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Elites in the UK: new approaches to contemporary class divisions

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Elites in the UK

New approaches to contemporary class divisions

Ana Paula Hey, Anna Grimaldi-Christensen and Mike Savage

Introduction

This paper reflects on the wider implications of Mike Savage's arguments about the relationship between class analysis and the emerging sociology of elites¹. We believe that in the current social and political context this project is of central importance across the globe. Elites are increasingly salient and visible social actors, and are ever more the subject of various grievances associated with populist politics. The task of sociologically rendering elites, removing them from the orbit of political science, and construing their relationship to social class, is of critical importance. This involves recognising the specificity of the British context in this work, as a means of prising out what might be of relevance in other political contexts.

We begin by clarifying how Savage identifies the significance of elites in his past research on the UK, before discussing the development of "new elites" in the context of neoliberal financialisation. The third section reviews the ways in which analyses of the elite relates to the arguments of the Great British Class Survey,

1. Before we begin, we need to explain the authorship of this paper. This arises from wider collaborations between the three authors, Ana Paula Hey and Anna Grimaldi-Christensen, who took the initiative in formulating the synthesis presented here, and the later assistance of Mike Savage, who takes full joint responsibility for the arguments delivered. Nonetheless, in order to ensure clarity of exposition, Savage's previous research is referred to in the third party throughout this text. Thanks also to Georgia Nichols for her assistance with editing.

examining in greater detail the sociological elements of the elites as discussed by Savage. Finally, the fourth section assesses the wider implications of this work for the study of elites in other political contexts, particularly Brazil where this article is being published.

UK social space: classes and elites

Over the past thirty years, British sociology – like that of many nations – has experienced a separation between research dedicated to social classes and that of the elites (see the discussion in Savage e Williams, 2008). Such a shift needs to be challenged given the fundamental dynamic of a classed society in a period of new capitalist forms, generated by shifts occurring in the late 1970s and particularly in the 1980s. This phase is characterized by “the most rapid and dramatic shift of income, assets and resources in favour of the very rich that has ever taken place in human history” (Savage e Williams, 2008, p. 1). The so-called “super rich” gain visibility in the old capitalist countries, such as the UK and the USA, and spread on a global scale, parallel to the consolidation of neoliberalism as a form of economic, political and social organization. Besides being new in the field of sociology (see Froud *et al.*, 2006; Savage e Williams, 2008; Savage, 2015), bringing the elite into view requires a new tone in epistemological and methodological approaches shrouded in the concrete class divisions of contemporary capitalism.

Exploring elites in times of neoliberalism also requires de-veiling the mechanisms of social composition, distribution and the use of power and privilege, echoing Boltanski (2013):

It is true that since the 2000s, there has developed an excellent philosophical and sociological critique of neoliberalism. The problem, very concretely, is that it hasn't been taken on in the field of politics, of course on the right, but also on the left. This forces us to wonder what the social order in which we are immersed might be, that is to say, a form of domination in which criticism can be expressed freely, but without producing the slightest effect. This should prompt us, as sociologists, to look not only at the poorest, or the dominated, whose condition disgusts us, but also, or above all, the “elites”, the “leaders” who occupy positions of power, as well as to the devices that enable them both to implement this power and to conceal it. We need, therefore, to better understand new mechanisms of power within a national and global framework, and in particular how they are supported less by ideologies aimed at formatting the desires of subjects than on the argument of necessity: “Whether you want it or not, there is only one way”. This new phenomenon could be seen in Bourdieu

in 1976, that is, in his early days, when we published an article on “the production of the dominant ideology”².

Essentially, the argument developed in this section is that we must contest the recent distinction we find created between traditional class and stratification theory, and a dedicated elite theory. This will require the typical economic analytics used to define the elite to cross-fertilise with the more sociological approach being applied to class analysis in innovative ways. The objective is, therefore, for research that can demonstrate a social structure which embodies class divisions but which simultaneously considers the properties that characterize society as a whole, analytically bringing to light a “distinct” portion with extreme levels of power and wealth. Inspired by the construction of social classes framed by Pierre Bourdieu, particularly in *La distinction* (1979), Savage sees classes as composed through three types of capital: the economic (wealth and income), the cultural (tastes, interests and activities) and the social, (social networks, friendships and associations). This approach took shape in a wide collective project associated with the Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion Project and developed together with the Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change³ (see respectively: Savage *et al.*, 2015c; Savage, 2015; Silva, 2015). First, the project used nationally representative survey data that could demonstrate the various forms of capital and the power that such capitals assume in their distribution across social space. Applying multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) to the data culminated in the work organized by Tony Bennett, “Culture, class, distinction”, published in 2009.

