Conclusion: The Merit Fallacy

If the studies' conceptualizations of merit, class, and eliteness are put into conversation, a distinctive pattern emerges, which I would like to call the 'merit fallacy' and which is part of their jeremiadic tendency to affirm and validate rather than genuinely criticize. Even though the authors are aware of the contingency of 'merit', Golden, Soares, and Stevens alike tend to fix its meanings by positioning it as the opposite of privilege, as the following examples show: Golden, for instance, contrasts students' "own merit" with "their paternal pedigrees," "intellectual potential" with "tens of millions of dollars," and applicants who "earn their admission" with those who have it "delivered to them as a birthright" (2). Soares mobilizes the same alleged opposition when he charges elite universities with "confusing merit with social class" (xii), or argues that students "should get into a top university because of [their] achievements, not because of accidents of birth" (2), or explains how in the course of the twentieth century elite colleges initiated "the abolition of family privilege" in favor of "the introduction of academic merit" (7). Stevens, in a similar vein, explains how "the inequalities of family, caste, and tribe gradually give way to hierarchies predicated in individual achievement" (11), and describes how individuals are evaluated "on the basis of demonstrated individual accomplishment, not inherited privilege" (12). All of this seems to suggest that 'merit'—as a comprehensive category comprising talent, skill, ambition, work, ability, accomplishment, etc.—and 'privilege'—as an equally comprehensive moniker for inherited wealth, cultural capital, and social connections—are somehow completely distinct and distinguishable factors confounded willfully by the admissions offices of elite colleges. Positing a dichotomy between 'merit' on the one hand and 'privilege' on the other hand obscures the fact that merit in all its forms—even and especially in the seemingly neutral sense of 'measurable virtue'—is more often than not the expression and continuance rather than the opposite of privilege.

4. Conservative Critiques

In 1987, philosopher Allan Bloom published what turned out to be a surprise bestseller, *The Closing of the American Mind*. Its subtitle, "How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students," sums up the main argument. According to Mark S. Jendrysik, Bloom's tract can be

seen as an expression of what he calls American declinism, "a belief that the United States is in a state of terminal moral collapse" (2002: 361). *The Closing of the American Mind* furthermore provided the blue print for jeremiadic critiques of the academic establishment, in particular for conservative critics—Jendrysik calls it "the foundational work of the modern jeremiad" (2008: 37). Bloom decried what he saw as overwhelming evidence of "cultural decadence and national decline" (Jendrysik 2008: 38), in particular in the sphere of higher education, and attacked the alleged moral relativism, intellectual rootlessness, and political correctness of the academy. Given these concerns, it is not surprising that both Deresiewicz and Douthat mention Bloom favorably. What unites all three of them is a vision of America gone astray, and a concomitant plea to return to the right path.

In the following, I discuss Douthat's *Privilege* and Deresiewicz's *Excellent Sheep* separately, and address in detail the ways in which their jeremiadic tendencies inform their negotiations of merit, class, and eliteness. I argue that their response to the tension between elitism and egalitarianism is to rewrite this tension as one that centers not on inequality but is concerned instead with quality, or the lack thereof. To retrieve the right path of American excellence, according to Douthat and Deresiewicz, means to abdicate the neoliberal eliteness of mindless credentialism, which their books set out to criticize, in favor of a return to a humanistic eliteness that is more substantial, more serious, and more soulful than its current competitor. Like the progressivist studies discussed in the previous section, both authors ultimately desire a classless eliteness, but unlike them, they emphasize the qualitative nature of the eliteness more than the dream of classlessness. In the end, *Privilege* and *Excellent Sheep* both construct a conservative vision of the elite university as a classless, raceless, and genderless haven for serious intellectual engagement, free of decadence, entitlement, and the pitfalls of privilege, and thus free to contribute its civic duty to the project of American exceptionalism.

