

ELITES IN THE UK: PULLING AWAY?

Social mobility, geographic mobility and elite occupations

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About the Sutton Trust

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Foreword

In 2005, the Sutton Trust published research on the decline of social mobility in Britain. It put social mobility on the map. It starkly demonstrated that opportunities to get on in life were unequal and many of the ladders to success for previous generations had gone.

15 years later it is clear that the gap in opportunity between those at the top of society and everyone else has still not been bridged. Today's report provides powerful new evidence of persistent inequality of opportunity. Despite the expansion of professional and managerial jobs in the latter part of the twentieth century, opportunities for those born into less well-off homes to break into those jobs have declined further. The research shows that the probability of men in professional and managerial jobs having come from the lowest occupational classes has declined substantially, from 20% for those born between 1955-1961 down to 12% for those born between 1975-1981.

Today's report also explores the role of place in these social divisions. Geography has been one of the key dividing lines that has characterised social mobility in recent years. The report highlights that while the economic power of London has increased, those taking advantage of its ladder of opportunity have become increasingly restricted. While those born in the capital have a great chance to fulfil their potential, this has not been the case elsewhere. Moving to London to work in a high flying job is in fact largely the preserve of those who come from well-off homes outside the capital. The Dick Whittington vision of moving to the capital to move up in the world is largely a myth.

The majority of socially mobile people have been able to access professional opportunities where they grew up. It is crucial that the new government builds on this for future generations, by creating new opportunities across the country, so that talented people from all regions of the UK can access education and opportunities wherever they live.

We need the best schools and universities to open their doors to young people with potential regardless of their family background. And we need a revolution in apprenticeships, with high quality degree and higher apprenticeships made available across the country. If so, we can kickstart opportunity in communities that feel left behind, and make sure there are opportunities for those from the poorest parts of the country and from all backgrounds.

I'd like to thank Professor Savage, Dr Hecht and the team at the LSE for this vital new research.

Sir Peter Lampl

Founder and Executive Chairman of the Sutton Trust, Chairman of the Education Endowment Foundation

Executive Summary

This report presents the most systematic study of whether elites in the UK are pulling away, not just *economically* but also *socially*, in terms of their attitudes and cultural distinctiveness, and *geographically*, in terms of where they live. It uses both existing evidence and original analysis of the Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study.

Elites here are defined in two senses; firstly '*economic elites*', a group of the most economically, culturally and socially advantaged in society, and '*occupational elites*', a much larger group comprising of those who work in professional and managerial jobs, the most privileged group of occupations.

Economic research has demonstrated that the richest 1 percent in terms of income in the UK have increased their relative *economic* advantage since the 1980s. While the rise of the top 1 percent of earners has been very marked (albeit less so since 2008), wealth inequality trends are less clear. Nonetheless, wealth inequality remains much higher than income inequality.

Cultural and Social Differences

- Economic elites are aware of their increasing advantage, though are likely to see themselves as upper middle class rather than upper class. They are likely to justify their position through beliefs in meritocracy. However, these meritocratic views are also largely endorsed by the wider population and thus the elite exaggerate rather than repudiate wider common sense perspectives on social mobility.
- Economic elites do not have distinctive cultural or lifestyle practices, and although they are somewhat more likely to engage in high-brow cultural activities, this is far from overwhelming.
- Although the impact of private schooling on access to elite universities and firms remains important, their power has slightly waned over the very long run.

Mobility into Elite Occupations

- To assess social mobility into elite occupations, we have conducted empirical research using the Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study (LS), a 1 percent sample of linked census records of the population of England and Wales, which links individual records from the five decennial censuses between 1971 and 2011. The LS also includes linked events data (i.e. births, deaths and cancer registrations). The LS fills a gap in our understanding of social mobility into elite occupations for individuals born in 1955-1961, 1965-1971 and 1975-1981, and gives an authoritative picture on trends in mobility.
- Absolute upward social mobility into elite occupations has slightly decreased in recent times, with men in professional and managerial occupations born between 1975-1981 having slightly more socially exclusive backgrounds than their counterparts who were born between 1955-1961.
- As absolute social mobility has slightly decreased, men in professional and managerial occupations are less likely to have been 'long range' socially mobile – rising into the professional and managerial class from the lowest occupational classes. While about 1 in 5 men with elite occupations born between 1955-1961 have experienced long-range mobility, only 1 in 8 of those born in 1975-1981 share the same trajectory. For women, there was little change in long-range social mobility between the oldest and youngest cohort.

The Relationship Between Geographical Mobility and Social Mobility

- Occupational elites, those employed in higher managerial and professional occupations, have not become more geographically segregated over the period 1981-2011. In fact, outside London, such segregation has declined.
- Moving into elite occupations from working class occupations does not require moving geographically: The vast majority of people born in 1965-1971 and 1975-1981 who have been 'long-range socially mobile' into elite occupations have never moved long-distance (69% and 68% respectively). The long-range socially mobile are about 25-30 percentage points more likely to be residentially immobile than those who stay in the highest class.
- In comparison, those brought up with a privileged class background were much more likely to have moved long-distance; a majority of these intergenerationally stable individuals have moved long-distance at least once (58% of those born 1965-1971 and 65% of those born 1975-1981).
- Even if the upwardly socially mobile move long-distance, they end up in areas which are not as affluent as those who are intergenerationally stable. There is a 'area ceiling', analogous to the class ceiling.

The Role of London

- London is a crucial arena for elites and has strengthened its position as the elite epicentre. However, the 'Dick Whittington' conception of moving to the capital to move up in the world does not reflect the reality. For the younger generation, moving to and living in London at age 30-36 and working in an elite occupation is overwhelmingly associated with being from a privileged background in the first place, and this holds even more true than for older generations.
- While the capital's economic power has increased, this data makes clear that it is those from privileged backgrounds that are most able to migrate to, and remain in London, and can therefore take advantage of the most sought-after career opportunities in Britain's elite occupations. Therefore, there is an association between geographic mobility and the reproduction of social class advantage, rather than social mobility.

Introduction

It is clear that there is a growing anxiety about elites in the UK. The signs are all around us. The politics of Brexit (the impending withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union resulting from the 2016 EU Referendum outcome) has often been seen as a popular vote against the London 'elite'. This picked up on widespread popular concern in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash around the excessive payment of senior staff in the financial services and corporate sector which has led to the public shaming of several high earners, most notably Philip Green. There is also a growing sensitivity to London's role as a major international site for international elites. Britain is not alone in these anxieties: the US Presidential Election 2016 has been narrated in similar terms; Trump's election has been described as a backlash against the 'elites', as well as the result of the power of money in the US, Russia and other nations. In both countries, popular perceptions that 'elites' are pulling away from 'the rest of us' have great currency.

But is this perception warranted? Currently, our knowledge is limited. Although we know a considerable amount about the changing economic distribution of income and to a lesser extent wealth inequality in the UK, we know far less about the broader social drivers, and in particular whether high earners are also a closed social elite – or whether, by contrast, people from all walks of life can be socially mobile into the elite and hence this is a fluid, mixed social grouping.

This issue was forcefully put onto our research agenda by the economist Thomas Piketty in his pathbreaking book *Capital in the 21st Century*, published to huge fanfare in 2014. Piketty demonstrated that in numerous nations – with the UK being a notable example – there has been rising income inequality since the 1980s, as top earners took an increasingly large share of national income. He also suggested that this shift was leading to the revival of old closed elites, somewhat on the model of traditional aristocracies. This provocative claim punctured the complacent view that high earners could be justified as dynamic change makers – and instead pointed to a bleaker picture in which elites feathered their own nests and perpetuate their own privileges – just as they used to do in feudal societies.

Piketty did not mobilise the kind of research data on social and cultural relations which would allow him to demonstrate that elites were becoming closed along the lines he suggested. In responding to Piketty's provocation, sociologists have played an increasingly important role in exploring the extent to which there are social, cultural, and attitudinal barriers between elites and the wider population. Admittedly, British sociologists have less to work on compared to numerous other nations: there is no tradition of elite surveys (such as in Norway¹) or a strong tradition in using administrative data (such as in US) to examine social mobility at the micro level.² However, this situation is changing. The BBC's Great British Class Survey, with its unusually large sample size of 325,000, and its skew towards the wealthy, played an important role in kick-starting research on the elite in the UK, and also provided a platform for further research, much of which we summarise in this report. Mike Savage and colleagues³ used the rich data on social networks and cultural activities to argue for the existence of a distinctive elite class which was not only economically privileged in terms of their income and accumulated wealth, but which also showed signs of social and cultural distinctiveness to the extent that they could be identified as a class. The term economic or wealth 'elites' was suggested to capture this phenomenon.⁴ Other contemporary sociologists have pushed in a similar direction: the American Shamus Khan has drawn attention to the

¹ (Denord et al., 2011)

² (Chetty and Hendren, 2018)

³ (Savage et al., 2013, 2014)

⁴ (Savage, 2015, Mears, 2015)

power of 'elites' as those with 'vastly disproportionate control over or access to a resource',⁵ with resources including 'social, cultural, symbolic [and] economic [capital]'.⁶

Our report represents the most comprehensive British account that we have about whether the rise of income inequality in the UK since the 1980s has been matched by corresponding processes of elite social closure. We summarise the key sociological contributions before also presenting original analyses of the spatial concentration of 'elites', social mobility into elites, and residential mobility and its intersection with social mobility into 'elite' occupations. To do so we have conducted empirical research using the Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study (LS), a 1 percent sample of linked census records of the population of England and Wales, which links individual records from the five decennial censuses between 1971 and 2011.⁷ The LS includes linked events data (i.e. births, deaths and cancer registrations) and is 'the largest longitudinal data resource in England and Wales', including census 'records on over 500,000 people usually resident in England and Wales at each point in time' and 'largely representative of the whole population'.⁸ We will compare those with higher professional and managerial occupations (NS-SEC1) in 1991, 2001, and 2011 to determine whether those in such occupations in 2011 have more socially and spatially exclusive histories than their counterparts in 2001 and 1991.

Our report sequentially considers four dimensions of elite social closure as follows:

1. Bringing the rich back in: Economic drivers of elite formation
2. The return of aristocracy? The attitudinal and cultural distinctiveness of elites
3. Social mobility and elite closure: gender, race and class
4. Putting the story together: geography and social mobility from the Longitudinal Study (LS)

⁵ (Khan, 2012: 361)

⁶ (Khan, 2015: 99)

⁷ (Buscha and Sturgis, 2018: 203; Savage and Fielding, 1989)

⁸ About the [Longitudinal Study \(LS\)](#)

Methodology

Who are the 'elites'?

Before delving into the literature on and our analysis of 'elites' and 'the rich' in the UK, we will clarify our terms, given that there is debate surrounding who constitutes the 'elite' and how they should be defined,⁹ not only in popular and media accounts, but also for social science research.

Economists have championed research on the top 1 percent, a field whose importance will be discussed in section 1, which highlights the increased economic power of this group. These might simply be called the 'rich'.¹⁰ The rich can be defined in absolute terms (for example those with income or wealth above a certain threshold, e.g. those with investable assets above a certain threshold, millionaires or billionaires) or in relative terms (for instance the top 1 percent, or 'certain multiples of median income or of the poverty line, or a maximum ratio of earnings within a corporation or a country').¹¹ Another approach by economist Tony Atkinson,¹² defines the rich as those whose capital income is equivalent to the average income in a country, meaning that the rich are those who do not have to work.

A focus on the rich or the 1 percent is distinct from, though compatible (as there is overlap) with approaches on institutional elites, which focus more on political resources and the power of elites.¹³ These elites can be defined as those 'who control the key material, symbolic and political resources within a country' as argued by Reis and Moore,¹⁴ and operationalised in research as those occupying 'commanding positions within the set of institutions that are most salient to national political influence and policy-making'.

Sociologists have championed the study of occupational elites.¹⁵ This definition is based upon a theory of social class which places occupations at the centre. In this perspective, individuals are categorized into class groups on the basis of their occupation, which is viewed as an indicator of individuals' position in 'employment relations'.¹⁶ The resulting class schema, the new British National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) is widely used, in particular in social mobility research. Individuals with the highest occupational social class are conceptualised as occupational 'elites'. Specifically, in the NS-SEC schema these are individuals with 'higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations' (NS-SEC analytic class 1). In this report we will move between these definitions as appropriate for our analysis. We should say that we do not regard these occupations as somehow equivalent to a 'governing elite' or a 'power elite' as others have used the term. Instead, we see higher professional and managerial occupations as distinct in terms of their relational level of prestige, autonomy and earnings. Moreover, in terms of broader issues of power and influence, these elite occupations are significant in the sense that they normally constitute the main reservoir or recruiting market from which governing or power elites are drawn.

