

Chapter 5

Life in elite arenas: elite schools

This chapter will provide a view into how life unfolds in two elite arenas and is communicated by those who are a part of them. It will start with a brief tour of the schools, and then focus on the rituals the students talk about and the meaning they ascribe to them. The interviews are typically about their experiences from their first year at school and follows the first period of excitement and curiosity to the last where groups and friendships have been established. The ambition is to describe the culture at the different schools and the way in which elite identities (Khan, 2012) are formed at the schools. In academic articles I have analysed masculinity at the Oslo Commerce School (OCS) and unease at Schola Osloensis (SO) and OCS, and oftentimes have pointed to their names when describing their elite status (Halvorsen & Ljunggren, 2021; Halvorsen, 2022). Unless there are historical reasons for upper-secondary schools having a special name, such as both OCS and SO, they are named “videregående skole” in Norway. Both of the schools here have historical names – Schola Osloensis in Norwegian is called “katedralskole” – literally cathedral school – showing its earlier connection to the church, and OCS is called “gymnas”, deriving from the ancient *gymnasion*, introduced in Norway via Germany and up until 1974 the official name for upper secondary schools. Of importance for a cultural sociology of upper secondary schools in Norway is the graduation celebrations, which informally can start early after beginning for some students, but formally lasts during the last months of their third year and especially around the Norwegian Constitution day, 17th of May. Allan Sande (2000) studied this, known as “russefeiring”, as rites of passage, in a perspective inspired by cultural sociology and anthropology. The celebration has long historical roots, but the first known example of today’s where the students wear uniforms is from 1905 when students in Oslo wore red hats, and SO were probably among the first schools this occurred.

At OCS however they began with a slight distinction when celebrating to mark their economic orientation, by wearing blue hats. The term “blåruss” has since been a strong signifier in Norway, and as such it is interesting that OCS is its place of origin. In this chapter I will attempt to provide an ethnographic account, where I will draw more explicitly from the data from the participant observation I conducted at the schools – mostly in the canteens, school yards and libraries.

5.1 Oslo commerce school: “The only private school where you don’t have to pay tuition”

Oslo Commerce School, founded as Christiania Commerce School, lies in the city centre of Oslo, close to the Royal Castle, the National Museum and the National Theatre. It’s a functionalist building which has housed the school since 1946; it sorts of blends into the surroundings and first becomes fully visible when you enter the school yard. The main entrance is through the school yard and consists of an impressive assembly hall with staircases visible from the entrance. The assembly hall has several statues, pictures, paintings and on the largest wall there is a frieze by the German-born artist Sigurd Winge (1909–1970) with a motive about the phases of life, which appears to take inspiration from ancient Greece or ancient Greeks⁹. It is 15.5 meters long and contains figures 4.5 meters high and was begun in 1948 and finished 8 years afterwards. This is where the main events such as graduation occurs. The aula also has an organ, with its pipes at the 3rd floor, and for OCS it is a tradition to play “Pomp and Circumstance”.

Inside the assembly hall there are staircases that are important for the social life at the school. A certain area is called “the third-years’ stair” and is considered a space for only the third-year students. This also goes for an area in the school yard, and generally it is the third-year students who decide, and the younger students have to accept their zones. Eva says: “There’s certain rules at this school. When you’re a first-year you can sit on the benches in

9 Also exhibited in the halls is a letter from the author Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson dating from 1926 and a large globe, allegedly dating from the second world war, according to the students.

the assembly hall. Not the third-years' stair". Asked about how strict these informal rules are she says that it is something everyone follows, and that one should not breach them.

When spending time at the school this also becomes apparent as there are clusters of students at different areas. In addition, the earlier rectors have portrait paintings of them hanging on the walls in the stairs, as well as photos of all former OCS students from the first class of 1876.¹⁰ This makes the students aware of the history, and several of the students are aware of the impressive alumni, counting amongst several the finance ministers Siv Jensen (Progress Party) and Per Kristian Foss (The Conservative Party), the minister of foreign affairs Knut Frydenlund (The Norwegian Labour Party), the actor Knut Wigert and in the later years artists Chirag Rashmikanth Patel og Magdi Omar Ytreeide Abdelmaguid from the group called Karpe, and member of parliament Khamshajiny Gunaratnam (The Norwegian Labour Party).

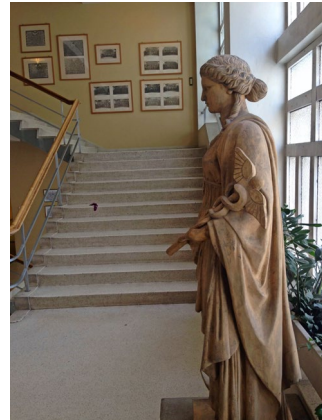


Figure 5.1 & 5.2 *The stairs where the photos of former students hang, and the aula seen from above*

¹⁰ There is one former student who is excluded from this display, and that is the person who at the time was known as Anders Behring Breivik, and who committed the Norway terror attacks of 22nd of July 2011. His picture has been removed, according to one of the interviewees.



