

# Everything I Know About Elite America I Learned From ‘Fresh Prince’ and ‘West Wing’

Television taught me how to move between social classes — but at what cost?

**By Rob Henderson**

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At first, I thought class was about money. “The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air” taught me that it wasn’t.

I started off in what most people think of as America’s lower class. I was given up for adoption when I was 3; I spent the next four years in seven foster homes. When I was 7, I was adopted and subsequently settled in Red Bluff, Calif., a working-class town, population 13,147, median household income \$27,029. Two years later, my adoptive parents got divorced; after that, my adoptive father severed ties.

When I was 15, I got my first job, as a dishwasher at a pizza restaurant, and on breaks, all my conversations with co-workers eventually turned to the topic of money. We would fantasize about what we would do if we suddenly had it: vacations, cars. In high school, we’d hear rumors that so-and-so was rich, because their parents had a second house or a boat. We all thought that money was the important thing: If you had it, you were “rich” — which for us was indistinguishable from “elite.” If you didn’t, you weren’t.

This was true, to an extent. But it wasn’t the whole story. How did I learn it wasn’t? From television.

It’s possible I watched more TV from birth to age 17 than most upper-class Americans watch their entire lives. In my foster homes, the television was playing constantly. My foster siblings and I fought over which shows to watch. Early on, we’d argue over “Power Rangers” or “Rugrats”; later, it was “Family Matters” or “Full House.”

Later, after my parents got divorced and my mom began working full time, the duplex we lived in was often empty. I’d turn the TV on first thing in the morning and again as soon as I got home from school. Certain shows were staples that I watched with rapt attention; others played in the background whenever my mom wasn’t around, telling me to turn them off.

Today I’m a Ph.D. student at Cambridge University. As someone who has had to navigate a long journey through a variety of social milieus — first foster care and my hometown, then the military, then Yale — television has been a constant and lifeline. It’s been both entertainment and social guide, teaching me the language and the ways of thinking I needed to move fluidly, more or less, from one environment to another.

Along the way, I've learned about the complicated ways that class interacts with taste, and what different social classes view as desirable. What I've come to realize, as I reflect on different influences in my life, is that the television I've watched has made me a different person than I would otherwise have been; choices I've made have been guided to a large degree by what TV has taught me about what constitutes a good life. Looking back, I can see that my decisions stemmed from a set of values — but whose? I thought I was building the life I desired, using fictional stories as a road map. Now I wonder how these stories shaped what I desired all along.

**One of my favorite shows growing up was “The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air.”** It taught me that social class wasn't just about money — college was important, too.

On “Fresh Prince,” Will, a teenager who grew up in West Philadelphia, is sent to live with his aunt and uncle in Bel-Air, Calif. He attends “Bel-Air Academy” along with his cousin, Carlton Banks. He doesn't quite fit in; in a poignant moment in Season 3, Will describes the difficulties he'd experienced trying keep up with the wealthier, more polished people around him. “It was like everybody had two skates, and I was trying to keep up with one,” he says.

It's in the third season that college becomes a major plot point. For Carlton, the question was not whether he would attend college, but whether he would follow in his father's footsteps and go to Princeton. But he doesn't get in. Will, on the other hand, is offered a spot, if he improves his grades.

The same themes come up in “The O.C.,” one of the biggest shows of the mid-2000s. In The O.C. — what a friend called “‘Fresh Prince’ with white people” — Ryan, a teenager from a rough neighborhood, moves in with a rich family, the Cohens. At first, he is seen as a troublemaker, but we soon find out he's a talented student (though he, too, feels out of place at his new private high school). In the third season, college again becomes a crucial plot point: Seth Cohen wants to attend Brown, but he doesn't get in. Ryan, who is less concerned with academics but nonetheless scored in the 98th percentile on the SAT, goes on to attend Berkeley.

It sounds absurd now, but this obsession with college genuinely puzzled me. The Banks family lived in a beautiful house and had a butler. Seth Cohen had his own sailboat. Why was college such a big deal?

