

Chapter 3

Elites and meaning

The mantra of interpretive analysis is plurality in theory, unity in meaning.

(Reed, 2011, p. 100)

Having introduced the research project and the background for the research questions, which is the history of Norwegian self-perceptions and self-images, in this chapter I will elaborate on the relevant theoretical challenges and lay out the conceptual framework applied in the book. I use theory as a dialogue about central questions and concerns (Benzecry, Krause, & Reed, 2018, p. 2). Topics, such as elite education and aesthetic judgments, organise academic research into journals, conferences and so on, whereas theories are overarching and may be applied to any topic. However, there are some theories that are topic-specific, that are yet to be applied to subject matters. This chapter deals with the more overarching theories: “Theorising in [this] sense is the performance of reading research in a way that cuts across topics with a view to implications for questions of order, practice, meaning and materiality” (Benzecry, Krause, & Reed, 2018, p. 13). This is a study in cultural sociology, and thus the question of meaning is the most important theoretical question.

First, I will deal with the traditional philosophical distinction between equality of opportunities and equality of outcome that is often drawn, and the question of meritocracy, and show how this is part of the repertoire available to actors making “meaningful constructions of inequality” (Alexander, 2007). The conceptions of equality are part of a repertoire of meaning embedded in cultural history. The dimension of meaning, and how it has a relative autonomy is central to this study. As such, this study stands in the tradition of the classical sociological theories of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, who in

different ways underlined meaning as central for sociology. Weber (1978) by emphasising *verstehen*, that we need to understand social actions in order to explain them, and Durkheim (1995) by looking at how structures of meaning shape action and understanding. The different discussions about inclusion, distribution, and justice that comprise the core of debates on inequality are culturally mediated, and dependent on interpretation. Symbolic boundaries and boundary work, for instance, demarcating who are worthy and who are not, then becomes central to this study (Lamont, 2000). Then, I will discuss the theoretical fruitfulness of a compromise between a “critical sociology” and a “sociology of critique” (Benatouil, 1999; Susen & Turner, 2014), combined with cultural sociology, and lastly, how this study employs the different tools provided by each of the traditions.

3.1 Meaning and inequality

Discussions of equality often derive from the distinction between equality of opportunities and equality of outcome. Equality of opportunity approaches underline the importance of an equal starting point and the opportunity for people to live their lives in accordance with their own needs and desires. Equality of outcome approaches often underline the importance of basic necessities, which everybody needs, and the importance of distributing them equally. There are, of course, central concepts here that are highly debated, such as “basic needs” and “equal starting point”, but it could be helpful to think of it as equality in the beginning and equality in the end of some kind of distribution. Often income is used as an example in this kind of literature: should everyone be given a basic income, or should income be based on work? Critical sociologists also tend to point out the distribution of money through inheritance and discuss the justification for how much one is supposed to get based on into which family one is born. Tax on inheritance is then often favoured through an “equality of opportunities” perspective. Another example often used is that of gender: should one provide an equal playing field regardless of gender, or should one distribute equal resources to everybody?

However, when it comes to opinions and values, this distinction becomes less useful. They are not subject to distribution in the same manner. How do

people value money and fame? How do people value literary quality? Or how do people value gender equality?

In the influential *Spheres of Justice* (1983), Michael Walzer distinguishes between what he calls “simple equality” and “complex equality”. In its essence equality is negative, Walzer claims, it requires constant action, and describes the lack of equal distribution. Where simple equality refers to resources that can easily be distributed across all of society, complex equality refers to aspects that are dependent upon social meaning and interpretation, and therefore hard to distribute. In other words, Walzer is preoccupied with matters that are unquantifiable: love, beauty, the good life, and so on. Complex equality is therefore equality within a certain sphere, with specific norms, values, and rules that operate in order to recognise common claims to equality. The distinction between simple and complex equality has been criticised, for instance by Robert Nozick, who has his own libertarian theory of equality, and who together with John Rawls might be perceived as the most influential analytical philosopher in the social sciences regarding these issues. Walzer develops a normative criticism for thinking about justice materialistically and considering abstract equality. Alexander (2007, p. 24) explicitly points to a “deep parallel” between *Spheres of Justice* and the “strong program” in cultural sociology (Alexander, 2003). The latter makes a hard line between what they call “weak programs” and their own approach. Crudely put, they use the metaphor of variables to explain:

Weak programs conceptualize meaning as a dependent variable, responding to the objective nature of “real” causes, to social structural forces of a material type. This sociology of culture approach makes the interpretive reconstruction of meaning marginal to sociology. *Cultural* sociology, by contrast, gives to meaning reconstruction central pride of place. Culture has relative autonomy from the social structural forces that surround it. (Alexander, 2007, p. 24)

Thus, cultural sociology treats culture as an independent variable, as an approach that defines the entire undertaking of sociology (Larsen, 2013). The “strong program” advocates for structural hermeneutics, where reconstruction of meanings central to social life is the primary undertaking (Alexander & Smith, 2003; Reed & Alexander, 2006), in order to understand structure and social power. In other words, power and structures, for example domination,

are impossible to understand without a reconstruction of the meanings central for them, according to this perspective.

One of the reasons that equality is such a contested topic is because it is a thick concept. Thin concepts such as right and wrong are preoccupied with normative judgment but do not contain descriptions of relations. This is exactly what thick concepts combine into an inseparable core: description and evaluation. Thick concepts presuppose cultural and institutional facts. Equality is not like right and wrong; it both describes a relationship between something and has an underlying evaluative dimension to it: some consider equality good; others consider it an obstacle. Gabriel Abend (2019) has criticised moral psychology and neuroscience for not paying necessary attention to thick concepts, and explicates the distinction originally made by the philosopher Bernard Williams in 1985:

First, they simultaneously describe and evaluate an object, yet description and evaluation are inseparable. Second, for a thick concept to be possible at all in a society, certain cultural and institutional facts must obtain there; that is, each thick concept has distinct cultural and institutional presuppositions. (Abend, 2019, p. 162)

To grasp the meaning and use of thick concepts such as equality, one has to undertake exploratory projects such as this one, where equality is not predefined or operationalised into a thin concept but viewed as a thick concept to be defined by actors themselves. Nonetheless, I do not aim to give a satisfying answer to Abend's call to sociologists of morality, but regard this as some necessary early steps.

3.2 Meritocracy and egalitarianism

Meritocracy means a rule where one is rewarded by one's efforts, often assumed to be deserved. It is in many ways the opposite of a rule where one is rewarded according to one's status, and it is typically used as a definitional remark of societies where work and education are central. Modern societies are expected to be more meritocratic than traditional ones, but as the sociologist Michael Young (1958) warned in his social science fiction *The Rise of the*

Meritocracy, it too can form a rigid society. The Norwegian translation of the title is telling *Intelligence as the Ruling Class* [Intelligensen som overklasse]. However, a meritocrat would argue that what is rewarded by effort, or good results is just. In studies of societies, characteristics such as democratic, meritocratic, or oligarchic are often used as continuous descriptions rather than discrete. A society might therefore be more or less meritocratic, and more or less democratic, however as a contrast to traditional hierarchical societies where rank was defined by lineage, modern societies are often described as more meritocratic and more horizontal. However, whether a crude distinction like this actually says anything important about modern societies is widely disputed, since these also are hierarchical in some respects and also might be less meritocratic than we like to think. Comparisons between more or less meritocratic might also be done across nation states: France is conceived to be very meritocratic, where scholarly results and rank are supposed to correlate, whereas Norway is conceived to be less meritocratic, because other aspects, such as morals, are regarded as more legitimate sources of rank (Sakslind, Skarpenes, & Hestholm, 2019). Meritocracy as a legitimising discourse enabling privilege, as Khan (2011) finds it in the U.S., might not work in the same manner in Norway, as I have developed further (Halvorsen, 2020).

Rather than being preoccupied with inequality and equality as such, this project is focused on the way these concepts are used in everyday situations. Do the actors in this study perceive society as equal or unequal, and if so, according to which parameters? In line with French pragmatic theory, I am interested in the critical capacities of the actors, and how these concepts are referred to or drawn upon and articulated. Also, the question of egalitarianism and elitism is not necessarily connected to the discussion over inequality and equality. The strong influence of egalitarianism in Norway does not entail an equal society, and the sheer presence of elites in a society does not entail elitism. Egalitarianism might be voiced in all classes of society, just as elitism might. Examples of egalitarianist phrases might be: “He might run faster than you, but that does not mean that he is better than you”, or “This novel is great, but it does not mean that it is better than any other”, or “Everybody is good according to their own standards”. Expressions of elitism might be: “He runs faster than you and should obviously be prioritised when it comes to running competitions”, or “This novel is great, and should get prizes and recognition above the rest”, or “Some are obviously better than others”. The latter expression

seems especially controversial in egalitarian societies. If one locates the elitism, or favouring of good candidates, in specific spheres, such as within sports, they might be accepted, but even here elite initiatives are highly controversial in public in Norway. In other words, there have been posed working hypotheses” that elitism is possible to trace to certain “enclosed” elite environments (Andersen & Mangset, 2012). This means that social scientists tend to expect concurrence between social background and opinions and values. This leads us to the critical sociology of Pierre Bourdieu.

