Global Elites, Privilege and Mobilities in Post-organized Capitalism

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Remembering Elites
by Mike Savage and Karel Williams (eds)

by Janine R. Wedel

Mobile Lives
by Anthony Elliott and John Urry
London: Routledge, 2010

Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul’s School
by Shamus Rahman Khan

Abstract
The four books under review form part of a resurgent social science interest in elites as obligatory entry points in understanding changing relations of power and growing inequalities in a post-organized capitalism. All four books demonstrate, in differing but often complementary ways, that in an age of formal meritocracy, rising powers, government outsourcing, weightless information economies, financial deregulation, and increasingly dense digitized networked information and communication systems, elites have changed. Their mobile lives, their ability to feel at ease in almost any situation, and their role as intermediaries connecting different spheres of cultural, economic and political life are defining features of the new, truly global elites. The four books demonstrate the enduring influence of Bourdieu as a

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theorist of elites and showcase methodological and conceptual innovations to further develop comparative research.

**Key words**
global elites □ inequality □ mobility □ social science

In an inspiring but largely unnoticed paper published in 2004, Jon Beaverstock and his colleagues asked how it was that in an age of unprecedented social and economic polarization intensified by the exploding income of the high-earners, academic concern with inequality was almost exclusively focused on the poor while a veil of silence enshrouding the rich so effectively contributed to their invisibility and impunity. A global economy fuelled by speculative finance was at the time quickly expanding the ranks of the high-earners (200,000 people joining the ranks in 2003 alone, totalling 7.3 million globally) (Merrill Lynch/Cap Gemini Ernst & Young, 2003). And their sumptuous lives were becoming increasingly conspicuous in global cities and privileged playgrounds. A transnational archipelago of mega-yachts, private islands, ultra-expensive mansions, luxury hotels and exclusive country clubs had become the stage where a new, truly global elite displayed – and concealed – its growing wealth.

The feelings of incredulity and uneasiness but also increasing recognition and admiration raised by opulent lifestyles were well captured in November 2004 in the investigative programme *Panorama*'s 'Winner Takes All Britain'. In a telling moment of the documentary reflective of the contemporary social climate, Simon Woodroffe, a multimillionaire and founder of Yo! Sushi, confidently claimed: ‘Now it’s okay to talk about making money. It’s okay to say I’m a millionaire’. Media attention on the rich has since intensified as the ambivalence with which the high-earners were being perceived turned partly into public resentment amid demands for a fairer society and moral and economic regeneration following the financial meltdown of 2008.

A growing number of journalistic-style publications rich in anecdotal detail, such as *Generation Deluxe* (Nowell, 2004), *Richistan* (Frank, 2007), *Superclass* (Rothkopf, 2009), *The Super-Rich Shall Inherit the Earth* (Armstrong, 2010) and *How the Super-Rich Are Destroying the Earth* (Kempf, 2010), have been contributing to an ongoing discussion about the social desirability of the rich. But, save for a few exceptions, such as Haseler’s *The Super-Rich* (2000) and Irvin’s *Super-Rich* (2008), the social sciences have been largely absent from these debates and a scholarly perspective on the way the rich are challenging state sovereignty, welfare provision, democracy and the environment is still lacking. The four books under review are valuable contributions in the task of dispelling this ‘glaring invisibility of elites’ (Savage and Williams, 2009: 2) in academic writing. All four regard elites as obligatory entry points in understanding changing
relations of power and growing inequality in a post-organized capitalist order. And all demonstrate, in differing but often complementary ways, that in an age of formal meritocracy, rising powers, government outsourcing, weightless information economies, financial deregulation, and increasingly dense digitized networked information and communication systems, elites have changed. The identity, the character, the occupations, the lives and the places of the elite are, in significant ways, new, and these books form part of an incipient and much needed effort to trace their shifting contours.

