The Chosen Ones[1]

Maintaining social privilege in 'Elite' institutions

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[1] Title Idea from 'The Chosen' by Jerome Karabel

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The ruling class is the social class of a given society that decided upon and sets that society's political agenda.

Malcolm Gladwell's[2]
Getting In: The social logic of Ivy League admissions

In his article for 'A Critic at Large' section of the New York Times, Malcolm Gladwell very overtly, sometimes even blatantly, talks about the admission strategies of the 'elite' educational institutions to maintain their social status, based on his reading of Jerome Karabel's 'The Chosen'. He studies and analyses the social factors that affect one's chances of getting admission into the reputed Ivy Leagues.

The author talks about his high school days and his applications for college admissions. One can almost hear him gleefully chortle when he says "I never asked anyone to write me a recommendation; it wasn't as if I were applying to a private club." From where he came, it really didn't matter *where* one went to college, but rather *whether* he or she did. "I thought everyone felt this way", he remarks, beautiful applying the idea that reality is socially constructed[3], because reality is different for each individual, influenced by life experiences and shaped by social interactions.

Gladwell talks about the various admission criteria that have been used at Harvard over the past century. It all started in 1905, when Harvard adopted the idea of an entrance examination as the principal mode of admission, which was fair and gave the academically-gifted a worthy shot. But this meritocratic spirit led to an astounding transformation for Harvard; the enrolment percentage of Jews rose remarkably. They were replacing less intelligent children of their wealthy alumni, which was a downside for funds.
But how could they keep the Jews out? Those who had cleared the examination were indubitably smarter, and thats when Harvard decided to alter its

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[2] https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/10/10/getting-in

The New York Times, October 10, 2005 Issue

[3]The Social Construction of Reality, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966)

interpretation of merit and calibre itself. They now wanted to learn about the candidate's 'character' including their race, colour and family background. The students had to write personal essays and submit letters of recommendation. At Princeton, the scene was appalling and disgraceful, as emissaries were sent to schools to identify potential students as 'undesirable'. They would definitely not be admitted, regardless of their academic prowess.

But this begs the question, why would they want to keep the Jews out in the first place? Jews were considered 'unfit' for society, sickly and narrow-minded. They were considered inferior due to their race and religion. These social forces influenced the behaviour of these institutions - a quintessential example of sociological imagination[4]. The societies we grow up in influence the way we perceive others. Our thoughts and actions are often a consequence of large-scale social forces. It is the society's outlook on Jews that affected this decision of the Ivy Leagues.

The admission criteria, Gladwell notes, soon consisted of more dimensions, including extracurriculars, personal life and athletic abilities. The applicants were segregated into 'dockets' based on their nationalities. Harvard wanted a strong football team. Yale even measured how tall her students were. Why? Because these qualities were characteristic of 'elite' and 'superior' people. They were the cream, as opposed to the Jews who were socially unacceptable, because this is how reality was socially (and unfortunately) constructed at the time.

That repugnant era of the discrimination of Jews is long gone, but the admission system that the Ivy Leagues use, has remained the same to this day. Those four dimensions still exist, and these institutes still lay emphasis on the personality of the students. They argue that they want strong characters and leaders with decent academic abilities who would have success even after college. But again, this elicits the question as to why does athletic ability and personality matter so much? The author mentions Shulman and Bowen's 'The Game of Life', which talks about such preferences. Although the authors themselves think that this is a preposterous way of admitting students, their studies indicate otherwise. Most athletes turn out to earn a lot more than their

[4] The Sociological Imagination, C. Wright Mills (1959)

peers and succeed because they are more energetic and confident. It makes one ponder if this system of admission really is better than the best-students model.

Most of the elite law schools follow a best-students model where the principal mode of admission are the LSATs. These examinations would undoubtedly determine how good a law student one could be; but would it also determine how good a *lawyer* one would be? Researchers Zedeck and Shultz note that being a good lawyer requires questioning and negotiation skills, stress management and countless other factors that cannot be ascertained by the LSATs solely.

The admission criteria goes a little overboard though, notes Gladwell, as he draws a parallel between Harvard and luxury brands. Harvard admits children of the alumni, sometimes at a rate far more than the others. This is definitely not fair and just, but they must reward 'customer loyalty'. The author believes that Harvard wants generous and loyal alumni and for that, the institute must reward them.

Gladwell also notes the resemblance between a treatment-effect institution like The Marine Corps and the Ivy Leagues. Harvard provides the best all-round education to its students, just like the Marine Corps turns you into a formidable soldier. However, the admission process is very analogous to that of a modelling agency. Economists Krueger and Dale consider the popular example of UPenn, an Ivy League, and Penn State, a state university. Students often have to choose between the two and because UPenn is considered superior to Penn State, students often choose the former one. Krueger notes that there is an enormous difference in the pay that a student makes, depending where he or she graduated from. But even if a student chooses the Penn State over the Ivy League, he or she would end up doing well regardless.

But would anyone do so? Krueger says, "You would think that the more ambitious student is the one who would choose to go to Penn, and the latter might be a little less confident." This is another classic example of how reality is being socially constructed. The ones going to the Ivy League are definitely 'better' because that's what our society believes. And if we apply sociological

imagination, a student would most likely choose UPenn over the state university because of the social forces and beliefs that the Ivy Leagues are paramount.

Our social interactions almost inevitably shape our thoughts and beliefs. Our brought up affects how we present ourselves. Our beliefs and prejudices cloud our perception of reality. Before signing off, Malcolm Gladwell asks the reader whether Harvard would really be Harvard with too many non-athletic shy people…
No it wouldn't. Why? Because we do not always see things for themselves, as they really are.

We see them as *we* are.