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## Shamus rahman khan privilege

Shamus Khan provides a fascinating look at an elite school in New Hampshire, where he notes that a different narrative for self-fashioning is emerging among students:One of the ironic consequences of the collectivist movements of the 1960s has been the further triumph of the individual and the death of the collective. Groups gathered together—blacks, women, gays, immigrants—to argue that the properties that grouped them should not matter. It should be our own human capital that matters; we should all have opportunities based on our capacities, not on some characteristics ascribed to us. The elite have largely adopted this stance. They have gone from seeing themselves as a coherent group, a class with particular histories and tastes, to a collection of the most talented and hardest working of our nation. They look more diverse, by which I mean that they now include members they formerly excluded. They have rejected moat and fence building around particular resources and qualities that might identify them as a class and have accepted the fundamentally American story of “work hard, get ahead.” They think in terms of their individual traits, capacities, skills, talents, and qualities. They certainly know that these are all cultivated, but this cultivation is done through hard work, and access is granted through capacity rather than birthright. Recall the three lessons of privilege that I outlined in the introduction: (1) hierarchies are natural and can be used to one’s advantage; (2) experiences matter more than innate or inherited qualities; and (3) the way to signal your elite status to others is through ease and openness in all social contexts. Inequality is ever-present, but elites now view it as fair. Hierarchies are enabling, not constraining. It is the inherent character of the individual that matters, not breeding, or skin color, or anything that smacks of an old-fashioned collectivity. There’s a great deal of information about the school that’s fun to read about, and his reading of the narrative being generated isn’t implausible. It’s particularly hilarious when he points out that while the students fancy themselves as budding scholars capable of contributing to scholarship, their actual effort and ability is mostly buffoonery and bullshit:the pedagogical philosophy of St. Paul’s prides itself on teaching grand ideas and weaving innumerable texts into a big-picture vision of Western culture. The students quickly learn to do the same. The results, however, are mixed—audacity has its price. Making compelling connections takes a deep understanding of the texts involved, as well as their surrounding contexts. The beauty and the absurdity of St. Paul’s is that it cultivates the assumption that students can and should be making these connections, all the time, whether or not they know what they’re talking about....The curriculum is set up to demand that students make connections across disciplinary lines. They are taught philosophy, history, English, art history, sociology, political science, and economics in the same class. Similarly, in math classes teachers talk about how the ideas they are learning are connected (or used) in the work they are doing, or have done, in science. Arts classes, too, are structured in dialogue with the happenings of humanities. If this sounds like an educational system ideally set up for training dilettantes, I don’t think that caricature is far off. The classes I observed abounded in variations on the interaction described above. The conversation of the day wasn’t great for learning Dickens but certainly would make for good cocktail conversation....the school’s emphasis on “habits of mind” ultimately translated into clever but insubstantial ways of relating each text to something else, of talking around ideas rather than engaging with them. They did not know anything concrete about the Enlightenment. They knew how to talk as if they did (and fool me in the process, which perhaps is more important than knowing anything). When I later inquired why I had been asked to teach Spinoza, of all people—a notoriously difficult writer and hardly a “common” philosopher who might be known by a high schooler—I received a smiling, wry, and infuriating answer: “I saw his name once; I always liked that name. That’s how I picked it.” I was fooled because rather than display any competence, August and Lee asked for something innovative. They wanted to combine novels, operas, and paintings with philosophy, talking about ideas of morality not just in the context of theorizing but in the arts and literature. I was carried away by the exciting possibility and, in this excitement, never uncovered that there was little behind this talk.While this is the most interesting part of the book, it also seems to raise more questions than it answers. I have little interest in the self-fashioning of these supposedly elite kids for its own sake. Instead, it now seems like a pressing question about how to square this lack of ability with their eventual successes. He answers this in part when he talks about the way a wealthy school like St. Paul’s spends an enormous amount of money per student and has connections with university admissions offices, like:St. Paul’s has almost one hundred formal organizations and far more informal ones. With only five hundred students, this effectively meant that nearly every student could run one of these groups (particularly by their senior year); similarly, the breadth of the academic offerings gave students options for excelling within the different academic divisions of the school. Through these nearly countless areas the school is structured so that every student can find a space to be one of the best at something....Even the best of high schools cannot convince top colleges that they should accept students who are not at the top of their graduating classes. How, then, do these schools make most of their class in the top 5 percent? There seems to be an impossible math going on here. How is it that the bottom 50 percent of these high school classes are still getting into outstanding colleges? The first thing to note is that the bottom 50 percent of a St. Paul’s class is very strong. The year I taught at St. Paul’s the average SAT scores were 1390/1600. That’s slightly below the average score of the Harvard freshman class (1470). But more important, the seemingly impossible math becomes possible when we realize that there are lots of 5 percents. We typically think of the top of a class as being an academic category. This may be particularly true for most high school students who are ranked. But St. Paul’s refuses to rank its students. And its grading system (high honors, honors, high pass, pass, and fail) does not allow for the construction of a grade point average, as grades are categories, not numbers. These impediments to a single scale upon which students from St. Paul’s are evaluated are telling. The trick is to create as many scales as possible. So while academics are one dimension upon which to compare students, there are many others we could look at. There are sports, arts of many varieties, even community service—a whole host of arenas for success. If you can get almost all of your students above a basic performance bar where they will be attractive to colleges—high enough grades and board scores—and then create lots of places for them to do well, then suddenly you have lots of “best” students.But what happens after they join Harvard en masse? Do their overinflated academic abilities serve them well there too (suggesting it’s a scam all the way down), or are they forced to develop new ones? Or is the “ease” they develop at St. Paul’s somehow key to understanding future success? Or does none of this matter, and it’s just the money that propelled most of them to St. Paul’s that matters? Or is it simply some kind of institutional inertia keeping an essentially arbitrary pipeline flowing? The point here is this: a study of St. Paul’s in isolation from every other institution is simply not very insightful about how elite networks work. Understanding the changing ways students self-fashion is interesting and we can appreciate how such narratives “might” ward off some questions. But that by itself just doesn’t seem like much to me. This is particularly so because Khan doesn’t even explore the nature of the self-fashioning he is so eager to reveal - for example, is this his summary of various attitudes or do students actually subscribe to this new story? Eg: When he talks about the students being cultural omnivores and claims that now “The effect is to blame non-elites for their lack of interest,” do students actually blame non-Paulies for their choices and relative career shortcomings, or is this just his reconstruction of their worldview and its logic? Or (as is suggested earlier in the book) do the students simply not think about outsiders too much? I want to know what students actually think about inequality, how they actually wrestle with it, not just a rational reconstruction!Even if such questions are reasonably cast aside as beyond the scope of a single researcher, even some generalizations made did make me a little skeptical - e.g: how much can really be understood about gender asymmetries by the experience of one non-conforming lesbian and one over-working unpopular girl, contrasted with the single example of a male president of the student body whose coming out was celebrated? Or given contradictory judgements about belonging and clothes, why does he feel so confident about deciding which view is shared broadly and which isn’t? Maybe he does have hard numbers or good reason for his decisions, but since they’re not provided, I came away uncomfortable with the sturdiness of his story. ....more







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