

## CHAPTER 6

# ‘What for – what ultimately for?’ Liberal Arts and Elite Universities in the United States

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### Abstract

The question of “what for – what ultimately for?” was asked by F.R. Leavis in response to C.P. Snow’s famous lecture, “The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution,” given at the University of Cambridge in 1959. What has since come to be known as ‘the Two Cultures’ debate concerned the gap – and the proper balance – between the technological and natural sciences on the one hand, and the humanities on the other. In his lecture, Snow had argued that the British educational system had over-rewarded the humanities at the expense of scientific and engineering education with the result that people in politics, administration, and industry were ill-equipped to manage the modern scientific world.

‘The Two Cultures’ debate was a fierce dialogue between two Cambridge colleagues about higher education and core curricula – about what we should teach young university students, and what a university education is and should be about. It has surfaced, since the 1960s, in various contexts – most recently in debates concerning the digital humanities and the future, in general, of the humanities. It is therefore a good place to start any discussion about ‘the liberal arts’ – a concept or idea which is the closest equivalent in the Amer-

ican educational context of the German concept of *Bildung* (and the Danish ‘dannelse’).

My chapter is divided into two parts. First, I will offer a few additional observations on the issue of ‘the Two Cultures’. Then, in part II, I will move on to my central topic: liberal arts and US elite universities. University rankings currently seem to be increasing in importance – or at least to be referred to more and more often by university presidents across Europe and the US – and the top universities ranked invariably include several American universities. It therefore makes good sense to have a chapter on US elite universities in a volume on elite universities. In my conclusion, I will return to ‘The Two Cultures Debate’ and compare it to debates currently taking place in the US concerning the future of the liberal arts.

**Key words:** The ‘Two Cultures’ debate – the importance of the humanities – the history of liberal arts in the US – US elite universities – debates on the future of the liberal arts in the US.

In coming to terms with great literature we discover that at bottom we really believe. What for – what ultimately for? What do men live by – the questions work and tell at what I can only call a religious depth of thought and feeling.

F.R. Leavis, 1962

The question of “what for – what ultimately for?” was asked by F.R. Leavis in response to C.P. Snow’s famous lecture, “The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution,” given at the University of Cambridge in 1959. What has since come to be known as ‘the Two Cultures’ debate concerned the gap – and the proper balance – between the technological and natural sciences on the one hand, and the humanities on the other. In his lecture, Snow had argued that

the British educational system had over-rewarded the humanities (especially Latin and Greek) at the expense of scientific and engineering education with the result that people in politics, administration, and industry were ill-equipped to manage the modern scientific world.

Leavis' reaction to Snow's lecture was delivered in his 1962 Richmond Lecture, "Two Cultures? The Significance of C.P. Snow." In and of himself Snow did not matter to Leavis; it is what he represented that was the problem. With all his clichés, repetitions and sentimental banalities, Snow was too obvious, too lacking in depth to question the received truth, Leavis thought. Snow could not stop talking about "social hope," and he preached a way of salvation that entailed welfare for all in terms of material standards of living and advantages of technology only.

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American universities make the top 200 of the list and even though the US seems to be losing some of its dominance,<sup>1</sup> it makes good sense to have a chapter on US elite universities in a volume on elite universities.

In my conclusion, I will return to ‘The Two Cultures Debate’ and compare it to debates currently taking place in the US concerning the future of the liberal arts.

### The ‘two cultures’ debate – and beyond

The dimension that Leavis most of all found lacking in Snow was the individual, the human one<sup>2</sup>. Though all human beings share certain common features – hunger and thirst, for example, and the fact that we all have eyes, noses, legs and arms – “individual lives cannot be aggregated or equated or dealt with quantitatively in any way.” (Leavis 1962 : 20) Spiritually, we are all different and it counts – or ought to count – how each individual human being thinks and feels. Snow’s “social hope” did not catch that inward quality of individual life, that kind of existential thought and experience which might ultimately lead to something as old-fashioned as wisdom. At one level, what was at stake was what the Germans would call *Weltschmerz* – the tragic feeling and creative probing into the big questions about life and death which may at its best produce great art and literature.

