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William Deresiewicz Talks with Executive Editor, Frank Shushok, Jr. about His Book, Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite & the Way to a Meaningful Life

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William Deresiewicz shares his perspective on some of the ways higher education is missing the mark.

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**Shushok:** I'd like to begin our conversation with a more personal angle. I'm asking people I interview about how they've changed. I'd value you reflecting about the ways the 20-year-old Bill is different than the 30-year-old Bill and, now, the Bill of today? What are the most salient lessons growing older is teaching you?

**Deresiewicz:** I don't know if you read my first book, but it’s about Jane Austen and how she helped me grow up, precisely in those years between 26 and 32. It's really become a life stage for a lot people, where you finish the process of growing up. When I was 20, I didn't really have much of a clue about what I wanted. I thought I knew. I didn’t have much understanding about what was motivating me, but I had a lot of passion and idealism, like many people do at that age. The key there for me was separating from what my family wanted from me. There was more solidity and less blowing in the wind.

In terms of who that person is relative to the person I am now, of course, there are lots of lessons learned and lots of ways I changed. Growing older gave me perspective. When you're young, the only moment is this moment. When you're a little kid, that's literally true—you have no conception of tomorrow. When you're a teenager, you may theoretically know about tomorrow, but everything feels incredibly urgent.
The Only Constant is Change

I'M NOW 53, AND I know that today is just one day, and tomorrow will bring a different feeling most likely. The best way, I believe, to deal with challenges—with difficult feelings—is to be patient and recognize that tomorrow will bring a different feeling, and that things have been different before, and that things will continue to be different in the future. One important way that I've changed in the last few years is that I've become more comfortable with the idea that things always change. I think that's a good thing because I think as you cross 50, you're thinking about how you are going to stay alive, not just physically but spiritually, emotionally. How are you going to continue to feel energetic about life?

When I was younger, I searched for stability, and this translated to the way I thought about things more broadly, of intellectual and cultural issues—wanting tradition and permanence. I still value those things, but I recognize what makes life exciting is the fact that things continue to change. This is a cliche, but to me, it's important to be open to change. You don't actually have to make things change, in a sense, you just have to stop resisting and embrace it and enjoy it if you can.

Shushok: I want to go back to your comment that higher education works against idealism. Could you say a little more about your thinking in this regard?

Deresiewicz: Yes, but first I want to anticipate something you said you hoped to discuss from my book Excellent Sheep. The biggest lesson I've learned since the book came out is that I thought that I had written a book only about elite higher education in America. What I heard from the aggregate of responses, however, is that the challenges I highlight aren't just about elite higher education or even just about higher education and, in fact, not just about America. The admissions process for selective American colleges does intensify these problems and, I think, plays a uniquely baleful role. But these are issues that exist at all levels of education and in all institutional types around the world. And rising economies are really modeling themselves after us.

I've spoken in Brazil, in China, in Singapore, and I've heard from people in many other rising economies in East Asia and the global south, and they model themselves after us. More than that, their elites are aspiring to get into our colleges, so they're really patterning their selection system and their preparation system after ours.

The Purpose of Education

I'VE ARGUED THAT EDUCATION FINDS itself in the age of neoliberalism. If neoliberalism can be defined as a system or an ideology that says that the market is everything, and our behavior in the market is the totality of our existence in the world, we function as consumers, yes, but more importantly, producers. Education in the age of neoliberalism is going to say the kinds of things that we hear being said about education all the time, which is that the purpose of college is career, and the purpose of K through 12 is to prepare

WILLIAM DERESIEWSICZ, AUTHOR OF EXCELLENT SHEEP: THE MISEDUCATION OF THE AMERICAN ELITE & THE WAY TO A MEANINGFUL LIFE.
you for “College and Career.” Of course, if college is also career, then what we are really saying is that the purpose of school is to prepare one for a career.

Now career is obviously one important purpose, but it’s only one purpose, and everything else about the purpose of education to me is to prepare students for life, and life encompasses a lot of things. One of the things it encompasses is to prepare students for citizenship. I don’t see a lot of this happening.

Young people are susceptible to pressures from adults and have less ability to gain perspective on their own emotions, let alone what other people are telling them. And when we constantly pressure them, from quite a young age, to hit the ground running and be narrowly vocationally trained by the time they get out of college (or out of community college if they don’t go to college or wherever they finish their education), anything like idealism is going to be squeezed out.

