sheep,” Deresiewicz expands his argument into a full-on manifesto about the failures of the meritocracy. His timing is good. Ambitious families continue to arm their children with APs, SAT prep courses and expensive admissions advisors. At the same time, despite big financial aid packages, the student bodies at elite schools remain staggeringly affluent.

So do the schools. Yale has an endowment of some $20 billion; the University of Connecticut, 90 minutes down the road and with a student body three times as large, has an endowment one-sixtieth that size. As public institutions suffer round after round of cuts, Ivy League endowments keep swelling. When we speak of inequality, it’s not just in individual income where the disparities have grown starker.

I reached Deresiewicz by phone in Portland, Oregon, where he has lived since leaving academia. Over the course of two conversations, we spoke about funding for public universities, the appeal of the homeless-to-Harvard narrative, and why admissions counselors never reward kids who blow off calculus.

So, what makes someone an excellent sheep? Can you go to, say, Harvard and *not* be an excellent sheep?

I don’t mean to sort every student in the world into excellent sheep and not-excellent sheep, branding people as if they were cattle. Here’s my point. In the last 50 years, the system that takes kids in the Ivy League and

comparable schools has evolved to create a certain kind of student. Yes, it's possible to go to Harvard and not be an excellent sheep. The point is that the system is pushing you very hard in that direction.

What are some characteristics of that excellent sheep-ness? Even if students aren't livestock, as you point out.

First of all, they tend to be timid and risk-averse, because the system requires perfection. There's constant busyness, the constant accumulation of credentials. And this is the sheep part: conformity. You're doing the same things that everyone else like you is doing, in order to get the same goals that everyone like you wants. I would also add — and I'm not the first person to write about it — that there's an enormous sense of anxiety among these students that goes beyond the normal adolescent anxiety.

Basically, the system is 50 years old, but it's getting worse all the time.

What happened 50 years ago? Or when, historically, do you think that this educational shift begins?

That's a very easy question to answer. But let me just add one more characteristic that may be the most controversial. I would also say that there's intellectual shallowness. Which doesn't mean these kids aren't smart. They're smart, and they're very academically accomplished. But there's a big disconnect now between being academically accomplished and being intellectual. Being intellectual means really getting into something and studying for its own sake, not "I need to get an A in this class, because it's one of 20 things I need to do right now."

OK, back to the history.

Ivy League and comparable colleges used to serve the WASP aristocracy, and the admissions process was completely different. Basically, if you went to a New England prep school, you almost certainly got in. And then there was a deliberate decision, especially at Yale in 1964, to change the system. We went from an aristocracy to what we call a meritocracy, where it didn't matter where you went to high school, it didn't matter your color, your gender. We're going admit the best and the brightest, as judged by SATs and grades and other criteria.

What's happened since then has just been a credentials arms race.

If you talk to admissions counselors at elite schools, they'll swear that they want bright, curious, quirky kids — not just well-credentialed winners. Are admissions counselors being dishonest? Or are the standards so skewed that those types of kids won't even make it past the first cut?

I think that people who work in admissions offices really have the best intentions. I really do.

I think that they're looking for quirky kids with something special. But every kid has to pass that bar of having really great grades. You can't be so quirky that you say, "You know what? I'm a word person. I'll never become a scientist, so I'm not gonna care about getting an A in calculus, because I'd rather read another book." I mean, forget it. You can't be that kid. Also, the kids that do get in have become so good at gaming the system. They know how to look like that kind of person. Kids know how to manufacture the appearance of being an interesting person. That's not the same as being an interesting person.

There are more than 20 million Americans enrolled in some sort of college or university program right now. Only a fraction of them are going to these elite schools. I guess my question is, "So what?" How much does what happens in this narrow channel of elite education really matter?

First of all, Harvard only admits about 2,000 kids a year. But about 35,000 kids apply. I know this is a rough estimate, but James Fallows has an essay about this from a few years ago, where he estimates that 10-15 percent of American high school students are caught up in the selective college admissions process.