At another level, the issue, as Leavis saw it, was the pace of life that modern science and technology seemed to result in. Snow had kept stressing, in his Rede Lecture, the urgency of his concerns, the speed with which today turns into tomorrow – “we have very little time. So little I dare not guess at it” (Snow 1998: 51) – but he hadn’t really paused to consider the deeper implications of this. Brakes must be applied sometimes, Leavis thought. It was not that Snow

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1. See Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2015-2016 – available at [https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2016/world-ranking#!/page/0/length/25/sort\\_by/rank\\_label/sort\\_order/asc/cols/rank\\_only](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2016/world-ranking#!/page/0/length/25/sort_by/rank_label/sort_order/asc/cols/rank_only).

2. This next part of my chapter which concerns ‘the Two Cultures’ debate is taken from Porsdam, 2013.



r. Yale University - an Ivy League university, and one of the oldest in the United States.

was wrong in advocating improvements in scientific education and in living standards for everyone; it was more that “such concern is not enough – disastrously not enough.” (Leavis 1962: 25) Things were changing so rapidly, and critical reflection was urgently needed to help make sense of it all – and to prevent the worst scientific blunders which, in the atomic day and age, could have fatal results. Moreover, important ethical issues could well be at stake – issues that perhaps scientists themselves would not be aware of:

The advance of science and technology means a human future of change so rapid and of such kinds, of tests and challenges so unprecedented, of decisions and possible non-decisions so momentous and insidious in their consequences, that mankind – this is surely clear – will need to be in full intelligent possession of its full humanity (and ‘possession’ here means, not confident ownership of that which belongs to *us* – our property, but a basic living deference towards that to which, opening as it does into the unknown and itself unmeasurable, we know we belong). I haven’t chosen to say that mankind will need all its traditional wisdom; that might suggest a kind of conservatism that, so far as I am concerned, is the enemy. What we need, and shall continue to need not less, is something with the livingness of the

deepest vital instinct; as intelligence, a power – rooted, strong in experience, and supremely human – of creative response to the new challenges of time; something that is alien to either of Snow’s cultures. (Leavis 1962: 25-26)

Intellectual depth and complexity along with a both critical and creative response to change – or *life*, an essential concept to Leavis because it was right at the core of what it means to be human – this is what humanities scholars such as Leavis himself could help preserve. Without “the creation of the human world, including language,” he argued, “the triumphant erection of the scientific edifice would not have been possible.” The word “language” is crucial here. To Leavis, language was not just a means of communication; it was through language that meaning was created – meaning which was then transmitted through literature as a “cultural community or consciousness.” The place where this cultural consciousness might be sustained was the university, and because language was central to thought and thought, past as well as present, would be communicated via literature, the center of the university ought to be a “vital English School,” Leavis maintained:

Like Snow I look to the university. Unlike Snow, I am concerned to make it really a university, something (that is) more than a collocation of specialist departments – to make it a centre of human consciousness: perception, knowledge, judgment and responsibility. And perhaps I have sufficiently indicated on what lines I would justify my seeing the centre of a university in a vital English School. (Leavis 1962: 27, 28, 29)

Snow’s lecture got an immediate response, both positive and negative, and he later thought that this must be because he had touched on something which was already “in the air”: “It was clear that many people had been thinking on this assembly of topics. The ideas were in the air... any of us could have produced a hubbub.” Apart from the fact that these ideas were not all that original to him, what could be inferred from this, Snow claimed, was that “there must be something in them.” (Snow 1998: 54-55)

Snow had a point. Whether or not people agreed with him – and Leavis and many others obviously did not – he was on to something that greatly interested people. In fact, there was a similar debate going on at the University of Oxford. Here, Isaiah Berlin took the leading part in building a new graduate college, Wolfson College, which would promote the powerful scientific and technological developments of the time. (Hardy et al. 2009) And across the Atlantic, famous historian and special assistant to President Kennedy between 1961 to 1963 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. gave a talk to the American Sociological Association at its fifty-seventh annual meeting in August 1962 (a mere six months after Leavis had reacted so strongly to Snow) in which he discussed what he considered to be the hegemonic drive of the quantitative approach. This particular annual meeting of the ASA being in honor of Paul Lazarsfeld, who was considered by many to be one of the founders of modern empirical sociology, Schlesinger had called his talk “The Humanist Looks at Empirical Social Research”. (Schlesinger, Jr. 1962)

Schlesinger started out with a *cri de coeur*:

