

Talking Pigs? Lessons from Elite Schooling

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In comparison to the transformative rights movements of the 1960s, the question of what was happening among the elite seemed quaint. As women and nonwhites began to demand and acquire greater social integration and opportunities, the future appeared to be one in which marginalized groups would be integrated into the mass of society. The fattening middle, rather than the diminished tail, would be the object of our analysis. The changes were revolutionary: the household structure of Western nations radically changed, the economy transformed, cultural tastes were realigned, global dynamics seemed more pronounced, and the legitimacy of social barriers was undermined. In comparison to these processes, knowledge about the elite was rather unimportant. Indeed, we seemed to be moving away from elites and elite rule to a different, more just world. Our theoretical and methodological tools reflected this realignment. Regression analysis flattened out the extremes of distributions; trends were driven by the middle of society rather than the exceptional outliers. Scholars questioned how status was attained rather than maintained.

But more recent experience and the corresponding scholarship about both inequality and elites has pushed against these methodological and theoretical approaches. Elites are driving inequality, and within our winner-take all markets, the importance of these nonrepresentative outliers requires new social science approaches. Perhaps more than any other area, the sociology of education has led the charge in this new study of the elite. In this chapter I draw upon this work for important empirical lessons about the elite, as well as insights into the conceptual framework of sociology more generally.

The privileged place of education with respect to these developments is partly due to scholars in this research area being uniquely situated to study

the elite. Whereas boardrooms are largely behind closed doors, academics inhabit and indeed run a central institution of elite formation and reproduction: schools.

Most schools are not elite, of course, and most academics are not in a position to walk out their door and observe the dynamics of elite reproduction. This trivial observation has an important implication. The difference between Harvard and a local community college in Cambridge, Massachusetts, may be so dramatic that to suggest they are part of the same category of phenomena borders on the absurd. Where many colleges have shrinking faculty, Harvard has faculty with shrinking teaching obligations. Whereas most colleges accept almost everyone who applies, Harvard is harder and harder to get into. Where most colleges are struggling to stay afloat, Harvard sits atop tens of billions of dollars.

This reveals a trend that goes far beyond schooling. Elites have tended to be countercyclical. When others have been economically mobile, elites been locked in place. And vice versa. Combining these insights—(1) that elite institutions are nonrepresentative, (2) that those institutions can reveal much about the workings of power in America, and (3) that such power is often not deployed for the good of all because those who are powerful experience different economic cycles—reveals core lessons for sociology.

In this chapter I begin by outlining what it means to study nonrepresentative institutions. Next, I discuss the idea of elites as “countercyclical,” explicating the implications of this position. And finally I outline a cultural rhetoric that helps us better understand the practical implications of these first two points. Overall, I hope to show what general lessons sociologists can draw from the study of the nonrepresentative case of elite schooling.

Studying Nonrepresentative Institutions: New Classifications

Ivan Ermakoff has recently made the case for the epistemic contributions and normative expectations of studying “exceptional cases” (2014). Ermakoff’s own work is far from our current concern; he writes on fascism and democratic abdications. Yet he provides keen insights into what we might learn from the study of the exceptional. Ermakoff draws upon Blumer (1986: 146) to think of a case as an “object of consideration.” He suggests that there are three advantages to looking beyond the representative. First, exceptional cases reveal the limits of our standard classifications. Second, they outline new classes of objects. And third, they magnify relational patterns that are less visible in more mundane contexts.

While social scientists might think of nonrepresentativeness as a criticism, I seek to build upon Ermakoff and think of the virtues of the exception. In certain realms of social life, we know this well. Take, for example, the scholarship on extreme poverty (Desmond 2015). Beyond the importance of knowing about those who are suffering, extreme poverty gives us an exceptional case with which to challenge our classifications, generate new classifications, and magnify the relational patterns of inequality.

We can only push this analogy so far, however, as it would be an analytical mistake to assume that the tails of the distribution (the elite and the homeless) are ruled by the same inverted dynamics. They share their exceptionalism, and in this, their theoretic and methodological value. But we have far too little evidence to expand our analogy to imagine that poverty and wealth are the inverse of one another. And so we must study both.