Remembering Elites

Remembering Elites is, of the four books, the one that argues most comprehensively for a revival of elite studies. In the opening chapter its editors, Mike Savage and Karel Williams, offer an informed and pertinent incursion into the history of elite studies and the reasons that led to its demise. Their aim is not so much retrieving forgotten concepts and methods as mapping the field in search of future directions. Savage and Williams note how, towards the middle of the 20th century, political and academic usage of the term elite changed from agents of change playing strategic roles in fostering or frustrating processes of social and economic modernization, to traditional interest groups opposing progressive change. This unhelpful shift in the meaning of the term was followed by social science innovations that progressively extenuated academic interest in elites. This implied a double displacement, methodological and conceptual, that pushed elites out of the academic gaze.

First, since the 1960s, there has been a displacement of the methodological pluralism of earlier elite studies by the sample survey as the dominant tool to research social inequality. As quantitative analysis based on sample surveys became the most legitimate method in social science, elites disappeared from studies of social change sensitive only to statistically significant groups. Second came the advent of structuralism and post-structuralism. Classic theorizing about elites had oscillated between humanistic views of sovereign power and the ‘subject’ and instrumental understandings of elites as passive devices of structural dynamics. Since the 1970s more influential theories about the distributed nature of social relations central to the work of Foucault and Actor Network Theory questioned the idea that any specific group may have particular relevance in processes of social change. Interest in elites largely vanished and the scant scholarship emerging from certain currents within post-structuralism had a more restricted focus on the role of ‘knowledge’ in the formation of elites. Most significant here has been the work of Pierre Bourdieu on cultural elites. However, cultural elites form only one part of the shifting landscape of elite formation in present-day capitalism and a focus on power-knowledge fails to capture some of its most significant developments.
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If current theorizing about social and economic change inadequately grasps key dynamics of elite formations so too, Savage and Williams assert, do old arguments about interlocking directorates and related notions of ‘old boy networks’, ‘inner circles’ or ‘the establishment’. Elites in present-day capitalism hardly resemble the managerial elites of organized capitalism described by Wright Mills by the middle of the 20th century. In searching for new approaches that capture this shifting landscape, *Remembering Elites* stresses the significance of financialization:

One of the most striking developments in present-day capitalism is the increasing number of highly paid financial intermediaries whose role is not the executive management of ‘men and things’ within corporate hierarchies but the switching or servicing of the flows of money through market trading and corporate deals whose profits greatly increase the number of working rich. (Savage and Williams, 2009: 10)

The City illustrates the significance of this trend. While no more than 600 senior managers and executive directors in the FTSE earn more than £1 million per annum, there are in London up to 15,000 senior, highly paid financial intermediaries. The role of financialization in this shifting landscape is that of a disorganizing power, seemingly reducing the role of previously dominant managerial elites and readjusting power relations between different elites as well as between capital markets, firms and households.

The intellectual strategy proposed by Savage and Williams to capture these processes is to develop more descriptive approaches to elite formation in relation to recent social science accounts of money as a social device or social agent. The key insight here is that ‘those who control money are establishing themselves as central social and political agents, who can also embed themselves in wider circuits of power’ (2009: 9). A more descriptive approach that bypasses a priori definitions of elites would then examine ‘how the wealthy have prospered and regrouped in contemporary financialized capitalism’, ‘how the fortunes of particular individuals and groups have so signally prospered, and how they have managed to become economic, social, cultural and political agents in association with their enrichment’ (2009: 9).

The collection of articles in *Remembering Elites* examines the composition of elites and what difference they make in a way that showcases a rich range of conceptual and methodological possibilities for a renewed research agenda. Methodologically it demonstrates the still unfulfilled potential of social network analysis in examining elite formations, especially when combined with other lines of analysis involving ethnographic and documentary sources. Conceptually, many of the chapters show the innovative ways in which the work of Pierre Bourdieu can be put to work, especially when economic capital is problematized with the same vigour as other forms of capital and due attention is paid to field
dynamics orchestrated by financialization. Particularly appealing is the historical perspective, especially in Part 1 of the book, that allows the reader to gain an idea of key changes but also enduring continuities in elite formations, dispelling the notion that a completely new phase of capitalism has engendered an overarching new elite. Part 2, ‘Money, Finance and Business Elites: Processes and Outcomes’, is arguably the most innovative both methodologically and conceptually and includes fascinating accounts of non-executive directors and heads of dealing rooms. Part 3, ‘Cultural Elites and the Consumption of Elites’, is well integrated as a useful reminder that cultural capital is instrumental in the production and reproduction of economic elites and that different elites should be studied in relation to each other.

