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American revolt against meritocracy.
A review of Christopher Hayes's *Twilight of the Elites: America after Meritocracy*, William Deresiewicz's *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*, and Thomas Frank's *Listen, Liberal: Or, What Ever Happened to the Party of the People*

It will be the reign of scientific intelligence, the most aristocratic, despotic, arrogant and contemptuous of all regimes. There will be a new class, a new hierarchy of real and pretended scientists and scholars, and the world will be divided into a minority ruling in the name of knowledge and an immense ignorant majority.

Mikhail Bakunin

On 9 November 2016, the liberal press of the Western world, as well as the liberal sector of the Internet – constituting a vivid reflection of opinions and emotions of the global class of affluent and well-educated middle class – began a debate on the blow to its ideology (unprecedented for several decades), as represented by Donald Trump's victory and Hillary Clinton's defeat in the US presidential elections. If we were to judge by the pre-election narration, a thing without any sense has happened – a female candidate who throughout her adult life was minutely constructing the CV of a future female president, the most competent and experienced person who has ever run for the highest office in the USA (Reuters 2016), lost to a man using the English language at the level of a third grader (Shafer 2015), a vulgar crypto-fascist without any esprit or taste, a xenophobic demagogue unable to open his mouth without insulting some group of voters (Frank 2016a). In the subsequent days that followed, as the emotions gradually cooled down, there emerged the first attempts at solving the mystery of the victory – a victory that was equally or even more surprising to social researchers than to the global “creative class”. Reasons behind it were sought among the international march of the essentialist nationalism, deeply rooted racism and misogyny of the American back country, and an unprecedented mobilization of the privileged, who did not want to or could not become aware of being privileged.

This review seeks to present a line of reasoning posing an alternative to the above-mentioned explanations behind the successes of populism in such countries as the United States or Great Britain. This train of thought attaches great importance to both the failures and unfortunate successes of the system of education, and in particular higher education system. The reviewed publications are Christopher Hayes's *Twilight of the Elites: America after Meritocracy*, William Deresiewicz's *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*, and Thomas Frank's *Listen, Liberal: Or, What Ever Happened to the Party of the People*. Their authors intended them as books about the situation in the United States, but in view of the existence of the global network of economic interdependencies and – increasingly – the global class structure, they are also relevant for Poland and Europe. If we were to agree with Frank's, Deresiewicz's and Hayes's analyses, the successes of the populists would have to be considered an attempt at defeating a corrupted, unjust and non-democratic social system into which the contemporary meritocracy has evolved rather than (or not only as) a racist or nativist revolt against the increasingly diversified society.

The power of the most gifted ones

Just like the "civil society" (Starego 2016), meritocracy seems to be an idea with almost no enemies. As far as in relation to democracy people are willing to use the quotation from Churchill that "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time...", the meritocratic rules of the game have become a part of common sense to such an extent that the society automatically perceives education through their lenses (Melosik 2015). It is not associated – despite the meaning of the other part of the term – with a system through which some people rule others, but with a manner of the construction of social relations guided by elementary principles of justice. These principles provide that every human being's position and role should be determined solely by their actions, ambitions, and determination. And as much as for centre-right neoliberals it is the operation of the free market which is responsible for the "just construction of inequalities" (Stańczyk 2013), the centre-left sees the analogical chance in the functioning of the universal education system. We can say that as much as there is no capitalism without markets and no autocracy without an army, one cannot imagine meritocracy without a higher education system.

This huge importance which in meritocratic social systems is attributed to education, and in particular higher education – preferably one based on institutions which are ordered according to a strong and clear hierarchy – bonds universities and the best secondary and primary schools closely with authorities of this world. The social system emerging as a result of this alliance was described by Christopher Hayes in his book *Twilight of the Elites* in 2012. The functioning of elite schools of higher learning and their role in the formation of the "ethos" of new meritocratic elites was described by William Deresiewicz in *Excellent Sheep* in 2014.

