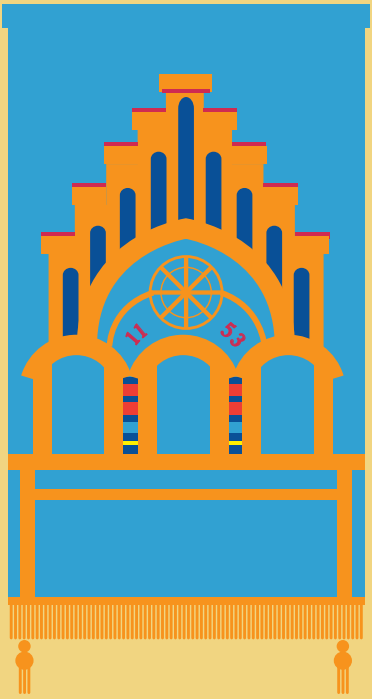
PÅL CSASZNI HALVORSEN

Egalitarian consecration

THE MAKING OF EGALITARIAN NORWAY AND HISTORICAL ELITE INSTITUTIONS



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Preface

This book is an edited version of my Ph.D. dissertation in sociology from 2020 with two newly written chapters (5 and 6). Many people should and could be thanked in this regard, but I will keep it short. First, thank you to everyone who participated in the interviews and shared their time and perspectives on different matters. Secondly, I would like to thank my advisors who have been of great inspiration: Kjetil Ansgar Jakobsen at Nord university, Håkon Larsen at OsloMet and Ron Eyerman at Yale University. I have had the good fortune of having people close to me outside of academia which I also include in my work and who provide me with help and motivation: Fredrik Wilhelmsen, Andrea Csaszni Rygh, and Torgeir Holljen Thon especially. I also must thank Anna Lund, Aksel Tjora and editor Balder Holm for their invaluable feedback on the dissertation and on how to turn it into a book. At last, I want to thank Nord university and the Faculty of Social Sciences for providing great circumstances for writing a dissertation. Nord university has also provided economic support for this open access publication. I hope it's fun to read and that it might stimulate a sociological curiosity among the readers.

Oslo, 26.04.2024
Pål Csaszni Halvorsen

Sammendrag: Hva er historiske eliteinstitusjoner, og hvordan er det å være en del av dem i det som betegnes som en særpreget egalitær kultur? Der hvor tidligere studier av eliter i Norge har gått kvantitativt til verks, og sett på sosial reproduksjon, tar denne avhandlingen en kvalitativ tilnærming og ser på kulturelle aspekter og konkrete erfaringer knyttet til å være en del av historiske eliteinstitusjoner. Halvorsen ser på eliteskoler og litteraturkritikk som eksempler på eliteinstitusjoner, det vil si institusjoner som har knyttet til seg visse kulturelle forestillinger om "elite". I studien finner han en rekke ulike måter aktører forholder seg til det å være del av historiske eliteinstitusjoner. Han finner blant annet at det å være del av en institusjon med elitetradisjoner ikke nødvendigvis innebærer at man interesserer seg for elitekultur eller kommer til å inneha en eliteposisjon selv; snarere er det slik at både eliteskole-elevene og litteraturkritikerne som er intervjuet strever med disse forestillingene og heller knytter seg til den egalitære tradisjonen. Slik sett argumenteres det i avhandlingen for at egalitære tradisjoner ikke er et slør for å skjule elitetilhørighet, men at forståelser av elite i Norge er sterkt preget av den egalitære tradisjonen.

*Nøkkelord***:** Egaliatarianisme, eliteskoler, elite, litteraturkritikk, kultursosiologi

Abstract: What are historical elite institutions, and how is it to be a part of them in an allegedly egalitarian culture? In contrast to earlier studies of elites in Norway, this book takes a qualitative approach and focus on cultural aspects and everyday experiences that are a part of historical elite institutions. The two empirical institutions are elite high schools and literary criticism, being historical elite institutions because they have cultural connotations of "eliteness" tied to them. The study finds different ways in which actors manoeuvre how they are a part of the historical elite institutions, for example it does not entail an interest in elite culture or striving to achieve an elite position on a personal level. More accurately, both students and critics struggle with these cultural aspects and instead connect themselves to a broader tradition of egalitarianism in Norway. In that regard the book argues that egalitarian traditions are not a veil to hide elite membership, but that perceptions of what elite is in Norway are strongly coloured by the egalitarian tradition.

*Keywords***:** Egalitarianism, Elite Education, Elite, Book Reviewing, Cultural Sociology

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Chapter 1

Introduction

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

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

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

the social sciences[1] have described Norwegian culture as egalitarian, providing resources for meaning-making to which this study relates in multiple ways; notably these resources are available to and referred to by the interviewees. A third chapter on theoretical and conceptual approaches is then followed by a fourth chapter on the methodological approach, before the fifth chapter delves into the material and analyses. A conclusion with suggestions for further research closes the book.

1.1 Elites and elite culture in Norway

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

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

1 Sociology and social anthropology mostly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.2 National consecration

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

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

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

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

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

Norway's oldest school specialising in commercial education from 1875; Oslo Commerce School [Oslo handelsgymnas] is also studied in this book, in addition to *Schola Osloensis*. They are both elite schools within the public system, which is free of charge. They are both located in the city centre of Oslo. However, Oslo Commerce School is closer to symbolically important institutions such as the royal castle, the parliament and the ministry of foreign affairs (as well as the former U. S. Embassy[4]). During the Second World War, the school building was used as a command centre for the occupying German troops, which also built a bunker underneath it, which today is a museum. The history of the school is nonetheless proud, with numerous important alumni, such as ministers of both finance and foreign affairs.

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

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

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

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

1.3 Historical elite institutions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Chapter 2

The making of egalitarian Norway

Discourses on equality and elite formation in Norway have been developed and shaped by social scientists, historians and authors over the centuries. Thus, the knowledge practices mobilised in this study are not only observers of, but also participants, even agents in the social world that is studied. This chapter will outline how authors, historians, and sociologists have discoursed on equality and helped shape the self-understanding of the Norwegian public. The need for a chapter like this appeared as soon as different conceptions of equality and nationhood appeared in the material from the interviews.

The chapter serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it will offer historical information and review literature and debates that are important to this study, but that may be less known to an international audience. Secondly, the chapter will help situate the study in a certain intellectual context and help the critical reflection of both author and reader.

The approach is to read national literature, history, and sociology[5] as self-proclaimed expert discourses on equality, discourses that have played decisive roles in the construction of national identity centred on conceptualising Norway as being a uniquely egalitarian nation. Historians, authors, and sociologists claim to know, each in their own way and for their own reasons, who the Norwegians are, and they all have proclaimed that Norway is the land of exceptional equality. Authors know this because of their artistic sensibility and their intimate relationship to the "mother tongue", historians because they know the sources and origins of the nation, and sociologists because they are

5 One could of course also include law and other social sciences, but since the empirical studies to a very little degree deals with formal or legal matters, this is not included. A good introduction and overview over questions of more legal and formal matters, see Pedersen (2018).

able to see and muster the totality of social facts. It is worth noting that the connection between historiography and the nation-state and nationalism is not (solely) a matter of ideology or agenda, as Krause (2021, p. 43) pointed out, but has "mundane institutional and material vectors" (as well). The chapter will describe from a second order perspective how this construction of national exceptionalism has been going on from the founding of Norway as a modern nation state through the Constitution of 1814, up until contemporary sociological debates. In summary, they have established different traditions, constituting repertoires of references that are available to actors in making sense of Norwegianness.

National character, conceived as a fixed mental set, is a myth; but as Michael Walzer pointed out "the sharing of sensibilities and institutions among the members of a historical community is a fact of life" (Walzer, 1983, p. 28). National identities, as well as the role and standing of cultural professionals and intellectuals in a nation are shaped through the activities of scholars and artists and codified and institutionalised by the school system and through the cultural and political institutions of the state and civil society. When identity discourses are institutionalised in this manner, notably through the schools, that may endow them with surprising inertia. For the major European nations –notably France and Germany the cultural power houses of the 19th century – these processes have been examined in detail and comparatively by historical sociologists Fritz Ringer (1969, 1992), Jürgen Kocka (1990, 1995) and Christophe Charle (2015).

As in other countries, in the 19th and 20th century, Norwegian artists as well as social scientists, engaged in the interwoven and conflictual processes of democratisation and national identity formation. Authors, historians and social scientists were poets in the original Greek sense of the term in the sense that they created a certain register for national identity, which Norwegians consider uniquely Norwegian. It has been pointed out for example by Kocka (1995) as well as Hroch (1998), Anderson (1991), and Kuipers (2012) that though people tend to understand themselves as unique, national identities are remarkably similar. Modern nations see themselves in the light of the key positive values of modernity – equality, freedom and solidarity – as well as pride in cultural achievements, natural beauty and some degree of military prowess, and they claim to be deeply rooted in history. Arguing that equality

is a national trait is not specifically Norwegian, but the general depiction nonetheless has a Norwegian version.

2.1 Inventing the nation

Europe was the birthplace of the nation-state at the end of the eighteenth century, and "took the lead in inventing (and propagating) nationhood and nationalism" (Brubaker, 1996, p. 1). The Enlightenment thought of the 18th century, notably the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), established equality as the key value of society, along with liberty and the sovereignty of the people. The American and French revolutions of the late 18th century and their corresponding constitutions put this into letter and practice. The Norwegian Constitution of 1814, parts of which remains valid today, established the same principles for Norway. The movement of 1814 was a dual or triple revolution, which established liberal constitutional government, abolished privileges and the nobility (formally only in 1821) and established an autonomous nation state linked to neighbouring Sweden only through the person of the king and a shared foreign policy. Throughout the 19th century nationalist energies were, however, ignited by the fact that Sweden was clearly the dominant partner in the loose union, controlling the joint foreign policy, with the king largely residing in Stockholm.

In Norway, as in other European countries, the 19th century was the great age of nation building. A nation is here understood as an imagined community, that is a socially constructed community imagined by people that consider themselves to be part of it (Anderson, 1991). In such an understanding, nations do not become substances and entities, but institutionalised forms, practical categories and events (Brubaker, 1996, p. 16, Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). According to Anderson, the imagined community of the nation takes place in connection with the development and generalisation of print culture in the 18th and 19th centuries, with journals and daily newspapers, publishing houses and compulsory schooling, a perspective which holds true for Norway.

Independent Norway began in 1814 as a civic nation on the French model, stressing formal civic and political rights. During the 19th century cultural nationalism of the Herderian model became more influential (Sørensen, 1998). Narratives of Norwegian nation state building often start with the

members of *Norske Selskab* ("the Norwegian society") in Copenhagen. In this developmentalist narrative, the beginnings of the Norwegian nation state started with their patriotism and cultural mobilisation, which came to fruition with the uprising in 1814 and the constitution of May 17th. The Norwegian Constitution of 1814 provided the senior civil servants, in Norwegian called *embetsmenn*, with central roles. It is described as a tightly knit status group, in Weberian terms. The lack of both nobility and a wealthy bourgeoisie with political authority in Norway, allowed a period of relatively meritocratic rules of academics. In many ways it was a rule of upper middle-class people. *Schola Osloensis*, which was established in 1153, became very influential in this period, providing the educated elites, the mandarins, with the perfect preparation for university. First, by providing priests and senior civil servants to the autocracy before 1814, and afterwards to the constitutional government. Contemporary historians, following Jens Arup Seip (1905–1992), called it *embetsmannsstaten* (1814–1884) – the civil servant state, or the mandarin state, a regime for nation building and modernisation from above, run by civil servants. The historian Peter Andreas Munch (1810–1864) and the poet Johan Sebastian Welhaven (1807–1873) were two of its central ideologists along with the jurist and economist Anton Martin Schweigaard (1808–1870). Munch and Welhaven idealised the farmer, thereby making themselves "invisible" as a ruling group. National romanticism was the ideology of *embetsmannsstaten*.

The modern parliamentarian breakthrough in 1884 took place as a revolt, in opposition to *embetsmannsstaten*. In contrast, the French democratic breakthrough in 1871 was at the same time a breakthrough for a meritocratic society based on education. In the 19th century the Royal Fredrik's University in Christiania [Oslo] was the only institution of higher education in the country. The revolt against the *ancien régime* of the *embetsmannsstat* was therefore necessarily also a revolt against the university and against the academy style literature of Welhaven and his followers. From this point on there is a distinct connection in Norway between anti-intellectualism and democracy, and it has become something that academics and intellectuals have had to manoeuvre around from early on (Jakobsen, 2011).

Norwegian intellectuals of the 18th and 19th century drew models and arguments from the European intellectual discourse of the time, notably the populist discourse of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johan Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803), cherishing the authenticity and cultural vitality of peasant

culture. Early in the beginning a discourse developed, which was sceptical of an imported general European culture, stigmatised as *finkultur* (Jakobsen, 1995, 1997). Originally developed as a form of national romanticism by authors and historians affiliated with the ruling *embetsmenn* of the urban centres, this populist ideology was soon turned against the mandarins by later liberal and socialist movements.

When the *embetsmannsstat* ended, opposition groups merged in the party *Venstre* [the Left], and introduced parliamentary government based on political parties. The opposition had been building all the way since the 1860s. The historian Ernst Sars (1835–1917) was a key ideologist, along with the author Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832–1910). The two idealised the oppositional activities of author Henrik Wergeland (1808–1845) in the 1830s and helped create a politically effective "Wergeland myth" and the concept of "poetocracy", which I deal with in the next part on literature.

2.2 "Poetocracy"

"Poetocracy" seems to have originated as a pejorative and satirical term in the late 19th century. It was Johan Ernst Sars, however, who in 1902 turned the pun into a serious concept. It aimed at explaining the position and role of authors in Norway at a formative period in the 19th century and up until around 1900. He claimed that authors, in their cultural creativity, defined what Norwegian culture was, and had an enormous impact on public as well as political life. Not only did they impact decisions, but they actually made them through their implicit and explicit work. Sars wrote this in an article about Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's influence on Norwegian politics, as a *digter-politiker* [a poet politician], but also used Henrik Wergeland as an example.