Ross Douthat: *Privilege* (2005)

Ross Douthat published *Privilege: Harvard and the Education of the Ruling Class* in 2005, just a few years after his graduation from the eponymous college, of which he aims to offer, according to the back cover, a "penetrating critique." In a fitting turn of events, the book's publication mirrors some of the phenomena Douthat lambastes, as he explains in an interview: "[T]he way I ended up selling the book is actually a perfect example of the sort of connection-building

and privilege that I talk about in the book itself" (quoted in Healy)—a former Harvard classmate had put him in touch with a literary agent who helped the fledgling author to develop and ultimately sell the proposal. Marketed by its publisher, Hyperion Books, under the header 'Sociology', *Privilege* exhibits the genre hybridity typical of the conservative jeremiadic texts discussed in this chapter, and demonstrates the multiplicity of personal, cultural, political, and aesthetic dimensions on which elite education becomes meaningful in twenty-first-century America.

Asked what prompted him to write about Harvard, Douthat mentions three literary role models that situate his work within a tradition of conservative cultural critique, and that can serve as points of departure to discuss the three generic forms actualized in his text: the memoir, the coming-of-age-story, and the cultural commentary. The first is Tom Wolfe's 2004 novel *I am Charlotte Simmons*, which chronicles the experiences of a working-class scholarship student at a fictional elite university. Douthat explains that while he "really enjoyed" Wolfe's novel, he also thought that someone closer to the actual undergraduate experience than Wolfe, who was well into his seventies when he finished *Charlotte Simmons*, should write about it: "I felt like college from the point of view of the college students was fertile literary terrain" (quoted in Kolhatkar). Describing his own work "as *I am Charlotte Simmons*, but with less sex" (ibid.), Douthat thus emphasizes that his is a coming-of-age story, tracing his difficult path at Harvard from adolescence to adulthood. In addition to the staples of the genre—love, sex, friendship—the dominant motif is his disillusionment with the elite institution. Arriving in Cambridge "with the highest of expectations" (5), Douthat describes entering the university "wide-eyed and naïve, expecting to be surrounded by intellectual ferment and immersed in what Matthew Arnolds called the 'best that has been thought and said'" (11). His disappointment—with his peers, his professors, and the whole Harvardian culture—is what drives most of the narrative. The jeremiadic element in his writing is thus not so much a mourning of a better past, but a mourning of the idealized Harvard of his imagination, which crumbles in the face of the real thing. Interestingly, the motif of disillusionment is equally strong in Curtis Sittenfeld's novel *Prep*, discussed in the last chapter of this study, but while Lee Fiora blames herself for the disenchanting experience of the elite educational space, Douthat blames Harvard, and only Harvard, for his.

In fact, given the nature of Douthat's expectations, the reader learns surprisingly little about the author's intellectual development, nor of any efforts

he makes to actualize his aspirations. A notable exception is his conservatism, which he mentions several times (e.g. 62, 229). On the one hand, this intellectual and political self-categorization seems to function as a rhetorical gesture to establish outsider status, and thus to render his criticism of Harvard more convincing. Unlike Charlotte Simmons, whose otherness is marked by her socio-economic as well as her regional background, Douthat hails from an upper-middle-class family in Connecticut and attended a private high school "in a leafy New Haven suburb" (6). His conservatism thus serves to strengthen his maverick status, as does his Catholicism, since both apparently are rare occurrences in the Harvard community. On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, the references to his conservative worldview serve to establish his position in the intellectual tradition of a particular brand of movement conservatism, similar to that espoused by Allan Bloom, which combines a stringent anti-elitism with a reverence for cultural and intellectual eliteness.

A second influence Douthat cites is David Brooks, whose arguments and observations in writings such as *Bobos in Paradise* or "The Organization Kid"[6] are echoed in *Privilege*. Here we see Douthat as cultural observer and would-be ethnographer who, like Brooks, aims to make broad claims about "the culture of privilege" (*Privilege* back cover) by letting the reader catch a glimpse of what life at one of America's most selective and prestigious universities is 'really' like. Douthat proposes to take off the "ideological veneer" (9) and expose the truth about the institution: Harvard "was not a refuge of genius and a sanctuary of intellect," but a place for mindless posturing and networking. The issues Douthat explores in his capacity as social commentator include grade inflation and the prevalence of postmodern jargon in the humanities—again, a nod to his conservative roots, in particular perhaps to Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*—activism and politics on campus, which he dismisses as more or less laughable, and the pitfalls of promiscuity.