*Remembering Elites* showcases state-of-the-art research and compellingly broadens the research agenda on inequality. The reader may notice, however, that little mention is made of the challenges and limits to accessing data in a world, the world of finance, where privacy, silence and secrecy routinely define business interactions. This is no small challenge given, for example, the proportion of trade and banking assets routed offshore. ‘Offshore’, Nicholas Shaxson writes in his stunning book *Treasure Islands*, ‘is a project of wealthy and powerful elites to help them take the benefits from society without paying for them’ (2011: 10). ‘In 2005, the Tax Justice Network’, he adds, ‘estimated that wealthy individuals hold perhaps $11.5 trillion worth of wealth offshore. That is a quarter of all global wealth, and equivalent to the entire gross national product of the United States’ (2011: 26). Writing about the contemporary significance of finance, Shaxson observes that:

The offshore world is all around us. More than half of world trade passes, at least on paper, through tax havens. Over half of all banking assets, and a third of foreign direct investment by multinational corporations, are routed offshore. Some 85 per cent of international banking and bond issuance takes place in the so-called Euromarket, a stateless offshore zone... The IMF estimated in 2010 that the balance sheets of small island financial centres alone added up to $18 trillion – a sum equivalent to about a third of the world’s GDP. And that, it said, was probably an underestimate. The US Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported in 2008 that 83 of the USA’s biggest 100 corporations had subsidiaries in tax havens. The following year research by the Tax Justice Network, using a broader definition of offshore, discovered that ninety-nine of Europe’s hundred largest companies used offshore subsidiaries. In each country the largest user was by far a bank. (2011: 8)

Shaxson’s book explores a system which works *directly and aggressively* against transparency. Offshore secrecy shifts control of information – and the power that flows from information – decisively towards the insiders’ (2011: 13, emphasis in original).
Shadow Elites

Shadow Elites (2010), by anthropologist Janine Wedel, is in this respect a telling reminder of the elusive nature of elites as objects of academic research (and indeed of any kind of monitoring) and the methodological challenges that this involves. Drawing on ethnographic research on the transition of ex-communist countries towards market economies and the privatization of the US government, Wedel traces the ascendancy of a new elite formed by individuals who ‘through their activities ... connect state with private, bureaucracy with market, political with economic, macro with micro’ (2010: x–xi). Wedel does not write specifically about finance and bankers, though bankers are indeed included in what she describes as an expanding army of consultants and media gurus, academics and financial advisers, politicians, political analysts and retired army officials who silently glide between different projects, work teams, arenas and countries simultaneously performing different roles. As noted earlier in reference to mid-20th century elites, intermediaries connecting different policy, cultural and business fields are not new. What is distinctive about these shadow elites is, first, their ability to take advantage of and bend rules that allow their activities to pass unchecked and, second, to take decisions that affect us all and which were formerly restricted to public officials. The result is the institutionalization of practices that undermine market competition, public accountability and, above all, public trust, ‘the principles that have long defined modern states, free markets, democracy itself’ (Wedel, 2010: 5).