I would later realize that these shows were my first glimpse into a world that wasn't mine. These shows were intended for a middle-class audience, with plot points steeped in middle-class values. In “Class: A Guide Through the American Status System,” Paul Fussell argues that the criteria we use to define the tiers of the social hierarchy are in fact indicative of our social class. For people near the bottom, social class is defined by money — in this regard, I was right in line with my peers when I was growing up. The middle class, though, doesn't just value money; equally important is education.

I didn't know this at the time, of course; as a kid watching "Fresh Prince," I just figured if Will was going to college, then maybe I should too.

**But it would take some time for me to get there.** My early life had been a mess, and I'd been a terrible student. I graduated with a 2.2 G.P.A.; I didn't even sign up to take the SAT. (While the characters from my favorite shows were offered admission to Princeton and Berkeley, the smartest kid in my high school class — the one everyone *knew* was going to college — went to California State University, Fullerton). Instead, I enlisted in the military.

Members of the military are [disproportionately](#) from the middle class, and throughout my enlistment, I learned from actual rather than fictional people about the importance of education. Service members who had college credits or a degree were typically promoted faster, and supervisors often urged subordinates to take night classes. The military offered veterans the G.I. Bill to cover tuition; I finally started making college plans.

One year before my enlistment was over, but before I knew where I'd be headed next, I attended the Warrior-Scholar Project, an organization that hosts "academic boot camps" to teach military veterans how to succeed in higher education. I learned a lot: how to write an essay, tips for studying, making the most of office hours.

Equally useful, though, were the insights I gleaned from the unstructured time. The tutors were either students or graduates of top universities like Yale, Dartmouth and Amherst. Between lessons and writing workshops, the other students and I would hang out with them; sometimes I'd overhear them chatting with one another.

I became close with one, a recent Yale graduate. One evening, I saw him watching something on his MacBook. He told me it was "The West Wing."

I'd never seen this show, nor did I know anyone who'd watched it. My military friends watched "Two and a Half Men," "Family Guy," "Game of Thrones." But when another tutor overheard him recommend the show to me, she nodded vigorously, saying I *had* to watch it.

I took the recommendation seriously. This was the first show that two Ivy League graduates had ever recommended to me. It suddenly seemed important to understand. What if I attended college and someone referenced the show and I didn't get it?

I started watching "The West Wing." As I watched, I had an uncomfortable realization: "The West Wing" is not very good.

The show had the pacing of a 90s TV drama (fair enough); the way the characters spoke seemed strange to me (though I've since grown to enjoy "Sorkinese"). Still, I kept watching, because I was intrigued by what it told me about the people who'd recommended it.

It turns out, as the show's creator, Aaron Sorkin, [has explained](#), if I didn't like the show, that's in part because I wasn't really meant to. The pilot episode didn't test well with people like me. But, according to Mr. Sorkin, it tested "extremely well" with certain audience segments. Among them: households that earned more than \$75,000 a year, households with at least one college graduate and households that subscribed to The New York Times.

And though the show was not my favorite, I was fascinated by its characters. They were constantly engaged in debates about contentious social and political issues. One plotline I found particularly interesting was when President Bartlet's deputy communications director, Sam Seaborn, loses a debate against a Republican woman named Ainsley Hayes. To her surprise, Hayes is subsequently offered a job in the Democratic administration; the president cites her "sense of civic duty."

The more I watched, the more the characters reminded me of the Warrior-Scholar Project tutors. Characters like Josh Lyman and C.J. Cregg were educated at elite universities and, despite their flaws, tried to live up to their moral principles. They engaged in fierce debate with political foes, but respected them too. The characters who staffed the Bartlet administration were highly educated, extremely witty, clever and idealistic. It made me wonder: Was this show so popular among elite college graduates because they saw aspirational versions of themselves in it? And if this was how they aspired to be, was this also how I should aspire to be?