This conservative strand in Douthat's writing is furthermore supported by the third, and arguably most important, role model he mentions: William F. Buckley, Jr. and his 1951 *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of 'Academic*

6 "The Organization Kid" (2001) appeared in *The Atlantic* and raised an argument about mindlessness and entitlement at elite institutions (specifically, Princeton) very similar to that brought forth by Deresiewicz a few years later: "The young men and women of America's future elite work their laptops to the bone, rarely question authority, and happily accept their positions at the top of the heap as part of the natural order of life."

Freedom', a classic in conservative writing and institutional critique. Buckley, whom Douthat lovingly describes as "the great man, the right's godfather, the urbane and wicked prince of the conservatives" (241), likewise wrote the famous indictment of his alma mater shortly after his graduation. While Buckley's intervention focused mainly on what he experienced as Yale's undue promotion of secularism, liberalism, and collectivism, Douthat's critique is aimed at Harvard's hypocrisy, its snobbery, and the lack of intellectual rigor expected and guidance offered by the institution. The disingenuousness Douthat diagnoses does not only characterize Harvard, however, but the entire system of elite education: "It is a culture that pays lip service to various earnest ideals—like diversity and public service and tolerance—but in point of fact indoctrinates its students with a religion of success, and seduces them, oh so subtly, with the promise that what they have is theirs by right, the right of talent" (11). Instead of the humanistic eliteness he was looking for, Douthat thus finds only what I conceptualize as a neoliberal eliteness, an essentially empty pattern of distinction used primarily to legitimize wealth and power: Caught in "the scramble for upward mobility, achievement, success for success' sake" (ibid.), Douthat is disappointed by the false sense of legitimacy and entitlement Harvard inspires in its students, who despite being "intellectually adrift" turn into "an American ruling class that is smug, stratified, self-congratulatory" (4). The use of the term 'smug' again signals Douthat's position in a particular conservative intellectual tradition, in which 'smugness' is associated with liberals and leftists. Douthat concludes that while Harvard "remains one of the best places on earth to educate oneself," the institution does not actively seek to educate its students and "will not guide or shape or even push back in any significant way against entropy and laziness and careerism" (138). It is the collective paucity of seriousness, of honest engagement with classes and materials, and the thoughtless glorification of success that Douthat finds most appalling about the elite educational experience. His main issue, it is important to note, is thus not the socio-economic homogeneity of his peers, as his book's subtitle might indicate, but their academic and intellectual mediocrity. Douthat's critique is not a critique of the political economy of elite education, but of its cultural shortcomings.

Merit, Eliteness, Class

Douthat frames his own background in the paradigm of the academic meritocracy. His parents went to Yale and Stanford, and thus, as he explains, "had

the whole meritocratic pedigree" (5). It is interesting to note that their affiliation with these institutions is in itself enough for Douthat to establish his meritocratic genealogy, even though he offers no further information on his parents' backgrounds or how they gained access to the colleges, thus insinuating that a genuine academic meritocracy was fully functional in the past. As part of that tradition, he himself "excelled academically" (6) at his prep school, engaged in the right kinds of extracurricular activities, and eventually made it to Harvard. This blue print of a merit narrative is complicated by the fact that it is evident from the beginning of his book that Douthat is critical of these very structures: One of the two epigraphs that precede his story is a quote from Christopher Lasch's *The Revolt of the Elites* (1995): "Meritocracy is a parody of democracy." Douthat thus obviously mistrusts the notion of eliteness qua merit that the progressivist studies on admission and exclusion are so eager to support.