The field of action of these ‘cross-pollinating institutional nomads’ (Wedel, 2010: 193) has been expanded by a shifting global environment characterized by forms of governing increasingly reliant on deregulation and outsourcing (the actual privatization of government functions); the end of the Cold War, which created loosely-governed spaces, especially in the ex-Soviet republics; rapid development of information and communication technologies; and what Wedel calls the embrace of ‘truthiness’, which allows individuals to playfully decouple their self-presentation in public from recorded evidence. This international setting multiplies the possibilities for double strategies. In this environment roles proliferate, sometimes in harmonic, sometimes in conflicting ways, yet intermediaries claiming to have no allegiances are increasingly adept at and able to construct ‘coincidences of interest’. Their privileged access to sensitive information formerly in the hands of state officials and international organizations, and its use in different situations and for different purposes, allows them to accumulate influence, power and wealth while eluding democratic controls designed for state organizations. Through their role as policy advisers they help shape new institutional forms of power and influence according to their own interests, effectively privatizing policy beyond the reach of traditional monitoring systems. These strategies are successful mainly due to their capability to hide their multiple roles and present their most attractive credentials at each situation.
Wedel calls these new intermediaries ‘flexians’ (‘flex nets’ when they act in groups). Terms like ‘conflict of interest’ and ‘corruption’, Wedel writes, are inadequate to describe this shadow elite. Flexians and flex nets move in the expanding grey areas of government, international agencies and the global economy, taking advantage of loops which are closed to democratic processes. While gliding between different institutions, countries, and policy and media arenas, they serve their own interests rather than those of the institutions, governments or publics they are officially working for. Their loyalty is to people that conform to their own networks rather than institutions. This form of personalized bureaucracy may engender a continuity of policies even when governments change. Yet flex nets are different from interest groups:

Whereas interest groups promote a political cause or defend the agendas of a particular group, and lobbies offer politicians support and resources in exchange for preferences in policies, flex nets are not formal or permanent entities. Their existence is unannounced, and they do not seek to incorporate themselves as such. Moreover, members of flex nets are united by shared activities and interpersonal histories. ‘Interests groups’ and ‘lobbies’ do not convey the ambiguous state-private networks of flex nets, which coordinate power and influence from multiple vantage points—often far removed from public input, knowledge, or potential sanction. (Wedel, 2010: 16)

The fluidity of these sociations partly reflects the changing and transnational environments in which flexians and flex nets operate. Flexians and flex nets navigate through, and thrive in, turbulence and disorder. Writing about the economic transition in Eastern Europe (Chapter 3), Wedel describes the remarkable dexterity and resourcefulness of flexians at adapting to their new environments and, interestingly, the stunning speed at which these skills were developed. Successfully navigating the murky waters of disorganized capitalism where deregulation and outsourcing have blurred the formerly sacrosanct boundaries between private and public, moving across different arenas and countries, presenting themselves through their most attractive roles, convincingly asserting their understanding of a given reality, requires a new transnational or mobile habitus. ‘The people I came to call flexians’, Wedel writes about her interviewees in the former communist countries, ‘would soon appear on the world stage. Some of them operated across borders in the manner of global elites, international high flyers who ally more comfortably with their fellow global elites than with their own countrymen’ (2010: 14).

Written with journalistic flair, Shadow Elites is an example of the potential of ethnography to research the more obscure dimensions of elite formations. But Shadow Elites also reads as a warning of the difficulties and limitations to be encountered. This applies to the opaque field of finance which is most often directed towards performing accountability without necessarily being accountable. And this applies also to the
challenges posed by the global reach of the elite’s movements and operations and the extent to which ‘existing means are far from being sufficient or able to cover the travelling bases of the players, who operate largely above public input, knowledge and visibility’ (2010: 205). *Shadow Elites* rightly identifies the intensive and extensive spatial mobilities as both a defining feature of the new elite and a key resource in erasing traces of their operations, wealth and influence. As in the work of other scholars such as Bauman (2000) and Castells (1996), there is, however, a lack of sustained analysis on the specific work mobilities do in transforming the nature of occupations, life-strategies, patterns of everyday life, power, privilege and inequality.

