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

derives: Given the centrality of the notion of equal opportunity for the self-description and legitimation of the American social order, the existence of a highly stratified educational system is bound to cause fundamental cultural and socio-political tensions, in particular if the system's reward structure is all too easily swayed by the undue influence of what Bourdieu has called economic, social, and cultural capital. It is fair to assume, moreover, that debates about elite education form one of the primary discursive arenas in which the tension between elitism and egalitarianism is actualized and negotiated, heightened or relieved, and thus an arena worthy of scholarly attention.

Starting with the Puritan belief in predestination and the elect, elitist thought has continuously been an integral part of the American experiment (cf. Wolin vii). Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, for instance, famously disagreed about the role of the 'natural *aristoi*' in the young Republic: While both shared the belief in a "natural aristocracy among men [based on] virtue and talent" (Jefferson in a letter to Adams, quoted in Lerner 95), they were divided on its political implications. Whereas Jefferson argued that the natural aristocrats should be actively sought out and employed in public service, Adams was wary of the potentially uncontainable influence this New World nobility might exert. The notion of a '*natural* aristocracy' moreover indicates one of the central conflicts in the discourse, namely to what extent eliteness is rooted in innate qualities, or learned behavior and work, or inherited privilege, respectively. A century later, another major American thinker, Ralph Waldo Emerson, argued in his lecture on aristocracy that "the existence of an upper class is not injurious, as long as it is dependent on merit" (42), thus resorting to a legitimatory concept that is among the primary preoccupations of this study. The tension between elitism and egalitarianism, in Emerson's view, could be resolved by guaranteeing that privilege had to be earned and hence would be deserved in some way.

Skepticism as to the legitimacy of elite power—the question, that is, whether the privileges of the rulers really are 'dependent on merit'—has likewise always been an crucial part of the discourse, with criticism and doubt voiced on both ends of the political spectrum. While liberal perspectives tend to denounce the incompatibility of elitist sentiment with the democratic principles on which the United States was founded, conservative commentators, too, often find fault with the prospect of elite influence. William F. Buckley, Jr., for instance, once stated that he would "rather be governed by the first 2,000 people in the Boston telephone directory than by the 2,000 people on the faculty of Havard University" ("Transcript for July 11"), though whether

this position reflects the traditional American mistrust toward intellectuals or simply Buckley's bias as a 'Yale man' remains uncertain.[1]

As two archetypal poles of the American imagination, elitism and egalitarianism thus have been at the heart of the nation's socio-political discourse ever since its inception. Recent years, however, have again revived the issue's urgency. The debates surrounding charges of elitism during the 2012 presidential campaign, for instance, demonstrate quite strikingly the ambiguity of eliteness in contemporary American society. Disagreement as to whether the next president of the United States ought to be a member of the elite or a bona fide 'Average Joe' dominated much of the campaign efforts, as both candidates tried to outperform each other in their demonstration of allegedly intimate familiarity with 'common folk'. Both Barack Obama and Mitt Romney were furthermore praised and vilified alike for their obvious affiliations with certain types of elite distinction, as journalist Anne Applebaum argues:

> Both Obamas come from what might loosely be called the intellectual/academic meritocracy, the 'liberal elite', the post-WASP Ivy League, easily caricatured as the world of free-trade coffee, organic arugula, smug opinions, and Martha's Vineyard. The Romneys, by contrast, belong to the financial oligarchy, the 'global elite', the post-financial-deregulation world which is just as easily caricatured as one of iced champagne, offshore bank accounts, dressage trainers, and private islands.

Alluding to matters of education and wealth, patterns of consumption, political ideologies, and social behaviors, Applebaum's assessment touches upon many of the socio-cultural and political issues involved in studying the contemporary elite. It might be added, moreover, that the boundaries between the different cultural types of elite distinction are blurry—Romney, for instance, also hold degrees from Harvard University, and while Obama's net worth is only a fraction of his contestant's, he is certainly affluent as well.

