

pathic—there is little doubt that all five studies are meant to be received as critical interventions. They confirm preexisting stereotypes about the entitled offspring of the very rich; they shock, surprise, and ultimately disillusion those who had believed in the meritocracy; they spark debates among educators, administrators, and families. And yet, despite their obvious critical commitments, the studies ultimately, and to a degree paradoxically, end up affirming the system they set out to critique.

This, then, is due to their jeremiadic tendencies: They implicitly or explicitly remind the reader of the promise of American elite education—as a means of ensuring social mobility, among other things, and as a globally legible symbol of American exceptionalism—then address all the ways in which elite educational institutions are failing their mission, and then conclude by delineating the enticing vision of elite redemption: the perfect meritocracy, a system in which eliteness is stripped of the burden of class and thus turned into another instantiation of the American Dream. Instead of questioning the validity of the elite educational system as such, or thinking about possible alternatives to the meritocratic framework, the studies' criticism ultimately strengthens that system and validates that framework. Like the Puritan jeremiads, then, their “cries of declension and doom [are] part of a strategy designed to revitalize the errand” (Bercovitch xiv), namely to celebrate the vision of a classless eliteness as an expression of American exceptionalism.

### 3. Progressivist Critiques

The admissions process of elite colleges is a mystery to many. Applicants and cultural commentators alike perceive the dynamics of admission and exclusion as enigmatic, intransparent, and even willfully obscurantist—a procedure inscrutable to outsiders and quite likely discriminatory on multiple levels. This view is in part created by media portrayals of the work of admissions officers: In a wave of recent articles, the admissions policies of elite colleges have been described as a “frenzied, soul-deadening process” (Wong), as “unpredictable” (Menand 2003), “insanely selective” (Dillon), and “crazy competitive” (Nordquist), and as resulting in “hysteria” (Tierney) among college-aged kids and their families. Thus framed in the rhetoric of psychopathology, the elite admissions process is presented by national news outlets as irrational, erratic, even absurd—a framing that deflects from the agency of admissions

officers, college administrators, and interest groups, all of whom have high stakes in the admissions game.

In addition to these general concerns about the opacity of elite college admissions, the past few decades have seen substantial evidence for patterns of systemic exclusion on the grounds of gender, race, ethnicity, and religious affiliation. Social justice arguments about elite college admissions are therefore a staple of the critical landscape, and have been throughout the second half of the twentieth century. In recent years, there has again been an increase in progressivist publications concerned with matters of equal access and representation in the context of elite college admissions, and their focus has primarily been on class. Given the current degree of inequality in the United States, this emphasis on socio-economic issues is hardly surprising.

The three texts discussed in this section—Golden's *Price of Admission*, Soares's *Power of Privilege*, and Stevens's *Creating a Class*—examine both parts of the equation of admission and exclusion. On the one hand, they reflect on the characteristics and achievements of those students who are admitted to elite colleges: grades, test scores, extracurricular activities, and athletic accomplishments, but also socio-economic status, race, family background, and the extent of the family's involvement with the school in question. The institutional politics behind admissions decisions come under scrutiny here, as does the situatedness of these politics within larger socio-cultural contexts.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the studies are interested in the characteristics that have kept qualified candidates out of elite institutions. Soares, for instance, has excavated a disturbing story of discrimination, snobbery, and hypocrisy at America's most prestigious colleges, where patterns of systematic exclusion on racial, ethnic, and religious grounds were the norm for most their long histories. Despite all professions to the contrary, moreover, discriminatory practices apparently continue to inform the admissions policies of elite colleges, as the controversy surrounding alleged quotas on students of Asian descent suggests.

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3 One example to illustrate this is Jerome Karabel's discussion of the increasing admission of women at Harvard in the early 1970s. The turn toward coeducation, he argues convincingly, was not primarily an expression of the institution's allegiance with the women's movement or gender equality, but rather a result of the dynamics of competition among the Big Three: Princeton and Yale had started to admit women in 1969 and thus proved more attractive for parts of the elite clientele (cf. 442).

