

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Shamus Rahman Khan, *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, 248 pp. \$US 29.95 hardcover (978-1-4008-3622-2)

Privilege takes us into the world of St. Paul's, an exclusive boarding school, to examine the new American elite. In this well written ethnography, Khan returns to his alma mater as a teacher and researcher and discovers a transformed institution. Gone are the minority student dorms and (overt) expressions of old money and connections. In its place, the school prides itself on its racial diversity, the inclusion of women, and scholarships that allow superb disadvantaged students an education at St. Paul's. Years after graduating, Khan finds himself in a school that eschews notions of "who you are" in favour of "what you've done." Students who rely too heavily on family legacies are sequestered, and reside in a new version of a minority dorm Khan found himself in almost twenty years before. The faculty, staff and students aspire to model a world of diversity, cultural flexibility and hard work.

Although much has changed at St. Paul's, the fundamental mission of the school remains. Students at St. Paul's learn how to embody privilege, much as they have throughout the school's 150 year history. What we learn from Khan is that while the method of doing privilege has changed, the ability of the elite to reproduce themselves has remained remarkably stable. Perhaps more problematic is that the new language of meritocracy (what you do, rather than who you are) allows them to frame their position as the sole result of talent and hard work. Students at St. Paul's learn to explain their good fortunes as a result of these qualities, and by default in contrast to the lack of these traits among the less advantaged.

Do students at St. Paul's work hard? Through his year long tenure at St. Paul's, Khan learns that the most successful students are not necessarily the hardest working. He notes that many women, minority, and scholarship students work harder, seeing St. Paul's as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The cruel irony is that while these students are memorizing Plato, their more successful peers are learning to embody what Khan refers to as the "ease of privilege." Masters of this lesson cultivate a distinct way of carrying themselves. They feel at ease in a variety of social settings, and learn an interactional style that allows them to "cre-

ate intimacy without acting like you are equal.” These students learn to easily move between the esoteric and the common, in Khan’s words from *Beowulf* to *Jaws*. Embodying ease is not about memorization or developing a deep understanding since it is arguably impossible for anyone to be an expert on all subjects. Rather, it is about having just enough knowledge about a variety of topics and, more importantly, having the confidence to engage others about these topics.

The ease of privilege is consequential because it prepares many St. Paul’s students for positions of power. While doers know facts and fret over technical details, leaders motivate, interact, and traverse a variety of settings and fields of knowledge. These leadership skills are the very lessons they learn at St. Paul’s. And yet, through the process of socialization at elite institutions such as St. Paul’s, they also come to believe that their position is the result of their superior intellect, talent, and hard work.

While the empirical meat of *Privilege* is from the United States, Canadian scholars of inequality and education will find this book useful. The ethnographic material is worth reading for its empirical contribution alone; but more importantly it also illustrates how the relative steepness of the US postsecondary system contributes to enduring social inequalities. In the United States, the vast hierarchy of postsecondary institutions creates a second, and some argue impenetrable, layer of social mobility. Not only do students need to get into a postsecondary institution, they have to get into the “right” postsecondary institution. Institutions vary in institutional prestige, and this prestige ranking maps onto different occupational trajectories and economic futures. Institutions such as St. Paul’s are wildly successful at placing their students into the schools that sit at the top of this institutional hierarchy. As Khan writes, “the college that students from St. Paul’s are *most likely* to attend is Harvard, followed by Brown, the University of Pennsylvania, Dartmouth, Yale, Cornell, Princeton and Stanford” (p. 37). The acceptance rate of St. Paul’s students to these esteemed institutions is three times the national average. This is not simply a matter of ability. St. Paul’s spends an average of \$80,000 per year, per pupil, and has the luxury of offering hundreds of clubs and courses, and hiring a small army of guidance counselors, many of whom have connections to top postsecondary institutions.

The idea was recently posed, and quickly dismissed, that we create a similar two-tier system. Canada’s self-appointed “big five” universities unsuccessfully lobbied for a clear division of labour between research institutions and teaching institutions. The former would arguably confer higher status, and enjoy the spoils of enhanced funding capabilities through research grants, endowments, and other private enterprises. If this initiative had been successful, *Privilege* could have foreshadowed

the restructuring of some dimensions of social inequality in Canada. While there is no doubt that students who attend elite boarding and private schools in Canada enjoy enormous social advantages, the relative institutional flatness of Canada's postsecondary system partially limits their ability to reproduce those advantages through our university system. The destinations of the recent graduating classes of Branksome Hall, the Canadian all-girls school equivalent of St. Paul's, is telling. Harvard, Cambridge, and Princeton were certainly among the institutions listed. But so were Queen's, Western, and the University of Toronto. In fact these three institutions — attended in large numbers by rank and file middle class Canadians — were among the top five choices of their graduates. Perhaps this outcome is not such a bad thing.

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