Book Review Essay

Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul’s School

By Shamus Rahman Khan

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Elite boarding schools are thought of as bastions of privilege, and politicians typically claim to represent “the people,” so maybe it is not surprising that many politicians are loathe to acknowledge their boarding school backgrounds. Consider the five men who were on the Democratic and Republican Presidential tickets in 2000, 2004 and 2008. How often did George W. Bush talk about Andover, Al Gore talk about St. Albans, John Kerry talk about St. Paul’s, Obama talk about Punahou, or John McCain talk about the Episcopal School? It is no coincidence that so many of the country’s Presidents (e.g., FDR, JFK) and serious Presidential contenders went to elite boarding schools, for, despite their claims to the contrary, as the title of one of the best books about prep schools suggests, these schools are about “preparing for power” (Cookson and Persell 1985).

It is no secret that elite boarding schools educate the children of the rich and powerful, and it is no secret that these schools always have had to adjust to changing times since they were established in the late 19th century, when they became, as sociologist (and St. Paul’s alumnus) E. Digby Baltzell (1964) put it, “a vital factor in the creation of a national upper class, with more or less homogeneous values and behavior patterns.” (127)

Over the years, Baltzell and many others, academics as well as nonacademics, have dissected the role these schools play in social reproduction and the efforts they made in the past 50 years to adapt to the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, an increasingly global economy, and the widespread corporate and cultural endorsement of diversity. At the time they were founded, and well into the 20th century, many of these schools accepted no (or very few) Catholics, Jews, blacks, women, or students from poor or working class families. Now they do, though the numbers vary from school to school, and the schools can be quite guarded about just how many of their students are in these categories (for example, how many are on full scholarship). Periodically, students who broke gender, racial or ethnic barriers at these schools have written about their experiences, typically in memoir form, such as Paul Cowan’s (1967) recollections of
being a Jew at Choate during the Eisenhower years, or Lorene Cary’s (1991)
experiences in the early 1970s as the second African American female student
and then, some years later, as a teacher, and, subsequently, a member of the
board of trustees at St. Paul’s.

As Cary’s memoir and more recent ones by journalist Charlise Lyles (1994)
and Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick (2011) demonstrate, these schools
are part of a corporate-mediated feeder system that assures that a small number
of youngsters from previously excluded and discriminated against groups enter
an educational pipeline that can lead to positions of power in the corporate and
political realms (especially for African Americans from working or lower class
backgrounds). Scholarships for such students begin at elementary school, and
they continue through middle school, secondary school, college, and graduate
school. Because of this pipeline, and especially because of what is learned and
gained during the years spent at elite prep schools, it no longer takes three gen-
nerations to move into the national elite, if it ever did. The right socialization
from 12-21 years of age is probably all that it takes (Zweigenhaft and Domhoff
2011:chap. 6).

Shamus Rahman Khan’s Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at
St. Paul’s School is a welcome addition to the sociological literature on elite
prep schools. Khan, like Barack Obama, is the child of parents from two differ-
cent countries. Whereas Obama’s parental roots were in Kenya and the American
Midwest (and then Hawaii), Khan’s immigrant father, a surgeon, is Pakistani,
and his immigrant mother, a nurse, is Irish. Whereas Obama attended Hawaii’s
most elite prep school, Punahou, one of the 10 most richly endowed private
schools in the country, in the 1970s as the son of a single mother with limited
economic resources, Khan attended St. Paul’s in the 1990s as the son of wealthy
parents, a youngster whose family had been on “tours of Europe, South America,
and Asia” and “ate at fine restaurants.” And whereas after prep school and col-
lege Obama went on to law school, and to a career as a community organizer
and politician, Khan became a sociologist and, a decade after he attended St.
Paul’s, he returned for a year to teach and do the research that lead to this book.