We need to recognise that elites have a gendered dimension which can be opaque when focusing on occupational 'elites' which privileges individuals' position in the labour market. Income from capital and the wealth of families are not considered in this definition of who is 'elite'. Further, labour markets are

⁹ (Khan, 2012)

¹⁰ (Burchardt et al., forthcoming; Schimpfössl, 2018)

¹¹ (Medeiros and de Souza, 2014)

¹² (Atkinson, 2006)

¹³ (Reis and Moore, 2005; Scott, 2008)

¹⁴ (2005: 2)

¹⁵ (Friedman et al., 2015; Laurison and Friedman, 2015)

¹⁶ (Goldthorpe and McKnight, 2004: 1)

a public sphere historically associated with male breadwinners.¹⁷ Feminist approaches to 'elite' studies have pointed to the importance of elite women for the reproduction of inequality, as illustrated by Luna Glucksberg.¹⁸ Therefore, important aspects of the social relations of economic life are missed in occupational definitions of 'elites'¹⁹.

We can also see elites as a distinctive class. Mike Savage and colleagues²⁰ were able to use the rich data of the BBC Great British Class Survey (GBCS) on social networks and cultural activities to argue for the existence of a distinctive elite class which was not only economically privileged in terms of their income and accumulated wealth, but which also showed signs of social and cultural distinctiveness to the extent that they could be identified as a distinctive class. Members of the 'elite' social class, are part of the 6 percent of most economically advantaged in the country. The term economic or wealth 'elites' was suggested to capture this phenomenon.²¹

This conceptualisation fits in well with the analysis of social class developed by French social theorist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu²² who has argued that '[t]he social world is accumulated history' and that '[c]apital is accumulated labour'. Other contemporary sociologists have pushed in a similar direction: Shamus Khan defines 'elites' as those with 'vastly disproportionate control over or access to a resource',²³ with resources including 'social, cultural, symbolic [and] economic [capital]'.²⁴ Economic capital is particularly important, as it is at the root of all other capitals, meaning that it can be transferred into other forms of capital.²⁵ Subsequent research has further considered the argument that elites are a distinctive social class and we review this work in sections 1-3.

In the remainder of this report, we refer to previous research on the 1 percent and institutional elites with a degree of power, however we focus our analysis on economic or wealth elites as well as occupational 'elites' who work in higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations.

Analysing the attitudinal or cultural distinctiveness of 'elites': BBC GBCS and ISSP

Note that the choice of which category of the 'elite' is analysed, is often restricted based on the availability of data. The BBC's Great British Class Survey (GBCS), with its unusually large sample and its skew towards the wealthy, played an important role in kick-starting research on the elite in the UK, and also in providing a platform for more recent research, much of which we summarise in this report.

The GBCS was an innovative web-survey research project with over 325,000 respondents hosted by the BBC. The results of this analysis have attracted wide-spread interest from people across the nation, as well as internationally. By analysing the novel data derived from the online survey and considering participants' income and wealth, social network and cultural consumption, Mike Savage and colleagues were able to identify a new social class schema including an 'elite' social class described above, comprising of the most economically, culturally and socially advantaged group in society.

The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) is a cross-national collaboration programme conducting annual surveys on diverse topics relevant to social sciences. The ISSP offers nationally representative data on social attitudes including a module on 'social inequality'. The last two years where these data were collected are 1999 and 2009. The most recently available data for 2009 (2019 data is not yet released) includes a battery of questions on what matters for 'getting ahead' indicative of

¹⁷ (Savage, 2014)

¹⁸ (Glucksberg, 2016b)

¹⁹ (Savage, 2014)

²⁰ (Savage et al., 2013, 2014)

²¹ (Savage, 2015, Mears, 2015)

²² (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 46)

²³ (Khan, 2012: 361)

²⁴ (Khan, 2015: 99)

²⁵ (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 46)

participants 'meritocratic' beliefs, as well as data on participants' household income. We refer to this data in section 2.1. In 2009, the ISSP includes 830 respondents for Great Britain for whom data is available on family income and views on how important 'hard work' is for 'getting ahead'.

Analysing the spatial concentration of occupational 'elites' and the relationship between geographic and social mobility into elite occupations: the ONS LS

While much of academic inquiry into 'elites' has focused at points in time, we have conducted empirical research using the Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study (LS), a 1 percent sample of linked census records of the population of England and Wales, which links individual records from the five decennial censuses between 1971 and 2011. The LS is 'the largest longitudinal data resource in England and Wales', including census 'records on over 500,000 people usually resident in England and Wales at each point in time' and 'largely representative of the whole population'.²⁶ The LS includes linked events data (i.e. births, deaths and cancer registrations).

The LS allows us to investigate whether elites have pulled away geographically, and to assess how geographic mobility relates to social mobility into elite occupations.²⁷ LS data presents a major advantage compared to the survey data which has often been used for research on social mobility. This is 'partly due to our large sample sizes but also because we are able to draw on a single consistent dataset over time, rather than multiple surveys with myriad inconsistencies in variable definition and survey design'.²⁸

LS members are selected based on being born on one of four (undisclosed) birth dates. Members are followed over subsequent censuses, and their data is linked (linkage stops when members die or emigrate from England and Wales). New members join the LS when they are born on one of the four birth dates or when they have immigrated to England and Wales from another country, since the previous census. 'The LS thus provides representative cross-sectional and longitudinal information about the population of England and Wales for the years 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011'. We excluded Scotland and Northern Ireland from our analyses 'because the respective studies commenced in 1991 and do not therefore allow comparisons over the period of interest'.²⁹

The census does not measure wages, income, or wealth and as a result we will compare those with higher professional and managerial occupations (NS-SEC1) in 1991, 2001, and 2011 to consider their previous geographical locations in censuses going back to 1971. However, data on occupations is available which we harvest for our analysis of the *spatial concentration of NS-SEC1 individuals*. To this end, LS members' social class positions have been harmonised across the 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011 censuses and coded to distinguish those in higher professional and managerial occupations (NS-SEC1 occupations) which we further separate into those in higher managerial occupations³⁰ (NS-SEC 1.1) and those in higher professional occupations (NS-SEC1.2). Further, Local Authority Districts (LADs) were harmonized to ensure comparability across years. Then, to assess residential segregation by social class (specifically of NS-SEC1 individuals), a measure of population evenness was computed in form of the Index of Dissimilarity.³¹

Further, the LS allows us to analyse the *social and geographic mobility patterns of NS-SEC1 individuals*. For this, LS members (for whom data is available) were matched to their LS non-member parents in

²⁶ About the [Longitudinal Study \(LS\)](#).

²⁷ (Buscha and Sturgis, 2018: 203; Savage and Fielding, 1989)

²⁸ (Bell et al., 2019, p. 3)

²⁹ (Buscha and Sturgis, 2018, p. 160)

³⁰ Including 'Employers in large establishments' and 'Higher managerial and administrative occupations'.

³¹ (Massey and Denton 1988; Fransham, 2019)

order to determine the social class origin of LS members via the occupation of the co-resident parents recorded when LS members were children.³² The measure of parental social class in the LS is particularly strong, because it is based on parent's actual occupation as recorded in the census, rather than people's recall of their parent's occupation later in life. Following the approach of Buscha and Sturgis (2018) we observe children at ages 10-16 while living with their parents. These individuals are followed up 10 years later when they are 20-26, and 20 years later when they are 30-36. By this age their occupational status has stabilised enough so that we can measure their adult social class. There are three cohorts in the LS data whom we can follow and whose social mobility trajectory we can compare (Table 1).

To give concrete examples, the *1955-61 cohort* are first observed as children in 1971 aged 10-16 at which time parental social class was measured. These individuals' own social class was measured in 1991 (when they were aged 30-36). Unfortunately, there is no 'distance of move' variable available for this cohort (between 1971 and 1981; in addition, changes in local authority boundaries over time mean that we cannot check whether they have moved area³³) hence we do not know about any moves when they were young. Nevertheless, this cohort offers data on parental social class hence it has been included in the analyses of social mobility.

There is data for parental social class and distance moved between censuses for the *1965-71 cohorts*, measuring parent's social class in 1981 and LS members' own social class (child's social class) in 2001, and the *1975-81 cohorts*, measuring parent's social class in 1991 and own social class in 2011 (boldface in table 1). These cohorts will be the focus in our analysis of the interrelationship between social and geographic mobility.

Table 1: ONS LS cohorts used

	Census Year				
	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
1955-61	10-16	20-26	30-36	40-46	50-56
1965-71		10-16	20-26	30-36	40-46
1975-81			10-16	20-26	30-36
1985-91				10-16	20-26

Source: ONS-LS 1971–2011.

Note: Following approach of Buscha and Sturgis (2018)

To measure social mobility into Class 1 of the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC1), denoting higher managerial, administrative, and professional occupations, we follow the established approach of Laurison and Friedman. We distinguish between *intergenerational stability* (parents already held NS-SEC1 occupations, i.e. were higher managers and professionals), *short-range mobility* (parents had NS-SEC2 occupations, i.e. were lower managers and professionals), *mid-range mobility* (parents had NS-SEC3, 4 and 5 occupations, i.e. intermediate and clerical occupations), and *long-range mobility* (parents in NS-SEC6-7: routine and semi-routine occupations).³⁴

To investigate whether upward social mobility is linked to an individual's *geographical mobility*,³⁵ we investigated how far individuals moved between censuses. We focused on those individuals who moved further than 28 kilometres between censuses – which would put them in the top quarter of distance moved.

³² Here, we follow Buscha and Sturgis (2018)

³³ The exception is that we know whether people are from London or not.

³⁴ (Laurison and Friedman, 2016)

³⁵ (Savage, 1988) (Savage, 1988)

Further, Local Authority Districts in the capital (London boroughs) were compared to those in the rest of the country to see if *moving to London* is associated with having NS-SEC1 occupations (distinguishing between migration by those who were intergenerationally stable in elite occupations and those who were mobile into it). Accounting for whether people have moved in (or out of) London is important as the capital has been shown to be distinctive in terms of its class pay gap.³⁶ Specifically, sociologists Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison have shown that the class-origin pay gap in higher professional and managerial occupations, whereby those from less advantaged backgrounds are paid less than their privileged peers, is particularly pronounced in the capital.³⁷ Given this finding, we address whether there is a 'London' effect moderating the relationship between spatial and social mobility.

To measure the 'social exclusivity' of an area, we use social class shares and social class ranks. The class share is the within-year proportion of the LAD population in NS-SEC1. We also rank areas in terms of their (within-year) NS-SEC 1 share (i.e. area with smallest NS-SEC1 share = 1, area with highest share = 341, where number of LAs per year = 341). This measure accounts for changes in the social class structure over time. It facilitates comparisons between areas over time, when the overall NS-SEC1 share has increased dramatically.

³⁶ (Friedman and Laurison, 2017)

³⁷ (Friedman and Laurison, 2017)

1. Bringing the rich back in: economic drivers of elite formation

Concerns about the elite pulling away originated from the work of economists who since the early 2000s have championed research on income shares, highlighting the distinctiveness of top earners. Economists have provided extensive historical and international analyses of top income and wealth shares (see the World Inequality Database (WID) for a summary of this research field).³⁸ Top income shares are the shares of overall national income taken by the richest 1 percent (or by the top 0.1, top 0.01 percent, and so on). The same principle applies for top wealth shares. This research field has been established by Sir Tony Atkinson, and popularised by Thomas Piketty's book.³⁹ The term 'the 1 percent', has been taken up and used as a slogan by the Occupy movement to galvanize against rising inequality.⁴⁰

In the mid-1970s, the UK was among the most equal countries, but became one of the most unequal of the rich nations by the early 1990s. The top 1 percent in the UK have almost doubled their share of total national income from 7 percent in 1981 to 13 percent in 2015.⁴¹ On the basis of the Gini coefficient, it appears as if inequality in the United Kingdom has levelled off since the early 1990s, after substantial increases during the Thatcher years. However, top income shares (Figure 1) continued to increase strongly between 1990-2010,⁴² as happened across the Anglophone nations during that time. Although there was a brief dip between 2009-2010, top income shares have recovered subsequently. Since 2010 the share of the top 1 percent in overall income is increasing again in Anglophone countries for which data is available (the US, the UK and Australia) (Figure 1).