**Mobile Lives**

*Mobile Lives* (2010) is not exclusively focused on elites, but its inclusion in this review is fully justified by the way it convincingly addresses these issues and opens up new directions for elite studies. Drawing on, and further developing, the mobilities paradigm (Sheller and Urry, 2006), the book examines the intersections of everyday lives and the mobility systems that are central to the new global economy. It shows how networked transport, information and communication infrastructures are not just becoming an essential part of everyday life but also shaping identities and the emotional repertoire through which individuals encounter, define and respond to others and the world. In a social context of ‘detraditionalization’ and ‘individualization’ where traditional norms and values cease to have binding moral content, digitized information and communication systems have assumed a structuring nature in themselves by shaping scripts of selfhood, textures of emotion and everyday routines. And it is especially those on the fast lines of this expanding mobile world – the rich and the super-rich – whose social lives are becoming most detraditionalized. It is the mobile lives of the rich and the super-rich that better illustrate the rising ‘networked individualism’ of disorganized capitalism.

The book provides a new set of conceptual tools to capture the textures of mobiles lives, a new vocabulary with which to talk about and make sense of the way identity and inequality in the 21st century are being refashioned in terms of the capacity for movement. Of particular significance for the argument of the book is the concept of ‘network capital’:

Network capital can be distinguished from cultural or economic capital (in Bourdieu’s sense). Whereas the latter were, for the most part, built up by individuals, network capital is largely subjectless, communications-driven and information-based. People with very high levels of network capital experience high levels of geographical mobility, have extensive institutional contacts, and are at home in, and moving across, many diverse settings. What specially matters is information – its production, transmission, circulation and, above all, sharing. To have high network capital is to join a field of
expanding networks, or what Wellman and his collaborators term ‘connected lives’. (Elliott and Urry, 2010: 11)

Concepts like network capital, miniaturized mobilities, affect storage, networked individualism, meetingness, neighbourhood lives, and portable personhood, among others, are illustrated in each chapter by reference to the working and social life of an interviewee. Following this same pattern that makes the book such a compelling read, Chapter 4 examines the lives of individuals exceptionally rich in network capital. The focal character in this chapter is Wim Eisner, one of Europe’s leading investment bankers working in the City. Eisner made his fortune investing in hedge funds and futures and later on the industrialization of emerging Asian economies. At the time of the interview he was the head of a private investment bank. His professional life resembles, in some respects, that of the flexians described by Wedel: he thrives in turbulence, his working agenda is structured by short-term projects, short-term contacts and ad-hoc teams assembled with the same speed as they are disassembled; his professional roles and responsibilities are varied – investment banker, manager, expert in hedge funds, networker, real estate guru – and this often involves shifting between economic sectors of the broader economy and relentless demands for travel and networking.

Eisner is what Bauman terms a ‘global’, a person leading a ‘fast track’ mobile life. His life is a life on the move – we learn that he spent 268 nights away from home in 2007. Yet, far from experiencing this as a personal and professional constraint, Eisner sees it as opening new and vital business horizons. His global lifestyle, defined by ever-expanding professional and networking possibilities, and his rich circle of personal contacts afford him increased personal freedom away from the routine and somehow tiresome aspects of office and family life. Eisner describes how, on returning to London, demands made upon his time by his staff, his wife, and his teenage daughter, who studies at a boarding school, often have an unnerving effect. By contrast, he talks about the pleasure found in places where obligations to others are minimal such as business suites, first-class lounges or limousine transfers.

Eisner’s life typifies what Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) have identified as a new institutional regime in advanced capitalism based on flexibility, ingenuity, adaptability, speed and weightlessness. More than the possession of specific qualifications, the skills to navigate the turbulent high strata of the global economy with its demands for multi-tasking across space, time and networks is ‘the capacity to learn and adapt to new functions, to gain trust, to communicate, to relate’ (2010: 76). This involves what Eisner implicitly understands as a necessary degree of emotional detachment from situations, teams and projects undergoing continuous change. The higher a global is in the hierarchy of a global economy and the more turbulent the work environment is, the greater the value of this kind of ‘detached engagement’ skilfully practised by Eisner. This life on the
move attending the demands for physical co-presence in several key nodes of the global economy involves a new executive routine characterized by a non-routine and a mode of supervision at-a-distance of subordinates working at the office.