This study “affirms that ‘the most powerful dimension of cultural difference... reflects what Bourdieu called ‘total volume of capital’, holdings of cultural and economic assets, which form the basis of social class structure’ (Bennett *et al.*, 2009,

2. In the original: “C’est vrai qu’à partir des années 2000, s’est développée une excellente critique philosophique et sociologique du néolibéralisme. Le problème, bien concret, est qu’elle n’a pas eu prise sur le champ politique, bien sûr à droite, mais aussi à gauche. Cela nous oblige à nous demander ce que peut bien être l’ordre social dans lequel nous sommes plongés, c’est-à-dire une forme de domination dans laquelle la critique peut s’exprimer librement, mais pourtant sans produire le moindre effet./Cela devrait nous inciter, en tant que sociologues, à nous intéresser non seulement aux plus pauvres ou aux dominés, dont la condition nous indigne, mais aussi, ou surtout, aux ‘élites’, aux ‘responsables’, qui occupent les positions de pouvoir, et aux dispositifs qui leur permettent à la fois de mettre en œuvre ce pouvoir et de le dissimuler. Il nous faut donc mieux comprendre les nouveaux dispositifs de pouvoir, dans un cadre national et dans un cadre global et, notamment, la façon dont ils prennent appui, moins sur des idéologies visant à formater les désirs des sujets que sur l’argument de la nécessité : ‘Que vous le vouliez ou non, il n’y a qu’une seule voie’. Ce phénomène nouveau, nous l’avions entrevu avec Bourdieu dès 1976, c’est-à-dire à ses débuts, lorsque nous avons publié un article sur ‘la production de l’idéologie dominante’”.
3. Team of key researchers composed of Tony Bennett, Mike Savage, Elizabeth Silva and Alan Warde.

p. 251). [...] These two indicators – occupation and education – correlate strongly because the distribution of economic capital (the key asset for class position) forms the basis for the distribution of the other forms of capital: cultural and social” (Silva, 2015, p. 378).

For the Brazilian and wider Latin American public, such research allows an interface with the elaboration of methodological mechanisms, potentially useful from the comparative point of view, and which involve familiar theoretical constructs. In particular, we refer here to the fertile dialogue with Bourdieu (1966; 1979; 1985) on constructing classes inductively, rather than through scholastic and deductive schema. Here we depart from the notion that their expression resides, effectively, in the: “belonging to a social structure, as a system of positions and oppositions endowed with meaning, which confer properties of class, thus differentiating class condition (inherent properties) from class position (the specificity of which is assumed given the location in a position different to other classes)” (Hey e Catani, 2013, p. 33). At the same time, we also refer to an essential aspect relative to how cultural classification systems are rooted in the class system, in which elements such as schooling, sociocultural practices, preferences and tastes are amalgamated in a structurally unequal distribution across agents in the social world.

This view was elaborated in analysis of data produced by the largest survey ever to take place in the UK, the Great British Class Survey 2011 (GBCS), directed by Mike Savage (LSE) and Fiona Devine (University of Manchester)⁴. Developed through collaborations between academics, the BBC Lab UK and BBC Current Affairs⁵, the survey attracted responses from over 161,000 people, encompassing questions on assets and income, cultural activities and social ties, which were then used to discern seven “new” social classes. The survey was complemented with a further 1,026 respondents, using face to face surveys conducted by the market-research firm GfK (see Savage *et al.*, 2015b). Asking identical questions to those in the GBCS, this data

4. This survey required an extensive and thorough elaboration by Savage and his colleagues within sociology, as it questioned the very limits of the definition of class, not only by professional occupation, traditionally used in national census surveys, but by the conjugation of resources of material and symbolic order (see Froud *et al.*, 2006; Savage e Williams, 2008; Savage, 2015).

5. Segments of the publicly funded BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation). BBC Lab UK is a website that hosted the survey. The platform to explore social class was proposed by Trippenbach, an interactive producer at the BBC (See Devine e Snee, 2015). The web survey required twenty minutes from each respondent to answer questions on their leisure interests, cultural tastes, social networks and economic situation. Following the success of this stage, an interactive Class Calculator was also created by BBC Lab UK, which takes less than a minute to ask about income, savings and house value, cultural interests and social networks. In just a few seconds, the calculator reveals the “new” class that the respondent belongs to. By the end of 2014, approximately 9 million people had used the Class Calculator (take the test at <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-22000973>).

