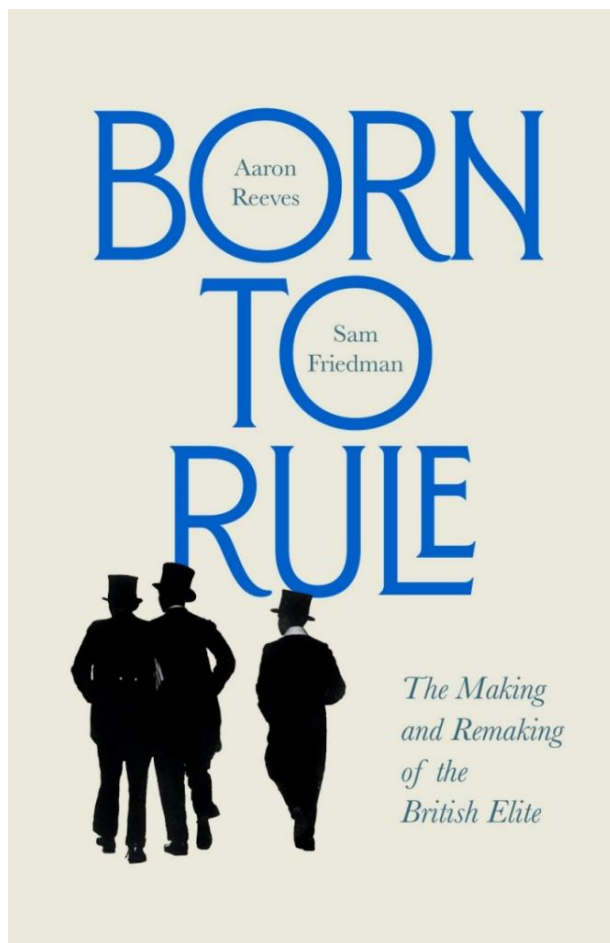


Book Review

The Making and Remaking of the British Elite

“Born to Rule” by Aaron Reeves and Sam Friedman

By Eric Martone



In *Born to Rule: The Making and Remaking of the British Elite*, sociologists Aaron Reeves and Sam Friedman present a comprehensive analysis of the British elite from the Victorian era to the present day. Their research delves into who comprises this elite, the

pathways they traverse to attain their positions, and the pivotal role educational institutions play in this process. By examining over 125,000 profiles from sources like "Who's Who," genealogical records, and conducting interviews with more than 200 leading figures, the authors shed light on the enduring influence of education in shaping Britain's ruling class.

The British public school system has long been a cornerstone in the formation of the nation's elite. Institutions such as Eton, Harrow, and Winchester have historically been associated with grooming individuals for leadership roles within the British Empire and its institutions. The 19th-century public school ethos emphasized service to the Crown and Empire, instilling values that perpetuated a ruling class mentality. Graduates from these schools often benefited from exclusive networks, commonly referred to as the "old boy network," which facilitated their ascent into influential positions.

Reeves and Friedman highlight that, despite societal changes, the pathway to elite status in Britain remains closely tied to specific educational trajectories. A significant proportion of the elite have been educated at prestigious public schools, followed by attendance at elite universities, particularly Oxford and Cambridge. This educational lineage not only provides academic credentials but also immerses individuals in social networks that are instrumental in securing positions of power.

The authors' analysis reveals a striking continuity in the composition of the British elite. Individuals born into the top 1 percent of society are just as likely to ascend to elite positions today as they were 125 years ago. This persistence underscores the role of educational institutions in maintaining social stratification. While there have been efforts to diversify student bodies, the overrepresentation of privately educated individuals in elite roles remains pronounced.

In response to these findings, Reeves and Friedman advocate for significant reforms in university admissions to promote social mobility. They propose that prestigious institutions like Oxford and Cambridge, as well as other Russell Group universities, limit the proportion of privately educated students to 10 percent, reflecting the national demographic. Currently, these universities admit approximately 30 percent of their students from private schools, a figure that contributes to the perpetuation of elite dominance. Implementing such a cap, along with considering a merit-based lottery system for admissions, could diversify the student body and challenge the entrenched pathways to power.

A notable observation in *Born to Rule* is the modern elite's tendency to present themselves as ordinary, downplaying their privileged backgrounds. This performance of ordinariness serves to mitigate public resentment and perpetuate the myth of meritocracy. By emphasizing personal effort and merit over inherited privilege, the elite obscure the structural advantages conferred by their educational backgrounds.

Born to Rule offers a compelling examination of the British elite, including an examination of the enduring role of educational systems in shaping societal hierarchies. Reeves and Friedman's meticulous research illuminates the ways in which educational institutions serve

both as gateways to opportunity and as gatekeepers of privilege. Their call for reforms in educational admissions policies underscores the need to address systemic inequalities and promote genuine social mobility. This work is essential reading for those interested in understanding the intricate connections between education and power in Britain.

“Born to Rule: The Making and Remaking of the British Elite.” By Aaron Reeves and Sam Friedman.

Cambridge, MA and London, UK: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2024. ISBN: 9780674257719

About the Author

Aaron Reeves is professor of sociology at the London School of Economics. An award-winning sociologist who has written extensively on social inequality, he is coeditor of the *British Journal of Sociology*.

Sam Friedman is professor of sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science and the coauthor of *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 coeditor of the *British Journal of Sociology*.

About the Reviewer

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