In line with recent accounts by Sennet (2007) and Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) on the changing nature of working conditions in advanced capitalist economies, Elliott and Urry observe that ‘the scientific approach to management that dominated advanced societies during the late twentieth century – involving the continuous presence of executives and ongoing surveillance of employees – has become a formidable barrier to progress in the early twenty-first century’ (2010: 76).

And along with this orientation to management based on floating organizational responsibilities and the supervision of subordinates, Elliott and Urry identify other key social forms through which life-strategies and identities of the globals are being made and re-made. First there is the intensity and extensity of their networking mobilities and especially their speed. Quoting Bauman, Elliott and Urry stress how ‘speed of movement has become today a major, perhaps the paramount factor of social stratification and the hierarchy of domination’ (Bauman, 2002: 26–27). Second, there are ‘networked possibilities’ that afford the organization of globals’ professional and personal lives. Elliott and Urry write that ‘the “networked” dimensions of the self, in contrast to the self as a generic phenomenon, presume a reflexive architecture of informational connections. How far certain individuals are able to exploit networked possibilities depends to a large extent on how rich they are in terms of informational connectivity’ (2010: 77–78). Third comes the familiarity with which globals as affluent consumers display a cosmopolitan outlook. In the mercantile version practised by globals this often involves an indifference or aversion towards more established or grounded notions of belonging.

Finally, such ‘distance from locality’ is relentlessly orientated towards an ‘elsewhere’, structured as a ‘detailed mapping of possible escape routes’, lived as a series of exits from local situations that demand a degree of attachment and commitment. What globals seem to be escaping from, Elliott and Urry suggest, is a fear of entrapment and fixity, as if slowing down or stopping meant the shrinking of their vital horizon. In a society of extensive and intensive mobilities where ‘to be immobile … is a kind of symbolic death … the ultramobilities of the globals might be seen as an attempt to “master” an otherwise unsettling and dangerous world. The capacity to be always elsewhere is the capacity to thwart whatever debilitating circumstances arise within local contexts’ (2010: 79). In his book Treasure Islands, Shaxson also describes elites’ professional and personal strategies as a constant search for an ‘elsewhere’, a constant mapping of escape routes through offshore that rescinds fiscal obligations. Beyond its technical meaning, offshore refers also to a state of mind and offers ‘escape routes from the duties that come with living in and obtaining benefits from society – tax, responsible financial regulation, criminal laws, inheritance rules and
so on. ... Offshore is fundamentally about being an elsewhere zone of escape' (Shaxon, 2011: 8–9, emphasis in original).

In the final part of Chapter 4, Elliott and Urry discuss how this potential for being elsewhere has become a marker of the good life and an aspiration for a growing majority. ‘The desirable life’, they write, ‘is not only about money and possessions; it is about movement, the capacity to escape, to be elsewhere, especially in certain kinds of distinct, ambient place. Mobility status stands today for an addiction to power and pleasure’ (2010: 80). The final chapters of the book, Chapters 6 and 7, examine in detail the possible social and environmental future scenarios that such addiction could lead to.

Privilege
Given the huge costs that globals impose upon society, given their social withdrawal and the widening gap between ‘them and us’, a key question is how the rich manage to get away with it while keeping their legitimacy virtually unscathed. True, as noted at the beginning, the recent crisis has sparked a wave of public ire and intensified the debate about the desirability and affordability of the rich. But as Elliott and Urry observe, the distinct social figure of ‘the global’ still inspires glamour and respectability (2010: 80). How then, to borrow Sharon Zukin’s (1993) words, do elites craft a ‘friendly façade of power’? If the rich can no longer lay claim to their heritage to justify their position in an open society, how do they still maintain their grip on economic and political life? At a time when hierarchies are officially outmoded, where are the hierarchical structures essential for an elite to be an elite now? And what difference, if any, does a global mobile economy make in the way the new elite legitimize their wealth and privilege? These remain important questions in the research agenda of a renewed elite studies. Privilege, by sociologist Shamus Khan, provides suggestive answers to some of them.