was used to benchmark the biases observed in the initial results, and included fifty interviews geared to rendering more qualitative evidence concerning what people thought about class in their own words. The (big) data generated by GBCS project⁶ could be, and has been, interpreted in a number of ways, but what interests us here is demonstrating those results which allow a discussion about the top of the social structure. It is not our intention to discuss how the seven specific classes developed in the Great British Class Survey were elaborated by Savage and his colleagues through the linking of forms of capital (economic, cultural and social). This would consist of a long and ample discussion in the field of sociology, which has already taken place in many journals⁷. Furthermore, a focus on the seven classes as opposed to the rationale behind them, as will be demonstrated in the final section, has seen a series of criticisms. Instead, we focus on how a very wealthy elite at the apex of the class structure stands out, and how they form a strong and distinctive social class in large part due to wealth, but also because they are culturally engaged and well connected. In doing so we highlight the centrality of accumulation and therefore the discreet categorical distinctions which define the elite, in ways which reshape wider class analysis and the relationship between the two.

Elites and “new elites”

In the book *Social class in the 21st century*, Savage *et al.* (2015c) focus in particular on the very wealthy, who have exclusive social circles and enjoy similar pursuits, often attending the same elite universities and collecting in specific urban locations: “London and other major cities are becoming key venues for this elite formation” (Savage, 2016, p. 478). Appearing nothing like the classic “old boys club”, aristocratic land-owning stereotype of the past, the current UK elite have largely disappeared from view, both in the public eye as well as in academic research, due largely to poorly adapted research tools.

Conventional classifications no longer serve to locate and describe the “elite” of British society to a satisfactory degree. These “hegemonic social science methods” allow the elite to slip from view (Savage e Williams, 2008, p. 7). Classic survey and interview methods, basing results on financial and economic data analysis, as well as occupation and education, theoretically stem from the ideas which only recognize

6. The data can be accessed via the UK data archive (<https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/catalogue/?sn=7616>).

7. See, in particular, the special issues dedicated to the presentation of this research and its results, as well as to the criticisms raised in: *Sociological Review*, 63 (2), 2015; *Sociology*, 47 (2), 2013; 48 (3), 2014; 49 (6), 2015.

two forms of interaction or influence between the so-called elite class and wider society: either as key (active) agents for social change, or as (passive) instruments which perpetuate and support existing structures. In either case, the elite is traditionally seen as some form of “establishment” that is controlled by the same group holding financial power. Yet according to Savage *et al.* (2015c), although the power of economic capital is vital, this “establishment” is not a helpful sociological concept because it implies greater closure and categorical separation from a wider wealthy sector of the population than their research has indicated.

The authors contend that since the 1980s, increasing financialisation of the market, as well as public services, has boosted the number of higher-paid intermediary financial elites, and “apparently diminishe[d] the role of previously dominant managerial elites”. This “new” elite, embedded further and more subtly into society, has a different role to its predecessor, which was only, as suggested, interactive with the rest of society in its active or passive interactive roles, either as agents or instruments of social change. Their “role is not the executive management of ‘men and things’ within corporate hierarchies but the switching or servicing of the flows of money through market trading and corporate deals whose profits greatly increase the numbers of working rich” (Savage e Williams, 2008, p. 10).

The structure and processes of this modern-day capitalism also function under a different pace in relation to the new elites – “whereas giant firms were once long-lived survivors, they now typically have short lives, often involving changes of ownership” (Savage e Williams, 2008, p. 13). Increased membership coupled with the temporality of companies’ hold on power means those at the top are required to group, disperse, and regroup around capital, sometimes with opposing interests, at a pace which no longer requires homogeneity:

None of this requires a unitary elite, nor any kind of ‘executive committee of the bourgeoisie’, to reconcile sectionalism. [...] Financial power thus works through the social and cultural imaginary with unpredictable and variable effects which often include disappointment about the gap between promise and outcome. (Savage e Williams, 2008, pp. 13-14)

Considering these elements, Savage *et al.* argue that we need to overcome the crystallized notion that elites are traditional “upper class” status groups representing reactionary survival and an opposition to the project of modernization. Drawing on Bourdieu, the contemporary field of power is “a scene of internal contestation and dispute between the most powerful and well-resourced agents from different sectors and professions, such as the financial, political, legal and journalistic elements” (Savage *et al.*, 2015c, p. 309). The fractures, solidarities,

and links between those at the top, seen as dialectically cohesive and dispersed, now become relevant.

