

I. Exposition:

Approaching the Elite Educational Space

1. Introductory Remarks

In order to build my argument on firm theoretical ground, I want to begin my examination of the discourse of elite education with an expository chapter, in which I address and explain the central terms and concepts, offer some historical context on the emergence and development of elite educational institutions in the United States, and introduce the three categories that inform my readings of the various materials that constitute the discourse of elite education: eliteness, merit, and class. As indicated above, my research interests and my approach evolved from two initial hypotheses about the cultural formation of eliteness and education in the United States: First, the tension between elitism and egalitarianism that informs American culture and politics, and second, the agglomeration of a range of cultural meanings around the elite educational space—a kind of semiotics of elite (educational) distinction. In the following, I want to explain these two guiding assumptions in a little more detail, before introducing my study's three central analytical categories: eliteness, merit, and class.

2. Starting Points: Eliteness and Education in American Culture

Throughout American history, the existence of elites and the question of the legitimacy, usefulness, and alleged inevitability of elite influence have preoccupied scholarly discourse and public debate alike. Cultural critic William A. Henry III, in his polemic *In Defense of Elitism* (1994), in fact argues that “the great post-World War II American dialectic has been between elitism and egalitarianism” (3). It is from this dialectic that my first guiding assumption