

investigating the aspen elite
by sean elias

After completing coursework and passing preliminary exams last year, I moved to a mountain hideaway in Colorado's Roaring Fork Valley to contemplate my doctoral dissertation and future career, write a couple articles, teach a few classes at Colorado Mountain College, and dig deep into nature.

While I had come to the valley primarily to take advantage of the four ski mountains and surrounding environ, I quickly realized another benefit of my temporary stay: It afforded me a glimpse into the social world of Aspen's elite.

Equipped with two principal tools of ethnography—participant observation and interviewing—as well as an Aspen/Snowmass season pass, Caribou Club membership, my best Thomas Pink shirts, and an Armani blazer, I began my “study.”

I interacted with corporate CEOs, models and ex-models, an heiress to and overseer of one of the largest breweries in the United States, a ski bum with a serious trust fund, a prince, a large land developer, a tennis star, a famous musician, and a football player made infamous after the murder of his wife. My educational, occasionally surreal, encounters with these elite ranged from brief verbal exchanges to long conversations over dinner and drinks or while skiing or attending functions.

While it's certainly entertaining to rub elbows with the likes of these people in such a setting, it's sociologically fascinating to do so because it teaches a little bit about how the elite maintain their power, hiding from the public, cutting deals behind close doors and on gondolas that most people can't afford to ride. I came to see this exclusive resort town as a microcosm of the elite's social world—a telling, compact social environment where society's powerbrokers wear their lifestyles, customs, habits, behaviors, and attitudes on their sleeves.

What distinguishes Aspen from other mountain-town micro-centers inhabited by the wealthy (Sun Valley, Idaho; Jackson Hole, Wyoming; Vail, Colorado, for example) is that the developed, up-scale, mini urban oasis in the mountains attracts the action-seeking jet-set who want to experience mountain living along with the “in” social scene, hotspots, and events of a thriving, sophisticated metropolis. Aspen is more of a social meeting ground than the other exclusive mountain towns, which are more low-key, family oriented locations where the wealthy have homes. Moreover, while its base is mostly American, Aspen appears to attract more international elites than Sun Valley, Vail, or Jackson Hole. Aspen definitely attracts more celebrities and high-profile individuals than the other mountain towns and is more singles-friendly.

Aspen occupies a special zone among the elite. Defined by its cosmopolitan chic in the midst of high-end nature (one of the most exquisite, picturesque natural settings on this planet), it offers the comforts of financial and cultural macro-centers like New York or L.A., Paris or London, along with the advantages of nature in the Colorado Rockies. Not only can the wealthy access world-class music, opera, theater, hotels, spas, restaurants, art galleries, and high couture shopping (Prada, Malo, Brioni, Louis Vuitton, Fendi, Christian Dior,

Gucci, Chanel, and Bvlgari, among others), they can then walk down the street to the gondola, Roaring Fork River, extensive trail systems, or golf course.

Aspen's elite is by no means homogeneous. A crude, unscientific breakdown of the elite strata, based on observable indicators of wealth and capital, divides them into multiple layers or different ranks. The top dogs are the ultra elite, multi-billionaires (Texas oilmen, Saudi royalty, principal owners of U.S. and foreign mega-corporations) who own an exclusive downtown spread, home on Red Mountain, or ranch on the outskirts of town (prices range from \$20 million to more than \$200 million). In most cases, the ultra elite's homes are vacation homes, vacant most of the year. This group travels on \$30-300 million jets that dock at Aspen airport, build homes for their pilots and chefs, easily spend a grand or two (or 20, for a special occasion) for wine, and have single items of jewelry that equal the life wages and savings of several upper-middle class families.

The second tier are multi-billionaires, those who may own a somewhat less expensive jet and home. Included in this group are large-scale real estate developers, entertainment industry executives and owners, and a few successful CEOs. Below them are the multi-millionaires, a dying breed in Aspen. As the new, slightly exaggerated, saying goes, "the billionaires are displacing the millionaires," who are forced to move DV (down valley) to Snowmass, Basalt, Carbondale, and Glenwood Springs (in hierarchical order). In the fourth and final tier are supermodels, star athletes, actors, musicians, and other entertainers, as well as the up-and-coming and newly arrived capitalist business class who have acquired multiple millions. For this group, Aspen offers time-shares.

So then, Aspenites are divided into a number of private and exclusive circles—social networks, as sociologists call them—that reflect the economic divisions among them. But while separate cliques exist, interaction among groups occurs frequently. Billionaires are often eager to associate with millionaire models, athletes, musicians, actors, or other celebrities, and they do business with millionaire operators and managers. Like high school, invitations to social events are the true indicators of where someone stands in Aspen's hierarchy.

