

Chapter 1

Introduction

We come from different backgrounds and are born into life situations we cannot choose ourselves. This is true for elites as well as others.

This book explores cultural life in elite arenas – historical elite institutions – and how actors within these make sense of their positions. More specifically it looks critically at how privileges are handled and how these provide advantages to people, how certain symbolic assets become consecrated, and elevated above the rest. In other words, it is a study situated within the sociology of elites. It might be read as a study of inequality, but it is so only to the extent that inequality and equality are concepts central to meaning-making or legitimisation. In Norwegian society, studies of elites and inequality have received a lot of attention because of the allegedly egalitarian culture, and the political aims of social democratic governing politics (Lo & Dankertsen, 2023). Despite widespread support for politics of equality and a self-understanding as an equal society, there are nonetheless elite positions in Norwegian society, and these elites typically reside in specific elite arenas. This study positions its main questions in this crux between elite positions and egalitarian ideals.

This introductory chapter aims at providing the reader with a basic outline of the book and presents and familiarises the reader with the themes and concepts that are central to the research, such as “elite”, “egalitarianism”, and “institutions”. The first section of this chapter provides an introduction to studies of elites and elite culture and discusses the connection between literary criticism and upper secondary education as historical elite institutions. Following this, Chapter two will provide an account of how history, literature, and

the social sciences¹ have described Norwegian culture as egalitarian, providing resources for meaning-making to which this study relates in multiple ways; notably these resources are available to and referred to by the interviewees. A third chapter on theoretical and conceptual approaches is then followed by a fourth chapter on the methodological approach, before the fifth chapter delves into the material and analyses. A conclusion with suggestions for further research closes the book.

1.1 Elites and elite culture in Norway

Elites have been studied in a variety of ways in Norway, for instance through surveys using a position method, or through a Bourdieusian analytical lens and multiple correspondence analyses. Yet, the research has not been sufficiently attentive to cultural aspects and life experiences. Instead, culture has been studied as a tool to maintain a social position, and not as the complex matter it is. First, it must be acknowledged that there is a plethora of ways of studying elites and elite culture as a phenomenon, depending on both theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. To begin untangling the different ways it has been studied, we look at some core concepts. What is elite? And what does consecration entail?

Elites are often defined as people with “control over and access to a resource” (Khan, 2012, p. 362). Elites are assumed to have the power to set the terms through which tastes are assigned moral and social value (Holt, 1997, p. 95). This goes for taste in a variety of cultural products such as literature, music, food, as well as leisure activities and home decoration. In other words, it contains both the narrow and the broad definition of culture. When these values are assigned to different tastes, an effect is that cultural hierarchies are constructed, where the more valuable and less valuable tastes are ranked. Sometimes this is obvious, such as when certain authors get prestigious prizes, or when formal canons are made, such as the Danish government-initiated canon establishment in 2005–06, which resulted in a list of 108 artworks. Most often, however, this notion of a cultural hierarchy is not formalised. The

1 Sociology and social anthropology mostly.

vagueness of cultural hierarchies is a result of the subject of the ranking, namely culture, which has a long history of resisting categorisation and quantification. Booksellers as such are an interesting example since they have to negotiate the sacred literature and the profane economic aspects of books, and thus end up as “reluctant capitalists”, as Miller (2007) writes in her study; they work with literature and sell books at the same time. Publishing houses also have to deal with a similar dilemma on whether to publish highbrow fiction literature or supposed “literature that sells”, and in order to gain recognition as a serious publishing house they need to balance these two. This makes publishing houses internal redistributing organisations where the bestsellers finance the other books. In Norway the “book agreement” between the association of publishers and association of booksellers also ensures that competition is limited, and economic aspects are kept at a distance, given that all books are sold at a fixed price during the first year after publication.²

A long tradition of sociologists has dealt with the question of taste, power, culture, art, and status – all the way from Georg Simmel’s investigation of Rembrandt in 1916 for instance, sociologists have questioned how it is that certain artists and certain works gain status and become objects that function as resources in society. Other artists worthy of similar attention have been Ludwig van Beethoven (DeNora, 1996), Vincent van Gogh (Heinich, 1997), Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (Elias, 1991), Gustave Flaubert (Bourdieu, 2000; Sartre, 1994) and Édouard Manet (Bourdieu, 2017), unsurprisingly all from the European, Western canon. Studies like these typically focus on one of four aspects: (1) a link between the specific aesthetics and the general social condition, (2) social conditions surrounding the artwork, (3) social relations connected to the reception, or (4) the construction of an artistic identity. This means that despite often bearing the name of one artist, these studies analyse either production, creation, or reception, which are the typical spheres of sociology of culture (Childress, 2017). Whether the products or knowledge about these artists or these works is called cultural capital, social resources, or connoisseurship is of a lesser importance in this study, which tries to take cultural hierarchies, even though they are vague, as a point of departure.

