

## II. Critique: Elite Education and its Discontents

---

### 1. Introductory Remarks

In January 2017, *The New York Times* published an interactive online tool to explore the results of a study on the role of colleges in intergenerational mobility, evocatively titled “Some Colleges Have More Students From the Top 1 Percent Than the Bottom 60. Find Yours.” Based on anonymous tax filings and tuition records, the research was conducted by the Equality of Opportunity Project,<sup>1</sup> a team of economists and sociologists dedicated to exploring various aspects of socio-economic mobility. Among the most important results of the study was that income segregation among students across colleges is much more pronounced than previously assumed, and that the number of low- and middle-income students “varies substantially” depending on the college (“Some Colleges”). At the same time, however, the study found that if students from low- and middle-income families do attend an elite college, they fair just as well as their wealthier peers in terms of academic success and earnings outcomes. The researchers furthermore developed a new statistical value, the ‘mobility

---

1 The Equality of Opportunity Project is led by principal investigators Raj Chetty (Stanford), John Friedman (Brown), and Nathaniel Hendren (Harvard). According to its website, the project’s research agenda is to use big data to understand what has led to the erosion of upward income mobility in the US over the last decades, and to “develop scalable policy solutions that will empower families to rise out of poverty and achieve better life outcomes.” The primary research areas of the Equality of Opportunity Project are education (e.g. “Mobility Report Cards: The Role of Colleges in Intergenerational Mobility”), neighborhoods (e.g. “The Effects of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility: Childhood Exposure Effects and County Level Estimates”), and health (e.g. “The Association between Income and Life Expectancy in the United States, 2001-2014”).

rate', which "combines a college's share of students from lower-income families with its success at propelling them into the upper part of the distribution" (ibid.). Building on these insights, the digital tool created by *The New York Times* allows for an interactive comparison of colleges with regard to a number of variables, for instance 'percentage of low- and middle-income students' or 'colleges with the highest mobility rate', and offers detailed profiles of more than 2,000 colleges. Using neutral rhetoric, the *Times* piece offers a largely descriptive account of the study's findings. And yet, unless one assumes that affluence causes intelligence, the critical impetus of the report is clear: The sons and daughters of affluent families are heavily overrepresented at elite colleges and universities across the nation, a fact that is drastically at odds with the core values of a society ostensibly invested in equality of opportunity and upward mobility.

As one among many research efforts dedicated to exploring and critiquing the status quo of elite education, the Equality of Opportunity Project illustrates some of the main characteristics of the critical landscape in focus in this chapter. Along with most other publications constituting this critical sphere, the project assumes that colleges, and particularly elite colleges, ought to function as engines of upward mobility, as agents of the American Dream. Their conception of eliteness, then, is primarily driven by economic success; they are not necessarily concerned with the quality of education or the happiness of the students, but focus first and foremost on their position in the income distribution. Building on this assumption, the Equality of Opportunity Project identifies a major issue: the striking socio-economic homogeneity of student bodies on elite campuses and the obvious lack of students from low-income families. In this focus on class, the project is again representative of the overall critical landscape, which has likewise foregrounded questions of socio-economic stratification in recent years. The study identifies as a major class-related problem the difference between 'affordability' and 'access', and contends that while some elite colleges have done much to address the former, little has been done about the latter. This distinction can furthermore be seen as symptomatic of another characteristic of the critical landscape: While class does play an increasingly important role, there seems to be no consensus as to how to theorize it. Attempts are made to conceptualize 'class' analogously to other identity markers such as 'race' or 'gender', but as I have outlined in detail in the previous chapter of this study, this conceptualization is reductive and problematic since it does not account for the specificity of class as

a hierarchized category situated at the intersection of cultural and material factors.

