

Introduction

Tommy Hilfiger's 2013 fall campaign, somewhat enigmatically titled *cárpēdiem mañana*, centers around main protagonist Chloe Hilfiger's arrival at college. Shot at Princeton University, the campaign features all the staples of collegiate imagery: Gothic architecture, fall foliage, and groups of well-dressed students reading books. The campaign did not raise any eyebrows; after all, fashion brands have a long history of appropriating Ivy League aesthetics to sell their products. The image of the elite campus is a familiar sight in the marketing of high-end clothing ranging from traditional New England brands like J.Press and Brooks Brothers to newer labels such as Ralph Lauren and J.Crew. Hilfiger's campaign distinguished itself only through its elaborateness: His fictional Hilfigers, an "all-American family" pioneered three years earlier, were fleshed out in detailed character profiles on the brand's website and even, on occasion, operated their own Twitter accounts ("Fall 2013"). It was surely no coincidence, moreover, that the narratives about the family members were written by Lisa Birnbach, famous for her work in *The Official Preppy Handbook* (1980)¹—another publication using and, in the process, shaping the collegiate aesthetics.

1 The Official Preppy Handbook was published in 1980 as "a tongue-in-cheek guide to one of America's obscure little subcultures," as one of its editors puts it (Wallace). It became a bestseller, inspiring a range of similar publications (e.g. *The Official J.A.P. Handbook* (1982), *The Official Slacker Handbook* (1994), or *The Hipster Handbook* (2003)), and is still regularly cited in a variety of preppy-themed blogs and magazine articles. Part of its lasting appeal, as Andy Selsberg argues, lies in its skilled navigation of the tension between elitism and egalitarianism: The Official Preppy Handbook "capitalizes on our ambivalence about exclusivity. We cannot shake the idea that self-reinvention is as easy as following a new dress code, but we also call out those poseurs who try to crash the party by dressing like someone they're not. The handbooks at once invite people in and close the gates."

Even though the campaign was not deemed particularly noteworthy or surprising, there is something curious, and curiously American, about its utilization of the elite educational space. In fact, in a different cultural context—the German one, for instance—the conjunction of fashion and the educational setting would be unusual and arguably unsuccessful. Hilfiger's penchant for collegiate aesthetics thus prompts a reflection about the meanings activated through the use of the elite campus: Which desires and values are written into the physical fabric of the elite college, and what does that tell us about eliteness and education in America, about class and consumption patterns, and, ultimately, about the complex semantics and cultural implications of a space whose meanings remain ambiguous and contested? Hilfiger's campaign, after all, did not only capitalize on the beauty of the Princeton campus landscape, but also on the conglomerate of cultural meanings this setting evokes: privilege, excellence, power, a legitimately beautiful and good life.

This study is concerned with elite education and its peculiar position in the American cultural imagination. Its primary trajectory is epistemological: I am interested in what we know about the elite educational space, how we gain this knowledge, and how the various sites of knowledge production navigate the tensions and contradictions invariably involved in these epistemological practices. My initial point of departure was an interest in the cultural representations and reverberations of social stratification, and in particular the negotiation of wealth and distinction. Since the elite educational system plays a decisive role in explaining, maintaining, and reproducing upper-class status and power, it provides an apt lens through which to engage the above-mentioned issues.

My book departs from two preliminary theses that have inspired and guided my readings: First, I assume that there is a tension between certain American core values, such as equal opportunity and the American Dream of individual achievement and upward mobility, and the existence of a highly stratified educational system that selects not only on the basis of talent and skill, but also, much more profanely, on the basis of money. This tension causes a representational dilemma for the institutions themselves—how to communicate their eliteness without seeming elitist?—and is at the heart of most other discursive formations of the elite educational space. In fact,

all of the individual materials I interrogate in this study address the tension between elitism and egalitarianism in one way or another.²

Second, I argue that the elite educational space in the course of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century has appropriated a number of meanings that transcend academic education proper. These additional meanings are reflected, for instance, in a certain aesthetics that is associated with the campus—a semiotics of elite distinction employed, for instance, by Tommy Hilfiger and other brands—and I argue that this can be conceptualized as a specific type of charisma, operating in one way or another in all of the materials I discuss in this study. As a cultural signifier with charismatic overtones, then, the elite educational space is part of the ongoing negotiation and perpetuation of certain grand narratives and national myths in the United States, most importantly the myth of the meritocracy.