2 This in contrast to more common book selling traditions following market initiatives and lowering the price of popular novels.

Schools also exist within cultural hierarchies, meaning that they have different status and are ranked. Faced with the choice of upper secondary education, one can often choose between schools with different specialisations and orientations, such as an economic school, an arts school and a sports school. There are also other aspects of importance to the placing of schools in cultural hierarchies, such as location and how old it is, and what kind of history it has. Together they designate some schools as elevated above the rest; they become elite schools. Elite schools, in turn, have the education of the elite as their goal. Attending elite schools then becomes partaking in consecrating activity.

This project deals with two institutions in Norway, literary criticism and elite schools, and their consecrating roles. In particular, this project deals with elite school students and book reviewers within these institutions. To attend elite schools or be a part of the literary world, actors often need to be recognised as having the right to do so, in the form of mastering the social codes or having the necessary education. During recent decades there has been an ongoing discussion about what counts as cultural capital, given its relational definition. In addition, these questions have been central: is legitimate arts still a consequential social resource, and the questions about which products and how they ought to be consumed. For instance, humanistic studies found legitimate arts as an inconsequential social resource in the U.S. (Huysen, 1986), while sociological studies found a change from snobbish taste patterns to omnivore taste patterns (Peterson & Kern, 1996; Friedman & Reeves, 2020), and from national orientation to international orientation. The “omnivore discussion” and postmodernism overthrew or reshuffled many academic discussions about taste, culture, and power. However, the cultural history of certain works seems firmly grounded. These are the consecrated works that are elevated above the rest, meaning that they are assigned a higher status and are attributed an aura of significant value. They enter the elite. Lizé (2016) defined consecration as characterised by two complementary features: “(a) it concerns a high accumulation of symbolic capital, and (b) it implies a distinction between a select group of cultural creators or artworks that are worthy of admiration and the much larger group that is not”. Želinský (2019, p. 4), however, provided an interesting elaboration of consecration by emphasising the *sacred*, which lies at the etymological root of the term. He provides a telling example to clarify his innovation: “People do not pay the £4 fee (MacDonald

& Erheriene, 2015) to visit Karl Marx's grave because he was recognised as a legitimate participant in nineteenth-century intellectual discourse. They do so because Marx remains a cultural phenomenon that has been sacralised by social movements, individuals, and political regimes". Thus, consecration becomes more than legitimisation. In this study, consecration is defined as the act of making people or artworks more worthy than someone or something else. How are such elevated statuses achieved? How are cultural hierarchies constructed? And is this special in cultures assumed to be egalitarian, such as the Norwegian one?

Another central discussion for cultural capital regards new sources and platforms, and communication of cultural evaluations. Grant Blank (2007) pointed out how expanding sources of information make it necessary for people to increasingly rely on the evaluation of others, through platforms like TripAdvisor, Yelp, IMDb or Goodreads, for instance. Traditional cultural authorities have resided in print media, especially the newspapers, whereas tomorrow's cultural authorities might be both multiple and in a wide range of media. The present has been named "a time where everyone's a critic" and "peak criticism". Does that mean that traditional cultural authorities are on the wane? If so, it might be because criticism seems like "a holdover from forms of cultural authority long abandoned", as Hanrahan (2013, p. 74) suggested. This cultural authority is closely associated with the elite and eliteness, which has to be negotiated in everyday settings: "status boundaries are reproduced simply through expressing one's tastes" (Holt, 1997, p. 102).

