

## Chapter 7

# Discussion and conclusions

The last decade has seen a revival in elite studies in Western academia, in which this book can be seen as a part in some ways. Some of these studies often argue that increased inequality demands a return to the hitherto long and strong tradition of focusing on the working class since elite studies are understood to have put them on hold (Ljunggren, 2016, pp. 33–38). This is an example of Abbotts’ point about research being cyclical – after a period of studies of one subject with one perspective, one tends to either change the subject or the perspective and investigate how that might bring about other findings. This book, on the other hand, argues the need for understanding elites in their own right, and for us to understand something new, as also advocated by Larsen (2019) and Farrell (2020). There is still more work to be done. Central questions in such a regard are: What goes on within these elite institutions and how do their members construct meaning? To get a fuller understanding, these affective and subjective aspects of elites are important to understand. In other words, from my perspective there is a danger of repeating *sociologisms* if the meaningful aspects or the “content” of art is not taken into consideration (Benzecry & Collins, 2014; Eyerman, 2006). The process of consecration that elites have to relate to, are often analysed from the outside, looking at awards and prestigious schools and results, but how are they made sense of from the perspective of those who either contribute to the process or are subject to it?

A wide international literature on elites, elite education, and elite institutions have been consulted. In order to understand the negotiations at hand however, a chapter on different contributions to the formation of Norwegian identity was also necessary. As Kuipers (2012, p. 20) pointed out: “our Self ... is partly determined by the country where we have grown up”, even though many countries experience less similarities internally now than during the

first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The national narratives may not be as defining for inhabitants today, but they are nonetheless available, and possible to put to use. Rather than comparing empirically across national borders, two institutions that are studied in international sociology are chosen for this study because they are new terrain in Norway. “All research compares”, as Kuipers (2012, p. 21) stated.

As the first chapter pointed out, I have been particularly interested in consecration and the construction of cultural hierarchies, elite statuses, and the egalitarian culture in Norway. In order to answer the main research question, I broke it into two sub-questions, and I also had four guiding questions throughout the project. These were:

- *Sub-RQ1*: How do elite school students make sense of their position?
- *Sub-RQ2*: How do literary critics assign value and thereby construct cultural hierarchies?
- *Guiding Question 1*: How does the egalitarian culture of Norway manifest itself in accounts of assumed elites?
- *Guiding Question 2*: How are cultural hierarchies legitimised in an egalitarian culture?
- *Guiding Question 3*: What does it mean to be an elite member in an egalitarian culture?
- *Guiding Question 4*: How is the elite culture of the institutions made sense of by actors?

The matter of how egalitarian the Norwegian culture really is, is not easily measured, and the fact that the number of farmers in Norway in the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century was lower than many would expect cannot work as a counter-argument to the presence of egalitarianism. Egalitarianism may be taken to relate to *affective* structures of the culture, such as moral standards and normative views, while inequality and elite relates to *distributional* structures, such as economy and statistical descriptions. In other words, it is possible to inhabit privilege correctly and incorrectly (Sherman, 2017), and in Norway this is closely related to how one manages the repertoire of egalitarianism, as well as more international trends, such as the “democratisation of tastes and styles” (Wouters, 2007). The coexistence of egalitarianism and inequality does not necessarily constitute contradictory discourses, rather they are brought

together in different ways when actors make sense of status differences. Rather than shedding new light on national self-understandings, this book argues that it is an ongoing process, where actors make up new meanings. The “critical” tendency to view egalitarianism as a way of hiding *actual* inequality makes an error in the understanding of egalitarianism, I argue. To say, for instance, that “we imagine ourselves to be more equal than we are”, as a sort of confrontation, lacks the understanding of egalitarianism as a cultural repertoire that is possible to use in a variety of ways, not only in a “negative” way to hide or obfuscate, but also in a “positive” way to make something morally worthy or simply to express normative views on how one thinks something should be, rather than how it is. I find it is also problematic to treat inequality as more real than egalitarianism, since both are subject for interpretation. On the other hand, social inequalities have been increasing in Western Europe during the last decades, and gained a lot of scholarly attention, but it is still an open question whether egalitarian norms or national narratives affects social stratification, and, if so, how (Kuipers, 2012).

The relationship between egalitarianism and inequality affects a lot of situations in which sociological studies might be useful in understanding, for instance when it comes to questions of ranking culture. Why does ranking of culture tend to become a controversial subject? It might have something to do with the role of morality and the Norwegian middle class preferences for nature instead of culture. Cultural judgments are quite “mute” in Norway (Vassenden & Jonvik, 2018), and when they are expressed, they take the form of “conspicuous modesty”. The resistance towards ranking culture might thus be understood as a display of modesty. Both of the sub-research questions must be answered with the use of egalitarianism as a repertoire. The specific answers can be found in Chapters 5 and 6, as well as in Halvorsen (2020), Halvorsen and Ljunggren (2021) and Halvorsen (2022). Both the elite school students and the critics employ this narrative in their accounts. The elite school students locate their families in Norwegian history, their openness about having a privileged position is a way of making it morally worthy. In other words, the co-existence of egalitarianism and inequality has a long history and is often unproblematic. But for the sociologist, speaking metaphorically, they constitute two geologic plates that sometimes break against each other, thus creating tensions and problems in society. Such as when prizes and credibility are awarded “wrongly”, and the criteria for awarding is vague, or when

access to certain types of education becomes obviously based on economy or competition. In such cases, arguments are mobilised in order to affect the outcome, and as such becomes a way of understanding society.

