

An Interview with Shamus R. Khan for the *Czech Sociological Review*

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Shamus Rahman Khan is professor of sociology and American Studies at Princeton University. He writes on culture, inequality, gender, and elites. He is the author of over 100 articles, books, and essays, including *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St Paul's School* (Princeton), *The Practice of Research* (Oxford, with Dana Fisher), *Approaches to Ethnography: Modes of Representation and Analysis in Participant Observation* (Oxford, with Colin Jerolmack), and *Sexual Citizens: Sex, Power, and Assault on Campus* (W. W. Norton, with Jennifer Hirsch). He was a co-Principal Investigator of SHIFT, a multi-year study of sexual health and sexual violence at Columbia University. He directed the working group on the political influence of economic elites at the Russell Sage Foundation, is the series editor of 'The Middle Range' at Columbia University Press, and served as the editor of the journal *Public Culture*. He writes regularly for the popular press such as *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*, and has served as a columnist for *Time* magazine. In 2016 he was awarded Columbia University's highest teaching honour, the Presidential Teaching Award, and in 2018 he was awarded the Hans L. Zetterberg Prize from Uppsala University for 'the best sociologist under 40'. For more information, including links to his written work, see: <http://shamus Khan.com>.

This interview took place on 18 February 2020 in Prague and Portland, Oregon, using Skype. It was transcribed, edited, and completed in May 2020.

Ondřej Lánský: You published *Privilege* (2011) ten years ago. This book is probably your most considerable sociological work. The main topic is the ethnography of St Paul's School, which is a boarding school providing high school education that was founded in 1865. You are the son of an Irish mother and a father who was born in Pakistan. Your father knew poverty before he became a physician. Your parents encouraged you to be a student at St Paul's and you later decided to conduct empirical sociological research there. This kind of school prepares students for a special type of life, a life of the elite. What were

your most important findings? What can we say about the contemporary American elite, which you call the 'new elite'? And what has changed when we compare it with 19th-century elites – those from the so-called 'Gilded Age'?

Shamus R. Khan: St Paul's is a place where boys and girls, ages 14 to 18 years old, attend school just before going to university. It's one of the wealthiest educational institutions in the world, with an endowment of well over \$500 million. With just five hundred students it has more than a million dollars per student in endowment funds, which is just an enormous amount of money. Even with all that money, it still costs a lot of money to attend. It wasn't nearly as expensive when I was there, but I think today it's probably somewhere around \$50 000 per year to go to the school.

St Paul's has long been associated with American elites. The former secretary of state and presidential candidate John Kerry went to St Paul's. And when he went to St Paul's, he played on the hockey team with Robert Mueller, the head of the FBI and the person who investigated Donald Trump. Mueller and Kerry lived with Gary Trudeau, who is one of the most famous American cartoonists. His political cartoon, *Doonesbury*, is one of the most famous American political cartoons of the 20th century, and is named after his roommate, Ed Pillsbury, who is the heir to a massive American fortune. His family made baked goods and flour.

And so if you think for a moment, this is a place where an heir to a major American fortune, the future head of the FBI, a future senator, presidential nominee, and secretary of state, and one of the most influential cartoonists all lived together as teenage boys. And so I was very interested in studying at a place like this because there's so much – maybe not scholastically but culturally – about how America is different than Europe. It doesn't have this aristocratic legacy. America has a different character and relationship with capitalism. It's not that it's a utopia, but, there's this idea of exceptionalism.

I wanted to challenge that by studying at a place like St Paul's – maybe not an aristocratic institution but certainly not a democratic and open one. One of the main things I found in my ethnography was that it's still a very elite place, but that the nature of eliteness has changed. My argument about the new elite is that the former elites, even in the 1960s but certainly in the Gilded Age, often thought of themselves as a kind of class, a class for themselves. That is, they weren't just a class because they shared an economic position, but they shared a collective recognition of one another.