To this insight we might add, further, that elites are not only exceptional, but are those with power. Definitions of elites—those with vastly disproportionate control over or access to resources that provide them with power (Khan 2012a)—suggest that while elites may well be nonrepresentative of others within society, their relative monopoly of power makes them ideal space for understanding the power dynamics of a society. While the findings about elites may not be generalizable to other populations, the implications of these findings are important for understanding the direction of society. These two observations—that there are advantages to studying exceptional cases, and that elites as an exceptional case allow us to better understand the dynamics of power within society—serve as a justification for taking the nonrepresentative phenomena of elites seriously.

Schools are places where we can see networks form, culture emerge, ideas created, symbols adopted, and knowledge adopted and transformed. In short, if we want to know of the dynamics of economic, knowledge, cultural, social, and symbolic capital—how they emerge, are experienced over time, transform, and are transmitted—then schools, and elite schools in particular, become critical sites of inquiry. Following Ermakoff, we might ask what sociology learns in general from the study of the rather unique process of elite schooling. That is, what do we learn about classifications, classes of objects, and relational patterns?

First, elite schooling reveals some of the limits of our standard classifications. Let us take the classic Weberian view that exclusion and boundary drawing are core dynamics for social groups, and that such processes are central to the reproduction of inequality (Lamont 1992; Lamont and Molar 2002). From this perspective, competition over scarce resources generates status groupings, wherein groups seek to align themselves with particular

resources and define themselves in opposition to other groups. In the case of schools, this would mean having groups within a society align themselves with educational institutions in order to augment their social power, prestige, and advantage.

The sociology of elite education certainly provides evidence for this view. In his study of the history of admissions at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, Jerome Karabel (2005) outlines how these schools sought to draw and redraw boundaries around the class of people who belonged within their walls. Deploying a deep anti-Semitism, admissions officers and key administrators sought to include white Protestants and exclude others. This drawing of boundaries aligns closely with Weber's, and its modern applications in work like that of Michele Lamont. But if we look at the second part of Karabel's story, a different picture emerges.

The system based in anti-Semitism, one which sought to admit students not on the basis of academics alone but instead on a range of attributes considered "character," is now deployed by elite schools to *include* those who had previously been excluded. Elite schools are more racially diverse than ever before (many are "majority minority"); women make up the majority of students, and more than half of each class is on financial aid. Elite schools express a deep commitment to diversity (Berrey 2015; Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009a, 2009b; Khan 2011). While these transformations can be overstated, it is important to note that they are not window dressing.

My own elite institution, Columbia University, accepted an incoming class of 2020 that is 40 percent white. Fifteen percent of the class are Latino; 13 percent are African American; 28 percent are Asian/Asian American, and 3 percent are Native American. This is a massive transformation in the composition of the school, compared to a generation ago. It marks ways in which elite schools may be some of the most diverse in the country. Racial, ethnic, and religious exclusion, once defining features of elite schools, are now aggressively rejected by these institutions. Indeed, there is clearly an intentional commitment to diversity that cannot be imagined away. The symbolic boundaries may have shifted, and if you ask the leaders of these institutions, they would suggest that boundaries in general are being dismantled.

At the same time, these changes haven't been associated with increases in equality. Work on diversity within such schools has indicated mixed results at best (Berrey 2015; Jack 2016). More broadly, elites have captured a greater share of the national income and wealth. The study of elite schools reveals something new about our standard understanding wherein exclusion drives inequality and inclusion generates opportunity. The picture is

far more complicated, where certain dynamics of inclusion may well be coupled with increases in resource seizure.

Such an insight may already rest within the deeper reaches of our knowledge. Most sociologists, for example, would recognize both the potential emancipatory power of “free” markets, but also express concerns about how such open institutions can augment inequalities. Yet in general, our models of inequality rest on concepts like group exclusion. The literature on elite schooling throws critical light upon this, outlining how we can have things like democratic inequality or, better, how openness does not necessarily close the gap between people within a society.

