

# Introduction: Democratic Inequality

The direction in which education starts a man will determine  
his future in life.

—Plato

My story is part of the larger American story.

—Barack Obama

I am surrounded by black and Latino boys.

As I looked around the common room of my new dorm this was all I could think about. It was September 1993, and I was a rather young fourteen-year-old leaving home for the first time. My parents, who had helped me unpack my room and were about to say good-bye, noticed as well. We didn't say anything to one another. But the surprise on their faces was mirrored on my own. This was not what I expected, enrolling at a place like St. Paul's School. I thought I would be unlike everyone else. I thought my name and just-darker-than-olive skin would make me the most extreme outlier among the students. But though my parents grew up in small rural villages in Pakistan and Ireland and my father was not white, they had become wealthy. My father was a successful surgeon; my mother was a nurse. I had been at private school since seventh grade, and being partly from the Indian subcontinent hardly afforded one oppressed minority status. For the other boys around me, those from poor neighborhoods in America's urban centers, St. Paul's was a much more jarring experience.

I quickly realized that St. Paul's was far from racially diverse. That sea of dark skin only existed because we all lived in the same place: the minority student dorm. There was one for girls and one for boys. The other eighteen houses on campus were overwhelmingly filled with those whom you would expect to be at a school that educates families like the Rockefellers and Vanderbilts. This sequestering was not an intentionally racist practice

of the school. In fact the school was very self-conscious about it and a few years prior tried to distribute students of color across all houses on campus. But the non-white students complained. Though their neighborhoods of Harlem and the Upper East Side might border each other, a fairly large chasm separated the non-elite and elite students. They had difficulty living with one another. Within a year the minority student dorm returned. Non-white students were sequestered in their own space, just like most of them were in their ethnic neighborhoods back home.

I grew up in a variety of neighborhoods, but like most Americans, none of them was particularly diverse.<sup>1</sup> My parents' lives had not been much different until they met one another. In no small part this was because they grew up in rural towns in poor nations. My father's village consisted of subsistence farmers; things like electricity and plumbing arrived during my own childhood visits. My mother grew up on a small farm on the weather-beaten west coast of Ireland. At the time she was born, her family pumped their own water, had no electricity, and cooked on an open hearth. Modern comforts arrived during her childhood.

My parents' story is a familiar one. Their ambitions drove them to the promise of America. Early in life I lived in New York's rural Allegany County. But seeking to make the most of American opportunities, my parents moved to the suburbs of Boston where the schools were better and the chances for me and my brother were greater. There was more to this move than just new schools. The Pontiac that was standard in the driveways of rural America was replaced by a European luxury car. The trips to visit family in Ireland and Pakistan were augmented by tours of Europe, South America, and Asia. My parents did what many immigrants do: they played cultural catch-up. I spent my Saturdays attending the New England Conservatory of Music. Public school education was abandoned for private academies. There was no more time for my religious education. We became cosmopolitan.

For all these changes, my father never lost some of the cultural marks of a rural Pakistani villager, and many in Boston did not let him forget his roots. He was happiest working with his hands, whether doing surgery or toiling in the earth. As he spent his free time sculpting the garden of our home into a place that would soon be put on garden tours, he was mistaken for a hired hand by visitors. During a visit to our home, one of my father's colleagues exclaimed, "Where are your books!?" Never in

my life have I seen my father read a novel; his favorite music is still from the Indian movies of his childhood or the songs that greeted him when he arrived in Detroit in the early 1970s. He would not know Bach from Schoenberg. My father's reply to this cultural scolding by a New England blue blood was prescient: "Someday, my kids can have all the books they want." My parents were justifiably proud of what they had achieved, and the cultural tastes they would never develop they would instill in their children. We ate at fine restaurants. At one of these restaurants I saw my father, raised a Muslim, take his first sip of wine. The snobbery that always stung me—waiters handing me or my brother a wine list instead of my parents, who were clearly paying for the meal—seemed not to bother them. Compared to their achievements, these slights were trivial.

Attending an elite high school was the ultimate mark of success in our bourgeois suburban world, and I was determined to do so. My parents were not enthusiastic about my leaving home, but they knew the advantages of boarding school. Perhaps thinking of their own lives, they respected my desire to head out on my own. St. Paul's was on my tour of New England boarding schools. I didn't know anything about the place, but during my visit I was seduced. The school is a truly stunning physical place—one of the most beautiful campuses in the world. Luckily, I was accepted.