Wergeland is generally considered the finest Norwegian poet ever. By the time Sars wrote about Wergeland, he was already well on his way to be canonised as the poet of the nation, in a role similar to that of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller in Germany, Victor Hugo in French republicanism, or Adam Mickiewicz in Poland. Unlike the national romantics of the previous generation, Sars stressed the political radicalism of Wergeland, his role as one the leaders of the opposition to the dominance of *embetsmennene*. Wergeland, in short, was depicted by Sars as both the symbolic founding father

of modern Norway, and of the patriotic Venstre-coalition of farmers and liberal townspeople who brought down the rule of the *embetsmenn* in 1884, making the Government accountable to the parliament. Wergeland edited *Statsborgeren* [The Citizen (of the State)], the leading opposition newspaper of the time, and he was active both in the student, farmer and working people organisations.

Wergeland was a tremendously prolific writer in all genres, notably poetry and drama, in addition to being a historian. Unable, due to his radicalism, to get any position in the Norwegian civil service, the king would eventually try to appease the situation by arranging him a post as national archivist (Storsveen, 2008). His father, Nicolai, was one of the writers of the Constitution of 1814, an *eidsvollsmann*, and patriotism and Rousseauian radicalism ran thick in his family. Kåre Lunden (1995) explicitly names Henrik Wergeland as one of the most influential thinkers in Norwegian historiography, amongst others due to his *Norges Konsititions Historie* [The History of the Norwegian Constitution] (1841–3), even though he was "hardly an empirically outstanding researcher". He played an important part, together with Keyser and P.A. Munch, in shaping the Norwegian national narrative of the 19th century. Despite, or perhaps because, his notoriety with the authorities, and despite living a short life, he was something of a media celebrity, with a huge crowd following him to his grave when he died at age 37 in 1845. Wergeland wrote a huge number of letters and newspaper columns that have been the basis for several literary studies, and the largest collection of his writings is at the library of the high school he attended, namely *Schola Osloensis*. Sars named the period from 1830–1845 "the Wergeland period" and claimed that Wergeland personified what went on at the time (Fulsås, 1999, p. 254).

Whereas Wergeland represented the youthful and enthusiastic lust for a new national culture, Bjørnson represented the full-grown and responsible version, according to Sars. They both had a need to be agitators and public intellectuals as well as authors, but in a mutually reinforcing manner, where the different activities advanced each other. The most important for them was to "take hold of matters in life". Understanding the farmers was of vital importance for them both if we are to believe Sars. The historian holds, however, that where Wergeland was an enthusiast who wrote for and about farmers, but never understood them, Bjørnson managed to paint "true and touching images of the Norwegians farmer's inner life". Wergeland and Bjørnson were also separate in their views on Scandinavianism, where Bjørnson in his youth

was clearly in favour, while Wergeland was a Norwegian patriot and a cosmopolitan. In the 19th century, politicians had to deal with poets "and prophets" entering the political stage with their "fantasies and moralism". Sars creates the impression of politics as an almost bureaucratic and grey chore, in need of external injection of fantasy and moral, which was what the authors provided. "Big targets are not achieved through small measures", he writes polemically. In other words, we get the impression that authors could bring "big words" and great ideas to a political debate that lacked temperature.

The stride between Wergeland and Welhaven is well known in Norway, as it is a part of the curriculum for everyone in the Norwegian education system. Wergeland's free and avantgarde poems are read with Welhaven's bourgeoisie ("finkulturelle") rhyme-based ones as a contrast, and in many ways, they are exactly that. They were contemporaries, and they explicitly disapproved of each other's artistic visions. In many ways this can be read as an example of Bourdieu's distinction between avant-garde culture and bourgeois culture, that is between preferences for the heavy and the light, left and right bank theatre, and so on. Welhaven constitutes the autonomous pole of the literary field, which was being created, whereas Wergeland pioneers the heteronomous. Welhaven and his circle, which was happy to let itself be known as "intelligensen" [the circle of intelligence], pioneered a new continental style of educated urban life, where both genders met in clubs or salons to drink wine or tea, converse and enjoy culture. Wergeland would often wear peasant clothing and indulged in the traditional drinking bouts of student life. Wergeland's mix of avant-garde poetry, popular dress, bohemian lifestyle, social engagement, and patriotic fervour, and his claim to be authentic in defiance of conventions – his most famous poem is *Mig selv* [Myself]; it all came together and set a model, a habitus perhaps, on which the Norwegian field of literature has drawn ever since. Every pretender to a hegemonic position in the Norwegian field of literature is measured in light of "the Wergeland myth". With the great influence of Wergeland's model, and the limited influence of Welhaven's, it may be that literature fits the Bourdieusian model less neatly in Norway than in some other European countries because of the prestige of heteronomous literature. The legacy of the poetocracy is literary avant-gardism in favour of equality and common culture (a similarity with the American literary canon, exemplified with Emerson and Hemingway for instance, whereas the French, German and English literature rests on altogether different conceptions of literature and culture). Norwegian

literature might as such be an anomaly (Tavory & Timmermanns, 2011; Vassenden, 2018), in that heteronomous literature in many ways inhabits a higher position than theory would assume. However, the examples that do not neatly fit in with theory, provide an opportunity to theorise and discuss theorising in sociology. The position of Wergeland is connected to the close link between nationalism and liberalism in Norway, that enabled cultural expressions of societal matters and gave them a priority it lacked in some other countries. This is what Sars meant by "poetocracy", which did not occur to such an extent in Denmark and Sweden because they were old, well-established nation states, where liberalism and nationalism were more distinct, according to Sars. On the other hand, Sars tended to overlook the less flattering aspects of the authors and reduced them to characters in his own storytelling.

As the section on historical accounts will show, there have been noteworthy elites in Norwegian history, and also in cultural life, but elitism, and culture that is not rooted in egalitarianism, has had a hard time getting accepted (Stenseth, 1993). In other words, it could be so that elitism, even when meritocratically grounded, has an especially weak position in Norway compared to other countries. Another cultural influence worth mentioning in this regard is the Haugianism, after the Norwegian lay priest Hans Nielsen Hauge, who won great popular support for a Norwegian version of the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, while challenging the authority of the educated elites (Myhre, 2004, p. 129).

The concept "poetocracy" has become part of Norwegian self-conceptions. It has been expanded to include other central authors such as Henrik Ibsen and Alexander Kielland. They all wrote in a period often explained by the Danish literary historian Georg Brandes' formulation of the objective of literature in society: "to set up problems for debate". Central works from this period dealt with the role of bourgeoisie families, and public life – the break from a traditional period, towards a modern phase. Alexander Kielland wrote from the city of Stavanger about the challenges of merchants and ordinary folks. His novel *Arbeidsfolk* [Labourers] from 1881, is in many ways an articulation of *standssamfunnet* [The Society of Status Groups], where the different leaders of parts of the work organisations use the highest title when they refer to each other. By doing this they underline verticality, and rank. Another central novel by Kielland is *Gift* [Poison] about the teaching of Latin in school, which Kielland criticises. Also in this novel, we find a break with the traditional (Latin as a

school subject), and an emphasis of modern society, where school is supposed to be more open. Ibsen wrote about women's position in society in *Et dukkehjem* [A Doll's House], the role of religious belief in *Brand* and the role of dissidents in political cultures in *En folkefiende* [An Enemy of the People], for instance. Jakobsen (2004) claimed that Ibsen raised the literary field in Norway to higher levels of autonomy, in an analogical manner to what Flaubert did in France, according to Bourdieu's *The Rules of Art*. They self-objectivated themselves, using the literary tools at their disposal to capture various forces at play in the field of literature; thus, providing reflective autonomy in relation to those forces.

In 1970 "the poetocracy" was declared "dead", by the young philosopher Gunnar Skirbekk. It should be borne in mind that he was a social philosopher, a follower of Jürgen Habermas and a self-proclaimed speaker for the social sciences. It was the death of important culturally radical authors, such as Sigurd Hoel, Helge Krog and Arnulf Øverland, that made him claim this. Allegedly, they were the last bearers of "the poetocracy". Newly established social scientific disciplines, such as sociology and political science, were populated by people who took on the role previously held by the bearers of "the poetocracy". In short, Skirbekk proclaimed that public intellectuals were more likely to come from this background than a literary one.

In 2004; Gunnar Skirbekk revisited his prognosis about the death of "the poetocracy". He restated his views on fiction playing a vital role in *Bildung* and maintaining a political culture. Fiction "develops codes of meaning, self-conceptions and values [… it] teaches us to see ourselves and the others" (p. 438). He also reinstated the importance of literature in Norwegian history alongside the popular movements, "The discrete charm of the North", as he calls it, but he ends on a concerned note. Not only is the poetocracy dead, but this time he is also concerned for the future of philosophy and social sciences which he considers differentiated and specialised, and no longer preoccupied with public culture.

2.3 National history – egalitarianism as a national narrative

The historians were pioneers for the critical study of elites in Norway, as well as contributors to the discourse on Norwegian identity. In this part, we will look closer on a couple of influential historians and their work. "Norwegian

historical scholarship has primarily been a *national* historiography", Hubbard, Myhre, Nordby and Sogner (1995, p. 6) pointed out and drew our attention to notable examples of Norwegian historians, such as Rudolf Keyser (1804–1864), Peter Andreas Munch (1810–1864), Ernst Sars (1835–1917) and Halvdan Koht (1873–1965). The first academic historian to frame a major narrative around the theme of Norway as an exceptionally egalitarian nation seems to have been Rudolf Keyser. Together with P.A. Munch, he was the leading exponent of what Danish historians with some sarcasm called "The Norwegian historical school" (a pun on the famous "German historical school"). Based on speculative philological and no archaeological evidence, Keyser and Munch claimed that Norwegians (and some of the Swedes) were a Norse group, who had wandered in from the North, while the Danes and southern Swedes descended from Germans. This is known as "the immigration theory", constituting Norwegians as a unique people. This "theory" was soon to be accepted as truth in the Norwegian population, according to Dahl (1959, p. 51). Rudolf Keyser and P. A. Munch are understood as national romantics (Kjeldstadli, 1995). They explicitly connected Norwegian culture with values such as democracy and freedom and highlighted the foundation in the allodial right ("Odelsretten") as a building block for Norway, providing freeholders with absolute authority in political meetings, the "ting", and making farmers a unifying force in the history.

The historical interpretations by Keyser and Munch of Norwegian national development have strongly influenced public debate and self-perception (Dahl, 1995; Melve, 2010). Marte Mangset (2009, p. 424) argued that these formative decades not only formed the content of historical research, but also how Norwegian historians perceive themselves as disciplinary agents up until today. They were preoccupied with explaining how Norwegian culture and identity was formed, and doing so in a culture they themselves were a part of.

In his overview over Norwegian historiography and central actors, Lunden (1995) wrote: "All of these looked for the essential Norwegian history and Norwegian nationality among the farmers". He dates Norwegian egalitarianism to the farmers' "Storting" [parliament] of 1833 and 1836, and the 1837 law of on municipal councils. The main point is that the Norwegian society was not feudal as in Sweden and Denmark, and thus were more open and egalitarian. However, one can question this depiction of Sweden, which like Norway has a continuous tradition since the medieval ages of free, self-owning

farmers with parliamentary representation, and which unlike Denmark and Norway, never turned into an autocracy (Bengtsson, 2019; Piketty, 2019), but this seems to be of lesser importance to Lunden. For Lunden, a fundamental trait of these early historians is an evolutionary perspective and a teleological conception of history as progressive towards the better. He dates it back to Henrik Wergeland's writings: "[H]e developed the main lines in theories which later became more known through Ernst Sars" (Lunden, 1995, p. 33). The historical work laid the basis for the work of a national cultural revival, played out by Per Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe, who gathered and wrote down popular fairy tales, Welhaven, Bjørnson and Ibsen, who wrote plays that thematised Norway and Norwegian identity, Johan Christian Dahl and Adolph Tidemann, who painted landscapes from around the country, its fjords and mountains, and Ole Bull, who composed music with elements from traditional cultures. This period (ca. 1840–1870) is known as the national romanticism (Dahl, 1959, p. 44), where international influences from Johann Gottfried von Herder, gave inspiration to develop their own national works rooted in Norwegian folk culture. Central was the search for culture among farmers and common people, and the high culture of earlier times in Norway was disapproved of, according to Lunden (1995, p. 37). As will be mentioned several times throughout this book, the period of national romanticism has been influential in creating a self-conception of the Norwegian society, where equality and sameness is central, and inequality and eliteness under-communicated. The reason for this is thought to be the need for proving a national identity to oneself, because of the Norwegian state and society's weak position internationally at the time (Dahl, 1959, p. 44).

In addition to Herder, influences from Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Friedrich von Schelling are put forth by Kjeldstadli (1995) as important for the national romanticism, and he points out an affinity for ethnographic approaches. Despite being influenced by these international references, Kjeldstadli (1995, p. 55) claimed that they looked "upon theory as a necessary evil or even a nuisance". Norwegian historiography was known for emphasising the craftsman's ideology in favour of a more theoretical approach. Dahl (1959, p. 19) also pointed out that common European *isms* such as "romanticism", "nationalism", and "liberalism" also influenced different generations and schools of historians, but as "unreflexive and unobtrusive schemas of thought". Kjeldstadli (1995) describes Sars as believing in a step-by-step progress towards

freedom. Sars' writings are described as having four traits: (1) evolutionism, (2) belief in progress, (3) idealism and (4) searching for explanatory laws. Dahl (1956) described Sars as a positivist. The inexplicitness of theory goes through other important historians as well, such as Halvard Koht, Edvard Bull Jr., Sverre Steen, Jens Arup Seip and Andreas Holmsen. Kjeldstadli nonetheless interprets their works in order to explain the theoretical underpinnings of their writings. There are differences, but mostly there is unity, a "quarrelsome unity" (Kjeldstadli, 1995, p. 52). The one that stands out is Ottar Dahl, who wrote the only purely theoretical work produced by any major Norwegian historian, a study on causation in historical research (Dahl, 1956). All the way up until the 1970s, Norwegian historiography have been considered evolution-optimistic, and one reason for this might be the long-standing Norwegian tradition of writing the nation's history for the general reader in large works of many volumes to be found in every educated Norwegian home (Lindblad, 2010; Sejersted, 1995). Also, there is a great interest in local and regional history in Norway, providing work for many historians outside of the universities. In Sweden and Denmark, national history has not enjoyed the same popularity, and thus, history might have been academized to a greater degree.