But today, instead of thinking of themselves as a class, as being part of a group because of their families, because of their ties to institutions, because of their position in American history, elites think of themselves as very, very talented. And yet I argue that this cultural transformation isn't really that reflected in material reality. That is, there still tends to be a class. They still tend to go to the same kinds of schools. They still tend to come from the same kinds of families,

which is to say wealthy families. But the rhetoric around the elite has changed and that rhetoric has really embraced a logic of a meritocracy. So, they suggest that they're not where they are because they're part of a class. They're there because they're very talented individuals.

That's what I end up arguing in the book: the material conditions may not have radically changed that much, but the cultural context and framing of the groups has. I think that this is very important for understanding the elite because they think in very individualistic terms, and thinking in individualistic terms has consequences for the social policies that they support. For example, in terms of why people are poor and what we should do about it, and also, why people are rich and what the responsibility of rich people is to a society in general.

Ondřej Lánský: *Can you explain your term the 'ease of privilege'? Because I think that it is linked with your remark.*

Shamus R. Khan: The ease of privilege emerges from my Bourdieusian approach. I'm very much tied to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and initially, I've actually used the term *habitus* throughout the book. I wrote about the ways in which students had a set of dispositions that made them comfortable across a range of spaces. My editor didn't like the term, so he said, 'Look, it's too academic. You're writing a book that has a broader appeal than that. It's going to be read by, you know, first-year college students, et cetera.' And so he asked, 'Can you think of a different way of articulating this?'

I changed the term *habitus* to *ease*, and it's funny because it's become what the book is known for, I think. But the idea of the ease of privilege comes directly from Bourdieu and the idea is that privilege is an embodied disposition that emerges from spending a lot of time at elite institutions. Instead of conveying that social positions are inherited, the ease of privilege, the ease with which they move through the world, naturalises socially produced distinctions.

So in some ways, it's a very parallel argument to Bourdieu. But applying these insights to an American case, with younger students, shows something actually quite different than what Bourdieu argues in *Distinction* (1979). Because in the US, the ease has to reflect an openness rather than social closure. In the *State of Nobility* (1996) and in *Distinction*, we see this incredible attempt to make one's culture look very different than everybody else's.

And what I found in the United States was that people were trying to make their culture seem very open, capacious, you know, receptive, and that the people who were closed off, who were making distinctions, were people who were closed-minded, from the lower classes, et cetera. The elites were like Thomas Friedman's characters who thought of the world as flat and available, and functioned in that way. That is a big part of the character of ease, and points to one big distinction between my findings and those of Bourdieu.

And the book is actually structured in such a way that the first person you meet is a guy named Chase Abbott, who is from a classic elite American family and is struggling at school. He represents to me an archetypical person who Bourdieu would predict would be successful. I explain his failure by his explicit attempts to highlight his cultural difference; he doesn't have this ease across a wide range of contexts. He's constantly trying to create distinctions.

Ondřej Lánský: *Is it possible to say that one of the moments of this ease of privilege is something like ideology?*

Shamus R. Khan: I don't describe it as ideology, but I think one could easily think about it as ideology. So, the ideology that I would attribute to it would be an ideology of meritocracy. And I would note how that ideology isn't always reflected in practice. There's an ideological framework that emphasises how much the world has changed, and how now things are open and available, and if you just act in the right way, things will come to you if you are talented enough.

The argument I've made in this paper called 'Saying Meritocracy and Doing Privilege' (2012) is about the ways in which the ideology of the elite is one that presents the world as a meritocratic place where talents help you get ahead, but the practice of everyday people is a practice of privilege, which is a way in which ease really matters in helping people traverse social contexts. That practice emerges from spending time within elite institutions, and so it's incredibly costly to acquire.

Ondřej Lánský: *And is it now possible to study how this shapes everyday social policy or politics in the United States?*

Shamus R. Khan: I mean, it could be, yes, and I think that there's been a lot of really interesting work recently. Steven Brint, who is a sociologist in California, has just published a piece showing that the impact of an elite university pedigree is the most felt in cultural fields and the least in business and other kinds of areas. So if you look at different kinds of elites and ask where an elite educational pedigree really matters, it's academics and cultural producers of all kinds. This, I would say, is very important for the production of a kind of cultural ethos, where the people who are responsible for or take the most active role in the production of American culture are people who come from very, very elite educational institutions.