As we reflect upon such open inequality, we also begin to see our second basic insight, gleaned from Ermakoff: Studies of elite schools help us outline new classes of objects. Through the study of elite spaces, we begin to see different patterns of inequality. For example, whereas little has changed within patterns of racial segregation in much of society, within elite schools racial diversity has blossomed (Espenshade and Radford 2009). Where most of the US economy has been stagnant, the economy of elite schools is one of massive growth. If the cost of a Harvard education tracked to inflation since 1970, tuition would cost about fifteen thousand dollars a year. Instead it currently costs around forty-five thousand (this does not include room, board, and fees, which brings the total cost to well over sixty thousand). This doesn’t mean, though, that Harvard is more expensive for poorer students, as grants have made up for this massive rise in tuition. The openness we observe in elite schools is not mirrored across society; the economic growth they have enjoyed has not been shared; the mobility of new groups into schools does not represent a broader mobility of Americans. And so what we uncover when looking at elites, and in particular at elite schools, is something relatively unknown and obscured before: countercyclical economic and educational processes.

A “New” Object: The Countercyclical Character of the Elite

The broad story of inequality in America is that it declined in the postwar period, and then increased in the 1970s. Today, inequality is what it was at the tail end of the Gilded Age—which is to say that America is a very inequitable nation in comparison to other industrialized countries and to its recent past. One of the more specific takeaways from the account provided by economists Piketty and Saez is that the engine of inequality has been the rich rather than the poor or middle classes (2003). We cannot explain

a variable by a constant. And while the level of inequality in America has varied considerably over time, the relative position of the poor and middle classes has remained roughly the same since the 1960s. The fate of the rich, however, has waxed and waned; this variation is what has driven inequality over the last fifty years. While both the rich and poor experience the same national levels of inequality, they experience it quite differently. Disaggregating the general trend reveals important patterns.

We can start to do this by drawing upon the work of economists Edlund and Kopczuk (2009, see also Kopczuk and Saez 2004; Kopczuk et al. 2010). Using estate tax return data, these look at dynastic wealth by focusing on the very wealthy in the America (0.01 percent). They find that wealth mobility into the elite *declined* from the 1940s through the early 1970s, only to increase in the subsequent period. Which is to say that elites have been the key drivers of inequality, but that simultaneously there has been *more mobility* into the elite in recent years, under high inequality regimes. By contrast, in the recent past (1960s), inequality was lower, but so too was mobility into the elite relatively low.

This brings us to a crucial point: Elites in America have recently experienced “countercyclical” dynamics. When most Americans experienced mobility, elites experienced stagnation; while most Americans have been locked in place, elites have experienced considerable mobility (Khan 2015).¹ The language we use when talking about economics often deploys the imagery of water: rising tides lift all boats, or resources trickle down. Yet this image of economic processes moving over terrain rather seamlessly, such that what happens in one area spills over into the next, may well be inaccurate. The terrain between the rich and the rest is fractured; the economic worlds might be more separate than connected.

We can ask ourselves: What is the experience of the world from 1945 until the 1970s for two groups—average Americans and very, very wealthy Americans? If you were an average American in the immediate postwar period, you would experience some of the lowest levels of inequality our nation has ever seen. As inequality is a national measure, by definition you would share this experience with all Americans. But in other respects you would be rather different from elites. You would enjoy substantial mobility over your lifetime, and be less hindered or advantaged by your parents’ wages than your parents were by theirs. Hard-fought battles over racial and gender oppression also mean that the relative position of nonwhites and women began to advance. There would be variability among your group—with some members, particularly women and nonwhites, advancing more quickly than others, in no small part because they were so relatively disadvantaged that they

had more space within which to be mobile. Still, in general, for the average American, the experience was one of mobility both inter- and intragenerationally. We often read our American experience through this moment: one in which rights were fought over and won, opportunity was relatively available, and inequalities were comparatively low.

But if we were to look within, say, the very rich, we would find something different. Elite wages were comparatively stagnant, and so too was the likelihood of new men joining the elite; dynastic wealth was the most dominant in this moment in the twentieth century. This means that movement in (and out of) the elite was comparatively rare.

The recent story of the last three decades is very different, yet the general point remains the same. The average American has experienced comparative wage stagnation and relatively stagnant mobility. However, if we were to look in the elite, we would observe something quite different. The likelihood of being in the top .01 percent is not so strongly related to having parents that were within that group as it was in the 1960s. There are more “new rich” today than in the immediate past. And the wage gains that we observe within the top .01 percent are so dramatic as to be startling to most scholars and social commentators.

