

5. Concluding Remarks

This chapter rests on the premise that critique is a major mode of knowledge production. What a society singles out for inspection, the flaws this inspection finds, and the remedies that are subsequently proposed tell us much about the thing in question—elite education, in this case—and about the society that tries to make sense of it. The central dilemma that characterizes the situation of elite educational institutions in the United States is that one of their primary means of distinction—their exclusivity—is fundamentally at odds with a set of values that form the core of American self-understanding: equal opportunity, the possibility of upward mobility, and the virtue of hard work. Building on this, the objective of this chapter was threefold: to explore how the critical-analytical studies conceptualize and negotiate the nodal points eliteness, merit, and class, to examine how the critical-analytical texts respond to the tension between elitism and egalitarianism, and, finally, to understand the specific contribution of the epistemological mode of critique to the discourse of elite education. In order to answer these questions, I began by mapping the critical landscape surrounding elite education in the United States, and then discussed two main clusters of texts that reflect this landscape in terms of their research interests and genre multiplicity: first, progressivist social justice critiques of elite admissions politics, and second, conservative critiques of the campus cultures at elite colleges and universities. In the following, I want to briefly recapitulate the chapter's main insights and arguments.

The critical landscape shares a number of assumptions about its object of inquiry, the system of elite education: Elite colleges, most critics agree, are supposed to serve their country by acting as agents of social mobility and rewarding merit rather than inherited privilege. One of the most pressing problems this system faces, then, is that the institutions in question too often and too spectacularly fail to meet these demands—as the Equality of Opportunity Project has shown, the most prestigious universities are not the ones with the highest mobility rate, and students from affluent families are dramatically overrepresented at all top schools. It is not surprising, then, that the image of elite education generated in this critical sphere is one informed by the notion of crisis and the specter of national decline.

Broadly speaking, two diagnoses dominate the discourse: The progressivist social justice critiques argue that the admissions policies of elite colleges have to be reformed in order to ensure equal access for low-income students

and reduce the overrepresentation of kids from wealthy families. The conservative critiques, by contrast, focus on the culture of entitlement and the mindless glorification of success for its own sake that characterizes the elite educational experience.

Despite a number of differences, the five studies are similar in important respects. First, they all formulate a vision of eliteness as meritorious, and merit as measurable and academic. Second, they agree that class privilege exerts an undue influence on the elite educational experience in general and on the admissions process in particular. Third, they construct a framework of reform that assumes a binary opposition between ‘merit’ on the one hand and ‘privilege’ on the other—a false assumption that I have called the ‘merit fallacy’. This fallacy may well be rooted in the jeremiadic strategies that all five studies share: The promise they hold up—the inversion of their criticism—is that of a fully functional meritocracy, and for a meritocracy to be fully functional, merit has to be the polar opposite of privilege. If the two are inextricably linked to one another, as they de facto are, the meritocratic system will always be flawed. The response the critical-analytical mode offers to the tension between elitism and egalitarianism, then, is determined by its jeremiadic undertones and ultimately celebrates rather than genuinely criticizes the system of elite education. The progressivist social justice investigations argue for a *classless* eliteness, emphasizing the importance of equality of access and representation. The conservative cultural critiques, by contrast, suggest a classless *eliteness*, in which the focus is on quality rather than (in)equality. They want to return to a notion of a humanistic eliteness that is in sharp contrast to the neoliberal eliteness they see as the main flaw of the system. The entire critical sphere, however, is complicit with the elite educational system as such, and ultimately celebrates its potentials as an expression of and vehicle for the American Dream. The only rupture in this discursive trajectory is Deresiewicz’s brief suggestion to overhaul the system in its entirety—a suggestion that feels almost like an afterthought in his book and did not gain much attention in the discourse. Perhaps some of the curiously affirmative tendencies in this ostensibly critical epistemological formation stems from the composition of its participants, all of whom are part of or have ties to the system they profess to critique.