The elite educational space is thought about, commented on, praised, criticized, and imagined in a number of different cultural contexts. In order to achieve as comprehensive an understanding as possible of the epistemological dynamics surrounding elite education, my book follows an approach grounded in discourse theory, and investigates a number of heterogeneous discursive arenas—fictional and non-fictional texts; textual and audio-visual materials; written, spoken, and spatial forms of communication, all of which collectively produce the elite educational space in twenty-first century America. Building on these observations, I examine a range of different American (self-)descriptions of the elite educational space: scholarly and journalistic, institutional, and literary. In so doing, I am particularly interested in the occurrence and negotiation of potential fault lines and tensions in the discursive structure, the most important of which occur around the concepts reflected in the title of this study: the negotiation of class and capital, the notion of merit, and the meanings of eliteness in contemporary America. As the Hilfiger campaign indicates, moreover, knowledge about elite education is produced through a variety of semiotic channels: recurring images, symbols, and motifs; narrative patterns, metaphors, and allegories; the reiteration of iconic visualizations and well-established formulae. Form is foundational for the epistemology of elite education, and the poetics of the elite educational

2 In addition to elitism and egalitarianism, (populist) anti-elitism also plays a major role in American culture and politics. In the discourse of elite education as I conceptualize it, however, anti-elitist sentiment is relatively rare and thus does not figure prominently in my readings.

space will consequently be at the heart of my examination. The remainder of this introduction is divided into three sections: First, I discuss my study's context and relevance to the field of American studies; second, I outline my approach and method; and third, I offer a succinct overview of the four analytical chapters, briefly outlining their guiding questions and main insights.

Situating the Book: Context and Relevance

The dramatic rise of income inequality in the United States during the past few decades is increasingly gaining attention in American public discourse. Campaigning for the 2016 Democratic Party nomination, Bernie Sanders, for instance, called “the issue of wealth and income inequality [...] the great moral issue of our times” (quoted in Knowles); pundits, scholars, and major national news outlets overwhelmingly concur.³ Journalist and conservative commentator David Brooks, however, complains about this recent trend and argues that “America has always done better [...] when we are all focused on opportunity and mobility, not inequality, on individual and family aspiration, not class-consciousness. [...] We should not be focusing on a secondary issue and a statistical byproduct” (Brooks 2014). This is certainly a bold proposition to make in the post-crisis era, and even a cursory glance at the current socio-political landscape in the United States demonstrates that many disagree with Brooks's dismissal of class as ‘a secondary issue and a statistical byproduct’.

A number of actors, in fact, explicitly and consciously employ the signifier ‘class’ in their diagnoses of the twenty-first century American malaise: The Occupy movement, for instance, claims to “kick the ass of the ruling class” (Occupy Wall Street); Brooks's own newspaper, *The New York Times*, features

3 A few recent examples of articles in major news publications that likewise emphasize the importance of addressing income inequality: “Today's Inequality Could Easily Become Tomorrow's Catastrophe” (Robert J. Shiller, *The New York Times*, 26 Aug. 2016); “Why Economists Took So Long to Focus on Inequality” (Justin Fox, *Bloomberg*, 4 Jan. 2016); “Income Inequality is the New Economic Issue” (Susan Milligan, *U.S. News & World Report*, 1 May 2015); “Inequality: The Biggest Problem American Business Is Facing in 2015” (Sanjay Sanghoo, *Time*, 7 Jan. 2015); “Why income inequality is America's biggest (and most difficult) problem” (Sean McElwee, *Salon*, 26 Oct. 2014); “The Rich, the Right, and the Facts: Deconstructing the Income Distribution Debate” (Paul Krugman, *The American Prospect*, 4 Jun. 2014); “For Richer, For Poorer” (Zanny Minton Beddoes, *The Economist*, 13 Oct. 2012).