Douthat's understanding of eliteness, as we learn throughout the narrative, was changed fundamentally through his experience of the elite educational space. Before arriving at Harvard, Douthat conceptualized eliteness, according to his own admission, as an exclusively intellectual quality in the humanistic, Western tradition. He envisions the college as "a magical place, a paradise" (5) of academic excellence—the antithesis of the "high school jockocracy" that caused him so much unhappiness: Harvard "became a beacon of hope to my semi-alienated teenage mind. […] At Harvard, athleticism and good looks and popularity would count far less than the things that really mattered: native brilliance, and intellectual curiosity, and academic achievement" (7). As he soon realizes upon arriving in Cambridge, however, eliteness at Harvard is less academic than it is social, or even profanely financial. Douthat gives much room to revealing the naïveté of his youthful imaginations of the "Iviest of the Ivy League schools" (8) and correcting the notion of Harvard as a haven for intellectuals. In "the wider, institutional culture of Harvard," he argues, there is little room for the pursuit of intellectual endeavors for their own sake; instead, "the *real* business of Harvard [is] the pursuit of success" (ibid.). "At its crudest," Douthat complains, "a Harvard education is a four-year scramble to ingratiate oneself" (ibid.). *Privilege* thus conjures up the image of the elite educational space as a realm in which success and achievement trump academic inquiry at every turn; eliteness is a worldly category measurable in internships, job offers, and money spent. Rather than about learning and serious engagement, Harvard is about collecting capital.

In the chapter titled "Approaches to Knowledge," in which Douthat discusses Harvard's academic culture, he goes to great lengths to disprove the popular image of the overly studious Harvardian and, in the process, criticizes the practice of neoliberal eliteness. Even though he admits that some of his classmates "took academics very seriously" (122), most of them—Douthat included—"were studious primarily in our avoidance of academic work, and brilliant mostly in our maneuvering to achieve maximum GPA in return for minimal effort" (123). Douthat attributes this seeming paradox to the peculiar incentive structure of the meritocracy: On the one hand, because the driving force at Harvard was not thirst for knowledge, but hunger for success, classes were seen primarily as a means to an end, as "just another résumé-padding opportunity" (ibid) among many, and not as arenas for serious intellectual engagement. On the other hand, "Harvard's other demands—social, extracurricular, pre-professional" (140) dominated the students' lives to such a degree that academics were never the top priority.

Douthat's observations also reflect the transition between a liberal version of the meritocracy as a system that rewards hard work, diligence, and sacrifice, to a neoliberal instantiation of the same system, which now rewards success for its own sake, regardless of effort or dedication. The "meritocratic imagination," he argues, is dominated not by education or intellectual fulfillment, but by success: "People send their children to Harvard," he argues, "above all, because they want them to *succeed*—because they want them to be part of the ruling class, and Harvard is the easiest, best-known ticket" (10, emphasis in the original). This statement is problematic in a number of ways, however, not least because it contradicts his own reasoning for applying to Harvard and thus, presumably, also that of many other students and graduates. The question whether gaining admission to Harvard really is the "easiest […] ticket" to the ruling class—given the amount of effort and money that needs to be invested in receiving that ticket—remains unanswered as well. In any case, Douthat is disappointed in the Harvard he experiences and concludes: "Meritocracy is the ideological veneer, but social and economic stratification is the reality" (9). Of course, stratification does not at all contradict meritocracy. On the contrary, in Young's original account, 'social and economic stratification' were the exact results of implementing meritocratic structures, which is what Young warned against. This demonstrates that Douthat follows a very specific conception of eliteness as meritorious, and of merit as academic, which then renders the competition fair and the stratification jus-

tified. This pure vision of eliteness is contaminated by the neoliberal emphasis on success and careerism.

The possibility of a genuinely meritorious eliteness is thwarted, according to Douthat, by the prevalence of extreme wealth on campus and the socio-economic homogeneity of the student body. The book's subtitle—"Harvard and the Education of the Ruling Class"—suggests that Douthat's investigation positions class as a central category, and in some ways, it does. His impetus differs considerably from that of the progressivist studies, however, because his is essentially a cultural critique of entitlement rather than a political critique of inequality.

Douthat begins by addressing his own class background in the prologue, careful to establish a difference between himself and his equally affluent peers. Labelling his upbringing "superficially bourgeois" (5), he goes on to explain why his childhood was different from that of socio-economically similar Connecticut families: His mother was "chronically ill with strange and inexplicable allergies," which drove the family to "seek unorthodox cures" (ibid.). A number of cultural practices—a macrobiotic diet, a home birth, an aversion to vaccinations, summers spent in health food camps—distinguished Douthat's family from the more stereotypical upper middle class; or so Douthat claims, emphasizing the cultural rather than the material dimension of socio-economic stratification.