My argument here is not that economic resources are finite or zero-sum, and that when one group does well other groups are thus necessarily constrained (which is to say that there are no rising tides). These trends extend over too short a time period, and are too conditional on how you define the beginnings and ends of time periods, to make such a grand argument. But there is an important implication nonetheless: there is no “economy” in the sense of a unified experience of market conditions. Instead, just as there are multiple different economies in different geographic spaces within national markets, or differences across subsectors of the economy (say, finance versus manufacturing), so too are there economies across different parts of the income distribution. This is certainly true across race and gender, where intersectional experiences create different dynamics. Yet we have been less attentive to how it is also true between class factions.

My own realization of such dynamics does not only emerge from my having read the economics literature on this subject. The story I have just laid out may be supported by the economics literature, but it is not one that is told by economists. Instead, we see it most clearly in comparing the non-elite and elite schooling. We can observe these countercyclical processes not simply on the economic level for individuals, but on the institutional level as well.

In her book *Unequal City*, Carla Shedd outlines how the practices of pris-

ons have made their way into poor schools (2015). She shows students walking through metal detectors, being stopped and frisked in hallways, and subject to constant surveillance; behavioral issues are more often addressed by the police than by school administrators. The rise of what we might think of as the “incarceral school” generates distrust of authority and feelings of powerlessness. Shedd’s work is consistent with many school ethnographies of middle-class and poor schools, which focus on the imposition of rules upon students, the challenges of managing authority, and systems of punishment. Further, such work notes the recent rise of such practices. Willis’ classic *Learning to Labour* remains a powerful account of the relationship between class, culture, and schooling (1977). Yet if we compare it to Shedd’s work, or to that of Bowen Paulle (2013), who explored high-poverty schools in New York and Amsterdam, we see a fairly radical transformation. Whereas Willis’s “lads” were met with school disapproval at their acts of resistance, Shedd’s young men and women are met by police officers and imprisoned.

We might compare this with the work of other scholars, such as my own work on elite schooling (2011), or that of Ruben Gaztambide-Fernandez (2009) on similar institutions. We both explored the lives of elite boarding schools at the same time Shedd was doing her research. Yet in our work there is almost no discussion of punishment. Instead of the imposition of surveillance, we note the rise of autonomy. We outline the work that schools do to encourage thinking outside rules to challenge received wisdom. Rather than distrust of institutions, students are taught to believe in the fundamental justness of the system; rather than the feeling of powerlessness, elite students are taught to feel the privilege of their own empowerment.

Further, while national school curricula move toward standardization and regulation, elite schools tout unique, tailored programming. While most schools are cutting back on arts education and funding for other kinds of programs, elite schools are building expertise in such areas to make their students distinct from the growing crowd of applications.

Just as the economic conditions are countercyclical, so too are the structure of elite schools. Whereas earlier scholarship on elite schools found that such institutions were “total”—regulating nearly every aspect of the lives of their members (Cookson and Persell 1985), recent work has suggested a considerable move away from such regulation. Whereas elite curricula were once highly structured around a set of texts and subjects that mirrored a narrowly defined elite culture and knowledge, today topics have proliferated to mirror a kind of omnivorous elite. Whereas most schools have remained stubbornly segregated, elite schools have become massively more diverse,

racially. While most schools see their federal and state support dwindling, elite schools continue to benefit disproportionately from federal research dollars, growing endowments, tax exemptions for both donations and purchases, and the benefits of higher and higher tuition.

When we think of the economy or schooling as a singular system, we don't see such dynamics. It's only in parsing out economic elites and elite schools as a distinct ecosystem that we begin to see new processes and unique objects. In the final section of this chapter, I push this observation further. I show how studies of elite schooling help magnify relational patterns that are less visible in more mundane contexts.

The Political and Economic Impact of Elite Schooling

Americans are comparatively segregated in terms of where we live, not just racially but also economically. While we often think of such segregation relative to the dynamics of concentrated poverty and disadvantage (Edin and Shaefer 2015; Sampson et al. 1999; Sharkey 2013), we must also think about the experiences of concentrated advantage and wealth.