Figure 5.3 & 5.4 *The class photos from 1876–1879, and from 1913–1916*

The first-year students have classrooms at ground floor, whereas the second-year students are at first floor, and third-year students at second floor. According to the 125 anniversary book, a *Festschrift* (Hestmann, 2000, p. 46) that was published about the school: “The students literally advance upwards in the system . . ., just as in the business life. The higher status you have in the system, the bigger the possibility is for gaining a spot at the top floor”.

In the 34 interviews we touch upon this aspect of being a part of a school with such a visible history and symbolically important things. Preben describes the school as having a “solemn atmosphere”:

The school is a museum, in a way. Every Thursday there are pensioners here visiting the bunker underneath. There are glass reminders everywhere with old “russeluer” from 1900, and pretty many cool things. There’s also pictures of all the classes from 1876 or something. That’s pretty different from a lot of the other schools. It’s cool, it’s proper.

The bunker Preben is talking about is from during the second world war when the Germans used the building as a headquarters during the war. The Reichskommissar for Norway during the German occupation Josef Terboven had his office there and the bunker was their command central. As such, part of school actually works as a museum, but both Preben and other students I interviewed use the word museum about the school as such, and in a positive way.

To be an OCSer (based on the name Oslo Commercial School), as the students call themselves, means to fit in at school and promote the school

values. “Tradition and innovation”, which is the vision of the school, is referred to by several of the students. According to them, the school tries hard to make the students promote the school values.

After he equalled Oxford and Cambridge in England with OCS in Norway as elite schools in the sense that they make you “become something”, Magnus said:

Because everybody that – most of those who have attended OCS have their life partly planned for them: study, travel some, get a job, get married. And we live in Norway, and come from families with money, so there isn't any... We are not going to have any special... We will not end up on the street anyway.

Magnus is reflexive in his answers through the entire interview. He constantly corrected himself as he does in the beginning here when he says “everybody”, and then corrected it to “most of”. This sort of awareness was apparent in many of the informants’ answers. Asked whether OCS can be considered an elite school, many say yes with reference to the school’s historical or symbolic sides. They acknowledge their privileges as white, West End students, but they also problematise what elite in this context would mean.

Esben talks about the school as traditional, preppy, like a museum and therefore prestigious, but at the same time, he holds back from fully accepting the elite status. “Tradition and all that”, shows an awareness, but also a kind of lack in interest. He is not traditional in the same sense, seems to be his message. Knut also depicts the school as a museum: “Yes, it really has this museum-vibe”. Traditionally elite schools have been homogenous, and this still accounts for OCS. When asked about the lack of diversity of students at the school, Geir says it is “built on a very traditional white structure, in a way”, and talks about some of the traditions at the school with the annual opening speeches by the rector in the assembly hall, as a symbol for the traditional sides to the school. He also explains how it is important to have a family history with the school, and many of the informants we have interviewed can talk about family members urging them to attend the school. Alice told me “The reason I attend OCS is that my father went here”, and she also explains that her elder brother and sister went to the school. According to Geir, family connections contributes to a sort of belonging, but what about those who do not have family in these photos? The students do consider the school an

elite school in the interviews, but that does not equal them using the label about themselves. As Khan (2012, p. 480) pointed out: “The culturally important shift in the elite identity has been from being a “class” to a collection of individuals – the best and the brightest”. The elite institutions, lineages and associations are supposed to play a lesser significant role within the formation of elite identities. The students still talk about the history of the school and lineages traditionally having formed an identity attached to the school but ascribe it an historical role. Both they and their teachers are more “casual” and “chilled-out” (they use exactly these English words) than the former OCS students. They describe parents who are former OCS students who comment the students of today as preoccupied with partying and out of touch with the history of the school. The traditional dress code at the school, where teachers wear suits and ties and the boys dress preppy, has changed towards more informal clothing for instance (Hestmann, 2000). As Knut explains, it is easy to have an impression of the school as “snobbish”, but when attending it you get another picture.

A difference between Scandinavian elite schools and the international literature on elite schooling, mainly from the U.S. and England, is the type of schools, where the Scandinavian are not boarding schools (Persson, 2016). The students we have interviewed spend less time at the school physically than the informants of Khan (2011) and Gaztambide-Fernández’ (2009), which makes the combination of ethnographic inquiry and interviews especially suitable to grasp how they refer to the school with regards to their elite identities. Through the interviews, we also get information on how they make sense of what happens outside of school, such as with the family and at weekend parties. Another difference for the Norwegian case especially is that there is no particular private sector of upper secondary schooling, the public schooling is free of charge and also still has the most renown schools.¹¹ With that in mind one student at OCS says, in the Festschrift of the school, “OCS is the only private school in the country where you don’t have to pay tuition”. This is said as a joke, and the word private is used not literally but to demarcate that the school functions as a private school, in that it for instance has the same type

11 There are some private schools, and local examples where these actually compete with public schools for the best students, but the general picture is one of a primarily state-run schooling system.

of exclusivity. Another funny remark in the Festschrift is the proud claim of OCS as “the school which skipped 1968!”