Returning to St. Paul’s, a boarding school in the USA, as a teacher and researcher ten years after graduating, Khan examined how elite schools instil meritorious traits in students, helping them gain access to key educational, economic and political institutions. Weaving autobiographical reflections with ethnographic data and social theory, Privilege is written with the stylistic grace and admirable clarity that make cutting edge sociology accessible to a wider public. The result is an enlightening and pleasurable read. St. Paul’s is the sort of place where the likes of Wim Eisner and some of the oldest money in the United States send their children. Reflecting a wider cultural mood and contrary to received wisdom regarding elite educational institutions as explicitly protecting and reproducing a world of inherited privilege, St. Paul’s embraces a meritocracy of talent. The vision students acquire through their three-year stay is one of a world of equal opportunities where aptitude and work pay off. In this worldview inequality is the natural result of what people make of those opportunities.
Against this ideological background, students learn that hierarchies are natural and should be treated as ladders, not limits. ‘St. Paul’s’, Khan writes, ‘does not radically rethink the world; the hierarchy remains, but the possibilities within are new’ (2011: 56). The challenge is how one approaches those hierarchies. St. Paul’s, with its own daily routines, rituals and social pyramid, acts as a veritable microcosm and training ground where students acquire the subtle skill of negotiating hierarchical relations. With those above them in the social hierarchy of the school – the faculty – students learn to interact in ways which are both familiar and respectful. Living on the school premises, both students and faculty interact daily on numerous occasions and in different contexts, both formal and informal. Such intense interaction at the chapel, in the classroom, in the playgrounds, while eating at the same table every evening and at regular special occasions, enables students to master the uncertain space between intimacy and respectful deference for a superior; it instils in them a feeling for the right distance, a feeling for the right moment and the right way of negotiating hierarchies.

To those below them in the school’s hierarchy – cleaners, porters and other maintenance staff – students also show a polite interest and a respectful distance, although in a different way. Whereas faculty members remain significant others at any time, staff instantly slide into invisibility after each of those warm and respectful interactions. The crucial point, nonetheless, is that students develop a sensitivity to interact across the boundaries of social class, as if hierarchies did not exist.

This disposition to cross boundaries extends to the field of cultural consumption. At St. Paul’s the new elite are encouraged to become cultural omnivores, to consume anything from the finest creation of high culture to the most unremarkable product of popular culture. Students feel as comfortable talking about opera as discussing rap music or the most recent Hollywood blockbuster. The lack of similar research among teenagers from rich families elsewhere makes it difficult to discern the generational and geographical specificities of these findings. This cultural omnivorousness is certainly not found among the senior members of the UK managerial elite discussed by Warde and Bennett in *Remembering Elites* (2009: 240–259). In line with existing research on patterns of cultural consumption among upper classes, the elite members interviewed by Warde and Bennett are more dismissive of popular culture and far more inclined to engage in more highbrow activities such as opera and theatre going. At St. Paul’s such openness fits well with the accepted view of the world as a pool of opportunities open to those with the right disposition. In the students’ worldview failure to advance is never associated with wider structural constraints. Those who fail to advance in their careers and get stuck, socially and physically, like the ladies who clean their dormitories, are seen as having had bad luck, or lacking the appropriate openness to new opportunities in work and life.
A key argument in *Privilege* is that by learning to respect but also tactfully negotiate hierarchies and being cultural egalitarians, students learn to feel at ease in almost every situation. This is, Khan argues, St. Paul’s signature emotion: *ease*, the mark of privilege in an age of access and meritocracy, the ability to reproduce hierarchies while making them invisible by becoming like everyone else, by being able to confidently exchange jokes with both cleaners and faculty, by treating with detached curiosity both high-brow culture and the most banal objects of mass consumption. Ease is the skill allowing students to move across boundaries—social, cultural and geographical. It is this embodied disposition which enables hierarchies not to limit but foster their advancement. The ideal of St. Paul’s is not scholastic but interactional. The value of St. Paul’s experience is *being* there. In fact, and this is one of the most intriguing aspects of the book, students do not acquire knowledge which is different or better; they do not develop a deep understanding of any topic or engage intensively with specific questions, texts or authors, despite their relentless emphasis on framing their advancement in terms of hard work. If anything, it transpires from Khan’s account, students at St. Paul’s are studying less rather than more. What students do learn is a *style of knowing*. Students are encouraged to ask grand questions about Western culture and, in so doing, learn to feel comfortable with knowledge, develop a voice, a habit of mind, and a specific way of relating to others and the world.