I was unprepared for my new life. The shock of moving from poor rural New York to rich suburban Boston was repeated during my first days at St. Paul's. This school had long been home to the social elite of the nation. Here were members of a national upper class that went well beyond the professional circles of my suburban home. Children with multiple homes who chartered planes for weekend international trips, came from family dynasties, and inherited unimaginable advantages met me on the school's brick paths. My parents' newfound wealth was miniscule compared to many at the school. And in my first days, all the European tours, violin lessons, and private schooling could not buy me a place among many of my classmates. I was not comfortable around this new group of people. I instead found a home by recessing into my dorm, away from the entitlements of most of my classmates.

For my entire time at St. Paul's I lived in the same minority student dorm. But as I became more at ease at the school, as I began to understand the place and my classmates, I also began to find ways to fit in. Upon graduating I was elected by my classmates to represent them on the

board of managers of the alumni. While this respect of my peers made me proud, I was not sad to be moving on. I had purposefully not applied to the Ivy League schools that my classmates would be attending. St. Paul's was a world I had learned to fit into but one that I was not particularly happy in.

The source of my discontent was my increasing awareness of inequality. I kept returning to my first days: both my surprise at my minority student dorm and my discomfort among my elite classmates. The experience remained an aggravating curiosity. Why was elite schooling like a birthright for some Americans and a herculean achievement for others? Why did students from certain backgrounds seem to have such an easy time feeling comfortable and doing well at the school while others seemed to relentlessly struggle? And, most important, while students were repeatedly told that we were among the best of the best,<sup>2</sup> why was it that so many of the best came from among the rich? These were all questions about inequality, and they drove me away from the world of St. Paul's. But learning more about inequality also brought me back.

### Democratic Inequality, Elite Education, and the Rise of the Meritocracy

No society will ever be equal. Questions about inequality are not “Is there inequality?” but instead “How much inequality is there, and what is its character?” Inequality is more tolerable if its character is perceived as “fair.” Systematic, durable inequalities<sup>3</sup>—those where advantages and disadvantages are transferred from generation to generation—are largely unacceptable to our contemporary sensibility. We are unhappy if our poor always remain poor or our rich seem to have a stranglehold on wealth. We are similarly uncomfortable with the notion that ascribed characteristics like race help determine our life chances. Levels of inequality are slightly more contentious. Some of us do not mind large gaps between rich and poor if the poor receive a livable income and the rich are given the capacity to innovate to create more wealth. Others feel that larger and larger gaps generate social problems. The evidence seems to show that inequality is bad for societies.<sup>4</sup> Following these data, I am among those who believe that too much inequality is both immoral and inefficient.

One of the curiosities in recent years is how our social institutions have opened to those they previously excluded, yet at the same time inequality has increased. We live in a world of democratic inequality, by which I mean that our nation embraces the democratic principle of openness and access, yet as that embrace has increased so too have our levels of inequality. We often think of openness and equality as going hand in hand. And yet if we look at our experiences over the last fifty years we can see that that is simply not the case. This is most notable in elite colleges, where student bodies are increasingly racially diverse but simultaneously richer.

In 1951 blacks made up approximately 0.8 percent of the students at elite colleges.<sup>5</sup> Today blacks make up about 8 percent of Ivy League students; the Columbia class of 2014 is 13 percent black—representative of the black population in our nation as a whole. A similar change could be shown for other races, and women today are outperforming men, creating a gender gap in college attendance in favor of women.<sup>6</sup> Without question our elite educational institutions have become far more open racially and to women. This is a tremendous transformation, nothing short of a revolution. And it has happened not only in our schools but also in our political and economic life.

Yet at the same time the overall level of inequality has increased dramatically. When we think of inequality we often think of poverty. And when social scientists study inequality they tend to focus on the conditions of disadvantage. There are good reasons for this—understanding the lives of the poor should help us alleviate some of the difficulties of poverty. But if we want to understand the recent increases in American inequality we must know more about the wealthy, as well as the institutions that are important for their production and maintenance. This becomes clear if we look at what has happened to the incomes of American households over the last forty years. From 1967 to 2008 average American households saw their earnings increase about 25 percent. This is respectable but hardly laudatory. But as we move up the income ladder, we see something quite dramatic. The incomes of the richest 5 percent of households increased 68 percent. And the higher we go, the greater the increase in income. The top 1 percent of American households saw their incomes increase by 323 percent, and the richest 0.1 percent of Americans received a staggering 492 percent increase in earnings.<sup>7</sup> Why has inequality increased over the past forty years? Mostly because of the exploding incomes of the rich.