In Gustav’s account both large houses and “cool” cars, typical examples of material well-being, are used to describe the surroundings of the student. Gustav might have some interest or admiration for those things but describes himself as lucky to have been protected from extreme family wealth. Gustav himself comes from a wealthy family, but he self-reflexively distances himself from the status of “outdoor pools”, “private skate parks” and such. The students describe how they learn through their peers that wealth in itself is not impressive. You will be made fun of if you are focused upon showing that you have money.

The stereotypes about wealthy people and people from West End Oslo also serves as a topic they use to define their identity. OCS is associated with the west side, and to be an OCSer means that you have to negotiate these stereotypes, which the students do by showing reflexivity and openness. However, when asked about the stereotypes they often distance themselves and draw symbolic boundaries towards others, whether “they” are East End youth, “hipsters”, girls or “immigrants”.

Ole first started at OCS in 2nd grade, after having done 1st grade at another school in the city centre. He describes his way to OCS as a way of coming home to “the guys”, and explicitly uses the masculine culture at OCS as a reason why he changed school.”

5.2 Rituals at OCS

First day of school is marked by a special ritual at Oslo Commerce School; all new students have to pass through a “corridor” of the older students. They are typically aware of this before the school day, and they talk about this as making it even more important what they wear at first school day, for instance. The knowledge of this ritual is typically passed down through siblings and friends, but also the limited recruitment basis, the fact that OCS mainly recruits from the west side, probably eases the dissemination of this knowledge. Aidin, one of the few students from the east side of Oslo, says:

I took the rear entrance. I took the metro and came via Solli square, thinking that they might have left since I was a bit late. I think it would have been a bit scary with the third-years, in that corridor, yes. I don't mean any harm, the welcome week was very nice, but I don't know. The OCS-thing, that the school is preoccupied with traditions, right. So good initiative, very openminded people and helpful.

He is very positive towards the school in general throughout the interview but is also very open about not participating in much of the social activities connected formally or informally to the school. In this way he distinguishes himself from the rest of the sample, and as such provides another perspective on the rituals.

The corridor is not the only ritual the students have to partake in during their time at the school. Of course, all schools have rituals such as the official ceremonies at the end of the terms, but OCS has several unofficial ones as well organised by the students and some of them also unpopular at the school. This especially goes for the activities surrounding the first period at the school, resembling the perhaps equally controversial tradition for “fadderuke” when starting university (Vigen & Tjora, 2023). At OCS it was also called “fadderuke” at an earlier stage, but it has been rebranded as “the welcome week”, in order to underline positive intentions. It has attracted national media attention together with the annual school revue. The latest article from 17th of February 2017 had the title “We have heard that people do blowjobs in order to get to participate in the revue, but we don't know of any personally” and followed up on a report on sexual culture among youth in Oslo (Aftenposten, 2017). As the boys in the sample explain it, the events have undergone a historical transformation from being extreme initiation rites (hazing games, as some of them call it themselves) to become harmless events. This can also be understood as classical elite institutions aimed at creating a common identity losing their position. Some welcome this change because it gives them fewer concerns, while others are a bit negative towards the weakening of this identity formative arena. Such as Knut who self-reflexively makes an object out of himself in such situations:

My perspective is that objectively it is instructional to experience exclusion. I am not saying that I would welcome being rejected by a group that I wanted to be a part of. That would have sucked.

But objectively, I will encounter social exclusion anyways, whether it is now or later in life. I don't see any reason to not experience it early when I will encounter it again anyways. It is much easier to cope with when you know, or when you have experienced it.

He explains experiences of exclusionary practice as unavoidable, and therefore appreciates them as enabling him able to cope with it later in his life. This positioning of oneself as a potential object for an unpleasant practice, but nevertheless supporting the practice was found among several of the students.

When I asked Ole about the ritual at Frognerparken he said: "I think we – we do move close to the edge of what is acceptable and not, but I think we're good, in a way". This shows the interest in transgressing, but also within certain limitations, and in other words that they are aware of how the activities will be perceived "outside".

At OCS it is especially one group/association that is important and that is Mercur. Mercur was founded in 1877, has its own office, and has been arranging debates, meetings, parties, Valentine's Day, easter egg hunt and the annual Christmas ball in the assembly hall. Esben, who I interviewed, was a part of Mercur, and said that he had been at a meeting with rector and got a message that it was not accepted that Mercur was a part of the Frognerparken ritual.