Exclusion, as I have argued in the previous chapter, is one of the three dominant signifiers of eliteness, complemented by excellence/exceptionality on the one hand and power/leadership on the other. The selection of the few and the exclusion of the many is a crucial and constitutive factor in the production of elite status at institutions such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, as are the various rituals associated with this process: the applications, the standardized tests, the visiting weekends, and the big and small envelopes.<sup>4</sup> Exclusion and exclusivity, however—both in the sense of being highly selective and, more generally, as being “high class, expensive; highbrow” (“exclusivity, n.”)—are at the same time the features most drastically at odds with American self-descriptions of the openness, fluidity, and upward mobility of US society. It is not surprising, then, that the gatekeeping procedures in place to practice exclusion and guarantee its success are suspicious almost by default. Exclusion is accepted and tolerated in the American imagination only when it is perceived as legitimate and fair, and when the exclusionary decisions mirror the American commitment to equality of opportunity and individual achievement.

The works of Golden, Soares, and Stevens demonstrate that patterns of systemic discrimination (e.g. against Asian Americans) and competitive disadvantages (e.g. for low-income applicants) continue to inform elite college admissions; they also show that despite the media rhetoric described above, there is in fact very little irrational about the politics of admission and exclusion. Instead, these politics are the result of much negotiation and mediation among the different parties involved, all of whom benefit in one way or another from the current status quo of elite college admissions. The institutions themselves retain high levels of control over the composition of entering classes and are thus able to navigate the often conflicting expectations and demands of a number of interested parties—most importantly, perhaps, alumni associations, athletic departments, and major donors. The impenetrability of the admissions process has furthermore spawned a booming industry of application support services, ranging from SAT tutoring and application mentoring to so-called ‘essay-ready summers’ and enrichment programs of various kinds. The money and power generated by the opacity thus suggests that

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4 The arrival of the dream college’s response is an iconic moment in the discourse, and a thin envelope stands for rejection. For a more detailed discussion of the phenomenon, see Louis Menand’s article “The Thin Envelope” (*New Yorker*, 2003).

there is very little 'irrational' or 'crazy' about the admissions policies of elite colleges, even though, on occasion, they might present themselves as such.

In the following, I begin by introducing the three studies in a little more detail, and then discuss the ways in which they negotiate the three categories that form the central interest of this study: merit, class, and eliteness. My primary question is how the three authors respond to the tension between elitism and egalitarianism, and my reading is informed by the notion of the jeremiadic tendencies the texts exhibit. I argue that all three texts operate within the ideological framework of the meritocracy and propose an understanding of merit as a measurable academic entity. They identify the undue influence of socio-economic factors as the main problem facing elite admissions and make a number of recommendations to correct this deficiency. Throughout their argumentation it becomes clear that the studies do not find fault with the notion of eliteness per se; instead, they denounce a specific plutocratic version of eliteness. Even though their research emphases differ, all three texts share a common flaw, which I call the 'merit fallacy': They assume the existence of 'merit' as a stable function of academic eliteness and put it in binary opposition with 'privilege', by which they mean all forms of inherited and thus presumably undeserved capital. This dichotomy obscures the fact that merit in all of its manifestations is more often than not the expression rather than the opposite of privilege. Reading the three texts as instantiations of the jeremiadic mode thus demonstrates that despite their ostensible commitment to critique, they ultimately affirm and celebrate the meritocracy as a systemic expression of the American Dream.

