

Before I delve into my readings of the epistemology of critique, a brief note is necessary on the composition of the critical landscape and, in particular, on the speaking positions of the actors in this landscape. Conservative public intellectual Wilfred McClay, in an essay on Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), points out that "there is a special weight given in American culture to critics who criticize from within." This is undoubtedly true, and for good reason: Insiders are assumed to be more knowledgeable, informed, and credible, and to have higher stakes in the game; their criticism is received as unmarred by envy, misunderstandings, or other ulterior motives. The discourse of elite education, however, is populated *exclusively* by critics who criticize from within: Every single publication I have come across was written by someone who has been or still is part of the system. It is a conversation upheld entirely by insiders. This is particularly pertinent when it comes to the sphere of criticism, of course—those who are allowed to address their concerns, whose voices are heard and accepted as credible and authoritative, are all part of the system they set out to criticize. The exclusivity of the elite campus, and the gatekeeping procedures in place to guarantee it, are thus mirrored in the very discourse meant to critique them.

2. Mapping the Critical Landscape

The practices and politics of educational institutions have always been subject to critical inquiry. After all, the importance of education for the political, economic, and socio-cultural wellbeing of post-industrial democratic societies is a matter of broad consensus, and large amounts of tax money are involved in financing private as well as public institutions. Elite colleges and universities—as "venue[s] where access to power and influence is rationed" (Loury xxii)—find themselves under particular scrutiny. Given the degree of socio-economic inequality in the United States in an era that has been called, by economist Paul Krugman and others, a "second gilded age" (cf. Livingston), it is indeed not surprising that elite institutions have in recent years increasingly come into focus in both journalism and scholarship. What role do the nation's most exclusive colleges play in this era of growing inequality? Do they actually help to provide intergenerational mobility, as a majority of Americans expects them to, or do they, on the contrary, exacerbate the problem by serving as bastions of privilege and elite self-reproduction? In the following, I want to map the critical landscape surrounding the issue of elite education in the

United States, before briefly introducing the corpus of texts I have chosen to analyze in this chapter. Even though reviewers have used a range of different labels to describe the modes of critical writing employed by the authors—critique, indictment, polemic, among others—I argue that one important mode is missing from the discussion: the jeremiadic. Often seen as a quintessentially American form of criticism, the jeremiad produces a dynamics of celebration-through-lament that quite accurately reflects the cultural work of the studies analyzed in this chapter. In the concluding section, I thus discuss my approach of reading the five texts through the lens of the jeremiad.

‘From a Murmur to a Roar’: Criticism of (Elite) Education in the Contemporary US

Criticism directed at the many failures of educational institutions of all stripes is gaining momentum, as Andrew Delbanco, cultural critic and professor at Columbia University, points out: “[P]ublic demand that our colleges scrutinize, justify, and reform themselves has grown from a murmur to a roar” (2012: ix)—not least due to the devastating effects of the financial crisis. Parents, Delbanco continues, criticize the rising cost of tuition; students remonstrate against the crippling debt burdening them upon graduation; employers complain about incompetent graduates and insufficient quality standards; and politicians argue over accountability and funding. Everybody, it seems, has something to say about the current state of higher education in the United States, and little of it is positive.

Most critics are preoccupied to some degree with the question of what college, in general, should do, and for whom. As even the most cursory glance at the critical landscape demonstrates, there is no consensus about the expectations directed toward the collegiate experience in the contemporary United States. Is a college’s main responsibility toward society, toward the individual student, toward specific groups of students, or toward its own survival as an institution? Delbanco, to offer but one example of an attempt at answering these questions, names “three central principles” to which colleges should adhere: The first is equality of opportunity—colleges should enable students “to discover their passions and pursue them as far as their talents allow” regardless of their personal background. Second, college ought to be a “rehearsal space for democracy” and teach students how to be active and thoughtful citizens. Finally, Delbanco argues that college should not focus solely on the production and dissemination of knowledge, but help “young people prepare

for lives of meaning and purpose” (2012: xiv). Given the complexity of this conglomerate of social, civic, cultural, and personal dimensions, it is not surprising that colleges all too often fail to meet the demands directed at them. This heterogeneity of expectations, in which academic education often seems like an afterthought, is reflected also in the self-representation of elite colleges that I discuss in greater depth in the third chapter of this study. An additional factor to be considered in this context is the financial situation in particular of private colleges, which exerts its own influence on the ability and willingness of individual institutions to live up to popular expectations.