Probably the most influential Norwegian national narrative has been written by Ernst Sars. He belonged to the what is called the Lysaker Circle, a neo-elitist group of liberal intellectuals who reframed and modernised the Norwegian self-image towards the end of the 19th century (Stenseth, 1993). For Sars, the relation between elites and democracy was dialectic. He described elites as drivers of history, that fulfilled their historical mission when the culture they created was democratised and the elites themselves absolved in the totality of the nation.

The industrial and capitalistic breakthrough towards the end of the 19th Century saw an increase in wealth, and the formation of an elite in Norway as well. The Oslo Commerce School was founded during this period, in 1875, providing at the time the highest commercial education in the country. Not long after, in 1889, a law was passed that claimed that all children had an equal right to elementary education (*Folkeskoleloven* [the Law of the Volksschule]), and with it the subject of "Norwegian" that solidly founded literature as important for all to read and learn. A democratic literary ideal was founded through the reading books of Nordahl Rolfsen, where everybody was supposed to read the same, and literature was supposed to make the pupils into

"decent Norwegians" (Gujord & Vassenden, 2015, p. 285). This literary ideal in what later became known as the "One School for All" policy of Norway has persisted up until today, and at the same time at least some canonised texts have been central (Gujord & Vassenden, 2015).

Halvdan Koht is particularly interesting for being the first Norwegian historian influenced by Marx, in that he focused on divisions between classes in society. However, he read it into a question about integration, the different "classes" throughout history became integrated into the nation: first, the farmers in 1884, and then the workers in 1935, when the Labour movement came to power. He is considered a central ideologist of "Arbeiderpartiet" [The Worker's Party], and from 1935 to 1940 he was Minister of Foreign Relations.

According to Myhre (1995, p. 227), the establishment of social history at the University of Oslo was a watershed. This was mostly due to the research project "The development of Norwegian society, circa 1860–1900", which was a collective organised around Sivert Langholm. They produced four books, many articles, and over 50 master theses. They studied specific groups, instead of the nation, and used quantitative methods, hitherto uncommon.

In the second part of the 1970s, Knut Mykland edited a fifteen-volume history of Norway, which is considered the first example of social history in Norway. The use of social theory expanded, and "sociology was the main supplier" (Myhre, 1995, p. 225). Edvard Bull Jr. named the last one, the chapter on the 1970s, "The New Insecurity". This signals a shift from the positive and general account of historians to a sensitivity towards the "invisible" in history. The projects were more specific than the general narratives of former historians, but they still had the modernisation of Norway as a contextual frame. Kjeldstadli and Olstad wrote about the transition from an estate society (*standssamfunn*, as in the Weberian "Stand") to a modern class society.

The social historians, like the Norwegian sociologists at the time, took little interest in the study of elites and the educated middle classes. A critical perspective on elites was, however, offered in the very influential work of the historian Jens Arup Seip. Seip ostensibly continued the Rankean tradition of studying high level politics through the scrutiny of written sources. He did, however, give this venerable form of history writing a new twist by focusing on how political life in democracies systematically hides what according to Seip is really going on; the monopolisation of power by elites, and the struggle between and within elites. Seip conducted a critical analysis of Norwegian

19th Century elites in his study of embetsmannsstaten, and he also did so in a critical take on Norwegian social democracy (from 1945 onwards), which he named the "one party state", pinpointing the tacit alliance of the labour party machine with technocratic and bureaucratic elites. Seip, in short, was the realist who deconstructed certain national mythologies that had hitherto been propagated by the profession of historian.

Despite introducing social issues, and providing, in the case of Seip and some of his followers a more realistic understanding on the nation and its politics, the historical accounts are still known to rely on the national level, with a focus on the characteristics of Norwegian society. Sejersted (1993) called this the Norwegian *Sonderweg,* where ever since 1814 the state fostered economic growth on behalf of the citizens, compensating for the lack of a capitalist class with authority. An historical anthology with contributions from the five Nordic countries and an American editor used the phrase of Alexis de Tocqueville as a descriptive title for the egalitarian ideology underlying these societies: "A passion for equality". Central for the Norwegians were support of social harmony, and compromises in situations of conflicts of interest (Graubard, 1986). The Norwegian contribution was written by the historian Hans Fredrik Dahl, and called "Those equal folk" (Dahl, 1986).

This very brief outline of Norwegian historiography provides a background for understanding egalitarianism. The tradition of writing history from the perspective of the nation has been particularly influential in Norway, often highlighting exceptionality. A belief in Norway as the land of self-owning farmers characterised by unique equality since medieval times has been perpetuated. There is, however, no clear statistical support for the widespread belief that Norway in the nineteenth century was more egalitarian than other European countries. Income taxation was non-existent or minimal; ship owners and other businessmen made fortunes, while the salaries and accumulated wealth of the *embetsmenn* were such that it also made them something of an economic elite. In fact, historical data on wealth and income inequality show that the Norwegian levels are far from exceptional (Aaberge, Atkinson, & Modalsli, 2016). At the same time hundreds of thousands emigrated to America because of the lack of opportunity in Norway. Except for Ireland, no other European country lost a larger portion of its population to overseas emigration. One hypothesis that has been posed by Jakobsen (2019) is that emigration would not have reached such levels if wealth had been more equally distributed.

In sum, one could say that the national narrative about Norwegian egalitarianism contains mythic elements, or at least not a detailed and accurate description of societal relations, but it is a highly effective and historically powerful narrative.

I will here mention two supplemental aspects of the development of history as a subject in Norway. The first aspect is an increasing sensitivity for questions of inequality. Ericsson, Fink and Myhre (2004, pp. 8–10) were the first to study the middle classes, and they wrote: "[Scandinavian] societies were distinctively coloured by their middle classes, and yet these groups represented a shadowy and almost anonymous presence in both contemporary and historical analysis".[6] Now, after their middle-class project, the conditions changed. Myhre (2004, p. 107) claimed that one reason for the absence of the middle class(es) in Norwegian historiography might be that up until the 20th century it was a small and rather unimportant group, and also that historiographical developments reflect contemporary society. Most attention was given to the working classes and the farmers, as well as the upper class. In the beginning of the 19th century, exporters of lumber, metal and fish were referred to as "lumber patricians", "lumber nobility" or "Christiania nobles", even though Norway did not have any formalised nobility. According to Myhre they were considered a cultural elite. When it comes to lifestyles however, Myhre (2004, p. 135) found that the middle-class lifestyle was "more or less an imitation of that of their social superiors", but also that "take it to the extreme" and overdo the lifestyle "out of social insecurity" was common.

The second aspect is the shift in focus from Norway to a wide diversification of subjects with different methodological and theoretical approaches. The subject of history is considered to be less unified today than before. The new method for defining the discipline of history appears to be the method of elimination, that is to draw boundaries towards what cannot be considered history, rather than being on a quest for defining the absolute core of the subject (Halvorsen, 2016b).

6 However, this strand of research lacks a unifying definition of "middle class."

2.4 Sociology – a sensitivity for inequality

There are few studies of when, how and why sociology emerged in Norway, but the narratives about the emergence often start with key figures. The key figures that are claimed to do sociology before sociology was formally institutionalised are Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754) and Eilert Sundt (1817–1875) (Engelstad, Grennes, Kalleberg, & Malnes, 2005). They were both initially theologians. They are reckoned as founding fathers of social sciences in general in Norway, but Sundt has been of greater importance for sociology's self-understanding. Sundt was also a priest, and wrote studies based on ethnographic approaches in between the 1840s and the 1860s (Stenseth, 2000). He wrote studies about urban poverty, rural farming, and health among other things. His focus was on specific disadvantaged groups, and he divided the population into two groups: the propertied and the non-propertied. Sundt overlooked the middle classes just as the historians of his time did. After him, several decades passed before sociological studies were undertaken. In the 1950s, sociology began its formal disciplinary history in Norway, through an initiative by students in Oslo, surrounding Nils Christie (1928–2015) and at the Institute for Social Research. Similar to other European countries then, it is hard to find the origin of sociology in Norway, but the formal organisation of it begins after the second world war (Wagner, 2001). The first introductory book in sociology was written in 1964 by Vilhelm Aubert (1922–1988), and simply named *Sosiologi* [Sociology].

Sociology from the founding period in the 1950s and 1960s is called both the "golden age" and the period of "problem-oriented empiricism". Central works are Ottar Brox's study of Northern Norway, Sverre Lysgaard's study of "The Workers' Collective", Thomas Mathiesen's study of inmates and Harriet Holter's study of women's role conflicts in industry. The historian Fredrik W. Thue (2006) provides an extensive account of this period in his thesis, and what Holst (2006) has called the "critical-normative backsliding" of the period. Golden age sociologists were influenced by empiricist philosophy (especially by Arne Næss), American survey-research, and structural functionalism (Mjøset 1991, p. 150), but most importantly they wrote about Norwegian matters, and became "the guilty conscience of the welfare state'. Central to this notion is, on one hand, the task of measuring the intentions of the welfare state to provide equal opportunities and fairer distribution, and on the other hand pointing out that the basis for the welfare state lies in a system based on inequality. As Mjøset (1991, p. 162) wrote: "[T]he sociologist [of

this era] is a populist because his starting point is the community, and the welfare demands of the family". However, the elites and the educated middle class were not studied in this period, but rather specific groups and institutions oriented towards integrating members into society.

Sociology has followed the tradition of historians in writing large-scale works about the Norwegian society, and one of those works is actually called exactly that, *Det norske samfunn* [The Norwegian Society]. The first edition was published in 1968, edited by Natalie Rogoff Ramsøy, who was educated at the University of Chicago, but at the time associate professor at the University of Oslo. The second edition, from 1975, was edited by Ramsøy and Mariken Vaa (also at UiO). It established that Norway has an egalitarian stratification pattern (Torgersen 1975, p. 524). A third edition was published in 1986, with Lars Alldén added to the editorial team, and after that the editor was changed completely. Ivar Frønes and Lise Kjølsrød, both sociologists at the University of Oslo took over, and have edited the 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th editions of the book, where the last edition had so many chapters that it was separated into three volumes. The book has often been read as a representative example of, and even "mirroring", developments within Norwegian sociology (Aakvaag, 2011; Pedersen, 2015; Slagstad, 2016). When summarised, the story that this book series tell, is a story of ambitions of describing the totality of the Norwegian society, strongly influenced by functionalism, towards an increase in topics and a rejection of describing what holds the society together. There is no clear unity in theoretical inspiration, and maybe even a lack of theorising (Aakvaag, 2011). A trademark has been "a sensitivity for inequality", which I think can be extended to describe the general trend within Norwegian sociology (Pedersen, 2015). However, the last edition received harsh criticism for excluding a chapter on class and inequality, and it has been claimed that the expansion of the project reflects the discipline's lack of identity (Slagstad, 2016). Slagstad's criticism begs the question: when sociology no longer defines itself with reference to inequality, what is it then?

Else Øyen's introductory book from 1976 has a telling title: *Sociology and Inequality.* She states that there is no "official policy for the amount of equality – or inequality – there should be in the Norwegian society" (Øyen, 1992, p. 23). This underpins the sociological normative position of having the perspective of the disadvantaged. It also shows a strong connection to "official politics". To a large degree this characterises the sociological ambition of research during these decades: inequality was on the agenda, to deal with these issues in a political manner.

The general depiction of the Norwegian society by the sociologists was in other words pointing out how the social democratic ideals of equality were not realised, or at least not as successful as sometimes described. Through telling an evolutionary story about the development of Norwegian society, these aspects were assumed to gain less attention than they deserved. One consequence was that the more "idealistic" sides of the culture of equality in Norway were studied by other than the sociologists, namely the anthropologists, especially Marianne Gullestad. In the 1970s, they started doing fieldwork in "their own societies".

Gullestad (1984, 1991, 1992) has been of vital importance to the understanding of equality from a social scientific perspective. Her anthropological accounts of everyday life in Bergen have emphasised the layperson's understanding of *equality as sameness*, in addition to highlighting the importance of equality as a value in Scandinavian countries. Gullestad (1992, p. 6) summarised the egalitarian ethos as under-communication of differences. She finds this in her material when she sees that the working-class mothers she studies do not protest, they rather "turn their backs on politics and bureaucracy by creating their own worlds and these worlds can be analysed as a more indirect resistance to "the system". Another anthropologist that has been working on Norwegian society and the concept of egalitarianism, is Hallvard Vike (Bendixen, Bringslid, & Vike, 2018; Henningsen & Vike, 1999; Lien, Lidén, & Vike, 2001; Vike, 2018). He claimed that Norwegian political culture is characterised by a moral elite control, where the elites are sanctioned morally and thus not able to transcend cultural restrictions that are a part of Norwegian culture.

Also worth mentioning, is two Government initiated studies of power in Norwegian society, with sociologists in central roles, the "power investigations" (Götz, 2013). The first was led by Gudmund Hernes from 1972 to 1982, and the second by Fredrik Engelstad and colleagues from 1998 to 2003. Both had an ambition of describing power relations within Norwegian society, and thereby providing important information both for public discussion and political deliberation. The second investigation, *Makt- og demokratiutredningen* [The power and democracy investigation] had an explicit focus on the democratic (legitimate) exercise of power. The first is considered to be influenced by American political science and positivism, whereas the second had a broader methodological approach. The second investigation also had internal disagreements in the leadership group, where Hege Skeje dissented based on gender issues and methodological nationalism, and Siri Meyer dissented based

on disagreements about the concept of power. Two social scientists and the sociologist (all of them men) formed the united conclusion: Øyvind Østerud, Per Selle and Fredrik Engelstad.

Up until today a research group has studied elites from a similar kind of perspective as the "power investigations". They use the positionality method, by selecting people in important positions, instead of the reputation method or the decision method. Survey research seems to be the preferred method. The latest result from this strand of research is Trygve Gulbrandsen's *Elites in an Egalitarian Society* (2019), which found that elites are well integrated in Norwegian society and strongly support the labour unions, and the anthology *Eliter i endring* [Changing elites] (Engelstad, Gulbrandsen, Midtbøen, & Teigen, 2022).

The study of inequality focusing on taste and lifestyle differences has been one in which sociologists have excelled. On the one side, we find studies of taste, aesthetics, and culture, and on the other side studies of inequality, hierarchies, class, and mechanisms of reproduction (Jonvik, 2018). Many studies have also analysed the connection between, how tastes, preferences, and cultural valuation are connected to and/or reflected in other social inequalities. A typical discussion here has been the question of whether the inequality levels in Norway have similarities with trends in other countries, or whether egalitarian aspects of the society make it less suitable for analysing with concepts that are derived from studies of other societies. In this latter vein, we find Arild Danielsen's (1998) critique of the conceptual translation of cultural capital from French to Norwegian societal relations. In his view, the different modernisation processes of the two nations mean that the content of a concept will differ, especially that the status of continental high culture is very different in the two countries.