In this sense, the contemporary elite class is very different to the idea of a traditional ‘upper class’ as well as ‘the establishment’: an “aristocratic, landed and gentlemanly class which held sway in Britain until the later twentieth century” (*Idem*, p. 303), evoking images of private schools and stately homes. Events across the 1970s and 1980s point to a decline of this reality, where the “de-industrialization of the old manufacturing heartlands” coupled with taxation of highest earners broke down the strong relations between this landed class and the establishment. The decline of this system was reflected in real-life contentions, such as Lady Diana Spencer’s embodiment of “a new ladylike aesthetic which positioned itself against the heart of the Establishment” (*Idem*, p. 305). Another manifestation of this shift can be witnessed in consumer culture: throughout the 1980s this image of landed gentry as a cultural motif acted as a goal for those intending to move up the social ladder, representing a “vulgarization of poshness” (*Idem*, p. 307).

While an “establishment” is still held through those same cultural and social mechanisms today, it no longer necessarily stems from a class characterized by land and property ownership in the old heartlands of Great Britain. Here we once again understand the significance of deconstructing traditional images and looking into the finer details in order to relocate and characterize the aesthetic and systematic elements of elites today.

Elites in the UK: social mobility, education, location and the “right to speak”

Having introduced Savage *et al.*’s interest in new elites, it is useful to relate this idea to the findings of the GBCS (Savage *et al.*, 2015b; 2015c). Certainly, the elite were not the sole interest of the project, but an understanding of their new appearance and interaction with capital, as those at the top, is vital to the main methodology of the research in question. In light of growing inequalities, and the failures of meritocracy and social mobility, it is necessary to understand the new class order of British society in a way that might facilitate new dealings with social problems.

Recalling the heterogeneous nature of values which classify this new elite, Savage and his team understood that class cannot be measured solely by economic capital, but must also consider cultural and social capitals. Economic capital refers to accumulated wealth and income, while cultural capital focuses on tastes, interests and activities, and social capital considers relationships, networks and associations. These in mind, the GBCS pulled together a composite measure which could “illuminate the wider cultural and political significance of class” (Savage *et al.* 2015c, p. 4). At the

same time, it is important to note that this approach understands class in the sense of “class for itself”, as a way of understanding how classes are formed, maintained, and passed on through generations.

Savage *et al.* (*Idem*) argue that the augmentation of economic capital leads to “a more complex and elaborate hierarchy of economic positions in the middle ranges of society”. While the top and bottom of the spectrum form coherent opposing images when it comes to the combination of income, savings and relationships to property, the middle sections appear more less clearly delineated. Here, occupation, for example, no longer associates with income quite so straight-forwardly, and accumulation as a long-term process plays a much more important role than previously understood.

The implications of this form of class analysis are considerable. Classes are not usefully seen as clearly bounded categorical groups, defined by some unitary criteria (such as occupation). Classes exist – if they exist at all – as social formations, crystallising particular combinations of capitals. Following Bourdieu (1979; 2000), this rescues class analysis from the “scholastic point of view” and insists on class as only meaningful historically, and as actual social agents with the potential to drive social and political change.

Here we can note the shift in the analysis of the GBCS from the initial 2013 paper to that portrayed in the 2015 book. In the former paper, seven classes were defined using latent class analysis of measures of economic, social and cultural capital from the nationally representative GfK survey. However, this mode of presentation tended to reify these seven classes and led to considerable criticism (e.g. Mills, 2015). The 2015 book adapted the subtly different emphasis that heuristically the GBCS analysis defined an elite at the top and a precariat at the bottom, but that the other classes in the middle ranges were rather more nebulous and their precise definition would be affected by measurement issues. This argument was analytically very important: rather than fixating on the relationship between the middle and working classes which has been the staple focus of class analysis, here it is the boundaries at the top levels of the class structure which are crucial.

In light of this work, the UK elite have been repainted. Precisely because there was a sample skew in the GBCS by geographical region (towards London and the South East), income (towards the wealthy), occupation (towards professionals and managers) and level of education (towards those with university qualifications), this led to a proportionately exaggerated amount of data on “those at the top”, a very unusual outcome in the British context. This fact has been used to an advantage, building an in-depth picture of the elite and the new evidence of mechanisms which keep them at such a position.

One of Savage's main analytical points, (partly following Piketty, 2013) is that it is necessary to move away from a focus on the super-rich, or the top 1% "super-wealthy" to include a rather larger portion of British society (the elite were defined as 6% of the population in Savage *et al.*, 2013). Occupationally they are characterized in frequency in descending order: chief executive officers (a large majority); IT and telecommunications directors; marketing and sales directors; functional managers and directors; barristers and judges; financial managers; dental practitioners; advertising and public relations directors. These occupations are associated with levels of economic capital which set them well apart from any other social group, with household income (after tax and other deductions) around £89k, almost double that of the next highest class, and an average house price of £325k, by far the highest compared to any other class. In addition, their average savings are particularly high, well over double that of any other class.