And so sometimes I think academics blame the business sector for the ideological dimensions that serve as the underpinning of public policy or our collective understanding. But I think this ignores the deep ways in which our own (academic) cultural logics are even more infused with being a part of elite institutions than other parts of American society.

Ondřej Lánský: You, of course, know the work of political scientist Jeffrey A. Winters on oligarchy. What is the main difference between elites and oligarchy? Which term is better for understanding contemporary social and cultural processes, and which one works better in the political sphere of society?

Shamus R. Khan: So you know, this may be an answer that favours my work over Jeffrey's, and I don't mean it that way, but I think not all elites construct oligarchies, but oligarchs are types of elites. So, there would be a broad category of elites, of which oligarchy is a type. In other work of mine, I've described elites as those with vastly disparate control over or access to resources and so for me, the question of elites is, 'What resources do they have control over or access to and how vastly different is that access or control?'

You could call me cynical, but I think all societies will have elites. There will almost always be some group of people who have vastly disparate proportionate access to some resources. The question is how vast that is and how powerful that allows that group or those individuals to be. And in some instances, what you get are oligarchical systems where the vastness of the control is particularly concentrated within a political and economic alliance, and under those conditions you'll see oligarchies.

But we don't see them everywhere. Which isn't to say that they're unimportant, and I actually think that right now in the United States, as well as in the Czech Republic, the analysis of elites being oligarchical is something that's very sensible. It seems to me an accurate description of what's happening.

Ondřej Lánský: In your analyses of the elite, you are using ethnography as a research methodology and the notion of elite as a basic conceptual tool, but you also use some Marxist figures and theses. I am convinced that your overall attitude is driven by deep Marxian convictions and possibly *Zeit diagnoses*, or something like that, which is that social inequality is simply unjust. Therefore, this leads you to a very activist position in your work, I think. I would say that your sociology is critical, critically-theoretical in some respects. Am I right?

Shamus R. Khan: Yes. I attended graduate school to go work with Erik Olin Wright, the analytic Marxist, and he was my advisor for the first four years. And interestingly, my brother is a PhD in political science and works in and runs non-profit organisations in England. He worked, in part, with Gerald A. Cohen (called Gerry or Jerry by his friends) at Oxford, and so we both had this deep influence by Marxism. There was something in Erik and, to a lesser extent, Gerry – because Gerry asked moral questions – but there was something about the analytic Marxists that, I thought, lost the moral outrage about the structure of societies.

I think where I'm not a Marxist anymore is in my commitment to a large range of inequalities that aren't just about class. So questions of nationhood, eth-

nicity, gender, and sexuality are all very important to me and I don't think that they can be derived from a class analysis. But I do think that one of the great advantages of a Marxian position – not the analytic Marxists but a range of Marxists – is reclaiming a language of morality for the left and talking about morality not in conservative terms, but in terms of what is just, and what we owe one another, and what basic human flourishing is and looks like.

This is where I do think Gerry Cohen was very helpful. I love his book *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* (2000). For me, as an American academic, it's a book that has a biting personal character to it. I think this moral tradition has had a huge impact on me and it really started with an undergraduate advisor of mine who was kind of a Leninist, I would say. The question of moral outrage, I think, is one of the spaces where Marxism actually really has a powerful thing to say with its almost emotional valence and with the ideas of alienation et cetera. It's, I think, not by chance that Marxism has been picked up and has an almost richer life in humanist disciplines in comparison to other kinds of sociological analyses – in part because of this tradition of alienation and this very emotive form of understanding.

Ondřej Lánský: *You are also the co-author of a new book, Sexual Citizens. It was published in January 2020. Could you please share your findings with us? Why did you choose this topic? How is it possible to link your previous theme of the elite with this new subject, which is in general about sexual assault?*

Shamus R. Khan: It's a co-authored book with Jennifer S. Hirsch, who is an anthropologist, and the book is based upon a much larger research project on sexual violence on college campuses, which I've been publishing from over the last four years. That research project involved 30 researchers who did quantitative and qualitative studies, and I co-headed the qualitative studies with Jennifer.