a special section titled 'Class Matters'⁴; and Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* became a somewhat unlikely bestseller in the summer of 2014. Cultural production, too, increasingly engages with social stratification. Consider, for instance, the reality show *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (2012-14), the documentary *American Winter* (2013), and the sitcom *Two Broke Girls* (since 2011), all of which examine various facets of poverty in the United States. On the other end of the spectrum, a number of formats focus on the lives of the very rich: The *Real Housewives* franchise (since 2006) and *Keeping up with the Kardashians* (since 2007) as reality shows, the documentaries *Born Rich* (2003) and *The One Percent* (2006), as well as fictional series such as the teen drama show *Gossip Girl* (2007-12) allow their audiences to catch a glimpse behind the curtains of the 0.1 percent. Brooks's discomfort notwithstanding, then, class and social stratification seem very much on the agenda in contemporary America. The examples also demonstrate the complexity of class as a category that signifies a whole array of disparate phenomena, ranging from cultural practices and behaviors to health, life chances, and the body.

It is not surprising, then, that sociological and political science research increasingly engages with class-related issues—ranging from broad interrogations of the distribution of power in the United States to more specific examinations of institutions, practices, and patterns of behavior. Since social stratification is a discursive and aesthetic negotiation as much as it is a material reality, however, it should be the focus of cultural and literary studies scholarship as well; the initial idea that eventually led to the present study was therefore to explore the discursive and aesthetic negotiation of upper-class America from a cultural studies perspective. While 'class' is indeed gaining traction as an object of research in American Studies, most scholarship—situated mainly within critical poverty studies—foregrounds the lower classes and investigates the ramifications of poverty and destitution. Even books whose titles seem to indicate a more comprehensive approach—for instance Keith Gandall's *Class Representation in Modern Fiction and Film* (2007)—ultimately betray this bias.⁵ My study thus intends to focus on the upper strata of society as

4 *Class Matters* was published in book form in 2005, exploring "the ways in which class—defined as a combination of income, education, wealth, and occupation—influences destiny in a society that like to think of itself as a land of opportunity" (blurb).

5 A similar imbalance can be observed in *Vanishing Moments: Class and American Literature* (Eric Schocket, 2006); *Narrating Class in American Fiction* (William Dow, 2009); and *Class and the Making of American Literature: Created Unequal* (ed. Andrew Larson, 2014).

the hitherto neglected part of the class equation, examining representations of eliteness, wealth, and upper-class culture.

Located at the intersection of cultural, sociological, political, and economic discourses around equality, stratification, and education, my study therefore has two main contributions to make to the field of American Studies: First, it brings cultural and literary studies to the study of eliteness in America, which has as of yet been almost exclusively sociological. Since the maintenance of the status quo depends in large parts on legitimacy derived from cultural practices—grand narratives, national myths, symbolic structures, token protagonists and recurring motifs—the critical interrogation of these cultural articulations seems to me an important part of the project of American Studies. Second, my study is part of the renewed effort within American Studies to re-introduce ‘class’ as a critical analytical category; after years of neglect, the exploration of class as a cultural and economic concept is gaining momentum. Its specificity—the fact that due to its material and hierarchical nature, it does not work analogously to other identity markers, such as race and gender—continues to be in need of adequate examination and theorization. In addition to these two aspects, my study also contributes to the continued examination of the foundational contradictions of Americanness. The tension between elitism and egalitarianism that is at the heart of my study is also, arguably, one of the central tensions informing the negotiation of American identity, politics, and culture in the twenty-first century.

