

Policy Discussion 2:

Documentary Film

“Ivory Towers”

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The Miseducation of America

The movie 'Ivory Tower' and the rhetoric of crisis and collapse

By William Deresiewicz

While I was watching *Ivory Tower*, a documentary about the state of college in America that appears in select theaters this month (the movie also airs on CNN this fall), it occurred to me that of the many problems with higher education these days, not the least concerns the way we talk about it. "Efficiency," "art-history majors," "kids who graduate with \$100,000 in debt," "the college bubble," the whole rhetoric of crisis and collapse: The public discourse is dominated by sound bites, one-liners, hearsay, horror stories, and a very great deal of misinformation.

Higher ed is not unique in this respect, of course, but it is particularly bad. College, as the movie points out, was always treated as a black box: 18-year-olds were inserted at one end, 22-year-olds came out the other, and as long as the system appeared to be working, no one bothered to inquire what happened in between. Americans, as a result, have very little understanding of what college is about—how it works, what it's for, what larger social benefits it offers—and those employed in higher education have had very little practice in explaining it to them. The debate has been left to the politicians, the pundits, and increasingly, the hustlers and ideologues. Few who talk about college in public understand it, and few who understand it talk about it.

Ivory Tower, for the most part, is an honorable exception. The movie, directed by Andrew Rossi (*Page One: Inside the New York Times*), covers a lot of territory, and it covers it patiently, clearly, and thoughtfully. The headline issues of ballooning tuition and student debt are placed in their historical context: institutional competition, expansion, and borrowing; administrative bloat; the rise of the "party track" and its concomitant amenities as public universities have turned to full payers from out of state to deal

with budgetary shortfalls; and the long-term withdrawal of public funding—the shift from taxes to student loans—that has been the fundamental factor in creating the entire mess.

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Along the way we visit Harvard, Arizona State, Deep Springs, Spelman, Cooper Union, and Bunker Hill Community College, listen to professors, students, presidents, experts, and entrepreneurs, hear about the "uncollege" movement, the "flipped" classroom, and, of course, MOOCs. Equally notable is what we do not hear about. Its regrettably tendentious title notwithstanding, the documentary refrains from taking the usual swipes at the liberal arts, English majors, or those old standbys, the lazy academic and the overpaid professor. It understands that college is about a great deal more, for both the student and society, than training people for their first jobs.

Still, for all its admirable instincts, *Ivory Tower* ends up reproducing some of the errors, and more importantly, many of the limitations of the higher-education debate. We can start with student debt, as everybody does. The movie hits the usual points. It reminds us that the total of outstanding student loans exceeds \$1-trillion, tells us that the average debt is \$25,000 at graduation, and touches on the story of a young person who has borrowed an enormous sum (\$140,000) and faces a daunting labor market while living on food stamps. But it also makes the usual omissions. It doesn't tell us that the rise in aggregate debt is mainly the result, not of individuals borrowing more for college, but of more individuals going. From 2000 to 2012, per-student borrowing increased by about 30 percent—deplorable, but not catastrophic. It doesn't tell us that "average debt" refers to all borrowers, not all students. Forty-three percent of those who graduate from public universities, which accounts for about 70 percent of the college population, don't take out any loans at all (a figure that changed very little over those 12 years). In 2012, average debt per graduate

was a little over \$14,000. (The numbers are somewhat worse at private institutions: about \$30,000 per borrower and \$20,000 per graduate.) As for those who owe \$100,000 or more, they represent a tiny minority of students, on the order of 2 percent. Meanwhile, 43 percent of borrowers (and therefore more than 65 percent of students) owe \$10,000 or less.

This is not to say that student debt is not a big, serious, and growing problem, or that tuitions are not far too high. Behind that trillion dollars in student debt lies another, no doubt even larger number: the sum that families are paying (and in some cases, borrowing) so their kids don't have to take out quite so many loans. Behind the figures on average debt at graduation is an even more distressing story: debt at, let us call it, nongraduation, the moment when so many young people decide to give up on college altogether (only 56 percent of students at public universities graduate within six years)—undoubtedly, in many cases, because they don't want to take on more debt. Then there are the many students who are deterred by costs from starting college at all. Still, just once I'd like to see a profile of a recent graduate who's taken out, say, \$15,000 in loans, because I want to know what the experience of the typical student actually is. How much does that debt constrain her when it comes to making choices: about jobs, about starting a family, about buying a house, about further education? How long does it take to pay off?