### Introducing the Texts

In 2013, *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Golden published a series of eight articles on the admissions practices of elite colleges, exposing what he called the "preferences of privilege" (4): the vast advantages enjoyed by different groups of mostly white and affluent students—alumni children, development cases, and athletes, among others. A year later, Golden received the Pulitzer Prize for Beat Reporting for these "compelling and meticulously documented stories" (Pulitzer Website). He subsequently turned the articles into a book, *The Price of Admission: How America's Ruling Class Buys Its Way Into Elite Colleges And Who Gets Left Outside the Gates*, published in 2006 to largely positive reviews. Preferential treatment on the grounds of either wealth or connections, Golden argues in his introduction, routinely allow[s] an academically weak

candidate to leap over a strong one and can represent an admissions boost equivalent to hundreds of SAT points at Ivy League schools and other elite colleges. The children of wealth and influence occupy so many slots that the admissions odds against middle-class and working-class students without outstanding records are even longer than the colleges acknowledge. (4)

In each of the following chapters, Golden outlines in detail the different forms the ‘preferences of privilege’ can take—ranging from the influence of big donors at Harvard and legacy preference at Notre Dame to favoritism shown toward faculty children at a number of elite institutions. Golden also devotes one chapter to discussing the pervasive discrimination against Asian American students and one to a positive example of what he terms “wealth-blind admissions” (263) at Caltech. In the last chapter, “Ending the Preferences of Privilege,” Golden offers a list of recommendations for elite colleges in order to make their admissions policies more fair and less dependent on economic and social capital.

Soares’s *The Power of Privilege* (2007) is a work of historical sociology and distinctively more scholarly in rhetoric and methodology than Golden’s book. Soares traces the changing trajectory of Yale’s admissions policies through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, focusing primarily on “the nexus between social class and admissions” (xii). In particular, he questions the validity of “the alleged shift in admissions after 1950 from character to brains” (xii). He concludes that this shift in fact never took place in the way the institutions themselves proclaimed, and that socio-economic factors still hold a decisive influence over who is and is not admitted to Yale and its peer institutions. Like Golden, Soares concludes his study with a list of suggestions that ought to pave the way “to a proper academic meritocracy” (196).

Mitchell Stevens’s approach in *Creating a Class* (2007) differs from most other studies on the topic, since his interest in the dynamics of admission and exclusion is not only directed in an abstract sense at the admissions politics of elite institutions, but is much more directly concerned with the actual work admissions officers do on a daily basis. “We know almost nothing,” Stevens points out, “about how officers balance incentives to reward high academic accomplishment, athletic skill, legacy or minority status, and the ability to pay full tuition” (20). *Creating a Class* furthermore establishes compelling ways to link the findings about the modus operandi of admissions officers to more general cultural dynamics informing the lives of American families in the early twenty-first century: “Upper-middle-class Americans have responded to the triumph of educational meritocracy by creating a whole new way of life orga-

nized around the production of measurably talented children and the delivery of news about kids to the right places at the right times. This system is expensive and time-consuming” (22). In a poignant choice of phrase, Stevens argues that elite educational institutions offer affluent families a way of “laundering privilege” (248). This emphasis on “the impressive organizational machinery” (3) that privileged families have developed in order to ensure their offspring’s access to elite institutions adds an important dimension to the socio-cultural, economic, and political reverberations of elite education in the United States.

### Merit, Class, Eliteness

As the category said to stand between admission and exclusion, merit is at the center of all three studies. As I have discussed already in the first chapter of this study, there is no clear consensus as to which qualities ‘merit’ actually references; Karabel points out that there has never been “a neutral definition of ‘merit’,” (3)—whatever meanings the term temporarily signifies will benefit some while disadvantaging others. These semantic uncertainties notwithstanding, it becomes clear that Golden, Soares, and Stevens want to see merit as a primarily academic category, one that is measurable, comparable, and cannot be bought or sold. This fixed version of merit as a conglomerate of innate and learned traits, the studies agree, should govern the admissions policies of elite colleges. In his first chapter, “Meritocracy and Its Discontents,” Soares for instance outlines his understanding of merit as rooted in “talent” and “achievement” (2) and points out that most Americans, according to a range of studies, likewise conceive of merit as “academic accomplishments” (1), signified by grades and test scores. Colleges, he points out, follow a much broader conception of the term and are thus at odds with popular opinion.