There is also a strong tradition of studies of inequality and wealth, and the end of the 1990s is maybe a starting point for this. One could roughly say that this research has been preoccupied with economic issues, lifestyle, housing, the upper classes, power, and the accumulation of different types of capital – especially through studies of register data. Many of these contributions and contributors are represented in *Eliter og klasser i et egalitært samfunn* [Elites and Classes in an Egalitarian Society], which developed an Oslo Register Data Class scheme (Hansen, Andersen, Flemmen, & Ljunggren, 2014), categorising different professions, summarised in the table below.

CAPITAL +

	Cultural upper class Professors, artists, architects, art directors	**Balanced upper class** Doctors, judges, dentists, civil engineers	**Economic upper class** Top 10% executives, managers, financial brokers, rentiers, self-employed
	Cultural upper middle class Upper and lower secondary school teachers, librarians, journalists, entertainment musicians	**Balanced upper middle class** Consultants, engineers and technicians, computer programmers	**Economic upper middle class** P50-P90 executives, managers, financial brokers, rentiers, self-employed
CC+ EC–	**Cultural lower middle class** Pre-school and primary school teachers, technical illustrators	**Balanced lower middle class** Office clerks, nurses, police officers	**Economic lower middle class** Bottom 50% executives, managers, financial brokers, rentiers, self-employed
		Skilled workers Auxiliary nurses, electricians, carpenters	
			Famers, fishers, foresters
		Unskilled workers Assistants, cleaners, shop assistants, drivers	
		Welfare dependents	

CAPITAL–

Figure 2.1 *The Oslo Register Data Class scheme*

Professors, and successful artists are some examples of the members of the cultural elite, classic professions like law and medicine constitute the professional elite, while wealthy owners, and leaders in business make up the

economic elite. The middle classes are divided in similar categories, whereas the bottom is horizontally divided between people on benefits, farmers and the working class. The authors were especially preoccupied with social mobility in and out of these categories, as well as symbolic boundary work and closure.

In 2007; Ove Skarpenes conducted a study of the Norwegian middle class. The crucial question was the status of "symbolic violence" in Norway. Skarpenes claimed that the middle classes exerted symbolic power, and not the elites as earlier assumed in research. The top-down distinction known from France, was not present in his data, and more specifically he found the interviewees were reluctant to ranking, because it could be regarded as moral hierarchisation of people. The study was undertaken in collaboration with Rune Sakslind and Roger Hestholm. They follow Danielsen's (1998) point about institutions providing national character to the culture they objectify, and that this might be founded on sports, instrumental or technical knowledge, richness or moral, and not necessarily high culture as in France. If there is one characteristic trait to Norwegian legitimate culture, they claim, it is morality.

In their study of literary preferences and practice, Gujord and Vassenden (2015) found three supplementary points to Skarpenes. *Firstly*, the middle class does not use literature in their symbolic boundary drawing, which supports Skarpenes' findings. *Secondly*, they argued that this cannot be generalised to a critique of logics of distinction as such because people do use for instance architecture, design, and other aesthetic products to draw symbolic boundaries. This goes against Skarpenes, they argue. One reason for this, they argue, is the central position of literature in the school curriculum, something which is less the case for music, art, design, and architecture. *Thirdly*, the explanation for the reluctance to use literature in boundary drawing might be as much about the ideology of the school (pedosentrism, where the students define for themselves what quality is, and that the value of the object lies within the relationship to the reader rather than in the object), as about the general ideology in Norway (egalitarianism). This point allows Skarpenes and his critics to be both right and wrong, they argue. A remaining question, for instance, becomes whether it can be described as reluctance or downplaying, the former giving an impression of something less strategic than the latter. They end by developing an interesting concept of "estetisk lystprinsipp" [aesthetic pleasure principle] (Gujord & Vassenden, 2015, p. 302), which means that readers disregard the hierarchy within literature because they do not want to

care about it. They thereby define for themselves what good literature is, and do not care about potential disagreements on the matter.

Summed up, I would categorise these last three types of studies as: (1) Class studies, (2) Pragmatic studies, and (3) Situation-centred studies. The first is built on a classical sociological tradition of revealing and criticising power and domination, whereas the second has focused on actor's creativity and reflexivity in use of culture. There have been wide disputes on methods (Heian, 2018, p. 18), typically centred around the question of "saying vs. doing" (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014a, 2014b), which seems to be one of the reasons for the third type to appear. The third type (3) tries to combine a critical perspective focusing on power and hierarchies, and a cultural sociological perspective focusing on individual meaning-making, with a sensitivity for how this is presented in, and affected by, situations.

Attempts at sorting out the egalitarian-inequality paradox include conceptualisations such as: elitist egalitarianism (Ljunggren, 2017), egalitarian individualism (Gullestad, 1991, 1992), inegalitarian egalitarianism (Bendixen, Bringsvold, & Vike, 2018) and populistic elitism (Henningsen & Vike, 1999). This project does not have any preconceptions about whether this really constitutes a complex or not in social life, but of most importance here is that it is firmly established as such in research and thereby becomes part of a repertoire that actors can use in making sense of society. These are questions we grapple with together as a society.

2.5 Concluding remarks

In this book, the accounts told by authors, historians, and sociologists are treated as part of repertoires of knowledge that are available for actors to draw upon in their sensemaking of society. These accounts contain central concepts that are sometimes not defined, or, perhaps most often, defined differently. In other words, this is not a coherent scientific tradition working cumulatively as a community. The different traditions provide building blocks mostly within their own tradition. Rather than trying to unify them, the aim in this chapter has been to present the reader with some of the influential discourses on equality and elite formation in Norway that also are available to and referenced by the interviewees in the interviews.

Halvorsen, P. C. (2024). *Egalitarian Consecration*.
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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 Fréderic, 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 economistic 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-Bourdieusian 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 cité, 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.

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Chapter 4

Studying elites in an egalitarian society

There are a lot of things that make strange noises in the social scientific night. That's why methodological communities exist – so you won't have to deal with those things on a regular basis if you don't want to.

(Abbott, 2004, p. 112)

The successful production of sociological truth requires the adept mobilization of theory

(Reed, 2011, p. 36)

This chapter will provide the reader with information about the research process: how it was planned, how it unfolded, which adjustments were needed, what ethical considerations were central, and how the collected data were gathered and analysed. The separation of research processes into different phases, such as planning, collecting and synthesising, runs the risk of giving an impression of a neat and chronologically linear process. In reality, this project unfolded in a much more entangled and overlapping way, with constant re-articulations of key research questions, for instance. However, for the sake of readability, it is presented here in a chronological fashion. The overarching theme of the thesis is consecration and the role of historical elite institutions in creating cultural hierarchies. This chapter will describe the overall research process, where for instance more information was collected than was used in the analysis. In some way one could say that the choice of what material to focus on is also the result of an analysis, for instance when the question of

masculinity construction at one of the schools appeared for us as particularly interesting, as a sociological puzzle, we "zoomed in" on this topic, and consequently did not focus on the interviews from the other school. Of course, this was a methodological choice since we could have done a comparative study between the two schools with a research question like: how do they construct masculinity at elite schools? Or why are masculinity constructions at two seemingly similar elite schools so different? However, the sample of these two schools would provide the answer, since it is exactly because these schools are typical examples of "economic" and "cultural capital" that they are different. For us, however, the interesting question as cultural sociologists was how the meaning-making happened on a local level, and therefore we were particularly focused on an interwoven in-group of teenagers at one of the schools. This chapter will therefore describe both the research process chronologically up until the point where the data were gathered, and then in a distilling manner that starts with the entire overarching material, show how and why some elements were given particular analysis. Before the narrative begins, I will give a brief presentation of the data in general.

4.1 Data

The data that form the basis for the analyses in this study are 88 individual interviews, 4 focus group interviews, and 30 hours of participant observation. The individual interviews were of 73 high school students and 15 literary critics, in some extent reflecting the size of their population. The interviews lasted between 90 and 180 minutes, which provided a total of around 11,880 minutes of interview material. Ordinary size for a sample in qualitative projects is 15 interviews +/– 10 according to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p. 113), and the methods literature describes the experiencing of a saturation point when the researcher understands that further interviewing is unnecessary. These were audio recorded, transcribed and coded, using HyperTRANSCRIBE and HyperRESEARCH. The interviews were coded with two distinct codebooks, consisting of 12 and 36 code groups respectively, and 64 and 50 codes in total. More details on coding follow later in this chapter. In total this provided around 2,640 pages of transcribed interviews. All the interviewees from the schools have been given fictitious names in order to secure their anonymity,

while the critics are referred to by the newspaper they wrote for at the time of the interviews. All participants gave us their informed consent, also to be referred to as they are here, and the data collections were approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Service. The data collection was undertaken in a two-fold manner, where the study of literary critics was done solely by me, and the study of elite schools were undertaken as part of a larger research group on a project called "Adolescent Elites". This project mainly took place at the University of Oslo, with Professor Willy Pedersen as project leader. Both projects were rather explorative and had a broad approach, with few predefined themes apart from the selection of interviewees. In the following I will describe the research process from beginning to end.

4.2 Planning and sampling

The main research question in this study first and foremost designates a social environment for further analysis, namely historical elite institutions, and even further it asks for negotiations. This indicated a qualitative research design. First, a couple of historical elite institutions were selected: upper secondary education and literary criticism and approached through three organisations: two public schools and the Critics' Association. I do not claim that these organisations constitute actual elites, but that they represent institutions that are symbolically understood as elite. A similar example may be operas, which are historical elite institutions, but not necessarily consisting of actual elites (Benzecry, 2011; Larsen, 2019). The emergence of a research question is often hard to explain in detail, but it is related to other studies. Research questions are often posed in relation to each other, either to problematise earlier research or to "spot gaps" between earlier research (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). So is the case here, where the selection of the schools and the critics was done based on gaps that were spotted in the research. Sociological research on literary critics in Norway is completely new ground, to which this study hopefully is the first small contribution. The sample can be said to fill a gap because it is related to sociological studies of taste and culture that leaves the question of the activity of professional quality assessment unanswered. Sociological studies of upper secondary education in Scandinavia exist *en masse*, and studies of elite schools also exist, but until now the study of elite schools in

Scandinavia have been very sparse (Törnqvist, 2019), and in Norway non-existent. The ambition was therefore to study hitherto unstudied groups in themselves, and not as prisms to understand something more general, or reflections of something specific. The project is to a large degree inspired by Daloz' (2010) pluralistic and comparative approach, where fixed conceptions deriving from theoretical standpoints are kept to a minimum. As he writes (2013, p. 15), his method consists of the following:

> (a) appealing to the authority of conventional models of interpretation only at the condition that they make sense in a particular context without giving a priori explanatory precedence to any of them; (b) being sufficiently open-minded to recognise those cases for which new theorising, or at least a revision of existing theories, is required; (c) taking a cautious stance toward concepts with a universalistic ring and toward grand theories that rely on them while encouraging studies that are attentive to local perceptions.

Hence, this approach does not lead to the discovery of covering laws or anything like it, but rather anomalies, or "problematic settings in which excessively general propositions no longer work" (2013, p. 16). Daloz advocated for inductive analysis and the search for understanding local cultures first, before theorising. I am sympathetic to the latter but share the criticism of Tavory and Timmermans (2014) of grounded theory and related methods called "inductive". This project aims at doing an abductive analysis with a constant consideration of theory and empirical material in light of each other. The abductive is characterised as different from inductive approaches, because of knowledge from different theories before the data collection, and throughout the research process, instead of picking it up at the end. Norman Blaikie (1993, pp. 176–177) defines abduction as:

> [T]he process used to produce social scientific accounts of social life by drawing on the concepts and meanings used by social actors … Once these descriptions are produced, the Interpretivist may then wish to understand them in terms of some existing social theory or perspective.

In this study this entails that the interviewees talk about their historical elite institutions, and questions concerning culture, taste, and inequality are put

under scrutiny first, and then afterwards "measured up against" the theoretical concepts of Bourdieu, Alexander, Boltanski, and Thévenot, or Lamont, for instance. Abduction has been described as the research logic to "measure" the fruitfulness of concepts in empirical research (Hagen & Gudmundsen, 2011), and thus fits this project. It is seen as an addition or a replacement to inductive methods. This line of research has often identified existing theories' problems with explaining phenomena, either through problems with concepts or simply limits to theory. This is what Vassenden (2018) called "productive anomalies", because these examples can be used to generate new concepts or reformulate them in a better way. It is considered a logic to generate new knowledge, and highlights creativity and imagination as central to analysing. The ambition of this study is to provide a deep understanding of specific relationships, and not to provide a representative overview of general patterns or mechanisms. The first step in an abductive analysis is description. It will also be considered whether or not these two institutions could fit within existing theoretical frameworks or not. However, the choice of two institutions shows a curiosity for the possibility of "theoretical stretching" of pre-existing concepts, and new theorising beyond the particular. In other words, the research design is constructed with a particular sensibility to being as open as possible to many potential findings.

This research project has also been inspired by Andrew Abbott's (2004, p. 15) point about methods being like any other social phenomena: a living, social thing, possible to categorise in a variety of ways. He shows how methods can be categorised according to (1) what type of data that one gathers, (2) how one analyses data, or (3) how one poses a question. The latter often dictates the data size one aims at, and gives three sub-categories: (1) case-study analysis, (2) Small-N analysis, and (3) Large-N analysis. According to this categorisation, this project could be called a Small-N analysis, in that it has a small number of cases and is interested in differences and similarities between them. He further pointed out that these methods are explanatory programs, and that they entail different concepts of explanation. I will elaborate on this later in the chapter. Based on a wide range of examples from social scientific literature, Abbott identifies different types of *heuristics*, i.e. ways of using gambits of imagination to "open up new topics, to find new things" (2004, p. 191). Central heuristics in this project have been to "problematize the obvious" (2004, p. 122), in the sense that it problematises the notion that

cultural tastes work as signs of distinction and expression of social distance that have been "obvious" to academics, and to "lump together" (2004, p. 245), by taking two seemingly different samples and treating them as instances of a single phenomenon, in this case historical elite institutions. These heuristics have guided the project since the beginning.