Applebaum's caricatures furthermore point toward the highly emotional and opinionated nature of the debates surrounding eliteness in the United States. Comments on elite distinction almost invariably betray a strong bias

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1 William F. Buckley Jr. (1925-2008) was among the most prominent conservative American thinkers and commentators of the twentieth century. In 1951, he published *God and Man at Yale*, a critique of liberalism and secularism at his alma mater that started his career. He founded the *National Review* in 1955 and hosted the public affairs show *Firing Line* from 1966 until 1999.

for or against eliteness, and are often determined by dogmatism and monomania. Anti-elitist sentiment, in particular, is a common and pronounced occurrence across the political spectrum, as journalist Tom Lutz explains: "We have billionaire antielitists, tenured antielitists, rightwing nutjob antielitists, leftwing wacko antielitists, famous artist antielitists, and Congressional antielitists." Lutz's list again illustrates the cultural versatility of the concept of elite distinction—it is unlikely, after all, that the many anti-elitists he references would agree on which particular elite it is that they so vehemently oppose. Anti-elitism can be directed against a diverse array of people or groups, as long as they are in possession of an excess of capital—economic, cultural, symbolic, or social. The strong opposition to any kind of eliteness seems to be a sentiment at once comfortable and comforting to many American subject positions. One is thus hard pressed to find, in the overall discourse of elite distinction, many instances of affirmative treatment of the notion of eliteness. The educational space, however, is a particularly interesting discursive arena because while anti-elitist sentiment is fairly common here as well, it remains one of the few epistemological realms in which the term 'elite' holds a certain socio-cultural cachet and is used as mark of praise instead of criticism.

The Elite Campus as a Cultural Signifier

The second hypothesis that guides this study is related to the cultural meanings attributed to the elite educational space. In his recent book, *College: What it Was, Is, and Should Be* (2012), cultural critic Andrew Delbanco reflects in some detail on the role of college in the United States and concludes that "[c]ollege is our American pastoral. We imagine it as a verdant world where the harshest sounds are the reciprocal thump of tennis balls or the clatter of cleats as young bodies trot up and down the fieldhouse steps" (2012: 11). Though Delbanco himself unfortunately does not elaborate on this reading of college as a pastoral space—except for alluding, somewhat ominously, to the "specter of mortality" (ibid.) that shadows the campus—his assessment is instructive in a number of ways. First, it demonstrates that the collegiate space is indeed a space that is "imagine[d]"—in the minds of individuals, in novels and films, in the fields of cultural criticism and scholarship, in the larger realm of public discourse—and, in the process, equipped with different, perhaps even contradictory meanings. Second, the notion of college as pastoral indicates that these various imaginations of the collegiate space reflect not only socio-cultural or political expectations but also allude to the sphere of the aesthetic,

the sensual, and the iconic. The pristine campus, almost otherworldly in its beauty and wholeness, does not only guarantee intellectual stimulation and social advancement, but also holds the promise of life in a charismatic, inspirational environment. Third, Delbanco's reflections point to a peculiar ambiguity in the imagination of the collegiate space in its cultural context: On the one hand, it is often seen as a place that is separate and offers respite from the 'real world', an almost utopian place that is distinct from its surroundings; on the other hand, the campus is read as and expected to be a microcosm of society at large. Last but not least, the remark points to a blind spot of sorts that is fairly characteristic of the discourse on higher education in the United States: Delbanco fails to mention that only a very specific kind of college may lend itself to a conceptualization along the lines of the pastoral; after all, he is not referring to an urban community college or to, say, a large Midwestern state university. Instead, he is concerned with a fairly small segment of the vast landscape of American higher education—the private, four-year liberal arts college. It is thus the elite educational space that, quite tellingly, is here turned into the generic American college.

In identifying the elite educational space as 'our American pastoral', Delbanco mobilizes the strong connection between the aesthetics of the elite campus, the narratives it generates, and its broader cultural meanings, particularly in the production of national myths. This demonstrates, once again, the importance of including the study of form and aesthetics in the discussion of eliteness in America. In *The Machine in the Garden* (1964)—perhaps the most famous account of pastoralism in American literature and culture—Leo Marx distinguishes two modes of the pastoral, "one that is popular and sentimental, the other imaginative and complex" (5). Marx interprets the sudden intrusion of the machine into the bucolic landscape as the symptomatic moment of American pastoralism, signifying the ambivalence and specificity of the American pastoral landscape with its emphasis on transformation and change (343). While this does not quite capture what Delbanco had in mind, pastoralism has also been described more broadly as a mode expressing "a natural desire for simplicity and innocence, a golden age, a world of leisure, song and love" (Sinfield 32), or, with Roger Sales, as representing the 'five Rs': "refuge, reflection, rescue, requiem, and reconstruction" (17).