While the global character of the elite mobility is likely massively overestimated (Young et al. 2016), understanding the global worldview of elites provides us with a richer picture of how the concentration of advantage yields unique experiences and perspectives. Perhaps the best look at these processes comes from the journalist Chrystia Freeland (2012), whose access to elites provides the reader an acute view of a world that is often more imagined than observed. Traveling with elites from penthouses to boardrooms to the streets of Davos, Switzerland, Freeland combines ethnographic skill with journalistic prose in conveying how it is that they understand and live in the world. In her work, Freeland argues that the plutocratic elite think of neighborhoods not relative to physical proximity or national bounds; they think of them globally, in terms of those they feel closest to in spirit rather than geography. In this sense, the Upper East Side may be closer to Tokyo's Ginza district than it is Spanish Harlem. While elites may be proximally close to nonelites, their tendency to occupy different worlds means that encounters between the two groups are few and relatively unsustained. This is likely a cognitive perspective more than a lived experience, yet its consequences are significant.

If we are to follow our earlier story, one of the things we see is a radical change in the social conditions of the elite.² One of those aspects is their "opening"—by which I mean that there is more mobility into the group

than before. But such an experience has been mirrored by other declines in what we might think of as social closure. We cannot underestimate these radical changes to society; access to opportunities from which the majority of the population (women, minorities) were once excluded is a major social transformation. This opening has not meant anything close to equality. But the impact of these changes on the ways in which people understand their worlds is profound.

Elite institutions are those that seem to have most forcefully embraced the language of openness. In the United States, the Ivy League has demonstrated a tremendous commitment to affirmative action; if you visit the website of any major corporation, all will have statements of their “diversity initiatives.” Scholars like Ellen Berrey (2015) and Lauren Rivera (2015) have given us strong empirical evidence to be highly skeptical of such rhetoric. Yet, even in light of the potentially hollow character of the diversity within schools and organizations, the rhetoric around such a feature is deeply expressed.

Still, elites have been relatively blind to problems of increased inequality (Jencks 2002), and hostile to programs that might help alleviate it (Page et al. 2013). It has been the growth of wages of those at the top that has resulted in the rise of inequality in most of the Western world (Atkinson and Piketty 2007, 2010). The democratic embrace among the elite has been accompanied by a similar rise in their fortunes. Again, this is a rather curious phenomenon. How can it be that the rich have enjoyed increasing fortunes, while dismantling some of the most profound limits (gender, racial) on access to their most important institutions: schools?

The answer is twofold. First, there is no single elite. Instead, there are elites. Those with control over elite educational institutions are many—from wealthy trustees to administrators who often, earlier in their careers, were professors, faculty, or students themselves. Over the last fifty years, educational elites, particularly intellectuals, have insisted that their institutions participate in a more diverse social project. This, perhaps more than other dynamics, has driven the embrace of diversity (though we should not forget that corporations have similar, if weaker, commitments).

The second explanation lies within the broader cultural transformation that has undergirded this first explanation. There are many explanations to the rise of inequality, from the declines in unionization (Western and Rosenfeld 2011) and the financialization of the economy (Tomaskovic-Devey and Lin 2011) to the increased capacity for managers to leapfrog one another (DiPrete et al. 2010; but see also Gabaix and Landier 2009). Under-

played in this literature, and at the core of my interest, is the cultural rhetoric that has facilitated these processes. I outline such rhetoric through an account of my own work. The core of this rhetoric is the idea of the rise of the talented, deserving, meritorious individual. And the increasing mobility among the elite, as well as the diversity of elite institutions, supports such a cultural framework. Looking, then, at studies of elite schools, we can see the emergence of new cultural frameworks for elites' self-understandings. And this helps reveal more general relational patterns within society.