Insofar as empirical social research can drive historians to criticize their assumptions, to expose their premises, to tighten their logic, to pursue and respect their facts, to restrain their rhetoric – in short, insofar as it gives them an acute sense of the extraordinary precariousness of the historical enterprise – it administers a wholly salutary shock to a somewhat uncritical and even complacent discipline. (Schlesinger, Jr. 1962: 768)

Having thus demonstrated that he had absolutely no quarrel with empirical social research per se and that, as a historian, he felt indebted to sociologists such as Lazarsfeld, Schlesinger then went on to clarify that the problem he wanted to address concerned the way in which many sociologists had come to consider empirical social research “not one of several paths to social wisdom, but the central and in-fallible path.” Having fallen under the spell of what Schlesinger thought could only be called “the mystique of empirical social research,” these sociologists had increasingly come to understand empirical social research as “above all, quantitative research – that

is, research which deals in quantifiable problems and yields numerical or quasi-numerical conclusions.” He stressed once again that he did not wish to be misunderstood; no historian could possibly “deny that quantitative research, complete with IBM cards and computers, can make an important contribution to historical understanding.” What he questioned was the assumption that such quantitative research “can handle everything which the humanist must take into account.” And perhaps worst of all, Schlesinger argued, was the dismissal of everything non-quantifiable as being irrelevant and un-important. What quantitative methods are not very good at handling can in fact well be “the things that matter most,” (Schlesinger, Jr. 1962: 768-70) he speculated – and then ended by going beyond his own discipline to conclude with a couple of paragraphs that concerned the humanities as a whole:

There is much, I would add, which we must leave, whether we like it or not, not just to historians but to poets, novelists, painters, musicians, philosophers, theologians, even politicians, even saints – in short, to one form or another of humanist. For an indefinite future, I suspect, humanism will continue to yield truths about both individual and social experience which quantitative social research by itself could never reach. Whether these truths are inherently or merely temporarily inaccessible to the quantitative method is a question which only experience can answer.

In the meantime, this humanist is bound to say that, as an aid to the understanding of society and men, quantitative social research is admirable and indispensable. As a guide to the significance of problems, it is misleading when it exudes the assumption that only problems susceptible to quantitative solutions are important. As a means of explaining human or social behavior, it is powerful but profoundly incomplete. As the source of a theory of human nature and of the universe, it is but a new formulation of an ancient romantic myth. (Schlesinger, Jr. 1962: 771)

Leavis would have agreed wholeheartedly. As Guy Ortolano has shown, it was not the importance of science and technology that Leavis questioned, but rather the complete endorsement by modern civilization of ideals such as description, logic and clarity – to the



exclusion of older, more qualitative ideals. (Ortolano 2005 & Ortolano 2009) For neither Leavis nor Schlesinger, that is, was it ever a question of science/technology versus the arts and humanities – but instead a question of finding the right balance between quantifying and qualitative ways of thinking. Both are important – and both offer us something that we cannot do without.

### Liberal arts and American elite universities

Schlesinger received his BA at Harvard University – where he also later taught (before becoming a part of President Kennedy's team), even without having ever obtained a proper PhD-degree. This was unusual. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and at the instigation of, among others, Charles William Eliot, who had become president of Harvard in 1869, research-based learning and scientific knowledge had become the norm. Under Eliot's leadership, the undergraduate curriculum was liberalized, and highly structured professional and advanced degrees were developed. From now on, only by completing a Bachelor's degree could a student proceed to either graduate school (for his/her Master's or PhD) or professional school (law, medicine, nursing etc.). This is pretty much the system we know today – a system which is very different from the Danish and other mainland European systems. While still in high school, an American student applies to college – a four-year degree which will give him/her a Bachelor's degree. Unlike in Denmark or Germany, the student does not apply to study a particular area of study (say, history or English or political science); he or she only chooses a major in his or her third year. During the first two years, he or she has to take courses in many different fields, ideally covering not only the humanities or the social sciences or the natural sciences – but all of these. "Implicit in the notion of such education as it is practiced in the US is the concept of breadth. You concentrate in one field, but you get exposure to a range of others. You don't just learn to think; you learn that there are different ways to think." (Deresiewicz 2014: 151)

If a student wants to go on studying beyond his or her Bachelor's degree, then he or she has to apply again to either graduate or

professional school. Advancement to a Master's degree is not automatic. A second application must be written – most often to a different university than the one at which a student did his or her Bachelor's degree. From now on, however, specialization occurs in the American as in the mainland-European systems. And if the undergraduate years are characterized by breadth and relative freedom, (post)graduate education is much more rigorously structured and linked to achievement in research (graduate school) or capacity to practice a profession (professional school).