Collectively, the texts posit a certain understanding of what a functioning educational meritocracy should entail: a fair and neutral selection process, based on objectively measurable admissions criteria, and impossible to sway by economic or social capital. There should neither be discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnicity, gender, or financial need, nor should access to certain forms of capital offer unfair advantages to candidates from society’s upper strata. In sum, the admissions process should be as transparent and class-neutral as possible. Much room is given in all four studies to delineating in detail the discrepancies between this ideal version of the academic meritocracy and the actual status quo of admissions politics in the United States.

One of the most pervasive tropes employed in these discussions is that of exposing or revealing a hidden truth. Golden, in particular, makes use of this trope frequently. His book's blurb states that Golden "shatters the myth of an American meritocracy" and "disclos[es] what elite colleges won't tell you." From the very beginning, Golden juxtaposes "popular notion[s]" about elite college admissions with "the truth" (1), and claims to "reveal[] the double standard" (4) that favors the wealthy and well-connected. Later, he talks about "the dirty little secret of college admissions" (54). It is not surprising, then, that the rhetoric of the reviews reflects this tendency: *The Price of Admission* was called "explosive" and "trenchant" (*Atlantic Monthly*) it was said to be full of "juicy stories" and "immensely readable," and while the author was said to have "fun making trouble in the best journalistic sense" (*Harvard Magazine*) his book was referred to as "a muckraking morality tale with many villains and few heroes" (*New York Review of Books*). Turning Golden's journalistic report into an intriguing, soap-opera-like tale full of deception, betrayal, and villainy distracts from the reality of the conditions he exposes.

While they thus agree that merit is a complex and contingent category, all three studies operate more or less enthusiastically within the ideological framework of the meritocracy. Even though Soares's book is aimed at "dispelling the myth of Ivy League meritocracy" and he asks, in his foreword, whether it might not be "time for us to pursue alternatives" in light of the obvious shortcomings of the meritocratic system, his suggestions for reform, if implemented, would not lead to an alternative system but simply to a 'better' kind of meritocracy, as he himself points out in his last sentence: "Taken separately or in combination, [the suggestions] should move us closer to a genuine academic meritocracy, and away from a system in which too many of the measures of merit turn out to be proxies for the privileges of social class" (201). Golden likewise advocates a different kind of meritocracy and ends his book with a rhetorical question: "Is it too much to ask that seats in the classrooms of such beautiful minds not be sold to the highest bidder but reserved for the students who earned them through their diligence and natural gifts?" (308). While Stevens is more wary of the meritocratic ideology, he does not explore any other valid models that could serve as the basis for an educational system either. Aware of the inherent pitfalls of the meritocracy, Stevens ends his study on a somewhat resigned note: "We might wish that all of our children could get to that place, but the hard truth is that however we write the rules of admission, there will never be room for everyone" (264). In this context, the jeremiadic element of the studies becomes clear: While criticizing the ways

in which elite institutions have gone astray in their admissions politics, all three texts ultimately affirm and celebrate the meritocracy and its commitment to eliteness as a systemic commitment to the American Dream and thus to American exceptionalism.

The problem all three studies identify as standing between the current status quo and the enticing vision of a functional meritocracy is the undue influence of class. In the introduction to her 2000 book, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, author and activist bell hooks points to the pervasive silence surrounding matters of socio-economic stratification in the United States: “Nowadays it is fashionable to talk about race or gender; the uncool subject is class” (vii). Most Americans, hooks argues, are unwilling and afraid even “to think about class” (ibid.), because acknowledging that socio-economic stratification informs life, work, and play would destabilize their position within society, creating anxiety and uncertainty in the process. hooks’s observation is instructive in a number of ways—it demonstrates that much of what academics, journalists, and activists think and talk about is subject to the cyclical developments of trends and fashions, and it points to the tendency of separating categories such as race, gender, and class, even though they are inextricably entwined in the lives and thoughts of people. What is most striking in this context, however, is that a mere decade later, the discursive situation has changed, and considerably so. In the discourse of elite education, at least, hooks’s diagnosis can no longer be said to hold true: Much room is given to socio-economic factors, particularly in the progressivist studies on admission and exclusion that form the core of this section—more so, arguably, than to matters of race, ethnicity, or gender.