In more specific terms, they can be categorized as follows:

The elite have close to the highest number of social contacts, though partly for this reason their mean status score is not the highest of all the classes, but the second highest (since if one knows a large number of people, this makes it more likely for them to know both high and low status people). They also score the highest on "highbrow" cultural capital, though by a less marked margin than for their economic capital, and they have moderately high scores on emerging cultural capital – so it would be unwise to just see them as highbrow. [...] They have the lowest proportion of ethnic minorities, the highest proportion of graduates, and over half come from families where the main earner was in senior management or the professions. They are clearly a relatively exclusive grouping, with restricted upward mobility into its ranks. [...] Graduates of elite universities are over-represented amongst their ranks, especially from Oxford, City, Kings College London, LSE, Cambridge, Bristol, London South Bank, Imperial College and Trinity College Dublin. Strikingly, six of these universities are located in London, only Trinity is from outside the south of England. Geographically, their residences are all over-represented in the south east of England, and especially in areas close to London in the affluent Home Counties (Savage *et al.*, 2013, pp. 233-234).

A number of further aspects deserve closer observation, such as those linked to social mobility, education, location and political participation. Using the analogy of climbing a steep mountain, Savage *et al.* (2015c, pp. 188-189) demonstrate the huge economic differences between those at the top and bottom. With inequalities well above what they were for previous generations, these mountains "now rise[ing] much further above the valley than they did three decades ago" (*Idem*, p. 188). The skills required to climb these mountains – that is, to get ahead of others – appear

to be based on “fitness, talent, determination and endeavour” (*Idem*, p. 188), but also require the mobilisation of capitals by parents and individuals.

In this light, and despite the hope and belief in the possibility of upward mobility, the GBCS data has revealed that the higher class you are, to follow the metaphor, the higher up the mountain you were to begin with. For example, “51% of those in our elite class had parents who were in class 1 (senior managerial and professional) compared to only 11% who had parents who were in the precariat” (*Idem*, p. 193). What further data shows is that while it is possible to move up, it is extremely likely you will remain in an economic, social or cultural camp similar to that of your parents, and though rising is hard, falling is less likely.

While many of these results may seem to prove what many sociologists have long argued regarding the problematic of social mobility, this unique insight on cultural and social capital reveals a further layer of complexity to the argument. Evidence points to a link between the *type* of profession and the likelihood of entry for individuals of a different background. If technical emerging professions are accepting of the upwardly mobile, the more traditional professions in law, business and medicine rely on “the more opaque and hard-to-acquire resources of cultural and social capital that the privileged tend to inherit from their parents” (*Idem*, p. 197).

Considering the cultural confidence and perceived political power held most highly by those of elite status, it holds that the three capitals are interdependent in maintaining these particular types of professions in similar hands. Further to this, the GBCS revealed that even when upward mobility occurs, there exists a very real “social class background pay gap”, in which the salary for the same career and position vary according to the employee’s background. For example, the CEOs, directors and presidents whose parents were either senior managers or in the traditional professions currently earn a salary of around £100k per year, while those whose parents were manual labourers or never worked have an average wage of around £83k. In addition, they will continue to have accumulated less cultural and social capital than those from more advantaged backgrounds (*Idem*, p. 216; see also Laurison e Friedman, 2016).

The exclusivity of the elite continues to hold true when it comes to education. The results of the GBCS drew fascinating lines between particular institutions and high levels of capitals, showing that, today, entry to the elite is disproportionately linked to specific universities. This research showed that it is not whether you go to university or not, but which university that matters more. While we have come a long way in terms of opening university doors to people of all kinds of backgrounds (the figure currently standing at about half of all under thirty-year-olds in Great Britain), “expansion has not, unfortunately, led to greater equality among young

people” (Savage *et al.*, 2015c, p. 224). Firstly, this is because the number of “disadvantaged” attending university has grown, but so also have the numbers for those already in the elite, thus when we look at the gap between the two, the evidence of improvement is marginal. The overall effect of increasing university attendance has actually seen a “tightening association between graduate status and membership of the most advantaged groups in British society” (*Idem*, p. 229).

There are currently over 150 universities in the UK, with considerable variations in status, determined largely by the age, size, character of the faculties and social recruitment of students. The older universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge, are based on a system of colleges, with many traditional features and famed reputations for their research, who generally receive students from the most favoured classes (the elite and established middle class). At the same time, the system floodgates other institutions, classified by Savage *et al.* (*Idem*, p. 233) as follows: redbrick universities, such as Birmingham, Manchester and Sheffield; plateglass universities, such as Sussex, Warwick and York, and; newer, post-1992 institutions, converted en masse to university status this year, which tend to have more varied social groups in their student body.