Finally, published the day before the presidential elections, the book *Listen, Liberal* by Thomas Frank (known in Poland for one of his previous publications *Co z tym Kansas?: czyli powieść o tym, jak konserwatyści zdobyli serce Ameryki* [What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America]), focuses on the political institutions of the well-educated "liberal class". The author pays particular attention to the way in which it transformed the Democratic Party – previously closely related to the trade unions. From the pedagogical perspective, Deresiewicz's book seems to be the most interesting of the above publications – however, we need to become aware that along with the development of the meritocratic system, the boundaries separating educational institutions from society increasingly blur. Education and the notions, ways of thinking, hierarchies, values, and desires related to it exit schools and structure the life of individuals and the entire society. It is an "invasion" which is not entirely different from the one of academic economy carried out earlier. In order to understand its consequences and the manner in which, by way of feedback, it changes schools themselves, as well as their roles and social and political requirements in relation to them, one needs to look at the entire social system – from the economy to politics. The United States is a good starting point for such an analysis, since the country has been dictating global educational trends for almost one hundred years. Also on the road to meritocracy, the US went further and earlier than other societies.

Half a century of animal-like training

The first consequence of depending the shape of future social hierarchy on school achievements is the universal demand of self-improvement, which starts at a very early age.

For members of the upper middle class – the most ambitious ones, but at the same time having no financial capital that would allow breaking the "resistance" of universities against the admission of less talented candidates – this is tantamount to designing the entire childhood to match the recruitment requirements of elite colleges.

As the sociologist Mitchell L. Stevens pointed out, "affluent families fashion an entire way of life organized around the production of measurable virtue in children". "Measurable" is understood here as possible to be included in the application for college admission (Deresiewicz 2014).

The recruitment system based on SAT tests (an equivalent of the Polish *matura* – secondary school exit examinations), and documentable out-of-school activities, sports achievements and – particularly significant for elite universities – "leadership skills", is to guarantee the candidates' "versatility". The wealth of the scope of activities that may increase one's chances of being admitted to the school of their dreams in combination with ruthless competition, results in the emergence of life paths in which nothing is a matter of chance and every action is subordinated to the possibility of achieving a higher place in the social hierarchy. This leads

to a specific variety of alienation, as a part of which the criteria of recruitment, formerly having a deep (although not always praiseworthy [see Karabel 2005]) social sense, are completely emptied from values stepping beyond their function of being a currency allowing one to buy their way into elite schools.

Kids do them [“rituals known only to propitiate gods”] because they know they are supposed to, not because they, or anybody else, actually believes in them. If students were told that they needed to stand on their heads to get into Harvard, they would do so as eagerly, as diligently, as skilfully, and as thoughtlessly as they do everything else. The process takes activities that used to be ends in themselves and reduces them to means. (Deresiewicz 2014)

The process of the unending fight for position exerts considerable pressure on universities. Their prestige (determined by national and international university rankings) is related to professors’ research achievements and selectiveness of the recruitment process. School wastrels negatively affect the position in the ranking. Therefore, when the schools finally admit “the best of the best”, they lose any motivation to perform any further screening. Expulsion of students does not lie in the interest of academics who are busy almost solely with their research, schools which are penalized for it in ranking, or – obviously – students themselves or their parents. As a result,

[...] professors and students have largely entered into, in the words of one observer, a “mutual nonaggression pact.” Students want to do as little as possible. Professors are rewarded for research, especially in elite schools, so they want to spend as little time in their classes as they can. (Deresiewicz 2014)

In consequence, institutions educating the meritocratic elite resigned from their behaviour-shaping and – largely – educational function. But although

Getting through the door is very difficult, [...] once you’re in, there’s almost nothing you can do to get yourself kicked out. Not the worst academic failure, not the most egregious act of plagiarism, not even threatening a fellow student with bodily harm [...] is sufficient to get you expelled. Once you’ve been admitted to the club, [...] you’ve got a God-given right to stay in the club. [...] Kids at prestigious schools, in other words, receive an endless string of second chances. (Deresiewicz 2014)