The interviews with the literary critics were done in 2013 and 2018. They were done through the Critics Association in Norway, and the U.S. Qualitative interviews were chosen to understand their negotiations of the historical elite institution of criticism, as well as their description of their work on a more daily basis. There was also a choice to give them the possibility to express themselves, beyond the restrictions of newspaper columns and newsworthiness. The interviews were semi-structured, with the same set of questions, but appearing in a different manner in most of the interviews.

The planning and sampling of the material connected to the school project was done as a part of a research group during the winter and spring of 2016. The project was called "adolescent elites", and elite schools in Oslo were explicitly sampled. There was no ambition of mapping the amount or reach of elite schools, but rather to gain access to some of them and do a closer study on what goes on inside them. The schools that were selected both have long traditions and prestigious alumni. The schools specialise in different subjects, the Oslo Commerce School is famous for its business and economy orientation, whereas *Schola Osloensis* is famous for its academic and cultural orientation. Part of the research group was inspired by Bourdieusian research and they had developed The Oslo Register Data Class scheme to conceptualise class differentiation, and distribution of cultural and economic capital in Norway. All indicators pointed to Oslo Commerce School as a school where the students come from economic upper-class families, and *Schola Osloensis* as a school where the students come from cultural upper-class families. For this study, the concepts of capital as a sampling guidance were of lesser importance, given that I was interested in these schools in their own right as elite institutions, not as examples of something other than themselves. When I was invited on this project, and partook in forming it, my experience from interviewing literary critics was central, and the questions that we posed and the themes we were preoccupied with as a group resonated with those I had worked with earlier. These themes were questions about taste, status, culture, self-conceptions, elites,

(perceptions of) social distance, Norwegian culture, egalitarianism, snobbishness, distinction, literature, money, prizes, and hierarchies.

4.3 Data collection

The interviews with critics were undertaken at the place they preferred: the home of the interviewee (3), their offices (2), public cafés (7), and by telephone (3). They were all conducted by the author, with a similar style and same interview guide. As other elite researchers (Ljunggren, 2016; Mikecz, 2012) have noted, offices are not the best location for interviewing, as these provide a formal setting, but I considered it as a potentially fruitful negotiation to let them choose themselves, and given that only two interviewees wanted this, I took the risk. My experience, however, was similar, it provided a much more difficult setting for the interviews. The difference in time was dealt with by re-reading the first interviews before undertaking the last ones. The latest ones were in my second language, English, which proved to be a bit challenging, but nonetheless provided good data, and interviews that in hindsight were strikingly similar to the ones conducted in Norwegian. Since these interviewees can be said to have a "voice of their own" and be publicly known, I made sure to gather information from the interviewees beforehand, such as reading their last reviews, checking out their Twitter account and some of the public discussions in which they had engaged. After this, I "customised" some of the questions in the interview guides to make them aware that I was prepared and to give them easier examples upon which to build. I got the impression that if we had a common example, it was easier for the interviewee to share perspectives and opinions. For the American sample the (at the time) recently published books *My struggle* by the Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgård became a good example. I also used more general examples, such as discussing whether young critics tend to be more critical than older critics, and if so why. The interviews with the school students were all conducted at the schools, 40 of them by the author and the rest by a professor and two research assistants. These interviews were all conducted in empty classrooms at the schools, which I found to be a good framework for the interviews. The topics we touched upon included parental education and employment, grandparents' education and employment, family wealth, area

of upbringing in Oslo, networks of peers, early school experiences, networks at OCS and OS, perceived social hierarchies at the school, the importance of homework and studying, as well as plans for the future. However, other topics – such as sports, partying, use of alcohol and drugs, party buses known in Norwegian as *russebuss*, the importance of fashion and clothes, holidays, and the use of social media – were also broached. The interviewees were recruited through a focus group made up of four students, who each gave us ten interviewees to contact through their phone numbers.

4.3.1 Participant observation

I undertook the participant observation in the spring of 2016, mostly by spending time at the "open" areas of the schools, such as the schoolyard and the libraries. Having interviewed many students, I became a person that some people at the school recognised, but the schools were also accustomed to different "non-students" walking around the schools, attending meetings or doing presentations, so my presence was not particularly conspicuous. It went by more or less unnoticed, except for friendly greetings. Also, my focus was not to snoop around and gather information by staring at people, but more to hang around and get a sense of the everyday atmosphere at the schools. This resulted in small field notes with descriptions of what I saw and impressions I got. Altogether this became around 30 notes that I have used as background information in the writing of the analysis.

4.3.2 Quantitative data

Before the selection of samples, quantitative overviews of the populations were consulted. For the critics this is mostly from Andreassen (2006) and Wright Lund (2005). For the upper secondary education in Oslo the "Young in Oslo" study (N 24 000) (Andersen & Bakken, 2016) provided detailed information on the different schools and made the selection easier. Andersen and Bakken, who are responsible for the "Young in Oslo" study, were also connected to the "Adolescent Elites" project. We were given the surveys that they had used and gave our interviewees the same. All interviewees filled out this short survey, and thus enabled us to locate our sample within a broader population. The combination of survey and interview data enabled us to establish a rather

precise ORDC classification (Hansen, Flemmen, & Andersen, 2009, see Fig. 1) of the participants. The classification was done on the basis of their parents' profession, and the main classification we do in the analysis is between the OCS, whose parents are from predominantly economic upper middle or upper class, such as economist, physician or lawyer, and SO, whose parents are from predominantly the upper middle or upper class, with a skew towards cultural professions such as architects, directors, and professors. These quantitative measures are not used in specific analysis other than to provide an overview of an example of what the sample selection is.

4.3.3 Interviews

The part on elite schooling draws on 73 individual interviews, lasting approximately two hours each, undertaken at the two elite high schools in inner city Oslo, with adolescents aged 17 or 18. We also conducted four focus group interviews with current and previous students at the two schools. The first two focus group interviews were conducted to establish a good interview guide based on what the interviewees gave us information about, and to give us a rough impression of what to expect at the different schools, as well as to recruit further interviewees. The two focus groups with previous students were done after the individual interviews and provided a sort of validation. First, we asked them the same kind of questions about their time at the school and their choice of school, and then we presented them with some of the answers we had gotten from the current students. To be able to work as an actual validation, we would have had to do this with more rigour, but their answers, which expressed resonance, nonetheless gave us an indication that we were onto a sound description of the schools and the school cultures.

The sample of critics consists of individual interviews with 15 book reviewers from Norway and the U.S. All interviews were conducted by the author, in the language of the interviewee. The selection was done through the National Book Critics Circle associations in the respective countries, where one person was contacted strategically and the rest through "snowball sampling". All the interviews touched on questions about nationality of criticism or literature, but mostly they focused on the different conceptions of the "profession". The reviewers that are interviewed all write regularly for the most important newspapers and news media in the two countries, that is *New*

York Times, *Washington Post*, *LA Times*, *NPR*, *NRK*, *Morgenbladet*, *Dagbladet*, *Klassekampen*, *Dag og tid*, and more.

4.4 Analysing interview data

According to Kvale (1996, p. 103), the analysis part of research projects goes all the way from when the interviewee had given answers, until the researcher has written out the research in the form of a book, an article, or a report. Being aware of this, we wrote reflection notes after every single interview in "Adolescent Elites", with short summaries of the impressions we got, and what we thought might be key insights. We also had conversations with the other interviewers, to get an impression of what kind of information surfaced in the other interviews. After they were collected, I transcribed the interviews using HYPERtranscribe for the interviews with the critics and trained a group of master students to transcribe the interviews using the same program for the interviews with the students. The transcriptions were not closely written with details on utterances, but every word was noted, in the line of Tavory and Timmermanns' (2014, p. 134) recommendations:

> [D]etailed transcription of interviews is important. If we do not produce close transcriptions, we will either change accounts retroactively or simply forget some snippets of conversation that could have proved crucial for our argument. Even if it is impossible to provide a full transcription that captures every utterance, movement, environmental stimulus, and biological parameter, this does not negate the aim of a comprehensive record. To appropriate Clifford Geertz's medical metaphor, the fact that we cannot perfectly disinfect our scalpels does not mean we should conduct surgery in the sewer.

I have aimed at making the analysis as pluralistic as possible, maintaining several theoretical inspirations. After the transcription of the interviews, I initially coded them with pen and paper, underlining passages I found interesting and writing analytic notes on the side. After that I coded the interviews in the program HYPERresearch. Again, the sample of critics were coded only by me, while the same project team coded the interviews with the students (I also did some of these myself).

Coding often gives the impression of a rigorous way of leading to an answer that inevitably lies within the data but given the many ways data can fit different models and stories, another approach, more in line with humanist studies, to coding was done here. As Biernacki (2012, p. 11) pointed out, coding runs the risk of becoming a ritual practice, "regenerating meanings into an isolated token, a datum label". Humanist approaches provide us with the "gift of an acute trial, the insurance of shared documentation, and the transformative power of anomalies" (Biernacki, 2012, p. 3), and can be considered both more rigorous and open to the reader. Tavory and Timmermanns (2014, p. 138) warned about the perils of coding while at the same time highlighting the helpful sides.

> Taking field notes, transcribing interviews, and performing coding are important ways to guard against biased memories and the imposition of preconceived ideas on observations – in other words, to increase the resistance of the objects we encounter. And where field notes and transcriptions function as mnemonic devices, coding leads to greater familiarization with the researcher's observations. These procedures thus operate as methods of justification, helping the researcher to ensure that the path to the completed argument is not mired in incompetent memory and other cognitive biases. These practical processes do more than that, however. If we remain on the level of mnemonics, we divorce the research process from the active generation of theoretical insights and re-create the boundary between moments of discovery and moments of justification. A key point of a pragmatist position is that this neat division is untenable, that discovery and justification are analytically and practically intertwined.

In the coding of the transcribed interviews, as pointed out in Halvorsen & Ljunggren (2020), we utilised both a thematic approach – using for instance "Oslo", "parents", "friends" and "school work" – but also a more open form of descriptive coding, where the initial codes were expanded by sub-codes of "speech acts" (cf. Holstein & Gubrium, 2003), that covered for instance "what is a man", "who are "the boys", and "gendered expectations". A similar approach was taken in the critics interviews. In the analyses, both forms of codes proved helpful in scrutinising the topics under question. Theoretical coding was not done, but instead passages and interpretations were analysed up against theories afterwards.

4.5 Strengths and limitations to interviews

The answers and thoughts of the interviewees on, and descriptions of, elite activities could surely be dismissed as examples of respondents giving the "correct" answer – in line with hermeneutics of suspicion. This is a common critique of interview studies in general (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014a, b), but it misses the strengths of interviews and the active parts of speech (Cerulo, 2014; Pugh, 2013). In my study, the choice of words by the interviewees show that they are well-immersed in what can be called a discourse of egalitarianism, and it is an untangling of these local understandings and enactments that we have put under scrutiny. However, ethnographic fieldwork to uncover several aspects of this is encouraged for further research. As a researcher I had no interest in promoting or criticising elites. On the basis of this I take their answers and reflections on the questions as legitimate and valid/honourable illustrations. In other words, interviews were chosen in order to elicit how they wanted to present themselves, that is what Pugh (2013, p. 50) calls the *honourable* information that interviews provide. This means that interviewees are actively conducting "a form of display work", which is interesting in itself, and does not necessarily provide insights into what they *actually* mean or feel. The interviews then provide information on beliefs, thoughts, reasonings, and meanings of elites. However, it is important to point out that there are many questions regarding elites that this empirical material does not address.

The interviews with the critics proved to be a good arena for the interviewees to express which values they were preoccupied with in their professional activity. The interviews were not situations where they had to legitimise their activity, but they talked about those kinds of situations. The number of situations where legitimation became necessary was uneven, most of them were nonetheless preoccupied with the central question of the need for criticism. This might be because they were prepared in case they needed to mobilise arguments in favour of criticism, or because many of them have a humanist educational background, and the so-called crisis of humanities is a related discourse. The reasons why we as a society need humanistic studies are in many cases the same for why we need criticism. Several of those interviewed, as well as many critics in general, have written books on this topic (the need for criticism, and to acknowledge the point that for some it seems like a pointless

and unnecessary activity). In the interviews several of the interviewees referred to their own books or texts on the matter. These texts were also consulted, but not included, in the empirical material that is analysed.

The interviews with the students covered many aspects of their high school life, but mostly aspects connected to their school. The students also partake in other areas in society, which the interviews to a lesser extent provided information on, although some information was given about family and upbringing. A lot of research on elite education has focused more on areas such as upbringing, eating, attire, and sport and other recreational activities than done here. This is partially a result of the studies being undertaken in Anglo-American contexts, where such activities are more strongly connected to school than in Norway, but it is also a question of method. More comprehensive participatory observation might have brought more detailed information into these aspects. However, the interviews provided rich information on how the students understand themselves and their school, which are of greatest importance here.

4.6 Interpretivism: what is it that's going on here?

Earlier in this chapter I noted that this research could be considered an example of "small-N analysis", according to Abbott's categorisation. The other methods he categorised are ethnography, historical narrative, and survey research. He argued that they differ in both questions posed, data gathered, and in view of what an explanation is. In other words, they rely on theoretical perspectives as well. He distinguished between three views on what constitutes an explanation: (1) the pragmatic view, where an explanation is an account that allows intervention, (2) the syntactic view, where an explanation is an account that allows us to make a beautiful and compelling argument, and (3) the semantic view, where "an explanation is an account that suffices" (2004, p. 9). The small-N analysis is a method that in practice borrows from many different methodological traditions but is mostly associated with the semantic program and close to ethnography. The semantic programme "explains the world of social particulars by assimilating it to more and more general *patterns*" (2012, p. 28), according to Abbott, and this fits this research project as well. First, I describe the institutions I look at, then I look for similarities

and differences, and how that enables me to discuss the role of elites, in this case students at elite schools, and critics and their self-perception.