In my earlier work (Khan 2011), I argued that the culturally important shift in the elite identity has been from being a "class" to being a collection of individuals—the best and the brightest (see also Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009). Rather than identifying themselves as a group constituted through institutions and organizations (families, schools, clubs, a shared cultural and historical legacy, etc.), today's elites consider themselves as having become elite because of their individual talents. What "groups" elites is the fact that they have worked hard and gotten ahead; they are the cream that has risen to the top. In embracing this individual work rather than class narrative, elites draw upon and support the language of meritocracy (Lemann 2000; Young 1958). Yet this language of meritocracy has its own history; the concept of merit is socially defined, not objectively constituted.

The rise of diversity and equal opportunity has played a role in the changing conceptualizations of merit. During the collectivist movements of the 1960s, groups gathered together—blacks, women, gays, and immigrants—to argue that the properties that grouped them and were then used to explain or justify their disadvantage should not matter. It should be human capital that matters; we should all have opportunities based on our capacities, not on characteristics ascribed to us. Yet the continued embrace of this framework may well be strongest outside these groups, within institutions initially designed to keep such "diverse" people out. I developed this idea in the context of an ethnography of St. Paul's School—one of the most elite boarding schools in the nation, and my alma mater.

My research aim was to better understand a place that vigorously embraces the importance of being an "open" or representative institution in a context where inequality was increasing, and, as Espenshade and Radford have shown, where schools refused to take into account the disadvantages of poverty when making their admission decisions (2009). I found students at St. Paul's School to be very forthcoming and almost universally consistent about how they made sense of their success: through their own toil. Framing achievements as the result of hard work—whether consciously or not—

works against a common suspicion of entitlement and the nagging feeling that the rich succeed just because of who they are. St. Paul's students sought to replace the entitlement frame with one based on merit. Ascension was a goal that came through work, not a deserved acquisition that came from time spent at an institution, or by inheritance.

The students are not completely naive in building such a narrative. They know that not everyone who works hard gets ahead. They see many at their school who suffer this fate. These people are the staff—the men and women who make the school function day in and day out. Not surprisingly, students speak fondly of staff members. They are the caretakers and cheerleaders for students while parents are away. Gathering all of the interview responses together, we learn that the students explain the stagnation of the staff by suggesting that they are unlucky, have different priorities, or—most commonly—are casualties of an unjust era that we have since overcome. Throughout these accounts, students maintain a belief in meritocracy.

Students also know that being talented and hardworking may not make them the best at everything. In fact, they consistently bring up other students who are better than they are. Students told stories about a violinist on campus who might soon have a premiere at Carnegie Hall, a mathematician who would win one of the greatest prizes in that discipline (the Fields Medal), an artist who would sell paintings for millions, and a squash player who would soon take home a gold medal in the junior Olympics. There is, no doubt, a certain teenage mentality to this; students assume that the school is the whole world. But it was not simply that the students thought of themselves as having a potential, and that the world was theirs to contribute to; they also recognized that certain people had extraordinary talents and skills that far exceeded their own. At St. Paul's School, the students believed they were surrounded by such talents; as a result, that which was extraordinary became a part of their ordinary reality. Their school was a collection of some of the most talented and hardworking kids in the world.

This new world held promise and required more work; students simultaneously expressed a commitment to social justice and a narrative of just how far the world had come. The lessons from their accounts were of past injustices, present opportunities, and the necessity of work, discipline, and talent to make it. This did not mean the world was an equal place; some people were better than others, and their talents were important to recognize. The view was that inequalities were increasingly acquired by the action of individuals and decreasingly ascribed by class, race, or gender. There certainly still were privileges and unjust disadvantages. But these were rapidly

being stamped out, and were less prevalent than they had been a generation earlier.

The elite have vigorously adopted the stance of an open meritorious society. They look more diverse, including many of those they formerly excluded. And while they know that their individual traits, capacities, skills, talents and qualities are cultivated, they suggest that this cultivation is done through hard work, and that access is granted through capacity rather than birthright.

Elite culture today, then, is one of “individual self-cultivation.” This cultural framework is not simply a delusional presentation of self or a hegemonic attempt to blind the masses, but instead has an experiential basis. Elites can maintain such a rhetoric in the face of overwhelming evidence against its general reality partly because they live in segregated spaces of concentrated advantage. Such spaces are radically different from those that most Americans occupy.