What's true of debt is true of employment, as well. The job market for recent graduates is undoubtedly tough, but it is very far from "miserable," as someone in the movie is allowed to say. In fact, the higher you go up the educational ladder, the less severe the economic downturn has been. As of April, the unemployment rate for college graduates ages 25 to 34 was 3 percent. The wage premium for people with bachelor's degrees has been rising steadily since 1980 and now stands at 98 percent relative to those who have only finished high school—a difference, as the movie notes, that amounts to nearly an extra million dollars in median lifetime earnings. College is not only still a good investment; it is the best investment you can make.

This is not a cause for rejoicing; it's the reason kids are in a bind.

They know they have to go to college, and they also know they're probably going to have to take on debt to do so. But it's also the reason that higher education is not, in fact, a bubble—that there isn't going to be a sudden institutional collapse.

Ivory Tower shows us why it's so important that we get this right: that we think with facts, with respect to college costs and what they get you, not emotions. When we cherry pick the scariest stories and numbers, we do two things: We open the door to hucksters selling easy answers, and we forget what college is really for. Apocalypticism leads to messianism. Close behind the anxious parents whom we see on college tours at Wesleyan and NYU—variously blithe or glum adolescents in tow—come, like vultures to a kill, a pair of now-familiar figures: Peter Thiel and Sebastian Thrun. The former is the sponsor of the Thiel Fellowship, which pays about two dozen students a year \$100,000 each to drop out of school and pursue other projects. The latter is a founder of Udacity, one of the leading purveyors of MOOCs.

Thrun's motives are not difficult to discern. An oily charlatan who looks and sounds like a Bond villain, he wants to make a lot of money. Udacity, like Coursera and others, is a for-profit enterprise. All that business about bringing the world's educational resources to children in Outer Mongolia is nothing more than a loss leader. At the news conference announcing Udacity's deal to offer for-credit courses at San Jose State—the key initial step in monetizing the MOOCs—he looks like he just swallowed a canary. He also refuses to answer the first question: "How's Udacity being paid, and how much?"

Thiel is in it for other reasons. Like Peter Schiff, whom we see more than once—the movie's leading spokesman for the claim that college is a bubble that's about to burst, Schiff is an investor who predicted the financial collapse and has been wrong about pretty much everything since—Thiel is a doctrinaire libertarian. Thiel describes himself as an objectivist, has donated widely to right-wing candidates, and has said that he no longer believes "that freedom and democracy are compatible." Schiff opposes the minimum wage and the corporate income tax and believes that Medicare is a Ponzi scheme. Both men have been involved in Ron

Paul's presidential campaigns. Their claims about higher education, and in Thiel's case, his moves against it, are clearly driven by hostility to public institutions, public spending, public everything.

Ivory Tower, to its credit, ends up undermining Thrun pretty thoroughly and Thiel quite effectively (though all too briefly). We follow the saga at San Jose State from the news conference, to the reaction on the campus, which became a major center of anti-MOOC activism (one professor, noting that Udacity is a start-up, says, "I wouldn't hire a start-up to ... do a bathroom remodel"), to the pilot project's dismal outcomes: a pass rate of about 50 percent in one course and 25 percent in two others. (The movie was presumably completed too soon to include the news that Thrun, having more or less given up on the kinds of kids who go to San Jose State, has [shifted his attention](#) to corporate clients.) As for Thiel, we get simply this: Asked about the problem of the 99.99+ percent of students who don't receive his fellowships and aren't likely to become the next Mark Zuckerberg, he says, "I don't have answers for it."

Still, too much is allowed to pass unchallenged. Thiel's concession comes after long, uncritical visits to the UnCollege Gap Year Program, in San Francisco, and an "education hacker house," in Silicon Valley. (The latter is described as "a communal living space where college dropouts work on education-related start-ups," which makes me want to start a communal living space where medical-school dropouts work on surgery-related start-ups.) The \$100,000 meme is sounded more than once. A kid on the gap-year program is allowed to assert that "in a couple of years," schools are going to start folding and "the only colleges that are going to matter in the future" are the ones in the Ivy League—an article of faith among the hack-your-education crowd. The notion that you now can get what you need out of college by going online is insistently repeated.