Class then assumes a new kind of importance for Douthat when he arrives at Harvard and finds it rampant with rich people. Though "a smattering of poor students" exists, most of his classmates are a "wildly privileged lot, culled from the country's upwardly mobile enclaves and blessed with deep, parentally funded pockets" (9). In the three chapters that follow, Douthat discusses various social and cultural reverberations of stratification. In the first, "The Fall of Straus B-32," he seeks to explain the failure of Harvard's diversity politics, using as his only example the story of the suite adjacent to his, Straus B-32, whose inhabitants seemed emblematic of the university's commitment to diversity: "Forth and Nick, Siddarth and Damian: a rich kid schooled at Groton, two children of immigrants, and a great-great-grandson of slaves. The social engineers in the Freshman Dean's Office must have enjoyed putting together that particular slice of Harvard, we joked, and after a while, there was a dollop of bitterness in the laughter (19)." Douthat then details the emerging conflict between Forth, "the blond, blue-eyed grandson of a cabinet secretary" and Damian, "who was southern and black and relatively poor" (ibid.), and argues that Harvard's diversity politics are hypocritical and useless because

they focus only on "the most superficial form of diversity—the diversity of color" (48). Douthat finds other measures of diversity—regional or class background, for instance—more substantial, but since they are not part of the official university politics, he concludes that "Harvard is not some bubbling stew of diversity. It is a place filled with haute bourgeois students from the professional and creative classes, a place where a smattering of strivers from underprivileged backgrounds are asked to become the 'seasoning in the rice', as one minority tutor put it bitterly during my freshman year" (52). Douthat is right, of course, in pointing to the glaring lack of socio-economic diversity at Harvard and other elite schools. That he calls the 'diversity of color' the 'most superficial form of diversity', however, arguably reveals more about his own subject position as a white man than it does about Harvard's diversity politics.

In the following two chapters, Douthat continues to explore the role of class at Harvard, recounting in great detail his attempt and subsequent failure to join one of the exclusive final clubs, which he introduces as a further expressions of the dominance of wealth and privilege on campus. He concludes the chapter by explaining that his rejection from the club was ultimately a good thing, since "Harvard was privileged enough, […] and sufficiently detached from the real world, without going a step further and entering the charmed circle of final-club brats" (82). The appeal of upper-class institutions such as the final clubs, however, becomes very obvious in Douthat's loving descriptions of the various locales in which his 'punching' took place; his attempts at rationalizing his failure to gain access sound half-hearted and somewhat forced.

His third chapter, "The Strange Career of Suzanne Pomey," demonstrates the fairly dramatic consequences the pervasive culture of privilege can have for individual students. Suzanne Pomey, Douthat tells us, was a campus celebrity, of sorts, a "Harvard queen bee" (86), known for her lavish parties and for being the producer of the Hasty Pudding Theatricals. Shortly before graduation, however, she was convicted of embezzling close to a hundred thousand dollars from Hasty Pudding; instead of donning cap and gown and receiving her degree with the rest of her classmates, Suzanne was then "arrested and charged with grand larceny" (86). Douthat uses the case of Suzanne Pomey to criticize Harvard's "cutthroat culture" (95), which is based not only on the "boundless ambition" of its students, but also, and arguably more importantly, on "an astonishing foundation of wealth" (ibid.). Suzanne Pomey, it turned out during the scandal, did not come from a wealthy family,

as everyone had thought, but had stolen the money to pretend that she did, to succeed in Harvard's social scene. According to Douthat, her case is instructive because she represented "Harvard's raging id: She had the ambition, the obsession with fame, and the desire for riches that animated so many of us, and like us she stored them up behind the façade of a pure heart and good intentions, of community service and academic excellence" (108). Class, then, matters greatly in Douthat's account because it is, he claims, the ultimate goal of the "meritocratic elite" (116), a goal he denounces as superficial, misguided, and irresponsible. Harvard's undergraduates—along with the students at other elite schools—have been raised to believe, Douthat argues, that "their worth is contingent on the level of wealth and power and personal achievement they attain" (ibid.). Gaining or maintaining upper-class status is thus what drives most students at elite colleges—resulting in the lack of interest in serious engagement and the overemphasis on measures of success that Douthat criticizes.

