

# Q and A with Sam Friedman and Aaron Reeves on *Born to Rule*

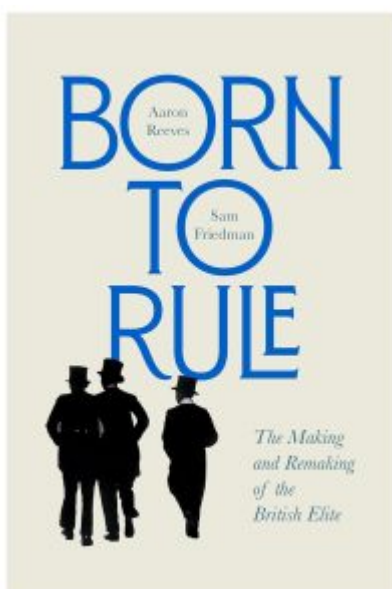
In this interview with **Anna D’Alton**, **Sam Friedman** and **Aaron Reeves** discuss their new book, ***Born to Rule: The Making and Remaking of the British Elite***. Drawing on years of extensive research into the complete Who’s Who database and other sources, the book examines the make-up and political views of those with power, influence and extreme wealth in Britain, and how this group has changed (or not) over the past 125 years.

Sam Friedman and Aaron Reeves will launch the book at a public, hybrid LSE event on Thursday 03 October – [find details on how to attend](#).

You can also take look at a [YouTube short](#), an [LSE Festival exhibition poster](#) and an [LSE Research for the World feature](#), all based on the book’s research.

**[Born to Rule: The Making and Remaking of the British Elite. Sam Friedman and Aaron Reeves. Harvard University Press. 2024.](#)**

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**Anna D’Alton (AD): What was the impetus for writing a book examining Britain’s elite over the past 125 years?**

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**Sam Friedman (SF):** Aaron and I have always been interested in the various ways that social class shapes people's lives in Britain. [My previous work](#) has looked at how people's backgrounds shape their ability to get in and get on in Britain's top occupations, while [Aaron's work](#) has looked at the classed assumptions that are built into the policy design aimed at those living in poverty. We realised we had a shared interest in how patterns of class inequality are shaped by the decisions, ideologies and behaviours of those in positions of power. This project is an attempt to understand who those people are – who rules and shapes Britain.

**AD: What qualifies somebody into Britain's Elite? Who are the wealth elite?**

**Aaron Reeves (AR):** The definition of the elite we use in this project is based on a book called [Who's Who](#), an annually published list of noteworthy and influential people that's been collected in Britain in its current form since 1897. It comprises the heads of major organisations, companies or institutions, members of parliament, judges and others who hold significant influence in their respective fields. We think of this group collectively as a positional elite.

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The wealth elite are those in *Who's Who* that are also in the top one per cent of wealth distribution. These two definitions operate in the analysis: we're interested both in the elite in general (around 33,000 people, in [2022](#)) and in the wealth elite (around 6,000 of that 33,000).

**AD: Why have you drawn on such numerous and varied datasets to inform your research for the book, including the complete *Who's Who* database, surveys and interviews you conducted, historical probate records and genealogical data?**

**SF:** We started with the complete 125-year *Who's Who* database. We were concerned with what this could tell us about the way in which the elite has changed over time, particularly the channels through which they are recruited and why these matter. It soon became clear that, to answer some of the things that we were interested in, we would need to go beyond *Who's Who*.

For example, we had really interesting data from *Who's Who* on entrants' schooling, but little information about their family backgrounds. Getting information from [probate](#) records about their parents' wealth, then, was crucial to understand how their family wealth has shaped elite trajectories over time.

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Another key question for us was whether elites are a cohesive group in terms of how they think and act, as people like [Matthew Goodwin](#) have argued. Trying to answer that is hard to do systematically, but we were lucky enough to get permission from *Who's Who* to circulate a survey to everyone in the current edition, which allowed us to ask all sorts of interesting questions about elites' policy preferences and their attitudes on a range of culture war issues.

**AD: Did you perceive any in how your *Who's Who* survey respondents and interview subjects account for their success?**

**AR:** There are two big trends worth drawing out. The first is that, during the twentieth century, we see a shift in the way elites present themselves. Elites were previously much more comfortable describing the help they received from family members and how that fed into successful careers. We found several accounts of what might be today considered pretty egregious forms of nepotism.

Strikingly, elites today try hard to come across as ordinary, and in doing so try to play up the meritocratic nature of their career trajectories. Many elites we spoke to stress, for example, the hard work that they've put in, their own ingenuity, their special skills and talents, and often play up aspects of their background that might allude to disadvantage or the odds they had to overcome to achieve success.

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But when you look at where these people have come from, the proportion that were born into privilege has hardly changed. At the end of the nineteenth century, about 20 per

cent of the people in *Who's Who* were born into families in the top one per cent of the wealth distribution, and today it's about the same proportion.