3.3 The critical sociology of Pierre Bourdieu

First of all, before delving into the relevant details, it should be pointed out that Pierre Bourdieu is undoubtedly one of the grand names of sociology internationally, and as such his work is read differently and has room for internal tensions, gaps and developments (Alexander, 1982, pp. 300 et seq.). The three most central works in Bourdieu’s oeuvre that relates to this study are *Distinction*, *The State Nobility*, and *The Rules of Art*. All of these have an ambition to go against a common assumption or an official version, and thus to unveil and criticise existing power relations, as is emblematic of Bourdieu’s sociology (Røyseng, 2015). As he writes about the title *Distinction*, “it is there to remind us of how what we ordinarily call distinction, a certain quality to morals and manners, which are often considered innate, *actually* is only a difference” (Bourdieu, 1995, p. 33).⁷ A premise for Bourdieu is the existence of inequality, power struggles, and conflicts. It has been the dominant theoretical perspective in sociological studies in Scandinavia, at least in the culture sector (Heian, 2018).

7 An interesting thing to note here is that the word *distinksjon* in Norwegian is almost never used, it is mainly a word to describe rank in the military, so if we are to believe ethnologists in that societies develop a vocabulary for aspects of societies, their concern with this is of lesser importance (Daloz, 2013, p. 14). As “cultural capital” has been a part of everyday parlance, the word *distinksjon* has also made its way into interviews I have conducted for this study, but then with a reference to Bourdieu himself. The Bourdieusian metalanguage for society has been adopted by and immersed in society itself, and thus made the distinction between “etic” and “emic” notions hard to untangle.

The State Nobility is a study of elite education in France and shows how the alleged meritocracy of the French education system actually favours those from privileged backgrounds because of their mastering of cultural codes, and not because of work or legitimate deservedness. The strong patterns of reproduction are thus interpreted as not providing space for education having consequences for class reproduction. The ambition of *The Rules of Art* is to explain the field of culture or intellectuals through analysing how Flaubert writes himself into it in *L'Education sentimentale*. In Bourdieusian terms one could say that the protagonist of the novel, the unproductive author Frédéric, becomes a prism through which Flaubert objectivates the determinations to which he is subject, and thus creates for himself a position from where he can engage in a revolution of autonomy (Jakobsen, 2004, pp. 150–155). That is to show how the genius of literary creation is actually conditioned socially, through showing how Flaubert deconstructs the realistic novel and the romantic notion of the artist, and thus creates new ground. Bourdieu tries to combine an internal reading, often associated with literary studies, and an external reading, often associated with sociology of literature, in order to provide a more complete picture of the literary field. However, in their eagerness to debunk myths, these studies end up with too shallow depictions of actors and mechanisms (Eyerman, 2006, pp. 27–28). In other words, culture, defined as ways of making sense of the world, ends up being determined by the social structural forces surrounding it (Biernacki, 1995, pp. 23–24).

Bourdieu's most influential study is nonetheless *Distinction* from 1979, about taste and aesthetic judgments. It conceptualises two different displays of taste called: 1) "taste for necessity", which is often ascribed to the working classes or those with less capital (in either form: cultural, social, economic, or symbolic), and 2) "taste for freedom", which is ascribed to elites and those with more capital. The capital composition principle that locates actors within a certain field, is field-specific. Types of capital are what define fields. However, these are cut across by the display of taste. The intermediate layer in this account, the *petit bourgeois*, are described as striving for a "taste for freedom" without succeeding (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 318–371). They have an aesthetic appreciation and consumption pattern characterised by disinterest. The appreciation of opera, or buying of clothes, are not supposed to appear as actions undertaken due to need, due to knowledge and wants. On the other end, buying clothes and watching television is not done due to needs and demands of