Approaching American Elite Education: Theory and Methodology

I want to begin with a brief note on my theoretical and methodological premises. Elite education in twenty-first century America is a large, fuzzy topic that could be approached from a number of different perspectives, depending on one’s initial assumptions and research interests. What intrigued me most about this topic, however, was its proliferation and the resulting epistemological variety of its many instantiations. As much the object of sober sociological analysis as of wild imaginations, elite education seemed to produce several competing and complementary visions of itself, using a range of different modes of meaning production—analysis, narrative, imagery, among others. Since it is these epistemological trajectories I want to trace, and these visions I want to understand and interrogate, my approach needed to be flexible enough to allow for the juxtaposition of different

materials and the combination of different strategies of reading them. In the following, I want to briefly outline my theoretical premises, which I take from Clifford Geertz, Eva Illouz, and, specifically with regard to class, from Pierre Bourdieu, and my methodological approach, which is grounded in discourse theory. To conclude this section, I give a succinct definition of what I mean when I talk about ‘the discourse of elite education’ and explain the time frame my book covers.

Very broadly speaking, my approach is grounded the notion of culture as text. In this, I follow thinkers such as cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who proposes a semiotic understanding of culture as an “interworked system of construable signs” (14), in the tradition of Max Weber’s assertion that “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun” (5). In this study, I want to trace some of these particular webs, these culturally constructed conceptual systems and the semiotic codes that govern them, in order to understand how they gain and maintain cultural legitimacy. Geertz argues that cultural analysis can be likened to constructing a reading of a manuscript, “sorting out the structures of signification [...] and determining their social ground and import” (9). Cultural formations, practices, and artifacts can thus be read and examined like texts, using the methodological instrumentarium provided by literary and cultural studies.

My own position toward the materials I analyze is informed by the work of cultural sociologist Eva Illouz, who describes her approach in *Saving the Modern Soul* (2008) as one that “move[s] the field of cultural studies away from the ‘epistemology of suspicion’” (4). The task of cultural analysis, according to Illouz, is not to assess cultural practices against some predefined standard, but to gain an understanding of “how they have come to be what they are and why, in being what they are, they ‘accomplish things’ for people” (ibid.). Illouz thus emphasizes the importance of understanding the “mechanism of culture: how meanings are produced, how they are woven into the social fabric, how they are used in daily life to shape relationships and cope with an uncertain world, and why they come to organize our interpretation of self and others” (4-5). Now, Illouz’s approach does not work equally well with all of the materials I analyze in this study—promotional brochures, for instance, are harder to approach in this way than, say, novels. But I take from Illouz the aspiration to meet the materials on eye level, so to speak, and to analyze them first according to their own professed claims and assumptions.

Though I do not employ his concept of the field in this study, my understanding of class is largely grounded in Bourdieu’s work on capital and social

reproduction in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1979) and *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (with Jean-Claude Passeron, 1970). In particular, Bourdieu's conception of capital as "accumulated labor, either in materialized form or in embodied form" (1986: 241) has informed my own understanding of eliteness as a category closely related to these different forms of material, conceptual, or embodied resources and assets—Bourdieu distinguishes between economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital. A more detailed discussion of Bourdieu's understanding of class and capital follows in the first chapter of this study.

On the macro level, my book follows a discourse-analytical approach. Since the meanings of elite education in the contemporary United States are produced and negotiated across a wide range of different texts, images, and practices, and originate from a wide range of sources, discourse theory is the most suitable tool for selecting and structuring my corpus. 'Discourse' is perhaps one of the most elusive and ill-defined terms currently in circulation, and can mean a number of different things. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), Michel Foucault acknowledges this ambiguity, and explains that he treats the term "sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements" (2005: 90). The central assumption of discourse theory is that meaning is constructed, contingent, and always in flux; a discourse, then, is conceptualized as the partial and temporary fixation of meaning within a particular field, a particular time, a particular cultural context (Jørgensen and Phillips 26). In their attempt to fixate meaning, discourses, however, are inherently unstable, as Foucault points out:

We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (1978: 100-01)

Thus, the potential for subversion, the instability, and the tendency toward contradiction are endemic to the discourse itself. Discourse analysis as an approach is aimed at "map[ping] out the process in which we struggle about the way in which the meaning of signs is to be fixed, and the processes by

which some fixations of meaning become so conventionalized that we think of them as naturalized” (ibid.).