Disagreement as to the precise nature of the mission(s) of college notwithstanding, there is consensus among critics and commentators in at least one crucial respect: College is important. Despite a number of well-popularized and quasi-mythical dropout success stories—Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, and Oprah Winfrey, among others—popular opinion and sociological research alike agree that a college education is more necessary than ever in the contemporary United States. In *Higher Education in America* (2013), Derek Bok points out that the median income for college graduates is almost twice as high as that of those holding only a high school diploma (81); journalist David Leonhardt states that the discrepancy between college and high school graduates has “reached a record high” and concludes that a degree from a four-year college “has probably never been more valuable than now” (2014). It is not surprising, then, that almost eighty percent of all ninth and tenth graders say they want to go to college; polls demonstrate that the overwhelming majority of Americans acknowledge that “a college education has become as important as a high school diploma used to be” (Bok 82). It is crucial to note, in this context, that these findings are particularly relevant for careers in law, medicine, business, and similar upper-middle-class professions, which, as Stevens points out, “virtually require[] a college education” (10). While the value of a college degree thus has increased in general, it is felt most acutely by those in the middle- and upper-middle classes, for whom not getting a college degree has become all but unimaginable.

While there is indeed widespread agreement about the importance of a college education, parents, applicants, and employers likewise concur that not all degrees from all colleges are equally valuable. Elite educational institutions, as the previous chapter has demonstrated, are known to play a decisive role in (re)producing wealth, status, and power; they offer access to the upper echelons of business, politics, medicine, the law, and a host of other professional arenas; their graduates populate leadership positions across a range

of key sectors in American society. Bok for instance points to the fact that “a mere dozen institutions [...] have educated 54 percent of the CEOs of large corporations and 42 percent of the nation’s top government leaders” (123). A mere handful of colleges thus hold a disproportionate sway in terms of placing their graduates in positions of power and influence, and spots at these institutions are predictably fiercely contested. In fact, the hierarchization of the American college landscape has reached such a degree that getting into the ‘right’ college has turned into a cultural obsession among segments of the population; Delbanco points out, half-jokingly, that the most profitable week of the year for local news vendors is “probably the week *US News & World Report* comes out with its annual college rankings issue” (2012: 1). The importance attributed to the rankings is one symptom among many of the increasing fetishization of a small number of institutions whose exclusivity is one of their primary means of distinction.

Given this pervasive influence, it is not surprising that elite institutions are subject to heightened scrutiny by academics, pundits, and journalists alike. In fact, recent years have seen a surge in publications on the issue, suggesting that there is a large audience interested in analysis and critique of the nation’s elite universities. Critical analyses and interventions come in a variety of guises, ranging from in-depth profiles in magazines² to full-length sociological studies such as Jerome Karabel’s monumental *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (2005). These critical investigations reflect an ambivalence toward elite education that is pervasive in American culture, a collective attitude that oscillates between pride in the institutions’ global reputation of excellence, and suspicion, or even resentment, toward their exclusionary practices, their disproportionate influence, and their alleged snobbery.

Despite the multiplicity of voices contributing to the critical discourse about elite education, two relatively distinct analytical concerns dominate the conversation. The first and arguably most pervasive topic is the issue of admission and exclusion. Texts in this group examine who gains access to elite colleges, who does not, and why. The dominance of this trope in itself already suggests the predominantly affirmative nature of the critical landscape, which

2 For instance the *Economist*’s “America’s New Aristocracy: Education and the Inheritance of Privilege” (2015), *Vanity Fair*’s “Inside the Legal Intrigue at Columbia’s Elite, Secret Campus Society” (2015) or *Time Magazine*’s “Who Needs Harvard? Forget the Ivy League!” (2006).