This research can be considered interpretivist, and this makes questions of interpretation, description, and explanation important. Interpretivism is a "theory of method", and thus a set of thoughts on how the gathering of data influences what one can say about the questions asked. The view of descriptions applied in this project is that they always entail an interpretation, and that a neutral description is impossible. Describing something is to put it into words, giving it a form it did not have before. It can be seen as an answer to Erving Goffman's (1986) classic question: "What is it that's going on here?" In that way, a good description is, from my perspective, also an explanation, and a good example might be a finding (Jøker, 2017). By an explanation I mean that it brings us to an understanding that we did not have prior to reading the analysis, that we are able to understand what the project aims at explaining. We can look at the well-known example of Bourdieu's use of distinction as a concept: Sociologists have been preoccupied with the notion of signifying distance and symbolic aspects of power for decades, as Jean-Pascal Daloz (2010, 2013) has pointed out. It could be read descriptively as an act of showing difference, or in some way communicating differences in taste, but in a Bourdieusian setting we associate the concept with an explanation: it is given an explanatory status. Does this use of distinction provide a causal or a functionalist explanation? Does the logic of distinction point to some explanatory causes between taste and class, or are they correlations that fit with the theoretical model of a class society? As Weber wrote: "[A] description is…indispensable in order to clearly understand the object of the investigation…The final and definitive concept in contrast cannot stand at the beginning of the investigation, but must come at the end" (Weber, 1930, p. 47). However, with an abductive approach the theoretical concepts are also a part of the project in the beginning, but then in combination with an openness for restrictions in how central it becomes or how encompassing it can be applied. Distinction might therefore be a descriptive concept in the beginning, since it frames certain topics one is interested in, and then through analysis its meaning becomes a specific one, and thus becomes explanatory. A result of *Distinction* as a study, is that the concept has become heavily theory-laden and filled with presuppositions. It has been criticised several times for becoming immune to empirical material, since the conclusion already lies within the definition of the concept(s) (Biernacki, 2012,

for instance). In this project it has been important to "offload" the concept of distinction, in order to be open to interpret the specificities that occur in the empirical material.

In this attempt of a sociology of constructions of eliteness and hierarchies, positioned in a post-positivist theoretical landscape, the notion of re-reading is central. The methodological point behind this is that the facts do not speak for themselves and are not enough. The facts have to be interpreted and regarded in relation to something else than themselves. In order to do so one has to read the interviews or the empirical material over and over again to ensure openness to the layers of meaning that can be found. Not that cultural sociology is an archaeological exercise to dig down to the inner, deeper (more real) meaning of speech, but it needs to deal with the plurality in order to give a cultural explanation. Building on minimal interpretations of single interviews and circumstances, one ends up with a maximal interpretation (Reed, 2011, p. 31). As Tavory (2020, p. 10) wrote about inferring from interviews: "by eliciting representations and narratives, researchers can identify structural aspects of interviewees' landscapes of meaning".

4.7 Ethics

Ethics is often dealt with as it is here, as a short text within a longer one, that sort of works like ticking of a box. Have you remembered to conduct the research according to the guidelines? The "ethics sections" often try to convince or just state that the answer is yes, after the specific guidelines are named. Guidelines like these are often imposed on the research from a national ethics board, an institutional one, or informally through the research community. The data collection is approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data service. The ethical part of the research consists of anonymising the interviewees and getting informed consent (which I have gotten and done), but it also penetrates all the other aspects of the research. This short text under the sub-title ethics is thus written performatively, to remind the reader of keeping questions about the ethical aspects in mind during the entire reading of the book.

An example that can help explain the ethical aspects of this study, is the aforementioned point by Biernacki about coding. His point is that coding runs

the risk of effacing the boundary between reporting and creating facts, and that humanistic interpretation lies at the centre without being shown. In my mind this becomes an ethical question. The coding in this project is therefore not done in order to make the project "appear scientific", and thus to make findings anyone would have arrived at following the same procedures. The coding is merely done to organise the material, and orient me as a researcher. It does not at any stage exclude the reading and rereading of the entire material. The project is explicitly an interpretive undertaking, where the reader is invited to follow every step of the process. This makes the project more or less transparent. In turn, transparency is a way of ensuring validity, and one might claim, as Biernacki, that this is the best way of ensuring validity.

Ethics is then not a constraining framework, as it might be understood by researchers conducting fieldwork in sensitive areas such as hospitals, but rather a commitment the researcher has. An example that might highlight ethical dilemmas in this research might be the descriptions or classifications of individuals. Norwegian research has found that people do not want to be described as "privileged elites" (Skarpenes, 2007; Jarness, 2013; Krogstad, 2019). This became a topic during the interviews when I explicitly questioned them about their own and their surroundings' elite status. The classification as "elite" was often resisted, as one also finds people do with other classifications. For instance, Skeggs (1997) found that individuals "dis-identify" with class categorisations because they are connected to negative characteristics. It then becomes a difficult task for the researcher to balance the interviewees personal descriptions and more general social descriptions. Rather than categorising the interviewees into a category they themselves do not approve, this project aims at opening up how they deal with these issues and treating that as a source for information about society. The important part of the study is not to identify who constitutes the elite, but rather how people in places associated with elite status relate to it.

4.8 Concluding reflections

In order to investigate these historical elite institutions and their meaning, it has been fruitful to approach them without predefined variables, but to openly to understand them in themselves. This open approach to studying elites is

advocated by several sociologists (Larsen, 2018, 2019; Daloz, 2010, 2013, for instance). In this chapter, I have described how the research process unfolded from beginning to end, and also covered the amount of material gathered. This hopefully gives the reader the necessary information to evaluate the soundness of the interpretations and findings summarised in the next chapter.

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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 Greeks[9]. 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 Rashmikant 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", og "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 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, equalling 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 desposal 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.

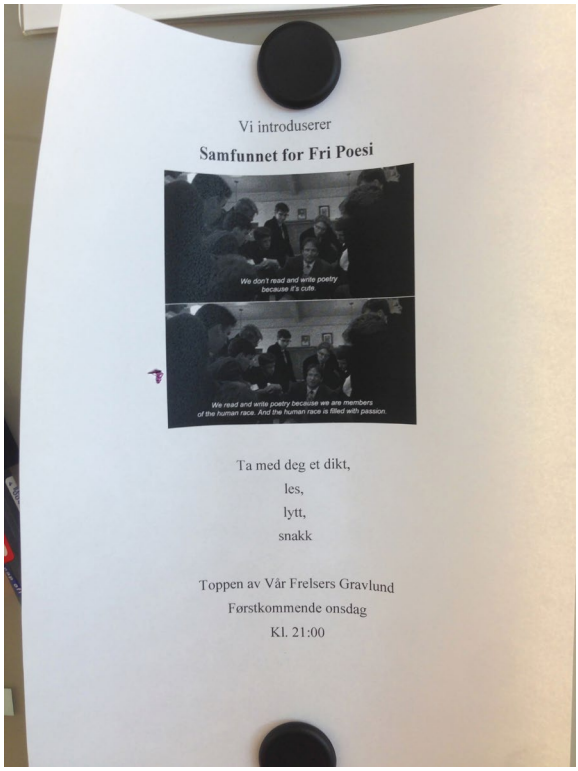

Figure 5.6 *Poster for the society for free poetry*

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.

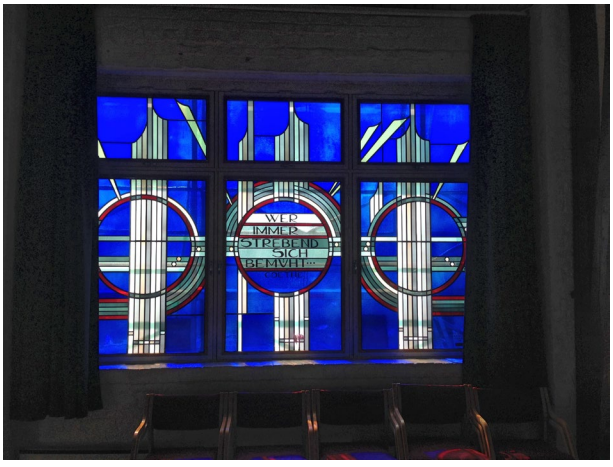

Figure 5.9 *The stained-glass window in one of the assembly halls at SO contains a quote by Goethe in German: "Wer immer strebend sich bemüht" [The one who strives]*

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 desposal 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.

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Chapter 6

Life in elite arenas: book reviewing

The prolonged, indiscriminate reviewing of books is a quite exceptionally thankless, irritating and exhausting job … It not only involves praising trash – though it does involve that … but constantly inventing reactions towards books about which one has no spontaneous feelings whatever.

George Orwell (1968 [1946]), "Confessions of a Book Reviewer"

6.1 Book reviewers in the service of the good

Both the growing of online book reviewing at websites like Amazon and Goodreads, and the struggling times for print newspapers, lead many to assume that the traditional aesthetic authority of the book reviewer might be on the wane (Vassenden, 2023). In addition, book reviewers themselves think that they are ill-perceived by others and mobilise justifications in order to show how they contribute to the common good. Through interviews with book reviewers, this chapter aims at untangling these different justifications, and finds three different defences.

The three justifications that appear in the interviews are to regard criticism as (1) resistance towards commercialisation, (2) guidance, and (3) peer-review. The first is a defence for a pure art against a profane economy, the second a help offered to people in an ever more information-filled society, and the third a creative response to artists that hopefully help them in their artistic careers. These different constructions help the reviewers in upholding their task as highly important within society in general, and not only within a sector. It also shows that they do not take their professional position for granted, but

that they view it as something they have to actively make sense of in order to gain public legitimacy. In other words, this chapter shows how book reviewing is deeply rooted in culture. It ends by encouraging more research on aesthetic authorities and the assumptions about whether they are on the wane or not.

Reading, evaluating, and writing about books for newspapers are the core activities of a book reviewer, but how is this task made meaningful when met with criticism? (Fine, 2018, p. 108; Eyerman & Ring, 1998). The increasing development of digital media platforms and recommendation services, seem to cast the status of the book reviewer as an authority on aesthetic matters in question. Why would we need to pay for an expert opinion when we can check evaluations online? Internationally there is a strong notion of criticism being in decline due to the proliferation of lay opinions on the internet, promoting an "everyone's a critic" discourse and "more 'horizontal' cultural recommendations" (Debenedetti & Gahriani, 2018). Hanrahan (2013, p. 74) stated that our "increasingly evaluative culture" co-exists with "the collapse of professional criticism". In a recent example from Norway, publishing houses are criticised for producing magazines that blur the distinction between criticism and promotion. According to the book reviewers interviewed for this project, their moral character is also being put into question, as representatives for elitism and cultural hierarchy, and, in the end, mostly preoccupied with their own status.

Whereas these challenges and the consequences have been studied in detail for professional news journalism, there has been few studies of how this affects criticism. Previous research on book reviewers describes underlying and/or contextual aspects of the practice (Bourdieu, 1996, 2000; Chong 2011, 2013, 2015, 2018, 2020; Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005; Roberge, 2010; Van Rees, 1987; Verboord, 2010), such as how subjective meaning is "made objective" (Chong, 2013, p. 266) or how background variables such as ethnicity influence the review (Chong, 2011). This chapter draws inspiration from the new cultural sociology (Larsen, 2019) and looks at book reviewing from another angle, that of the book reviewers. The chapter examines the explicit arguments put forth by the literary critics themselves for the continued relevance of their practice, and, thus, how they meet the challenges in the media landscape. Instead of pointing to a single variable influencing reviewing practices, I show how the literary critics mobilise different conceptions of the positive impact of their judgments, and how they contribute to the common good (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006).

Cohen and Dromi (2018, p. 117) looked at a professional group that also perceive their moral character as questioned, namely advertisement practitioners, and found that they respond by mobilising shared views of their work as benefitting society. Contributing to the common good thus becomes providing a good service to society, as it would also be in the case of book reviewing. An example could be that a reviewer could claim that his/her work benefits authors, which in turn provide society with good literature. In contrast a claim could be that they contribute to make literature and literary careers economically profitable. Even though book reviewing is a highly individualistic undertaking, critics together form a professional community that provide collective responses to challenges through historical examples. In this chapter the following research question is posed: How do present-day book reviewers respond to the contemporary challenges to their status in Norway?

The case of Norway might highlight challenges that are more general, in that the question of cultural authority might be especially controversial in an egalitarian culture such as the Norwegian one (Skarpenes, 2007; Skarpenes & Sakslind, 2010), which has a unique literary policy where "most of the national fiction literature" (Engelstad, Larsen, & Rogstad, 2017, p. 59) is bought by the Arts Council and sent to the public libraries across the entire country. The responses by the book reviewers show an active engagement with articulating arguments for the continued existence of traditional aesthetic authority in a new media landscape, in a way that balances cultural hierarchies and egalitarianism. They nonetheless portray their profession as a defence against dispersion and/or quantification of aesthetic judgments. The assumption is that the analysis of how book reviewers meet challenges will be relevant for understanding cultural authority, and media landscapes in other national, and international contexts. Moreover, the chapter contributes to the more general literature on how professional groups address challenges. In the following, I will present previous research on book reviewers and book reviews, before I turn to an analysis of book reviewing today.

6.2 What is a book reviewer?

The present-day evaluation of literature might be an "invention of a reaction", as George Orwell writes, and might not understand, or decide, what is going

to be considered great art in the future. Book reviewers have power (Steiner, 2010), and partake in consecrating activity, by awarding good reviews, but do not have the power to consecrate alone (Chong, 2020; Lizé, 2016). They are intermediaries between the creators of cultural objects and the audience receiving it, and as such resemble the position of a radio programmer (Ahlkvist & Faulkner, 2002). In addition, they can be described as "producers of meaning" (Griswold, 1987) since they participate in the definition of cultural patterns. Reviewers are however not gatekeepers, as Blank (2006) pointed out, and do not hold formal power. To be perceived as relevant for readers, book reviewers have to gain credibility. They have to convince the readers that they will provide important and trustworthy information. The reader is free to choose whether they want to follow the recommendation or not. Persuasion, in other words, becomes a key competence for reviewers, just as for advertising practitioners. The production of credible information is often threatened by questions over money and conflicts of interest. The reviewer has to make all potential problematic aspects explicit in order to not be discredited. They have this in common with gatekeepers, but whereas the decisions of gatekeepers are done with formal authority, book reviewers depend on the readers in order to become an authority (Blank, 2006). This is why this research has been inspired by the "strong program" in cultural sociology, which is articulated in opposition to theoretical programs focusing on social structure such as those of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault (Alexander & Smith, 2003). The "strong program" is preoccupied with the study of how the inner structure of discourse produce meaning, and thus culture becomes explanatory. Rather than power being something social that influences culture, power is cultural in this perspective.