**AD: How does the performance of ordinariness by contemporary elites work to their advantage?**

**SF:** There can be a real payoff to this shift toward ordinary self-presentation, as we found when we conducted a set of survey experiments with the general public around how they perceive elites. We found that when the public thinks of elites as ordinary, either in the sense that they've come from humble backgrounds or are culturally ordinary in their tastes, recreations, and pastimes, they tend to uprate them (elites) in really striking ways – as more down-to-earth, relatable, hard-working, and even to some extent competent. What that indicates is that there's a real currency, a "symbolic market", for elite ordinariness, in the eyes of the public.

**AD: How does extreme wealth or extreme distance from necessity, advantage those elites from privileged backgrounds in terms of their approach to risk?**

**SF:** What we see in the narrations of people from these backgrounds is a sense that

they were insulated against negative outcomes of the decisions they made by the security of extreme wealth: the sense that they can take risks, make mistakes and easily pick themselves up again. They could pursue short-term or insecure career routes that may, and often did, have long-term payoffs for their career.

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**AD: Despite reforms to standardise education and testing in Britain in the twentieth century, attending elite schools and universities still significantly increases a person's likelihood of obtaining elite positions in society. How does this operate?**

**AR:** There are several ways in which the schools operate to produce that advantage. One is that Britain's elite schools are very effective at helping their students to gain the educational credentials which help them get into elite universities. Those elite universities (particularly Oxford and Cambridge) are often critical in helping them get into elite positions.

Secondly, these schools and universities have an important hub function, in that they build nascent social networks that scaffold these individuals' careers. We don't need to look further than the best-known politicians in Britain today, many of whom went to these schools and whose careers have reinforced each other.

A third way these schools operate is to cultivate a particular orientation to the social world that is also bound up with the performance of "eliteness". Elite schools proactively inculcate an ability to engage with the "right kind" of culture with the embodied sense of ease that is critical in these kinds of elite spaces and professions.

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Although not everyone that goes to these schools necessarily makes it to the top of their chosen career, the advantage is staggering. Still today, alumni of the top nine [Clarendon schools](#) are 52 times more likely than the general public to get into *Who's Who*.

**AD: How do wealth elites leverage their power to influence politics and policymaking in Britain?**

**AR:** Firstly, people with a great deal of wealth are often in positions of power and influence where policymakers take them seriously. A second well-documented mechanism is that wealth gives you the ability to exert influence. That might be directly, through donations, or indirectly, such as participating in charitable dinners with an expensive entry ticket where policymakers are present.

A third mechanism we draw out in the book is a new argument: that wealth gives people the ability to step back from the main aspect of their careers to pursue pet projects and agendas or ideas that they care about. We found numerous individuals who were able to leverage both their wealth and their influence at key moments in their careers to influence areas that they feel are important in British society.

**AD: Why do you argue that we must reduce the outsize influence and social exclusivity of elites?**

**SF:** There's a basic social problem here around the extreme social exclusivity of the elite and the rates of entry from very privileged, wealthy backgrounds or elite educational backgrounds. This makes a mockery of the idea that we have equal opportunity in this country to reach positions of power and influence.

But there's a wider issue. We show quite clearly in the book that this exclusivity affects the politics we get – that people's backgrounds map on to their political attitudes. Most prominently, we show that elites from working-class backgrounds, women and ethnic minorities who reach elite positions are quite different politically to other elites. Notably, they tend to tilt to the left, politically and socially.

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**AD: What are some of the key policy solutions you propose to achieve this aim of reducing elites' power?**

**AR:** We have several suggestions in the book. One is a wealth tax to break, or at least weaken, the link between wealth and elite reproduction to give a fairer opportunity to many more people to get into positions of power and influence.

Another recommendation is to reconfigure the trajectories that have dominated access to elite positions. We propose changing the admission process in elite universities to limit the number of privately educated students at [Russell Group universities](#) to 10 per cent of their incoming cohort – the same proportion of the British population that have ever attended a private school. This would reduce the proportion of privately educated students in Russell Group universities by about 50 per cent, quell demand for private schools, and remake in important ways the trajectories that have allowed people to get into positions of power and influence.

We also propose mechanisms that aim to redistribute power in big organisations and key institutions that currently sits with those at the top. We propose putting more workers on the boards of corporations so that you don't have to become the CEO to have influence over how a company is run.

We argue for quite a radical change to the government: we would remove all hereditary peerages and replace the House of Lords with a senate drawn from a random selection of the population. This would enable ordinary people to have a more proactive say over governmental policymaking, as well as through the ballot box.

Each of these policies, in their own way, is either trying to tackle the inequitable mechanisms through which elites are recruited, or indeed, to address more fundamentally the inequalities in power that exist between those in influential positions and everyone else in British society.

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**Note:** *This interview gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

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