That is roughly 400,000 kids a year. They're still worth talking about. And then, actually this *does* impact everybody, if only because this is the leadership class. Our leaders are also excellent sheep: They're timid; they're risk-averse. They're self-serving. They are intellectually underpowered and very full of themselves, because they've been told their whole life how wonderful they are, and therefore, that they deserve everything they're getting.

How do you think our society …

Entitlement. That's called "entitlement," by the way.

OK, so you would say we have this entitled meritocracy, which is a direct product, in some ways, of students' experiences in high school and in elite colleges.

Yes.

Do you think that we still need elite institutions, though? I mean, is it valuable to have schools that gather top students together, but we should be choosing those students differently? Or would you say that, just by having an educational elite, our system will always produce entitled people who go on to wreck the world?

I would say both. I think reforming Ivy League admissions standards is tough but relatively realistic, and it's happened in the past. One thing schools could do would be to have fewer hoops. You can only list certain extracurriculars on your application. You can't take more than a certain number of APs.

Ultimately, to me, the real problem is that we have a handful of institutions that, through some historical accident, have ended up being the training ground for our leadership class. Other countries don't do it like this; it doesn't work this way in Canada. It doesn't work this way in France. It doesn't work this way in Germany, and it's part of the reason that those societies have lower levels of inequality. So what we really need to do is the other huge thing that we did in the decades after World War II, which is a massive investment in public higher education.

When an excerpt from your book was published in the New Republic last month, a lot of the blowback was from Ivy League alumni who come from working-class backgrounds. They cited the gigantic financial aid packages that schools like Princeton and Harvard offer. Can't Ivy League schools fulfill this dream of social mobility? Or are we over-attached to that vision of elite schools as social mobility engines?

We're over-attached in two respects. First of all, because we've evolved in the direction of this winner-take-all society. Public universities were an enormous engine of social mobility; they were the great engines of social mobility in the decades after the war. Part of the problem is the idea that you have to go to one of 10 schools if you're going to enjoy social mobility, or if you're going to be able to make it into the elite echelons of society.

Yes, there are people who can tell that story about themselves: "I came from a working-class background," "I came from a middle-class background. We could never have afforded these schools." But the other problem with this notion: There aren't a lot of kids like that anymore, and the numbers don't lie. These places are very class-segregated. Those stories of the kid who really was able to rise up from poverty, they become an alibi for the way the system mainly works.

What's the appeal, then, of that homeless-to-Harvard kind of narrative?

Well, because it's the embodiment of the American Dream, which we'd like to believe is still in good shape. But it's not.

It's the same reason people play the lottery. People have a wildly unrealistic idea of their chances of winning. This notion that a kid can go to Harvard: The chances that it's going to be your kid are infinitesimal. It's easier to set up a lottery that gives people the illusion that they have a chance, and that doesn't cost me or you any money, than to make the kinds of commitments in terms of taxation that are actually going to hurt, that are going to take money out of affluent people's pockets, to create a system where people really do have a decent chance.

Reading your book, I got the sense that your target wasn't just elite education, but this larger class system that we have. At times, I felt like I was reading a critique of the bourgeoisie, or maybe what David Brooks calls "Bobos" — I don't know if you're familiar with his idea of Bobos, the bourgeois bohemians.

Yes, of course, absolutely.

So, what is your target here?

Well, let me step back. My book is addressing a number of different issues and a number of different audiences, and the reason I talk about all these things is that I think they're related, and that they need to be talked about together, and we always talk about them in isolation from one another. But there is a larger message, and the larger message is directed at this very unequal society that we've developed, where you have an upper middle class that David Brooks very aptly calls "bourgeois bohemian."

Does that class create these schools? Or do the schools create the class?

Both. Historically, the schools obviously existed already, and, through their changes in admissions policies, from the '30s through the '60s, they created a new class. They created the modern meritocracy.

But what's happened in the last 50 years is that the meritocracy has in turn re-created the schools in their own image. They have created a system that took the meritocracy from what it was supposed to be, and made it what I refer to as a "hereditary meritocracy." If your kid is going to get into one of these schools, with some exceptions, they have to be stuffed full of education resources almost from the moment they're born, almost from the moment they start school.

