DTC - Essay on the Uplift of Education

I want to talk today about *pejoration*. Those of you who, having winced after reading the first sentence to find not only a four-syllable word in it, but a word whose definition you cannot determine from its placement in the sentence (known as context), can stop reading at this point if you find the mental strain too taxing. For those of you who are either amused by my tone of condescension and are willing to take a chance on me and forge ahead, or are not too proud to admit that you had to look up the word *perjoration*, well done. It is precisely for you that I offer this little discourse, because you are among a special group, a cohort that is seeking improvement, a group that has a thirst for knowledge. I am here to tell you that despite what you may have heard from certain quarters of the political world, being educated is not something to be ashamed of; knowing things, understanding things, should be the goal of everyone.

The word is *elite*. Here is a fair definition: "A select group that is superior in terms of ability or qualities to the rest of a group or society." That definition does not identify ethnicity, race, religion, education, political affiliation or geographical origin. When NCAA basketball teams make it to the quarter-finals of the championships, those teams are referred to as the "Elite Eight." Why? Mostly because no better alliterative word to accompany the number "eight" could be found by the sportswriters who make these decisions; but also because the word *elite* expresses the superiority of those teams over the fifty-six others that didn't make it that far in the tournament.

But why has the word *elite* acquired a derogatory connotation? Or, to be more precise, when did the word *elite* experience *pejoration*, which in the field of linguistics is "the process by which a word acquires a negative meaning"? According to author Susan Jacoby, "The perversion of the word's meaning dates from the late 1960s, when the academic left pinned the label on faculty members who resisted the establishment of separate departments for what were then called "minority studies." In this case, two distinct faculty groups were tarred with elitism: those who wanted to incorporate black and women's studies into the core curriculum, and those who thought that blacks and women had produced nothing worthy of study. Instead of elitist, the former group should have been described as "inclusionary" and the latter as "bigoted." Ms. Jacoby continues her history lesson by explaining that the Reagan administration later managed to apply it as a slur to the left alone. She adds that the fact that right-wing intellectual establishment also constituted a powerful elite was somehow obscured, a situation that exists to this day, with right-wingers like Senators Josh Hawley, Ted Cruz, and J.D. Vance playing the everyman role while each of them hold coveted Ivy League *bona fides*.

It was Eleanor Roosevelt who said, "Great minds discuss ideas; average minds discuss events; small minds discuss people." While we all at one point or another need to discuss people and events, once in a while we find ourselves talking about ideas, abstractions we could call them. But talking about abstractions or ideas sometimes requires a little bit more thinking; ideas require the ability to express oneself using more complex thought processes and language skills. You can easily describe a person, say your old Uncle Joe; or an event, such as the concert you attended; but trying to articulate an idea can be difficult. More importantly, ideas, because they are intangible, and stray into the metaphysical—the philosophy of abstract concepts—require not only an ability to communicate clearly, but an orderly mind. One does not require Eleanor's "great" mind in order to discuss great ideas. But the idea that abstract concepts are the sole province of college-educated eggheads is nonsense. As Susan Jacoby relates in her essay "Best Is The New Worst" (NYT May 30, 2008), "I have received hundreds of e-mail messages calling me an elitist for drawing attention to America's knowledge deficit. One of the most memorable came from a man who objected to my citation of a statistic, from a 2006 National Geographic-Roper survey, indicating that nearly two-thirds of Americans age 18 to 24 cannot find Iraq on a map. 'Why should I care whether my mechanic knows where Iraq is, as long as he knows how to fix my car?' the man asked. But what could be more elitist than the idea that a mechanic cannot be expected to know the location of a country where thousands of Americans of his own generation are fighting and dying?"

Just because you know where Iraq is, or what the three branches of our government are, does not make you an elitist snob; it simply makes you a better informed citizen. Whether you are a car mechanic or a cocktail waitress or a bee keeper, there are things you need to know in order to be a good citizen, and being a poorly informed member of the electorate can be just as costly as being a poorly informed consumer.

Ms. Jacoby is prepared to blame the Republicans back in the 1980's for making a liberal education something to be ashamed of, but then, we somehow did manage to elect an erudite Black President. We should all strive to be elite; we should admire excellence in any field of endeavor. There is only one person to blame for a lack of education or accepting ignorance as a badge of honor, and it's not the other guy.

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