Class is thus included as a central analytical category in all three studies in focus here. Golden’s emphasis on socio-economic factors is already alluded to in his title, both in the phrase “the price of admission” and in its mentioning of “the ruling class,” even though it might be pointed out, in this context, that he does not theorize his usage of the latter concept. Soares explains in his foreword that his study is “specifically focused on the nexus between social class and the admissions regime” (xii). Following a slightly more comprehensive approach, Stevens includes race and gender in his discussion of admission policies, but highlights socio-economic factors as well, for instance in his reading of collegiate aesthetics. He identifies a “larger myopia” in sociological accounts of education and stratification, namely in the neglect of “the sensual aspects of class” (18). Class distinctions, he argues, are rooted and expressed

not only in wealth, income, and credentials, but also in “[w]hat a society calls beautiful [...] and what it makes beautiful in turn” (ibid.).

Even though they do not explicitly define it, it becomes clear that all four studies follow a Bourdieusian understanding of class as a complex and multi-layered category determined by access to and use of different forms of capital; often, class becomes meaningful when there is either an excess or a lack of this access to economic, cultural, or social resources. The analysis of class is further complicated by its oscillation between cultural and identitarian aspects on the one hand, and material, economic factors on the other. Even though both play important and, at times, distinct roles in the context of elite education, the debates on admission and exclusion tend to privilege material factors, perhaps because they are easier to pinpoint, and the problems they cause, for instance the inability to pay for tuition, seem easier to solve. The studies agree, moreover, that socio-economic factors do not exist in a vacuum, but have to be theorized and analyzed as intersectional categories that are informed by and, in turn, inform other identity markers. The link between class and race, in particular, is discussed in a number of contexts, for instance with regard to the issue of affirmative action or when Golden points to the double advantage caused by whiteness and wealth.<sup>5</sup>

Both admission and exclusion, the studies agree, happen on the grounds of socio-economic factors: Class can be an advantage to some, and a hindrance to most. The current, information-based admissions regime that displaced the earlier discriminatory practices may well be more meritocratic, but, as Steven argues, it “nevertheless systematically favors the wealthy, well educated, and well connected” (22). Excess of capital thus exerts an undue influence on the admissions process—the ‘preferences of privilege’ exposed by Golden all too often guarantee access for children from affluent families. Lack of capital, in turn, makes it almost impossible for candidates with lower-class backgrounds to gain admission. As mentioned above, the emergence and stabilization of the ideology of meritocracy crucially changed the ways in which upper-middle-class families in the United States structure childhood and adolescence; it generated “a whole new way of life organized around the production of measurably talented children” (Stevens 22). Families who lack

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5 For an in-depth discussion of the intersections of class and race in higher education, see Tomas J. Espenshade and Alexandria Walton Radford’s *No Longer Separate, Not Yet Equal: Race and Class in Elite College Admission and Campus Life* (2009).

the resources to participate in this process are thus obviously and systematically disadvantaged and the resulting scarcity of students from poor families at elite schools is one of the main areas of criticism in the studies.