The model of the modern research university that motivated Charles Eliot at Harvard and his colleagues was an importation from Germany. According to the German idea of the university, which was, in part, inspired by the writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt, “the pursuit of scientific knowledge, in religion, biology, or history, meant endless systematic inquiry and open publication and discussion,” the practical use of scholarly findings always taking “a back seat to protecting the ongoing pursuit of knowledge for its own sake.” (Roth 2014: 107) Students would work together with their professors to pursue knowledge – a pursuit that can be successful only if it is free, not just from censorship, but also from being directed by the powers that be in terms of what to study and how to publish and make use of the fruits of such study. The result for US education, argues Michael S. Roth, was that liberal education came to be seen as a preparation for further academic or professional study:

Whether one was to pursue engineering or medicine, law or commerce, students were imagined to continue their specialized training on the base of the broad liberal learning they experienced as undergraduates. Colleges were seen as components of universities in which students would receive the benefits of professionalization through more advanced study, and universities were organized not primarily to disseminate knowledge to students but to produce knowledge through research. (Roth 2014: 106)

Before the mid- to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, liberal education had been seen as an end in itself. The mission had been character building – to



2. Harvard University - another Ivy League university, and the oldest in the United States.

produce citizens who could act responsibly because they had learned to think for themselves. At least until the 1970s or so, a version of this latter mission still existed at many elite undergraduate institutions. Then, for reasons that I shall come back to, things changed. A fierce debate has followed these changes. The scientific and vocational model has won out completely in relation to graduate and professional schools; the debates currently raging in the US concern the undergraduate or liberal arts level.

It is no coincidence that the September 2015 issues of both *Harper's* and *The Atlantic* (two well-respected magazines) carried lead articles on the state of higher education in the US, for example. The article in *Harper's*, "The Neoliberal Arts: How college sold its soul to the market," is written by William Deresiewicz. (Deresiewicz 2015) The title of *The Atlantic* article, written by Jonathan Haidt and Gred Lukianoff, is "The Coddling of the American Mind." (Haidt & Lukianoff 2015) Whereas in his article, Deresiewicz criticizes the culture of the market and neoliberalism for reducing all values to money values, Haidt and Lukianoff take aim, in their *Atlantic* article, at phenomena such as "vindictive protectiveness," "trigger warn-

ings,” “microaggression,” and “emotional reasoning” – all new ways in which college students, in the name of emotional well-being, are demanding protection from words and ideas that they consider offensive. The thematic focus of these articles may thus be somewhat different, but they both point to recent developments that their authors deem disastrous for the liberal arts and for the opportunity of American students to get a good education.

Deresiewicz and Haidt are both academics while Lukianoff is an attorney and the president of a foundation. All three are vocal participants, both as public intellectuals and as academics, in the current debates on liberal arts education and elite universities. (Deresiewicz 2014; Haidt 2012 and Haidt 2005; Lukianoff 2014 and Lukianoff 2012) Their writings on the skills and values they want these institutions to impart to their students reflect the way in which college and university degrees are a major marker of status in the American context. And today, of course, the Ivy League Schools and certain other universities such as Stanford and MIT have become brand names that attract many, many more applicants than they have seats for. These are also the schools that for a number of years have topped every ranking of the most elite universities in the world (along with a few European ones such as Oxford and Cambridge).

Competition to get into these elite schools is accordingly fierce, just as admission standards are extreme. Most of all, though, these schools are very expensive. The average college tuition has increased over 1,200 percent since 1978 (the first year that records were kept), claims Fareed Zakaria in his 2015 book, *In Defense of a Liberal Education*. “That is four times the pace of the consumer price index and twice as fast as medical costs” – an extraordinary cost spiral and “one of the most striking phenomena in modern American life.” (Zakaria 2015: 119-120) A liberal education was affordable to a middle-class family in the 1950s and 1960s. This is no longer the case, Zakaria writes – no wonder, therefore, that many parents worry about their son or daughter “jeopardize[ing] everything by majoring in the ‘wrong’ subject or getting a less marketable degree.” (Zakaria 2014: 120)