Judging from these different conceptualizations, one might well claim that there is a certain element of the pastoral—a gesture toward pastoralism, as it were—that is very much definitive of cultural negotiations of the elite campus in America. Andrew Ettin describes such elements as "pastoral insets"

(75), while Marx uses the phrase "pastoral interlude" (25) to describe instances of the pastoral occurring in otherwise non-pastoral contexts. These interludes find expression in the countless descriptions of the picturesque elite campus that occur in so many of the materials that constitute my corpus. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* (1920), for instance, protagonist Amory Blaine describes Princeton as "lazy and good-looking and aristocratic—you know, like a spring day" (23); similarly, the protagonist of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992) remembers his first encounter with the prestigious Hampden College, mediated by a brochure: "Even now I remember those pictures, like pictures in a storybook one loved as a child. Radiant meadows, mountains vaporous in the trembling distance; leaves ankle-deep on a gusty autumn road; bonfires and fog in the valleys; cellos, dark windowpanes, snow" (10). Finally, Lee Fiora, protagonist of Curtis Sittenfeld's novel *Prep*, which I discuss in detail in the last chapter, acknowledges the role of the pastoral qualities of the campus in her decision to apply to the Ault School:

> Ault had been my idea. I'd researched boarding schools at the public library and written away for catalogs myself. Their glossy pages showed photographs of teenagers in wool sweaters singing hymns in the chapel, gripping lacrosse sticks, intently reading a math equation written across the chalkboard. I had traded away my family for this glossiness. I'd pretended it was about academics, but it never had been. (25)

Pastoral insets, however, do not only occur in fictional texts. To name but one example: Mitchell Stevens, author of *Creating a Class* (2006), which is subject of this study's second chapter, begins his account of the admissions practices at an elite college with a chapter quite tellingly titled "A School in a Garden," and offers the following description of the school grounds:

> Set at a high elevation overlooking farmland, sleepy towns, and hardwood forests, the College enjoys a geographical prominence commensurate with its stunning campus. Lovely old buildings from the early campaigns resemble pieces of a giant chess set, carefully positions around shade quadrangles. Slate roofs and mullioned windows convey a sense of history. A few of the facades are illuminated in the evenings, making them visible for miles into the surrounding valleys. The most impressive route of arrival carries drivers through a sweeping lawn dotted with perennial beds and specimen trees. Lovingly tended, the trees are a special point of pride. (5)

Interestingly, even the inevitable gestures of competitive self-assertion bound to surface in the discourse of elite education are often rendered in the rhetoric of the pastoral. Hard work, intellectual exertion, and exhaustion, seemingly at odds with the placid tranquility of the pastoral campus, are framed in romanticized terms. Donna Tartt's Richard Papen, for instance, explains how Hampden College, "suffused with a weak, academic light," evokes "long hours in dusty libraries, and old books, and silence" (6). In *Education's End* (2007), law professor Anthony T. Kronman fondly recalls his days at Williams College:

> We met once a week, in Professor Lawrence's home at the end of Main Street, a few blocks from campus. Each session lasted three hours. We broke in the middle for tea, and there were always fresh cookies (courtesy of Mrs. Lawrence). The fall came on, the days shortened, the air grew chilly. The Berkshires were covered in scarlet and gold. When we arrived at Professor Lawrence's home, late in the afternoon, we found a fire going, and his two golden retrievers asleep like bookends beside the hearth. (4)

Kronman's account neatly illustrates some of the most prevalent aspects of the picturesque elite educational space: the intimacy between teacher and students; the ease and effortlessness of work; the inspirational quality of the pastoral landscape. Furthermore, the activity of work and its attendant technology are pastoralized by framing them with the fire and the sleeping golden retrievers, which together echo the "scarlet and gold" of the pastoral landscape. However, it is not only the older accounts of elite educational experiences that exhibit this tendency. A student quoted in *Harvard Magazine*, for instance, who is said to study from 3 to 5 am before going to rowing practice at 6, describes her experience as follows: "'Lamont [library] is beautiful at 5 am—my favorite time, […]. Sunlight streams in'" (Lambert). Similarly, the *Yale College Viewbook*, a 65-page full color brochure advertising Yale, is full of photographs showing students working in a number of scenic settings, sitting on the well-manicured lawns or in the beautifully decorated libraries. Other promotional materials follow this strategy of combining the ambitious with the arcadian, thus providing sources of self-affirmation for the elite community.