I discuss in greater detail below. The politics of individual institutions as well as their situatedness within larger socio-cultural and political contexts come under scrutiny here. The process of admission and exclusion, and the criteria upon which it is based, are of interest not only to those immediately involved—students, parents, administrators, professors—but also to social critics and the general public: “all of us,” as economist Glenn Loury puts it (xxii). This again is due in part to the widespread expectation that colleges ought to play a role in producing upward mobility. The second group of texts focuses on the larger question of the elite educational experience and its implications for US society. What kinds of subjectivities are produced in and through elite colleges, and what does that mean for the composition, mentality, and behavior of the American leadership class? Which values, interests, and behaviors do the institutions encourage, cultivate, and reward? The books in this group claim to offer wide-reaching diagnoses of the various shortcomings of the status quo and critique the overall work of elite institutions.

Regardless of the specific angle, much of the criticism directed against the elite educational system is rendered in the rhetoric of crisis, outrage, and uncertainty, and specifically points to the national implications of such crises. Elite colleges and universities, various works seem to suggest, do not only fail individuals and social or ethnic groups; elite institutions are failing the nation as a whole, as the following titles indicate: *Degrees of Inequality: How the Politics of Higher Education Sabotaged the American Dream* (Suzanne Mettler, 2014); *The Price of Silence: The Duke Lacrosse Scandal, the Power of the Elite, and the Corruption of Our Great Universities* (William D. Cohan, 2015); *Twilight of the Elites: America After Meritocracy* (Chris Hayes, 2012). The subtitles of Golden’s and Deresiewicz’s works—“How America’s Ruling Class Buys Its Way Into Elite Colleges And Who Gets Left Outside The Gates” and “The Miseducation of the American Elite”—point in the same direction.

Crisis frameworks are a popular and effective critical mode for journalists, pundits, and scholars alike, and have been a permanent fixture in public and academic debates alike—in particular in the United States, where the specter of national decline is “an idea whose time has always come,” as Stephen Jendrysik puts it (1). Kevin Phillips writes that American visions of national decline come in two guises, “one displaying economic and social polarization and injustice, which always stirs complaint among progressives, and the second representing moral and cultural decadence-cum-sophistication, which invariably stirs conservative and fundamentalist outrage” (218). This observation holds true also for the critical investigations of elite education in

the United States. Both types of studies assume that there is some kind of crisis going on, but they differ in the precise diagnosis and, consequently, in the remedies they propose. The texts in the first cluster—those interrogating the dynamics of admission and exclusion—follow a social justice logic and are interested primarily in matters of access and representation. Together, these texts can be grouped as progressivist interventions. The second cluster of texts is more conservative in its stance on elite education. While social justice issues do play a role in these investigations as well, representation and fairness are not their primary concern. Instead, their criticism is indeed directed at the decadence, snobbery, and entitlement of those who populate elite institutions, and at the failure of the institutions to correct these tendencies. Theirs has to be understood as a critique of quality rather than inequality. Even though both strands of criticism mobilize nostalgic and utopian tropes, their emphases thus differ, as do their conceptions of elitism and their responses to the tension between elitism and egalitarianism.