Book reviewing does not require a specific background, but reviewers in Norway often have higher education from the humanities. The exclusive expert knowledge that critics have is something one learns through practice, and this is why the critics as a fellowship are constantly in discussion with themselves over what good criticism is, and what the task of the critic actually is (Steiner, 2010). This also applies to the work ethic, such as the norm about reviewing debuts. It has been more and more common to describe it as a profession (DeVault, 1990). The classic distinction between professional book reviewers and others, are (1) that you are paid, and (2) that an editor guarantees the quality of the review (Blank, 2006; Steiner, 2010, p. 484).

Looking back, many reviewers might be considered as having made a "wrong" judgment, of which William Ritter's (2015 [1906]) rejection of Edvard Munch's art can be an example. In fact, being wrong is one of the critic's core duties, according to A. O. Scott (2016, p. 168). The present situation is labelled by some as "peak criticism" (Heller, 2016), meaning that from now on the quality of criticism and aesthetic judgments will fall and, in the end, disappear as a tool of orientation for people. It can also be understood, without the attention to quality, as a situation where criticism as we know it today, formulated in lengthy texts with both readings and judgments, might go "out of fashion". According to that description it is tempting to rewrite Marx' (1974 [1845], p. 54) famous quote from The German Ideology about the communist society, where it will be possible "to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner … without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic", in a way that shows how the latter is characterised in our present society. However, recent research shows that the "everyone's a critic discourse" might be overexaggerated (Debenedetti & Gahriani, 2018; Verboord, 2010).

6.3 The sociology of book reviewing

The interest for cultural reviewing, and in particular book reviewing, within sociology has been growing the last twenty years (Baumann, 2001, 2002; Bourdieu, 1996, 2000; Chong, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2018; Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005; Holbrook, 1999; Johnston & Baumann, 2014; Roberge, 2010; Van Rees, 1987; Verboord, 2010). Several of these researchers are also focused on the strategically important positions of book reviewers: "[C]riticism is fundamental for understanding how culture and politics shape the ambiguous self-interpretation of society", as Roberge (2010, p. 435) wrote. A lot of this research has been focused on what criteria the book reviewers apply (Chong, 2013), operating with criteria, which are not approved by the critics themselves. This chapter therefore aims at moving beyond the focus on criteria, and towards an understanding of the aesthetic judgments as explained by the reviewers themselves.

Most research on book reviewers in Norway are by literary scholars with a historical perspective (Beyer & Moi, 1990; Hagen, 2004; Forser, 2002;

Furuseth, 2013; Furuseth, Thon, & Vassenden, 2016; Imerslund 1970; Linneberg, 1990), tracing both the activity of book reviewing and writing more biographically about specific reviewers. The main thesis in these works seems to be that book reviewing is becoming more and more professionalised and detached from a public sphere, more belonging to a specific cultural sphere, alongside other developments leading to institutional differentiation. A sense of concern can be traced in these works to a loss of the role of the critic as a societal authority, or public intellectual, interpreting new developments on behalf of the rest of society.

6.4 The new cultural sociology

In this part, I will discuss two sociological topics that are of theoretical interest in the research on book reviewing: legitimacy and national repertoires. These are conceptual tools which are a part of the new cultural sociology (Larsen, 2019). Legitimacy is unstable, and we need a theory of performance to examine how it is achieved. Meaning-making activities have to constantly keep the legitimacy alive (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Larsen, 2016). To use an example from the world of book reviewing, it is legitimate to thrash a new book if you come up with substantial arguments of why it is problematic or flawed. If you thrash a book that's written by a debutant, however, you are breaking a code among reviewers, the omerta, as Childress (2017) calls it.

For instance, different ways of legitimising reviews and cultural authority can be by referring to one's education, or one's experience, to ensure public debate, to offer readers a guide to what and how to read, or by making a distinction between taste and quality (or between aesthetics and morals). The boundary between what is considered legitimate and illegitimate is constantly negotiated. There are also other norms regarding how to present an aesthetic judgment that need to be taken into consideration. Book reviewing is influenced by the norms of society, at the same time as book reviewers create a space for themselves to present their judgment. This negotiation is brought together in performances.

The elements of social performance are, according to Alexander (2011, p. 103; Alexander & Mast, 2006, p. 17), collective representations, social scripts, actors, means of symbolic production, mise-en-scène, social power, interpretive

power and audience. The actors here are influential critics, who make judgments others have to consider, or that write in a specific style that other have to consider. Other actors of relevance would be editors, leaders of artists organisations, influential individual artists and authors, researchers, political organisations and foundations providing financial resources (such as Arts Councils, Cultural Ministers and philanthropic foundations). Their means of symbolic production is their national culture (Larsen, 2016). By successfully combining these elements, an actor will be able to persuade the audience about the authenticity of the performance. A successful performance will be perceived as a genuine action, just the way as a good movie will make you forget that it actually is a movie, or work of fiction. The performance-ness of the performance is pushed aside, and the meaning of authenticity appears. In other words, for a performance to be authentic, it is important that the meaning does not come from the script, props or the audience, but from the actor (Alexander, 2011). An important part of the legitimation work of the book reviewers is thus to argue publicly in an authentic way for the necessity of "professional" criticism.

When giving reasons for an activity one often refers to different sorts of values or myths, and by doing this the concept of national repertoires becomes relevant. To exemplify this, the research on class and distinction in Norway is useful. Here, the Bourdieusian claim that the middle class tend to exert symbolic boundaries towards lower classes has been widely debated. In Skarpenes' (2007) study, he asked middle class interviewees to give examples of what they regarded as good literature and bad literature, but they abstained from doing so. He contrasted it with the case of France, where the middle class, according to Bourdieu's (1995) analysis, exert symbolic power towards lower classes (Skarpenes, 2007). In other words, the definition of culture was not seen as imposed from above in the same manner as in France, but rather more democratic. A hypothesis put forth by Mangset and Andersen (2007) is that those in elite positions in Norway are dependent upon appealing to egalitarian values to legitimise their position. The repertoire found specific for Norwegian society by Skarpenes and Sakslind (2010, p. 228) is moral-egalitarian, and consists of traits such as solidarity, honesty, equality, democracy, local cultural and political orientation, altruism, moral, "ordinariness", and anti-intellectualism. This might be exemplified by a quote by the former Norwegian minister of culture: "I really hoped that the time where someone told people what is good and what is bad culture had passed" (Staude, 2017).

This was a response to a Norwegian theatre academic who claimed that the popular local plays known as "spel" were "conservative, self-centred and of low quality" (Ingebrethsen, 2017). While the criticism of the plays being "self-centred" is in harmony with the egalitarian notion, and was accepted, the judgment of the plays as being of "low quality" was rejected by the minister as belonging to "another time".

6.5 Talking to book reviewers

The primary sources analysed in this research are interviews with eleven Norwegian book reviewers who routinely publish reviews in nine different widely read newspapers: Klassekampen, Morgenbladet, Dag og tid, Dagbladet (2), Fædrelandsvennen, Adresseavisen, Bergens Tidende, NRK, and Varden, in addition to one freelancer that was not connected to a specific newspaper at the time. Five reviewers were male, and six female. Chong (2015) argued that interviews are especially useful when studying book reviews since these gives the reviewers time to reflect on matters that are not observable in the reviews. The interviews lasted from 1.5 hours to 3 hours and were conducted in 2014. Ten were done face-to-face at either offices or cafes, and one was done by telephone. They were contacted through The Critics Association in Norway. The conversation in the interviews had a semi-structured form, with a prepared interview guide (Kvale, 1996). The topic of interest was twofold: (1) their descriptions of the work as a critic, and (2) how they perceived their role in society more generally. There are about 7–9 full-time employed book reviewers in Norway, according to themselves, working with reviews and other cultural journalism. Most, however, are freelance workers in the cultural sphere, some are authors themselves, and some are university employees, typically in the humanities, who write reviews as well. In this sample there are some from each category. Given the small size of the population, this qualitative analysis also covers a lot in breadth, even though what is of main interest here is a deep understanding of their work. The interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed with HyperTranscribe and HyperResearch by the author.

Inspired by "the sociology of critique" (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006), a part of the new cultural sociology, the starting point of the analysis were the actors' own claims in the interviews. The meaning categories that were used as

codes were developed after reading and re-reading the interviews. "Consumer guidance" is an example of such a code. The interviews were chosen to obtain information on how the book reviewers present themselves and what they consider to be legitimate answers in a research setting, and not in order to get to know what they actually mean. If this was the interest, another research design would have been necessary. Pugh (2013, p. 50) called this type of information in interviews honourable, and gives it a central position for social scientific research. The questions and answers in the interviews are about fundamental positions in literary criticism and the presentation of self in these matters are not subject for abrupt changes, however it might be that interviews with book reviewers today would not only use different examples but maybe also obtain new information. Further research is encouraged in order to figure this out.

6.6 The landscape of book reviewing

The landscape of book reviewing is constantly changing. Quantitatively some newspapers have less reviews than before and some more, but qualitatively the change is of another importance. More and more seem to regard the criticism as a part of the commercial distribution of a book, and maybe to such a degree that it has become a part of the critics' self-conceptions (Pool, 2007). If so, the critic may not put a lot of time into the reviews and be satisfied with a "mere" presentation of the book. As Andersen (1986) wrote, the common description of critics as the first readers of books is wrong, because the books have been under scrutiny of the publishing houses and various consultants before publication. Childress (2017) described the "field of reception" as the last field a book enters, after "the field of creation" and "the field of production". The room for interpretation by the reader is in other words closely considered before it is possible to read. I would argue that this typical depiction of publishing houses as "the producers of meaning" does not leave enough room for creative interpretations of the reader (DeVault, 1990). The publishing house and their consultants operate in another context than the book reviewers and this is of decisive importance. In other words, the audience of the consultants' text and the critics' text are very different, and this affects how it is written. As Eyerman (2016, p. 85) wrote about the audience of a newspaper:

Audiences are multi-layered and varied, and though journalists do have some idea about who follows their work, this idea remains an abstraction, "the general reader". The general reader of the New York Times, however, is presumably different from that conceptualised by a reporter for the Times-Picayune. He also goes on to locate "pitch", "tone" and which advertisement the newspapers hold as signals for what audience they conceptualise. In other words, the newspapers try to influence how they are being read, but they do not have the possibility to fully decide. Reviewers also have "the general reader" of a newspaper in mind when writing, and the analysis will show different depictions of this, as well as how it influences the reviews.

6.7 Views on new media and challenges to book reviewing

The constantly changing media landscape appears differently from different perspectives. For a news journalist the challenges are different than for a book reviewer. During the interviews the book reviewers do not relate their situation to news journalists, but regard their future as tied together with the future of print newspapers. This resonates with Steiner's (2010, p. 474) depiction of critics' scepticism towards new media because their focus lies on "quality, informed knowledge and culture". In recent years journalism has encountered a crisis narrative, especially regarding the digital future of the profession (Alexander, Breese, & Luengo, 2016). This media development from publishing in an old media, such as the newspaper, to publishing online, urges journalists, critics and scholars to reconsider earlier approaches. Indeed, newspapers in Norway, and the U.S. as well, have seen diminishing space for book reviews (Chong, 2015, p. 136). In the last 10–15 years we have seen a lot of independent book review websites being established, and the critics themselves also have blogs where they publish reviews. The strategy of the critics of today might therefore seem to be to publish in many different media. How does the emergence of new channels of information change the scene of influence, and how might the authority of the critics change in these circumstances? In the following I will present some of their descriptions of online criticism before we go into the different perceptions of challenges that these entail.

Some of the reviewers relate the development of print media to the loss of an elite culture. In their accounts, the history of criticism is portrayed as

proud and important, in contrast to the criticism of today, which is considered as too commercialised and oriented towards the present. One of the reviewers from a local newspaper said:

> *If you take the best [book reviewing] you will find a lot that is better than it was before, but there is a loss in the status of book reviewing. In the 1890s it was on the frontpage of the newspapers; that was where the book reviewing was, large, and tons of columns. "The latest book from Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson". It was a large cultural event. Also, the book reviewers at this time were more educated, more concerned with history, more concerned with aesthetic or philosophical questions maybe. Today, as Dag Solstad has pointed out several times, people are very preoccupied with the present, so I think a lot of book reviewers have too little knowledge of history.*

A freelance book reviewer (former editor of Profil) also gave an example of the loss of elite culture, after first being reluctant to use the internet as an arena for criticism. "There is a kind of competition, and it might be a problem, but I have to say that I write my things no matter what they write on their book blogs. The internet is a big challenge since it contains everything from the serious to commercial garbage but let them do what they want". He/she then added concern for the classical status of high culture:

> *High and low culture, there is a classic separation between those who have and those who do not have education. I do not think it is possible to avoid that separation, or if it is wanted. I actually think the opposite is a larger problem, that serious culture does not get the attention it deserves, the way it has become in the public today.*

This is a paradoxical account in that it describes a crisis, insofar as the recognition of serious literature of good quality is jeopardised by the tendency to downplay the divide between high and low, but also a reluctance towards it. Still, it makes sense if you understand it as connected to a concern for art and literature, and not necessarily for an audience or an organisation. The authority of critics becomes inseparable from the role of newspapers in our culture, and therefore a defence for newspapers has to be initiated. As one of the informants from Dagbladet said:

> *Book blogs actually trick the readers. Those who are susceptible to think in deciding which book to choose, "Ok, this has gotten a good reception," when reading the cover. There is a fair number of readers that listen to book reviewers out there, and it is confusing for them [when book bloggers and book reviewers are equalled on book covers]; they might be fooled into buying crap.*

Further, the interviewee described criticism as an act of resistance towards individualised judgments and a commercialised industry. The interviewee from NRK also described criticism published on the internet as belonging to its own circuit:

> *I have an editor, and that means someone checks that I am "clean", that I do not take my cues from anyone else, publishers or others. When you do not have an editor, you do not know where people's loyalty lies, and the book bloggers also define their role too strongly when making recommendations, I think.*

Other reviewers appeal to authority on behalf of the common reader. Still, these interviewees do not entirely embrace the internet as an arena for criticism, as the interviewee from a local newspaper put it: "A housewife s might be a good reader and writer, but not necessarily. There is no editor or quality control [at book blogs]. I do not regard it as a challenge to the established book reviewing, rather it creates diversity". The informant from Dag og Tid also emphasised the diversity supplied by the internet: "It opens up the conversation about literature to more people". In this case the democratisation of criticism has a positive connotation in contrast to the earlier accounts.

