

PREFACE TO THE 2021 EDITION

On September 17, 2011, chants of “We. Are. The 99 percent!” rose up from Zuccotti Park in lower Manhattan, echoing off skyscrapers, rattling Wall Street traders, and soon entering the consciousness of not just the nation, but the world.

Nine months earlier, *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul’s School* first appeared in print. In the pages that follow, I tell the story of the students, teachers, and staff at St. Paul’s, one of the most elite boarding schools in the world. The school has long housed elite boys—and since the early 1970s, girls—serving as kind of a nursery for America’s richest families. In order to write this book I spent a year living and teaching at the school, researching its daily life and its people. I was a twenty-five-year-old PhD student at the time, seeking to launch my career as a sociologist.

But it was not my first time at the school. In 1993, at the age of fourteen, I left the comforts of my parents’ home; moved to Concord, New Hampshire; and enrolled as a student. My parents were professionals, but they were not members of a global economic elite. They had both been born into homes without running water or electricity. Their parents cooked on open hearths, my mom’s in one of the most rural parts of Ireland, and my father’s in Pakistan. My mother became a nurse; my father, a physician. They both immigrated to the United States in the early 1970s to start their careers. Their story is a familiar American tale of striving and mobility. My parents love this country. It is a place they credit with helping them move from poverty to possibility.

But this book is not about them. Instead, it is located more firmly within my own experiences. I am interested in the tension between the idea of a meritocracy—that talented individuals can succeed in an open society—with the reality of reproduction—that children inherit many things from

their parents, and one of those things is often their economic position. *Privilege* is in conversation with the scholarship of sociology and economics about how common mobility is, and the persistence of inequality. My own story is not one of rags to riches but instead the perhaps more common story of “cumulative advantage”: in other words, how my parents’ resources were invested in me, and over the years, how the rewards of that investment accumulated. This allowed me to end up in a professional position like their own, with greater ease than other, less resourced children.

The question at the center of this, my first book, is thus deeply personal. How were my brother and I able to retain the economic position our parents had worked to acquire? The answer, in part, is that we cultivated a series of non-economic traits that our parents did not have. Developing a social and cultural capacity paved the way for our future as professionals.

My parents instilled in me a strong moral commitment to work. They were harsh when I did not deliver on the standards they insisted upon. I still recall my father saying to me, when I brought home a math test on which I had received a 98 percent, “What happened to the other two points?” But they also recognized that drive and aptitude were not enough. We needed to cultivate other skills. My childhood was a parade of experiences my parents never had the opportunity to encounter as children—classical music lessons and concerts, trips to art museums and foreign countries. They made us different from them, in part so that we could succeed.

The central argument of this book is that elite schools are not meritocracies. Instead, they teach young people to hide their advantages from themselves and others. This argument largely rests on a distinction between “privilege” and “entitlement.” Elites who are “entitled” frequently suggest that who they are matters—that society needs to respect and even reward their whiteness, their family, or their masculinity, for example.

But most elites today are different. They suggest that their family advantages are not what matters. Rather, their successes are merited, a result of their hard work and skill. I argue that the privileged elite have the same advantages of birth as the entitled elite, but they think about themselves differently—as highly skilled, hard-working, and talented. The logic of entitlement, among the powerful, is a logic of group-belonging; the logic of privilege is a logic of individualism. What makes privilege pernicious is the way it masks all the benefits some young people are born into. That is part of the reason I locate this book within my own biog-

raphy. I want to uncover what is often hidden—the advantages that make successes possible.

When *Privilege* was first released, it seemed to capture the spirit of a moment. In the months before Occupy Wall Street, as conversations about elites and inequality gained steam, it became part of a broader conversation in our nation about who we in the United States were as a country, and where we were going. The average American, firmly planted in its middle class, evidence showed, was increasingly stuck in place. Families lost homes and livelihoods in a mortgage crisis created by “mortgage-backed securities”—financial instruments created by banks and traders that created huge windfalls for some bankers and financial speculators but also produced massive instability that ultimately led to national economic collapse. Instead of creating programs to directly help the families who were at risk of losing their homes, the government bailed out the banks that had underwritten those loans. The Federal Reserve and US government even utilized a secret lending program—to the tune of nearly 8 trillion dollars—to prop up the balance sheets of those banks.

Main street did not get much help. But Wall Street got everything it needed. More, even, than it asked for. And as a result, elites claimed over 100 percent of the financial recovery after the financial collapse of 2008. The Occupy movement was a welling up of rage over how elites were both responsible for our economic troubles and also the sole economic beneficiaries before *and after* the crisis.