These dual transformations of increasing openness and inequality run against many of our intuitions about how social processes work. How is it that some of our most elite and august institutions—those that are central pathways to reaching the highest levels of economic success—have transformed into being more open to those they previously excluded, yet the overall levels of inequality in our nation have increased so dramatically? How is it that our democratic ideal of greater openness has transferred into a much better life for the privileged few but stagnation for most of our nation?

Part of the explanation emerges once we look at class. The “openness” I have highlighted is racial. But if we add class to the mix, we see something quite different. While elite private colleges send out press release after press release proclaiming how they are helping make college affordable to the average American, the reality of college is that it is a place dominated by the rich. As my colleague Andrew Delbanco has noted,

Ninety percent of Harvard students come from families earning more than the median national income of \$55,000, and Harvard’s dean of admissions . . . defined “middle-income” Harvard families as those earning between \$110,000 and \$200,000. . . . Today’s students are richer on average than their predecessors. Between the mid-1970s and mid-1990s, in a sample of eleven prestigious colleges, the percentage of students from families in the bottom quartile of national family income remained roughly steady—around 10 percent. During the same period the percentage of students from the top quartile rose sharply, from a little more than one third to fully half. . . . And if the sample is broadened to include the top 150 colleges, the percentage of students from the bottom quartile drops to 3 percent.<sup>8</sup>

Harvard’s “middle income” is the richest 5 percent of our nation. <sup>9</sup> This alone should tell us a lot about our elite educational institutions. While they look more open to us, this is in no small part because to us openness means diversity, and diversity means race. But class matters.

Though poor students experience a host of disadvantages—from lower-quality schools to difficult access to out-of-school enrichment programs to the absence of support when they struggle—colleges are largely blind

to such struggles, treating poorer students as if they were the same as rich ones. This is in stark contrast to students who are legacies (whose past family members attended the college), athletes, or members of a minority group. Though students from these three groups are provided special consideration by colleges, increasing their chances of admission, poorer students are afforded no such luxury.<sup>10</sup> They may claim otherwise, but colleges are truly “need blind” in the worst possible way. They are ambivalent to the disadvantages of poverty. The result is a clear class bias in college enrollments. College professors, looking at our classrooms, know this sad truth quite well. Put simply, lots of rich kids go to college. Few poor ones do.<sup>11</sup>

As I discuss inequality I keep returning to education, and elite education in particular. This is no accident. One of the best predictors of your earnings is your level of education; attending an elite educational institution increases your wages even further.<sup>12</sup> Schooling matters for wealth. If the competitive nature of the college application process is any indicator, it’s clear that most Americans know this story quite well. Given that increases in inequality over the past fifty years are in no small part explained by the expansion of wealth, and elite schooling is central to becoming an elite, we need to know more about how elite schools are training those who are driving inequality.

Before casting elite schools as the villains of our story, we must pause. For all my criticism of elite schools as bastions of wealth, we must remember that these are not simply nefarious places, committed to producing the rich. And as far back as 1940, James Bryant Conant, the president of Harvard University, declared it our national duty “to afford all an unfettered start and a fair chance in the race of life.” Conant imagined creating a Jeffersonian ideal of a “natural aristocracy” where the elite would be selected on the basis of talent. At his core Conant was a Tocquevillian, hoping to strike a blow at the heart of the undeserving elite and replace it with what he imagined made America great: equality of conditions.<sup>13</sup> Over the past sixty years elite schools have made attempts to shift away from being bastions of entitled rich boys toward being places for the talented members of all of society. Many accepted black students long before they were compelled to do so by the pressures of the civil rights movement. They similarly transformed into places that do not just “allow” women; they created the conditions in which they could thrive. These schools’ religious foundations

led them to imagine that they were not simply places for the education of the advantaged but places that lead to the betterment of society.