entertainment or relaxation. But in order to get a solid grip on these matters we need some definitions of the key concepts of capital and classes. Bourdieu draws on the sociology of Marx and Weber: The Marxian inspiration is found in the preoccupation with capital and the so-called extension model (Desan, 2013), and the Weberian inspiration can be seen in the preoccupation with capital and lifestyle/taste as an equivalent to Weber's distinction between "class" and "stand". Bourdieu writes little about economic capital, even though it is the most important out of his four concepts of capital, or rather constitutes the main hierarchising principle. According to Desan (2013), economic capital in Bourdieu's theory is more or less money taken at face value. The innovation of Bourdieu is primarily to theorise cultural and social resources into capital as well – they are advantages one can use in order to achieve something, for instance a higher-class position. For example, the ability to reference *The Odyssey* by Homer or other canonical literature, knowledge of how to behave in public settings, or inspiring use of clothing can all be used in order to gain advantages in this perspective. There is no inherent quality to certain cultural resources that turns them into capital, instead this reflects the class position of the holder. It is the dominant class that defines what is legitimate culture for lower classes, and this is how it affirms its position (Daloz, 2010). The different capital forms as such might be exchanged with another, even though in reality this is a highly complex process. The last form of capital is symbolic capital – which is like a meta-capital, more a way of manifesting capital than an actual capital. For Bourdieu, a class is a group of individuals in close proximity within the social room (Hansen, 2005). This is a more open definition of class than Marx', and untangles the strict relationship between elites and classes, where heterogeneity in elites is common. Engelstad points out (2018) that elite studies inspired by Bourdieu (particularly Korsnes, Heilbron, Hjellbrekke, Bühlmann & Savage, 2018) describe the elite as constituting "a fraught and contingent assemblage" (p. 307), at the same time as they claim that "elites are not simply a collection of powerful people" (p. 305). They find that elites can "be seen as linked together in an aesthetical meaningful web" (p. 308), but that seems to be from too far a distance to get a good understanding of what the elite is, and how it is integrated.

Bourdieu's thesis in *Distinction* (1995) is a critique of Kant's point of aesthetic judgments being disinterested categorically. Bourdieu claims them to be inherently matters of social determinations and connected to power

struggles where the dominant obtains power and influence in society (Holt, 1997). Accordingly, a wide range of studies have examined the link between taste and different types of capital in different fields. The list of new capital concepts is constantly being updated, with digital capital perhaps being the latest (Bakken & Demant, 2019; Lyngstad, 2009). So, where Bourdieu allegedly extends Marx, several scholars have extended Bourdieu. Lyngstad (2009) warned about the way concepts of capital makes phenomena (that initially are hard to measure) appear easily measurable. Bourdieu's own measurements of cultural capital have been criticised for generalisations about preferences for materialised cultural capital, without basis in his empirical material (Gartman, 1991). The accumulation of capital has a strategic side to it, and many have questioned the potential economic pitfall that comes with the extension of the concept of capital. Bourdieu's critique of Kant has integrated the question of aesthetic judgments into sociology as a matter of habitus. The passion for art and meaningful aspects have therefore been underemphasised in sociological studies inspired by Bourdieu (Benzecry, 2011; Eyerman, 2006; Larsen, 2015; Wohl, 2015).

This study builds on many of the theoretical concepts and understandings derived from criticism of Bourdieu, and it might be important to remind the reader of this. However, this criticism is not meant to show how Bourdieu is wrong, but to push the research into areas where his theories do not reach, into what can be called anomalies (for differences and similarities between Bourdieusian and post-Bourdieuian theorisation, see Benatoil, 1999; Potthast, 2017; Susen, 2014). Natalie Heinich, for instance, an earlier student of Bourdieu, has criticised the analysis for being normative and conflict oriented, and instead advocates for an approach that considers value pluralism – treating different spheres of value in neutral and interpretive ways (Heinich, 1996). The conflicts actors thus are entangled in is something the researcher can describe without partaking him/herself. Bourdieu and Heinich share many theoretical points, for instance on art as socially constructed and relational phenomena, but they diverge in the question of power. Whereas Bourdieu in this dichotomy is depicted as a determinist, overemphasising power, Heinich is depicted as naïve, underemphasising power.