William Deresiewicz: *Excellent Sheep* (2014)

In 2008, William Deresiewicz published an article in *The American Scholar*, titled "The Disadvantages of an Elite Education." A comprehensive critique of the elite educational system, the text begins in the mode of the confessional: Deresiewicz recounts a situation in which he found himself in the company of a plumber he employed to fix his pipes—"a short, beefy guy with a goatee and […] a thick Boston accent"—and admits to his failure to relate in any way or even to make small talk with the man. So far had his Ivy League education removed him from the experience of 'common people' that he felt utterly unable to empathize with them: "I could carry on conversations with people from other countries, in other languages, but I couldn't talk to the man who was standing in my own house." In the article that builds on the anecdote, then, Deresiewicz faults the institutions responsible for his "Ivy retardation" for failing their educational mission, as the tag line suggests: "Our best universities have forgotten that the reason they exist is to make minds, not careers." Instead of fostering a wholesome atmosphere in which students are encouraged to explore their own minds and souls, and thus grow into responsible, empathic citizens, the Ivy League and its peer institutions, according to Deresiewicz, favor a materialistic and utilitarian approach to education, thereby producing students who are ambitious, talented, and successful but also shallow, arrogant, and out of touch with the larger populace. Like Douthat's *Privi-*

lege, Deresiewicz's writing is dedicated to exposing and denouncing what can be described as a neoliberal eliteness (marked by empty credentials, mindless success, etc.) and at the same time propagating the vision of a humanistic eliteness (marked by genuine learning, serious engagement, personal growth, etc.). Here, too, the potentials of the right kind of eliteness are simultaneously mourned and celebrated in perfect jeremiadic manner.

Deresiewicz himself spent a total of twenty-four years in the Ivy League, first as a student, then as a teacher, before abandoning academia in favor of pursuing an independent writing career. In 2014, *The New Republic*[7] published an updated version of his initial article on elite education. Provocatively titled "Don't Send Your Kid to the Ivy League," the article was accompanied by the image of a burning Harvard flag, and its tag line claimed that "[t]he nation's top colleges are turning our kids into zombies." The rhetoric is decisively more inflammatory and sensationalist—six years after the original article, elite universities are no longer faulted merely for being shallow and careerist, but for 'turning kids into zombies', arguably a more serious offense. In addition to this change in register, Deresiewicz also abandoned the plumber anecdote, probably due to the critical responses it had elicited—one reviewer called it "preposterous." Instead, he jumpstarts his critique of the kinds of subjectivities produced in and through elite institutions by recounting his "daylong stint on the Yale admissions committee," during which he caught a—to him, disturbing—first-hand impression of the ways in which admissions officers sift through the hyper-qualified yet strangely caricatural applicant pool. If the *American Scholar* article had already received its fair share of attention (it had been viewed online one million times, and shared 40,000 times of Facebook), the *New Republic* piece went viral—thus demonstrating the degree of cultural interest in matters of elite education. It inspired a number of responses, many of them critical, but also quite a few that echoed his concerns about the trajectory of elite education in twenty-first-century America.[8]

---

7 The choice of magazine is in itself interesting: given that it is a liberal and progressive venue, its readers might be more inclined to agree with social justice arguments as exhibited by the studies on admission and exclusion. And in fact, many of the responses demonstrate just that (cf. footnote 18).

8 Among them Steven Pinker's "The Trouble With Harvard," J.D. Chapman's "Send Your Kid to the Ivy League!," Andrew Giambrone's verbosely titled "I am a Laborer's Son. I went to Yale. I am not Trapped in a Bubble of Privilege," and Yishai Schwartz's "An Attack on the Ivy League is an Attack on the Meritocracy Itself."