In no small part this leading has meant attempts to create a meritocracy of talent. Things like the SAT—a test seeking to evaluate the “natural aptitude” of students and move away from favoring their wealth and lineage—emerged out of the ideal.<sup>14</sup> The test was imagined and instituted by Henry Chauncey, a descendant of Puritan ministers who arrived in this country in the 1630s. His family were firmly part of the American WASP establishment; they were among the very first students at the Groton School, one of the nation’s premier boarding schools, and Chauncey himself was a graduate of and later a dean at Harvard. Through the SAT Chauncey sought to level the playing field and in the process transform elite schools and thereby the elite. The paradox of open inequality shows how this project has been both a tremendous success and a tremendous failure. Who is at elite schools seems to have shifted. But the elite seem to have a firmer and firmer hold on our nation’s wealth and power.

One reason is that there is nothing innate about “merit.” Though we tend to think of merit as those qualities that are abstract and ahistorical, in fact what counts as meritorious is highly contextual. Many scholars have pointed to the ways in which our definitions of merit change over time, depending on cultural and institutional contexts!<sup>15</sup> The term “meritocracy” was coined by Michael Young. In the 1940s Young had been asked by England’s Labour Party to help institute and evaluate a new educational system meant to allow all young Britons the opportunity acquire the best education, should they be able. Young soon became cynical of the kind of technocratic approach to human character that such an education seemed to promote. Struggling to think of a word to describe this new system, he played off “aristocracy” and “democracy.” Rather than “rule by the best” (aristos) or “rule by the people” (demos), this system would establish “rule by the cleverest people.”<sup>16</sup> Though we often think of the word as something admirable, Young invented it to damn what he saw as the cold scientization of ability and the bureaucratization of talent.

At its core, “meritocracy” is a form of social engineering, aimed at identifying the talents of members of society so that individuals can be selected for appropriate opportunities. In the case of the SAT this means evaluating particular mathematics, reading, writing, and vocabulary skills and using them as indicators of academic ability!<sup>17</sup> This move toward meritocracy has



sought to decollectivize formerly valued attributes and instead individualize new ones that are “innate.” Rather than accept students because they manifest a character that revealed good heritage, this new system would look beyond the trappings of society and reward people’s inherent individual talents. When meritocracy began to make its way into college admissions, then dean of Harvard admissions, Wilbur Bender, worried, “Are there any good ways of identifying and measuring goodness, humanity, character, warmth, enthusiasm, responsibility, vitality, creativity, independence, heterosexuality, etc., etc., or should we care about these anyhow?”<sup>18</sup> As Jerome Karabel has shown, many of these traits were used as proxies for elite status.<sup>19</sup> Bender, the child of Mennonite parents from Goshen, Indiana, was no elite WASP. But he expressed concerns that echoed throughout the world of elite education in the 1950s and 1960s: what might happen to the elements of character that so marked the old American elite? Would the rise of the meritocracy mean the death of the old elite?

With “merit” we seem to have stripped individuals of the old baggage of social ties and status and replaced it with personal attributes—hard work, discipline, native intelligence, and other forms of human capital that can be evaluated separate from the conditions of social life. And the impact of the adoption of this approach has led to rather contradictory outcomes. It has undercut nepotism. It has been used to promote the opening of schools to talented members of society who previously were excluded. But it has also been used to question policies like affirmative action that take into account factors other than performance on select technocratic instruments. It has been used to justify the increased wages of the already wealthy (as their skills are so valuable and irreplaceable). And most important for me, it has obscured how outcomes are not simply a product of individual traits. As I shall argue, this meritocracy of hard work and achievement has naturalized socially constituted distinctions, making differences in outcomes appear a product of who people are rather than a product of the conditions of their making. It is through looking at the rise of the meritocracy that we can better understand the new elite and thereby some of the workings of our contemporary inequality.

In exploring St. Paul’s I will show how the school produces “meritorious” traits of students. We will see how these attributes are developed within elite settings that few have access to. What seems natural is made, but access to that making is strictly limited. Returning to my first days at

St. Paul's, we can see some of these tensions. The school had worked hard to recruit the talented members of minority groups; more were on campus than ever before. And these students did not represent diversity as mere window dressing. Instead St. Paul's hoped to take seriously its elite role within the great American project of equality and liberty. But for all these ambitious ideals, such a project was not a simple one. Admission was incredibly competitive; a condition of being an elite school is exclusion (or at least exclusivity). The acceptance of talented minorities did not guarantee integration. And openness did not always mean equality. The rich students still seemed to dominate the school. Yet structured around the new meritocracy, it seemed these outcomes were a product of different aptitudes and not different conditions. The promise of America was not fulfilled in my days at St. Paul's School.