The pervasive influence of class is seen as problematic in the three studies because it arrests all forms of social movement and thus leads to a solidification of existing strata in society. This development is diametrically opposed to the role elite colleges are expected to fulfill, namely to function as engines of upward social mobility—this is the primary answer the progressivist studies offer with regard to the tension of elitism and egalitarianism. Golden and Soares thus both place class at the center of the fairly comprehensive suggestions for reform they discuss as a remedy for the shortcomings their investigations have exposed. Many of these suggestions are geared toward ending upper-class advantages in the admissions process, for instance by ending legacy admission and separating fund-raising and admissions, thus making it harder for wealthy families to buy their way into colleges (Golden 292-3). But among the “desirable, non-utopian steps” (Soares 201) the studies propose are also many that target prospective students with low socio-economic backgrounds and make it easier, more attractive, and more promising for them to apply to elite schools: “Revamping the testing system, striving to admit the top 10 percent from all secondary schools, practicing socioeconomic sensitive admissions, reforming legacy and athlete admissions, actively challenging the criteria used by the ratings industry, and engaging with the public debate on secondary education” (Soares 200-1).

The increasing openness with which the pervasive influence of socio-economic factors is addressed is an important and productive step in the current critical conversation about elite education. Given the authors’ framing of their studies as part of the general social justice critique of inequality within the United States, however, there is a caveat: Even if all measures proposed in the texts were implemented, and even if elite colleges managed to drastically reduce the impact of socio-economic factors in the admissions process and were to become truly need- and wealth-blind, the effects would be arguably fairly minimal. None of the proposed measures would do much to alleviate the rampant, large-scale inequality characterizing the United States in the twenty-first century. In fact, rather than destabilizing a system that is a major legitimacy power in the current climate of inequality, the implementation of such measures would likely strengthen that system by creating additional legitimacy. Walter Benn Michaels observed in *The Trouble With Diversity* that “the function of the (very few) poor people at Harvard is to reassure the (very

many) rich people at Harvard that you can't just buy your way into Harvard" (99); this observation would arguably still hold true if the absolute numbers of poor students were to increase. What is more, elite colleges by definition cater only to a very small segment of the overall student population (approximately 4 percent); so even if the numbers of students from lower-class families were increased dramatically, such policies would very likely achieve upward mobility only for a very small number of ambitious, talented, and lucky students from the lower strata of society. If applicants from affluent and influential families were rejected, moreover, they would probably respond by flocking to other institutions, taking their capital with them. This change in the funding structures of elite institutions might influence the landscape of elite education in ways that are difficult to project.

This does not mean, of course, that lessening the undue influence of socio-economic factors is not a desirable goal. But as the comparison with race-based policies demonstrates, increasing equality in elite college admissions does not necessarily translate into increasing equality overall. The treatment of class-related issues in these studies thus demonstrates a number of blind spots in the discourse: First, the overrepresentation and overestimation of elite institutions; and second, the isolationism that characterizes the authors' engagement with elite education—both with regard to the rest of the educational landscape in the US and with regard to the glaring lack of international comparative perspective.

While merit and class are explicitly discussed and analyzed in the three studies, their conception of eliteness is much more opaque. The studies use a number of semantically similar terms to denote the eliteness of the institutions they investigate: Golden, for instance, talks about "top colleges," "premier colleges," "the nation's best and most selective universities," "America's foremost universities," and "ultraexclusive colleges" (1-3). Soares writes about the "most prestigious universities" (xii); Stevens refers to the "most distinguished colleges and universities" (1) and describes elite colleges as "among the nation's most enduring and most emulated organizations" (6). None of these monikers is particularly surprising; all of them allude to at least one of the features of eliteness I have introduced in the previous chapter: excellence/exceptionalism (best, top, premier, foremost, distinguished); exclusivity/selectivity (most selective, ultraexclusive); influence/power (leading, prestigious). Looking closer, the studies name a number of factors that together constitute the eliteness of elite colleges, for instance their endowments, the quality of their teaching and research, their spatial composition, their mis-

sion and obligation, the degree of influence they and their alumni exert in all sectors of society, and, most importantly, in their exclusivity. In fact, while all of these aspects are mentioned in the studies, often in passing, it is the criterion of exclusivity and selectivity that is most dominant in distinguishing elite from non-elite institutions. In this, the studies largely follow the practice of the most influential college rankings, which also assign disproportional importance to the admissions rates in deciding where to situate individual institutions.