The book is partly memoir, partly ethnography, and partly an attempt to
draw on Khan’s sociological imagination to understand the role of elite edu-
cation at schools like St. Paul’s. Khan concludes that in the 10 years between
his time as a student and his return as a teacher, things had really changed.
With reverberations of many previous claims over the years that the old estab-
lishment is dead and that it has been replaced by a new, diverse, meritocratic
(and, in its recent iterations, technological) elite (see, for example, Aldrich 1988,
Christopher 1989, and Brooks 2004), so, too, does Khan assert that there is a
new elite at schools like St. Paul’s. He dubs the current students “the new elite”
to distinguish them from “the old elite” of FDR, JFK, the Presidents Bush, and
Obama.

But have things really changed as much as Khan thinks?

First, it is helpful to locate St. Paul’s in the world of boarding schools. It’s
not just on the list of 40 schools (including Punahou) that Domhoff (1970)
used as “indicators” of upper-class membership, nor just one of the “select 16”
used by Baltzell (1958), or the 14 used by Useem and Karabel (1986) to check for “upper-class origins.” In fact, it is one of six schools referred to as “St. Grottlesex” – Groton, St. Paul’s, St. George’s, St. Mark’s, Kent, and Middlesex – that over the years have been identified as the most socially prominent prep schools in the country (e.g., McArthur 1953; Winter, Alpert and McClelland 1963; Levine, 1980; Saveth, 1988). St. Paul’s, therefore, is in the innermost circle of the many prestigious prep schools that comprise less than 1 percent of the secondary schools in America.

In 2004, at the age of 26, Khan returned to St. Paul’s for one year to teach and to observe (“I was here to mold these young men and women, but I was also here to study them”). His observations are perceptive, and the strength of the book is his detailed portrayal of life among the students, faculty and staff at the school. He looks with care and insight at such seemingly trivial but in fact important (to them) issues as which seats faculty are assigned in the Chapel and which students can sit on “the senior couch” in the Upper Common Room after dinner. Khan does an excellent job of depicting the complex, hierarchical, and sometimes “dense” relationships among students, faculty and staff, and, especially, among the students.

In Preparing for Power, written slightly more than 25 years ago, in a chapter titled “The Prep Crucible,” Cookson and Persell (1985) stressed that elite boarding schools are competitive, highly scheduled and rigorous environments in which the students work hard and come to believe that they earn the many privileges that result from succeeding at their schools. They conclude that, “Privilege must appear to be earned, because the only real justification for inequality is that it is deserved – in payment for sacrifices, the powerful must endure in the name of the common good.” For that reason, the rigorous rites of passage at prep schools “legitimate the maintenance of privilege” and lead to the internalization of class values. (125)

In this ethnography, Khan shows just how St. Paul’s manages to create a sense of class solidarity and justified privilege in a more diverse era that includes more women, students of color, and international students, and even openly gay and lesbian students (certainly not the case 25 years ago). Khan explains his task: “in telling the story of how an institution trains elites, I am firmly telling a Durkheimian story of how elite culture works through the elevation of a small group not by their individual characters but by a social process of schooling.”(162)

Khan also has been influenced by Pierre Bourdieu, showing how the students acquire what Bourdieu calls cultural capital. As Khan convincingly explains, at St. Paul’s it is not so much knowing things “about the world” as it is about acquiring an understanding of how to behave, and, especially, how to interact in many situations with ease (“how to carry oneself within the world... the mark of privilege, corporeal ease, is anything but easy to produce” [83]). Khan nicely details the ways in which the “newbs” are taught to behave properly at formal meals, including how to make conversation with strangers, and how to dress (no need for Savile Row, but Salvation Army clothes are not acceptable; brightly colored polo shirts with popped collars are fine). By the time the newbs become
“Paulies,” they have learned to negotiate the many rituals in the extremely hierarchical world of St. Paul’s. “The goal,” Khan writes, “is for such navigation to become natural so that you can converse with janitors and CEOs alike, so that you can be an elite with ease, living a life of ascension.”(135)

Notably, though Khan spends a lot of time looking at cultural capital, he says very little about social capital. He notes that the current adolescent elite downplays both “refined tastes and ‘who you know’” (14), but he does not indicate if he, too, thinks that “being well connected,” as they used to say in elite circles, will be unimportant in their lives. His focus is on which students were popular and respected, which students were thought to live in the “dork house” and which students do and do not have an easy time developing the “corporeal ease” that characterizes those he calls “the new elite,” more than on the fact that the prep school friends these students make, and the doors that will be open to them as a result of having attended St. Paul’s, will help them maintain or increase the considerable advantages most of them had when they arrived at the school.