While elite status association with top universities in Great Britain is no surprise, the particular data of the GBCS provided new further layers of detail. Proving more concentrated than previously expected, the elitist circles of exclusivity within universities is manifest. The elite exceptionality is tighter packed within a smaller number of universities than in the traditionally classed “Oxbridge” (Oxford and Cambridge universities) and “Russell Group” members (a cluster of the best 24 universities in the UK) (see Wakeling e Savage, 2015). The hierarchy between students from different universities is very visible. Even within the same city of Bristol, for example, with its University of Bristol (widely considered “for Oxbridge rejects” and more middle-class or “posh”), and the University of the West of England (seen as more working class) the “students associate the two different universities with young people from different social classes who are distinguished by different behaviour, clothes, and so on – what Bourdieu would label as different ‘habitus’” (Savage *et al.*, 2015c, p. 237).

Here we reach another distinguishing feature within the GBCS’s view of class: location. Rather than separating the social and spatial, Savage emphasises how these are inter-related: classes form in specific locations which are central to their being. A form of hierarchical geography favouring particular capital accumulations ran across a number of dimensions, mostly urban-rural, north-south, and the metropolitan capital of London versus Greater London. Location is also shown to correspond with other pockets of economic, cultural and social capital, such as house prices, school quality and job opportunities, making accumulation an even easier task for

those who are already higher up the “mountain”. Additionally, new spatial factors also help us to understand the changing shape of the elite and new structures of capital: “The old aristocratic class with roots in the land, at the apex of the class structure, has given way to a more fundamentally urbanized class” (*Idem*, p. 297).

London, a historically rich centre in terms of all forms of capital, is the home for most of the elite as defined by the GBCS’s categorization. Arguing against the stance that London is characterized by transnational “placeless” elites, the survey demonstrates “distinctive forms of elite territoriality at work” both in the centre of London and the South East of England. This is seen through higher levels of household income, property value, household savings, concentration of higher-status social networks, both highbrow *and* emerging cultural capital, and opportunities for higher-paid employment (see Cunningham e Savage, 2015, pp. 334-337 for a visual presentation of these distributions).

Using a further unit of analysis on the elite only, the Local Indicator of Spatial Association allows us to understand how the elite is spread across a given space. Applying a local regression methodology (Anselin, 1995; O’Sullivan e Unwin, 2003), Cunningham and Savage (2015) consider capitals *surrounding* a given area in relation to it, giving measures of high elite areas close to other elite areas, low elite areas close to other low elite areas, but also high elite areas close to low elite locations, and the inverse. Having utilized this, it becomes obvious that the London and South East elite form “distinctive patterns of cultural engagement”. Not only do they find that all forms of capital are most highly clustered in these areas, but that they correspond with occupation, painting a picture of an even more concentrated presence of business, cultural and legal elites all centred around London. The most advantaged is perhaps the London business elite because of the “economic power within this group is exclusively clustered in the south-east of England, where property values in addition to higher average income levels act to mark out a sub-group of elevated financial advantage” (Cunningham e Savage, 2015, p. 341).

This contrasts with the elite in areas such as Lancashire (North West England) and North Wales, where high income is generally coupled with low property value. Thus, London is a distinctive place where high levels of capital correlate and reproduce each other, further breeding and accentuating the advantages of this elite.

The final aspect of exclusive privilege to be discussed is that of political participation or political confidence. Earlier, this rather abstract form of privilege, confidence, was mentioned in the context of cultural capital, where one of the main markers in elite or higher class cultural capital was a sense of confidence and ability to manoeuvre through a wide range of topics pertaining to the “emerging” cultural capital, coupled with a negative judgement of those who could not. Additionally,

the elite are notably more aware of this form of privilege they have over others. As pointed out by surveys, the elite are the most likely to see themselves as being “at the top” and “have a distinctive sense of their own privileged class identity” (Savage *et al.*, 2015c, p. 371). This in mind, it is worth considering aspects of politicization and power as further characteristics of the elite. Returning to Bourdieu’s notion of a “right to speak”, Laurison (2015, p. 351) has used the rich data of the GBCS to better understand these aspects. In his view, the well off and well educated demonstrate greater participation in politics and also have at their disposal the economic capital to perform “other forms of persuasion” (*Idem*, p. 349) which in general correlate with “dominant or elite culture, practices and positions” (*Idem*, p. 351).