There is therefore no doubt that since the 1970s, the UK has seen the rise of income inequality in a form which would allow us to talk about elites pulling away economically. This reflects dramatically enhanced rewards to very few occupations. Sociologist Mark Williams, and economists Bell and van Reenen have shown that since the 1980s a small number of occupations – all based in finance – have driven much of the pulling away of top earners.^{43 44}

Figure 1: Top 1% national income share in Anglophone countries, 1920–2015

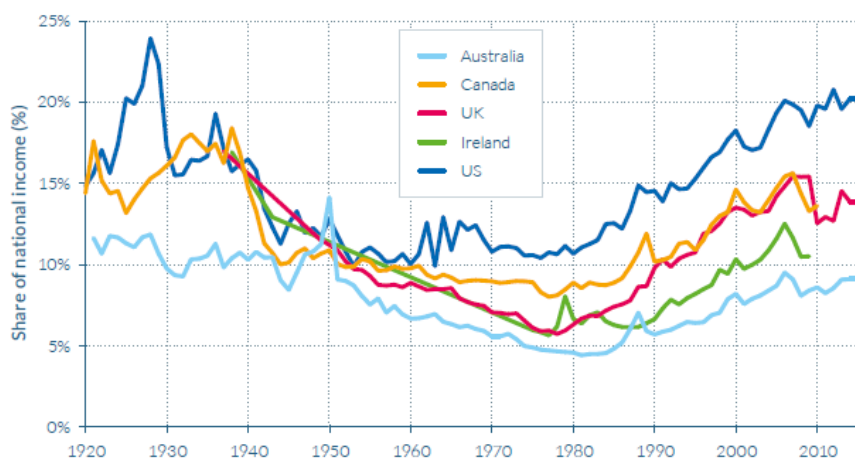


Figure source: World Inequality Report 2018 (Alvaredo et al., 2018)

Data source: Novokmet, Piketty & Zucman (2017). See wir2018.wid.world for data series and notes.

³⁸ (Alvaredo et al., 2019)

³⁹ (Piketty, 2014)

⁴⁰ (Alvaredo et al., 2013)

⁴¹ (Alvaredo et al., 2019)

⁴² (Piketty, 2014: 315)

⁴³ (Williams, 2011, p. 96)

⁴⁴ (Bell and Van Reenen, 2013)

It is also vital to bring wealth into this analysis of elites.⁴⁵ Wealth has historically been, and still is, more unequally distributed than income.⁴⁶ In the UK, top 1 percent wealth shares (the share of wealth in a country owned by the richest 1 percent), were high in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries up until the First World War, dropped during the twentieth century, but have been rising slightly since the late twentieth century (Figure 2), albeit not as dramatically as in Russia, China and the US.

Estimates by Alvaredo and colleagues, which are based on ‘estate-based estimates’ (official HMRC estimates using estate tax data), ‘allowing for under-statement of concentration’, ‘suggest that the share of the top 1 percent [in the UK] is between a fifth and a quarter of total personal wealth’.⁴⁷ Further, estimates show that the richest 1 percent in terms of wealth have increased their share of overall wealth in the period 1981-2012 (from 17-20 percent).

Figure 2: Top 1% wealth shares across the world, 1913-2015: the fall and rise of wealth inequality

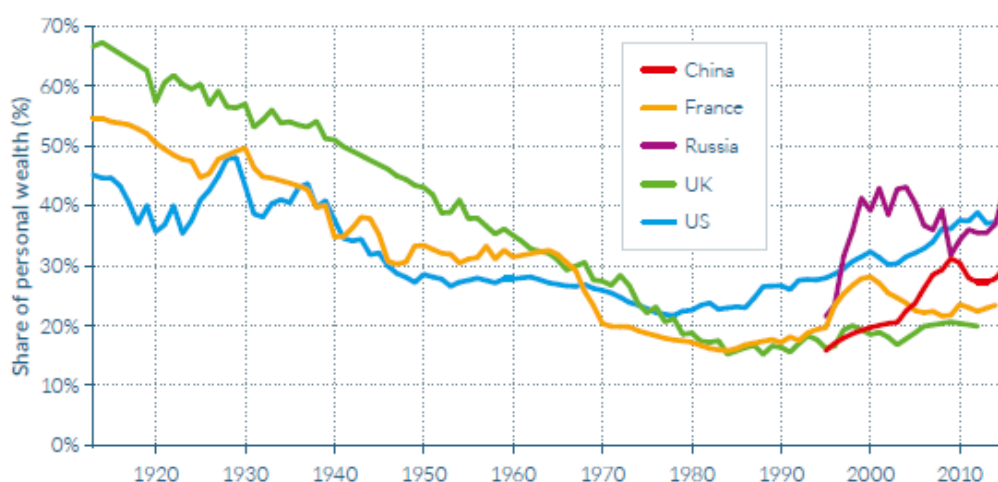


Figure source: World Inequality Report 2018

Data source: WID.world (2017). See wir2018.wid.world for data series and notes.

In sum, the share of UK national income accruing to the top 1 percent with highest incomes, increased strongly over the median-term (in almost four decades from 1981-2015). However, top wealth shares have not increased over the last decade (in the short short-term), nor in the very long-run (compared to top wealth shares in the 1930s). Further while wealth inequality is higher than income inequality, income inequality has increased more steeply since the 1980s. Waitkus and Pfeffer (2019) show that the UK has substantially lower wealth inequality than the US.

Wealth inequality enhances and amplifies income inequality. Analysis of GBCS data by Katharina Hecht⁴⁸ demonstrated that the most striking differentiation between individuals situated at the top of the after-tax household income distribution of the BBC online survey and all others is the sheer amount of the former group’s assets. Participants with household incomes – after taxes – of £200k and higher (economic ‘elites’) are 34 times more likely to own property worth higher than £500k and 16 times more likely to have savings higher than £200k than GBCS respondents with after tax household income less than £45k. Wealth and income inequality tend to reinforce each other in a vicious circle.

⁴⁵ (Glucksberg, 2016a; Piketty, 2014; Savage, 2014)

⁴⁶ (Hills and Bastagii, 2013; Piketty, 2014)

⁴⁷ (2015, p. 19) Note that data on the UK concentration of wealth after 2000 are ‘seriously incomplete’, and therefore top wealth shares can only be approximated. Further, the measurement of wealth is very difficult, and affected by a variety of measurement errors. See also Zucman for an estimate of wealth which is held in tax heavens (2015).

⁴⁸ (Hecht, 2017).

2. The return of aristocracy? The cultural & attitudinal distinctiveness of elites

So, does the economic pulling away of elites in the UK have a counterpart through a growing self-awareness and distinctive cultural profiles? This is a sociological response to Piketty's emphasis on the return to 19th century elite formation. During the Victorian era, economic elites were also clearly defined cultural and social elites, normally being defined as 'gentlemen' and 'ladies', sometimes landed aristocrats and nobles, who were imbued in their own sense of self-importance and certainty. Can we find an equivalent process today? Here, the evidence is more mixed.

2.1 Elite views: self-perceptions and beliefs in meritocracy

On the one hand, economic elites tend to be aware of their advantages – though this is often recognised in a coded way. A mixed-methods PhD study by Katharina Hecht, who conducted qualitative interviews followed by a short survey questionnaire with 30 UK-based top income earners (the 1 percent), showed that a majority did not see themselves as belonging to the 'top' group in society⁴⁹. This was the case even though participants were top earners, in elite occupations and nearly all had degree-level education.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, the 1 percent were much more likely than the population as a whole to place themselves in the highest group of society.⁵¹ Another, more coded way in which participants highlighted awareness of their advantage was by social comparison with 'the average earner' or 'the [person] on the street'. However, 'upward' comparisons⁵² with the most advantaged – those who were seen as doing even better than themselves – were also common. This is because a majority of the 1 percenters discussed top incomes as meritocratically deserved, explaining that reward, especially bonus pay, reflects top earners' economic contribution (the economic value created for clients, investors and shareholders).

In the GBCS, the starkest attitudinal differences between the economic elites and all others relates to self-identification with an advantaged social class. Firstly, participants with highest household incomes were slightly more likely to view themselves as belonging to a social class compared to all other individuals and were disproportionately more likely to self-identify as upper middle or upper class (Figure 3). Most indicated they feel that they belong to the upper middle class (54 percent). Strikingly, a significant minority (6 percent) indicated they belong to the upper class (this compares to 0.2 percent of all other respondents).

⁴⁹ On a scale from top (10) to bottom (1). Specifically, participants were asked: "In our society there are groups which tend to be towards the top and groups which tend to be towards the bottom. Here is a scale that runs from top (10) to bottom (1). Where would you put yourself now on this scale?"

⁵⁰ Apart from two participants.

⁵¹ In general, people tend to see themselves towards the middle of society (Evans and Kelley, 2004; Savage, 2015a: 21; Savage et al., 2010).

⁵² Compare with Sherman (2017).

Figure 3: Percentage of self-assigned social class by household income after taxes (GBCS)

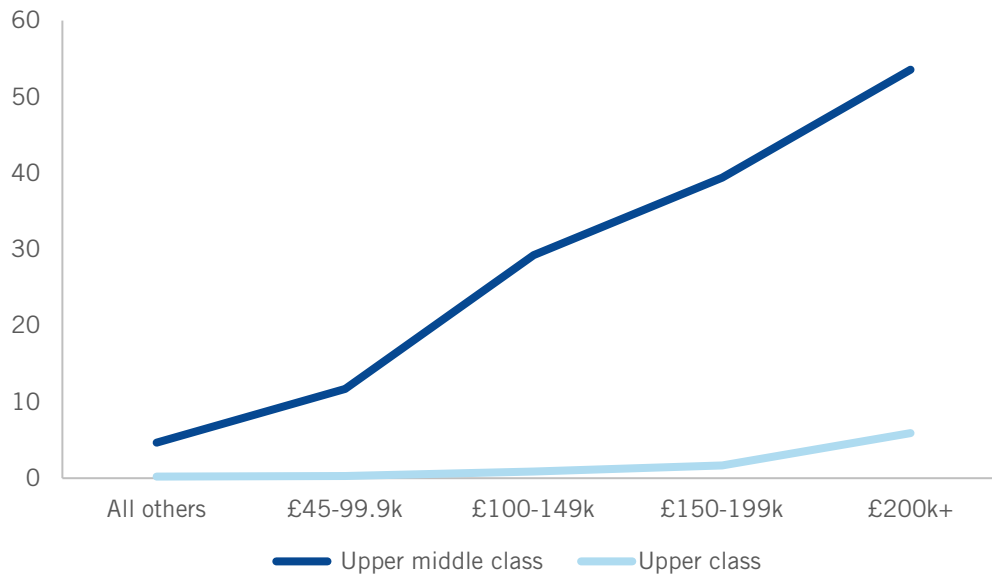


Figure source: (Hecht, 2017) **Data source:** GBCS waves 1 and 2.

On the other hand, the actual beliefs of the economically advantaged are not so distinctive: they do not generally see themselves as part of an elite status group akin to the Victorian upper class. Rather, economic elites generally endorse with particular gusto meritocratic values which are widely shared across society. This meritocratic view is central to how economic elites perceive inequality. Research by sociologists, such as Rachel Sherman who studied wealthy New Yorkers, or Shamus Khan, who studied the production of privilege at an elite East-Coast boarding school in the US, and Elisabeth Schimpfössl who studies rich Russians and their children, demonstrated that hard work and talent was central to elite self-perceptions.

Survey research has also demonstrated that the growing income gap is legitimated as meritocratically deserved more broadly.⁵³ In the GBCS, participants were asked to indicate their views on which were the three most important things for 'helping people to get a good job and achieve career success' among a list of options. A majority of all GBCS respondents selected meritocratic items (including 'hard work', 'personal ambition' and 'natural ability') in combination with 'level of education' as most important. Only a minority chose items related to social class background in addition to 'level of education' as the three most important things to get a good job and achieve career success (Figure 4).

