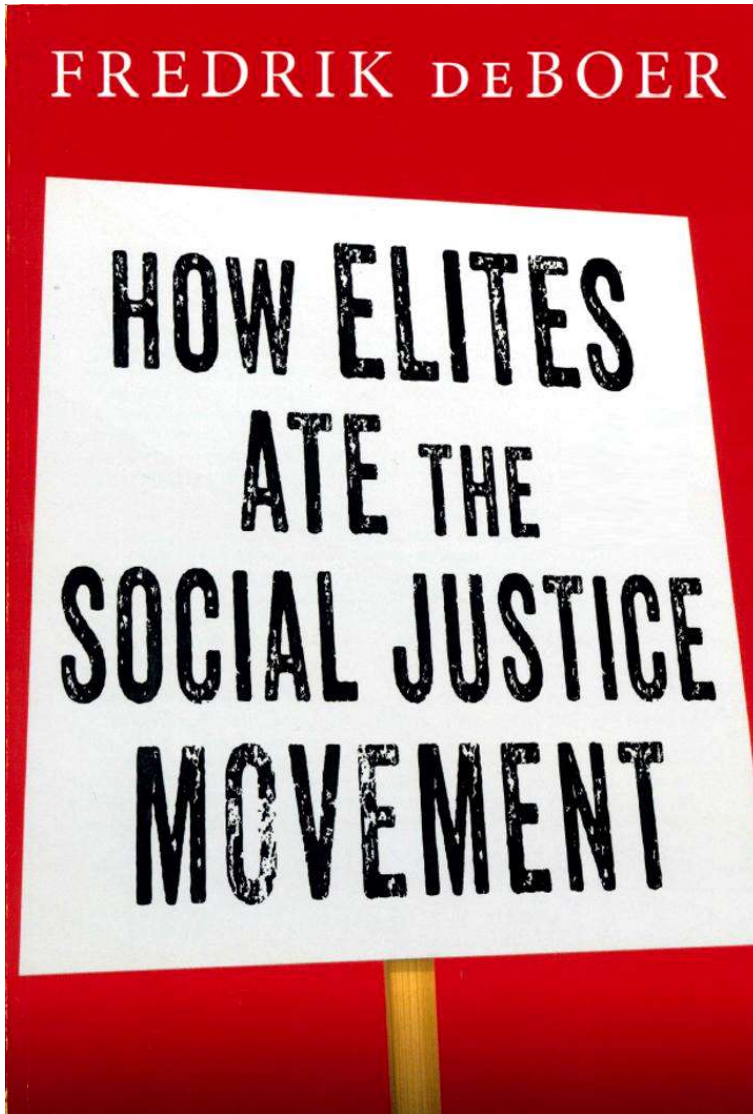


# deBoer merciless tackles his own side

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*“How Elites Ate the Social Justice System” by Fredrik deBoer. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2023, 256 pages, \$29.99 (hardcover).*



“One basic rule I try to follow when I write about current affairs is to remember that I do not live in extraordinary times,” Fredrik deBoer notes near the beginning of *“How Elites Ate the Social Justice System”* his valiant attempt to explain why today’s political movements seldom yield tangible results. “We live within the sweep of history, not outside of it, and it’s our nature as conscious beings to assume that our times must be special because we live in them. But better to remember that today’s crises will be little remembered.”

“My views, and this entire book, will be taken as a harsh indictment of the people and groups that gathered together to demand change in 2020,” he continues a little later. “And there are criticisms to be made if we are to better understand the way change happens and thus to ensure that it actually does. But there’s no shame in failing to achieve radical change. Not in these United States, where the forces of reaction jealousy hoard power. I will always have affection and respect for those who agitated for change in 2020, who took to the streets, who demanded

a better world. The purpose of critical engagement with protest movements is to strengthen them, make them better, to create the conditions where the world they dreamed of can become a reality.”

So begins an exceptionally thorough and no-holds-barred critique of modern social and political movements, especially those anointed with the proverbial ‘grass roots’ moniker. In meticulous and captivating detail, deBoer lays out why most of the causes we’ve seen ignited over the last couple of decades with an enthusiastic optimism often devolve into disorganization, confusion and entropy. But the author does not believe failure is inevitable; he feels ardently that inertia can be overcome by re-examining the basic premises most of those involved in striving for change seem to have and compensating for them given the new realities of the digital world in which we are all undeniably submerged these days. Without tangible and well-articulated goals, and lacking a vibrant

understanding of the mitigating forces imposed on these movements by established institutions and their political dynamics, real progress is virtually impossible.

That, and the fact that most of movements tend to be more about appearances than instigating a fundamental transformation to our systems and the policies and processes that drive them.

Authentic and lasting change is always driven by hunger, and those who have benefitted most from the cultural architecture they are rallying against are often ill-suited to precipitate the improvements that are arguably desperately needed. It is one thing to recognize something needs to be dismantled; it is quite another to know what needs to be elevated into the place it once occupied or how to successfully accomplish the renovation.

The book is well-researched, with 15 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the Introduction and eight chapters that form the main narrative. DeBoer's literary voice is ideally suited to his subject matter: a carefully choreographed synthesis of storytelling fused with a distinct ideological orientation. The author's enthusiasm is evident from page one; not only is he on a mission to shine a spotlight on what is happening right before our eyes, he is also adamant that we need to find a way to talk ourselves off the ledge before the inevitable consequences of our present path become intractable. Agree or disagree with his primary thesis, it is impossible not to see the world in a different context after working your way through this thought-provoking treatise.

DeBoer's work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Harper's*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Politico*, *Playboy*, *New Republic*, and *Foreign Policy*. He has a BA in English from Central Connecticut State University, an MA in writing and rhetoric from the University of Rhode Island, and a PhD in English from Purdue University. This is his second book; the first being "The Cult of Smart: How Our Broken Education System Perpetuates Social Injustice," which was published in 2020.

As the title implies, a large proportion of the manuscript is devoted to a dissection and analysis of the role social class plays in virtually every aspect of our society. This is most accentuated in "Why is class first," the seventh chapter and one I found expressly instructive:

"To understand why an orientation toward socioeconomic class is the best hope for progressive change, it's essential to distinguish a class-first leftist from another term which, I'm sorry to say, is often used interchangeably: 'class reductionist.' The class reductionist is the leftist who not only highlights class, seeing class as the major organizing principle of progressive politics, but also thinks that racism and sexism and homophobia and associated ills are class problems. The class reductionist is the guy who thinks that, for example, the oppression of Black Americans can be boiled down to their lower average incomes and wealth, or that high-profile police shootings are sparked by economic inequalities alone, rather than the confluence of poverty and race. The class reductionist believes that effective progressive organizing involves minimizing or ignoring racism, sexism, et cetera, under the dubious logic that those identity issues will necessarily prove divisive and serve as distractions from coming together to fight the bosses, the corporations, and the wealthy. So the story goes."

As Andrew Sullivan, the political commentator and former editor *The New Republic*, astutely observes, "deBoer is someone I have long passionately disagreed with, but he writes like a dream, has a relentless intellect, and is always, always worth reading. Sharp, funny, brutal and able to skewer every conventional political platitude, he is particularly merciless tackling his own side."

I could not agree more. Highly recommended.

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