When I use the phrase ‘discourse of elite education’, I refer to the sum of all statements made about the topic at a given point in time and within a given cultural context—in this case, the United States in the twenty-first century. Positions within the discourse are subject to rules and norms that govern their circulation, determine their influence, and strengthen or undermine their power. The discourse of elite education, then, is both a practice and a regulated system of knowledge, and, as such, it is part of larger discursive structures—relating, for instance, to education as a whole or to social stratification in America.

I conceptualize the discourse of elite education as a multidimensional conglomerate of meanings informed by various forces that produce knowledge and opinions. In order to map this vast discursive landscape, I distinguish between three dominant subdiscourses: sociological and journalistic research, institutional self-representation, and literary narratives. Even though there are other discursive arenas in which elite education is negotiated implicitly—fashion and advertising, for instance, as the example of Tommy Hilfiger has shown—I chose to focus on research, self-representation, and fiction because these are subdiscourses that deal with elite education directly and explicitly. As such, their contributions to the overall epistemology of elite education carry more weight and are thus more relevant for my analysis.

The images of elite campuses generated in these subfields have gained entry into the American cultural inventory and permanently shaped the collective perception of elite education. Since I am interested in the different kinds of knowledge produced about the topic, I furthermore assume that the subdiscourses are characterized by more or less distinct epistemological modes: the critical-analytical, the affirmative, and the imaginative. These modes are tied to different communicative purposes, restraints, and expectations. Fictional texts, for instance, are not necessarily expected to analyze, explain, and introduce solutions (like sociological studies), or expose and criticize (like journalistic accounts), or inform, advertise, and propagate (like self-representational texts). Of course, literary texts can do all of the above, but they are free to risk contradiction and paradox to a degree that other text types are not. The discursive contribution of literary texts is of interest precisely because of their ability to embrace and capitalize on ambiguity.

On the micro level of individual analyses, I draw on a range of different methodological tools, depending on the discursive context and the specific

set of research questions. In the chapter on Princeton's self-representation, for instance, I use an approach grounded what has come to be known as the 'spatial turn' in order to read the university's physical space; in the last chapter, which focuses on the imaginative mode, I draw on Jane Tompkins's concept of 'cultural work'. Throughout the book, moreover, I rely on the concept of nodal points, developed in the post-structuralist discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.⁶ Nodal points are privileged signifiers around which meanings congeal and become temporarily fixed, and which thus structure and organize the discourse (cf. 82). Other signs acquire their specific and contingent meanings from their relationship to the nodal point. In my conception, the three major nodal points 'eliteness', 'merit', and 'class' do not only structure and stabilize the discourse of elite education by fixating meanings and yielding a number of well-established narratives, but they also simultaneously hold the potential of challenging received wisdom and undermining established structures of meaning. This is why they are at the heart of my exploration.

The time frame this study principally covers is the early twenty-first century; my primary corpus includes texts published between 2005 and 2016. On the one hand, this time frame derives from pragmatic concerns of feasibility—combining the synchronic breadth of discourse analysis with a diachronic approach of historical comparison would have gone beyond what a dissertation can reasonably hope to achieve. On the other hand, the focus on the twenty-first century arises out of the discourse itself. In recent years, there has been a surge in publications on the issue, both in the critical-analytical and in the fictional realm, quite possibly as a reflection of the increased socio-cultural and economic importance of elite educational institutions. Furthermore, the history of elite education is fairly well researched, and the dominant narrative that emerges from this research can be generalized as a teleological narrative of liberal progressivism, especially pervasive in parts of the