⁵³ (Mijs, 2019)

Figure 4: What is important for career success by household income (GBCS)

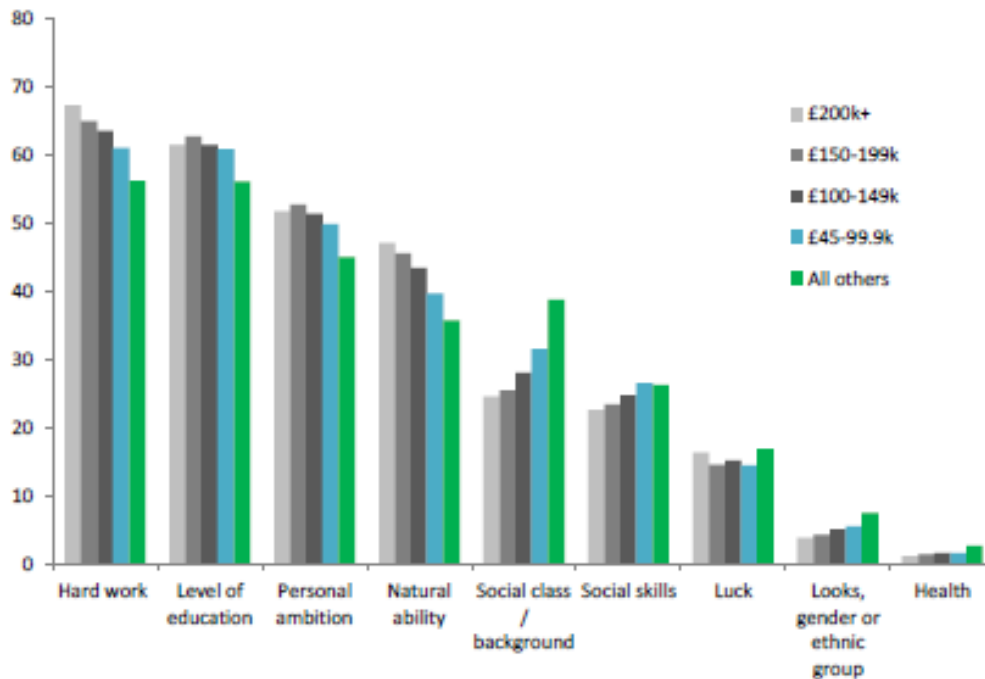


Figure source: Hecht (2017). **Data source:** GBCS wave 1. **Note:** The social class/background category consists of ‘being born into a wealthy family’, ‘having been to private school’, ‘having good social connections’, ‘having the right accent’ and ‘class’.

Further, GBCS respondents are more likely to select ‘meritocratic’ items including ‘hard work’, ‘level of education’, ‘personal ambition’ and ‘natural ability’ as their household income band increases, and are less likely to select ‘social reproduction’ items as important for career success. This finding is similar to Taylor and O’Brien’s research which found that creative workers in the most privileged positions, specifically those who with the highest rewards held the strongest belief in meritocracy in the sector.⁵⁴ Interestingly, GBCS participants were unlikely to choose the item ‘luck’ as one of the three most important things which matter for career success (and it does not have a socio-economic gradient). To summarise the findings from Hecht’s analysis of GBCS data, the attitudinal difference between economic elites and all others in the GBCS, though remarkable in its pattern, is not that pronounced.

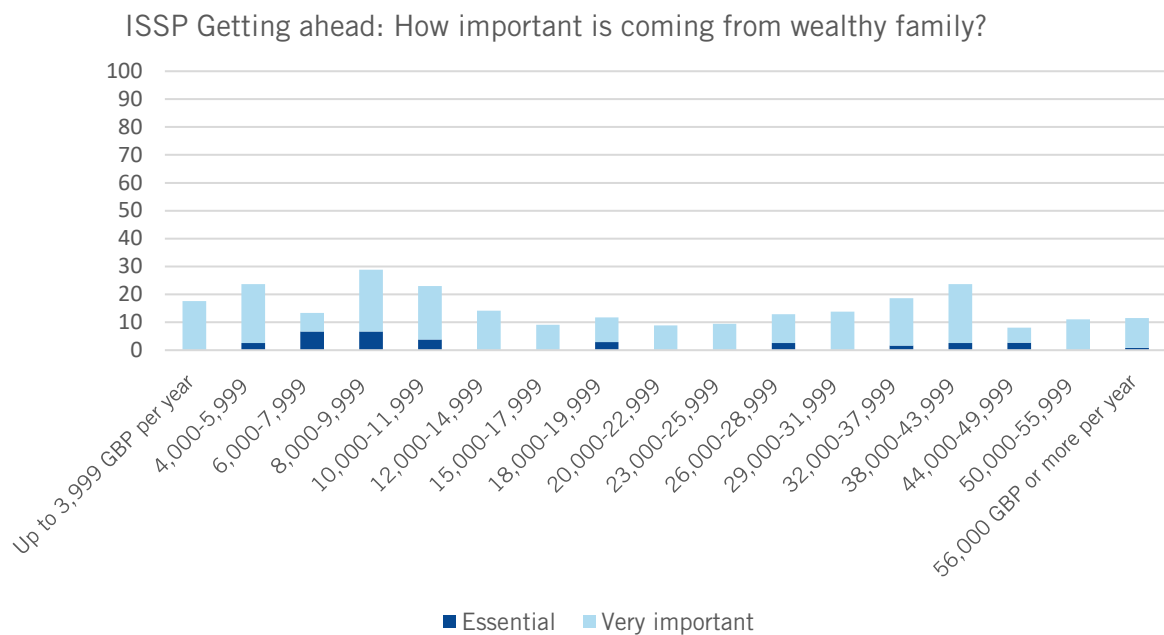
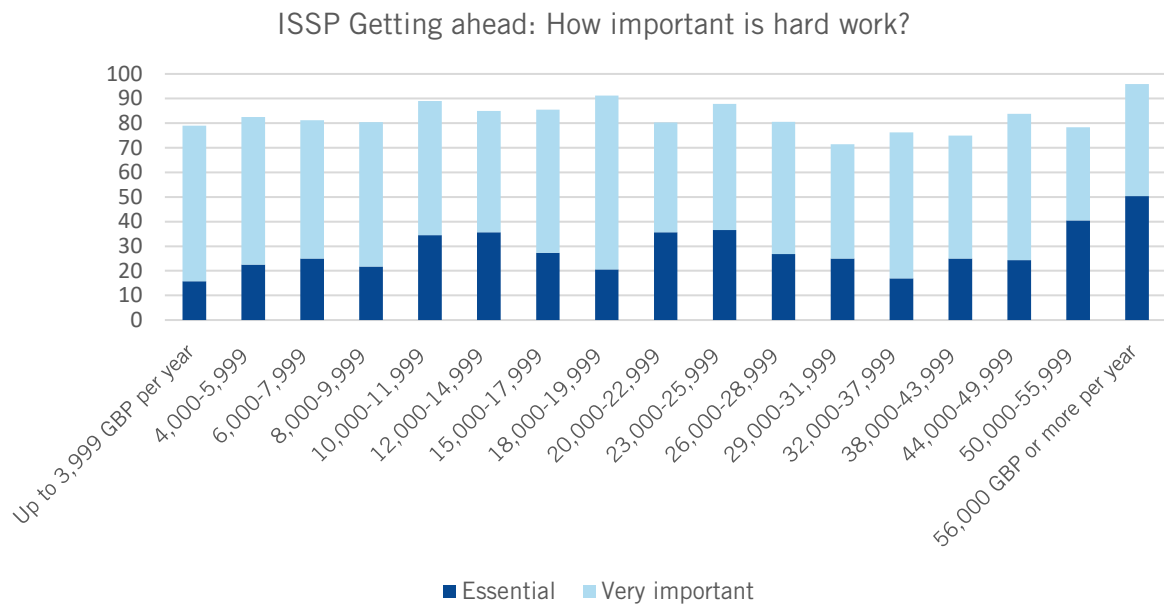
This finding is corroborated from other sources, including the International Social Survey Programme. Among other items in the social inequality module, participants in the ISSP survey are asked how important ‘hard work’ and ‘coming from a wealthy family’ is for getting ahead (answer options were: essential, very important, fairly important, not very important or not important at all). Focusing on these two items (Figure 5) shows that in 2009 a much larger proportion believes that ‘hard work’ is essential or very important, than ‘coming from a wealthy family’. This highlights that individual explanations are favoured over those of social structure. People with highest family income (£56k or more per year) were most likely to see hard work as essential or very important; however as was found for GBCS respondents, this belief was strong throughout the distribution.

There is no linear gradient in participants’ answers on how important coming from a wealthy family is for getting ahead, and those with the highest family incomes are similar in their views to others (though

⁵⁴ Taylor and O’Brien (2017)

those with incomes £12k and lower are much more likely to see a wealthy family as essential or very important, as are those with incomes £32-44k).

Figure 5 ISSP 2009: Perceptions of meritocracy

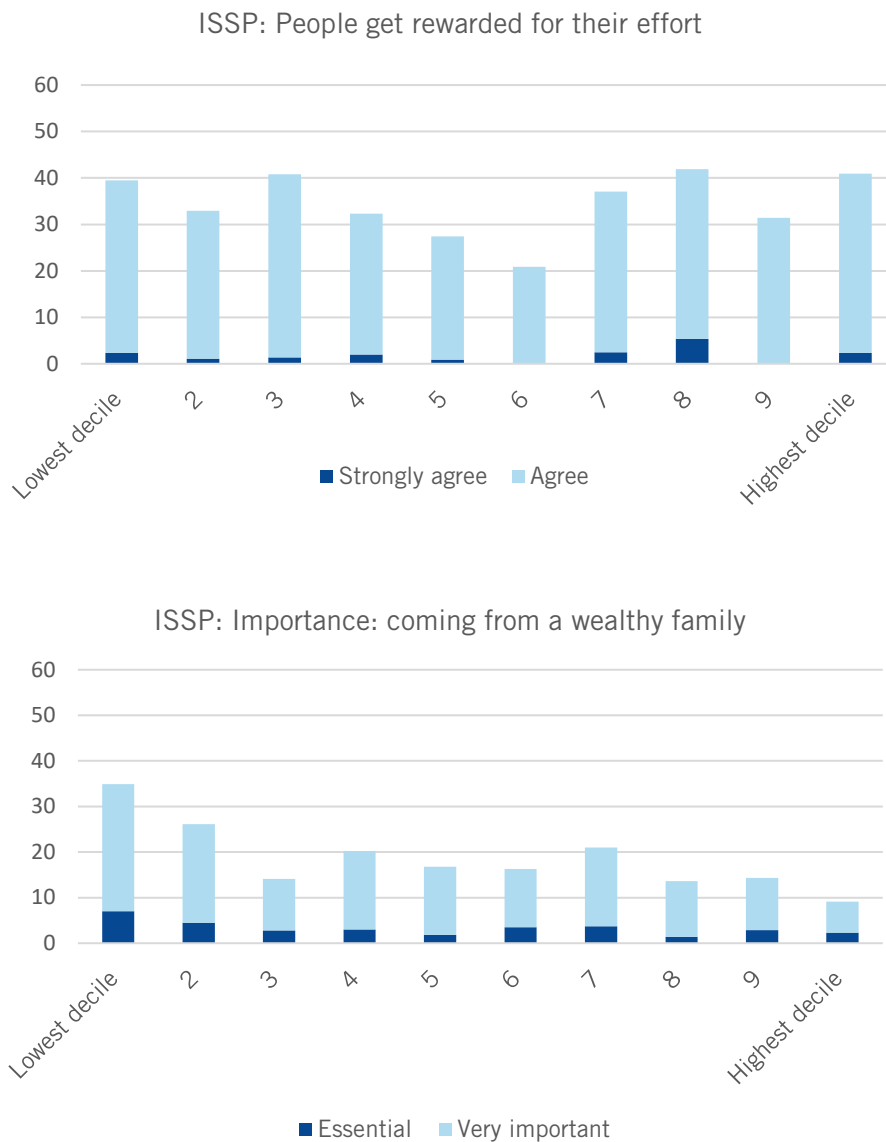


Data Source: International Social Survey Programme (ISSP Research Group, 2019)

In 1999, people with highest family income were much less likely to consider a wealthy background as essential or very important for getting ahead, than all other income groups (demonstrating that they were more likely to hold meritocratic views). However, they were not more likely to agree or strongly agree with the statement that people get rewarded for their effort (Figure 6).⁵⁵

⁵⁵ There is no question about the importance of hard work in 1999.