Me: So, you were not there?

Esben: I have been there both years, but not officially. Officially no one is there. What happens is that a third-year student sends a message to a guy in first grade and gets him to organise Frognerparken.

Me: And this is often someone who is a little brother?

Esben: Yes, something like that. And they have to write that they will take upon them all the blame if something happens. In that way we make sure that it is not the third-years who organise it.

As for what goes on at Frognerparken he says it's a circle where people are dared to do things in the centre. He mentions rap battles and dance battles,

and says it is generally fun, and that everybody gets embarrassed. Whereas the corridor and most of the welcome week can be considered the frontstage of the school landscape, the Frognerparken ritual belongs to the backstage (Gaztmbide-Fernandéz, 2009, p. 140). Being an unofficial event also means that many students do not participate, as for example Aidin from the east side, who says that he wasn't interested in taking the trip back to the west side at the evening to attend, and that: "I won't say I was scared, but the first week I keep a low profile". Eva tells about several of the "dares": "Make out with as many as possible in one minute", "Eat a banana from the crotch of this guy", or "make a chain of clothes". "It becomes very embarrassing", she said, "but I think it was fun. The making out was a bit strange, but eating a banana from the crotch, that's "ha-ha, it looks like a penis", childish humour, so I don't think that's a problem". Eva is also one of the students who attend the school having an older sibling at the school before, and she says that if she had only been two years younger than her sister, attending the school at the same time, it would have been guaranteed that she would have been picked to do something in the ring. This also shows that students without clear connections are handled more carefully in the rituals.

The school revue gets a lot of attention, and is structured around different groups, such as the actors and writers, costume, rig/amphitheatre, a group called "Kos og stemning", responsible for providing a good atmosphere around the work, and a group called "raid", responsible for organising parties. This is typically something which involves mostly the third-years, but the second-year students are also to some degree part of it, and supports the view that this is a status arena for the students. The revue gets reviewed in national newspapers alongside other school revues, and OCS is known for getting a good reception.

When it comes to the graduation celebrations, the "russetid", OCS have very many active students. Eva says the planning starts on the first day of school, whereas other students actually start even earlier, before they start school since they already know that they will attend OCS. The celebration is centred around organising groups and buying a bus, which they spend time on constructing. The buses all have different concepts, songs, and clothing, and they hire their own drivers. In order to be accepted as a part of a bus one is allegedly in need of a two-thirds vote from the present members of the bus. The cost of these buses is significant, one of the students estimate that it is about 30–40,000 NOK per student. Not all students participate on a bus,

and the ones who do not are explicit on feeling a bit excluded when they are not. The buses open up for others joining on the bus for a night or a period, but this is for a fee. Many students have part-time jobs in order to pay for participation at a bus, and they also do collective work for the bus. As such the organising of the “russetid” at OCS has a certain gründer spirit to it, and they conceive of it in this way as well. They learn how to run a kind of business, in a way. The buses are practical in many ways, but especially because they become autonomous spaces for the students, providing them a “party on wheels” (Fjær, Pedersen, & Sandberg, 2016). Here they do not have to worry about showing ID or being subject to guards, such as at a club. Anne tells about staying awake for 18 hours on constitution day, and partying pretty much every afternoon in May. The prestige amongst OCS students is to still perform well at exams while partying hard.

5.3 Questionnaire

All of the 34 students we interviewed at OCS filled out a questionnaire that we gave them, providing us information on where they lived, their parents occupation and information on cars, bedrooms, computers, books and money at disposal. The fact that the schools are elite schools does not automatically entail that the students are elite students or come from elite backgrounds. In sociological research on Oslo there has been consistent findings about a division between east and west, where the west is well-off and the east less well-off. Among the students we interviewed only four were from the east, and three of them from the inner-city east, leaving a domination of students from the west side. Apart from two parents all the parents have prominent positions. 20 of the students belong to families with two or more cars, equaling 59%. As a comparison, in the general population of Oslo only 18% have access to two or more cars.¹² All except one have their own bedroom. When it comes to vacations two responded to not having been on vacations the last year, three had been on one vacation, eleven had been on two vacations, and

12 https://www.toi.no/getfile.php/1340016-1427184703/mmarkiv/Bilder/7020-TOI_fakta-ark_bilreiser-3k.pdf

the rest (18) had been on two or more. Nine of the students reported having more than 1000 books at home. Nineteen of the students have two or more computers at home. We also asked them about money at disposal, meaning how much they could spend according to their own wishes during a month, and got the following result:

Table 5.1 *Response to the question: “How much money do you have at your disposal monthly?”*

NOK	Nr. of students
100–499	3
500–999	5
1000–1999	11
2000–2999	5
3000–4999	5
5000 +	5

As the table shows, the students have a considerable amount at disposal. The result of the questionnaire provides more information on who the students we met were, but also on what type of students attend the OCS and especially in contrast to SO, where we got answers to the same questionnaire.