We don’t even talk about idealism anymore—we talk about passion. We tell kids they need to find their passion, but we dis-equip them from doing that. It’s really cruel. I have lots of students say to me, “I don’t think I have a passion, and if I do, I don’t know how to find it.” There’s something really unnatural going on here because I think that young adulthood is naturally the time of idealism and passion, not of practicality. We know our job as adults is to make sure kids don’t run off the rails and ruin their lives with really stupid choices, but it’s also not time to put them in a box. I think it’s to equip them, which is not easy either, to find a life that is meaningful for them and that enables them to live with, I’ll say, purpose. We should enable them to put who they are uniquely into the world in a way that is first going to be able to support them financially and, second, help them feel connected. I think it’s about helping students feel connected into this world. Education is about helping students be more open and flexible and optimistic and more versatile about finding their own way of connecting to the world.

Shushok: You talk a lot about the “system” of elite higher education. I’d like to read you something you wrote, that is: [this 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: 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.” Can you explain the forces behind what you’re seeing and, more importantly, what can be done about it?

The Pressure of College Admissions

DERESIEWICZ: Here again, the point at which this pressure is brought to bear is the college admissions process, which as we know students begin to enter into many years earlier. I think affluence and privilege play into exactly when, but certainly, I think in the most well-resourced communities, this really becomes a reality in junior high school. They may not be talking about it in those terms yet, but basically, it’s time to “put aside childish things.” No more fun! I mean at best, it starts in 7th grade; sometimes, it starts a lot earlier. So it’s the college admissions process that’s structuring it in the most immediate way.

I think the larger force in play is the ever-intensifying inequality that creates a winner-take-all society and forces children into this competition. That’s funneled through parents. There’s a certain amount of narcissistic projection that can happen, and I think parents really need to be aware of this, but for the most part, I think parents are responding rationally to an irrational world. Their kids are terrified because their parents are terrified, and their parents are terrified because the world is terrifying.

I know that doesn’t really add up to “Here’s something you can do to make this better next week.” I do think there are things we can do, but I mean, in the broader picture, this is a situation we’ve all allowed to create together, to become created together over 40 years, and we need to unwind it. Of course, it touches many other areas of society, but we live in this world where the middle is disappearing and where we’ve systematically defunded public higher education. People increasingly feel that the only sure ticket to success is to get into one of the limited number of expensive private schools. If we had, say not just
Berkeley—the way it used to be, and one of the ways it used to be was free—but if we had 100 Berkeleys, there wouldn’t be the same pressure to get your foot hold now because it’s going to be too late.

Shushok: I think of myself as an optimistic person, but when I hear you describe this reality, I feel a sense of despair as it’s difficult to know how you unwind something that is so deep in the water. The system you describe is so entrenched, and the forces behind it are strong and powerful. Do you have thoughts, at a macro level or a micro level, about what people who care about these kinds of things can do?

Depressurize the Process

DERESIEWICZ: At the micro level, I think that there’s room to maneuver and to breathe for students and their parents. The truth is that this fear-driven rush in one direction isn’t actually, even in practical terms, necessarily the best thing to do. For one thing, this narrowly focused vocational education actually isn’t producing the best kind of economic future for individual kids. Ironically, those same economies that want to compete with us, especially East Asian and South Asian economies, are asking themselves, “Why is America so innovative?” and one of the big answers they’ve come up with is that we have a much more flexible, open, liberal arts kind of education that teaches young people to be more creative and more open. Even as we’re shutting those things down by rushing towards STEM and cutting the humanities, and teaching to the test, and cutting out art and music from schools, other countries are focused on introducing things we’re eliminating, especially at the university level.

As I’ve said many times to parents, let your kid explore—let them have a liberal arts education. Don’t necessarily study engineering or computer science; they may not be really interested in those subjects, but you think it’s going to guarantee them a future. You don’t need to do that, and you’re actually going to equip them better for a very open and fluid economy, right? We don’t live in the economy for which these educational systems were designed.

To a certain extent, you can have it both ways. You still have to work really hard, you have to stay in the game, but you don’t have to rush off in the same direction as everyone else. If you cultivate your own ability to be a lifelong learner, which is really important in today’s job market, you have more room to breathe. Plus, I also say that in terms of the future, or anything in practical terms, it actually doesn’t matter very much where you go to college.

The Need to Organize

THEN, THERE ARE THE MACRO solutions, which are always hard, but I will just say that a few years ago, before we really started to talk about inequality (which I think happened as a result of the Occupy Movement in 2011), no one was talking seriously about raising the minimum wage, or at least nobody was taking it seriously. Since then, almost kind of spontaneously, this movement for a $12 or a $15 minimum wage has gained enormous traction around the country. It’s won electoral victories in states and cities, some of them red states and cities. There seems to be momentum that’s just continuing to build.