Corpus Selection

In order to analyze the role of the mode of critique in the epistemology of US elite education, I have selected a number of books that mirror the concerns of the overall critical landscape in terms of their analytical foci and the multiplicity of genres that they represent. In the following, I introduce each of the publications briefly; more detailed observations will follow in the next two sections of this chapter. The first cluster of texts consists of progressivist critiques of the admissions practices of elite colleges and comprises the works of journalist Daniel Golden, sociologist Joseph Soares, and education researcher Mitchell L. Stevens. Golden's *The Price of Admission: How America's Ruling Class Buys Its Way Into Elite Colleges And Who Gets Left Outside The Gates* (2006) aims to reveal the ways in which "rich and well-connected students" (4) are favored in the admissions process of elite colleges. In each chapter, Golden investigates specific instances of preferential treatment—ranging from the influence of big donors at Harvard to legacy preference at Notre Dame. Soares's *The Power of Privilege: Yale and America's Elite Colleges* (2007), by contrast, follows a diachronic approach and traces the changing trajectory of Yale's admissions politics throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, foregrounding "the nexus between social class and admissions" (xii). Stevens's study *Creating a Class: College Admissions and the Education of Elites* (2007) differs

from the others in that he is concerned with the actual day-to-day work performed by admissions officers at a small elite college.

The second cluster of texts consists of conservative critiques of the elite college experience written by Ross Douthat and William Deresiewicz. In *Privilege: Harvard and the Education of the Ruling Class* (2005), Douthat uses his four years as a Harvard undergraduate as a point of departure to discuss and critique the system of elite education. In nine loosely connected chapters, he writes about diversity, social stratification, intimate relationships, political activism, and education at Harvard, all of which he finds lacking, primarily due to the all-embracing culture of privilege and the pervasiveness of “the scramble for upward mobility, achievement, success for success’s sake” (11). William Deresiewicz’s *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (2014), finally, approaches the same phenomenon from the perspective of the educator. His aim mirrors Douthat’s: to expose the fraudulent meritocracy and the culture of entitlement that characterizes elite campuses across the nation, and to discuss the implications for society at large. Elite educational institutions, Deresiewicz argues, fail their students by denying them a ‘real’ education, and society at large by producing an inept and irresponsible leadership class.

As mentioned above, the five books reflect the critical landscape not only in terms of their research interest and critical impetus, but also in terms of the variety of critical genres they represent: Golden’s *Price of Admission* relies heavily on investigative journalism and is written in an approachable and entertaining style, recounting numerous anecdotes unearthed by the author, whereas Soares’s *Privilege* is a work of historical sociology, clearly scholarly in terms of rhetoric and method. Stevens, though himself a professor, walks a middle ground in *Creating a Class*, pointing out in the introduction that his book is intended for “for general readers” interested in “the machinery of social opportunity and social distinction in America” (4), rather than for an academic audience. Douthat’s book is a memoir with a touch of the coming-of-age mode: He essentially tells his own story, but interspersed with more general information on the respective issues he addresses. Though Deresiewicz’s *Excellent Sheep* likewise relies on the author’s own experiences as a student and teacher at a number of elite universities, he takes a somewhat more detached perspective. His publisher, Simon and Schuster, files *Excellent Sheep* under ‘philosophy’ and ‘higher education’, and describes it as a ‘manifesto’—Deresiewicz’s criticism is thus less ruminative and more interventionist than Douthat’s.

The critical literature on elite education is thus positioned at the intersection of investigative journalism, scholarship, and popular non-fiction in various shapes and forms, read and utilized by scholars researching the rising levels of inequality and stratification, a general public concerned about the (re)production of the American leadership class, and those who are personally involved in the process of applying to an elite institution. This variety of genres, styles, and modes of investigation and critique suggests the widespread appeal of the issue to a diverse American audience and points to the various dimensions on which elite education becomes meaningful: the mental and emotional life of individual applicants and students, the historical position of ethnic and other social groups, and the well-established grand narratives of opportunity and success that fuel the notion of American exceptionalism.

'Revitalizing the Errand': Critique as Affirmation

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines criticism as the act of "passing judgment upon the qualities or merits of anything; esp. the passing of unfavourable judgment; fault-finding" ("criticism"). In the context of elite education, the epistemological mode of critique is actualized in many different ways—polemically, earnestly, understandingly, or accusatorily, for instance. The *New York Times* coverage of the Equality of Opportunity Project, to name an example, communicates its criticism implicitly, through the presentation of suggestive data. Similar critical trajectories can also be transported humorously, however, as in a fake commercial produced by the LA-based comedy group Back of the Class, which uses the tag line "Harvard University: Educating the Rich since 1636" and thus pokes fun at the socio-economic homogeneity of the college's student body.