Figure 6 ISSP 1999: Perceptions of meritocracy



Data Source: International Social Survey Programme (ISSP Research Group, 2019)

Given these ISSP data, we conclude that those with highest household income have not ‘pulled away’ from others in terms of their beliefs in meritocracy, because these views are strong throughout the distribution.⁵⁶

2.2 Cultural distinction and consumption patterns

A further area to probe the cultural distinctiveness of elites concerns the issue of whether they have clear consumption practices. Over a century ago, economist Torsten Veblen coined the phrase ‘conspicuous consumption’⁵⁷ to recognise the way that elites often wanted to demonstrate their prowess and superiority by marking it through lavish consumption. We have seen a return of these kinds of motifs today, for

⁵⁶ (see also Taylor and O’Brien, 2017)

⁵⁷ (Veblen, [1899] 2016)

instance in the interest in elite super yachts or private jets. But are these loaded vignettes typical? Research from the GBCS shows not.⁵⁸ ‘Although there are elements by which [the economic ‘elites’] are distinguished from other economic groups culturally and socially, these should not be overestimated’. There is ‘little evidence of distinctive cultural patterns which would strongly distinguish the very high earners from a wider group of middle-income households. The former are more likely to be attracted to ‘highbrow’ culture, [such as ‘going to the opera’ and ‘classical music concerts’] but this is far from being overwhelming, and a substantial proportion report the same kind of broadly omnivorous tastes which are characteristic of a broader middle-class population’.⁵⁹ (Figure 7) Further, even among the most economically advantaged of GBCS participants, only a minority engages in these ‘highbrow’ art forms.

However, there is a relationship between economic capital and cultural consumptions: those with highest household incomes after taxes are more likely to ‘watch sport live’, to be ‘playing sport’ and ‘go to the gym’ than others.

This view is underscored by Friedman and Reeves’s⁶⁰ account of changing elite cultural preferences, as revealed in self-reported accounts from *Who’s Who*. They show a clear shift from landed and aristocratic preferences (in the 19th century), towards highbrow intellectual and artistic lifestyles in the mid 20th century, and more recently towards a more ‘ordinary’ palate of interests – socialising, gardening and such like.

The findings presented in this section therefore highlight that contemporary modes of elite cultural distinction in the UK are complex and cannot be captured, as they may have been in the past, in terms of exclusive highbrow taste.

Figure 7: GBCS participants’ cultural capital

	Household income after taxes				
	£200k+	£150-199k	£100-149k	£45-99.9k	All others
Cultural capital: do sometimes or often					
going to the opera	28.8	20.4	16.4	10.4	7.4
classical music concerts	36.5	31.0	27.6	20.7	16.9
watch sport live	46.1	41.0	37.8	31.8	23.1
going to the theatre/musicals	66.6	60.3	57.2	49.4	39.6
playing sport	63.0	59.5	56.9	48.8	37.5
going to the gym	76.2	72.8	69.8	63.5	52.1
going to restaurants	97.9	97.5	97.0	94.7	86.7

Note: all figures are percentages

Note:

* indicated for variables with correlation with household income $\Rightarrow .2$

Key	5%	50%	95%
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Data source: GBCS waves 1 and 2.

⁵⁸ Though the questions on the GBCS survey did focus on highbrow consumption rather than ‘multimillionaire’ consumption.

⁵⁹ (Savage et al., 2018)

⁶⁰ (Friedman and Reeves, forthcoming).

2.3 Private schooling

A further issue related to cultural capital and the question whether the 'elite' have pulled away from others concerns the significance of private schooling. A previous report by the Sutton Trust and the Social Mobility Commission highlighted that the top professions in this country 'remain disproportionately populated by alumni of private schools'. To give a few illustrations, two thirds (67%) of the top judiciary, close to half of civil service permanent secretaries (59%) and newspaper columnists (44%), and nearly a third (29%) of MPs were privately educated, even though only about 7% of the population attended private school. While there are small positive signs in a few isolated areas, the overall picture is one of persistent inequality.⁶¹

Research by Aaron Reeves and colleagues investigated the effect of attending private schools on entering the prestigious list of 'elite' individuals included in the *Who's Who* list of 'noteworthy and influential' people in the UK. They were able to show that over a period of 120 years 'the propulsive power of Britain's public schools has diminished significantly' while 'public schools remain extraordinarily powerful channels of elite formation'. Whilst approximately 55 percent of *Who's Who* members born in 1830/1834 had attended a private school, approximately 45 percent of those born in 1965/1969 did so.⁶²

How do elite schools confer advantages to their pupils? In addition to facilitating jobs in a top profession or entrance onto *Who's Who*, UK survey research has demonstrated that children who went to private schools are conferred advantages in terms of their chances of being admitted at Oxbridge and their future earnings. Macmillan and colleagues found 'that privately educated graduates are a third more likely to enter into high-status occupations than state educated graduates from similarly affluent families and neighbourhoods, largely due to differences in educational attainment and university selection.'⁶³

The process of *how* private schools manage to confer these advantages to alumni is revealed by researchers who apply qualitative research methods having gained access to elite schools. Emma Taylor's findings from long-term ethnographic research at an elite boys' day school in London reveals the scaffolding provided by this institution that allows for the students to accrue a distinct form of embodied capital so valued by elite higher education institutions and professional service firms. A key part of this scaffolding is that of the student-teacher relationship, whereby pedagogical practices support and reinforce a 'flat' hierarchy where the students perceive themselves as relatively equal to those in positions of authority. This perception of a flattened hierarchy, along with a relaxed approach to discipline, provides space for students to practice their interactions with those in authority, without fear of repercussions, so that they gain confidence in navigating amongst elite personnel. Thus, they are given the opportunity to learn how to effectively apply pressure on those with power to secure advantages for themselves both at school and university.⁶⁴ Taylor's research adds to our understanding of how private schools instil dispositions in students which are advantageous for smooth progressions in elite universities and workplaces. This adds to previous evidence that private schools instil in students a certain view of, and disposition to, the world, one of meritocracy and equality of opportunity in which hierarchies are there to be climbed.⁶⁵

⁶¹ (The Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Commission, 2019)

⁶² (Reeves et al., 2017, p. 1139)

⁶³ (Macmillan et al., 2015, p. 487).

⁶⁴ (Taylor, forthcoming).

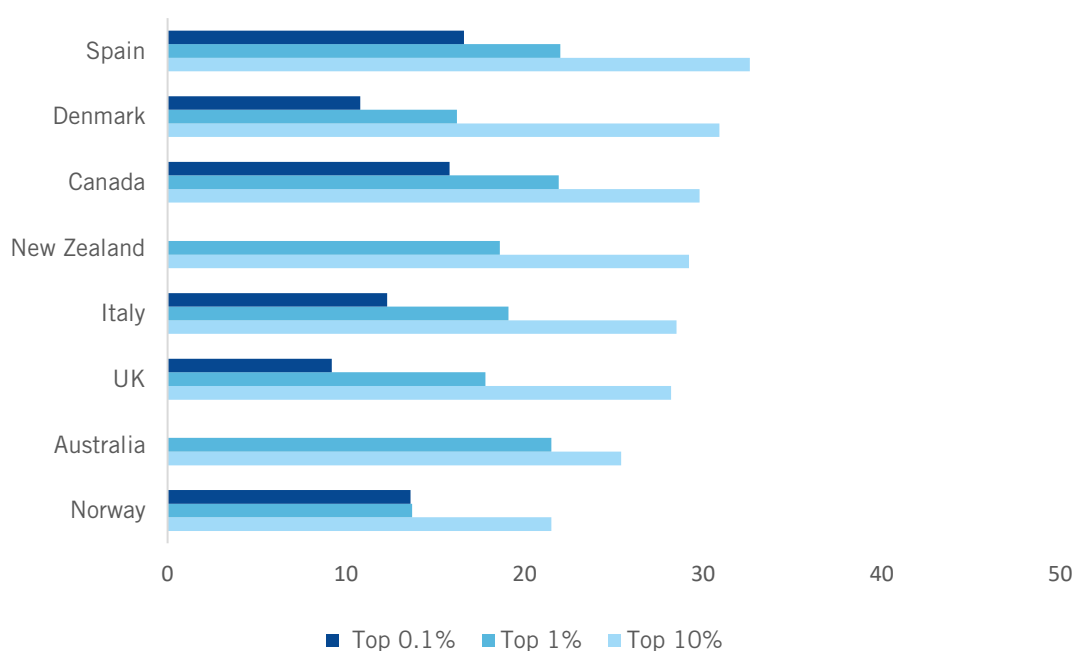
⁶⁵ A study by Shamus Khan of an elite boarding school in the North-East of the US has shown that a focus on meritocracy and openness among elites obscures how privilege secures one's elite status and renders it to appear self-made (Khan, 2011).

3. Social mobility and elite closure: gender, race and class

The study of social mobility is central to allowing us to assess how far elites are pulling apart. Insofar as access to elite positions is possible for people from a great variety of backgrounds, then it is hard to talk about elites pulling away as if they are a distinctive class of people. By contrast, the more that elites are self-reproducing – that is to say, they are able to reliably confer continuing elite membership to their offspring – this is crucial evidence that elites are indeed pulling away.

With respect to gender and race, men are vastly overrepresented among the top 1 and top 0.1 percent of the income distribution in Western nations (Figure 8).⁶⁶ In the US, white, male, partnered individuals predominantly make up the top 1 percent, both in terms of income and wealth.⁶⁷ Elites ‘particularly in the West, are overwhelmingly white and male’.⁶⁸ Taking a global perspective, individuals from advanced economies dominate the global 1 percent, however the share of those from developing nations is increasing. Specifically, while only comprising 14 percent of the world’s population, the advanced economies still accounted for 77% of the global top 1% in 2012 (whereas it was 85-88% during 1988-2005).⁶⁹

Figure 8: The share of women among top income groups



Data source: Atkinson et al., 2016

The vast underrepresentation of women and non-whites among global elites should not lead us to the erroneous assumption that research on elites therefore has little to contribute to the analysis of ‘race’ and gender. In fact, this finding highlights that ‘elites’ are crucial for exploring sexist and racist structures.⁷⁰ Yet, elite theory has been ‘almost silent on the issue of race and nation, as well as the

⁶⁶ (Atkinson et al., 2018)

⁶⁷ (Keister, 2014)

⁶⁸ (Cousin et al., 2018, p. 233)

⁶⁹ (Anand and Segal (2017)

⁷⁰ (Cousin et al., 2018)

importance of white dominance to understand elites within the West'.⁷¹ This 'blind spot' might be explained by a focus in elite theory on a 'unified 'elite'' (Ibid.) or simply by the way such dominance works.⁷²

Ethnographies of elite spaces have provided crucial insights into elite families, kinship formation, intergenerational transmissions of wealth (also addressed in economic work), gender and patriarchy. Anthropologist Luna Glucksberg's research highlights the importance of so-called 'family offices', institutions which are dedicated to the reproduction of wealth (and cultural capital) of economic 'elites'.⁷³ She shows how the (re)production of wealth is achieved not by family-office owning rich people themselves but by the labour of others specialised in the economic and social aspects of capital accumulation. Glucksberg's work also highlights the anxieties of the families who rely on the services of these institutions, specifically their concern with the transmission of capital (her finding is similar to Rachel Sherman's study on New York elite anxieties regarding the legitimacy of capital).⁷⁴

With respect to class the trends appear ambivalent. Looking at mobility between 'big' classes, notably with respect to those defined by the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC), it has been shown that there are no marked trends towards closure, with significant prospects for upward mobility. However, when attention is focused on specific elite occupations, the patterns are different. Friedman and Laurison show that many elite professions – such as medicine, law and journalism – remain highly socially exclusive. Only 6% of Britain's doctors are from working-class backgrounds, even though they are 33% of the workforce as a whole. Significantly, they also show that even when those from working-class backgrounds are successful in entering elite occupations, they go on to earn, on average, £6500 a year less than colleagues whose parents did 'middle-class' [professional or managerial jobs](#). This is partly explained by differences in educational attainment but, importantly, even when they adjust for education plus a range of indicators of merit, still half the class pay gap remains. Going on to explore a range of elite employers, Friedman and Laurison argue that this class pay gap is less about those from working-class backgrounds getting paid less for doing the same work and more that they face a 'class ceiling'. Hence, even those who are socially mobile continue to face barriers of entry, progression and maintenance of their new status.⁷⁵ In contemporary Britain, in other words, the privileged continue to dominate the top echelons.⁷⁶

⁷¹ (Cousin et al., 2018, p. 226f)

⁷² (Carangio, 2018)

⁷³ (Glucksberg, 2016a)

⁷⁴ (Sherman, 2017)

⁷⁵ (Friedman et al., 2017)

⁷⁶ (Friedman and Laurison, 2019)

4. Putting the story together: geography and social mobility from the Longitudinal Study

We have shown that there is no unambiguous answer to the question of whether ‘elites are pulling away’, but we have unearthed some building blocks of an answer. This focuses on the rise of high earners, the role of wealth as a potential reinforcing process, the way that elites mobilise around meritocratic discourses even while recognising themselves as key drivers of the economy. However, to take our analysis further we need to consider trends over time, and here we report a new analysis of the Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study (LS). As outlined in more detail in our methodology section, the LS is a 1 percent sample of linked census records of the population of England and Wales from five decennial censuses between 1971 and 2011 and also includes linked events data (i.e. births, deaths and cancer registrations). This is a ‘surprisingly neglected, high quality data source’⁷⁷ with over 500,000 members’ census responses collected at each census.