The project asked why it is that sexual assaults are so common among young people, and what can be done to prevent them.

The real focus is on prevention, so it's a public health approach. So much of the attention to sexual assault is on adjudication – 'What do we do after an assault happens?' – and this project asks, 'What do we do to make it less likely to happen?' I would point to three main themes from my previous work that really tie in with this book.

The first is an attention to inequality. Inequality, as it turns out, is hugely important for explaining sexual assault. People within the LGBTQ community are much more likely to experience assaults. Gender inequality has a huge impact on assaults. In our work, we find that students who have difficulty paying for their basic needs are much more likely to experience assaults. So, there's a class basis to sexual assault, to being victimised. So the first theme would be a study of inequality and its relationship to sexual assault.

The second theme would be that the book is based upon an ethnography of Columbia University and so it is an ethnography of an elite educational institution of young people. In some ways, it is a follow-up to the study of St Paul's. Students from St Paul's end up at disproportionate rates at places like the Ivy League, of which Columbia is a member. In some ways, in the next phase of educational life and, in this instance, through a different lens: with a keen attention to their sexual lives.

And the third theme relates to what I said earlier, which is about the ways in which the left has sort of abandoned the language of morality. When we think about sexual morality, we often think about things like conservative sexual morality, about who you should and should not be having sex with. So we think about morality and sexuality relative to, for example, questions of gay and lesbian people, or whether or not it's ethical to have sex outside of the context of marriage, et cetera. But there's another way to think about sexual morality, which is just how you treat the person that you're in a sexual situation with. Is it a treatment that is based on a fundamental respect for human dignity? I think that there's a lot to be said about that. The idea of the book *Sexual Citizens* is the idea that we fail to raise young people who have a sense of their own right to sexual self-determination, that they have the right to say yes and the right to say no to sex. But there's a second part to it, which is that the person that they're having sex with has the same rights. They're not just an object for their pleasure, but instead, someone who is a parallel, morally equivalent person.

Ondřej Lánský: *What do you think about the general role of elites and the super-rich in politics and society? We are sometimes confronted with news concerning the efforts to lengthen human life to almost immortality. For example, Google launched the sub-company Calico to solve the problem of death. Many famous persons share this dream. Peter Thiel, a co-founder of PayPal, declared that he aims to live forever, and Elon Musk of Tesla obviously dreams about space travel, maybe even about moving to Mars, and so on. Are we witnessing 'elite escapism' from a burning Earth?*

Shamus R. Khan: I think we're witnessing a bunch of things. One is that elites believe their own fantasies. They have become believers in the fantasy that these people are just so talented and that's what explains their position. It's utter fantasy. It's utter fantasy for the founders of Google. It's utter fantasy for Zuckerberg. It's utter fantasy for Musk. But they actually seem to believe it.

They seem to really think that they are superhuman and so they have begun to ignore the structural kinds of advantage that they have, and deny the role of pure chance in outcomes. We have these 'winner-takes-all markets' and they seem to sincerely think that they are just profoundly talented and skilled. It's very interesting to see them subsume their entire lives under a delusion.

And I think, disturbingly, we profoundly enable this. We enable this with our tax policy, basically. We're doing this right now with Bloomberg, who is go-

ing to spend billions of dollars on an election. I mean, he even noted that he will continue to spend billions of dollars even if he's not the nominee. [This interview took place in February 2020.] I don't think he'll actually do it and this is upending political science right now because all of the work in political science suggests that money doesn't matter that much for elections, but suddenly, it seems like it really matters. It's just that people hadn't spent enough yet for it to matter.

But Bloomberg is similar to Trump in imagining that since they run a business, they know how to run a country. And because they're wealthy, they're good at everything. They just are really super-talented human beings and we've produced this world where they are supported in believing that.

