

College High School example demonstrates. The centrality of the topos of merit in the discourse of elite education and the cultural work in which it engages thus have to be scrutinized carefully. The uneasy relationship between merit and class in particular calls for close examination.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I outlined in some detail the two guiding premises that informed my approach to the discourse of elite education: First, that there is a central tension between the American ideal of egalitarianism and the existence of a highly stratified educational system whose selection principles are all too often swayed by different forms of capital; and second, that the elite educational space works as a cultural signifier characterized by a semiotics of elite distinction whose meanings transcend academic education proper. I then introduced the three nodal points that I regard as central to the architecture of the discourse of elite education: eliteness, merit, and class. After addressing some defining features of the term 'elite'—its etymology, history of usage, and contemporary definitions—I laid out my own understanding of eliteness as a particularly productive concept in the field of cultural studies. Connoting privilege, wealth, and power as well as distinction, legitimacy, and skill, the concept of eliteness is more nuanced and flexible than semantically similar concepts and alludes to fantasies and desires, often distracting from its economic foundations. Despite its elusiveness, however, I have argued that the term commands a triad of relatively stable meanings: The first, and arguably most pervasive connotation is excellence/exceptionalism. An elite university is one that offers superior education to superior students, and boasts professors doing superior research. The second connotation the term elite holds is that of exclusivity/selectivity. By definition, elite institutions constitute only a small piece of the higher education pie, and they cater to an even smaller segment of the overall student population. Their exclusivity, measured in ever-decreasing admissions rates, is one of their primary assets, and the process of selection their applicants undergo one of their primary means of establishing legitimacy. Lastly, the notion of eliteness carries the connotation of influence/power. This refers on the one hand to the position of the institutions themselves, who are seen as leaders in the field of education, and on the other hand to the position of their graduates, who disproportionately populate leadership positions across all key sectors of the American society.

Related to and in continuous dialogue with the notion of eliteness is the concept of merit, which dominates the entire discourse. I recapitulated the changing historical conceptions of merit and discussed the particularities of its semantic flexibility. I traced the emergence and enthusiastic appropriation of the ideology of meritocracy in the United States, and discussed the role of merit in the discourse of elite education, in which it function as a structural master topos producing generic narratives of well-deserved and legitimate success. In the last section, I have introduced the third major category that permeates the discourse: class. Though it is often said that socio-economic stratification is rarely and only reluctantly talked about in the United States, this is not true for the discourse of elite education. Here, class has in fact become a central issue in all three subdiscourses I investigate in this study. In order to provide the necessary context for the more detailed discussions that follow in the individual analytical chapters, I outlined the role of class in the overall discourse, its relation to the concept of merit, and, lastly, my own understanding of class as a dialectical category comprising both cultural and material factors.