

BOOK REVIEW / COMPTE-RENDU

PEARLSTEIN, M. *Education Roads Less Traveled: Solving America's Fixation on Four-Year Degrees*. New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield. (2019). 127 pp. \$30.00 (Hardback). (ISBN 978-1-4758-4753-6).

Mitch Pearlstein's *Education Roads Less Travelled: Solving America's Fixation on Four-Year Degrees* is an ambitious undertaking. Pearlstein sheds light upon an often-overlooked conundrum that is faced by students given increasing pressure to pursue post-secondary degrees and the subsequent consequences of this trend for the larger economy. Pearlstein clearly illustrates how America's narrow focus on academic pathways comes to the detriment of other skilled-work industries, the economy, and in many cases, students themselves. While research has been conducted in relation to academic inflation and the notion of "access" to education, the dominant discourse continues to tout academic pathways as the only plausible avenue for achieving success and financial security. *Education Roads Less Travelled* interrogates this popular assumption by collecting both empirical and statistical data based on interviews with 80 students, practitioners, and other experts who have chosen alternative educational pathways and non-academic careers.

Education Roads Less Travelled draws together a comprehensive range of data to answer the question: What exactly are the "education roads less travelled"? And more importantly, where might they lead? Pearlstein notes the lack of skilled professionals particularly in "construction and manufacturing" as an increasing problem (p. 73). He explores potential consequences of "America's fixation on four-year degrees", ranging from "not having enough cars or airplanes built to not having anyone to fix the plumbing in our homes" (p. 74). Pearlstein's work makes sense of relevant macro statistics by highlighting their parallels within participants' experiences.

The book is structured into eight distinct yet related chapters on topics ranging from student debt to "underemployment" in which Pearlstein elucidates upon his thesis, namely, that systematic and gradual cultural change must occur in order for students to view alternative educational pathways as viable. In the first two chapters, Pearlstein discusses the pressure to pursue four-year degrees and

the stigmatization of other educational avenues. In chapters 3 to 5, Pearlstein examines issues of college debt and economic growth, and the very real financial crises many students are facing as a result of exorbitant college debt along with the deficit of trained professionals in a variety of skilled vocations. In chapters 6 and 8, Pearlstein suggests that more students entering non-academic vocations may resolve larger economic and societal problems. He illustrates how important the skilled trades are in terms of individual financial and collective well-being. In chapters 7 to 8, Pearlstein then gives examples of other educational pathways and provides evidence as to how lucrative and fulfilling these careers can be, including by interviewing subjects who have found joy embarking on alternate pathways such as the food industry and hairdressing.

Pearlstein's sixth chapter, "*Potential Social Detours*", with its dual focus on "marriage and class" on the one hand, and "race and class" on the other, engages with topics vast enough to merit their own books. Pearlstein is paying due diligence by touching upon the sociological impact that a hyper-focus on academic avenues has on marriage, race, and class. His ostensible intention is to highlight how academic inflation impacts different populations in inequitable ways and how it influences the marriage market overall. While the chapter makes some interesting observations, its scope is too limited and the treatment too broad to be very meaningful. Pearlstein references statistics about levels of education in relation to marriage, drawing deductions in relation to his argument, however, his treatment of race and gender relations especially seems perfunctory and lacking in intersectional analysis.

Finally, Pearlstein turns to the notion of "joyful work". Throughout the book, Pearlstein points to students who followed their bliss, so to speak, and in so doing found both career success and personal fulfillment; again, an important concept and one rarely discussed in the academic sphere. Some interviewees entered professions such as plumbing or welding while others enjoyed careers as hairstylists and chefs. Pearlstein's work brings to mind *Finding Your Element* by Ken Robinson (2014) and the canonical *What Colour is your Parachute?* by Richard N. Bolles (2001); both are examples of popular pedestrian non-fiction about finding joy in vocation. Both books have become synonymous with job hunting and are considered crucial texts by many job seekers. Similarly, Pearlstein promotes the skilled trades as a potential pathway to "joy", even as he also acknowledges the social stigmatization of these avenues; he cites familial, community, and peer pressure amongst the key deterrents in pursuing careers in these fields. Without familial support, particularly financial support, in many cases, students are pressured to enter four-year degree programs regardless of preference and aptitude. In *Education Roads Less Travelled*, what Pearlstein has done is to create a book that pushes back against that social reflex; it is a practical guide even while it simultaneously draws in academic audiences, engaging them in a conversation which is perhaps difficult to have.

Pearlstein himself is the “founder and former president of the Center of American Experiment...[and] he holds a doctorate in educational administration...” (p. 127). *Education Roads Less Travelled* follows a line of Pearlstein’s other successful academic publications but is the first to take this more applied orientation. Interestingly, Pearlstein does not align himself with any specific academic tradition despite being a self-professed “beneficiary” of undergraduate and graduate education (p. 3). This is likely very intentional, given his assertion that alternative educational pathways, *outside* of academic contexts, are the way to go. His argument, which lies at the crux of academia and practical application, is supported by Pearlstein’s own trajectory, which he generously draws upon, sometimes delving into personal narrative to further encourage or inspire his readers.

However, this book is not ultimately intended for those already on academic tracks but rather dedicated to the “... men and women who create, build, and fix things with their hands...” (p. xi). While Pearlstein’s book contributes to the academic arena by bringing together relevant data in a comprehensive way and elaborating upon these statistics through examining participant experiences, his book (also written with levity and in a way to be enjoyed) is more relevant for parents, teachers, guidance counselors, and others involved in secondary education. In this sense, Pearlstein has really created a practical, informative guide for parents and students faced with the dilemma of what to do after high school. This is, after all, as it should be, given Pearlstein’s ultimate aim: “For all concerned, it would be a big step forward if education roads currently less travelled were better traversed” (p. 121).

REFERENCES

- Bolles, R. N. (2001). *What colour is your parachute?* Ten Speed Press.
- Robinson, K., & Aronica, L. (2014). *Finding your element: How to discover your talents and passions and transform your life.* Penguin Books.