Early on, I thought of television as a window into another world. I would watch it to escape the one I was in, and to learn more about others. Later, though, it became more like a mirror. The more I saw, the more I learned what I wanted; the shows I chose to watch, in turn, reflected my desire to build a better life for myself, and I took my cues from them on how to construct it. Either stay like this, I thought, as I gazed at the TV, or try to live like that.

This was what happened with "The West Wing." At first, I watched to learn why the tutors recommended it to me. I continued to watch because it showed me what I wanted. I watched two full seasons before stopping, but scenes from the series have stayed with me. Josh Lyman boasted about how he'd attended Harvard and Yale. C.J. Cregg asked President Bartlet on behalf of a journalist onboard Air Force One why he'd attended Notre Dame when he'd gotten into Harvard, Yale and Williams. For me, the show confirmed that education was indeed a necessary ingredient for a better life — important not just for money, but for respect — but that not all educations were created equal.

**Watching "Fresh Prince" and other shows taught me** that higher education was important. "West Wing" reinforced the value of *elite* higher education, with a helping of idealism on the side. Television, in other words, gave me an aspirational road map for upward mobility. (Both shows, coincidentally, are planning reunion specials this fall.)

But it wasn't just a way to learn how the other half lived; TV was also a gateway into an unknown media landscape. Through my habit of reading about my favorite shows via

“episode recaps” and “analyses,” I discovered various prestige media outlets I’d never read — The Atlantic, Vanity Fair — where I later read articles about topics besides television. These publications, in turn, lead me to discover new and yet more prestigious shows: When in 2014 I read a column in The New Yorker in which Emily Nussbaum observed that the characters in the Showtime series “The Affair” are the kind of people who would watch “The Affair,” I knew I had to watch. (You know when the main characters on a show went to Williams College it’s intended for a niche audience — if it had been intended for the mainstream, they would have gone to Princeton or Harvard.)

What I’ve come to appreciate in the years since is that the stories portrayed were not exactly value neutral. Television, like all forms of fiction, contains implicit messages about how to be a good person and what sort of aims are worth pursuing. This is especially true for prestigious television shows, which one can view aspirationally, as I did, and which can make the implicit messages carry even more weight. There is a well-known idea that liberal Hollywood indoctrinates audiences, leading them to change their values or beliefs. (One [study suggests](#) that “Will & Grace” positively changed Americans’ attitudes toward gay people, for instance.) My story is a real-world example of how cultural power operates. It’s far more subtle than any indoctrination-type process — but that doesn’t mean it’s not real.

In the show “Mad Men,” the rags-to-riches protagonist Don Draper also watches movies and television to help blend into the world of New York’s upper class. It works well enough, but even so, he can’t quite smooth all his rough edges: In one episode, for example, Roger Sterling, Don’s boss, invites himself over to the Drapers’ house for dinner. After a few drinks, Roger says to Don, “By the way you drop your G’s every once in a while, I always thought you were raised on a farm.” Don, visibly uncomfortable, changes the subject.

For me, too, watching television took me only so far. I still didn’t quite fit in when I finally went to Yale. Though I didn’t drop my G’s, people on campus were fluent in a language I still could not speak. I remember being bewildered the first time I heard another student describe a joke I’d made as “gendered,” for instance — I’d never heard that word before.

But going to Yale also meant I no longer needed television to learn how to fit in among elites — I could learn from them in real life.

Recently, I was at an academic program in Washington, D.C. There, for the first time in my life, a stranger mistook me for having come from a wealthy background. “I’m not rich,” I said. “I just watch a lot of TV.” I said it as a joke, but it really wasn’t. My “bingeing to belong” approach wasn’t foolproof, but it helped. TV helped me to understand people who were worlds away from how I grew up. It gave me an understanding of the ingredients of social mobility. What I can’t quite disentangle is whether it taught me how to get what I had always wanted or taught me what to want.

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