Though a significant amount of material deals critically with the elite educational space without glamorizing it, the collective "longing for the picturesque" (Tartt 5), shared by protagonists and audiences alike, continues to permeate cultural negotiations of the elite educational space. Thus, in his 2012 coffee table book *The Ivy League*—with its cloth binding and high quality photographs itself an exemplar of the fetishization of the picturesque elite cam-

pus—Daniel Capello speaks of the Ivy League's "intangible, enthralling It factor" (11) in trying to describe the special quality of these schools, an auratic quality that is allegedly so mysterious as to be virtually unnamable.

The effects of pastoralism thus are not limited to the individual pastoral insets describing physical spaces but, like Marx's pastoral landscape, expand their meanings into the broader realm of the cultural space. In *The Machine in the Garden*, which has been described as "a minority report on the national psyche" (Sanford 274), Marx conceptualizes the American pastoral as one of the core constituents of a national mythology, one that posits a distinctive contrast to the European roots of pastoralism. As a cultural negotiation of escapist fantasies, anxieties, and fears that are channeled in a romanticized aesthetics that they then continually point beyond, the pastoral ideal becomes, in Marx's words, a "distinctively American theory of society" (4) that revolves around "the root conflict of our time" (365). The elite college pastoral can be described along similar lines. As a cultural signifier, the elite educational space amalgamates pastoral aesthetics and narrative structures with a number of highly productive American grand narratives and thus becomes both representative and generative of a national mythology.

The proliferation of pastoral and picturesque insets notwithstanding, it thus seems more productive to conceptualize the campus pastoral more broadly as an imaginary space, a collective fantasy of collegiate life that is firmly situated in the American cultural inventory. This fantasy plays with and instrumentalizes pastoral tropes and narrative structures—the retreat to the 'golden age' of college, the inspirational qualities of beautiful spaces, and the return to the 'real world'—but complicates them in a variety of ways.

What, then, is the merit of reading the cultural negotiation of elite education through the lens of the pastoral, even though it is doubtless an incomplete characterization? First, this reading sheds some light on the emergence of the elite educational space as a cultural signifier that in the course of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century has appropriated a range of cultural and ideological meanings. Second, it points to some of the discursive mechanisms that serve to legitimize the elite status of certain institutions and the actors associated with them—the more one thinks through the allegedly 'unnamable' It-factor diagnosed by Capello, the more one realizes that it is, of course, namable, because it is constructed, contingent, fabricated. Nonetheless, the aesthetics of the pastoral romanticizes the specific socio-political position elite colleges inhabit and, in so doing, deflects from less picturesque issues. Third, focusing on elite educational spaces as picturesque imaginations and cultural

constructions automatically raises questions about the actual spaces to which these fantasies are attached. The spatial boundedness of elite education allows for a reconsideration of the fairly un-pastoral facets that the aesthetics of the picturesque tends to veil, even though and because they shape and define the elite educational space: class and capital. Keeping these two guiding assumptions in mind, I now want to turn to the three categories that are at the heart of my exploration of the discourse of elite education—eliteness, merit, and class—and introduce each of them in detail.

3. 'Very Important, Very Powerful, or Very Prominent': Eliteness in America

In *Beyond the Ruling Class: Strategic Elites in Modern Society* (1963), sociologist Suzanne Keller writes about the inevitability of elite influence: "The existence and persistence of influential minorities is one of the constant characteristics of organized social life. Whether a community is small or large, rich or poor, simple or complex, it always sets some of its members apart as very important, very powerful, or very prominent" (3). While few scholars would dispute this, academic inquiry into the composition and distribution of power remains replete with terminological confusion and conceptual obscurity. Reflecting on the complexity of the possible structural distinctions, Anthony Giddens points out:

> We should be able to recognize […] that there can exist a 'governing class' without it necessarily being a 'ruling class'; that there can exist a 'power elite' without it necessarily being either a 'ruling' or a 'governing class', that there can be a system of 'leadership groups' which constitutes neither power 'elite', nor governing class' or 'ruling class'; that all of these social formations are compatible with the existence of an 'upper class'; and finally, that none of these categories prejudices the question of the relative primacy of the 'political' and 'economic' spheres within the class structure. (3)

Fraught with a variety of terminological and theoretical complications, the conceptual terrain of eliteness is far from easy to navigate. As the terms discussed by Giddens suggest, stratification in contemporary Western societies like the United States occurs simultaneously along several different dimensions—economic, social, political, and cultural, among others—and every