But while the Occupy movement had a clear articulation of what it saw as this injustice in its slogan of the 99 percent versus the 1 percent, for the academic community, it was hard to see or even make sense of what was happening. That’s because academics had largely ignored elites for the better part of three decades. As the shouts of Occupy grew louder, the book you are now reading was a rare text that brought its audience up close and personal into the lives of elites and the institutions that formed them.

Yet *Privilege* did not have particularly auspicious beginnings. Early in graduate school I read an article by Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*. It showed something I felt was profound: that inequality in America was almost exclusively explained by the changing fortunes of elites. When I read their piece, I was startled; that’s because if you were to take a course on inequality—and I had taken several such courses—you would spend most of your time learning about the

poor. What Piketty and Saez suggested, however, was that poor people had very little to do with inequality; instead, inequality was explained by the rise and fall of the fortunes of the rich.

And so I thought, “What if we did more to study the rich?” With the exception of my advisor, Mustafa Emirbayer, few thought this was a good idea. I was told that the Piketty and Saez article was simplistic, not terribly accurate, and might be wrong and that studying an elite boarding school was, in a word, “boring.” Why would you want to study the rich?

Today, it’s hard to imagine this kind of response. But in 2004, very few people were interested in elites, particularly in America. In fact, for the first six years of the project, much of the feedback I received was relatively negative. The premise of the book—that elites were responsible for inequality—probably was not true. And that the study of elites just was not that interesting. My dissertation committee—a group of scholars who evaluates the major research project you do to receive a PhD—expressed concerns at my defense that the project would go nowhere. I might even lose my job because it just was not a valuable scholarly contribution.

I persisted in the project largely because of Emirbayer’s enthusiastic support. The consummate cheerleader, he kept me afloat. The book did not change the world, but the world changed as I was writing the book. Suddenly what seemed boring, perhaps wrong, and even irrelevant, became necessary, interesting, and agenda-setting. I could tell that story by highlighting my own work. Or I could take a more sociological approach. *Privilege* came out at the right time. Had it been published five years earlier, I doubt its impact on the field would be anything near what it has been. I do not think I was so much prescient in undertaking this work, as I was lucky. I also had the advantage of having familiarity with an institution few knew about, and fewer still could get access to study.

To prepare for writing this new, tenth anniversary preface, I read the book again for the first time in about eight years. It’s a curious experience to revisit your own work. Some of the passages I read surprised me. There were ideas there I don’t remember having and arguments I forgot I had ever made. There were small things I wish I could change—for example, how some of the chapters open. There are also much larger things, like paying greater attention to whiteness in my discussion of race (which primarily focuses on the experiences of Black students). But what struck me most was how the book accomplished two goals I had set for myself in writing it.

The first was to demonstrate the usefulness of a sociological approach. The book uses three core ideas of sociology—race, class, and gender—to analyze the elite. And it shows how many of the things we take to be individual outcomes are “socially produced.” This is basic, bread-and-butter sociology. I wrote the book for my fellow scholars, of course. But I had a general reader in mind. Or perhaps the college freshman who might be introduced to the sociological imagination through this book.

The second was to bring you intimately into the lives of elites. I wanted to resist a zoological approach that showed elites to be foreign, perverse, or exotic specimens to be gawked at. Good ethnography (the method this book deploys) aims at understanding the point of view of the people it is researching. That means standing less in judgment and more in a position of empathetic understanding. But it also does not present that point of view as correct, or explanatory of outcomes. Instead, it presents that point of view alongside the writer’s perspective. In my case that meant showing how young elites view the world as a meritocracy. But that they live in a world of privilege.

In the pages that follow, I try to think through a puzzle that began and continues to define my career. It is the dilemma of what I call “democratic inequality.” How is it that our world has opened up so much to those it previously excluded, and yet inequality has increased? If we were to compare today to the 1960s, without question elite schools are more open. Women, minoritized students, LGBTQ+ students, students with financial need were either not allowed or hidden from view. The embrace of this wide range of people is so much more than window dressing. It is a profound transformation. And yet this opening up has not been associated with a more equitable nation. In fact, inequality is almost unimaginably greater today than it was in the 1960s. For so long we have thought that access is what we need to transform our institutions. Open the doors, and equality will follow. *Privilege* is my attempt to understand why that is not the case—to show how overlooking elites was not the only big problem with how we understood inequality. We need to understand why, as our institutions diversified, our inequalities increased. *Privilege*, I hope, is a step toward that understanding.

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Privilege