5.4 Schola Osloensis – the school for diversity, the school for you

Schola Osloensis attracts students from all over Oslo and is considered a school for smart students. It is therefore known as a school where many different students meet, but meet as equals at a knowledge level and this is considered a strength at the school. This is why one of the results of the research project this was a part of is called “Revenge of the Nerds” (Pedersen, Flemmen, & Jarness, 2018). One of the first things you are struck with when talking to a student at SO is the openness, they have towards being “weird”

and talking about having experiences with being bullied at lower secondary school. Asked about how she would describe SO Amalia says:

I think that we are a collection of people who want to be a bit weird, and that wants to... that express ourselves as we want. I think very many students find themselves during their time at school, to be a bit stereotypical, it is such an open environment for weirdos that people can do whatever they want and not get any judgmental looks.

As examples she mentions a trend of walking bare feet at school and dying the hair blue or orange, but generally the point is to “be yourself”. An example that several students bring forth as typically SO is playing quidditch in the school yard in the breaks, this is also an impression of SO by the students at OCS (“They play quidditch”). The experiences of being weird is in contrast to “society outside”, since it is normal to be weird at SO. An example of this might be the plethora of student groups which are organised around different activities, such as fandom around Harry Potter, Game of Thrones or “fabelprosa” (fable prose)¹³. Some groups are organised around social issues, such as the “nature and youth” group, or the “queer at SO” group. The “fabelprosa” group centres around board gaming, role playing and “zombie living”. Another activity that is organised as a group is Model United Nations, which have been studied in elite school context in Scandinavia before (Persson, 2016, 2023). David says in one of the interviews that it is a big thing at SO, and that it allows them to travel to other countries. He participates one evening every week in that group. Generally, the students are very concerned with embracing different expressions, diversity, and this along with their form of “weirdness” is also observable in the classrooms:

13 An umbrella term for fantasy, science fiction and horror literature developed by the Norwegian authors Jon Bing and Tor Åge Bringsværd.



Figure 5.5 One of the walls in a classroom contains this poster of *The Beatles*, and the messages: “No one was surprised when I wanted to join 3A”, “The class for diversity”, and “The class for you”

One of the classrooms are filled with LPs on the walls (Jesus Christ Superstar, Bruce Springsteen, Leonard Cohen and Paul Simon amongst others), and has a shelf with different books and DVDs that the students have compiled, making a kind of class library. Their preoccupation with music from the 60s, 70s and 80s goes well with the typical story of SO-students as dressed in second-hand clothes and typically with a bit more alternative style. The library of SO also has this community feeling, it is usual to encounter students sitting for themselves reading there, and on the walls, there are discussion boards where the students might recommend books to each other. When I was there the recommendations were: Augustin – *Confessions*, Dumas’ *Le Comte du Monte-Cristo*, Thoreau’s *Walden* (“Should be read by all technological people!”), and “everything by Percy Jackson! – important to learn some Greek mythology”.

Also, there was an invitation to attend the society for free poetry's meeting at the nearby cemetery, illustrated with images from the *Dead Poets Society* film.

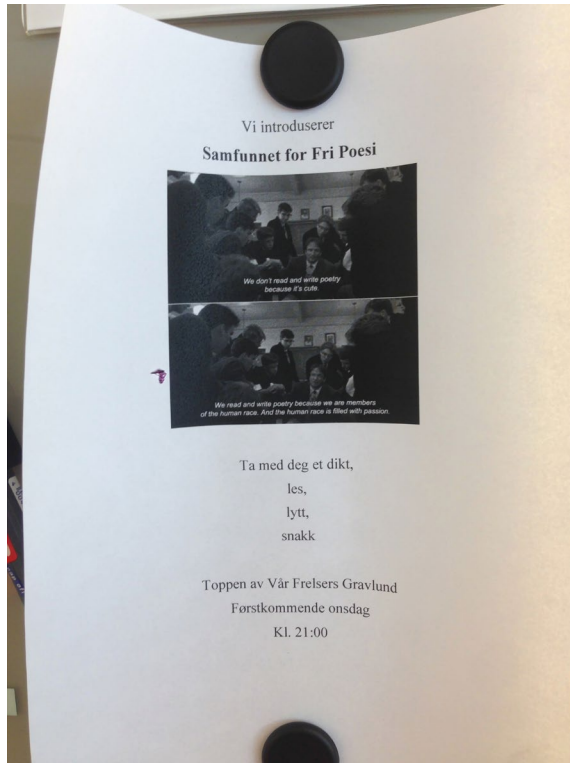


Figure 5.6 *Poster for the society for free poetry*

On the one hand there is this impression of students hanging up posters and making the school theirs, while on the other hand it also has the classical and historical side. The building itself is from 1902, the same year women were allowed as students. Inside there are marble boards with the names of notable former students engraved, and a large portrait of the poet Henrik Wergeland. The school also contains a special library with the collection of Wergeland's writings, adding to the impression of being a museum since it explicitly has preservation as its *raison d'être*. In 2012 the building was partially reconstructed, and an assembly hall was built underneath the school

yard. Underneath is a picture from the school yard where the entrance is from this new construction:



Figure 5.7 *SO seen from the school yard to the left of the entrance there's a chess game, and to the right there are students playing ping pong*

To the right in this picture is the canteen, which is a free-standing building in the school yard. Underneath the school yard there is an assembly hall where, for instance, the graduation ceremony is held. When I went to it the hall was filled with about 600 hundred family and friends, and it included music by the choir called “Pebling” who wear cloaks. Their repertoire includes for instance singing an excerpt from *Messa di Gloria* by Puccini (Pedersen et al., 2018). Afterwards there was speeches and awarding of diplomas from national competitions such as the Physics Olympics and the National Philosophy Tournament. On the cloaks of the Pebling choir is the seal of the school, which is also a part of the stained-glass window in the staircase:



Figure 5.8 *The seal of the school in stained glass window. It says: “Schola Osloensis AD 1153–19”*

Another stained-glass window, in the assembly hall where the theatre group have their rehearsals, has a quote by Goethe in German, contributing to a mood of *bildung* and culture.



Figure 5.9 *The stained-glass window in one of the assembly halls at SO contains a quote by Goethe in German: “Wer immer strebend sich bemüht” [The one who strives]*

SO is preoccupied with its literary aspects, and the theatre is a good example of this. Whereas the other schools in Oslo have revues with songs, jokes and comedy, SO put up plays (sometimes based on novels) such as *Crime and Punishment* by Dostojevskij (2015) and *A Dream Play* by August Strindberg (2016). The theatre and revue groups seem to perform some of the same social functions albeit with significantly different content. In the library there is a poster of “The Literary Disciples of SO”, meaning former students who are authors, and includes notable authors from the 18th and 19th century, as well as Theodor Caspari and Arnulf Øverland, for instance, who were important authors in the interwar period, and then notable authors from the last decades, such as Jostein Gaarder, Jan Kjærstad and Inger Elisabeth Hansen.

Literature is also prevalent in the interviews with the students, they actively talk about literature they read and want to read, which marks a significant contrast to OCS. As Pedersen, Jarness and Flemmen (2018) documented the students at SO are clearly oriented towards the legitimate cannon, and use the Bible, Homer’s *The Odyssey* and *The Illiad* as well as Sylvia Plath, Gabriel García Márquez and Elena Ferrante who are mentioned in the interviews as examples. It is not necessarily the type of literature that is read that is important, as Sofia notes about first day of school when everyone was expected to mention what they were preoccupied with, and a lot of people answered what they were reading, but one of the students:

Then there’s this guy sitting very correct at his chair and was like: “I read Hemingway”. It made me laugh. He didn’t just read Hemingway, he “read Hemingway” [mimicking a self-indulgent voice]. Haha.

The point here is that the way of presenting your interests were also the subject of attention among the students.

Asked about the elite status of the school most of the students hesitate and self-reflexively allow a discussion, such as Cecilia who does not really want to use the word “elite”: “I think it’s a difficult word to use. Yes, we do have good results. But I feel “elite” is such a negatively loaded word.” She elaborates indicating that she understands why the question is posed: “There is something with the tradition and consciousness about it, that it has always been [an elite school]”. On the other hand, there are several students who connects the elite status to high performing students and not any negative aspects. Serina from the east side

says: “You get very much [from attending SO]. The “Oh, you’re one of those, one who attends SO”. It does mean something.” She elaborates: “A lot of social networks are created here, and you get a lot of opportunities.” Julie also talks about the notion that at SO you get the impression that some of your peers will become something big, they will “end up on the board” (referring to the board in the staircase with the names of notable earlier students). As Pedersen, Jarness and Flemmen (2018) also have shown, the students try to neutralise the elite aspect of the school, especially when it is defined broader than with a focus on academic orientation or results. I have underlined that this neutralisation, or disavowal of elite status does not appear as clear or strategic, but rather as a way of connecting stories about their own school to widespread ideals in Norwegian society, such as egalitarianism (Halvorsen, 2022). The way the students make meaning of the school is tightly connected to the national narratives presented in Chapter 2 and the “code of modesty” that Gullestad (1992) claimed is significant for Norwegians, as also mentioned by Pedersen, Jarness and Flemmen (2018).