The main critique of Bourdieu here is that the theory tends to be suspiciously reproducible (what Skarpenes and Hestholm (2015) called “the epistemology of permanence”), to the extent that it has become an industry,

applicable to any social condition or environment, and immune to anomalies that do not fit neatly into the theory. One can read Bourdieu as transcending the separation between “the social” and “the cultural”, through emphasising that classes are *cultured* (Jakobsen, 2004, p. 46), as I am very sympathetic to, but then one runs the risk of giving a tautological character to empirical findings. It is a grand theory that tends to lead to preconceptions of empirical material (similar criticisms see Alexander, 1995; Engelstad, 2018; Larsen, 2015; Rancière, 2004). The central concepts of “capital”, “habitus”, and “field” are too theory-laden to undertake a cultural sociological project. There are also more inductive projects that are sceptical of Bourdieusian concepts as explanatory (Wimalasena & Marks, 2019). They are interesting as findings and descriptions of social relations, and in many circumstances they can provide a lot of information and good analysis, but the more positivistic, deductive approach often used when these concepts are applied, is a hindrance for understanding society.

3.4 Repertoire theory

Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thevenot’s theoretical framework from *On Justification* is one of the strands, along with Michele Lamont’s sociology of symbolic boundaries, in the new cultural sociology, and can be called a repertoire theory (Larsen, 2013). In *On Justification*, Boltanski and Thevenot aim to theorise critical moments in debates, *epreuves*, or tests, where actors mobilise arguments, values, and things in order to respond. Further, they aim to turn a historical account of such responses into a theoretical framework, in order to understand how actors make sense of their critical competencies. The result of this theorising is a framework of different *orders of worth* that actors draw on to appeal to *the common good*, thereby legitimising their arguments. The orders of worth then become different repertoires. Lamont’s sociology of symbolic boundaries emerged from her comparative interview studies of members of the working class in The U.S. and France in *The Dignity of Working Men*, and of members of the upper middle class in The U.S. and France in *Money, Morals and Manners*. A key finding in these studies was how undertheorized morality was as a feature of social difference. Symbolic boundaries may be understood as: “(1) group boundaries that demarcate the

limits of groups – or outsiders from insiders – who share common values or common definitions of the sacred, of stigma, or of exclusion, and (2) cognitive boundaries organising mental maps on the basis of symbolic distinctions” (Lamont & Thevenot, 2007, p. 4). It has been proven fruitful in analysing interview studies to understand how actors evaluate and criticise, and how some criteria of evaluation can be more important than others. Tellingly, Lamont has collaborated with Laurent Thevenot in the anthology *Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology*, regarding national repertoires of evaluation in France and the U.S, where they connect symbolic boundaries and orders of worth. In the following, I will explore some of the key aspects of the alignment of these two theoretical developments.

One of the key points for repertoire theory is to avoid the sociologist having the privileged position of viewing society from the outside, as they claim critical sociology does. This entails allowing actors, researchers, as well as interviewees, equal freedom and creativity in theory. Seeking out hidden factors predetermining expressions of individuals, such as the concept habitus might be read as, is not a part of the epistemology of pragmatic sociology. This is a choice and not an ontological argument, or a privileged perspective, but one of many possible perspectives. Nor should only the actor be considered knowledgeable. It is their explicit mobilisation of references, values, and arguments that are the basis for analysis. These values are not hierarchised or subsumed in one legitimate culture, but rather several cultures are regarded as co-existent in plurality, within different orders of worth (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2007), or institutions and communities of shared understanding (Walzer, 1987). Boltanski & Thevenot then identify six orders of worth: (1) inspired, (2) domestic, (3) fame, (4) civil, (5) market, and (6) industrial. Each of these orders consists of grammar, structures, and tools that actors use in legitimating a situation or an act. These orders provide a way of relating something specific to the general, which is a common good, thereby acting as justification. From the perspective of an actor, it would be an imperative to draw on grammar from one of these orders to legitimise one’s actions, and try to convince why one’s actions makes sense, or are justified, within this order (even though it might be unjustified in other orders). In fact, arguments being worthy in one order, make them invalid in others. This theoretical framework is supposed to be an analytical tool that can be used by researchers to place descriptions of empirical material in a broader context. As Larsen (2013, p. 46) warned,

a possible risk is that this becomes a deductive logic, and one ends up with finding what was already conceptualised (confirming the theory). This would, however, be contrary to the project of Boltanski and Thevenot, who explicitly regard the tool as an unfinished framework, where new orders might emerge, and old orders disappear. A telling example is Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005), where the order of worth called "the projective city"⁸ is found and thus becomes the seventh order in the framework. In this study there has not been a similar ambition to map or find different orders of worth, but the approach has nonetheless influenced the research design and analysis. For more on how so, see the next chapter.

