

## BOOKS &amp; ARTS

# Different class

The 'big three' universities in the United States are upholding a long tradition of élitism.

**The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admissions and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton**

by Jerome Karabel

Houghton Mifflin: 2005. 672 pp. \$28

## John Aubrey Douglass

In the decades after the American War of Independence in the late eighteenth century, many of the fledgling nation's political leaders envisaged a collection of colleges and universities as central agents of maturation for those born in the glow of the Enlightenment. In a society dominated politically by farmers, shopkeepers and artisans, the concept of the university as a source of intellectual development, civic leadership and socioeconomic mobility contrasted strongly with the stifling class inbreeding of the major European powers.

Yet the first wave of colleges to be established were more the vestiges of an old colonial system than a new order. As Jerome Karabel's book *The Chosen* chronicles, they were a service for gentlemen, protective of class and sectarian distinctions, and, at first, were built to produce clergy from socially elite families. Harvard and Yale universities were born as tools of the Congregational Church; Columbia (originally known as King's College) served Episcopalians; Princeton did the same for Presbyterians; Rutgers was an affiliate of the Dutch Reformed Church; and Brown was for Baptists. Following the English model, each provided dormitories and dining halls, and enforced chapel attendance with a devotion to their particular evangelical doctrine.

There were differences in their respective markets for students, but social class was the most important factor for admissions throughout the nineteenth century. Harvard, modelled on Emmanuel College at the University of Cambridge, UK, required courses to be taught in Latin, the language of the church, well into the nineteenth century. It also ranked the social status of a student's family — a practice that continued into the twentieth century. Yale and other colleges did the same.

Women were generally not welcomed. When Harvard first offered instruction for women in 1894, it set up Radcliffe College, across the Charles River from Harvard, with largely its own faculty. Harvard itself did not invite women into its classrooms until the Second World War. As late as 1943, its governing



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The upper crust: Harvard students in the 1870s were far from representative of the US public.

board refused to admit women to Harvard's medical school. Princeton and Yale, the two other members of the 'big three', stalled on coeducation at the undergraduate level until the 1960s.

Under its relatively progressive president Charles Eliot at the start of the twentieth century, Harvard, along with Yale and Princeton to a lesser degree, began to expand the scope of admissions — a conscious move to induce a more economically and culturally diverse student body that was more reflective of US society. The results were unimpressive. The big three formed the core, along with Columbia, of a cabal bent on marginally expanding access to certain preferred social and ethnic groups, while devising methods to exclude others.

One such tool was the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB), which was established in the early 1900s. CEEB examinations, the forerunner of the SAT, became an important building block for a slight expansion of access for the middle class and, occasionally, the working class. It also offered a way of excluding 'unassimilable' populations — particularly Jews — that were unfamiliar with the cultural idioms built into the test.

Changes in the admission process in the 1920s helped to block the rest of the undesir-

ables. Abbott Lawrence Lowell, Eliot's successor at Harvard, pushed an admissions policy intended to serve the acceptable social elite — largely protestant, some Catholics, some German Jews, but definitely not the later wave of Russian Jews. Princeton and Yale were even more aggressive in maintaining their links to an acceptable social class.

The elite private institutions that dominated higher education along the northeastern seaboard didn't just ask prospective students to take standardized tests that were purposefully gauged to reflect the cultural norms of the well-bred Protestant. They also began to ask for pictures and non-academic information and, more overtly, placed a high value on accepting the male offspring of alumni.

Like Princeton and Yale, the cost of attending Harvard kept out many lower-income students. There were scholarships, but not many. Of the 3,500 students enrolled at Harvard in 1933, 84% were from extremely wealthy families. Those from the lower economic groups constituted perhaps less than 5% and were often academically high achievers of Jewish background.

Karabel's book provides a richly detailed version of this story, its subtitle promising the unveiling of a "hidden history" of admission

and exclusion. Yet most observers of US higher education know of the elite nature and history of the big three and their role in educating the nation's rulers, past and present. The book is in part built on the shoulders of previous scholarly works, notably Marcia Graham Synnott's *The Half-Opened Door* (Greenwood, 1979) and Harold Wechsler's *The Qualified Student* (John Wiley, 1977).

What Karabel adds is an immersion into archival sources that allows him more fully to illuminate the voices of those who either set discriminatory admissions policies or struggled to change them. As Karabel observes, much has changed over the past forty or so years. The big three couldn't simply maintain their old allegiances and remain viable. Eventually, their leaders and influential alumni came to understand that greater inclusion meant they could play a larger role in society. They wanted their institutions to be more democratic and their students more academically talented.