The unusual gentleness with which students of elite universities are treated does not extend to the students of inferior schools. Firstly, the latter have no chance to win high positions in ranking anyway (and the drastic screening – just like in Polish universities – may be related to advantages of a financial nature), and secondly, their students are in for a different fate than that of the awaiting graduates of selective colleges:

Students at places like Cleveland State [...] are being trained to occupy positions somewhere in the middle of the class system, in the depths of one bureaucracy or other.

They're being conditioned for lives with few second chances, no extensions, little support, narrow opportunity – lives of subordination, supervision, and control, lives of deadlines, not guidelines. (Deresiewicz 2014).

These differences – between elites, which are forgiven everything, and the middle class subjected to finicky supervision – do not cease to exist when both groups leave their universities. The inequalities legitimised by education structure the entire social life – devoid of talent, the middle class functions in the increasingly tight corset of regulations, while “the best” avoid responsibility even if their actions lead the economy to the brink of a collapse. This drastic imbalance does not trigger off a reaction of politicians originating from the elites, as it is considered an element of what is understood as “justice” as a part of meritocracy rather than as a societal problem.

Pedagogy of the elite and pedagogy of the masses

Graduates of the best schools differ from the majority of those who are the elites of money or birth in that they not only acquired an institutional guarantee of their advantageous position, but also in the way they won it – taking part in merciless competition for a small number of places in selective colleges – which lets them believe that they owe all they have to their own work, skills and abilities. Acceptation of their own position requires from them a recognition that the existing state of things is fundamentally just. As Thomas Frank writes,

[...] they feel precious little sympathy for the less fortunate members of their cohort – for the adjuncts frozen out of the academic market for tenure, for colleagues who get fired, or even for the kids who don't get into “good” colleges. That life doesn't shower its blessings on people who can't make the grade isn't a shock or an injustice; it's the ways things ought to be. [...] Solidarity [...] stands in stark contradiction to the doctrine of individual excellence that every professional embodies (Frank 2016b).

A consent for inequalities originating both from homes devoted to fighting for a position and the system of education based on competition is extended to the entire social system. Paradoxically, it is the greatest weakness of the meritocratic system and a reason behind its gradual degeneration. It made it impossible for the political representation of the US meritocratic elites – being (in view of its support for the equal opportunities principle) the centre left Democratic Party, and not the centre right Republicans or the Republicans (serving the interests of financial rather than cultural aristocracy) – to fight with the inequalities growing since the 1980s. The exacerbation of inequalities (being – according to Frank – a direct consequence of a doctrine providing that the talented ones deserve everything, while the ones having no talents – very little) has two consequences. First, the stake in the fight for position is increasingly higher, as the gap between the (increasingly better rewarded) success and the (increasingly stronger punished) failure keeps

growing. What also grows in consequence is the motivation of the cultural aristocracy to invest into the future of their children – so that they do not experience the ruthless consequences of educational failure. Secondly, since cultural capital, in a more direct way than before, translates into financial status, the (strongly motivated) parents from the upper middle class have a double (cultural and financial) advantage above the rest of the society. If we add to this the advantage in the area of social capital they acquired while studying, it becomes obvious that there is no social group (with the exception of the richest ones – but there are very few of them), which could compete with the children of the meritocratic elite for places in prestigious schools.

This is paradoxical as – in compliance with the liberal credo – it is precisely education (rather than for example the redistribution of income) which is to be the solution to all social problems – including inequalities:

College can conquer unemployment as well as racism, they say; urban decay as well as inequality. Education will make us more tolerant, it will dissolve our doubts about globalization and climate change, it will give us the STEM skills we need as a society to compete. [...] there is no social or political problem that cannot be solved with more education and job training. Indeed, the only critique they will acknowledge of this beloved institution is that it, too, is not meritocratic enough. [...] (Frank 2016b)

The paradox of this situation lies in the fact that presenting (and politically promoting) education as a prescription for all problems, meritocrats simultaneously cut off access to the only institutions that can guarantee a dignified life in an unequal society to the rest of society. They cut it off, tightly filling them with their own children.