The books discussed in this chapter, by contrast, follow serious trajectories and are clearly identified in paratexts and reviews as critical investigations through the use of labels that signify various modes of critical writing. Golden's *Price of Admission* was labeled, rather dramatically, as a "fire-breathing, righteous attack on the culture of superprivilege" (*New York Times Book Review*), while Stevens's study is described in more neutral terms as a "fascinating behind-the-scenes account" (Hyden), using "fly-on-the-wall reporting [...] Mitchell Stevens has done a real service by pulling back the curtain on the secretive college admissions process" (Coll). Soares, on the other hand, is hailed as "one of the most important social critics" (Blau) and his book as a "provocative critique" (Ramirez, back cover). Deresiewicz's *Excel-*

lent Sheep was received as a more aggressive intervention, described variously as a “refreshingly barbed indictment” (*MORE Magazine*), a “withering analysis” (Wieseltier), a “passionate, deeply informed, and searing critique” (Zakaria), and even as “a call [...] for revolt” rather than reform (Hedges). Similarly, Douthat’s *Privilege* was referred to as an “incisive critique” and a “withering indictment” (*Booklist*), a “memoir-cum-pop-sociological investigation” (*Publisher’s Weekly*), and a “memoir-cum-polemic” and “thoughtful analysis” (*The New Yorker*). The book itself reflects this hybridity in its self-description as a “powerfully rendered portrait of a young manhood,” thus alluding to the genres of memoir and the coming of age novel; as a “pointed critique of this country’s most esteemed institutions,” thereby positioning itself within the realm of cultural critique; and, lastly, as “an exploration of issues such as affirmative action, grade inflation, political correctness, and curriculum reform.”

A range of different monikers is used to describe the books: investigation, report, analysis, indictment, polemic, critique, attack, and exploration. An important mode of critical writing that does not occur anywhere in the reviews, however, is the jeremiad. Perry Miller “rightly called the New England jeremiad America’s first distinctive literary genre,” as Sacvan Bercovitch puts it in *The American Jeremiad* (1978), perhaps the definitive account of the subject in the field of American Studies. The jeremiad is named after the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, who blames Israel for its own downfall since it broke the contract with Jehovah. As M.H. Abrams puts it, Jeremiah “denounced with gloomy eloquence [Israel’s] religious and moral iniquities, and calls on the people to repent and reform”—only then would Jehovah “renew the ancient covenant” (189). The Puritans brought the jeremiad with them from Europe to New England, transformed it in structure and content, and used it in a variety of contexts. As Bercovitch explains, the jeremiad “might be called the state-of-the-covenant address, tendered at every public occasion (on days of fasting and prayer, humiliation and thanksgiving, at covenant renewal and artillery company ceremonies, and, most elaborately and solemnly, at election day gatherings” (4).

In terms of structure, the Puritan jeremiad consists of three successive steps. First, it reiterates the promise God made to the Puritans and thus emphasizes their special mission, their ‘errand’. Second, the jeremiad outlines in detail the many ways in which members of the community are failing to keep their covenant, and laments the resulting decline. Third, the jeremiad offers the hope of redemption and return to the mission and God’s favor (cf. Jasinski 335). Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the jeremiad was secularized

and its usage no longer restricted to matters of faith and devotion. In addition to the basic structure of “promise, decline, and redemption” (Jasinski 335), the secularized jeremiad continued to insist on the singularity and specialness of the American people and the American experiment, whose exceptionalism manifested itself in the shared commitment to the American Dream. As Richard Posner explains, the jeremiad is characterized by a set of fairly strict conventions: “[I]t must be nostalgic, pessimistic, predictive, and judgmental” (9). Nostalgic and utopian in equal measure, the jeremiad harkens back to a vision of the past that is said to be superior to the present, and at the same time conjures up the image of a future in which this perfection might yet be possible again. Not all jeremiads claim that the perfect past has actually existed, however; some, as Andrew R. Murphy suggests, do not draw on the past “because of its concrete accomplishments or practices, but due to the radical *promise* of the American founding experience” (132, emphasis in the original).