This project about historical elite institutions relates these discussions in the overarching concept of consecration; the fact that something is given a status over something else. Individuals, groups, and objects can all be consecrated, and the consecration can also be undertaken by individuals and groups. Often a committee decides who to award a prize to for instance, which in the end might lead to consecration, or which album should be named "album of the year". However, this leads to a narrow understanding of consecration since the process often takes many years, split into different events (Wagner-Pacifici, 2017) and tests. In other words, a prize is one small contribution that may result in consecration. Consecration is a "process by which actors and objects are symbolically elevated to the sacred position within the community and embedded in its foundational narratives" (Želinský, 2019). To be awarded an "album of the year" prize alone is not enough, but neither is success in one's

own lifetime. Here, the interest lies in the actors and objects that become qualitatively different than legitimised ones, and thus distinguished from the competitive nature of regarding culture as capital.

Attending a school becomes a way of consecrating oneself through an institution, which then materialises in diplomas. Sociological accounts often downplay the tests and events of elite schooling, for instance by pointing out the high degree of elite reproduction that occurs through these institutions (Bourdieu, 1996). In other words, what is most important is to attend them and not what you do there. This resonates with studies of general reproduction highlighting the importance of economic inheritance over wages (Hansen & Wiborg, 2019). The claim is that elite schools will provide their students with the necessary resources to achieve and maintain elite status no matter what effectively. The sociological studies can be read as a way of profaning the sacred elite schools, which often work as symbols for something more than themselves, making what is special about them rather mundane and predictable. This echoes the sociological studies of supposed “geniuses”, for example, the artists mentioned, where the idea of a genius is posed as an ideology and a myth instead of the historical fact it allegedly is treated as (DeNora, 1996 for example). In this scholarly tradition, sociology is conceived as a way of pointing out how common-sense understandings often are “mere illusions”. This project aims at something else, which is to try to understand why people believe in genius, or in elite schooling, and how people make sense of these in an everyday setting.

1.2 National consecration

Sociologists disagree profoundly on the power of cultural knowledge in Norwegian society. There are two strands of research that have done extensive work on taste and class; the first in a Bourdieusian vein (Flemmen, 2013; Hansen et al., 2014; Hjellbrekke & Prieur, 2018; Jarness, 2013, 2015, 2017; Ljunggren, 2016, 2017; Prieur & Savage, 2013; Prieur, Rosenlund, & Schøtt-Larsen, 2008, 2015; Rosenlund, 1996, 2017); the second in the vein of French pragmatic “sociology of critique” and inspired by Michèle Lamont’s studies (Sakslind & Skarpenes, 2014; Sakslind, Skarpenes, & Hestholm, 2018; Skarpenes & Hestholm, 2015; Skarpenes & Sakslind, 2010, 2019). The former

sociologists conceive culture as capital that can be exchanged into social success and benefits, while the latter poses that the Norwegian social democracy fosters a democratic culture, where preferences are “played down”, and in turn, makes the exchangeability of cultural capital into power particularly weak. This Norwegian downplaying of difference is coined by the French comparative sociologist Jean-Pascal Daloz as “conspicuous modesty”.

Historically, Norwegian culture is heavily influenced by literature and authors from the national romantic period when the Norwegian nation state was consolidated. It was named a “poetocracy” (Sars, 1913). Notable and important authors from Norwegian history are playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906), and Nobel laureates Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832–1910), Knut Hamsun (1859–1952) and Sigrid Undset (1882–1949), as well as the poet Henrik Wergeland (1808–1845). Literature was the most nationally oriented and politically most important art form, as well as a common cultural expression for national belonging and self-understanding (Slaatta, 2018, p. 54). Today, however, literature is only one of many forms of cultural production and interacts only to a small degree with other technologies than books. Norway has an extensive cultural policy, which provides good conditions for fiction literature, through what I would call “the sacred square of cultural policy”. This consists of: (1) public libraries, (2) the aforementioned “book agreement” between the association of publishers and the association of book sellers, (3) the standard contract between publishers and authors, and (4) the “innkjøpsordningen” [The Purchasing Program] of Norway’s Art Council. “Innkjøpsordningen” is a program where most of Norwegian contemporary fiction is bought by the Art Council and distributed to the libraries all around the country. The standard contract between publishers and authors is supposed to ensure that authors are decently paid, and under equal requirements. In addition, there is a historical predisposition for a reading culture with preference for print media, if we are to believe the claim of Hallin and Macini (2004), about the influence of the Protestant insistence of reading texts in religious practice. Hallin and Macini’s argument is that in Protestant cultures, as the Norwegian one, laymen were required to read the bible and therefore illiteracy decreased, and literacy increased drastically. Today 40 percent of Norwegians read over 10 books a year, and the general reading statistics are strong and stable. In this way, the literary culture in Norway played an important part in consolidating the nation state and is still visible as producing images of the nation through its

high presence in the mandatory schooling system in the subject “Norwegian”. Colloquially, one could say that everybody that has gone through the school system has read the aforementioned authors.³