The rise in cost is at the heart of many of the present debates

about the value of a college degree. As many as forty percent of the current student body at both Harvard and Yale, by some estimates, come from the top six percentile of American households, just as about twenty two percent of students at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton come from only about one hundred high schools (0.3 percent of the nationwide total) – “the ‘feeder’ system is alive and well,” as Deresiewicz puts it. (Deresiewicz 2014: 207-208) What this means is that whereas there may well be diversity in terms of gender and race, there is an increasing economic *resegregation* happening at the moment on the campuses of US elite schools: “Economic inequality leads to educational inequality, which leads to an applicant pool that is heavily skewed toward the rich.” (Deresiewicz 2014: 207) As both his article in *Harper’s* and the title of his 2014 book, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* imply, Deresiewicz is highly critical of what is currently going on at the country’s elite schools, not just in terms of elite education today reproducing the class system, but also in terms of the quality of such education and its impact on students. Himself a product of elite education and having for a number of years taught in the English Department at Yale University, Deresiewicz left in 2008 and has since dedicated his freelance writing career to precisely the issue of the fate of the liberal arts in the US.

“What are the liberal arts,” Deresiewicz asks in his recent book – and then answers: “They are those disciplines” – the humanities, but also the sciences and social sciences – “in which the pursuit of knowledge is conducted for its own sake...They stand in contrast to applied or vocational fields like nursing, education, business, and even law and medicine (though they furnish the knowledge that underlies them)...”. (Deresiewicz 2014: 149-150) Without regard to any vocational utility or financial reward, “in the liberal arts, you pursue the trail of inquiry wherever it leads. Truth, not use or reward, is the only criterion” (Ibid.) – or this is at least the general idea. Students study the most challenging works of art, history, politics, philosophy, science and literature in order to learn, to educate themselves and to discipline their minds.

This is obviously of great importance at the individual level, to each student him- or herself; but educating a well-rounded citizenry

who can speak truth to power and make informed choices is just as important at the societal level. This is what several of the American Founding Fathers thought. Thomas Jefferson (the third president of the US) was committed to the idea, for example, that freedom is based on literacy and knowledge, and that the new republic's success, perhaps even its survival, depended upon the "virtue" of its citizens. He was convinced that only by educating its citizenry could the new American Republic avoid both governmental tyranny and popular anarchy. John Adams (the second president), otherwise Jefferson's political rival, agreed on the necessity of education as a foundation for maintaining freedom. He thought, like Jefferson, that education should be a project for the government - not a private initiative. In order to ensure that the US would be a place of merit where birth and hereditary privilege would not count for much, "the whole people," Adams wrote, "must take upon themselves the education of the whole people, and must be willing to bear the expenses of it...There should not be a district of one mile square, without a school in it, not founded by a charitable individual, but maintained at the public expense of the people themselves." (Quoted in Zakaria 2015: 113) And it was not just the popular instruction of the citizenry that mattered; higher education was also very much on the minds of many of the Founding Fathers.

Jefferson helped found the University of Virginia in 1819 (known to his contemporaries simply as 'Jefferson's university'), and a few years before that, in 1751, Benjamin Franklin was instrumental in forming an Academy which was the first independent, non-religiously affiliated college in the colonies and later became the University of Pennsylvania. A self-taught man and an inventor, Franklin was more focused, than were both Jefferson and Adams, on the practical and useful than on learning for its own sake. Knowledge was power, and Franklin thought that education should help students make better choices as they embarked on their careers in business or law, or in politics or some other field. One did not need a university to teach one how "to carry handsomely, and enter a Room genteenly (which might as well be acquir'd at a Dancing-School)...," as he once put it in his criticism of America's leading colleges at the time, for example Harvard, which produced, he thought, privilege

and conceit rather than practical and useful knowledge. (Quoted in Roth 2014: 96-97)

Though we are essentially talking about education for the few at this point – white, male property owners – the idea was to make higher education work toward inclusion and toward nation building. Many Founding Fathers worried whether citizens of the new American Republic would be able to set aside self-interest in favor of the general common good. Liberal education, they thought, would encourage the kind of disinterested behavior and the careful cultivation of every man's innate moral sense that is needed to further thinking along both individual and collective lines. The Constitution, created in 1787 and coming into force in 1789, did not specifically mention education so the American Philosophical Society (APS) sponsored a national competition in 1795 to elicit proposals for a "system of liberal education" and "a plan for instituting and conducting public schools" in America.<sup>3</sup>

Founded by Benjamin Franklin in 1743, the APS was one of the country's oldest and most prestigious scholarly organizations. Proposals were to be submitted anonymously, and the APS expected a great many of them. But only seven proposals were handed in. Members of the prize committee were especially pleased with two of these, both of which were declared winners of the competition. Written by Presbyterian minister Samuel Knox (1756-1832) and publisher and APS member Samuel Harrison Smith (1772-1845), respectively, both proposals called for the nation to adopt a hierarchical system of schooling from the primary to the college level and for the establishment of a national university which, in addition to having students read the classics, would emphasize distinctly American ideas.