The question is why. It is not due to a lack of commitment on the part of elite institutions. Nor is it because of the failure of the disadvantaged to desire mobility. In order to make sense of what is going on, this book leaves social statistics behind and explores my return to high school as a teacher and researcher, chronicling a year in the life of St. Paul's School.<sup>20</sup> Upon first imagining this project I was pretty sure I knew what I would find. I would return to the world of my first day at the school. I would enter a campus populated by rich, entitled students and observe a few poor, black, and Latino kids sequestered in their own dorm. I would note the social and cultural advantages of the students who arrived at school already primed to be the next generation of elites. And I would see how advantages were protected and maintained. But the St. Paul's I returned to was a very different place than the one I had graduated from just ten years earlier. My ethnographic examination of St. Paul's School surprised me. Instead of the arrogance of entitlements I discovered at St. Paul's an ease of privilege. This book is a story of a new elite—a group I had to rethink in light of my second time at St. Paul's—and how knowing about this elite reinforces our understanding of inequality within a meritocracy.

### Returning to St. Paul's: Privilege and the New Elite

Before us stood two enormous closed doors. Heavily carved slabs of thick oak with large looping braided wrought-iron handles, it was clear that

opening them would be no easy task. Standing in a hallway outside we could look out through the arched windows upon the immaculate lawns, ponds, buildings, and brick paths of the school that surrounded us. Behind those doors we could hear the muffled sounds of an organ and the murmurs of hundreds. I glanced around at the faces lined up behind me: excited, terrified, curious, tired. Some were nervously chattering, others frozen in place; surrounding me was a group of teenagers in their Sunday best, unsure what lay beyond. Behind those doors was our future. We waited.

As the doors opened a quiet overcame everyone. A deep, steady voice began announcing names. With each name another one of us stepped into a dark silence beyond those doors. Our line shortened; our time grew nearer. Soon I could peer into the building we were about to enter. Standing in the bright outside, I could just make out the contours of a cavernous space, softly lit with chandeliers that hung so far from the ceiling they seemed to float. I saw vague rows of people.

My name was called, and I stepped through the enormous doors. The Chapel was long and narrow. My eyes were slow to adjust. I told myself I shouldn't be nervous. After all, I had been through this before, years earlier. But it was hard to suppress my nerves. Dressed in a black gown with a blue and red hood and newly purchased shoes, my soles clicked too loudly against the cold stones. Some of the new faculty members walking in front of me looked around frantically, like rural tourists walking among skyscrapers for the first time. Others kept their eyes fixed on the distant altar, as though it were a beacon guiding them to the safety of their seat. As I casually and slowly walked between the pews, I spotted faces I recognized and places I had occupied years ago as a student. I was the last new faculty member to enter; after me came a stream of incoming freshmen, sophomores, and juniors. They swarmed in quickly behind me, unable to hide their anxiety, stepping on my heels until I took my seat.

This was our first ceremony at the school, "taking one's place." Through this ritual new members were formally introduced to the school and shown where we belonged among the community. Each new member had a designated seat—one we would occupy almost every morning for the next year. The seating is arranged like bleachers in a football stadium—four rows of wood-carved seats face one another, with the aisle we had just paraded down separating them. I belonged in the highest, back row, where all fac-

ulty members sat. To my right sat returning faculty, arranged in order of seniority; to my left were the new hires. In front of and below me were row after row of our students. As the new students took their place they filled out the very front row, closest to the aisle. Like the faculty, their place was arranged by seniority, with the seniors sitting in the row just below the faculty, and the new freshman in the lowest front row.

Stretched before me were girls and boys who had fought to gain entry to St. Paul's School. The pews were bursting with the weight and the promise of monumental success. The seniors closest to me knew that next year the college they were most likely to attend was Harvard—almost a third of them would be at the Ivy League, and nearly all of them at one of the top colleges in the nation. And college placement was merely the next step in their carefully cultivated lives. Just as this seating ceremony endowed them with a specific place at St. Paul's, so too would graduation from St. Paul's endow them with a place in an even more bountiful world. As they all had doubtlessly been reminded by eager parents, they would be part of an even broader community—a member of a group of graduates who occupied powerful positions throughout the world. The students around me, though fighting sleep and the hormonal haze of adolescence, knew that they were sitting in seats once occupied by the men and women who had led American commerce, government, and culture for the last century and a half. For the boys and girls around me, their own challenge was no less daunting; they were the new elite.