One of the largest collections of Henrik Wergeland’s writings is assembled at “the old library” at *Schola Osloensis* [Oslo Katedralskole / Oslo Cathedral School], one of Norway’s oldest high schools from 1153, given to them by the author himself as well as collected later. The library is run by an alumni organisation. It contains around 50,000 books; its oldest book is from 1488, making it one of the oldest and largest school collections in Scandinavia. The school is located next to the Cemetery of Our Saviour, where Wergeland is buried, as well as many other important figures in Norwegian history. This, I argue, provides the school with a certain aura. An aura which elevates it from other schools and makes it into a consecrated venue. The pupils at the school regularly use and work in the “new library”, but they have access and can tour the “old library” as well. How do circumstances like these affect the pupils? How aware are they of the history of their school, and how do they talk about it? Does it make them (consider themselves as) elite?

Norway’s oldest school specialising in commercial education from 1875; Oslo Commerce School [Oslo handelsgymnas] is also studied in this book, in addition to *Schola Osloensis*. They are both elite schools within the public system, which is free of charge. They are both located in the city centre of Oslo. However, Oslo Commerce School is closer to symbolically important institutions such as the royal castle, the parliament and the ministry of foreign affairs (as well as the former U. S. Embassy⁴). During the Second World War, the school building was used as a command centre for the occupying German troops, which also built a bunker underneath it, which today is a museum. The history of the school is nonetheless proud, with numerous important alumni, such as ministers of both finance and foreign affairs.

The reason for combining elite schools and literary criticism in this study is that they are both important consecrating venues which highlight the role of cultural knowledge in Norway. By examining them closer we can

3 However, it is worth mentioning that this is a tradition currently undergoing a change, from focus on the canon to more focus on individual choice.

4 It was the U. S. Embassy during the interviews conducted there. The embassy moved to a new location in Oslo in the spring of 2017.

get a better understanding of how hierarchies are negotiated, and maybe how they are constructed.

1.3 Historical elite institutions

The historical sociology occupied with institutions and legitimacy has its founder in Max Weber, and the conceptions of ideal types of legitimate rule: charismatic, traditional and legal-rational. This project is situated in the present, and rather than analysing trajectories or lifecycles, it regards history as a part of our present culture. The question of how change occurs through time has been a founding question for the discipline, as well as how people conceive and relate to it. Rather than aiming at a grand theory, or general explanation, this project digs down into two different, (on the surface quite different) institutions that are a significant part of the civil sphere. The institutions are the Norwegian high school system, exemplified through probably the most atypical schools within it, two elite schools, and literary criticism, exemplified through Norwegian book reviewing. These are approached through interviewing members of these institutions about their undertakings and perspectives on a wide range of issues. In some instances, historical knowledge can be regarded as a sort of social resource, available for those who have grown up in privileged circumstances and are working to reproduce their privileges. Nevertheless, this implies both a too rigid understanding of how changes occur through history and of individual autonomy (Alexander, 1995; Calhoun, 1993; Rancière, 2001). A cultural sociological approach like the one taken here is centred on the meaning-making processes and how meaning is constructed in society, which is irreducible to psychological or material factors, even though these also play a part. The approach is inspired by Alexander and Smith's (2003) "strong program" and their insistence on the importance of analysing meaning in order to understand society. After all, sociology is the study of society *and* its parts, not just its parts (Adorno, 1999). The motivation for this project is therefore not to solve an empirical problem, or to explain a hitherto unexplained social phenomena, it is rather to explore and theoretically describe situations in order to understand them. However, as will be dealt with more thoroughly in Chapter 4, the relationship between

explanations and descriptions are more complicated than indicated here, where the point is to highlight the motivation, not to describe the findings.