Creating a dialogue between GBCS/GfK data on the elite and research carried out by Clark and Acock (1989), Laurison examines responses to two main questions: “Can I influence British decisions?” and “Would I contact a UK government official or Member of Parliament?” Next, he experiments with variables of education, income, occupation and age to better understand the main factors in play. The picture of those elite with the greatest “right to speak” is clear: political participation is more likely if you are a university graduate earning over £200k. Additionally, there is a positive correlation between a sense of “the right to speak” and age, up until the age of 66 when this begins to decline (Laurison, 2015, p. 357). Furthermore, he notes differences in the finer details that demonstrate a trajectory, where attending a fee paying secondary school and later attending Oxbridge puts you in the best ‘position’ sociopolitically. This may suggest that paying for schooling is enough to give your children the political confidence they need to do well in life, yet further data demonstrates how this trajectory even begins well before schooling takes place: even if you are now in the elite, your parents’ origins matter when it comes to political engagement: “Growing up in a family with a main earner in a higher-status occupation (and thus likely with a high income and greater educational and cultural capital) is positively associated with greater political engagement among GBCS respondents” (*Idem*, p. 361).

Thinking elites: limits and possibilities

The construction of classes as expressed in the work of Savage and his colleagues required that the data had to be approached both epistemologically as well as empirically. Previous ways of conceiving class had to be rethought so that class analysis is fit for the analytical challenges of the 21st century. Work of such a nature involves academic polemics in itself, as well as arising amongst a long tradition of debates on class. Generally, the critics which have addressed work stemming from the GBCS can

be categorized in these two ways. First, there are critics who dispute the idea that classes are not only determined economically, a notion empirically rooted in the strong tradition of basing surveys on income and professional categorization; and second, how to measure and deploy types of capital which tend to be understood as non-determinant amongst social differences, those relating to culture and social ties.

An attempt to substantiate these elements has led to multiple debates, such as Collin Mills' (2015) critique of the collection and use of data, May's disappointment in its descriptive nature which fell short of the practicality and 'human betterment' (May, 2015) hoped for by readers, or Skeggs' (2015) disagreement with the survey's terminology of choice. However, for the purposes of this article, which focuses on the topic of the elite, we distance ourselves from the extensive debate on methodology and refer interested readers to the now considerable literature so they can make up their own minds.

Next, we turn to the critiques which found fault in Savage's definition of class⁸. In the main, this was picked up by Marxist based understandings of class relations. For Alberto Toscano and Jamie Woodcock, an understanding of the elite based on its relation to other classes, i.e. through exploitation, cannot be ignored. They argue that capital accumulation could be used to explain financialisation such as via the housing market (Toscano e Woodcock, 2015, p. 518), but would also render the survey conscious and applicable to more global structures. For Beverley Skeggs, on the other hand, the problem lies in a confused conflation of the terms "class" and "stratification": "The GBCS claims to be a relational analysis but it is more a gradational mapping of status, as Harriet Bradley (2014) notes" (Skeggs, 2015, p. 212). For her, it is the additional element of legitimating symbolic power that allows gradual stratifications to be understood as class. In other words, recognizing and self-identifying with the "symbolic mechanisms that uphold class power" (*Idem*, p. 213) such as exploitation, domination, dispossession and devaluation is vital to understanding class. Yet, Savage himself stated that: "the fundamental argument of the CARS [capitals, assets, and resources] perspective is that class is not to be conflated with the division of labour, or with concepts such as exploitation, which also become loaded and moralistic" (Savage *et al.*, 2015c, p. 47). The problem raised by these criticisms is that they appear to return class analysis to a theoretical discussion of first principles (is class seen "relationally", how is class related to "exploitation" etc.), rather than used for actual analysis of real world situations. Here, it is incumbent on critics of the GBCS to show that their perspectives make sense of the current political situation better. This is not a step which has been taken so far.

8. See also Latimer e Munro (2015) and Tyler (2015) for further discussions on class.

The applicability to the GBCS for contexts other than the UK is another source of criticism. For Tai-Lok Lui (2015), for example, structural differences in China, where institutions often play a vital role in class formation and reproduction means that consumption as seen by Savage would not be so appropriate. Savage's work therefore lacked the transferable quality which would give it extra credit, a fact which is addressed in the book itself:

We do not claim that the British experience is typical or that it lays down a course which other nations will follow. Far from it. However, we do think that the issues discussed here are unlikely to be confined to this country alone and will have resonances around the planet, even while we fully acknowledge that as one of the wealthier nations in the world, the relationship between wealth elites and poorer classes will be very different in other countries (Savage *et al.*, 2015c, p. 18).