6 Political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe developed their post-Marxist and poststructuralist discourse theory principally in their 1985 book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Their intervention is theoretical and fairly abstract rather than concretely methodological. Since the trajectory of my book is not primarily theoretical, I will not offer a detailed description of Laclau and Mouffe's work (Marianne W. Jørgensen and Louise J. Phillips offer a succinct and readable overview in their 2002 book *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*). For the purpose of my analyses, I draw primarily on their conception of the nodal point as a privileged signifier that structures the discourse.

critical-analytical discourse—a narrative of obstacles overcome and triumphs achieved: the end of the discrimination of Jews, women, and people of color, as well as change in admission standards, curricula, and educational objectives; all seems to move forward toward the perfect meritocracy. My book wants to intervene at the supposed endpoint of this story, at which the framework of meritocracy reigns supreme and is rarely questioned or challenged in any meaningful way.

Chapter Structure

As its title suggests, the first chapter, “Exposition: Approaching the Elite Educational Space,” serves to contextualize and situate the three analytical chapters that follow. Theorizing elite distinction and historicizing elite education, the chapter introduces the three key concepts that dominate the epistemology of elite education: eliteness, merit, and class. The second chapter, “Critique: Elite Education and Its Discontents,” begins the inquiry into the epistemological practices surrounding the elite educational space by focusing on the critical-analytical mode. In this chapter, I map the critical landscape and identify two major analytical concerns that structure it: on the one hand, the politics of admission and exclusion, and on the other hand, comprehensive critiques of the ‘cultures of privilege’ produced in and through the elite educational space along with their broader socio-cultural and political implications. My main argument in this chapter is that all of the studies are written in the mode of the jeremiad and thus ultimately validate and re-affirm the system the ostensibly seek to critique.

The third chapter, “Affirmation: Self-Representation at Princeton University,” moves from the critical-analytical to the affirmative mode, and accentuates the epistemological contribution of elite colleges themselves, asking which nodal points structure their self-conceptualizations. Using Princeton as a case study, I show how the university’s self-representation responds to a media discourse that marks elite education with the notions of impossibility and pathology by creating what I call a ‘meritocracy of affect’—a flexible structure of meaning production that integrates neoliberal and humanistic conceptions of eliteness. The meritocracy of affect, I suggest, is embedded in and stabilized by three complementary epistemological frames: diversity, the good life, and community. In my discussion of the individual frames, I focus

on the negotiation of class, merit, and eliteness, but also address a number of ruptures that occur in their respective instantiations.

The fourth and last chapter, “Imagination: Fictionalizations of the Elite Educational Experience,” explores the mode of imagination. A long history of fictional renditions of the elite campus has permanently shaped the image of collegiate America, and the imaginative mode has the capacity to include and put in dialogue the various tensions and contradictions that characterize elite education in the United States. In this chapter, I use Curtis Sittenfeld’s 2005 campus novel *Prep* as a point of departure to discuss these dynamics. In the first section, I situate the text in its discursive context by discussing reviews and academic responses. In the second section, I read the text itself and discuss the cultural work it potentially engages in, in particular with regard to class, merit, and eliteness. I argue that *Prep* can be seen simultaneously as an expression and a subversion of the neoliberal imagination: The novel subverts the “normalcy of mobility” (Jones 12) by presenting a protagonist who refuses to conform to the merit narrative, and thus forces the reader to think anew about class, capital, and the role of merit. In so doing, however, it ultimately creates a neoliberal reader—a reader who is offended by the protagonist’s passivity and stasis, who wants her to follow the cultural script of eliteness qua merit, and to do so convincingly and gladly. At the same time, *Prep*’s insistence on the importance of class in all of its manifestations runs counter to the neoliberal unwillingness to even acknowledge socio-economic stratification.