Khan’s claim that things changed dramatically between his graduation in 1996 and his return to the school in 2004-05, enough to call the students at St. Paul’s “the new elite,” is not completely convincing. He seems surprised, for example, that legacy students no longer rule the roost. He describes an encounter he had with one especially entitled legacy student, and emphasizes that legacy students at St. Paul’s who exude entitlement not only are unpopular, but he claims that “most community members (faculty, staff, students, and alumni).... question their admission and doubt that there will be a future for them at St. Paul’s School.”(21) But Khan does not tell us what percentage of the students were legacy students when he was a student at St. Paul’s, nor does he tell us what percentage were legacy students 10 years later – only that attitudes toward those who were especially open and obnoxious about their sense of entitlement had changed. Khan, therefore, seems to capture a change in attitudes about legacy students, one that allows for widespread disparagement of them and, perhaps, has lead or will lead to changes in the school’s admissions policies. Maybe the school now takes as many legacy students as it used to, but is more selective in which legacy students are accepted, or maybe most legacy students who feel entitled learn, quickly, not to express these politically incorrect views. We know from Bowen and Bok (2000) that, as a group, legacy students at Ivy League schools, like athletes, are much weaker academically than the other students at their schools. If, as is likely, this has been the case at St. Paul’s, then perhaps the school is in the process of narrowing that gap. Khan tells us, however, that “this book leaves social statistics behind” (10), so we have no way of knowing how meaningful this change in student attitudes might be.¹

As for ruling the roost, if legacy students have “lost their hold” on St. Paul’s, as Khan puts it, this change probably took place well before the period between Khan’s graduation and his return as a teacher. Khan tells us that when he was a student at St. Paul’s, in response to pressures from previous students of color, there was a minority dorm (in which he lived). Ten years later, there was no such separate dorm for the non-White students, but the entitled elite students tended to cluster together in a dorm of their own. “The entitled elite,” he tells us, had
“become more like the black students from just fifteen years ago – increasingly alone and isolated.”(21)

Black students at St. Paul’s may have been alone and isolated in the 1990s, but the evidence is that the experiences of Black students has varied tremendously at different schools. Lorene Cary reports that she sometimes felt alone and isolated as a student at St. Paul’s in the early 1970s, but she also seems to have been popular, respected, and one of the most active students on campus – she was one of only two students to win the coveted Rector’s Award at her graduation (Cary 1991:217). And as far back as the 1960s, Black students have assumed leadership roles at various of the elite prep schools. In 1969, The New York Times reported that at Andover ("the alma mater of the Lees and Washingtons of Virginia and the Quincys and Lowells of New England") three “Negro students from the ghettos of Chicago and Oakland” had been elected as class presidents. At the time, Andover had 840 students, 40 of whom were Black. These three scholarship students were quite popular, and, presumably, some Andover legacy students were well-liked and some were not (Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, 2003:47).

Khan’s claim that “many” elite schools “accepted black students long before they were compelled to do so by the pressures of the civil rights movement” (7) is also something of a stretch. A few schools had integrated prior to the 1960s, but they typically accepted very few students of color (often the children of celebrities). Only in the mid-1960s, spurred by the pressure of the civil rights movement, did very many schools join the efforts of the elite-sponsored A Better Chance (ABC) program to recruit promising Black students from inner-city middle schools who were likely to survive at prep schools both academically and socially, thanks in part to a summer socialization program sponsored by ABC; St. Paul’s was 1 of the 16 original participants (Zweigenhaft and Domhoff 2003:183-5).