The GBCS is not a template to be applied to different nations, but an encouragement to reflect on how economic, social and cultural capital may crystallise in various contexts. This having been said, taking elites seriously is something which may have wide resonance across the globe given economic trends towards the growing fortunes of the wealthy. Taking Savage's advice, we consider the possibilities of such a project in the case of Brazil, where this article is being produced and where finding and measuring the key factors in perpetuating massive inequality might benefit from considering the approach and scale of the GBCS. While it goes without saying that the self-labelled experiment cannot be transferred without first working on methodological adjustments and a consideration of Brazil's unique capital structures, the particular combination of data and the scale of the project could offer new insights. Firstly, we have seen how the data has highlighted the importance of cultural and social capital in determining divisions and maintaining class boundaries, especially across time. Secondly, the data collected has allowed for an extremely in-depth view of where other more particular forms of inequality are present, namely when looking at education and location, and therefore where they can begin to be dealt with. Location and education are of particular interest in the Brazilian context, of which we are informed via an abundance of research on inequality which considers variables of economic and cultural capital. This includes studies on territorial occupation in the big cities as a class inflection, as well as the perverse situation of the schooling process, which sees heightened disparities related to institutional quality, access and permanence of privileged social groups, and exclusion of less favoured classes.

In this light, the applicability of the GBCS to elites in a country like Brazil can be measured much more by the inquiries that the study itself has been provoking

in terms of similarities and differences. If, on the one hand, questions of current inequality can bring two contexts together, the historical mechanisms of production of these disparities assume irreducible particularities. But if we think of the inequalities from the configuration of the new financial capitalism and the political changes brought about by neoliberalism, would we have confluences in the formation of the “new elites”? Is there a new rearrangement of transnational classes that could be more visible in countries like Brazil, not only in relation to those belonging to the universe of the richest 1%?

The framework of British society demonstrated in the work of Savage presents specific cleavages, but the methodological elements which seek to define the structure of distribution for different types of capital is an important contribution to elite studies in the country. In this light, what is the dividing structure of classes stemming from the three types of capital (economic, cultural and social)? What are the characteristics of the CARS (capitals, assets, and resources) that mobilize for the elite and in which spaces do they guarantee them power? Would the Brazilian elite also be fractioned from a more traditional nucleus, composed of an urban-industrial aristocracy as well as a landed gentry, and a further urban-financial group concretized by financial intermediaries? Where do we situate the professional-liberals and the body of high state bureaucracy, marked by retaining distinctive types of capital in the country?

In sum, the GBCS’s research on the elite is an important means to think about investigating other social structures that are strongly polarized by the unequal distribution of various types of capital. Absorbing the wealth of material made available by the GBCS in the logic of the British society in question has already posed a challenge to sociological research, but linking this analysis to other empirical contexts is what would enable, perhaps, valued feedback to this endeavour.

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Abstract

Elites in the UK: new approaches to contemporary class divisions

The aim of this article is to demonstrate the "new" elites emerging in the UK amidst the economic, political and social context of neoliberalism. To do this, we examine the works of Mike Savage regarding what elite studies have meant for contemporary forms of social division. Using data from the Great British Class Survey, the author underlines sociological elements that are central to the composition of this financialised elite. We describe cleavages in terms of social mobility, education, location and politicization that are generated through the concentration of distinct types of capital (economic, social and cultural). Departing from the specific context of Great Britain, we intend to contribute to the development of a sociology of elites, through a discussion of both new perspectives and the limits and possibilities of treating different geographic, political and social contexts.

Keywords: New elites; Elites in the UK; Financialised elite; Elites and social divisions.

Resumo

Elites no Reino Unido: novas abordagens para divisões de classe contemporâneas

O objetivo do artigo é demonstrar as “novas” elites que emergem no Reino Unido no contexto econômico, político e social do neoliberalismo. Para tal, utilizam-se os amplos trabalhos de Mike Savage acerca do significado do estudo de elites para as formas contemporâneas das divisões sociais. Os dados do Great British Class Survey servem de base para este autor delinear os elementos sociológicos centrais da composição destas elites da financeirização. Descrevem-se as clivagens em termos de mobilidade social, educação, localização e politização geradas pela concentração de distintos tipos de capital (econômico, social e cultural). A partir da especificidade britânica, pretende-se contribuir para o desenvolvimento da sociologia das elites tanto na discussão de novas perspectivas quanto nos limites e possibilidades da abordagem em diferentes contextos geográficos, políticos e sociais.

Palavras-chave: Novas elites; Elites no Reino Unido; Elites da financeirização; Elites e divisões sociais.

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