The audacity of this system is shocking and ingenious. Asking big questions seems profound, but you cannot be wrong. The point is to develop a voice, an interpretation and a way of articulating. While most schools in the nation are busy disciplining students into taking regular tests, St. Paul’s is making such concreteness irrelevant. It is not about knowing those things for these kids. It is about this vague intangible way of knowing that becomes embodied ease. And rather than using standard benchmarks against which to measure students, St. Paul’s is cultivating individual characters that are later used to explain their success. (Khan, 2011: 172)

In developing a voice and providing opportunities for the students to pursue and develop their own personal interests through a myriad of generously resourced school clubs and associations, in instilling in them a sense of their tremendous abilities, in cultivating ease and making students comfortable in any situation, the school crafts ‘interesting characters’ and outlines individual traits that other institutions will later seek and reward during the students’ journey towards the top tiers of the social hierarchy.

The significance of this mode of education becomes clear in relation to the admission practices now prominent in Ivy League universities. Increasingly, these institutions reward the ethereal notion of ‘character’ in assessing students’ capabilities. The aim, these institutions argue, is to gather at each class a diverse group of students made of individual characters. It is these individual characters that institutions such as...
St. Paul’s breed and recommend to top universities that will then catapult students to the highest posts in the economic and political institutions of the United States.

Privilege analyses instances of social reproduction and change in elite institutions, further developing the Bourdesian sociology of education it relies on. Along with Remembering Elites and to some extent also Mobile Lives, Privilege demonstrates the enduring influence of Pierre Bourdieu as a theorist of elite formations. Bourdieu’s main focus was on cultural elites but, as Savage and Williams (2009: 16) note, his distinction between elites occupying a position within a field and elites moving across fields and linking otherwise disconnected arenas is most suggestive. The books under review refer to a disorganized capitalist order that has created the conditions for the emergence of new elites within new fields and, above all, the ascendency of (mainly financial) mediators whose job is to bridge different, multiplying spheres of economic, cultural and political life.

Asserting that St. Paul’s explicitly trains its students to be able to bridge diverse worlds or fields would imply too close an intimation with a functionalist analysis. Khan sensibly avoids such a claim. Nonetheless, ease as an embodied disposition does provide St. Paul’s students with the skills to cross social and cultural boundaries. It furnishes students with a cosmopolitan outlook that facilitates advancement in the increasingly turbulent environments that globals like Wim Eisner routinely occupy.

As a final reflection, one may note that despite the economic recession which commenced in 2008, the high earners continue to prosper. Their numbers have increased from 7.3 million in 2003 to 10 million in 2009 (Merrill Lynch/Cap Gemini & Ernst & Young, 2003, 2010). And it is in the rising Asian powers where some key changes are taking place. In 2003 the number of high net-worth individuals in Europe and Asia-Pacific was 2.6 million and 1.8 million respectively. In 2009, the number of rich people in Asia was, for the first time, the same as in Europe, about 3 million in each continent. Debates about social stratification in a global mobile economy call for greater attention to the imploding income and affluent lives of the high earners, as Beaverstock and his colleagues have sustainedly argued, and are set to figure prominently in the development of a cosmopolitan perspective (Beck, 2005) and a sociology beyond societies (Urry, 2000) capable of tracing the shifting contours of disorganized capitalism.

Note
1. The figures include individuals with investable financial assets of more than $1 million (excludes owner-occupied housing and consumables) (Merrill Lynch/ Cap Gemini Ernst & Young, 2003).

References


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