Since 1855 St. Paul's has been one of the primary homes for the adolescent elite of our nation. It is a strange feeling to know that you are partly responsible for shaping the minds and hearts of children who are expected to one day lead the world. Doubly strange because I had once been one of those students, watched over by many of the same faculty members with whom I now shared the back row. Here I was again. Only now my motives were far more complicated. I was here to mold these young men and women, but I was also here to study them.

How is it that a boarding school endows the future success of its members? What do these students have, develop, or learn that advantages them in the years to come? Just a few decades ago these questions might have been easy to answer. Students came from families that already had astounding advantages. For more than a hundred years, America's aris -

ocracy used institutions like St. Paul's to solidify their position as masters of our economy and government, to pass that power on to the next generation. St. Paul's helped transfer the birthright of each new group of students into credentials, relationships, and culture, all of which ensured their future success.

Today, the dominant role of the elite has become less straightforward. Looking at the faces before me I saw boys and girls from every part of the world. St. Paul's could never be mistaken for a public high school. It has an intentional diversity that few communities share or can afford. Sitting next to a poor Hispanic boy from the Bronx—who forty years ago would never have been admitted—is a frighteningly self-possessed girl from one of the richest WASP families in the world. St. Paul's is still a place for the already elite. Parents who visit often do so in a sea of Mercedes and BMWs, with the occasional chauffeured Rolls Royce; on sunny days, the campus seems to shimmer from the well-appointed jewelry that hangs carelessly from necks and wrists and fingers. But it is more. Today the school seeks to be a microcosm of our world. Rich and poor, black and white, boys and girls live in a community together. As they share their adolescent lives in classrooms, on sports fields, at dances, in dorms, and even in bed, they make up a diverse and idealized community. Sitting there in my Chapel seat, I saw before me a showcase of the promise of the diverse twenty-first-century world. And I began to understand the new ways that St. Paul's instills in its members the privileges of belonging to an elite.

In the pages that follow I present a portrait of what I call the “new elite”—a group of advantaged youths who don't quite reflect what we typically imagine when we conjure up a vision of the well-off. They are not all born into rich families. They are not all white. Their families did not arrive on these shores four centuries ago. They are not all from the Northeast. They do not share a prep culture; they don't avoid rap music and instead educate themselves in the “finer” cultural things.

We also don't know much about our elites. Though we eagerly read profiles in *Vanity Fair*, watch the latest exposé on the evening news, or smugly smile through television programs that show the grotesque underbelly of wealth, we lack a clear sense of how they acquire, maintain, and protect their positions. Who are the contemporary American elite? How are they educated? What do they learn about the world, the place of others, and

how to interact with them? And how have they adapted to the changing social environment of the past fifty years? How have they dealt with the demands for openness by those who for much of modern history have been excluded from their rolls?

I will argue that the new elite are not an entitled group of boys who rely on family wealth and slide through trust-funded lives. The new elite feel their heritage is not sufficient to guarantee a seat at the top of the social hierarchy, nor should their lives require the exclusion of others. Instead, in certain fundamental ways they are like the rest of twenty-first-century America: they firmly believe in the importance of the hard work required to achieve their position at a place like St. Paul's and the continued hard work it will take to maintain their advantaged position. Like new immigrants and middle-class Americans, they believe that anyone can achieve what they have, that upward mobility is a perpetual American possibility. And looking around at their many-hued peers, they are provided with experiential, though anecdotal, evidence that they are correct.

Instead of *entitlement*, I have found that St. Paul's increasingly cultivates *privilege*. Whereas elites of the past were entitled—building their worlds around the “right” breeding, connections, and culture—new elites develop privilege: a sense of self and a mode of interaction that advantage them. The old entitled elites constituted a class that worked to construct moats and walls around the resources that advantaged them. The new elite think of themselves as far more individualized, supposing that their position is a product of what they have done. They deemphasize refined tastes and “who you know” and instead highlight how you act in and approach the world. This is a very particular approach to being an elite, a fascinating combination of contemporary cultural mores and classic American values. The story that the new elite tell is built on America's deeply held belief that merit and hard work will pay off. And it also harnesses a twenty-first-century global outlook, absorbing and extracting value from anything and everything, always savvy to what's happening at the present moment. Part of the way in which institutions like St. Paul's and the Ivy League tell their story is to look less and less like an exclusive yacht club and more and more like a microcosm of our diverse social world—albeit a microcosm with very particular social rules. This book will take us into the world of St. Paul's School to draw out three lessons of privilege that students learn.