It is worth underlining that this framework is useful in situations where actors have to legitimise their actions or definitions, when there is *a test*. In settings such as with historical elite institutions, the institutions might lean on a Weberian traditional legitimacy, and therefore not need to perform legitimacy. In other words, they are not necessarily put to a test. However, I would argue that the historical elite institution of literary criticism is put on several tests when specific reviews become controversial, and the discussion of objectivity in book reviewing is put to a test. In addition, there seems to be a common assumption that book reviewing, as a newspaper undertaking, might be on a test altogether, as a result of emerging venues and platforms for literature and criticism. The schools in this study could serve as examples of historical elite institutions that seldom are put to test. Traditional legitimacy is often dependent on customs, rituals, and structures, and a typical example might be the king. I would argue that elite education could be understood as a similar example. Since the elite schools belong to the public school system they do not attract special attention, despite being very different from other schools.

The sociology of critique insists upon taking the actor's point of view. This becomes problematic in a critical sociological approach. Boltanski wrote:

[T]he metacritical position will therefore consist in making use of the point of view of the actors – that is to say, base itself on their moral sense and, in particular, on their ordinary sense of justice, to expose the discrepancy between

8 The word city, translated from the French *cit *, is used by Boltanski and Chiapello as an equivalent to order.

the social world as it is, and as it should be in order to satisfy people's moral expectations. (Boltanski, 2011, p. 30)

According to Nachi (2014), this strategy would lead to a compromise between sociology and social critique, and thus also between “critical sociology” and “sociology of critique”. He elaborated: “Whereas ‘critical sociology’ is constructed exclusively around an overarching position for critique, ignoring the point of view of actors, ‘pragmatic sociology’ is concerned mainly with the operations of ordinary critique and lacks any metacritical objective. Each programme errs by excess and insufficiency, hence the advantage of putting them together”, and he pointed out that this is not a collage or juxtaposition, but on the other hand a development that lies within the project of the “sociology of critique”. This might be a way of overcoming the critique of not being attuned to questions of inequality (Quéré & Terzi, 2014; Schwartz, 2013). The epistemological stance from *On Justification* supposes equal access to the orders of worth by different actors and groups, which have met criticism, but one interesting way forward would be to document which actors and groups mobilise different orders of worth, especially in discussions where inequality is central.

In her comparative cultural studies Lamont has been more attentive to questions of inequality, and on which basis actors conceive these, or what criteria actors use in demarcating those who are worthy from those who are not, insiders from outsiders, and so on. For instance in her study of working men in the U.S. and France, she is preoccupied with questions of class, and the cultural meaning-making aspects of it. This means that questions of e.g. religion, family, or recreational activities, that might be just as important for the working men, are not scrutinised in Lamont's study. Most of all it gained attention for showing the importance of actors' morals in how they position themselves in the world. One of the findings is that American workers employ symbolic boundaries between “hardworking” and “lazy” people, and that poor and unemployed people often are regarded as the latter, whereas French workers have sympathy with the poor and unemployed. American workers accept wealth to a much higher degree than their French counterparts, and whereas the Americans are critical towards non-whites in general, it is immigrants that French workers are critical towards. These symbolic boundaries are not seen as homologous to social boundaries, their meaning is relational and

not referential. This means that we cannot derive symbolic boundaries from social ones, according to Lamont. The workers she interviewed construct a world that makes them substantial, and standards that define who they are (responsible, hardworking, honest, law abiding, and so on), that in the end free them of economic determinism. In this way, her study can be regarded as cultural sociology: the meaning-making aspects are ascribed to the relative autonomy of culture.

One of many criticisms of Lamont's study of symbolic boundaries concerns the way she finds them. The interviews are explicitly planned so as to give answers about boundaries, and just as Lamont criticises Bourdieu for having *a priori* assumptions about cultural capital, she might be criticised for having *a priori* assumptions about symbolic boundaries. After reading the analysis we still do not know how important these boundaries are to the actors, or if this is how they see the world. There is also a problem of methods and generalisations in her studies, where she uses representative sampling of a non-representative sample and writes about the French and Americans in general. On the other hand, the number of interviews and the analysis provide convincing arguments and insights into the people that are studied.