As background for my understanding of these processes the concept of consecration has been central. I regard the people I have interviewed as in the midst of consecrating processes. As written in the introduction, with reference to Lizé (2016), consecration implies a distinction between a select group that is worthy and the much larger group that is not. Lizé focused specifically on cultural creators and artworks, while I and others (Malmqvist, 2017; Želinský, 2020), expand the concept of consecration to other parts of society. In other words, the critics try to make the distinction between what is worthy and what is not, but they are only few of the actors interested in doing this explicitly. Their valuation depends on recognition from the readers. Elite schools also try to elevate students above the ordinary level, but in order to do so they are dependent upon being recognised by society as elite venues. Thus, the full picture of consecration is yet to be explored, as “the receiving end”, or the recognising part, is not studied in this project. Still, this is a first necessary step, to look at the consecration process from the inside, of how it is to be situated in the midst of it.

## **7.1 How the historical elite institutions are negotiated**

The elite status of the two institutions studied here relies in part on their historical authority, and their history of being elite venues. The schools have traditionally had students from elite backgrounds, and the students have entered elite positions later on, and the literary criticism have consisted mostly of people with elite backgrounds. Today, this is not necessarily the case, especially not for literary criticism, which has had a much more diverse recruitment after higher education became more accessible. However, there are still clear patterns as to who undertakes what kinds of studies. The different histories of the institutions, despite sharing elite characteristics, facilitate different ways of negotiating the elite statuses. Roughly put there are three types of responses in the empirical material: At *Schola Osloensis* the elite status is played down as something the students are hesitant about, while at the Oslo Commerce School it is recognised. The literary critics tend to talk

about historical examples when talking about the elite status, so the accounts are highly historicised, whereas the elite status of today is being questioned. The accounts of the students at the elite schools are not historicised, but rather preoccupied with the present condition and their immediate surroundings, especially the confirmation of their peers. In the following, I will elaborate these points with reference to the empirical material.

As I show in Chapter 5 and Halvorsen (2022), elite status is downplayed at *Schola Osloensis*. I use the interview with Cecilia (balanced upper middle class) as an example, where she told me:

*I don't really want to call us [elite], but I know that there is a sort of consciousness around maybe confirming that we are, in a way. I mean, yes, we're an elite school because we're so proud of our traditions, and these paintings, and that it's so great and we get good grades, and yada, yada... So yeah, that's why I have a kind of negative... [Elite] is a negative word for me...*

And when I asked her what an elite school is, she elaborated:

*Elite school, it's like – what I – or it's like almost everybody has an impression of like “yes, we are the best” (mimicking a self-indulgent voice). And then I don't want to – I won't call it an elite school anymore, because, yes of course there are good, good grades and – but I think it's like that in many other places as well.*

Together, these quotes are an example of what resonated in the other interviews at *Schola Osloensis* as well. They are hesitant, but aware of some special status surrounding the school. Given other research on the same schools, finding specific types of stress developing (Pedersen & Eriksen, 2019), this might be seen as a defence mechanism, to convince themselves that they are attending a public school just like “everybody else”.

In Chapter 5 and Halvorsen and Ljunggren (2021) the case for Oslo Commerce School is elaborated upon specifically regarding the boys, but this also goes for the girls. They have a less tense relationship to calling it an elite school than the students at *Schola Osloensis*, however they do distance themselves from being snobbish or “traditional”. I write that the history of the school is

something they learn at OCS, and that the stories become symbolic means of production that they have privileged access to, but this is not mobilised specifically in the interviews. Magnus is the one whose statements on whether or not OSC is an elite school are quoted, he equated Oxford and Cambridge in England with OCS in Norway, as elite schools in the sense that they let you “become something”, he says. To compare one’s school with Oxford and Cambridge tells us that he positions the school in an elevated group.

When the critics are interviewed about elite status, they talk about the history of criticism. In Article 2, I quote the critic from *Bergens Tidende* on elite culture as a kind of premise for good literary criticism:

Criticism as an institution was established in a totally different culture than what we have now, in an elite culture, where a small part of the culture read *Morgenbladet* and *Aftenposten*, and newspapers like that, they’re concerned with aesthetic questions, they are educated in the way that they have read Goethe and Shakespeare and the like ... And then you get the democratisation of the culture, and then it becomes more of a stir, maybe ... The loss of an elite culture has been of great significance for literary criticism, there’s no doubt about that.

This critic is concerned about the loss of an elite culture, since he regards this as something that lifts the criticism to an elite status as well. Today this is not the case, he said. The idea of a need for an elite culture is not shared by all the critics. However, when asked about the eliteness, they all tend to make similar reflections on the history of criticism. In other words, whether criticism is an elite activity or not might be contested or uncertain at least, but the fact that it has been such is not questioned.

