



Sam Friedman

Aaron Reeves

April 9th, 2025

## Not such humble origins? The British elite's thirst to tell an "upward story" of their success

*What story do the British elite tell of their own success? Sam Friedman and Aaron Reeves find that the topic of class background often proves to be uncomfortable, with interviewees downplaying aspects of their upbringing that might signal privilege. What's behind this phenomenon – and has it always been this way?*

---

In last year's Conservative Party Leadership campaign, a curious theme emerged among frontrunners Kemi Badenoch, Robert Jenrick and James Cleverly. Each, it seemed, was competing to cast their origin story in a more humble light. First came **Badenoch's dubious claim** that she had "become working-class" after working for a few months at McDonald's aged 16. Next came a passionate defence from Robert Jenrick against the charge of middle class privilege (Jenrick has professional parents and was privately educated) in an **interview in the Times** where he pointed out that both his parents originally came from working-class backgrounds. And finally there was **The Guardian reporting on** James Cleverly's attempts to downplay his family's longstanding links to Colfe's, the private school he attended in an affluent London suburb.

Politicians are not the only influential people in Britain who struggle to navigate the treacherous terrain of how to tell their backstory. In our new book, ***Born to Rule: the making and remaking of the British elite***, we show that this trend is evident throughout the British elite. For instance, when we surveyed over 3000 entrants of *Who's Who* – Britain's longstanding catalogue of "influential and noteworthy" individuals – we found that 43% of those that told us they came from working-class backgrounds had actually grown up in families where their parents did middle-class professional work.

## Why do elites "identify downward" in this way?

What's behind this downward identification – or misidentification? Some clues emerged in follow-up interviews we conducted with over 140 entrants to Who's Who. While many happily acknowledged their privilege, we were struck by the number of interviewees who found the topic of class background uncomfortable. Answers were often stilted rather than direct; elaborate, but vague, with many attempting to deflect from, or downplay, aspects of their upbringing that might signal privilege. Many mentioned some aspects of their upbringing but omitted others. Others stressed the inexpensive nature of their private schooling, or the periods of economic uncertainty their family had faced.

Still others deflected their privilege by placing their upbringing within the context of a much longer family history that incorporated grandparents and sometimes even great-grandparents. These interviewees typically sidestepped, or only briefly addressed, questions about parental occupation. Instead, they located themselves within extended family stories of working-class struggle and upward mobility. Cerys (all names anonymised), a barrister, had been brought up by a father who had initially trained as a surgeon before later running and owning a large GP practice and a mother who was nurse and also the manager of the practice. Yet Cerys characterised her background as "lower middle-class", foregrounding her mother's extended family, particularly her grandmother, who had worked as a cleaner.

In this way, many instinctively moved to cast their origin in a humble light. And to us this often seemed bound up with the desire to **tell a meritocratic story**. Ian, a banker, answered questions about his background by focusing on his father, who "was born into relative poverty and lived a life of deprivation", although later in the interview he acknowledged that his father had gone on to be a successful business owner. Yet the idea that his own subsequent success had involved "escaping" from the "confines" of his background was central to his sense of self:

*"I regard myself as a well-educated boy who managed to escape the clutches of the confines of their background, the restrictions of their background and do something a little bit more interesting. So I don't regard myself as elite. I'm not that at all."*

We should be cautious in what we draw from examples like these. Such subjective understandings of class origin are not necessarily "incorrect" or cynically strategic. They often reflect authentic feelings of multigenerational upward mobility and "real" relational inequalities with colleagues or classmates from more elite origins. As the American social psychologist Robyn Fivush notes, our sense of identity is not only shaped by our own autobiographical memory but also by the stories we hear during childhood about the lives and characters in our extended family. These elements scaffold what she calls our "intergenerational self."

This intergenerational self was particularly complex for people with a migration story in their extended family. The upward story most of these people articulated was rooted in the downward mobility their parents or grandparents had experienced when migrating to the United Kingdom. These relatives may have been relatively advantaged in their origin country, but upon migrating had

been forced to take lower-paid or lower-status work, which had left an important mark on their identities.

Yet we would maintain that these kinds of origin stories nonetheless have tangible effects when they are expressed in everyday life. Whether intentional or not, they act to downplay one's class privilege in the eyes of others, especially in the face of questions that, if answered directly, would reveal such advantaged origins in fairly unambiguous terms.

## Have elites always emphasised “humble origins” stories?

But hasn't this always been the case? Haven't people in Britain always been keen to deflect attention away from caricatures of class privilege? Interestingly, the answer that emerges from our analysis is *no*. Examining 70 interviews with members of the British elite born in the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and held in the National Library's *National Life Stories* archive, a very different picture of elite identity emerges. Most of these people talked openly – often proudly – about the influence and successes of their parents and wider families.

Jeremy Morse, a banker and later university chancellor, offers a notable example. He talked happily about the inherited wealth that had shaped his life:

*“I had quite a lot of capital, both from my father and my mother's side, and my wife has inherited... So we have never been short of money... and I've never felt I have to, you know, take every penny from my work. And that's just a bit of luck”.*

The breeziness with which Morse discusses his and his wife's inherited wealth, and their ability to live off capital income, sits in stark contrast to the *uncomfortable discussions of class* among contemporary elites. What also stands out from the accounts of Morse and others is that these earlier cohorts embraced a more self-consciously upper-class upbringing. The British Library interviewers did not ask explicitly about class background, but this point becomes abundantly clear the moment one starts reading these transcripts (or listening to the audio): linguistically, in the distinct speech, diction, and turns of phrase, but also more generally through the unapologetically opulent or highbrow lifestyle that they explain characterised their childhoods.

Why does this shift toward concealing, disavowing, or downplaying elite backgrounds matter? This is pernicious, we argue, because it deflects attention away from the *inherited privilege* that many of *today's elite* continue to *enjoy*, both in their own eyes and among the publics they interact with. At the same time, one consequence of framing their lives as an upward struggle “against the odds” is that the subsequent life outcomes of these elites may appear more worthy, more deserving, and more meritorious. Whether this is intentional or not is hard to adjudicate. But either way, it tells us something significant about the quest for meritocratic legitimacy among the contemporary British elite.

*Sign up here to receive a **monthly summary** of blog posts from LSE Inequalities delivered direct to your inbox.*

***Born to Rule: the making and remaking of the British elite**, published by Harvard University Press, is out now.*

*All articles posted on this blog give the views of the author(s). They do not represent the position of LSE Inequalities, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

*Image credits: **Anton Vierietin** via Shutterstock.*

## About the author

### Sam Friedman

Sam Friedman is Professor of Sociology at LSE. His research focuses on the cultural dimensions of contemporary class division. He is the co-author of “Born to Rule: the making and remaking of the British elite” and “The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged” and author of “Comedy and Distinction: The Cultural Currency of a ‘Good’ Sense of Humour”. He is co-editor of the British Journal of Sociology.

### Aaron Reeves

Aaron Reeves is Professor of Sociology at LSE. His work studies the causes and consequences of social inequality, with a focus on the political economy of health, welfare reform, and processes of elite formation. The co-author of “Born to Rule: the making and remaking of the British elite”, his research has also been published in the American Sociological Review, American Journal of Sociology, The Lancet, British Medical Journal, and Socio-Economic Review.

**Posted In:** Class divides | Elites | Social mobility | UK inequalities



© LSE 2025