Shortly thereafter, Deresiewicz published *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (2014), the best-selling third step of his Ivy League critique. Again, he changed his opening remarks, now returning to the confessional mode and presenting the book as "a letter to my twenty-year-old self" (1). He himself, Deresiewicz tells his readers, "went off to college like a sleepwalker, like a zombie," without a clear conception of what receiving an education might actually entail, driven only by "vaguely understood objectives: status, wealth, getting to the top—in a word, 'success'" (ibid.). Having observed the same phenomenon in today's college students, Deresiewicz intends his book to be an intervention, focusing on "[w]hat that system [of elite education] does to kids and how they can escape from it, what it does to our society and how we can dismantle it" (2). The fact that he changed his opening vignette a third time demonstrates the difficulty of the critic to position himself with regard to the object of critique and with regard to his audience; Deresiewicz has to walk the fine line between authority and arrogance—a delicate balancing act in particular when it comes to class, education, and privilege. All told, his objective is similar to Douthat's: to find out what kind of subjectivities are produced in and through elite colleges and universities, and to explore the social, cultural, political, and economic ramifications of the fact that these colleges and universities supply the majority of the leadership class.[9] Deresiewicz is interested more in the individual than in the systemic dimension of these questions: Ten out of twelve chapters, or 200 out of 250 pages, are devoted to describing what happens to students on elite campuses and what they can do, individually, to counteract the system's detrimental influence. In contrast, his thoughts on more wide reaching systemic change take up much less room in his overall argument.

Merit, Eliteness, Class

Merit and eliteness are central categories in Deresiewicz's critique, and he conceptualizes them as closely entwined and mutually dependent. Class is

9 None of the studies really theorizes the category of the 'leadership class', but it can be inferred from their writings that the authors follow a pluralist or functionalist understanding of eliteness in the sense that educational institutions, among other actors, educate the people who then assume leadership positions across a range of key sectors, e.g. business, politics, law, etc. The studies do not engage with the question of the relative importance and power of each of these sectors, nor with the question of the existence of a coherent national leadership class.

addressed in several steps of his argument, in particular when he discusses the broader socio-political implications of the elite education system, but as I will show below, his is more a critique of snobbery than of inequality.

Deresiewicz's critique of life and work on elite campuses echoes much of what Douthat and similar critics talk about. The main enemy of these "meritocracy lamenters," as Rita Koganzon calls them (114) is the mechanisms of the meritocracy, which is conceptualized as "a ruthless, pointless competition for external accolades at the expense of true learning" (Koganzon 109). From kindergarten to the Ph.D., the structures governing advancement in the elite educational sector are flawed; the system's incentive structure is designed in a way that favors achievement over substance and therefore "forces you to choose between learning and success" (Deresiewicz 4). Here again, the vision of a humanistic eliteness that exists and is cultivated independently of worldly factors—i.e., the neoliberal system—comes to the fore. Deresiewicz criticizes as narrowly utilitarian the underlying conception of education that informs the work of elite institutions: Students are encouraged to view their education as a means to an end, not as an end in itself. The system furthermore creates elitist mentalities and a false sense of superiority. Instead of fostering curiosity, sincerity, and excitement about learning, elite colleges produce snobby, out-of-touch conformists who flock to the financial industry in droves because they are afraid of taking risks, afraid of failing, and unwilling and unable to think about what they really want from life. The charges of snobbery—Deresiewicz also uses the term "smug" (205)—echo the conservative critique also articulated by Douthat, in which the sense of social and cultural superiority is deemed worse than the actual inequality.

If class is not a central category in Deresiewicz's work, it is because he is not primarily interested in critiquing inequality, but, as his title suggests, in exposing the "miseducation" of the leadership class. The very beginning of his 'manifesto' demonstrates his lack of concern for and awareness of socio-economic factors: He explains that he himself went to college without giving much thought as to where and why, because college "was the 'next thing'" (1). There seems to be little awareness that for many American teenagers, college—and especially the elite kind—is not 'the next thing' at all, and that the casualness of his approach is in itself an expression of class privilege. He does, however, time and again acknowledge and discuss the presence of money on campus—"colleges like Harvard are bastions of privilege, places where the rich send their children to learn to walk, talk, and think like the rich, and to make sure that they stay rich" (209)—and he also raises the issue of "self-seg-