Figure 5.10 *A classroom with a wall painting of a building with Latin inscriptions*

At SO students encounter different social milieux because of the wide geographical recruitment, and one of the typical distinctions that appear is between houses and apartments, and east and the west side. As Anette says when asked about fellow students from the west side:

They have so much space, and so many things, in a way... It is obvious wealth. Even though they say: "No, we don't have that much money", they actually do. You can only look at the vacations they go to. Even though they maybe do not use a lot of money on a daily basis or enjoy showing off, they do have a lot. That is pretty obvious. And it is not so [much] fun to have the feeling of not having a private life, because we have such a small apartment.

She also says she gets provoked when they visit her and call their apartment "cosy" and "cute". As such these elite schools provides encounters with inequality which are quite unique (Halvorsen, 2023).

The embracement of diversity at SO nonetheless have some borders, and one of the boundaries is feminism. At SO it is unaccepted to not be a feminist. Another might be vegetarianism or veganism, if one does not accept vegetarianism or veganism, one is define outside of the SO community. Pedersen, Jarness and Flemmen (2018, p. 62) argue that this symbolic boundary drawing against those who do not conform to these values might function as elite distinction: "Liberal values, it seems, are not necessarily synonymous with egalitarianism and openness".

5.5 Rituals at SO

First day of school at SO consists of meetings with the classes in their classrooms, and less focus on the ritual aspects than OCS, but it nonetheless is experienced as special by many of the students. As Anette says:

It was almost like entering Hogwarts, there were so many hallways and staircases that you cannot imagine, and it leads to, for instance the assembly hall [with the Goethe quote], that is a very strange place, right, imagine that we have a place like that. Inside

there were lots of groups, such as the Harry Potter group. And the teachers we met were really cool. At this school it is the natural sciences teachers who are the coolest ... It seemed so good. So right. It was like something more than a school.

Sofia also tells us about the special atmosphere at school the first day, with a slight nervousness because of many new people:

It does not play any role whether we were friends beforehand or not, we were only alone then, so we got together and had that community. That I remember. That everybody was friends, and everybody was equal. Precisely because everybody was as alone as the others.

The warmth the students of SO describe the school with is daunting. They describe the school as a place which they belonged to and were met with open arms. The first week of school is especially centered around these groups since it is a recruitment period for them, but this does not equal any particular competition or hierarchy between them, according to the students. The only slight exception might be the theatre group which many said has a certain prestige and know it themselves. Amalia says the theatre group “has status, or not exactly status, but you know who they are”. When asked about which students have prestige or status at SO, David answers that it is:

The politically active who are on television and on the radio at times. They are high up. And then it is the people in the theatre, but I'm not sure it's right to put it in a hierarchy like that.

This self-reflexive distancing from or resistance towards constructing hierarchies is prevalent in many of the accounts. It goes along with the general attitude of embracing diversity.

Apart from the recruitment of the groups, the first week also includes outdoor activities organised by third-year students for the first-years, and it also is about doing humiliating things together. The students at SO however do not speak particularly much about this, and it seems of lesser importance. The third-year students are not ascribed any particular role regarding the

first-years. They also have informal gatherings, typically in parks such as St. Hanshaugen, but is not a ritual in any meaningful sense of the term, since the students do not really embrace it:

It was fun, and we played the “Never have I ever” drinking game, and all the second years were like “yes, we’ve been there everybody”, and they had alcohol, and then the first years are like “cool, but I have not really been able to obtain any alcohol”.

There is a lack of enthusiasm around these activities that make them less important when it comes to creating cohesion, and the cohesion is typically not across cohorts at SO, but within. Another game that is played the first weeks at SO, that has a stronger commitment, is called “the Ninja game”, and is a kind of role play where all the participants get a “victim” they are supposed to “kill” and this also entails that everyone has to avoid getting killed themselves. When you are about to “kill” someone you have to put on a ninja mask by tying a black t-shirt around your head and there are several ways to kill someone but in common for all of them is that the victim is not supposed to notice this before it happens. One way is to put a sock over the victim’s hand, another is to put almond essence on the victim’s food This goes on at school time and only at the school area but is not allowed during class. It often takes several months before a winner is crowned.

When it comes to graduation celebration, the “russetid”, this is obviously not important at SO. It is like a reversed world from OCS. The students do wear the (red) “russe”-uniforms, but they do not organise around buses, and the celebration is in a kind of contrast to the way of doing it at OCS. As Anette says:

A: Last year there was a bus, but it was not real. They were only pretending. So, yeah, that is telling.

Interviewer: So, you’re celebrating ironically, in a way?

A: Yes, at least those with the “bus” last year. A lot of people participate, but it is a very different attitude towards it. The “russetid” isn’t everything.

In other words, Anette says that the celebration is more important other places than at SO, where they typically value schoolwork and intellectual activities more than partying. However, they are allegedly one of the two schools who participate in the parades at constitution day, showing a more traditional approach to the celebration. Anette says that their participation at the constitution day is defining:

It's a shared mentality. "We are SO students, and we do like this. Everyone else has to follow behind". We participate in the constitution day parade we have a choir and we play quidditch in the breaks. It's very open, it's something for everyone. I have never heard about anyone who is dissatisfied with their choice [of school].

