

# *Elite and Ordinary: The Essential Tension in the University*

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**ABSTRACT:** Universities are often claimed to be elite institutions, yet they admit less than elite students. Furthermore, their faculty, though occasionally elite, are often ordinary, not to say mediocre. This apparent contradiction, so this paper argues, is in fact an essential tension between the elite and the ordinary in the university. A variety of ways in which this tension is developed and resolved is explored in the paper. It is argued that the tension between elite and ordinary is a necessary condition for the support of democracy by the university and for the maintenance of democracy within the university.

*Keywords:* university, elite, ordinary, democracy, university membership, university governance, power, tension, talent, privilege

Alan Montefiore has forcefully put the case for considering the university as a family which includes its old members and excludes the children of those old members, except on their individual merit. Here we have a potential tension between a meritocratic elite and the claims of the present "members" of an institution. In some circumstances this might be a tension between two elites, one based on cleverness and the other based on commitment to the institution and perhaps to family achievement. This might also be a tension between a meritocratic elite and a democratic, family-based collection of ordinary members. Or it might even be a tension between two different democratic grounds or bases for university admission, if one assumes that merit is more or less rare but evenly distributed throughout the population independent of wealth, or previous family history, or university attendance and the like and that, similarly, previous family history of university attendance says nothing about one's origins (at least in principle). There are a lot of "ifs" here.

So far as I know, the empirical aspects of this question are still unclear. Except for cases of unusually wisely married families, cases of great cleverness for more than two generations are pretty rare — the Bernoullis and some medieval Italian medical families come to mind. This is largely because after

three generations none of the original gene pool is left, or at any rate very little.

But it seems to me that the kind of tension which Montefiore's example suggests is to be found in the university in many settings. I shall refer to the general form of this tension as the tension between the "elite" and the "ordinary" in what follows. But the terms are not exact since what is in some sense an elite might also be in some sense very democratically based and in that sense ordinary. And similarly the ordinary (as regards brains, for example) who find themselves in a university are part of the democratic mass in that regard, but might be very unusual, very elite, as regards power or wealth or force of character or some such other quality.

There are three main ways in which such a tension shows itself: first, as regards admission (either to the ranks of the student or to the ranks of the teaching and research staff); second, as regards the distribution of privilege within the university; and third, as regards the distribution of power within the university. I take the tensions to which I speak as being parallel to the tensions in the society at large between what one might term "aristocracy" and "democracy." Again, roughly speaking, to the questions "Who should we admit to the membership of the university?", "To whom should we offer the privileges of the university?", and "To whom should we offer power within the university?", academic aristocracy would answer "to as few as possible, and in particular by excluding from membership, privilege, or power anybody who would not increase the university's strength" and academic democracy would answer "to as many as possible" by including in membership, privilege, or power anybody who would increase its strength.

My argument is essentially this: These are not incompatible answers. In every university, just as in every body politic whatever, there are those mentally ready to exercise power and privilege and those not yet ready. And there is a continual passage from the latter group to the former.

Karl Jaspers in *The Idea of the University* remarks that the students who make up a university are just a selection of ordinary people who, for one reason or another, happen to be able to get the education necessary for them to get in. He wrote this initially in the 1920s and said it again when he was Rector at Heidelberg in the 1950s. Yet German universities, from the time of Humboldt to our own day, were considered to be elite institutions.

In the beginnings of the university movement in Italy, some thousand years ago, the students were those who could pay a professor to teach. There were no admission standards other than that. In the northern universities, modelled after the University of Paris, the students were those who knew enough Latin to get in — and this could be very little. Yet a university education, in spite of this, was an unusual and rare medieval apprenticeship. To have belonged was to have belonged to an elite.

In our own age, the modern American university (or, perhaps, multiversity as Clark Kerr would have it) is a mass institution. Not only are there thousands of institutions which style themselves as universities, but millions of students attend. At some universities the student body is larger than the combined stu-

dent bodies of all the German universities in their 19th century heyday.

This is true of the University of Toronto which has some 77,000 students divided among some 20 colleges and halls of residence. But although this is a mass university in a mass university system it is an elite institution among institutions. University students, despite the fact that they represent, for example in Canada and the United States, some 20 percent of their age group, nonetheless consider themselves among the elite and are so considered by their society. They are ordinary, as Jaspers says, yet part of an elite: a selection from the society at large that somehow obtained the necessary educational attainments for entrance.