### **Lesson 1: Hierarchies Are Natural and They Can Be Treated Like Ladders, Not Ceilings**

Students learn to emphasize hard work and talent when explaining their good fortune. This framing is reinforced by a commitment to an open society—for only in such a society can these qualities explain one’s success. However, students also learn that the open society does not mean equality—far from it. A persistent lesson is the enduring, natural presence of hierarchy. Within the open society there are winners and losers. But unlike the past where these positions were ascribed through inheritance, today they are achieved. Hierarchies are not barriers that limit but ladders that allow for advancement. Learning to climb requires interacting with those above (and below) you in a very particular way: by creating intimacy without acting like you are an equal. This is a tricky interactive skill, pretending the hierarchy isn’t there but all the while respecting it. Hierarchies are dangerous and unjustifiable when too fixed or present—when society is closed and work and talent don’t matter. And so students learn a kind of interaction and sensibility where hierarchies are enabling rather than constraining—in short, where they are fair.

### **Lesson 2: Experiences Matter**

Students learn this through experience. Many St. Paul’s students are from already privileged backgrounds, and it would not be unreasonable to think that they would have an easier time learning these lessons. Yet adjusting to life at the school is difficult for everyone. The students who act as if they already hold the keys to success are rejected as entitled. In learning their place at the school students rely not on their heritage but instead on *experiences*. There is a shift from the logic of the old elite—who you are—to that of the new elite—what you have done. Privilege is not something you are born with; it is something you learn to develop and cultivate.

### **Lesson 3: Privilege Means Being at Ease, No Matter What the Context**

What students cultivate is a sense of how to carry themselves, and at its core this practice of privilege is ease: feeling comfortable in just about any social situation. In classrooms they are asked to think about both *Beowulf*

and *Jaws*. Outside the classroom they listen to classical music and hip-hop. Rather than mobilizing what we might think of as “elite knowledge” to mark themselves as distinct—epic poetry, fine art and music, classical learning—the new elite learn these and everything else. Embracing the open society, they display a kind of radical egalitarianism in their tastes. Privilege is not an attempt to construct boundaries around knowledge and protect such knowledge as a resource. Instead, students display a kind of omnivorousness. Ironically, exclusivity marks the losers in the hierarchical, open society. From this perspective, inequality is explained not by the practices of the elite but instead by the character of the disadvantaged. Their limited (exclusive) knowledge, tastes, and dispositions mean they have not seized upon the fruits of our newly open world.

This elite ease is also an embodied interactional resource. In looking at seemingly mundane acts of everyday life—from eating meals to dancing and dating—we will see how privilege becomes inscribed upon the bodies of students and how students are able to display their privilege through their interactions. In being embodied, privilege is not seen as a product of differences in opportunities but instead as a skill, talent, capacity—“who you are.” Students from St. Paul’s appear to naturally have what it takes to be successful. This helps hide durable inequality by naturalizing socially produced distinctions.

This book is my attempt to understand the new elite and, through drawing out these lessons of privilege, to make sense of our new inequality. This work often emphasizes the way in which culture—students’ dispositions, interactions, and ways of being in the world—defines elite belonging and thus helps drive inequality. Culture can be thought of as a kind of “capital”—like money it has value and can be put to work to acquire social advantages. In learning about the culture of the new elite I hope to elucidate some of the workings of inequality in a meritocracy.

My return to St. Paul’s was inspiring. I saw how even our most august institutions could rewrite the assumptions of previous generations and attempt to create a more inclusive world. And yet like all good tales, this one has another side. Students from St. Paul’s are undoubtedly privileged. They accrue extraordinary advantages, and the disjuncture between the lives of these students and the lives of other American teenagers—even those living a few miles down the road in Concord, New Hampshire—can



be shocking. The elite adoption of the American Dream, however well-intentioned, happens against a backdrop of increasing social inequality. In embracing an open society and embodying privilege, elites have obscured the persistence of social closure in our world.

Throughout the twentieth century the battles against inequality were battles of access: could women, blacks, and other excluded groups be integrated into the highest institutions and positions in our society? These battles were largely won. Yet the results have not been what we imagined. The promise of the open society was not just more access but more equality. This promise has proven to be a fiction. Twenty-first-century America is increasingly open yet relentlessly unequal. Our next great American project is to find a way out of this paradox.