This chapter constitutes the first step of my foray into the discourse of elite education in the United States, and explores the epistemological mode of critique by analyzing a number of sociological and journalistic texts that claim an explicit critical impetus. I ask three main questions: First, how do the studies respond to the tension between elitism and egalitarianism, which I conceptualize as the central fault line of the discourse on elite education? Second, how do they negotiate the three categories that are at the heart of my inquiry into this discourse, namely merit, class, and eliteness? And third, what role do form and aesthetics play in these dynamics? While the texts differ, to an extent, with regard to their specific analytical foci and research interests, the main argument I want to advance in this chapter is that they have one important feature in common: They are written in the mode of the jeremiad and thus ultimately affirm and validate the system they ostensibly critique. Even though their emphases vary, the texts that constitute the critical landscape agree in their desire for a classless eliteness, a notion that I consider a celebration of the collective fantasy of the American Dream and thus an expression of American exceptionalism.

In the following, I proceed in three steps. The first section maps the critical landscape that surrounds the issue of elite education. I address important publications and discursive trends, before introducing briefly the five books I use as case studies as well as my reasons for choosing them. In the sociological and journalistic sphere, I contend, elite education is discussed within a framework of crisis, manifesting itself in tuition costs, student debt, hyper-competitiveness, lack of socio-economic (and, to a lesser extent, racial) heterogeneity. The critical studies that respond to this perceived crisis by analyzing its dynamics and proposing solutions are varied in terms of genre and text type: They range from monumental sociological studies to largely anecdotal memoirs and pieces of investigative journalism. This multiplicity of genres suggests a widespread interest spanning academia and public discourse, as well as individuals who are or want to be part of the system of elite education. As the back cover of Daniel Golden's *The Price of Admission*, one of the texts in focus in this chapter, puts it: These studies are "a must-read not only for parents and students with a personal stake in college admissions but also for those disturbed by the growing divide between ordinary and privileged Americans." The five texts I have chosen to discuss in this chapter are representative of this multiplicity of genres and of the two research interests

that dominate the critical landscape. On the one hand, the politics of admission and exclusion, and on the other hand, broader investigations of the elite educational experience. I conclude the section by discussing the mode of the jeremiad as my own critical framework for reading the studies, drawing on the work of Sacvan Bercovitch and others.

In the second section, I focus on three studies that interrogate the admissions policies of elite colleges and universities from a progressivist social justice perspective: Daniel Golden's *The Price of Admission* (2006), Joseph Soares's *The Power of Privilege* (2007), and Mitchell Stevens's *Creating a Class* (2007). I argue that all three texts operate firmly within the ideological framework of the meritocracy and attempt to resolve the tension between elitism and egalitarianism by making reformist suggestions on how to improve the existing structures so as to eventually arrive at what the authors conceive of as a genuine academic meritocracy. In doing so, the studies fall prey to what I call the 'merit fallacy', namely the attempt to fix the meaning of 'merit' as the stable opposite of 'privilege', an attempt that does not account for the fact that merit is more often than not an expression and a continuance rather than the opposite of inherited privilege. While Golden, Soares, and Stevens offer a range of valid points of criticism in their books, they thus ultimately re-affirm the notion of the meritocracy and project the possibility of and desire for a classless eliteness, which I read as an expression of American exceptionalism.

In the third section, I turn to two texts that critique the larger institutional cultures of elite colleges and the kinds of subjectivities produced in and through the elite educational experience: Ross Douhat's *Privilege* (2005) and William Deresiewicz's *Excellent Sheep* (2014). Their answer to the tension between elitism and egalitarianism, I argue, is to rewrite this tension as one that centers on matters of quality rather than inequality; instead of critiquing the political economy that produces the system of elite education, the authors contend themselves with a critique of the flawed culture that characterizes this system. Both ultimately argue for the return to the notion of a humanistic eliteness of substantial and serious engagement, which they contrast with the current prevalence of what I call a neoliberal eliteness, characterized by a mindless glorification of success for its own sake. In the end, their conclusions are similar to that of the progressivist studies in that they, too, validate and re-affirm the system and advocate a classless eliteness, only that Douhat and Deresiewicz focus more on the nature of the eliteness than on the notion of classlessness—their criticism is directed less at who is excluded from elite colleges than at what those who are admitted do once they are in.

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