We should also note, what the movie understandably does not have time to tell us, who the people touting these alternatives to college are. We see the kids in the UnCollege program being addressed by Michael Staton, who is identified as a

partner in Learn Capital, a venture-capital company that specializes in education. Staton himself has a B.A. from Clark University. At the Silicon Valley hacker house, we meet Elizabeth Stark. As far as I've been able to discover, Stark does not have a significant financial stake in persuading students not to go to college, but she does have a degree from Harvard Law as well as teaching affiliations at Yale and NYU. (Thiel, by the way, has bachelor's and law degrees from Stanford, the former as a philosophy major; Thrun has a Ph.D. from the University of Bonn; and Schiff received a bachelor's at Berkeley.)

As for Dale Stephens, who founded UnCollege with a Thiel Fellowship, and to whose ripened wisdom we are also treated, this is a young man who clearly knows how to get his bread buttered. Tuition for the gap year program runs \$15,000-16,000 for a 10-week semester, which is more than what they'd make you pay at Stanford. Stephens will also sell you his book, *Hacking Your Education*, for \$10.70 in paperback, \$10.16 on Kindle. As usual, the surest way to profit from a get-rich-quick scheme is to peddle it to others.

I'd like to know whether the rest of these people, if they had their educations to do over again, would take their own advice, or what they plan to tell their children. I'd also like to know how many college dropouts Thiel, Thrun, Schiff, or Staton have hired, as well as whether Stark, were she to sit on the admissions committee at, say, Harvard Law, would admit one.

"The truth is, there are powerful forces at work in our society that are actively hostile to the college ideal."

It isn't likely that a lot of kids are going to follow these pied pipers anytime soon. Far more dangerous for the future of higher education—and this is equally true of the MOOCs, which, Thrun's apostasy notwithstanding, are still regarded as the coming thing—is the way in which these schemes impoverish our idea of what college ought to be about in the first place. *Ivory Tower* tells and shows us much about these larger purposes. Columbia's Andrew Delbanco, who writes frequently on higher education (and who, I

should say, is a friend and former teacher of mine) is given room to speak of college as "a way of trying to preserve cultural memory" and thus "a kind of struggle against time and mortality"; about the commitment, at colonial institutions, "to the idea that students could be transformed to lead lives of meaning and purpose"; and about the need, in a democracy, to cultivate an educated citizenry. A Spelman student tells us that "college, being a place of mental growth, simultaneously can be a place of spiritual growth, because the two really go hand in hand." At Deep Springs, we witness students working on the ranch, debating Hegel in a seminar, engaging intensely with a professor, and meeting to choose the curriculum—scenes that illustrate the claim that one of them makes (and that you are not likely to hear at Harvard, Arizona State, or pretty much anywhere else), that "the school stands for something."

All that in about the first half-hour. But then come the issues of funding and debt; the revolt at Cooper Union over the decision to abrogate the institution's mission statement and begin to charge tuition; the arrival of Thiel and Thrun and their guinea pigs, minions, and critics. By the time we're done, the only questions left are costs and how to pay for them, not what it is we're paying for. The latter has been answered, implicitly but unmistakably, in Thiel and Thrun's own terms: the instrumental and economic ones of jobs and job skills. (The course we spend by far the most amount of time observing, across the whole film, is Harvard's "Introduction to Computer Science," now the largest class in the college.)

The movie, no doubt inadvertently, has reproduced the drift of the larger debate. If the only thing you think about, on the front end of the college experience, is money, then that's the only thing you're going to think about on the back end, too. Which means that when you come to talk about the four years in between, you have already lost the argument.

This is how Michael Staton breaks it down for the kids in the UnCollege program: When parents pay for college, he says, "what they're really paying for is for you not to be left behind in the information economy." (Talk about a positive message.) He

then "unbundles" the value of college into three components: knowledge, network, and credential—all of which, he says, can now be accessed easily and freely, or cheaply, online. Even in the narrowest of instrumental terms, the idea of learning being propagated here is absurdly simplistic and underinformed. (As with elementary and secondary education, the loudest voices in the college debate tend to belong to those who have the least experience in the classroom.) What Staton means by knowledge, as he puts it himself, is "content," and what he means by teaching is the transfer of content. That's the model of the MOOCs, as well: education as an engineering problem, the movement of information from one brain to another—not the development of intellectual capacities, not the ability to formulate questions or devise solutions to unfamiliar problems, not imagination and creativity, not the power to continue learning after college on your own (all of which are necessary, as any employer will tell you, for a successful career in the "information economy"), and certainly not personal growth or the discovery of meaning, let alone any kind of larger social purpose.