Education, democracy, and nation building have been inextricably linked in the American context and in American social thought and practice ever since. As the higher education system has gradually been opened up to non-WASPs (white Anglo-Saxon Protes-

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3. Benjamin Justice and others tell this fascinating story in Justice, Benjamin (ed.): *The Founding Fathers, Education, and "The Great Contest": The American Philosophical Society Prize of 1797*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

tants) and women, attending college has been viewed as a means to promote social mobility and to overcome structural barriers to status and opportunity. For a number of immigrants, for example, college has been much more than “a glorified trade school,” as Fareed Zakaria puts it. (Zakaria 2015: 17) “Newcomers,” Zakaria (himself an immigrant from India) writes, “often from lower middle-class backgrounds and immigrant families with little education, enthusiastically embraced the liberal arts. They saw it as a gateway to a career, and also as a way to assimilate into American culture.” (Ibid.)

Zakaria especially points to the post-war years during which this was a familiar pattern. Today, as we have already seen, the picture is somewhat different. For the past couple of decades politicians and others have sought to reorient US higher education into something more focused and technical, just as the cost of a decent college education has become prohibitive. “Education,” write Grace Kao, Elizabeth Vaquera and Kimberly Goyette, has always been “an important way to judge how well immigrants ‘fit in’ or assimilate into the US.” (Kao et.al., 2013: 2-3) However, opportunities to succeed in the American educational system are not the same for all immigrants. “Race, ethnicity, gender, national origin and the ability to speak English fluently are important in shaping the very different lives experienced by immigrants.” (Ibid.)

The discussion about how inclusive and meritocratic American higher education (and especially elite schools such as the Ivy League schools) is and ought to be, but also how practical/vocational a liberal arts education ought to be has been there ever since – as has the question of whether it would be better to have a fixed curriculum of topics for all to pursue (the ‘Great Books’ approach), or whether the students ought to be able to choose for themselves. But whatever their take on this, most American educators have seen the development of character as one of the most essential results of a liberal arts education.

For William Deresiewicz’s “excellent sheep,” those “miseducated” members of the American elite, however, neither talk of character building nor of meritocracy seem to matter anymore, however. Already privileged, Deresiewicz’s Yale undergraduates do not see college as a time for self-discovery so much as a time to accumulate



extra credentials or gold stars. Deresiewicz calls them “credentialists” because they only do things (double-majors, say) to boost their CVs and out of a lust for prestige and affluence – not to follow their dreams, experiment, or find their true passion. Some of this is a response to their parents’ need for gratification through achievement, and Deresiewicz sees Yale Law Professor Amy Chua’s book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* from 2011 as the perfect example of all that is wrong with US elite academia today. Chua intended her book to be a rebuke to lazy American parenting styles; instead, claims Deresiewicz,

Chua’s ‘Asian’ parenting style is simply an extreme version of upper-middle-class practice – the unrelenting pressure as she hounds her daughters to excel, the willful disregard of everything except ‘achievement’ – and it shows us all that’s wrong with it and that lies behind it. Perusing her book is like reading a novel with an unreliable narrator: she is constantly revealing things she doesn’t realize about herself, is blind to the meaning of her own story. (Deresiewicz 2014: 46)

The very fact that her daughters did get into Harvard, should not be seen as a validation of her method, but instead as “a condemnation of Harvard’s, and of the system as a whole,” Deresiewicz maintains. “Of course her daughter[s] got into Harvard: that is exactly the kind of parenting the system rewards. That’s exactly what is wrong with it.” (Deresiewicz 2014: 48)