regation by mind-set and lifestyle—which really means, by economic status" (215). But these issues are not his primary concern. His major point of criticism is rooted in what he refers to as the "elite mentality" (214), grounded in a conflation of class, eliteness, and merit. The essence of this mentality, Deresiewicz claims, is the fact that to affluent families, the presence of their offspring on elite campuses is "a never-ending source of self-delight" and a powerful legitimation for their privilege: "[Y]ou're here because you earned it, and you earned it because you're the best" (ibid.). It is this attitude, the elitism of the elite, that Deresiewicz finds offensive more than anything else; he criticizes students and their parents for assuming that their affiliation with an elite school means that they are "simply better—better morally, better metaphysically, higher on some absolute scale of human value" (ibid.).

When he does talk about the systemic ramifications of elite education, his diagnosis and criticism mirror that of the progressivist studies discussed earlier in this chapter. Elite colleges and universities, Deresiewicz argues, "reproduc[e] the class system" (205). The system aggravates inequality, hinders social mobility, sustains privilege, and thus produces an elite that is not only isolated from the people it is meant to lead, but also "smug about its right to its position" (ibid.). The major cause of the persistence of socio-economic stratification, and here Deresiewicz repeats Stevens's argument, is "the ever-growing cost of manufacturing children who are fit to compete in the college admissions game" (206). Deresiewicz's observations and his suggestions for reform are firmly in line with the consensus of the critical literature on elite education. A new and improved system, he demands, has to ensure that "privilege cannot be handed down" (235), though this is, of course, ultimately impossible to achieve. In addition to the usual suggestions on how to change the admissions process—no more special treatment for legacy students and athletes, etc.—Deresiewicz asks colleges to reconsider their understanding of merit. Instead of encouraging blind conformity and rote memorization, the admissions process should reward "resilience, self-reliance, independence of spirit, genuine curiosity and creativity, and a willingness to take risks and make mistakes" (236). Deresiewicz fails to explain in any detail, unfortunately, how these changes might be implemented in the daily work of admissions officers who have to read and select thousands upon thousands of applications.

Toward the end of *Excellent Sheep*, however, Deresiewicz surprises the reader with some thoughts on how "to rethink, reform, and reverse the entire project of elite education" (4), as he puts it in the introduction. His last chapter, evocatively titled "The Self-Overcoming of the Hereditary Meritocracy,"

offers some ideas about a comprehensive reform of the system and, literally on the book's last five pages, Deresiewicz makes a number of suggestions that set him apart from the majority of criticism:

> The changes must go deeper, though, than just reforming the admissions process at selective schools. That might address the problem of mediocrity, but it won't address the greater one of inequality. Private colleges and universities will only ever go so far in opening their gates to the poor and middle class, for the simple reason that they cannot afford to do otherwise. We need instead to overhaul the entire way we organize our higher education system. The problem is the Ivy League itself—the position it and other schools have been allowed to occupy. (237)

One of the biggest problems caused by the way the elite educational system is set up, Deresiewicz argues, is that a number of private institutions have been entrusted with the "training of our leadership class" (237). These colleges and universities, he contends, will always prioritize their own institutional interests over those of society at large, and are thus inherently ill-equipped to meet their responsibilities. This, again, falls into the realm of criticizing the mediocrity of the leadership class produced by elite colleges. An additional, and even more important, reformist intervention would have much broader consequences: Deresiewicz explains how for the longest time he thought that the goal was to create a system in which every child had the same chance to get into an elite college, but that he now realizes that what is really needed is an educational system in which "you don't have to go to the Ivy League, or any private college, to get a first-rate education" (238). What Deresiewicz advocates, on these last pages of his book, is "[p]ublic education, financed with public money, for the benefit of all" (ibid.). He does not restrict his demands to post-secondary education, moreover, but argues persuasively that in order to combat inequality effectively, the stratification of the K-12 sector has to be alleviated as well. Given that these claims are all but unique in the critical literature I surveyed for this chapter, it is interesting to note that Deresiewicz does not position them more centrally. Most reviews do not even discuss these suggestions for reform in any detail, but focus exclusively on the critique of the culture of privilege prevalent at elite institutions.