Given their commitment to the ideology of the meritocracy, it is not surprising that Golden, Soares, and Stevens conceptualize eliteness within this framework. Golden, addressing the structural position of private colleges and universities, points out that as tax-exempt, nonprofit institutions, they benefit immensely from subsidies and various kinds of government funding (10). His conception of elite universities thus includes important social obligations that they fail to fulfill: “[T]hey are shirking their mission to unearth and nurture diamonds in the rough” (ibid.). Elite institutions are thus beholden to the nation, and their admission policies, which, according to Golden and the other studies, “stifle talent and exalt mediocrity,” ultimately do not only discriminate against individual students but “weaken the country’s economic competitiveness and political leadership” (11). Soares introduces another important qualitative distinction between elite and non-elite institutions: Large state universities are distinctly more utilitarian in mission and outlook; fittingly, their students are admitted “based on [...] subject-specific competence,” and live in “beehive dorms” (11); elite colleges, in turn, tend to favor the liberal arts over the sciences and allow their students to live “in residential country-club like surroundings” (ibid.).

Ultimately, the elite status of the institutions in focus in the studies—Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Duke, Brown, Notre Dame, Hamilton College, Wesleyan, and others—is accepted as a given and neither explained in any detail nor challenged in any meaningful way. In fact, none of the studies really criticizes the elite educational system for its elitism; the authors’ criticism is for the most part directed at the plutocratic and discriminatory structures that govern the system. Eliteness as such, along with its many socio-political and cultural implications, is not at the center of these studies, and even if it were, it would not be criticized. As their commitment to the meritocracy demonstrates, the authors do not find fault with the notion of eliteness, on the contrary. They conceptualize it as an important and desirable facet of the higher education landscape, provided it is the right kind of eliteness.

## Conclusion: The Merit Fallacy

If the studies' conceptualizations of merit, class, and eliteness are put into conversation, a distinctive pattern emerges, which I would like to call the 'merit fallacy' and which is part of their jeremiadic tendency to affirm and validate rather than genuinely criticize. Even though the authors are aware of the contingency of 'merit', Golden, Soares, and Stevens alike tend to fix its meanings by positioning it as the opposite of privilege, as the following examples show: Golden, for instance, contrasts students' "own merit" with "their paternal pedigrees," "intellectual potential" with "tens of millions of dollars," and applicants who "earn their admission" with those who have it "delivered to them as a birthright" (2). Soares mobilizes the same alleged opposition when he charges elite universities with "confusing merit with social class" (xii), or argues that students "should get into a top university because of [their] achievements, not because of accidents of birth" (2), or explains how in the course of the twentieth century elite colleges initiated "the abolition of family privilege" in favor of "the introduction of academic merit" (7). Stevens, in a similar vein, explains how "the inequalities of family, caste, and tribe gradually give way to hierarchies predicated in individual achievement" (11), and describes how individuals are evaluated "on the basis of demonstrated individual accomplishment, not inherited privilege" (12). All of this seems to suggest that 'merit'—as a comprehensive category comprising talent, skill, ambition, work, ability, accomplishment, etc.—and 'privilege'—as an equally comprehensive moniker for inherited wealth, cultural capital, and social connections—are somehow completely distinct and distinguishable factors confounded willfully by the admissions offices of elite colleges. Positing a dichotomy between 'merit' on the one hand and 'privilege' on the other hand obscures the fact that merit in all its forms—even and especially in the seemingly neutral sense of 'measurable virtue'—is more often than not the expression and continuance rather than the opposite of privilege.

## 4. Conservative Critiques

In 1987, philosopher Allan Bloom published what turned out to be a surprise bestseller, *The Closing of the American Mind*. Its subtitle, "How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students," sums up the main argument. According to Mark S. Jendrysik, Bloom's tract can be