Early in the book, Khan writes, “One of the curiosities in recent years is how our social institutions have opened up to those they previously excluded, yet at the same time inequality has increased.”(5) A bit further on he notes that “the world is more open, but still unequal…. We don’t have good answers to why these seemingly incongruent observations go together.”(39) But it is more than a “curiosity” that we have greater diversity and greater inequality, and there are some good answers. One such answer is based on the extensive social psychological research by Steven Wright and others (e.g., Wright and Taylor 1998, 1999), and discussed in depth by social psychologist Thomas Pettigrew (2010), which shows that the addition of a small number of upwardly mobile members of excluded groups can decrease pressure for change, and increase the emphasis on individual mobility. In other words, an increase in diversity can solidify the status quo, and it can accompany, or even allow for, greater inequality.

In his brief concluding chapter, Khan seems less baffled by this contradiction and suggests it is not merely a “curiosity” but an irony, and that there might indeed be a way to explain it. He writes that with “the rise of the individual” and “the death of collectivist politics,” there is “an odd, perhaps even ironic outcome: by becoming more democratic the elite have undercut the power of
the weak within our nation.” (199) While this is a start in the right direction, it might have been useful to add that the American value system based on classical liberalism celebrates individualism and thereby provides justification for and tolerance of individual mobility for African Americans, other people of color, women, and gays and lesbians. At the same time, however, liberal individualism is used by the wealthy few as part of their strong resistance to any “collectivist” efforts, such as those by their employees in fields, factories, and office buildings to form unions or lobby for government social benefits for everyone (for more detailed discussions of the ironies of diversity, see Skrentny 1996, and Zweigenhaft and Domhoff 2006: chap. 8).

Though Khan does not focus primarily on his years as a student at St. Paul’s, he uses personal examples from this period to show how things have changed. Moreover, he is the narrator of this ethnography, and he is often a participant in the events he observes and analyzes. We get to know him, and he is an enjoyable and informative companion, one who is honest about the challenges he has faced (as a student, as a teacher and as a researcher) and often self-deprecating and endearing (e.g., “I am oblivious to fashion”). He is capable of surprising the reader (no surprise that he plays the violin, or that he coaches squash, but, to paraphrase St. Paul’s alum John Kerry, who among us would have predicted that he was into fantasy NASCAR?). He does not avoid some of St. Paul’s more embarrassing moments, such as a Rector whose salary increased from “around $180,000 to $530,000” while the school was cutting staff positions, a shocking and much-publicized hazing scandal that included scantily clothed girls, bananas and whipped cream, or a group of students that he observed casually throwing stones at an Alexander Calder outdoor sculpture on the campus. This readable book provides a vivid, often elucidating, and not always pretty look at life at St. Paul’s as of the 2004-05 school year.

Most St. Paul’s graduates are still from very wealthy backgrounds, though now some are female, and now there are more foreign students (or students whose parents did not grow up in America). The student culture surely has changed since the 1960s, and, in some ways, it changed in the decade between Khan’s time as a student and as a teacher (for example, by the time he returned, the president of the student body was able to come out as a gay person without the recriminations he likely would have experienced a decade earlier). Merit is perhaps more important at St. Paul’s than it once was, though presumably the smartest and most hard-working students always have gotten the best grades, the best athletes always have been the stars of the teams, and the students who have been best-liked and most respected always have been elected as student leaders. Learning to be physically and interpersonally at ease with others may be more important, or more apparent, than it used to be, but these qualities are not exactly new to students at schools like St. Paul’s.

As I read further and further into this engaging book, I kept thinking of a quote from Bourdieu that Khan introduced in the third chapter: “Many sociologists marvel at the ways in which the world changes. I marvel at how it stays the same.” (81) Khan marvels at the changes he observes in student dynamics within the bubble of St. Paul’s from the time he was 18 to the time he was 26. I marvel
at how St. Paul’s continues to play the same role in social reproduction, and in
the power structure, that it has played for a very long time.

Note
1 In contrast, in Race and Class Matters at an Elite College, social psychologist Elizabeth
Aries (2008) provides the rather stunning data that fully 25 percent of the students in
the entering class of 1972 at Amherst College were legacies; by the fall of 2005 when the
class of 2009 entered Amherst, that figure had dropped by half to 12 percent.

References
Lyles, Charilise. 1994. Do I dare disturb the universe? From the projects to the prep school. Boston, MA: Faber and Faber.