The main advantages of this large-scale dataset are that it allows us to combine personal with area characteristics, to observe the occupations of participants and their parents when they were children and to assess change in individual trajectories between censuses due to its longitudinal design. The LS offers data on occupational social class of LS members and their parents when members were children. Therefore, we can assess:

- 1) whether the spatial concentration of people with higher professional and managerial occupations has changed over time,
- 2) the social mobility patterns of these people and whether they have changed for people born between 1955-61, 1965-71 and 1975-81,
- 3) the interrelationship between social and geographic mobility for people born between 1965-71 and 1975-81 and
- 4) the importance of London for this interrelationship.

We focus our analysis on occupational ‘elites’ – people in the highest social class (NS-SEC 1) who work in higher professional or managerial occupations. As we have discussed in our methodology section, we measure social mobility into these occupations following the established approach of Laurison and Friedman: we distinguish between *intergenerational stability* (parents were higher managers and professionals), *short-range mobility* (parents were lower managers and professionals), *mid-range mobility* (parents held intermediate and clerical occupations), and *long-range mobility* (parents held routine and semi-routine occupations).⁷⁸

4.1 Have those with higher managerial and professional occupations become more spatially segregated?

The most straightforward measure we used to assess whether those with ‘elite’ occupations have become more segregated across local authority areas is the index of dissimilarity. This measure has an intuitive interpretation, as ‘[i]t is the proportion of people or households who would have to move home, across local authority boundaries, were that group to be equally represented everywhere’. Hence it ‘is the simplest of segregation indices to use to describe the changing level of geographical social polarisation’.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ (Buscha and Sturgis, 2018: 172)

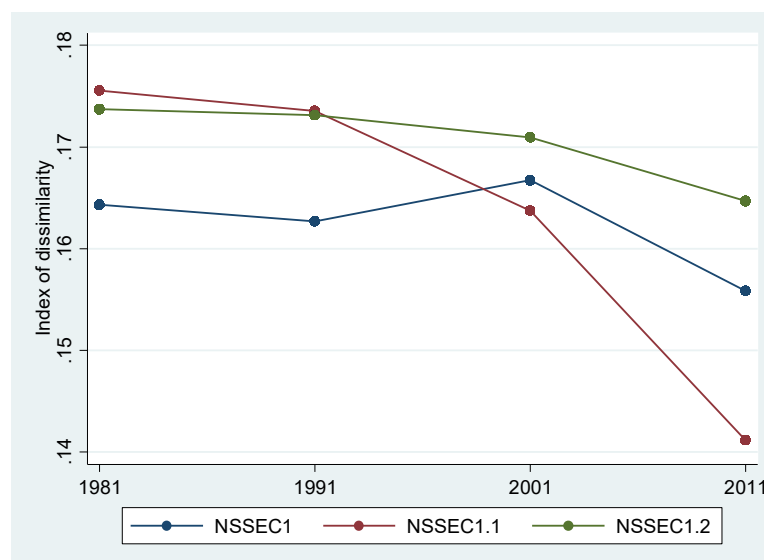
⁷⁸ (Laurison and Friedman, 2016).

⁷⁹ (Dorling and Rees, 2003, p. 1288).

Here we come across a surprising and counterintuitive finding: over the 30-year period 1981-2011, the geographic polarization of where people with 'elite' occupations live has decreased (Figure 9). Individuals with higher managerial and professional occupations have become more evenly distributed over English local authority areas – far from 'pulling away', they seem to have become more spatially integrated.⁸⁰ The change towards less polarization has been stronger for those with higher managerial (NS-SEC1.1), rather than higher professional (NS-SEC1.2) occupations. In 2011 approximately 17% of people with higher professional jobs would have to move compared with 14% of those with higher managerial jobs in order for them to be equally represented everywhere.

However, we also need to recognise that this trend of decreasing polarization might be driven by the location of people who were upwardly mobile into higher and managerial occupations (as discussed later in section 4.3.1). They may live in less prestigious areas (measured by proportion of NS-SEC1 individuals in a local authority area) than the intergenerationally stable, thereby decreasing the spatial concentration of higher managerial or professional people overall.

Figure 9: Index of dissimilarity: Overall geographical polarization of people with higher managerial and professional occupations



Source: ONS LS

However, we need to distinguish London from the rest of the UK. London has already been identified as being highly distinctive from the Great British Class Survey. Of those with highest household incomes after taxes, 44.2 percent of those with household incomes of £200k or higher, 35.9 percent of those with household incomes of £150-199k, and 33 percent of those with household incomes of £100-149k

⁸⁰ The change in the geography of advantaged social classes is in line with a change in the geography of poverty. Including all local authority areas in England between 2005 and 2014, Mark Fransham demonstrated that 'Poverty amongst children and working age people is becoming more evenly distributed in almost all local authority types, with the largest changes occurring in the most urban areas. The change is strongly associated with the increasing proportion of low-income households living in private sector housing'.⁸⁰ This study confirmed previous studies which have shown that income poverty is increasingly evenly distributed in British cities.⁸⁰

who participated in the BBC GBCS live in London. This compares to 13.6 percent of all other respondents.

Figure 10 shows where GBCS respondents with household income after taxes of £200k are over and underrepresented in the UK (controlling for population density and the skewed GBCS sample distribution). Red indicates overrepresentation and blue indicates underrepresentation.

Figure 10 The geography of GBCS participants' household Income

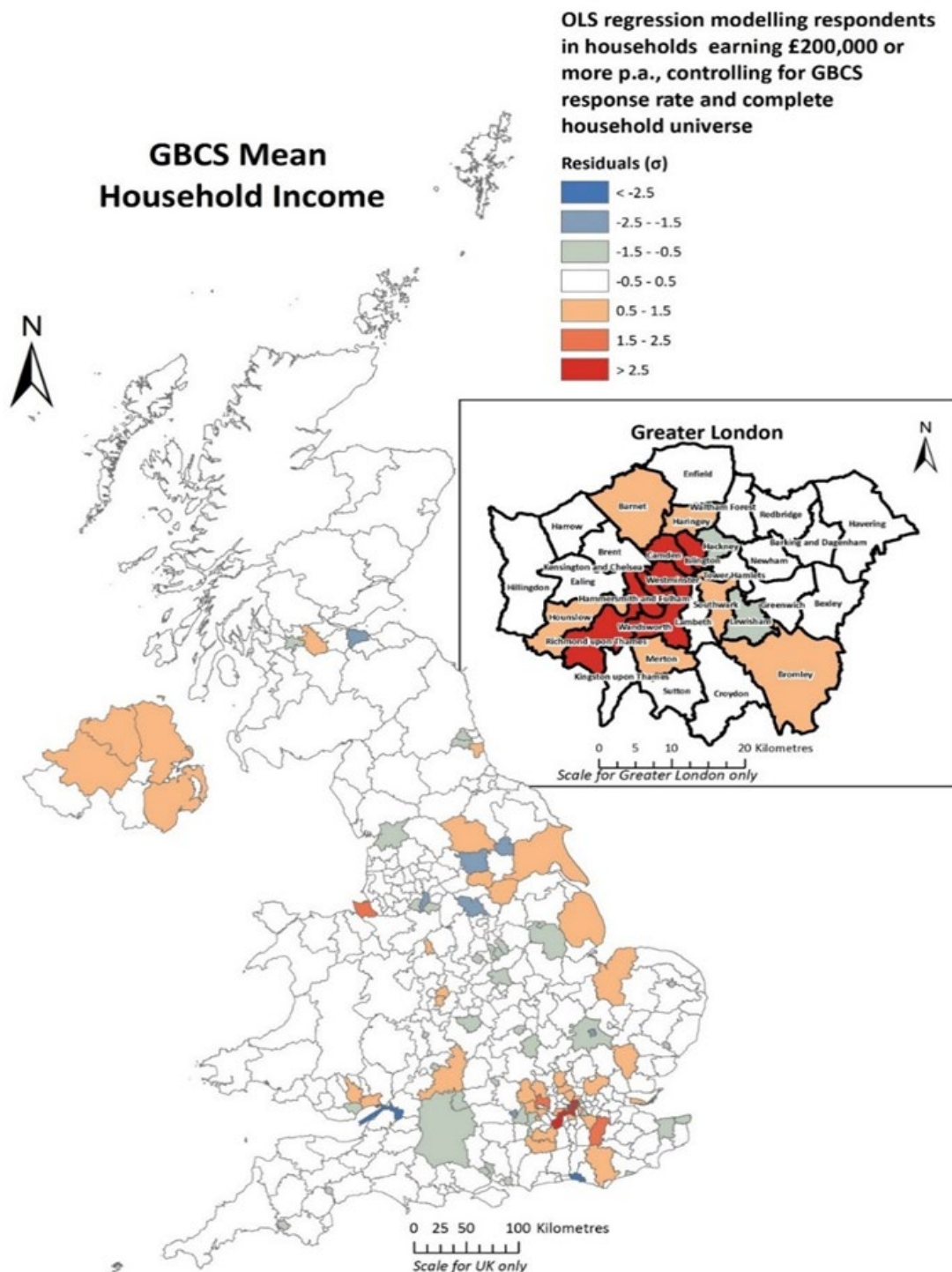


Image source: (Savage et al., 2018). See also (Cunningham and Savage, 2015)

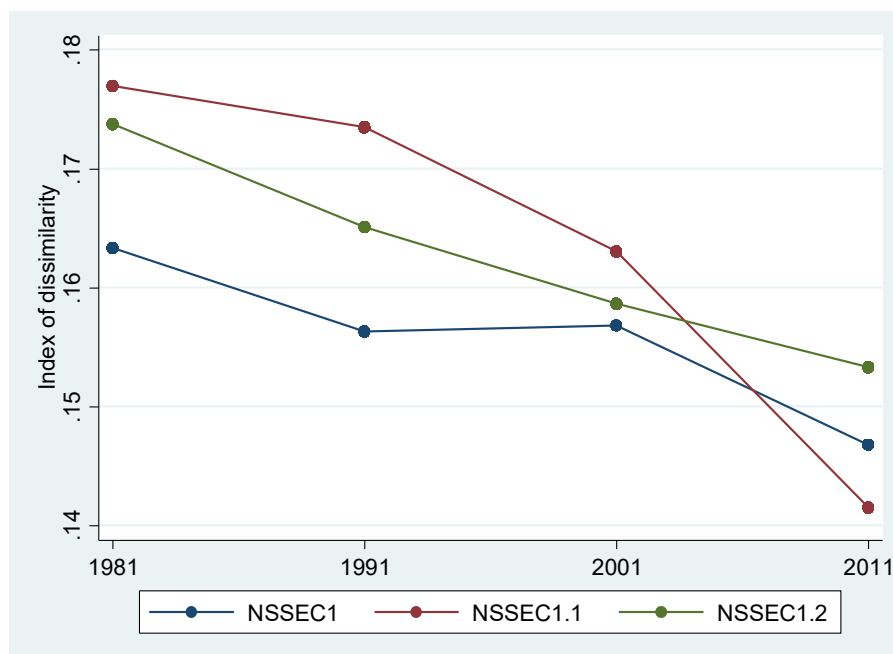
We can see how starkly the geography of very high incomes maps onto the West London corridor threading down the Thames from the City to Windsor. These areas see a major over-representation of those with very high household incomes which is not matched in any other location.

As the GBCS only offers data at one point in time, the LS longitudinal data is invaluable. Breaking down the data into spatial concentration in London (Figure 12) vs all other areas (Figure 11) shows that the index of dissimilarity decreases in England excluding London, between 1981-2011, suggesting that the residential segregation of individuals with highest occupational social class has decreased over time.