## Concluding remarks

One of the academics who has joined the chorus of criticism against the way in which liberal arts have developed in the US is the former Dean of the Yale Law School, Anthony Kronman. Since he stepped down as Dean in 2004, Kronman has taught in the so-called Directed Studies Program at Yale, devoting himself to the humanities. In his 2007 book, *Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*, he makes a passionate plea to revive what he sees as the lost tradition of the liberal arts, especially the humanities, of preparing young people to address life’s most im-

portant question: what is living for? Echoing, but never quoting or referring directly to F.R. Leavis, Kronman claims that defining a 'good life' has been pushed to the margins of respectability in the fields of literature, philosophy, history and politics. The result is a lot of unhappy young people who get no spiritual guidance. Looking for answers to the most important, existential questions having been demoted in the humanities by now, Kronman argues, these young people end up being attracted, sometimes fatally so, to various religions and dubious sects. This is a problem both at the personal and the societal level.

Like several of the other critics mentioned already, Kronman puts part of the blame for this sorry state of affairs on the advancement of the technological and natural sciences at the cost of the humanities. But he adds one more reason: the rise from the 1970s onwards of political correctness which has shut down any serious discussion of life's meaning in favor of a multicultural take that is focused exclusively on race and gender equality. He sums up his argument in this way:

...the culture of political correctness that strangles serious debate, the careerism that distract from life as a whole, the blind acceptance of science and technology that disguise and deny our human condition. It is these that now put the idea of an art of living at risk and undermine the authority of the humanities teachers to teach it. (258-59)

I encountered political correctness of the sort that Kronman talks about when I first came to the US to do a PhD in American studies at Yale University in 1983. The 1980s was the decade that saw the first serious cannon debates and culture wars. These were very much with us in the American Studies Department. As graduate students, most of us would be teaching assistants for professors teaching core courses on American literature and history – and for these courses, the question of **whose** literature, **whose** history invariably came up. When I decided to do my dissertation on the author Henry James and the way in which he discussed the relationship between his native America and his adopted Europe, one of my fellow students asked why I wanted to write on one of these dead, white, (semi-)

3. “The Ivy League consists of these eight prestigious universities, seven of which were founded in the U.S. colonial period.”



European males – why not write on Toni Morrison instead, she suggested.

Before going to Yale I had finished an MA in English at the university where I now teach and do research. The University of Copenhagen that I knew in the late 1970s and early ‘80s was in the last throes, so to speak, of the kind of Marxist thinking that characterized the humanities around and after 1968. We didn’t do literary theory in the English Department; we did Marxist literary theory, for example. The sort of dogmatic thinking that this would sometimes result in was wonderful to get away from. Yale was a great relief for me in this sense as in so many others; spending four years at this magnificent university opened my horizon in every way – even though you could say that I exchanged one kind of political correctness for another.

The 1980s was also the decade of deconstruction at Yale. Paul de Man and Hillis Miller were there, and Derrida would come to town regularly to lecture. Deconstructivist and postmodernist thinking have quite obviously been important in so many different ways; the pompousness of certain Eurocentric ways of thinking and reacting needed to be exposed and discredited. But deconstructivist thinking has also left one sad legacy: an overly developed way of being critical. For several decades now, students have been taught that being smart means being a critical unmasker of all that doesn’t make sense:

Our best college students are really good at being critical...But...being entirely negative, is not only seriously unsatisfying; it is ultimately

counterproductive. And not only because those outside the tribe see these marks of sophistication as politically correct groupthink...In training our students in the techniques of critical thinking, we may be giving them reasons to remain *guarded* – which can translate into reasons *not* to learn...Critical thinking is sterile without the capacity for empathy and comprehension that stretches the self. (Roth 2014: 182-184; emphases in the original)

Things are deconstructed – but rarely then reconstructed. This allows students to develop a critical distance to the context or culture under study, but it does not necessarily help them address ethical issues and issues of values (including their own). As Roth puts it, “we have been less interested in showing how we make a norm legitimate than in sharpening our tools for delegitimation.” (Roth 2014: 185)

That “what for – what ultimately for?” question with which I opened is just as important today as it was when Leavis raised it. For Leavis and several of the other critics of the liberal arts that I have considered here, the main culprit is the rise of the quantitative and technological. That may be – but to this should be added the legacy of deconstruction, in my opinion. Investigating “how we generate the values we believe in, or the norms according to which we go about our lives”, and “how we make a norm legitimate” (Roth 2014: 185) is important – why else would our students leave university with a belief that it matters to get engaged and to fight for that in which you believe?

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