The truth is, there are powerful forces at work in our society that are actively hostile to the college ideal. That distrust critical thinking and deny the proposition that democracy necessitates an educated citizenry. That have no use for larger social purposes. That decline to recognize the worth of that which can't be bought or sold. Above all, that reject the view that higher education is a basic human right.

The film recounts the history and recent fate of that idea: its origin among the philanthropists of the industrial age, figures like Peter Cooper, founder of his eponymous Union; its progressive unfolding through the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862, the GI Bill of 1944, the postwar expansion of the University of California, and the Higher Education Act of 1965, which created the federal student-loan and grant programs; and its deliberate destruction under Ronald Reagan and his ideological heirs.

Free, high-quality higher education (just like free, high-quality school, which we continue to at least pretend to endorse): that is what we used to believe in; that's what many other countries still

believe in; that is what we must believe in once again. The filmmakers undoubtedly knew what they were doing when they chose to show us the moment, during that seminar at Deep Springs, when the students are debating Hegel's proposition that, as their professor puts it, "you need to have a common identity as citizens, because it creates the bonds of affection." Or in Delbanco's words, "What kind of society do we want to be?" Cooper Union's commencement speaker, that tumultuous spring of 2013, turns out to have been none other than Michael Bloomberg. "The debate you're having really isn't about whether education is free," we see him tell the students. "It's really about who can and who is willing to pay for it."

On this the billionaire and I agree. In terms of the "can" (and it's hard to believe the word could even pass his lips), the answer is clear. Not just the plutocrats, not just the upper class, but the upper middle class, as well. Everybody knows by now that the share of national income that accrues to the famous one percent has risen to about 23 percent, higher than at almost any time since 1928. But the share that accrues to the top 10 percent as a whole, which stayed around 33 percent from the 1950s through the 1970s, has risen to its highest level ever (or at least, since record-keeping started), more than 50 percent. In a \$17-trillion economy, the difference represents a premium of nearly \$3-trillion a year, about five times the federal deficit and more than enough for this and many other public purposes.

The problem of costs, to be sure, is not a one-way street. Higher education must indeed increase efficiency, but how? Institutions have been willing to spend on everything in recent years except the thing that matters most: instruction. Dorms, deans, sports, but not professors. Piglike presidential salaries, paid for by hiring adjuncts. Now, with MOOCs and other forms of online instruction, the talk is more of the same. My friends, they are coming for you. The professoriate no longer has the luxury of thinking that all this is someone else's problem. If you want to save your skins, let alone ensure the future of the enterprise, you need to wake up and organize against the people who are organizing against you. The fact is that by focusing exclusively on monetary issues, the current conversation prevents us not only

from remembering the higher objectives of an undergraduate education, but also from recognizing just how bad a job our institutions have been doing at fulfilling them. Colleges and universities have a lot to answer for; if they want to regain the support of the larger society, they need to prove that they are worthy of it.

Ivory Tower ends, in the manner of such films today, by referring us to a [website](#). Under the rubric "Take Action," the site encourages us to sign a petition that calls on Congress to pass legislation, of the kind proposed by Elizabeth Warren (and just [blocked](#) by Senate Republicans), allowing individuals to refinance their student loans. That would certainly be a good thing, but we need to set our sights a great deal higher. If service workers can demand a \$15 minimum wage, more than double the federal level, then those who care about higher education can insist on the elimination of tuition and fees at state institutions and their replacement by public funding furnished by taxes on the upper 10 percent. As with the minimum wage, the campaign can be conducted state by state, and it can and should involve a large coalition of interested groups: students, parents, and instructors, to start with. Total enrollment at American colleges and universities now stands at 20 million, on top of another million-plus on the faculty. That's a formidable voting bloc, should it learn to exercise its power. Since the Occupy movement in 2011, it's clear that the fight to reverse the tide of growing inequality has been joined. It's time we joined it.

William Deresiewicz is the author of Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life, forthcoming in August from Free Press.