The numbers are undeniable. In 1985, 46 percent of students at the 250 most selective colleges came from the top quarter of the income distribution. By 2000, it was 55 percent. By 2006 (albeit in a somewhat smaller sample), it was 67 percent. Only 15 percent came from bottom half that year; a slightly older study put the share of the bottom quarter at all of 3 percent. (Deresiewicz 2014)

Christopher Hayes, the author of *Twilight of the Elites*, calls this process (with reference to the famous phrase used by Roberta Michels) “the iron law of meritocracy”:

The Iron Law of Meritocracy states that eventually the inequality produced by a meritocratic system will grow large enough to subvert the mechanisms of mobility. Unequal outcomes make equal opportunities impossible. [...] Those who are able to climb up the ladder will find ways to pull it up after them, or to selectively lower it down to allow their friends, allies, and kin to scramble up. In other words: “Whoever says meritocracy says oligarchy.” (Hayes 2012)

Who oversees the guards?

For all the authors in question, the contradiction between meritocracy and democracy is as clear as that between democracy and oligarchy. These assumptions could be slightly alleviated, if the “rule of the most gifted ones” really was more economically effective and more supportive of social cohesion and tolerance than its (often no less hierarchic) alternatives. Is this really so? The answer, contained in each of the books in question, although varied as to the degree of radicalism, is consistent in one point – the period of the rule of the meritocratic elite (omitting the issue of an equalization of educational opportunities, the results of which are mainly felt in the case of gender inequality) should be assessed negatively.

The reasons behind this state of affairs are complex and their analysis exceeds the scope of this review. However, three issues demand attention. The first one is the consent to inequality presented in the preceding section. Meritocrats see education as a cure for this. Nevertheless, they are unable to share access to education with the other social classes. This makes permanent work on the “extension of educational opportunities” a political farce.

The second one is the issue of the fundamental lack of responsibility resulting both from the principle of rewarding the best, and the fact that the majority of professions practiced by the educated class have the structure of self-governing professions:

Although we are the subjects of all these diagnoses and prescriptions, the group to which professionals ultimately answer is not the public but their peers (and, of course, their clients). [...] The professions are autonomous; they are not required to heed voices from below their circle of expertise. (Frank 2016b).

The close liaisons between state authorities and experts (often graduates of the same universities) on the other hand, and the world of the judicature, legal bar, business, and financial institutions dominated by graduates of the Ivy League schools on the other, may extend the circle of individuals that the cultural aristocracy feels responsible to. This extension, however, applies solely to representatives of the same elite belonging to other circles and environments. Additionally, the hermetic nature of the authority environments (also existing in other countries with elite sectors of higher education) generates the third obstacle to good governance – the absence of intellectual flexibility, risk-taking or opposing orthodoxy. The sources of this state of things can be traced already to the ruthless system of selection every member of the elite must have gone through:

So extreme are the admission standards now, so ferocious the competition, that kids who manage to get into elite colleges have, by definition, never experienced anything but success. The prospect of not being successful terrifies them, disorients them, defeats them. [...] The cost of falling short, even temporarily, becomes not merely prac-

tical, but existential. [...]. The result is a violent aversion to risk. You have no margin for error, so you avoid the possibility that you will ever make an error. That is one of the reasons that elite education has become so inimical to learning. [...] nobody wants to take a chance on a class they might not ace, so nobody is willing to venture beyond the things they [...] do very well. (Deresiewicz 2014)