3.5 Cultural sociology

Jeffrey C. Alexander has been a central part of American sociology for several decades, but his advocacy for a cultural sociology is fairly new and widening throughout the world. His magnum opus *The Civil Sphere*, has now been developed empirically outside the U.S. through anthologies about Southeast Asia, South America and the Nordic region. Alongside Philip Smith he launched the "strong program" for cultural sociology, drawing heavily on Emile Durkheim and Clifford Geertz. The "strong program" was explained earlier in this chapter through the use of variables as metaphors and using the term "structural hermeneutics". The latter is thought of as a way of combining "possibilities for general theory construction" and "the texture and temper of social life" (Alexander & Smith, 2003, p. 26).

From Durkheim, the "strong program" has taken the analysis of modernity as consisting of culture structures built around binaries, such as sacred and profane. It is the late Durkheim, of the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*,

that is of interest here. From Geertz (1973), the concept of “thick description” is central, and the emphasis on sophisticated interpretation of empirical material, from everyday life within the social sciences. In his study of war, Philip Smith showed how decisions like whether Britain should go to war over the Falkland Islands or not, was heavily dependent on the narration of the case. By analysing how media depictions of the case resonated with culture structures such as the binary between the sacred and the profane, he was able to explain how the war was justified.

Central for the strong program is the concept of “performance”, which indicates a creative conception of the actor. In his study of the presidential campaign of Barack Obama, Alexander analysed how cultural elements were fused by Obama in performances in a successful manner, which in turn won him the presidency, and thus, how matters that political scientists tend to overlook in their analysis, such as aesthetic choices and cultural elements, often are highly explanatory in the social world. Actors are in this perspective, perceived as more than strategic, as for instance driven by passion as well. They exist within a society where the civil sphere is important. The civil sphere is defined in opposition to non-civil spheres, and it is a solidarity sphere with universalising community. Examples of non-civil spheres are the market and the state. Furthermore, the civil sphere is essentially a communicative sphere, and preoccupied with evaluation, critique, and justification. Therefore such a thing as “silent” or “hidden” civility does not exist. This makes *the publicly communicated* interesting material in itself for social scientists, and not something in need of unveiling. The civil sphere is upheld and supported by institutions, but it is essentially cultural and normative.

3.6 Theorising, pragmatism and value pluralism: an example

In this study none of the abovementioned theoretical traditions are given a privileged position; they are rather presented as the texts in which theorising will be a dialogue. Nonetheless, four key theoretical points have guided the questions and analysis: (1) actors are not preconceived as driven by unseen, or underlying forces, and their explicit arguments provide the researcher with information about how they construct the world, (2) the relative autonomy

of meaning makes it relational and not referential; conflict of distribution is conflict of interpretation, (3) actors can refer or use different repertoires in their meaning-making and are not reduced to their economic trajectory, sexual orientation, or other social status, and (4) the meaning-making activities of actors are deeply cultural and include orientations that are not strategic. With this as background I will try to theorise different aspects of historical elite institutions and discuss how they are made meaningful by the interviewees. Before we move to the use of the concepts of “institution” and “elite”, I will provide an example of my theoretical approach.

I will criticise and elaborate on an example from Chong (2015, p. 14). She describes a Bourdieusian analysis of literary critics like this:

In his theory of symbolic fields, Bourdieu (1993, 1996) focuses on the strategic self-serving consequences of evaluation. He emphasizes how critics can use reviewing as a vehicle for reproducing their tastes and cultural authority as gatekeepers and agents of consecration in the cultural field. Critics achieve this, for instance, by representing their personal taste as “good” taste or using reviews as a venue for displaying their cultural capital; though they may be more or less conscious about these processes. Reviews, then, reflect not only critics’ evaluations of aesthetic quality, but also the larger project of competing with people occupying similar positions in the field, namely, other critics. Hence, critics’ concerns about the social consequences of their reviews are not just (at least, consciously) about reproducing or legitimating their tastes (Bourdieu 1984), but also how to frame and compose their reviews, which in some cases (i.e., “playing nice”) meant obscuring how much they liked or disliked a book.

This example shows how the concept of field entails to regard social life as a game constituted by certain rules. It shows how their evaluation is reduced to their social status. First, the power of gatekeeping as a literary critic is questionable, since it is more like a recommendation (or the opposite) than a decision, and second, the agency for cultural consecration is rather an activity to put under empirical research than to pose a priori. However, reviews can be a source to understand more than only the topic written about. Chong writes that a review “reflects”, but I would not pose such a mechanism to it, but rather say it contains information. It contains information about how critics

perceive their profession, and its contribution to society, and thus how criticism is entangled in national repertoires of evaluation. This is one way I have approached the empirical material. Thirdly, the concept of field is sociocentric in that it claims that actors within a field are oriented towards themselves (other critics) and not outwards. This is also something that should be left open to empirical research, and not be theoretically pre-conceived.