The book can be understood as an answer to the question of how historical elite institutions are negotiated in an egalitarian culture. The question could be approached in many different ways but given a quantity of good quantitative research on class, culture and stratification in Norway, a qualitative approach to unpack some of the experiences at the heart of these processes needed exploration. The choice of the cultural/literary sphere and the school is made in a typical Bourdieusian vein, so that it is possible to compare the findings with other research on elite distinction (Daloz, 2013), but mostly because they play an intertwined role in Norwegian culture (as I develop further in Chapter 2). There are two assumptions underlying the research question: 1) that the history of institutions can provide legitimacy, and 2) that the members have to maintain their status through everyday actions. One could assume the presence of anti-intellectualism that is often mobilised in cultural discussions in Norway makes the elite status into a status is hard to legitimise.

Nevertheless, with an abductive approach I have considered the project as explicitly “metaphysically pluralistic”, which is to say that no data, theory, or specific method is considered as having a privileged approach to social reality. Nevertheless, observations and use of categories are considered to always be theory-laden in this perspective, which makes for an interest in social actors’ own descriptions of what elite is, instead of the researcher’s categorisation of some as representatives of an “elite”. This also relates the approach taken here to the French pragmatic sociology of critique (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006; Susen & Turner, 2014; Halvorsen, 2016a). As has been pointed out by several researchers, the interest in moving beyond a critical sociology to a sociology of critique can be seen as having more in common with Bourdieu than not (Dromi & Stabler, 2023; Kindley, 2016).

Following Alexander (2006), I claim that modernity consists of culture structures built around binaries, such as the Durkheimian sacred/profane. Consecration in this perspective means looking at how objects and/or actors become sacred, and regarded as something that transcends our earthly existence. It also becomes necessary to say something about its opposite activity: desecration. Desecration signifies the process of losing status, of becoming profane. In later years, desecration has gained attention when monuments and cultural heritage have been destroyed (Galchinsky, 2018; Zubrzycki, 2016).

This reminds us of the importance of not taking consecration for granted, as providing a stable position. Especially in our times, when people change objects at a rapid pace, the sacrality of objects seems to be very time limited, and this is often especially so for technological ones. So, the questions of how long objects maintain their status as sacred – and how they can lose this status – also become important. The sacrality of something has to be upheld through everyday actions, or else it will lose its status.

The recent years have seen an increase in studies of concentrated wealth on top (Farrell, 2020; Kantola & Kuusela, 2019; Khan, 2011; Kuusela, 2018; Schimpfössl, 2018; Sherman, 2017). Holmqvist's (2017) ethnography from Djursholm, north of Stockholm in Sweden, which he labels as a "leadership community", is also an example of this trend. He explicitly links this to the question of who or what provides consecration, which provides important insights into an elite arena. He writes about Djursholm as a specific place that consecrates its inhabitants, to a large degree because the inhabitants express a self-reinforcing myth about what it means to be an inhabitant in Djursholm. In our examples of education and book reviewing, the consecration is not happening in a specific geographical area, but it is rather the culture surrounding the institutions that provides the elevated status. Holmqvist shows how the place consecrates those living there, but he does not deal with the way in which a place could enact such a function. There is a clear problem of agency in his account, which in this project is dealt with in focusing on the acts where consecration is created. For example, Holmqvist writes a lot about the schooling in the area based on interviews with the parents, and people working at the school in very many different positions, but almost nothing with the students. This makes his account lack the aspect of agency in consecration, namely the aspect of those being consecrated, the ones "levelling up" and those who also have to maintain the high level. It makes his account overstate how consecration functions; in that it gives the impression that everybody is lifted up by this process. We know from different school statistics that this is not the case. There is almost always someone who drops out or fails in all school systems (Skarpenes & Nilsen, 2014).

These are the questions that have guided my research. How does the egalitarian culture of Norway manifest itself in accounts of assumed elites? How are cultural hierarchies legitimised in an egalitarian culture? What does

it mean to be an elite member in an egalitarian culture? How is the elite culture of the institutions made meaningful by actors?

The following chapters will proceed like this: Chapter 2 presents the background for the research questions through the history of Norwegian self-perceptions and self-images, Chapter 3 presents the theoretical and conceptual framework for the project, Chapter 4 turns to the methodological considerations, and presents the research design and empirical material, Chapter 5 provides an introduction to the research at the elite schools and presents findings, whereas Chapter 6 contains an analysis of the critics' description of the future need for criticism, and its role in society. Chapter 7 contains a discussion and conclusion.