



Cord Meyer (St. Paul's '38) speaks to the assembled students of Groton, 1948

Prepped for Success

Are the old schools still what they were?

BY CHRISTOPHER BENSON

Growing up in the Rocky Mountain West, I never had a classmate uprooted to an elite boarding school in the East. That would have been tantamount to a Gamelan dance, or lunar landing.

The “foreign” has psychic sway on us precisely because it departs from our prosaic experience, luring us into an alternative narrative. My curiosity about boarding schools began with the autobiographical accounts in William F. Buckley’s *Nearer, My God*, in which he remembered tearful homesickness, “smothering my face with the collar of my pajamas so that I would not be heard by my neighbors,” and in C.S. Lewis’s *Surprised by Joy*, in which he remembered “the gray faces of all the other boys, and their deathlike stillness” in the presence of “Oldie,” the cruel head-

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The Best of the Best
Becoming Elite
at an American Boarding School
 by Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernández
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master who flogged students for “vulgar accents” and geometry mistakes.

My curiosity deepened when I enrolled in a summer conference at Phillips Exeter Academy to undergo training in a pedagogical method named after a philanthropist (Edward Harkness)—not a philosopher (Socrates)—who sought to revolutionize the classroom through student-centered learning. I figured that this might be the closest I would ever get to the hallowed (and perhaps haunted) world of the elite boarding school. Not so.

Enter ethnographer Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, who does not let his readers forget that he is “a light-skinned

Puerto Rican male” and was permitted, initially as a consultant and later as a researcher, to cozy up (emphasis on “up”) to the predominantly vanilla, patrician class at Weston, the fictitious name he gives an elite boarding school in New England. For two years he sought to camouflage himself at sporting events, pep rallies, admissions tours, dorm lobbies, semiformal dances, dining halls, and classrooms, eyeing the “hidden curriculum.”

As ethnographers go, he writes in the confessional mode of Oprah Winfrey, divulging his status-anxiety (“I was inescapably an outsider, and a ‘lower’ outsider at that”) and the prurient—albeit academicized—mode of Howard Stern, observing the ubiquity of skin during springtime (“She is wearing a slightly transparent white tube dress that contrasts little with her fair skin, and that accentuates her curvaceous body”). Ethnographer is a

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misnomer, by the way: Here is a status-tician, whose “quest for love from the world,” as Alain de Botton diagnosed it in *Status Anxiety*, hides beneath his abstruse goal to examine “how students mobilize symbolic resources to construct and enact elite identifications, and the role such constructions and enactments play in how they negotiate other symbolic boundaries within the context of one elite boarding school.” Only a student in the Graduate School of Education at Harvard could write such gobbledygook. Translation: The author examines how a youngster becomes what Lewis calls “One of the Most Important People There Are.”

David Hume once noted that “it is not a great disproportion between ourselves and others which produces envy, but on the contrary, a proximity.” The squinty-eyed monster of envy stalks Gaztambide-Fernández. At once he feels proximity to the elite, owing to his own Ivy League education, and disproportion, owing to his bourgeois family. His tone, as a consequence, wavers between reverence and rebuke. Boarding schools are elite, he declares, because of their typology (private designation), scholastics (curricular scope and sophistication), history (connection to elite social networks), demography (social class of student population), and geography (facilities and location). Of these five characteristics, the last is the most interesting: The spatial abundance of the pastoral landscape mirrors the economic abundance of the elites who carve their niche in it.

Boarding schools also qualify as “total institutions,” a term that the sociologist Erving Goffman used to describe prisons, concentration camps, and mental hospitals, where all “aspects of life are conducted in the same place and under the same single authority.” After reading *The Best of the Best*, the reader may conclude that there is an uncanny resemblance between students and inmates. Working, sleeping, and playing together, both groups employ insider jargon and erect hierarchies based on sexual prowess and worldly smarts. In addition, the schoolhouse and prison house are “bubbles,” not only outliers from the proverbial “real

world”—preparing their denizens to survive Wall Street or Main Street—but also shelters for delusions of grandeur.

Becoming One of the Most Important People There Are involves five E’s: *exclusion* in the admissions process, where wunderkind-wannabes are selected from affluent households that breed a culture of competition, if not neurosis; *engagement* in the academic, athletic, and artistic opportunities at the school; *excellence* in the aforementioned undertakings; *entitlement* to privileges based on a self-congratulatory work

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ethic; and *envisioning* future privileges, including admission to elite colleges and universities, and access to high-status careers and leadership roles.

Since the 1970s, American boarding schools have sought to diversify their student populations. Nevertheless, they still retain the appearance of WASPy kids in Ralph Lauren ads. Gaztambide-Fernández hankers for more diversification while recognizing the predicament that faces a black girl from Watts or a farm boy from Grand Forks who feels like a recipient of institutional paternalism. Their skin color and zip code are tallied up as a credit to the school—but at the cost of their experiencing the soft bigotries of white guilt and economic guilt.

A “discourse of distinction” emerges among the students at an elite boarding

school, which serves a twofold purpose: To separate them from the hoi polloi, and to rank them among the aristoi (“the best”). Consider these statistics:

In 2008, 16,043 students—roughly 0.10 percent of the more than 16 million secondary school students in the United States—enrolled in schools that could be categorized as elite boarding schools. While the U.S. public spent an average of \$8,701 per pupil in 2005, elite boarding schools spent more than \$46,000 per pupil.