One club in particular presents an interesting, if partial, view of the elite. The members-only Caribou Club occupies an almost secretive space beneath one of the ritziest shopping squares in Aspen. With a comfortable, but somewhat stuffy, British clubhouse feel, "The Bou" provides a space for the Aspen elite and their guests to "go underground" and escape paparazzi. Once members have been graciously or pretentiously greeted by Billy, Louis, Oliver, or another member of the distinguished staff (a staff who will turn away elites who aren't members or whose memberships are past due), they have several options: eat a private meal in one of the dining areas, relax in the parlor furnished with comfortable sofas and chairs (and a black jack table), let loose on the dance floor, or chat at the bar. Social interaction at The Caribou is generally segregated, although the environment allows for greater interaction with the elite than other venues in Aspen.

Another locale that affords social interaction with the elite is the gondola, or chairlift, on Ajax, the town's ski mountain. To get up the mountain to ski, hike,

sightsee, or dine at the summit restaurant or exclusive, private Aspen Mountain Club, you have to ride the gondola. This neutral territory occasions chance encounters with and eavesdropping among every level of the Aspen elite. No doubt, important political and economic matters are discussed on these glides up the mountain. I'm convinced that if someone wanted to learn key secrets of big business and government, they'd need only bug the gondola and chairlifts of Aspen.

Aspen's glitz, glamour, and prestige, along with the general "life is good" attitude among the elite, can disrupt your sense of reality, morality, and values, stupefying you into a Disney-like fantasy that ignores the large scale of human labor and sacrifice that support the fantasy. To regain consciousness and come back to the world most people know, you need only direct your focus away from the luminaries toward the Aspen working class who provide the elite with the leisure time, services, and overall decadent lifestyle they increasingly demand.

It is the hard-working, largely Mexican and Central American labor force that personally tend to the elite and are largely responsible for building and maintaining the town. This group occupies the numerous, overcrowded trailer parks you pass on the way up-valley to Aspen; they are the workers waiting at the bus stops early in the morning and late into the day.

Racial diversity in Aspen is present solely in the caste-like divide between privileged whites and Latino workers. Latino and black residents are altogether absent in Aspen, a sad, revealing reflection of the overall racial composition of the elite. Regardless of race, "the average Joe" doesn't exist in Aspen. Low-end service jobs are occupied by DVT ("down valley trash,") according to some Aspenites, and the high-end service jobs are filled with individuals either connected to the elite or "in demand" to a degree that they can afford to live in Aspen and frequent its high-priced businesses. Little to no socioeconomic middle ground exists for those employed in Aspen. Either you're "in" or you're "out."

Most Aspenites are unaffected by the collapsing U.S. economy, more than likely some are profiting from it. Unscrupulous, even criminal, business profiteers residing in the Aspen area is nothing new. Before he died, Ken Lay had several homes around Aspen. One question I failed to ask was, "to what end will you go to achieve economic success?" Yet, I have a notion about the answer, gleaned through my experiences. In a conversation with an Aspenite, I spoke of the outlawry of the elite, the fact that to join and survive in its ranks, in most cases, you needed to be an outlaw, to play outside, above, society's rules and laws. The Aspenite knowingly smiled and responded in agreement.

Certainly not all the Aspen elite are unscrupulous or criminal, yet most appear to be motivated primarily by profit and accumulation of resources and power at the expense of others. One of the most notable and serious problems I observed was an unwillingness to question their right to wealth or privilege and their unwillingness to acknowledge the effects of their decisions and actions on those less fortunate. They were focused wealth generators with blinders to the social evils of no-limit materialism and unfettered capitalism.

In the year I spent flirting with high society I came to realize more fully that the wealthy simply don't think the way most people do. When discussing

business, the corporate elite appear to be primarily concerned with the “bottom line,” or profit. They’re detached from the day-to-day operations of employees and unconcerned with non-economic—social—development of their corporations. Sadly, I learned the elite only participate in philanthropy and promote “just” causes as a way to escape their guilt about being excessive. It’s clear that their priorities are shaped by an ability to make a quick stop of the mini-jumbo jet in St. Barth’s on the way to St. Moritz to retrieve a particular article of forgotten clothing.

The Aspen elite are a good sample of the extremities and decadence of capitalism and materialist culture. Undoubtedly, constant generation of great wealth and living a highly materialistic, high-dollar lifestyle are primary concerns for most Aspenites and other elite. But do these credentials justify the elite’s status as ‘models’ and ‘leaders’ of society? Engineering wealth is one matter, whereas engineering society is another. It’s unsettling, and probably not to healthy for society, that most Americans and members of other nations look to the elite, not as just as leaders of the economy, but as leaders of politics, culture, morality, and knowledge. As this study revealed, most elite are powerbrokers focused on *their* bottom line, most often at the expense of society’s bottom line; the elite are concerned primarily with creating wealth for themselves, not society. Thus, society’s members need to re-think and question the elite’s role in areas outside of the economy, and examine the elite’s loyalty to society in the pursuit of profit.