I don't know that they're trying to escape from a burning planet, because I think that they'll actually be able to escape from a burning planet on this planet. I think that Peter Theil's orientation towards New Zealand is not a mistake. New Zealand has a lot of mountains and high areas that will weather the flooding. It's unlikely to experience, given its physical location, the kinds of horrible weather conditions that we'll see in other places. And so they'll just find places to live on the planet and in countries that are like small islands of isolation away from the suffering of everyone else.

Ondřej Lánský: *What are the most important topics in contemporary sociology, by which I mean both empirical and theoretical fields of research? Could you please answer this question in general and also share with us your personal view on this? What are the most important topics in sociology for you?*

Shamus R. Khan: I do think that we're facing some major and potentially catastrophic crises and that we haven't dedicated enough attention to them. So I really do think the environment requires a range of sociological accounts from a broader understanding of how it is that people respond to the climate crisis. So right now, in the United States, we function largely under the fantasy that all that matters is the science and we should just debate whether or not it's going to be two degrees Celsius or three degrees Celsius that ruins us, and that the answer to that question is going to somehow drive policy.

And then, secondly, to return to my kind of theme, inequalities are hugely related to the climate crisis. Poor countries are going to be profoundly impacted. The climate crisis – and I don't use this word lightly – is potentially genocidal for certain cultures. What is going to happen to Bangladesh? We could wipe out 200 million people from the Earth or force them into refugee contexts; that will be catastrophic. Whole areas in and around Saharan Africa are going to be completely at a loss in terms of having absolutely no water, so where one place is flooded, elsewhere another people will be starving or dying of thirst. These are borderline genocidal outcomes. We've decided to accept this. And I think it requires not a scientific intervention of what the causes are, but instead, a sociological analysis. And I think that we must do this. I'm not dedicating

myself to it in any way, but I think that as a discipline, it is going to be hugely important.

And the third thing is that sociology has been highly dominated by a pretty narrow set of ideas that have emerged from a pretty narrow set of empirical contexts. Most of our theoretical models come from empirical studies based in the United States, England, France, and Germany, and, if you look at the world, these are very non-representative cases. They're actually deeply related to one another. They're systematically biased, there's a huge level of provincialism across all of those national contexts to not even take seriously significant differences in other parts of the world. So that, I think, is a huge thing that we need to pay attention to. I would say climate, a sociology that is much more global, and across all of them, attention to inequalities.

Ondřej Lánský: *Does this mean that we have to decolonise sociology?*

Shamus R. Khan: I think that it means a lot of things. It means that the institutional orientations are to support ourselves – and by ourselves I mean Americans – to go do work in other contexts, and that strikes me as the wrong way to go about it. We should support the work of people in those local contexts who want to do the kind of work that they want to do. So in the decolonial sense, I think yes, because right now, our orientation is to understand what's happening in Bangladesh, to understand Laos, to understand Pakistan. I mean, what we do is we send people there and they come back with reports, and that's a kind of colonial orientation too.

The other way would be to say that we should actually read the work of people from those spaces instead of assuming that they just don't understand Bourdieu correctly in the ways in which they apply the concepts. We should ask ourselves whether or not our Bourdieusian understanding is based in a very, very localised empirical context and that we're getting things wrong because of that.

Ondřej Lánský: *Does this mean that sociological thinking should always be connected with praxis, and should always be political?*

Shamus R. Khan: I would say that my sociological work will always be. But I don't think everyone should be. I don't know. I like having a discipline where some people just aren't interested in that quest of praxis, and what they want to do is to develop a methodological technique or they want to study something that they have a deep commitment to, such as someone who wants to look at 10th-century Korea because they think it is just inherently valuable to know things.

And I do think that one of the great parts of being an academic is a deep commitment, an almost aesthetic commitment, to knowing things. I want to be

in a discipline where people who want to engage in praxis are not punished for doing so, but that people who don't want to, the people who are interested in something else, can also do their kind of intellectual work.

Ondřej Lánský: *Shamus, thank you very much for your responses.*