Outsiders are denigrated as socially stuffed and mentally starved, whereas insiders are dignified by a hierarchy of smartness and workaholicism. PGs (post-graduates unofficially recruited to sports teams) fall to the bottom of the totem pole. “Latin Distinction” graduates (the study of Latin for three years and a modern Romance language for two years) rise to the top.

Our author never scrutinizes fidelity to the Gospel of Work, which begins in the classroom and ends in the boardroom. If the average worker spends a month longer on the job each year than in 1970, imagine how much stress and how little leisure characterizes the elite worker, who tarries in the office long after the janitors empty the wastebaskets because an appetite for consumerism drives him more than a pursuit of excellence. The ugly truth that few Americans will confront is that “the Work Ethic’s boss is Mammon,” as the historian Eugene McCarragher puts it.

Beyond the sphere of work, there is the sphere of social interaction, where unofficially “reserved seating” in the chapel and dining hall segregates students according to the logic of whether they are cool or weird. At Weston, brainiacs and virtuosos are cool, with jocks and “posses” (the slick, fine, and beautiful) as the runners-up. By contrast, participants in SAHAS (the Society of African and Hispanic American Students), A-Club (the Actors Club), and GSA (the Gay-Straight Alliance) are seldom on the margins of cool, and usually downright weird.

Just as the Jets and the Sharks mark their turf in *West Side Story*, the cool gang and the weird gang mark their turf on campus: the former gravitating

toward the “valley” side, featuring the football stadium, athletic complex, and baseball diamonds, and the latter gravitating toward the “hills” side, featuring the academic classrooms, theater, music building, and art studios. Gaztambide-Fernández notes that the valley side is linked to “dominant and static gender ideals, athletic prowess, traditional definitions of beauty, and definitions of ‘popularity’ commonly associated with non-elite school contexts,” whereas the hills side is linked to “more fluid and thus marginal sexual and gender identifications, intellectualism, artistic interests like theater, and fringe activities like punk and ‘alternative’ cultural repertoires.” The “perfect Westonian,” he says, transgresses these turf lines, embodying the ideal of the “well-rounded” individual who, first and foremost, performs decently in her grades, then plays the oboe, exerts herself in field hockey, and socializes with the ease of a Stepford wife.

In the sphere of intimacy, our author observes that teachers seem curiously incurious about the pecking order at the school, as they sit at their own dining room tables, absorbed with their own children. Moreover, they are sideshows to the construction of a Westonian identity—which makes me wonder if the inmates run the asylum. When the adults are away, how do the kids play? Our “nosy ethnographer” reveals the bonding rituals, starting innocuously with dorm wrestling, midnight runs, dodgeball games, tailgate parties, Homecoming Weekend, prom fashion show, and out-of-town permissions, but progressing iniquitously to “porno night” initiation, gambling, drug deals, boozing, and sex on classroom tables.

If this causes parents consternation, ask yourself if the ethnographer compromises the integrity of his study when he stealthily buries the hint of darker debauchery in a footnote: “I have chosen not to share details of rituals I witnessed that might be interpreted as

scandalous or that might mislead readers to interpret this book as an exposé of ‘rich kids acting badly.’”

Gaztambide-Fernández concludes with cries of inequality, turning the spotlight on race, class, and gender, providing weak examples that suggest disparities between the propaganda of the school, which upholds diversity, meritocracy, and egalitarianism, and the practice of the students, which reveals uniformity, plutocracy, and male



Phillips Academy, Andover (1951)

chauvinism. Monica, a brown-skinned girl, feels like she is a “pet” when white girls touse her hair; Michael, a Southern boy on partial scholarship, feels ambivalent about calling himself a “Westonian” in his hometown; Krista, a day student whose father works in dining services, feels estranged from her classmates who buy Versace clothes on a shopping trip to New York; and Julie, an outspoken senior, feels girls police their intellectual visibility in the classroom to preen in front of the boys.

According to our all-too-serious author, these feelings demonstrate

“oppression in the production of elite status groups.” Really? Carping about such “unequal distinctions” sounds frivolous, as if there might be a way to permanently straighten kinky hair or attire everyone in haute couture. It also sounds envious, as C.S. Lewis observed in his essay “Equality” in 1943: “When equality is treated not as a medicine or a safety-gadget but as an ideal we begin to breed that stunted and envious sort of mind which hates all superiority. That mind is the special disease of democracy, as cruelty and servility are the special diseases of privileged societies.”

An essential evil at Weston is not social inequality but “paternalistic nihilism,” a term from Cornel West that refers to the insincere and ineffectual do-goodism of the liberal power elite. This outlook is shamelessly expressed by the headmaster at the graduation ceremony, when she perfunctorily exhorts students to help “those in the margins of society” and, in the next breath, says, “You have worked hard, contributed to life, and opened doors of opportunity,” so go ahead and develop a sense of “sophisticated selfishness”—an apt definition of elitism.

Ultimately, *The Best of the Best* disappoints because it gives us only partial access to the life of the boarding school, which is not so much the fault of its author as its genre. Auto-

biography, as in the case of Buckley and Lewis, proves far more satisfying than ethnography: The former is lived from the inside and the latter from the outside. Gaztambide-Fernández can only observe the “perilous social geography” in the boarding school, questioning whether he would subject his daughter to its inequalities, whereas Lewis can confess that he developed worldliness at a boarding school—“the desire for glitter, swagger, distinction, the desire to be in the know,” questioning why parents would exile their child to a “concentration camp.”

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