In parallel with other universities, both public and private, Harvard, Princeton and Yale altered their admissions process to take more scholastically brilliant children from the middle and upper-middle classes. More important, they adopted affirmative-action policies to boost the number of minority students, initially focusing mainly on African-Americans.

There has, then, been a marked change for the better. The big three and a handful of other highly selective private institutions now educate a growing number of high-achieving minorities, some from lower-income backgrounds. Of the big three, Harvard has the highest percentage of undergraduates from ethnic minorities, about 28%. As in many other highly selective institutions, Asian-Americans are by far the largest minority group; African-Americans represent just 6.5%.

Some other things have not changed quite so much. Most minority students are from high-income families. Students from low-income families still go largely to public universities and colleges. Students from wealthy families still congregate at the most prestigious private institutions. Indeed, there is evidence that this trend is accelerating, reflecting, to some degree, the growing chasm between the rich and poor in the United States.

As Karabel notes, the big three are among the least diverse of the leading universities in terms of economic class. One reason is that admissions policies still favour the children of alumni. In 2002, 40% of such 'legacies' who applied to Harvard were admitted, compared with just 11% of all other applicants — a "birthright out of eighteenth-century British aristocracy, not twenty-first-century American democracy", one critic complained.

A limited supply of high-quality, prestigious, selective and increasingly wealthy private institutions, accompanied by growing demand both domestically and internationally, means the big three and their brethren will remain

élite and powerful. What is largely missing in Karabel's and other examinations of the big three is a parallel story: the rise of the public university movement in the United States and its huge impact on socio-economic mobility. The scale of that enterprise dwarfs that of the big three and other private universities. Arguably, the viability and fate of public uni-

versities will have a greater effect on the nation's democratic experiment and global competitiveness. But the star power and academic achievements of the big three continue to draw the most attention, obscuring this reality. ■ John Aubrey Douglass is at the Center for Studies in Higher Education, University of California, Berkeley, California 94720-4650, USA.

## Cultural reflections

### **Hubris and Hybrids: A Cultural History of Technology and Science**

by Mikael Hård & Andrew Jamison  
Routledge: 2005. 335 pp. \$90 (hbk);  
\$29.95 (pbk)

#### **Howard P. Segal**

It is a truism that culture, broadly defined, shapes science and technology as much as they shape culture. This once controversial position became the conventional wisdom decades ago, after purely internal histories of science and technology, followed by largely uncritical interpretations of their developments, were displaced as the dominant models.

In their excellent book *Hubris and Hybrids*, historians Mikael Hård and Andrew Jamison engage in a cultural assessment of science and technology. They replace the traditional 'heroic tale' of scientific genius with stories of the frequently mixed blessings of science and technology.

The 'hubris' of the title is reflected in James Watson's book *The Double Helix* (Atheneum, 1968), which recounts the race to discover the structure of DNA. In Watson's book the professional and monetary rewards were seen virtually as ends in themselves; there was a role for intuition along with conventional scientific methods; there was questionable treatment of peers; and there was little concern for the social and moral consequences of research.

For Watson, limits to either human intelligence or human power over nature had virtually disappeared. Yet Watson never denied his own flaws, and so helped to push scientific heroes off their traditional pedestals.

But even this account is too 'romantic' for Hård and Jamison, who seek even franker explorations of science from inside the laboratory — but only if paired with external (yet no less frank) analyses, such as Vandana Shiva's *Stolen Harvest* (South End, 2000). 'Hybrids' is the implicit theme of Shiva's book, which describes the way large corporations use the biotechnology derived from the genetic code. Some of these enterprises make huge profits while exploiting poor farmers, harming the environment, and undermining traditional balances between mankind and nature.

Hård and Jamison describe this story as a "tragedy" but wisely go beyond merely stressing the victimization. They never reduce their stories to wholesale good versus evil. Instead they focus on the growing convergence between science and technology into 'technoscience'. This is not simply about the elimination of most of the remaining barriers between scientific discovery and technological applications. It is also the story of changing meanings of being human, as we incorporate ever more technology within ourselves and our immediate surroundings. The authors discuss the possible cloning of people in the future, as well

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Frankenstein (Kenneth Branagh, left) refused to take responsibility for his creation (Robert De Niro).