have been transgendered when hired), the male privilege that accompanies status as a man is clear. This ability for transmen to achieve male privileges raises the question of why transgender men are often treated with respect and authority, when transgender status overall is a marginalized and discredited status. Schilt takes on this question in chapter 6, synthesizing interview data with content analysis from questionnaire data, news reports, and legal cases about transgender employment discrimination. She includes explanations of individual difference and of transwomen’s greater difficulty than transmen in “passing” but emphasizes most the importance of the cultural logic of gendered organizations and how the greater value placed on men shapes the context that encourages a move “up” the gender hierarchy more than a move “down.”

Schilt cautions readers not to interpret her argument as structural determinism, suggesting that changes in the gender system can be difficult to detect without an eye toward the larger historical context. She emphasizes the many ways that individuals can and do challenge the gender status quo and points to continually changing gender relations in the United States. Nevertheless, she questions whether gender inequality can ever be eradicated without the elimination of a male/female binary. Overall, her argument seems to echo Betsy Lucal’s perspective on the strength of the gender binary when she wrote, “No one ever said that dismantling patriarchy was going to be easy” (“What It Means to Be Gendered Me: Life on the Boundaries of a Dichotomous Gender System,” Gender and Society 13 [1999]: 781–97). The book is full of rich detail and examples that make a strong case that the current “biological diversity” framework that allows transmen to be accepted in the workplace also continues to reproduce a male/female binary and gender inequality. Schilt’s book is gripping without seeming prurient and is essential reading for scholars of gender and LGBTQ studies. Because of its strong core sociological perspective and Schilt’s vibrant writing, Just One of the Guys would be useful to students in courses ranging from introductory gender studies or sociology to graduate courses in gender, social construction, or ethnography.


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Social science scholarship is replete with examinations of inequality and social hierarchies that feature the experiences and characteristics of those who fall at the bottom of those hierarchies. In Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul’s School, Shamus Rahman Khan astutely
points out that the reproduction of social inequality requires attention to those who occupy the top of the hierarchical ladder—the elite. Khan explains that the United States has cultivated a new elite, one that is divergent both from the aristocracy of Europe preindustrialization and the wealthy elite that developed during industrialist capitalist expansion in the United States. Resultant in part from the social changes following a civil rights movement that challenged elite exclusions, America’s new elite develops in the context of what appears to be a remarkably open post–civil rights movement society. Yet, although the United States may appear more open than ever, Khan reminds us that hierarchies are as embedded in the fabric of this society as they ever were, and in fact the gap between the richest and the poorest is greater now than at any other moment in U.S. history. To understand the contradiction between this apparently more open society on the one hand and these extreme and seemingly permanent inequalities on the other, Khan examines the (re)production of the elite at one of America’s most exclusive premiere adolescent boarding schools, St. Paul’s School.

In what must be described as an exemplary ethnographic investigation of an elite institution, Khan elucidates the manner in which adolescents from some of the wealthiest families in the United States (tuition at St. Paul’s is in the neighborhood of $40,000 per year) are disciplined to enact and embody a new framing of elitism. Khan notes that St. Paul’s School is racially diverse (much of this diversity is the result of the scholarships St. Paul’s gives out: one-third of the student body is there via scholarship) and half the student population is female. This appearance of diversity paves the way for a discourse that constructs social and economic success as a result of individual effort and merit, not legacy or wealth. Yet despite this discursive framing, Khan illustrates that there are mechanisms at work that socialize these young people into the elite—the socialization processes of Privilege.

Having attended St. Paul’s school himself, and then having returned as a teacher at the school to facilitate his ethnographic research, Khan is able to illuminate the contours of privilege with remarkable detail. Through his data we learn that young elites at St. Paul’s learn how to both discursively embrace the ideology of individual merit and embody privilege. Khan explains that students at St. Paul’s, in contrast to previous elite generations who guarded their social and cultural space, are comfortable engaging with popular cultural representations like hip-hop music and Hollywood film on the one hand, and classical music and Beowulf on the other. Thus, a key element of new elitism is ability (and the privilege) to move in and out of any social situation. Khan notes that this social and cultural ease in all situations does not necessarily come naturally to students but is something that must be learned through a process of socialization. He describes, for example, the manner in which new students at St. Paul’s learn the etiquette of table manners and formal dining, while simultaneously learning that they must reject expressions of arro-
gance or pretention and engage in these rituals of etiquette as though they are easy and natural. Yet Khan’s analysis simultaneously illuminates the historical legacy of racialized and gendered wealth inequality in the United States as he discusses the way in which nonwhite and nonmale bodies get constructed as the exotic or problematic “other.” For example, Khan details the way in which African-American students are treated as stereotypical representatives of “authentic” popular culture. As well, he explicates how young female students are sexualized in a manner that construes female bodies as fundamentally sexual, yet simultaneously problematizes that sexuality.

While I found both Khan’s data and his analysis compelling, there were moments when I felt he failed to make important connections between the processes of socialization at St. Paul’s School and broader social structural patterns that reproduce inequality. For example, while Khan notes that the rhetoric of merit facilitates students in naturalizing their status as elites, he fails to connect this rhetoric with the racial structure of the school as well as the broader society. In reading his narratives I saw clear connections between the school’s racial diversity, the rhetoric of individual merit, and the “ease” of privilege. In other words, I would suggest that the very presence of students of color at St. Paul’s (the result of St. Paul’s scholarships), rather than signifying substantive “openness” in U.S. society, functions as tacit support of an ideology that disregards social and historical processes of racial and socioeconomic inequality to justify elite social positionality through an at best mistaken, and at worst dishonest, belief that it is the result of individual effort. Listening to hip-hop as well as Vivaldi gives St. Paul’s white students the benefit of an unequal history of racialized wealth accumulation and privileged access to elite institutions, as well as an asserted entitlement to cultural forms born out of the impoverished economic consequences of this inequality. If Khan had seriously engaged the literature on race in the post–civil rights era, particularly with regard to discursive and ideological tactics of abstract liberalism and color-blind racism, I believe he could have made these connections more explicitly.

Despite these critiques, this book is beautifully written and filled with important insights into processes of socialization among the elite. I recommend this book for all scholars interested in the reproduction of inequality in U.S. society.


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