The political consequences of this change in the way elites think (being the main subject of Frank's book and a considerable part of the material described by Hayes) step beyond the hermetic nature, the related lack of public accountability and intellectual openness, and the unwillingness to take risk. However, these traits were responsible for the ultimate defeat of the government – being, according to Hayes, „the crowning achievement” of meritocracy – of Barak Obama in its fight against the problems left behind by his predecessors. The exacerbation of inequalities and thus the increased stakes of the activity of elites, the temptations awaiting them and the motivation to avoid a defeat combined with individualism – the perception of one's own position as solely one's own credit – lead to a slow decomposition of the social fabric. People who do not belong to elites become victims of “predatory bankers, predatory educators, even predatory health care providers” (Frank 2016b). Professional ethics is replaced by the seeking of maximum profits, and reputation loses any significance:

[...] it's rather difficult to design a competitive system that heavily rewards performance and doesn't also reward cheating. [...] it has the perverse consequence of turning reputation on its head. Those engaged in the most fraudulent activity, landing the largest deals and profits, creating the most dodgy and fictitious revenue, come to be the most highly regarded, while those who demur or, worse, blow the whistle, come to be viewed suspiciously, even regarded with contempt. (Hayes 2012)

At the same time – just like in the case of elite schools – none of the pathological behaviours of the elites is punished, which affects the social legitimization of the existing system of power.

These pathologies can be considered a symptom of social inequalities rather than meritocracy as such – however, it is the latter which allowed and continues to allow to legitimize them before the society. What is even more, the very core of the meritocratic system is increasingly based on fraud. The schools that are to select the most gifted individuals actually choose their students almost solely from among a narrow group of the wealthy upper middle class. Cooptation from outside the social elites, including the programme of positive discrimination, plays the role of a fig leaf for the money – and the capital-oiled social capital of reproduction. “The function of the (very few) poor people at Harvard is to reassure the (very many) rich people at Harvard that you can't just buy your way into Harvard.” (Deresiewicz 2014). Meritocracy promises the selection of “the best ones”, but is unable to fulfil the promise – and the related social costs incurred by the underprivileged presented with subsequent “no-alternative” reforms taking away their resources for life, by the middle class striving for social advancement, despite having no

money or connections necessary to send their children to top universities, and finally by the elites trained since their earliest years for participation in the rat race devouring all their childhood seem to considerably exceed the possible profits.

Summary

In Poland, the education of elites at the academic level is not as fetishized as in the United States, since there are no institutions here that would offer it. However, this situation may change. The process of reforming the system of higher education and education as such is in progress, and one of its goals – regardless of the party membership of the subsequent ministers – is an increase in the selectiveness of the best schools, limiting the number of the issued MA diplomas and encouraging hierarchisation of the higher education system. These plans enjoy a wide-spread support of the academic circles longing for (the relatively recent) times when Polish university was an institution for the elites.

The books I have presented in this review originated in reaction to pathologies of the system which Poland has been trying to establish for the last few years. Americans are fetishizing their universities, or – to be more exact – the process of enrolment, to a historically unprecedented degree. We should not assume, however, that the existence of a meritocratic elite would have different consequences by the Vistula River than it has by the Potomac. Although the appearance of considerable economic pathologies requires the existence of a strongly liberal economic system, political and social pathologies take a similar form in all the countries educating their elites in selective schools. Both France and Great Britain may boast a ruling class which is as hermetic, as corrupt, and as isolated from the mainstream daily life as the United States. All the three countries are also marked by an exceptional power of the populist – or should we rather say democratic – reaction to the alienation of elites.

Hayes's, Deresiewicz's and Frank's books – with all their imperfections resulting from the journalistic and polemical approach to the problem – one lacking scientific rigour – offer an insight into what Poland might be like if we desire to train our own meritocratic elites. In contrast to what we can sometimes hear in the public sphere or academic discussions, there are many alternatives to the system they have described. Let us hope that we shall have enough common sense to choose one of them.

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