Interviewer: You participate in the parade. Is that special?

Foss also does, but we are the only upper secondary schools who do. We are the last ones in the parade, so many people join in behind. We have breakfast at school together first, and then the choir sings at the cemetery in front of everyone before we leave for the parade.

This is a very typical activity for the constitution day in Norway, but many of the upper secondary schools and their students prioritise their specific "russetid" and do the constitution day celebration in a less formal way.

The theatre marks a very different interest for performing arts at SO than the revues that are common at many of the other upper secondary schools in Oslo. There are some views upon it being a bit more challenging to attract audience and get it reviewed in the newspaper, and as such less appealing than the revues, but it is nonetheless backed by most of the students. They are proud of the theatre and that SO is different from the others, even though it might be perceived as special. This also resonates well with the diversity embracement, and a general view that those with interest for revue can attend other schools. There is interest for revues at SO nonetheless, and Sofia tells about an interesting encounter when she and three friends went to see the revue at OCS: "We felt so lonely, we were standing in a group, we were entirely normal, wearing what we usually wear and was just about to see the revue. But it was like being in... communism! They were looking exactly the same." Then she goes on to praise

the revue saying she was surprised and that it really was good, both the jokes, the performances, the show and pretty much all its aspects. Especially she was impressed with how timely and political the jokes were. But there is one thing she did not like: “I did not like their program. They had a program, and it was filled with typos and it was completely terrible to read. So, my prejudice was correct after all, OCS was back to the way one supposes OCS to be.

5.6 Questionnaire

At SO we interviewed 39 students and got response to the questionnaire from all of them. Again, this is information on where they lived, their parents’ occupations, and information on cars, bedrooms, computers, books and money at their disposal. Comparing to the four from Oslo east at OCS, the sample at SO is clearly different. There are 21 students from Oslo east at SO, and 17 from the west – leaving one student out of the count. This student actually lived outside of Oslo, but registered as living at her grandmother’s apartment in Oslo in order to be able to attend SO. It is only one example but shows a clear ambition about where to attend school. The parents all have prominent positions with a slight lean towards cultural sector – there is a film producer, several artists, architects and authors among the parents. Twelve students claimed to have more than 1000 books at home (31% compared to 26% at OCS). Ten of them reported having access to two or more cars, equalling 26% – half of the amount at OCS, but still higher than the average in Oslo. Only one reported not having access to a car. All except two have their own bedrooms. Two of the students reported not having been on vacations the last year, where seventeen reported having been on one vacation. Eight students reported having been on two vacations, whereas eleven reported having been on two or more vacations. This is a slightly different picture than from OCS, where many more had been on several vacations. Thirty of the students have two or more computers at home. When it comes to money at disposal during a month for the students at SO, the numbers are as following:

Table 5.2 *Response to the question: “How much money do you have at your disposal monthly?”*

NOK	Nr. of students
100–499	6
500–999	16
1000–1999	7
2000–2999	6
3000–4999	2
5000 +	2

This is much lower than the money at disposal for the students at OCS, probably having consequences for life at school.

5.7 Conclusion

Persson (2016, p. 1) and several Swedish researchers (see for example Börjesson et al., 2015; Bihagen et al., 2013) have claimed that the notions of egalitarianism in the educational debate actually obscures the fact that institutions for elite schooling exist in Scandinavia, and historically has been a part of the societies. Agreeing with this claim, this is an attempt that hopes for allowing more research on elite schooling in Scandinavia and the mechanisms of social stratification at work within the institution.

Rather than taking a critical approach focusing on the distinctions made by the students, I have been preoccupied with trying to understand their surroundings and how they relate to them. They are not merely products of their background but exist and participate in a cultural context which they negotiate in different ways. The rituals, as symbolic sequences of action repeated as tradition with specific dates, places and participants, are a part of this institutional setting the students negotiate, and as such provides a good entry point for understanding the arenas. Gaztambide-Fernandéz (2009, p. 136) have pointed out the importance of rituals for elite schools in creating shared experiences and the self-understanding of the students as distinguished

from other adolescents; “it generates implicit boundaries around entitlement and gives students a sense of certainty about their future”. The importance and intensity of the rituals regarding, for instance, creating identity and/or community varies, as this chapter shows, according to how people negotiate them. I hope to have shown how the meaning-making activities of the students at SO and OCS are deeply cultural and more than the strategical image of an elite student that is most often brought forward in the sociological research.

The presentation of the strikingly different school cultures at SO and OCS have hopefully shown how different paths towards elite identities exist in Norway. The knowledge of and experience from these cultures provide the students with advantages in their life afterwards, and especially the symbolic mastery of being part of an elite institution in an egalitarian society such as in Norway can be considered an asset of importance to which they have had privileged access.