3.7 Eliteness

Overarching the cases I have been interested in here, is an alleged “elite” status that actors have to negotiate. Whether something *de facto* constitutes an elite or not is often difficult to define precisely and should rather be dealt with empirically (Daloz, 2013). Literary critics are considered to belong to an elite institution that traditionally has defined what is considered to be the canon (not single-handedly, but they are often the ones quoted in historical accounts, for example). The high school students in this study are considered to belong to elite institutions because of the history of the schools, and because of the entry levels. Most of them also come from privileged backgrounds, but this is not the main point of the eliteness. Most important is that these institutions stand out *vis-à-vis* non-elite institutions within the same sphere. In literary criticism, the “non-elite” is for instance layman opinion or aesthetic judgments, and in the school system it is most of the other schools in the Norwegian school system. It does not, however, exclude that there are also other elite institutions in the same sphere, only that these are examples of some, and as such, well suited for a qualitative project.

3.8 Institution

Criticism is an institution because it works as an arena where struggles over meaning are constantly fought in relatively stable cultural forms, such as the review (Hohendahl, 1982; Roberge, 2011). It can be called a “communicative institution”, as Alexander (2006) has defined it. It exists out in the world and tries to convince an audience to listen to its recommendations. As Roberge (2011, p. 441) pointed out, however, criticism as an institution is special in

that it lacks the unity and strength that other institutions enjoy, and “it would almost be possible to say that criticism lives in perpetual puberty”. It relies entirely on the audience, in contrast to traditional gatekeepers, who have the formal authority themselves (Blank, 2007). Institutions can be understood in many different ways, and in its most basic form they can be defined as stable relations between actions and sanctions, which enable norms and values to develop and individuals to cohabit with certain expectations and knowledge on how to act (Slaatta, 2018, p. 33). Ahrne (1994, p. 4) defined institutions as: “first and foremost cultural rules that regulate social activity into a pattern”. Organisations on the other hand, are “materialised institutions” (Ahrne, 1994, p. 4). Focusing on institutions therefore shifts the focus away from the intentions and actions of the actors involved, and towards routines, social values, and norms that are latent or manifest in the surroundings of actors (van Maanen, 2009). A typical example of this might be studies of how artists, critics, curators, and gallerists talk among themselves in a specialised language that provides belonging among those who understand it, as well as establishes a boundary towards those on the outside who do not understand.

The institution of criticism revolves around a permanent crisis: the questions and rethinking of canon and aesthetic authority (Hohendahl, 1982, p. 44; Roberge, 2011, p. 442). The structure of the art world functions as a playground for many, but it becomes a living for very few. Central in several definitions of artists or critics, is whether or not they can make a living out of it. The struggle for recognition and a career is difficult, which is interesting, in that recognition is supposed to come in the form of status and not money, if we are to believe Bourdieu’s depiction of the art world as a reverse form of the economic world.

That high schools are institutions is more obvious from a layman’s perspective. You can point to specific buildings, curricula, and actors playing different roles in order for the system to work. The school “produces” candidates. While the two specific schools I have researched are organisations, they are also a part of the institution of secondary education. It is also important for these elite schools to distance themselves from money and privilege. The Norwegian school system is explicitly politically aimed at providing equal opportunities and to work as an equalising arena, in contrast to e.g. leisure time, where differences are allowed to be played out. This means that money or economy are not supposed to give anyone advantages in the Norwegian

school system, thus for instance school trips are not allowed if they entail financing from outside (by parents, or students themselves). Skarpenes and Sakslind summarise the historical development of the school system:

Norwegian modernization during the 20th century meant the building of egalitarian institutions promoting egalitarianism as a culture. In principle, they kept the emerging society open for the lower classes. The construction of a unified (primary) school (enhetsskolen) (1920) exemplifies this: in terms of structure, by incorporating all social classes, and by the postponement of meritocratic tracking. In terms of culture, by education policies that systematically modified and down-graded professional and academic ambitions by appealing to “populist” values. (Skarpenes & Sakslind, 2018, p. 5).

This culture was expanded to secondary schools during the 20th century. In the next chapter I will show how I have gathered the data and of what the empirical material consists, before Chapters 5 and 6 will present the analysis of the institutions. Chapter 7 will discuss and conclude the book.