Sending their children off to colleges that are “majority minority,” it’s hard for elite parents to imagine a world of exclusion. Like most of us, elites suffer from availability bias—making erroneous judgments on the basis of biased information. Young people get into elite schools by “outcompeting” their local, often demographically very similar peers. They then enter elite institutions that look radically different from their homogeneous home environments. It may be inaccurate for them to think that they’re part of a great project toward the building of equality, but it is not terribly naive, given their experience.

The narrative of openness and talent may help elites explain themselves to themselves, but as we have seen from our discussion of overall patterns of mobility and equality, it obscures the broader American experience. The result might not be pernicious, but the consequences are important. Society has recessed in the minds of the elite; if anything, it is a producer of social problems. What society did was create the biases of old institutions based in categorization—racism, sexism, and exclusion. The resulting view is one in which society must be as benign as possible, sitting in the background as we play out our lives in a flat world. And the result of such a stance is a new efficiency: the market.

Such a view suggests that social problems are the result of the times in which we think in terms of collectivities. With such barriers removed, market equality can take over. We live the results of this triumph today, and I would argue that it has been a world with less equality and mobility for the average American and a more empowered elite.

Conclusion

Meritocracy is a social arrangement like any other: it is a loose set of rules that can be adapted in order to obscure advantages, all while justifying them on the basis of shared values. Markets allow elites to limit investments in all by undermining public goods and shared, socialized resource allocations. This allows them to increase their own advantage by deploying their economic spoils in markets; they receive returns to these investments, while those without resources to invest are left behind. As Miles Corak has shown in his work (2013), those societies with higher returns to education tend to be less mobile. This is an associational finding, but it might be explained by high-inequality regimes wherein those with resource surpluses purchase additional education, thereby solidifying advantages for their offspring.

In suggesting that it is their work and not their wealth, and that it is their talents and not their lineage, elites do two things. First, they draw on a generally available cultural architecture to explain their own experiences, and overgeneralize from this. Elite schools have played a critical role in this cultural production. To look at the process of such schooling, from preparation and application, to being in residence and its consequences, we see the constant reification of individual self-cultivation. Such a cultural architecture is, of course, a rhetoric and not an explanation. Most elites have not achieved from nothing; only a few have done so, whereas most have achieved an enormous amount from the position of already considerable advantage. Yet the cultural architecture supported by elite schooling helps obscure this fact. Second, elites have applied the cultural view of *their* world to *the* world. From their biased available information, they have generalized to institutions and experiences not like their own.

As scholars, we might learn from this. As this chapter has argued, it may well be better to treat exceptional cases as exceptional, and to point to the advantages of such cases rather than couch them in a veneer of representativeness. Elite schools in particular are nonrepresentative; this does not make them unimportant. Indeed, the very fact that they do not represent a general trend may be what makes them the most interesting and important schools to understand.

The aim of this chapter was to show the reader what we can learn from looking at the exceptional case of elite schooling. Drawing upon the work of Ivan Ermakoff, it outlined three ways in which we can take advantage of the exception. First, exceptional cases reveal the limits of our standard classifications. Second, they outline new classes of objects. And third, they magnify relational patterns that are less visible in more mundane contexts.

The literature on elite schooling can and should remain a series of case studies of the exceptional. Through them we can better see the cultural dynamics and logics underlying a group that is driving our current patterns of inequality. I have interwoven the story of elite schools with the economics literature to help demonstrate the broad implications of such localized observations. Such implications do not mean that they apply to all classes of objects. Indeed, part of the point has been to show how different elite schools are from the rest, and how even though these are a tiny range of phenomena, they matter for revealing things far beyond what they narrowly represent.

During a conversation about generalizability of cases, a colleague once remarked to me, "If I showed you a pig that could converse in English, would you need to see a second one before you thought it was important?" Elite schools are hardly as remarkable as talking pigs. But their rarity may well be what makes them important. They are a class of objects that are knowable to scholars. And such knowledge tells us much about our social world that we are unable to see clearly in most other contexts.

Notes

1. The next few paragraphs borrow slightly from this paper.
2. In the following paragraphs I draw upon earlier published works, most deeply Khan 2011, 2012b; and Khan and Jerolmack 2013.

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