However, we do not see this clear pattern of decreasing geographic concentration of people with higher professional and managerial occupations in London (Figure 12). It shows that while those with higher managerial professions have become less geographically concentrated over London's local authority areas, those with higher professional occupations are still as geographically concentrated in 2011 as they were in 1981. Nevertheless, the difference between these occupational groups should not be overstated. For illustration, in 2011, approximately 16 percent of people with higher professional jobs, and 14 percent of people with higher managerial jobs would have had to move local authority area for their occupational class groups to be evenly distributed across local authority areas in London (this compares to 16 and 18 percent, respectively, who would have had to move in 1981).

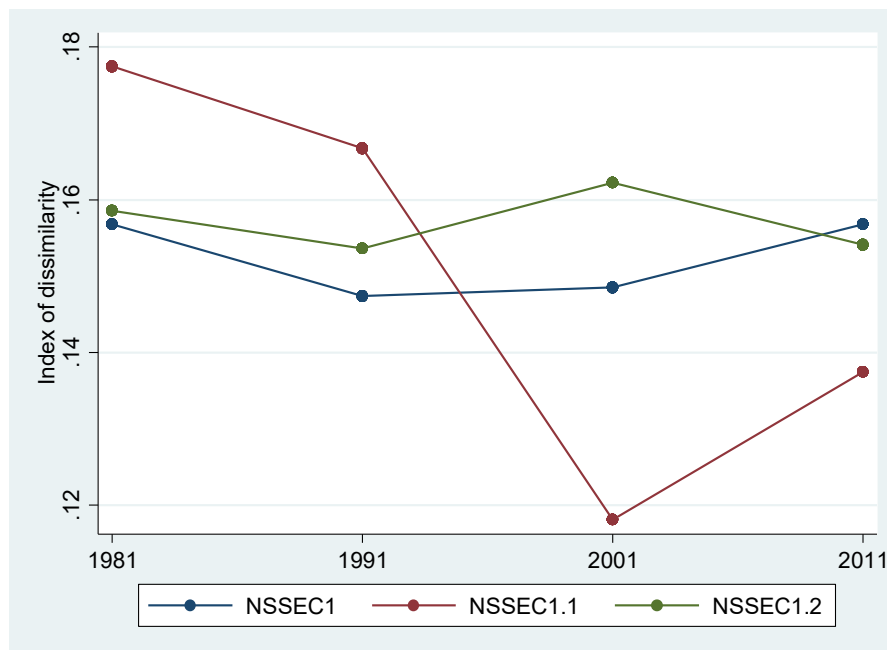
London is distinctive, therefore. Firstly, people with very high household incomes are vastly overrepresented in London, particularly in West London. Further, London is distinct in the evolving spatial distribution of people with occupations in the highest social class (compare Figure 11 and 12). While the geographic segregation of occupational elites outside London is decreasing, in the capital it remains stable.

Figure 11: Index of dissimilarity: Outside London



Source: ONS LS

Figure 12: Index of dissimilarity: in London



Source: ONS LS

4.2. Social mobility trajectories into higher professional and managerial occupations

Let us now consider social mobility trajectories into elite occupations. There has been much previous work on changes in social mobility, but less research has directly focused on mobility trajectories into top occupations.⁸¹ Further, while sociologists focus on intergenerational occupational class mobility, economists primarily study intergenerational income mobility.⁸² Hence,

‘economists focus on the extent to which individuals’ relative position in the income distribution changes across generations while ‘sociologists typically distinguish between two types of mobility rates; *absolute mobility*, which measures the percentage of individuals whose class destinations are different from their class origins (in terms of upward, downward and total movement) and *relative mobility*, which measures the relative chances of individuals of different class origins arriving at different class destinations net of all change in the occupational structure’.⁸³

Previous research on intergenerational mobility in the UK has focused on cohort studies which follow children born in a particular week through their childhood and adult life.⁸⁴ Economist Jo Blanden and her colleagues found that intergenerational income mobility fell when comparing a birth cohort born in 1970 to one born in 1958. Their results demonstrated that ‘adult earnings of the second cohort were more closely linked to their parental income when they were aged 16 as teenagers than was the case for the first cohort’ indicating a decline in income ‘mobility experienced across the 1958 and 1970 cohorts’.⁸⁵ In contrast, sociologists Erzsébet Bukodi, John H. Goldthorpe and their team found that there has been no decline in either absolute nor relative mobility. Analysing intergenerational class mobility based on data covering four birth cohorts (people born in 1946, 1958, 1970 and 1980-4) they present

⁸¹ (Laurison and Friedman, 2016)

⁸² (Bukodi et al., 2015; Laurison and Friedman, 2016)

⁸³ (Friedman et al., 2017)

⁸⁴ (Bell et al., 2019)

⁸⁵ (Blanden et al., 2004; cited in Blanden and Machin, 2008, p. 101 and 111)

evidence that relative mobility rates have been generally and broadly stable over the later twentieth century (Bukodi et al., 2015). Therefore, relative social class mobility, which adjusts for changes in sizes of social classes, has changed little over time.

While these studies based on birth cohorts have significantly enhanced our understanding of income and social class mobility, they 'are infrequent, suffer from significant attrition over time and do not provide a large enough sample to provide estimates at anything other than the national level'.⁸⁶ The LS data with its large sample size, longitudinal aspect and 'low rates of nonresponse and attrition across waves'⁸⁷ overcomes these shortcomings. It also provides a new source of data for a generation born after the 1970 birth cohort study.

Though research which utilises LS data to study changes in social mobility is scarce, sociologists and economists have begun to utilize this excellent data resource. Franz Buscha and Patrick Sturgis analysed absolute and relative rates of social class mobility for cohorts born between 1955–61, 1965–71 and 1975–81. They found that levels of absolute total mobility were broadly stable across these cohorts. Further, their analysis of changes in relative social mobility found that there was 'a small but significant increase in relative social class mobility for both men and women between the cohorts born in the late 1950s and the late 1960s'. [...] The increase in fluidity from the late 1950s to the early 1960s was still evident in the cohorts born in the late 1970s, although there was no evidence of a continuation in the trend of increasing openness between the late 1960s and the subsequent cohorts'.⁸⁸ These findings are in line with Bukodi and colleagues who found no evidence for a decline in absolute or relative mobility. Further, Brian Bell, Jack Blundell and Stephen Machin have also analysed LS data, and demonstrated that there was little overall change in intergenerational occupational mobility across three cohorts in England and Wales (born between 1954-1963; 1964-1973 and 1974-1983).

Our approach adds to this research, by focusing on patterns of social mobility *within* the overall class structure, in particular social mobility into the highest social class (i.e. into higher managerial and professional occupations).⁸⁹

We now turn to these findings. Figure 13 shows the proportion of people in a given cohort and gender who experienced specific mobility trajectories into higher managerial and professional occupations. Among women, a similar proportion were intergenerationally stable in the 1955-61 cohorts than in the younger cohorts. However, in the youngest cohort (born in 1975-1981) there are larger proportions of short-range mobile and smaller proportions of long-range mobile people. This latter pattern is also observed among men. Overall, these findings are consistent with previous research which has shown that absolute mobility was broadly stable across cohorts, but that there is a small trend towards absolute upward social mobility being lower among younger cohorts.⁹⁰

As absolute upward social mobility has slightly decreased, men in professional and managerial occupations who were born between 1975-1981 have slightly more socially exclusive histories than their counterparts who were born between 1955-1961. Specifically, for the youngest male cohort (born in 1975-1981), the probability of having been long-range mobile (.12) was significantly lower than it was for the older cohorts, who were born between 1955-1961 and 1965-1971 (.19 and .18 respectively). Further, a higher proportion of people in higher managerial and professional occupations were intergenerationally stable in the two younger cohorts than in the oldest cohort (.21 compared to .17).

⁸⁶ (Bell et al., 2019, p. 1)

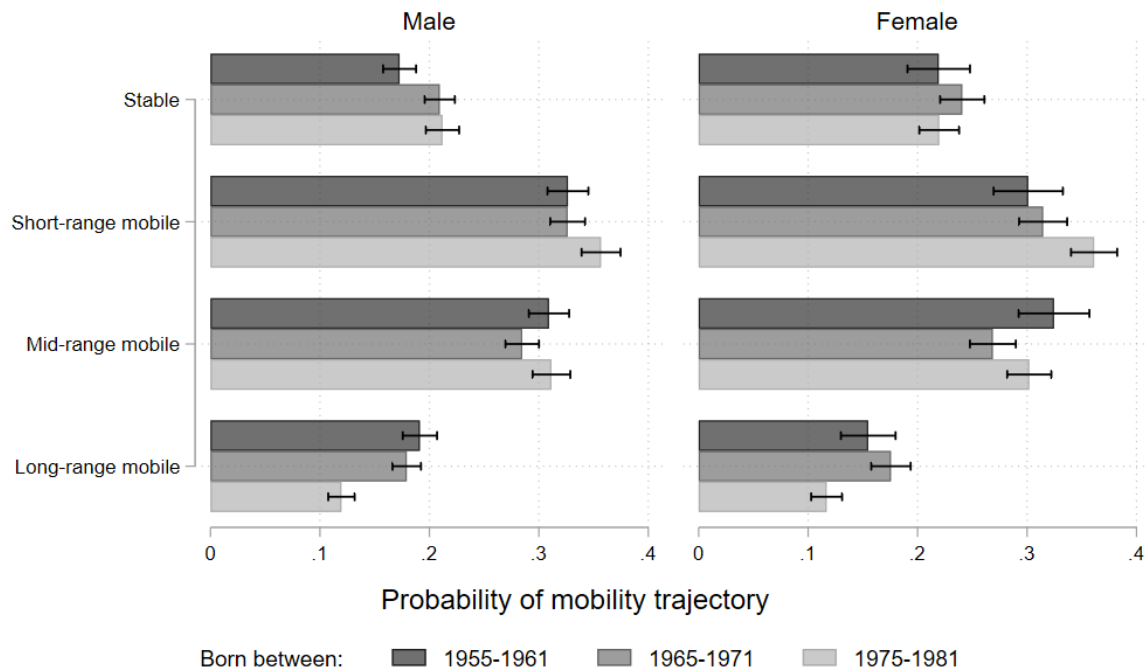
⁸⁷ (Buscha and Sturgis, 2018, p. 154)

⁸⁸ (Buscha and Sturgis, 2018, p. 174)

⁸⁹ (Laurison and Friedman, 2016)

⁹⁰ (Bukodi et al., 2015; Buscha and Sturgis, 2018)

Figure 13: Social mobility trajectory into higher professional and managerial occupations by cohort and gender



Source: ONS LS

For women however, there are no statistically significant differences in the social exclusivity of backgrounds between the different cohorts (though the probability to have been long-range socially mobile is lowest for the youngest cohort of women as well). These findings should also be considered in the context of a shrinking proportion of cohort members who originate from working-class origins, hence fewer people could experience long-range upward social mobility.⁹¹

4.3 The association between spatial and social mobility

We now turn to the crux of our analysis: the relationship between geographical and social mobility. This is a new, emergent research area. In a first study exploring regional differences in the pattern of occupational social mobility in the UK, Friedman and Macmillan find substantial differences in mobility across regions. Further, ‘social mobility in Inner London is unique’ as ‘those from disadvantaged backgrounds who are from London, or who move in from elsewhere in the UK, do experience higher than average rates of upward mobility’, hence London does act as an ‘escalator’ (as has been suggested by Fielding, 1992). However, this is not the case for international migrants, which at least in part explains the counterintuitive finding that ‘the average person currently living in London is actually much less likely to have experienced upward mobility than someone situated elsewhere in the country’. Therefore, the idea of ‘London as the national engine-room of upward social mobility’ does not apply to international migrants who experience ‘comparatively low upward mobility and high downward mobility’.⁹² Note that this study focuses on where participants live as adults, rather than where they grew up.⁹³

⁹¹ (Bukodi et al., 2015)

⁹² (Friedman and Macmillan, 2017, p. 68)

⁹³ (Bell et al., 2019)

Brian Bell and colleagues, having conducted the most detailed geographical analysis of social mobility for England and Wales using the LS, also find that there are significant regional differences in intergenerational mobility, and that these were strongly persistent over time. Specifically, they highlight that London, and in particular Inner West London, stood out as the most upwardly mobile area for social class 'in the mid 20th century, but mobility in London had declined substantially by the 1970s and 1980s birth cohorts'⁹⁴ which is consistent with Friedman and Macmillan's findings. While Bell and colleagues work is insightful, their analysis does not differentiate between 'movers' and 'stayers', an important issue which we focus on in our work.