One thing that I’ve learned, and I’m a very pessimistic person, is that the future is profoundly unknowable. Many of the most important changes that have happened in my lifetime, from the fall of the Soviet Union, the Tea Party, Occupy, the election of Donald Trump; often, these are things that are unforeseeable the day before they happen, so we don’t know. But if people organize, then they can get more done than they could ever imagine possible. If you add up all the people who work in higher education, and the students who are currently enrolled in higher education and their parents, that’s a lot of voters. Now, they aren’t all necessarily going to be higher education voters or vote the way you want them to, but that’s a lot of people whom higher education touches. I would think all of those people, for example, are interested in reversing this disastrous defunding of public higher education at the state level. I don’t really see that mobilization, but it certainly seems like there’s potential for it.

Shushok: Your book is clearly a critique of higher education and even larger critique of our culture. Given that, I’m wondering what you learned about
The Liberal Arts Mission

DERESIEWICZ: I actually didn’t hear from as many professors as I would have hoped, which reaffirms my impression that many professors are checked out. I heard from people associated one way or another with Ivy League institutions in particular, who responded generally with a great deal of hostility and defensiveness. The kind of higher education professional who has reached out most belongs to the group of institutions that I had the nicest things to say about—liberal arts colleges. I’ve spoken at a lot of liberal arts colleges since then and interacted with liberal arts college presidents and so forth, and that’s been really nice. They want me to come to reaffirm the liberal arts mission, or I’ve been invited to other kinds of institutions—private, public, community colleges—the whole variety actually, who are not necessarily the head of the institution but want another advocate for the liberal arts. That is great, but it’s also shown me that a lot of people in the liberal arts feel under siege. I certainly didn’t get anyone calling or writing me and saying “Oh, you know you’ve opened my eyes to the problem we have it our school, and we really must do something about it!” It’s either “Thank you, I’ve been fighting this fight for a long time but I’m only one person” or “you don’t know what you’re talking about!,” which I know isn’t true because the one group of people I continue to hear from, as I already heard from many before I wrote the book, were students and alumni who say, “Yeah this is how things are.”

Shushok: One of the many things that I appreciated about your book was that you took the time to talk directly to students. In fact, you spend an entire chapter encouraging students to find “spirit guides.” Could you talk about what you mean by spirit guides, as well as share with readers who can become them?

Decentering the Teacher

DERESIEWICZ: That’s a great question. I think it’s implicit in the book, but I wish I had said it even more forcefully and explicitly. I know I’m going to say this in my usual hyperbolic way, but the only purpose of an educational institution at whatever level is to arrange for the encounter between students and extraordinary teachers. That’s the whole thing, and everything else should serve that purpose, and if it doesn’t serve that purpose, it should get out of the way.

If we could do anything, in practical terms, I think we need to put more money back into the public higher education system and reallocate resources within all institutional types. But, philosophically, it needs to be even more than a focus on the liberal arts or a “re-dedicated” focus on the liberal arts; it’s got to be putting the teacher back to the center of the college and of the student experience. I think most people who teach in higher education, especially since most of them aren’t professors, get into teaching because they want to teach. They know that teaching is a vocation, it’s not something they do to get rich. I think that most non-faculty higher education professionals are involved for the same reason, for the right reason. Depending on their role, they also have the potential to be what I call spirit guides, but the real word, the simpler word, is mentor.

My mentor said that a true teacher teaches students, not classes. It’s a question of whether they have the opportunity to do it, and having the opportunity
to do it is all about, first of all, resources. You know if you’re teaching four different classes in four different institutions scattered across the Los Angeles metropolitan area, and you’re getting $3,500 to $5,000 for each one, you’re not going to have time to be a mentor. If you’re in an institution that only hires, retains, promotes, and tenures faculty based on the research program, you’re not going to spend a lot of time being a mentor, or even a decent classroom teacher. It’s resources and it’s also the direction that an institution acts, in the way it messages, and in the way it incentivizes.

Then, we don’t really have to teach a young person how to be idealistic. We don’t have to teach a toddler to dance, right? These are all things that people will do as long as you don’t prevent them from doing it. I think young students seeking direction will find wise adults who are interested in giving them direction as long as you create the right conditions. You don’t need to teach anybody how to do that.

Shushok: I’m probably going backwards here, but you were on a path, and now you’ve gotten off at least the path of the professorate. What happened with you?