While Miller stressed the “vehemence of its complaint,” Bercovitch locates the cultural significance of the jeremiad in its “unshakable optimism” (8). The trajectory of jeremiadic complaint, moreover, is reformist rather than revolutionary, and it is always teleological, as Bercovitch notes: “The question in these latter-day jeremiads, as in their seventeenth-century precursors, was never ‘Who are we?’ but, almost in deliberate evasion of that question, the old prophetic refrain: ‘When is our errand to be fulfilled? How long, O Lord, how long?’ And the answers, again as in the Puritan jeremiads, invariably joined lament and celebration in reaffirming America’s mission” (11). The cultural work of the jeremiad, then, lies in “simultaneously lamenting a declension and celebrating a national dream,” as Bercovitch puts it. In so doing, it ultimately transforms the epistemology of critique into one of affirmation and validation. Building on Bercovitch’s work, Murphy explains this peculiar dynamic: “[J]eremiadic strategies function to transform dissent and doubt about American society into a rededication to the principles of American culture [...]. The jeremiad deflects attention away from possible institutional or systemic flaws and toward considerations of individual sin” (402). This means that the “depth of social criticism” (ibid.) offered by jeremiadic texts is, by nature, limited.

The books discussed in this chapter do not conform perfectly to the conventions of the jeremiad, but they are written, I want to suggest, in a jeremiadic mode and mobilize a range of jeremiadic elements. Reading them as such helps to explain a central conundrum marking these texts: Though they may differ in style—by turns accusatory and aggressive or thoughtful and em-

pathic—there is little doubt that all five studies are meant to be received as critical interventions. They confirm preexisting stereotypes about the entitled offspring of the very rich; they shock, surprise, and ultimately disillusion those who had believed in the meritocracy; they spark debates among educators, administrators, and families. And yet, despite their obvious critical commitments, the studies ultimately, and to a degree paradoxically, end up affirming the system they set out to critique.

This, then, is due to their jeremiadic tendencies: They implicitly or explicitly remind the reader of the promise of American elite education—as a means of ensuring social mobility, among other things, and as a globally legible symbol of American exceptionalism—then address all the ways in which elite educational institutions are failing their mission, and then conclude by delineating the enticing vision of elite redemption: the perfect meritocracy, a system in which eliteness is stripped of the burden of class and thus turned into another instantiation of the American Dream. Instead of questioning the validity of the elite educational system as such, or thinking about possible alternatives to the meritocratic framework, the studies' criticism ultimately strengthens that system and validates that framework. Like the Puritan jeremiads, then, their “cries of declension and doom [are] part of a strategy designed to revitalize the errand” (Bercovitch xiv), namely to celebrate the vision of a classless eliteness as an expression of American exceptionalism.

3. Progressivist Critiques

The admissions process of elite colleges is a mystery to many. Applicants and cultural commentators alike perceive the dynamics of admission and exclusion as enigmatic, intransparent, and even willfully obscurantist—a procedure inscrutable to outsiders and quite likely discriminatory on multiple levels. This view is in part created by media portrayals of the work of admissions officers: In a wave of recent articles, the admissions policies of elite colleges have been described as a “frenzied, soul-deadening process” (Wong), as “unpredictable” (Menand 2003), “insanely selective” (Dillon), and “crazy competitive” (Nordquist), and as resulting in “hysteria” (Tierney) among college-aged kids and their families. Thus framed in the rhetoric of psychopathology, the elite admissions process is presented by national news outlets as irrational, erratic, even absurd—a framing that deflects from the agency of admissions