According to this perspective the development of the media is to be taken care of by the institutions, not by critics, that is, they are more concerned about the distribution of the message than about which channel it is distributed through (Steiner, 2010). The critics therefore do not have to defend print media or newspapers. In fact, in this narrative the internet as an arena for criticism is regarded as initiating more reading of criticism in general:

> *I think it is positive for the book industry in general, and for the authors. For them it is good that the readers discuss their literature, and it helps the sale. Book reviewers lose some authority among*

> *the people who prefer reading book blogs of course, so the ability to reach out might have decreased. But I think that if they are interested, they will read the reviews in the newspapers as well.*

This account is positive towards the internet as an arena for criticism on the basis that since it is democratic and open to everyone, it could be a place for anyone to start out. In other words, the challenge of online book reviewing is regarded quite differently by the book reviewers.

6.8 Says who? Moral challenges

Book reviewers are at times unpopular and often contested because they are involved in questions about selection processes, power, canonisation, and literary value (Steiner, 2010, p. 486). Partly this is because it is difficult, if not impossible, to pin down the foundations for aesthetic judgments objectively (Blank, 2007, pp. 32–33). Book reviewing has an "epistemic uncertainty" (Chong, 2020). When met with criticism from the "outside" the book reviewers thus come up with general reasons for why the judgment is still for the common good. They develop cultural tools to provide a positive self-perception. When asked about how they think they are perceived by a general public, several answer that it is something they cannot consider. In other words, their writings are so specialised, for interested people, and not for a general public. As the interviewee from Klassekampen when asked about how people react to criticism as a profession: "It seems so useless to some. You have to be in the right company to say that you are a critic without getting special attention, but usually I am, so it is no problem for me". This does not mean that people are not concerned about aesthetic judgments, but precisely that they perceive them as useless. S/he continued: "[Criticism] is, like, just one level more useless than working with art. Even more "far out". It is weird to some; I can sense that sometimes". Several of the critics have the impression that the value of their work is often overlooked. One of the interviewees from Dagbladet says: "The common reader, or people, are not necessarily so fond of critics". The other interviewee from Dagbladet went even further:

> *The critics are conceived as odious, and that is maybe how it is supposed to be. I am soon to be [anonymised] years old, and I am*

> *thinking: was I supposed to spend my life complaining about authors in Norway writing bad books? I mean, it's an activity that's a little… It's not exactly how I imagined my life to be. So, I understand people thinking: what in the world are critics? What are they good for? But we are necessary within the literary, if not in the broader picture. When we have a literary scene, we need criticism.*

Several describe that they think criticism is perceived as "unproductive" compared to other professions. The interviewee from Klassekampen claimed that critics are "the most badmouthed profession in the world" and refers to the number of negative mails she has received. When the interviewee from Klassekampen talked about "the right company" one could assume that it concerns people with similar kinds of professions and interests as critics.

The critics do not feel particularly challenged by book bloggers or "horizontalisation" of recommendation services, but morally challenged. This means that they seem to miss a societal recognition of the value of their work, and, even further, they feel that they are misrecognised as "snobs" and having illegitimate motivations, such as status and self-interest.

When conceived negatively by the "outside", one could imagine two strategies: (1) trying to convince others of the positive aspect of the activity, or (2) searching for confirmation and consolidation among the likeminded. For institutions to be perceived as legitimate they have to balance both, but publicly the first aspect is of vital importance. One example might be the Opera in Oslo, which actively conducts legitimation work to ensure legitimacy in the broader public (Larsen, 2016). In the interviews I found that the book reviewers actively performed arguments in order to convince a general public of the positive aspect of their activity, even though they were hesitant towards entering a discussion with people who questioned book reviewing. When talking to them three different ways of redefining criticism as a way of meeting the challenges emerged, which defined criticism as (1) resistance towards commercialisation, (2) as guidance, and (3) as peer review.

6.8.1 Resistance towards commercialisation

By posing criticism as a resistance towards commercialisation the critics appeal to aesthetic authority. This is an appeal to be representatives of the general/broader public in aesthetic manners within a sphere that is becoming

ever more commercialised. Literature is posed as a sacred object against the profane economy, and also a vulgar culture. One of the interviewees were concerned about the lack of seriousness in literature, and said:

> *I: There's an incredible vulgarity somewhere out there. I think it's really frightening. Not that we have to get along everybody, but I am thinking about a lack in common decency, to use an old expression, it's become acceptable to lack common decency.*
>
> *O: Do you regard criticism as a resistance towards this?*
>
> *I: Of course it is … I want to give reasons for my opinions and highlight what I think it is important that people read, which is something else.*

The critic voiced a longing for common decency, which seems to be connected to a culture that acknowledges quality, and that the challenge for criticism is to defend the sacrality of literature from illegitimate interests. The challenge for this kind of legitimation work is that it might be perceived as elitist, arguing that broader culture is vulgar. But the interviewees do not fear this, as the one from NRK said:

> *Siv Jensen [former Minister of Finance, from the right-wing Progressive party] and her friends will of course find me and the likes as extremely elitist, and that argument is understandable. But if you accept that there is something called quality in this world; in carpentry, at a café and in art, then it isn't such a bad idea that some have achieved [the] competency to judge it. I have a pragmatic relationship to quality, and do not accept that populist objection.*

The populist objection the critic is referring to is the abstention of ranking cultural products hierarchically (Skarpenes, 2007). By doing this the critic is able to distinguish between what is worthy of being a part of literature on from those that are not. This critical attitude establishes canons and is preoccupied with preserving the status of classics. It is well rooted in the school system and in publishing houses. This resistance is also directed towards the publishing houses, however, since they are commercial organisations. The

critics standing outside the publishing houses therefore might function as watchdogs against the publishing houses, telling the public when they are sneaking in commercial products and not worthy literature. The interviewee from NRK says: "We are the only one who's telling it like it is. The publishing houses are becoming more and more commercialised, and send more and more garbage to people, so we have to change that."

In this account, people are becoming passive recipients of the books of the publishing houses, and the job of critics is to locate and clearly explain the difference between quality and lack of quality to an audience. They become cultural intermediaries between readers and publishing houses, and a part of the production process each time they review a book. This is why credibility is so important for critics. They have to stand as independent actors who have their own opinions. One interviewee from Dagbladet said: "You know that quantity rules in the market-governed popular culture, and I see [criticism] as a small counter voice to that, and then people have to take it as it is".

6.8.2 Criticism as guidance

A second way of contributing to the common good is to pose criticism as curating in a world with ever more to choose between. The publishing houses launch more books than anyone can read, and the number of books to choose from, from a reader's perspective is very broad. This is where the critic can guide the reader in a world of information overload. In this legitimation work, reading is more of a common activity and commercialisation is not posed as a threat, but more as an aspect of the industry to which one has to have a pragmatic relationship. As one of the interviewees from Dagbladet said: "The serious criticism is not so important in itself, in my opinion, but I think that reviews might help the readers". This is a legitimation using "small words", in contrast to the former who used "big words" (Larsen, 2016).

Asked about quality, and if one has to adjust one's own conceptions to the audience, the critic from Bergens Tidende answered confirming:

> *After a while you realise that if you are to keep your own standard you would have to write negative reviews of 90–95% of all books, and that becomes very bothersome. For everybody, right? Yes, except the readers who would be left with a really small but exquisite*

> *selection. Of course I write for readers, but not the ones Skarpenes has interviewed. I write for those that actually read criticism. The big negative word in this business is consumer journalism – is that what we are doing? Well, I'd say we at least do reader guidance.*

Here the critic reformulates "consumer journalism" to "reader guidance" and gives it a positive connotation. In his/her account there is no need to resist the commercial aspect of the book industry. The important task is to evaluate literature according to quality, which correlates with economy in unpredicted ways. This critic also says that the common assumption of small publications being of high quality or having status is a myth, that at least the critics are tired of, and that the opposite often is the rule: small publications are small because they are not good enough.

The reviewer from Fædrelandsvennen is even less dismissive of the language of markets, when he says: "I am trying to address the readers of the paper, not the author or other actors within the literary field. I regard the activity also as a form of consumer guidance." This reviewer does not even distinguish between readers and consumers. The reviewer from Klassekampen also distinguished between reader guidance on one hand, and serious criticism on the other: "I think it is important to be both. To take journalistic considerations, and do a justifiable aesthetic judgement, and to approach both educated readers as well as those have not studied literature". This reviewer also voiced an ideal of helping out. The mission of reviewing in this perspective becomes to provide readers with suggestions and recommendations that they can trust. The critic is thus able to distinguish between what is worthy of spending time on from those that are not, and this should be an appreciated service "in this day and age with so much to choose from". In other words, this is not an appeal to be an advocate for literature on behalf of readers as the former, but a more humble and journalistic legitimation work.

6.8.3 Criticism as peer review

Criticism is also regarded as contributing to the common good by providing artists with feedback. One of the returning challenges in the interviews was the question of the intention of the author. Many literary theories address this issue, and it is not possible to deal with fully in a reviewing practice, but

it is of significance whether the reviewer is preoccupied with the question or not. One of the reviewers who explicitly are said:

> *When reviewing I have been preoccupied with seriously considering, and trying to understand what the aim of the author is. That is, what it really is, where they go, what they really want to communicate, and I try to judge what I read in that light.*

This is a critic who is reluctant towards ranking and perceives that as a less important aspect of criticism. What is important in this aspect is to recognise that most authors get very few reviews, and that they matter for them. The critic that abstains from judging does it seemingly out of respect for the artist, who might have other ambitions than the critic perceives. One consequence might be that readers are confused about whether it is a good book or not. From the perspective of the moral-egalitarian repertoire of evaluation (Skarpenes, 2007) this might be regarded as avoiding stating whether it is a good or bad work because they do not want to offend those who are of a differing opinion. Another reason might be the difficulty of doing this. It becomes a paradox, since the evaluation is exactly what is expected from a critic (Blank, 2006). However, this is valued within the literary sphere, and explicitly voiced as a legitimation by the reviewers. A successful performance of criticism is one that is devoid of insecurity, because that convinces the audience that the reviewers are authentic in voicing their opinion and not just communicating it strategically. There are ways of distancing oneself from the hierarchical conception of culture with certainty, such as the Norwegian literary critic Henning Hagerup (Van der Hagen, 2016): "As a critic I do not have any wish for establishing a strict literary hierarchy. There are many rooms in the house of literature, and, in fact, I find very much of it important". After this, he nevertheless goes on talking about the culture in general, and saying that physical training is expected of people, but that "mental training" is looked down upon. In other words, he is voicing a protest against the egalitarian notion. This is a common understanding among book reviewers, the comparison between a reader and an athlete; one of them are allowed by society to be good, while the other is not. This legitimation work is thus a search for confirmation and consolidation among the likeminded, as well as an attempt to lift the necessity of art to a more general level.

6.9 New areas as resources for criticism

Whether or not the ways of meeting the challenges are successful or not is up to the audience to decide, but it is important to show that the challenges are met (Larsen, 2016), and the book reviewers show this in several arenas. Book reviewers are generally best known from the texts they write in newspapers. In one way, these texts are where the reviewers perform legitimacy. Often these reviews reveal more about the reviewer than the book, and a good digression or a nice picture is often added to please the reader. The reader of book reviews is also interested in something other than "simply" a recommendation of what to read. It is acknowledged by the reviewers, and seen as a matter of writing in mass media newspapers that book reviewing contains an element of what we can call "consumption guidance", even though it is held at some distance. As with judging, this is all about how it is done. To put a "like" on a post on Facebook, or to give stars to a movie at IMDb is judging, but it is very different from writing a book review. The decisive difference is that book reviewers have to show knowledge for undertaking the task, and that they have understood what the work aims at, while giving form to a consistent argument of their own. The publishing houses push to get their books reviewed, and this is the problem of book bloggers, who being without editors, have a bigger challenge than book reviewers in being perceived as credible (Steiner, 2010).

The legitimacy of book reviewers is also performed elsewhere, in other texts they write (opinion texts and essays) and in interviews, as a part of cultural journalism for instance. During a career of writing book reviews, for instance it is common to write a book about how this has been experienced, taking controversial judgments as points of departure (Norheim, 2012; Scott, 2016). The book reviewers also perform in radio shows, podcasts, literary events and festivals. Norwegian book reviewers have, for instance, participated in international debates on Karl Ove Knausgård and My Struggle, to present to the event by the country of his birth. This development of "eventification" (Lindholm, 2015) is of course also criticised among reviewers for leaving the text in the background, instead of the foreground, "where it belongs".

Altogether, the book reviewers portray the dispersion and quantification of criticism as a challenge that will influence society in general, if not change it entirely. That is, "our" ability to understand aesthetic works of art

is in need of critics, so we at least have someone who takes it seriously. The book reviewers are a highly individualised group, but in this matter they make a case for the fellowship of book reviewers. Contrary to the content of the "elegies" performed by book reviewers themselves, and literary and media scholars (Debendetti & Ghariani, 2018), this analysis holds that successful performances, which can also be the function of the "elegies", will uphold the legitimacy and activity of book reviewing in print media.

6.10 Conclusion

When met with alleged criticism and misrecognition the critics mobilise legitimation work based on general principles, such as the quality of art, the help for consumers or feedback to artists. This chapter shows how book reviewing is performed in many arenas, and thus might ensure the continued existence of a traditional aesthetic authority by many who have assumed it to be on the wane. How literary critics talk about their practice, and what values they refer to while making judgments show the importance of moral self-perceptions in the defence of their profession. Several institutions in the cultural sphere constantly have to legitimise their practice just like the literary criticism does, by referring to certain values (Larsen, 2013). As with the opera, literary criticism seemingly might be in a tension between elite and egalitarianism, but none of them are contempt as strictly elite, and both of them are active in combining these notions in order to gain legitimacy. By interviewing literary critics about their profession, I have tried to show how they create a context around themselves. The critics have different perceptions of society, and therefore they refer to different values when they legitimise their position. Nonetheless, they are consensual in understanding their profession as a defence against dispersion and/or quantification of aesthetic judgments. Dispersion is framed as targeting very special audiences, and the criticism as addressed to "the common reader". Quantification is framed as levelling discussions that are important for democracy, while criticism keeps it alive. By looking at the meaning-making practices of book reviewers we can see how they strive to gain aesthetic authority in a constantly changing media landscape.

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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 19th 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 18th or 19th 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).

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