The category of ahistorical, where I put both of the student groups, means that they do not use the history of their schools or institutions to legitimise an elite status. It does not mean that they are not aware of the history of their schools, they might very well be, but they do not mobilise this in their answers. In other words, they are focused on the present, and they consider the school important as one among many aspects of their lives. When they talk about elite status, they talk about grades and compare themselves to other schools.

## 7.2 Discussion

Consecration takes time and works differently within different spheres. In some places there are specific gatekeepers with criteria one must fulfil to enter, whereas in other places there are not. These criteria are not necessarily as absolute as they might sound, they are subject to negotiation and change within the cohort, or between cohorts, as well as changes in technicalities. If we for instance use school admission, the grade levels regulate admission in Norway, but the grade level at the different schools is changing from year-to-year. Where some have more or less stable recruitment from high performing students, others are posed with challenging ruptures and potential loss in status (Oslo Commerce School could be a potential case of this latter category). Even though there are many symbolic aspects allegedly working positively for schools in the city centre of Oslo, these depend on how they are perceived by potential students in the end. A traditional elite school might be perceived as both challenging and interesting, or as backward and passé. Nowadays, high culture is less associated with elites than before, and several studies find “snobbishness” and “feeling superior to others” to be characteristics elites no longer have or admit to having (Bennett et al., 2009; Chan, 2019; Farrell, 2020; Friedman & Reeves, 2020; Kuipers, 2012). Instead, increasing egalitarianism and informalisation have “obfuscated inequality” (Kuipers, 2012, p. 26). It all depends on how the tradition is interpreted and put to use. Just like criticism, the schools have to be re-consecrated continually to maintain their status, and in many ways this is the same as legitimation work, though not necessarily as strategic as legitimation work might sound. Schools becomes re-consecrated by restating their central missions in society, and the reasons why society is a better place with them present. In other words, students, and most likely also teachers, parents, and others, are aware of the sacrality of these institutions, and they uphold it through everyday actions.

In the case of literature, consecration might be a more obvious concept to use, in that it is a more common concept in the cultural sphere. Consecration has been studied in movies, music, and other artistic forms. Sociologically I find it interesting because the criteria are relational. The question of quality, which is often made the most important, is almost an ultimate question of interpretation. Who decides which interpretation is the best? How can interpretations be ranked or hierarchised? In a recent comment upon the Critics

Association in Norway's announcement of the "ten best critics in Norwegian history", Frode Helmich Pedersen (2019) wrote that the list should (this was before it was announced) consist of the ten critics who most often had correct judgments. However, it is far from easy to make that statement, since it implies a final answer of the quality of a book, and also it dismisses the potential importance of making wrong judgments (as Scott 2016 pointed out as a quality of reviewing). Ultimately, the contribution in this book is to show how these are questions that critics grapple within their work on a continual basis, and also how they do it. The students also participate in consecration activities, but to a large degree they are subject to them – their choice of school is often related to the knowledge of how consecrating a venue it has – this book also brings information on consecration from that perspective.

### **7.3 Limitations and directions for future research**

As indicated in the articles, I strongly encourage more research into both of these areas, which have hitherto not been given the attention they deserve. This project involves many people from many parts of society, both geographically and along other social variables, but from few organisations. Therefore, a natural step further would be to design studies that have a comparative dimension, either across organisations like different critics, prize committees, sports decisions (who to select for academy programs and the like), or across countries, as for instance doing a comparative study of elite students in Scandinavia, England, and France.

For the subject of consecration, it is also necessary to look at the receiving end, or the audience aspect of the matter. That is why critics and others doing cultural judgments are trusted and regarded as credible. I find Grant Blank's (2007) introduction of "Sociology of Reviews" as a productive path forward and consider there to be potential theoretical and empirical gains from exploring this further. Given the increasing amount of information available, second-hand opinions, expert judgments, and recommendations should be of great interest for sociologists trying to understand contemporary society.

Ultimately, sociology needs more insight into aesthetic matters, but it has to avoid standing on the outside of the creative parts of art in society. This is not to suggest that there is an actual core of art that we have to enter, but



that to better understand society we also have to dare to believe in beauty in academic research, and not put it aside for our leisure time.

## 7.4 Conclusion

By combining cultural sociology and repertoire theory (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2007; Daloz, 2010, 2013; Lamont, Lamont, & Thevenot, 2007; Larsen, 2015), I argue the importance of acknowledging complex cultural and aesthetic matters, and avoid accounts where actors are given unacknowledged motivations in empirical studies of consecration. In the research on critics and students, this study relates to ongoing academic debates over elites and culture, and adds nuance to questions on egalitarianism, status, performance of gender, and elite culture. I show how elite students vary across schools, and how critics vary among themselves, with regard to how they talk about the elite status of the institutions of which they are a part. Altogether, this shows how the institutions “do not emerge out of thin air” but change and are upheld in relation to national traditions, habits and conventions (Kuipers, 2012; Lamont & Thévenot, 2000).