The university is a place in which we distinguish between elite and ordinary in a variety of ways. Most strikingly, we distinguish in this way, with some shading to be sure, in the disciplines and professions. Thus we have elite and ordinary mathematicians, elite and ordinary historians, elite and run-of-the-mill physicists, poets, musicians, engineers, and brain surgeons. And here we are distinguishing not between privilege (as in mere attendance at a university) and not; but between talent, or even genius, and not. Most of us who attend university and pass, perhaps even do well, have no special talent for what we do and certainly no genius. This doesn't prevent us from doing whatever it is, perhaps even well. But we make the distinctions naturally.

We also distinguish between those who are on faculty and those who are not. A Professor in a European university belongs in some sense to an elite (whether or not she or he possesses talent or genius). And here a tenured professor similarly belongs, whatever the rank.

A named chair, "The Regius Professor of History," the "Lucasian Professor of Natural Philosophy," the "Edgar M. Warburg Professor of Economics," also places one in an elite — often an elite of privilege, income, and perks.

Some belong, not to an elite of talent or privilege, but to an elite of power. A dean, a college head, a provost, an academic vice president, at least in the Canadian case, can be of this sort. Here power is usually connected with being able to direct money towards or away from a program — to help friends and hinder enemies, as Thrasymachus puts it in the *Republic*.

Some belong to an elite of connections, within or without the university. Bertrand Russell, when at Trinity College, Cambridge, would be a good example. He came from a ducal family with a grandfather who was prime minister, and when he entered the university he was "looked out for" by Whitehead and members of an elite group known as the Apostles.

Some belong to an elite of wealth and enjoy privilege while in an institution historically rather poor. Perhaps Lord Byron, also at Trinity College, Cambridge, with his main floor rooms, his pet bear, and his live-in mistress who dressed as a boy suggests the notion.

The university is a place in which this multiplex of elites are tolerated maximally and in which none can dominate over all the others. And the ordinary benefit.

There have been a variety of experiments in numerous university institutions

with respect to university governance in the last 25 years which has tended to shift the dialectic balance between the elite and the ordinary, between the faculty and the administration and the faculty and the students, towards the democratic or ordinary side. This has occurred with respect to the distribution of power, if not of privilege.

In a few universities, governance had been entirely by the faculty, or the Senior Members, in Oxford terminology. Junior members had some limited privileges, but involvement in the running of the day-to-day operations, its policies, and its syllabus or curriculum was not among them. Since the mid-1960s, we have seen a variety of experiments which have tended to transfer power and privilege to the student body and, in some cases, to other staff categories not normally considered university members in Montefiore's terms. For example, student unions which are self-governing bodies of students with considerable financial clout have gained powers over large buildings (as at the University of Alberta in the mid-sixties), sometimes residences, bookstores, businesses of diverse sorts. An Oxford riot in the 1960s consisted of students hammering on the door of All Souls demanding that it should be opened to students and of A. L. Rowse asking the student leader how many books he had written. At the University of Toronto the power formerly held by the Board of Governors was transferred to a new body, a governing council, on which faculty and students, as well as appointed external representatives would sit. The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education has had numerous "democratic" constitutions in which all staff categories are represented. In some departments selection of new faculty has been by vote which includes secretaries and research assistants, as well as faculty and students.

The tension between the elite and the ordinary in a university is not necessarily a bad thing which all university or colleges heads must strive to eliminate. On the contrary, it is a necessary feature of the kind of institution which a university is. It is not an institution of fixed privilege, but an ever-shifting institution of astonishingly persistent form but steady renewal.

When Isaac Barrow, the great Cambridge algebraicist got a young Lincolnshire farm boy, Isaac Newton, as a student in the 17th century plague years, it didn't take him too long to realize he had a young man of special talent and in a few years he gave up his chair, the Lucasian Professorship of Mathematics, in Newton's favour. Newton had been ordinary, but he quickly entered the elite. He let his young student Roger Cotes edit the second edition of his great book, and, I suspect, would have relinquished his chair to him had he not died young. In this age of pension plans and high income taxes, it is harder to do that sort of thing. But the renewal of the faculty drawn from the best of the students is the re-creation of the teaching and research elite who gain power and privilege.

In sum, a university is an institution in which there is necessarily a perpetual tension between ordinary members and elite members. This tension shows itself in three main ways, in terms of membership, in terms of privilege and power, and in terms of academic status. The educational opportunities for an intellectual elite are made possible by the university as an institution welcoming the ordinary

as well, who form its bulk and who support its services. The tension is often resolved by the occasional passing of ordinary members into the body of the elite of status or privilege since it is often hard to determine in advance, usually impossible, just who is to be so numbered. As regards power, the tension is tempered by democratic tendencies in the academy. But these tendencies are never absolute and are best when used sparingly to elect a representative elite drawn from the ranks of the ordinary.

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