Deresiewicz: Maybe I should have said this, but I think people were so quick to read my book as sour grapes anyway that it actually didn’t even occur to me to talk about this in the book. I should have realized that people would have this question. It’s really a simple answer. I left academia because I didn’t have a choice.

You know that I was at Yale. I didn’t expect to get tenure; junior faculty at places like Yale generally don’t get tenured, and I didn’t expect to get tenured. One of the things that I loved about Yale was there were a lot of junior faculty—they would hire three or four assistant professors every year. So we had a big cohort, which was really nice, and I saw a lot of people in the years ahead of me sort of play out the script. They would be there between three and six years, and then, they would get their next job because they published. That’s what I expected. I wanted and expected that job would probably be in a liberal arts college. I applied to every kind of school that had an opening in my field. Over the course of four years, I applied to about 40 schools. The interviews I got were liberal arts colleges, four interviews, but in the end, I didn’t get any of those jobs. I came to the end of my contract at Yale, and I had to find a different line of work. That was it. It was a terrible thing for me. It was terribly sad for me, and it continues to be, not every day in the way that it used to be. I don’t miss the faculty meetings or miss, quite frankly, doing academic writing because I was never that keen on it. I miss being a mentor and developing relationships with students. So, that’s what happened.

I made choices as an academic, even during graduate school, and in my years at Yale, to do things in ways I knew were not the smartest way for my professional future, like spending more time than I needed to teaching. So I knew that I wasn’t playing the game by the rules, and so, my not getting that next job had a lot to do with my own choices. But I think, notwithstanding all the choices I made, I would still have been able to find that job if it weren’t for what’s happened to the academic job market over the last 40 years. I mean, ultimately, the reason that I’m not a professor is because three-fourths of teaching in higher ed now is not done by professors, and all of those professorial positions have been converted to contingent labor.

I mean, ultimately, the reason that I’m not a professor is because three-fourths of teaching in higher ed now is not done by professors, and all of those professorial positions have been converted to contingent labor. I think that’s the real reason—that’s why me and many people like me can’t work in academia anymore or are marginally attached to academia and maybe won’t be there for very much longer.

Shushok: People who read About Campus care about the kinds of things you are talking about, in all different parts of colleges and universities. They’re at the small liberal arts colleges, and at the large research universities, and at community colleges. I wonder what you might want to share with those who are reading this interview and who are thinking about college students and their own work and how to make choices that add up to value for students. What comes to mind that you could offer up as counsel or advice?

Deresiewicz: That’s a hard question to answer. You’re asking me to address a lot of people who are in a lot of different roles in a lot of different institutions. I’m wary of saying anything, but let me say this. As this conversation exemplifies, there’s a lot of— I don’t know if anguish is the right word—but morale in higher ed is not high, it hasn’t been high for a long time. People who care about the mission feel under siege, faculty, staff...
and I think a big component of that is feeling powerless. So, this is easy advice for me to give because, actually, I never was in a position to even try to put it into practice, but it’s what we said before.

...those students who were part of the union fight had a kind of energy and optimism and sense of personal powerfulness that most of the other students didn’t have. So, I think there’s really something just immediately relieving and powerful about connecting to other people in your situation or feeling the same way.

How do you address these macro issues? I think you have to address it through organizing. You have to address it through solidarity. I think solidarity helps alleviate that feeling of powerlessness and also the feeling of loneliness, “I’m the only one in this.” I know that there may be legal regulations that govern the ways that different people can organize, but I feel like that’s my advice. I know it sounds so cheap and easy, and also, everyone’s saying this in general in the political climate now, “Get involved!” It still sounds like good advice, you know, but it doesn’t mean that you’re going to win. When I look at graduate student unionization, of course, you know we won this great victory, and now, it looks like the victory’s going to be taken away. It’s a long fight, but also, I think graduate school is a time that can feel really disempowering, especially if you’re in a Ph.D program. You just feel lost and isolated and with no agency, and those students who were part of the union fight had a kind of energy and optimism and sense of personal powerfulness that most of the other students didn’t have. So, I think there’s really something just immediately relieving and powerful about connecting to other people in your situation or feeling the same way.

**Shushok:** This has been an insightful conversation. You’ve given us a lot to think about. I’m grateful you wrote this book and that you continue to facilitate this conversation by giving talks and visiting campuses. My guess is that these moments are adding up to a conversation that will help higher education be better, and I truly appreciate it.

**Deresiewicz:** Thanks. I’m far from the only one, right? That’s really what matters, that it becomes a conversation and a lot of people are speaking up. I’m glad to be able to contribute in this way.