I just saw a cartoon in the New Yorker of two rich people, and one of them is saying, "The meritocracy worked for my grandfather, the meritocracy worked for my father, and now the meritocracy is working for me." And this is exactly the point.

And this goes beyond legacy admissions?

Oh, no, no, this is not about legacy admissions. Legacy admissions are an issue, but this is not about legacy admissions, I really want to be clear about that.

One phrase that I quote in the book is that the college admission process is the way that we launder privilege in this country. Instead of saying, "You get to go because you're born," which is obviously unfair, we say, "You get to go because you have really great scores and grades and you've done a million extracurricular activities." But the only way to get to that point is if you have rich parents. I mean, again, there are exceptions, but there are not a lot of exceptions.

In your book, you describe this leadership class as one that demonstrates "a Victorian engorgement with its own virtues."

Right. They think that they got to where they got because they're such great people. I didn't say that line in reference to the kids, I said it in reference to the whole adult elite. Listen, every elite has a way of justifying itself. I don't think any elite ever said, just listen, we're stronger, so we took what we wanted. There's always some ideology that rationalizes it. And our ideology is meritocracy, and it says, you got all this because you deserved it. Nobody wants to see that, no, actually, you got all this because your parents put you in a position to get all this. I quote another student in the book saying of her peers at Yale, that they're aware of themselves as an academic elite, but not as a social or economic elite.

Won't there always be elites, though? I feel like the education system will structure itself in such a way as to create an elite, no matter what steps are taken to democratize it.

That's not clear. And I think that that's an excuse.

Let me put this a different way: I think you're right, but it certainly could be better, and I think it's incumbent upon us, if we care about justice, if we care about democracy, to do everything we can to fight it. That's what those postwar reforms were about, right? Not just reforming elite private college admissions to let in the working-class Jewish kids from Brooklyn, but also, and I think more significantly, this enormous expansion of public higher education.

The new rise in inequality coincides with — I'm not saying this is the only factor by any means — but it coincides with the withdrawal of investment in public higher education, which has been dropping for 35 years, and is now about half, on a per student basis, as it was then.

Really, it's been that steep a decline?

It was already steep before 2008, and then after the financial collapse, it's been like another 25 percent drop.

Yikes.

Yeah.

Last year Virginia Foxx, a member of Congress from North Carolina, said that she felt confused by high levels of student debt. She had worked her way through college in the 1960s, and she hadn't fallen behind, so why were students today struggling? As a millennial, I remember that being an especially depressing comment to read.

Right, this is someone who doesn't understand. Is she a Republican?

Yes, she's a Republican.

I would love to know what tuition at UNC was in the '70s. I know what it was at Berkeley in the '70s, and throughout the University of California system. I can tell you to the exact dollar. It was zero.

What people, states, voters, politicians figured out is that instead of all of us paying taxes to support public higher education, we could just have the students take out loans.

So, I'm curious, if you were talking to a high school senior today, what would your advice be?

Think about where you're going to college. Think carefully about where you're going to college. Most kids go to the most prestigious school that'll let them in. Why are you doing this?

I think these second-tier liberal arts colleges are great places. I mean, not all of them, but I think they have a great institutional model. And public universities have certain advantages, like a more diverse population. There are obviously a few drawbacks, but one way of splitting the difference, possibly, is an honors college or an honors program.

Kenneth Griffin, a hedge fund manager, recently gave $150 million to Harvard to improve its financial aid. I imagine that you don't feel like that's the best way for the money to be used. I'm curious, if we do reinvest in higher education elsewhere, what would the investment look like?

First of all, whatever: It's nice of him to do that. Also, in the larger scheme of what it takes to fund a higher education system, while $150 million is a huge amount for any individual, it's not a lot of money in terms of what it costs to fund the whole system.

We did this before. We know how to do this. The problem is we don't have the political will, or we don't believe we have the political will. So we do what we did in California in the '50s. They raised taxes, and they looked to create great public higher education systems.

Listen, I think I know what a great college education looks like. It looks like students learning in small classrooms face to face with instructors who are well paid and well treated.