



# The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. Jerome Karabel

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### **The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton.**

Jerome Karabel. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005. 711 pp. \$28.00.

*The Chosen* is a dispiriting book for a college professor to read, not only because it recounts a history of anti-Semitism that was blatant, deliberate, and well known, not only because so many intellectual leaders of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were not merely complicit in discrimination, but architects of it, but perhaps most of all, because so much of the system originally designed to keep Jews out of Columbia, Harvard, Princeton, and Yale is still in place, at those Ivy League schools and across the country. *The Chosen* does not make me proud to have taught for nearly 20 years at Princeton and Harvard, schools that have yet to foreswear admissions practices originally designed to keep Jews out. But *The Chosen* does make me proud to share a discipline with its author.

The book has been widely reviewed in the popular press, and so its main themes are well known. Early in the twentieth century, Harvard, Princeton, and Yale became alarmed at the number of Jews entering each year. At the time, these schools admitted all comers who could pass an entrance examination that was not particularly trying. For the most part, young men from the sorts of backgrounds that the Ivies would not have appreciated did not go to college, and if they did, they knew not to apply to these colleges. That changed as more and more sons of Jewish immigrants from Europe applied for admission. Columbia soon found that 40 percent of its entering class was Jewish. Harvard counted two or three Jews among every ten freshmen.

These schools responded by devising the first modern admissions systems. Before 1910, they did not have offices devoted to admissions; they did not cap the number of people admitted; they did not request letters from headmasters, principals, or teachers to gauge the "character" of students; they did not favor geographic diversity, athletic ability, or alumni sons. They had let anyone in who requested admission and did a credible job on the exam. To deal with the new "Jewish problem," the Ivies made all of these changes and more. One approach was to impose a quota on Jews. Application materials asked for the religion of the applicant and of his ancestors and asked whether the family name had ever been changed. In those days, the forms were mercifully short, and so the intent of this was not lost on applicants.

Explicit talk of exclusion and quotas ran afoul of the sensibilities of some alumni and faculty—though surprisingly few—and so exclusion of Jews became a stealth operation. "Character" became the euphemism for Protestant (Catholics faced discrimination as well). Yale didn't advertise it, but up to the early 1960s, it kept Jews to 10 or 12 percent of each freshman class. World War II had not put an end to the system of admissions designed to exclude Jews.

While all three schools heralded a new era of open admissions in the 1960s and 1970s, and while all three actively recruited African-Americans, key elements of the admissions

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structure designed to minimize the number of Jews in each class survived. That system continued to disadvantage Jews and the growing number of Asian applicants, who were less likely to be from Montana, less likely to be sons (and now daughters) of alumni, less likely to be athletes, less likely to have attended private preparatory schools, and less likely to have buildings named after their forefathers gracing the campus. In the 1980s, a federal probe exonerated Harvard on the charge that it discriminated against Asians, but the verdict was that it admitted fewer Asians, not because of a quota but by dint of the practices originally designed to exclude Jews.

Most mortal writers would have stopped at 1960 and written a second book on what happened next. But the great power of this massive and entirely readable volume (but for moments when the stomach turns or the blood boils) is that it contains so much evidence, so even-handedly presented. Karabel's overarching theme is that those in power determine the selection criteria and thus that notions of merit vary over time. Why would "character," the code word for Protestant, and athletic prowess, the code word for intellectually challenged, become important determinants of admission? Because these criteria privileged the children of privilege.

For the reader of the *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Karabel's book is a thorough history of how a particular administrative regime evolved in three leading organizations in one field. By tracing the rise, spread, and evolution of the admissions regime across three schools, Karabel provides both a view of institutional inertia and evolution within the organization and a history of learning and imitation across organizations. As such, his book should be read alongside Philip Selznick's (1949) classic study of the TVA, Zald and Denton's (1963) classic study of the YMCA, and Burton Clark's (1960) classic study of the junior college, but also with the recent works of institutionalists studying learning and diffusion across organizations (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Davis, Diekmann, and Tinsley, 1994; Edelman, Uggen, and Erlanger, 1999). In the studies of Selznick, Zald and Denton, and Clark, organizations and administrative programs designed for one end show staying power, such that when the end disappears, the means does not. Administrative programs were given new ends to meet. They were retrofitted to changing circumstances. What kept the programs alive was often individuals, committed to both the organization and its routines.

That is precisely what we see with the history of college admissions. The whole panoply of strategies for reducing the admission of Jews without creating an explicit quota survived. Admissions directors around the country will tell you why athletic preference, alumni offspring ("legacy") preference, regional distribution, and well-roundedness (the new "character") remain vital parts of the admission process. They will tell you that without these things, private donations would dry up. Karabel cites the size of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton's endowments to debunk that assertion. They will tell you that the student body would be too "intellectu-

al" (long the code word for Jewish), not broad enough. The fact is, universities in the other developed nations do not, on the whole, bother with all of these things. In Canada, in France, in Germany, universities may not administer the simple admissions test of old, but neither have they embraced the admissions components that Americans consider to be vital, and which by chance were originally adopted to exclude a particular religious minority.

Karabel's detective work in the archives of these three universities also lays bare the mechanisms by which new practices were invented, tweaked, and diffused across an organizational field, in this case the field of elite colleges. By the late 1930s, Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and their peers had arrived at a quite effective and yet subtle system for limiting the number of Jewish students. Columbia was the institutional entrepreneur for many of these practices because Columbia was the first of the Ivies to have large numbers of Jewish students. Columbia created an office of admissions in 1910, introduced nonacademic criteria for admission ("character" and "leadership"), capped the number of students, and used an explicit quota. Harvard ran into trouble when it tried to impose an explicit quota, and so Harvard backed away from that system, as did Princeton and Yale, which were eagerly awaiting the results of experiments elsewhere. Geographic diversity was an innovation that spread and stuck. So were quotas for the athletic teams. Early in the book, we see a group of college deans and presidents, self-consciously trying to solve the "Jewish problem." They looked to other schools for strategies to try, took lessons from the bad publicity and failed policies at peer institutions, and together institutionalized much of the complex admissions system we know today. It is organizational sociology's loss that the book was not framed as an exercise in institutional theory, but nothing stops us from reading it in that way.

In the end, Karabel's mission is to change the way college admissions works. He views today's admissions system as built from the ruins of the system designed to exclude and asks what we might change to create the kind of equality of opportunity that some of the better intentioned presidents of these universities championed even in the late 1800s. There are heroes as well as villains in Karabel's story, some of whom championed the cause of the working-class boy who had made it on merit alone. Karabel himself favors a system that would eliminate the preferences for legacies and athletes but would give an even chance to sons and daughters of the working class. Karabel's ideal system may be a utopian dream, but since the publication of the book, Harvard has abandoned its early-admission program, which Karabel describes as yet another boost for the children of privilege, who do not have to shop for the best financial aid package and so can commit to a school before looking at the sticker price. Other schools are talking of doing the same. As goes Harvard, so goes America. That is the punch line here, for the system that Harvard, Yale, and Princeton designed can now be found everywhere in America. If Kara-

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bel's utopia is to be realized, it is clear where the test cases should be.

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