We now turn to our findings on the relationship between long distance moves and social mobility trajectory. Figure 14 plots the proportion of individuals who have made zero, one or two long distance moves⁹⁵ by social mobility trajectory into higher professional and managerial occupations. It suggests that even among a group of individuals who are employed in relatively elite occupations those who were long-range socially mobile are about 25-30 percentage points more likely to be residentially immobile than those who are intergenerationally stable. Further, a majority of the long-range socially mobile have never moved long-distance. This is unexpected and confounds the widespread view (for instance in Goodhart's 'somewheres and nowheres' argument) that more socially mobile individuals are less attached to place and community. Somewhat in line with Savage's (1988) long-standing view, it suggests that upward mobility is possible in situ, and that the cosmopolitan experience of needing to move to advance one's career is not typical of those who achieve long-range social mobility into elite occupations. Nevertheless, geographic immobility may have bearings for the quality of the career opportunities one is able to take up in higher professional and managerial occupations, particularly compared to those who move to London.

Our findings also suggest that there is little evidence that those who manage to gain access into 'elite' occupations from less advantaged classes do so only if they have the capacity to move geographically. Specifically, those with privileged class backgrounds are much more likely to have completed either one or two long-distance moves than those who were long-range socially mobile into managerial or professional occupations (58% vs 31% for the older cohort).

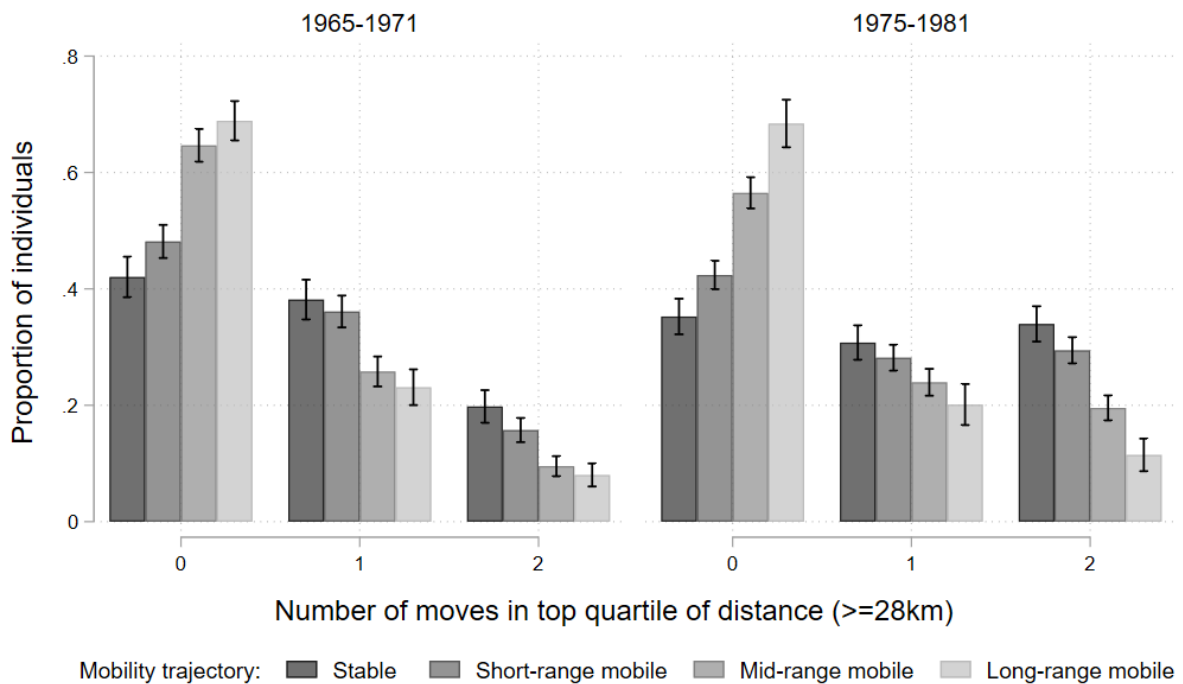
Comparing the geographic mobility patterns of the two cohorts (plotted on the left and right-hand side of Figure 14) demonstrates the younger cohort is much more likely to have engaged in two long-distance moves. And, as in the older cohort, it is those from privileged class backgrounds who were much more likely to have long-distance moved twice compared to those who were long-range socially mobile (34% vs 11%).

The younger cohort (born in 1975-1981) show striking variation in geographic mobility based on their social mobility experience. A majority of those who have been long-range socially mobile into elite professions, have never moved long-distance (68%). By contrast, a majority of those in elite professions who are from privileged backgrounds have moved long-distance at least once (65%).

⁹⁴ (Bell et al., 2019)

⁹⁵ Moves ≥ 28 km and hence situated in the top 25% of all moves by distance.

Figure 14 Number of long-distance moves between census years by social mobility trajectory into higher professional and managerial occupations and birth cohort



Source: ONS LS

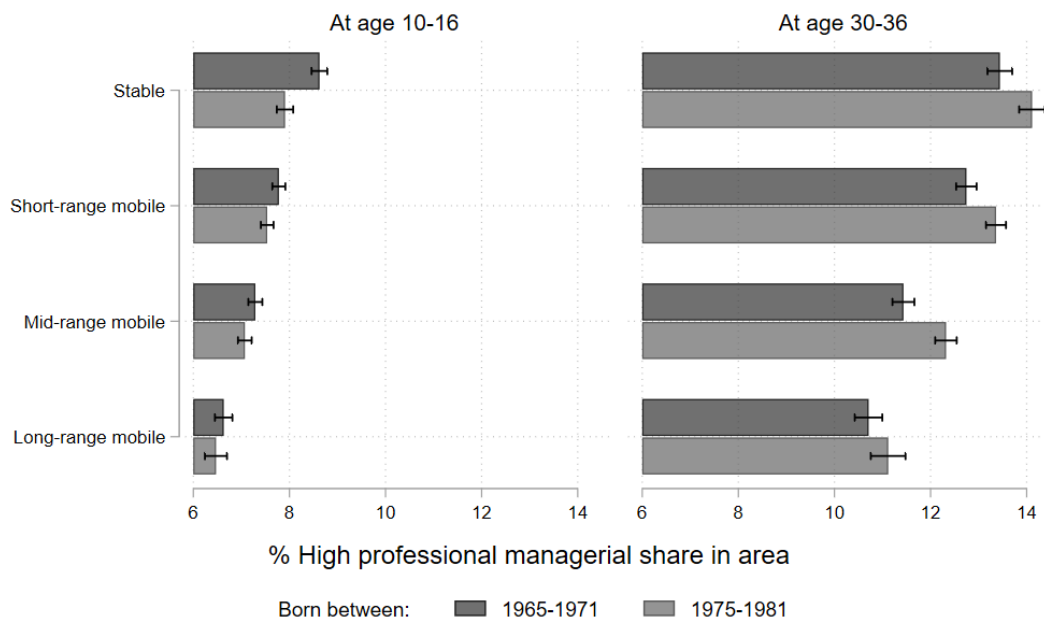
4.3.1 Social mobility and changes in class composition of individuals' local authority areas: an 'area ceiling'

We also considered whether achieving upward social mobility into higher managerial and professional occupations leads to living in an equally affluent area as those from privileged backgrounds. The share of those economically active in highest social classes in an area has previously been previously shown to be useful as a proxy for affluence.⁹⁶

Those who are intergenerationally stable lived in areas with about 1-2 percentage points higher professional managerial shares when they were aged 10-16 than those who are long-range mobile (for those between 1965-1971 this was in 1981 and for those born in 1975-1981 this was in 1991). One might expect that achieving upward social mobility facilitates 'catching up' with the stable in regards to the social exclusivity of their neighbourhoods in adulthood. However, the pattern at age 30-36 is essentially identical to the one at age 10-16: the socially mobile live in less exclusive areas than do the stable in childhood as well as in adulthood (Figure 15).

⁹⁶ (Williamson, 2016).

Figure 15 Area of residence by social mobility trajectory into ‘elite’ occupations



Source: ONS LS

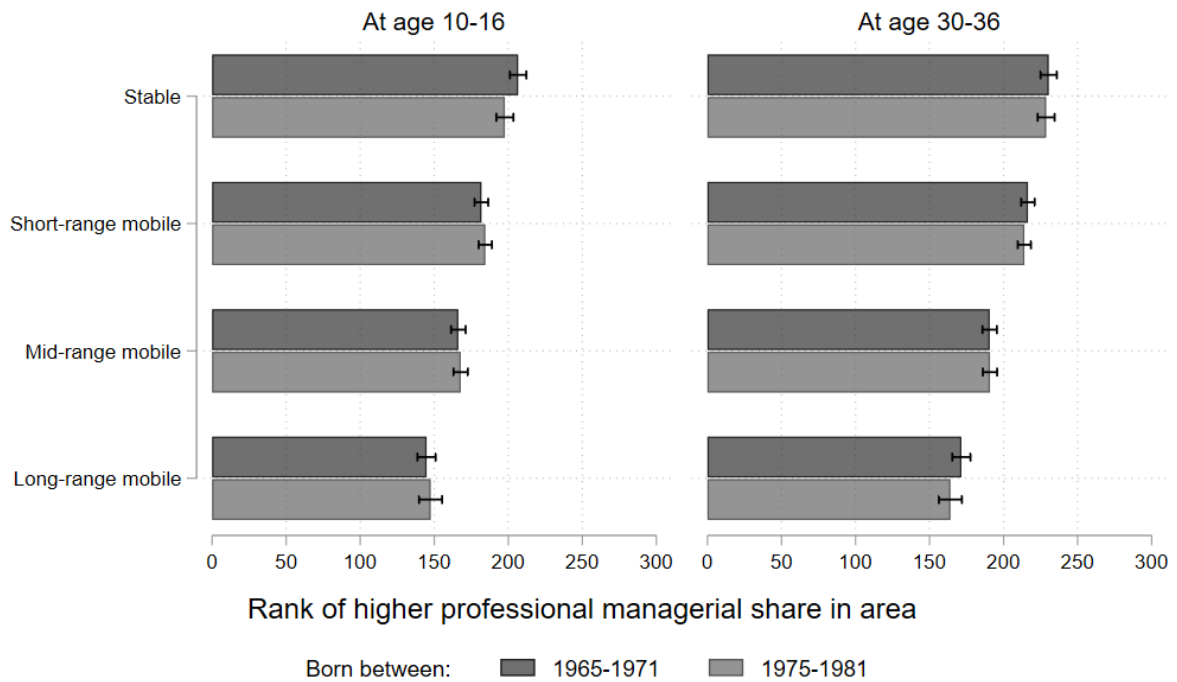
Note: ‘% high professional managerial share in area’ is a proxy for the affluence of an area.

Comparing the left and right-hand side plots in above figure shows that over the 20-year period where participants matured from ages 10-16, to 30-36, the percentage of people with higher professional and managerial occupations has increased immensely.

As the share of higher professional managerial occupations has increased across the country over the last 40 years, we rank areas within each year by their higher professional and managerial share, where areas with a higher rank have a greater share. This allows us to assess the relative social exclusivity of areas in which people with higher social class position live, and facilitates a ‘like-for-like’ comparison over time.

All individuals who end up in professional managerial occupations, no matter whether they were intergenerationally stable or socially mobile into these occupations, see, on average, an improvement in the rank of the area they lived in at age 30-36 compared to the one that they lived in at age 10-16. Surprisingly, this increase is very similar for those with privileged backgrounds (who are intergenerationally stable) to those who are long-range upwardly socially mobile. Those who are intergenerationally stable start in areas ranked on average 200/341, and end up in areas ranked about 220/341, while those who are long-range socially mobile start in areas ranked about 140/341 and end up in those ranked about 160/341 (Figure 16).

Figure 16: Rank of higher professional managerial share of area by social mobility trajectory into higher professional and managerial occupations and cohort



Source: ONS LS

As a result, there is no evidence that people who are upwardly socially mobile into professional managerial occupations end up in areas that look similar in terms of class composition to their intergenerationally stable peers. Among both younger and older cohorts, those who have been long-range socially mobile into professional or managerial occupations lived in lower ranked areas compared to those with privileged backgrounds, not only as children (aged 10-16) but also as adults (age 30-36). Despite their social mobility success, they do not live in equally affluent areas as adults compared to their peers from advantaged backgrounds. Further, the short-range mobile live in more exclusive areas than the mid-range mobile.

These findings provide evidence that there is an ‘area ceiling’ (or a ‘neighbourhood gap’). Those who were socially mobile into elite occupations, on average are unable to or may not desire to ‘break into’ the ‘top’ residential local authority areas. There is a ‘neighbourhood class ceiling’.

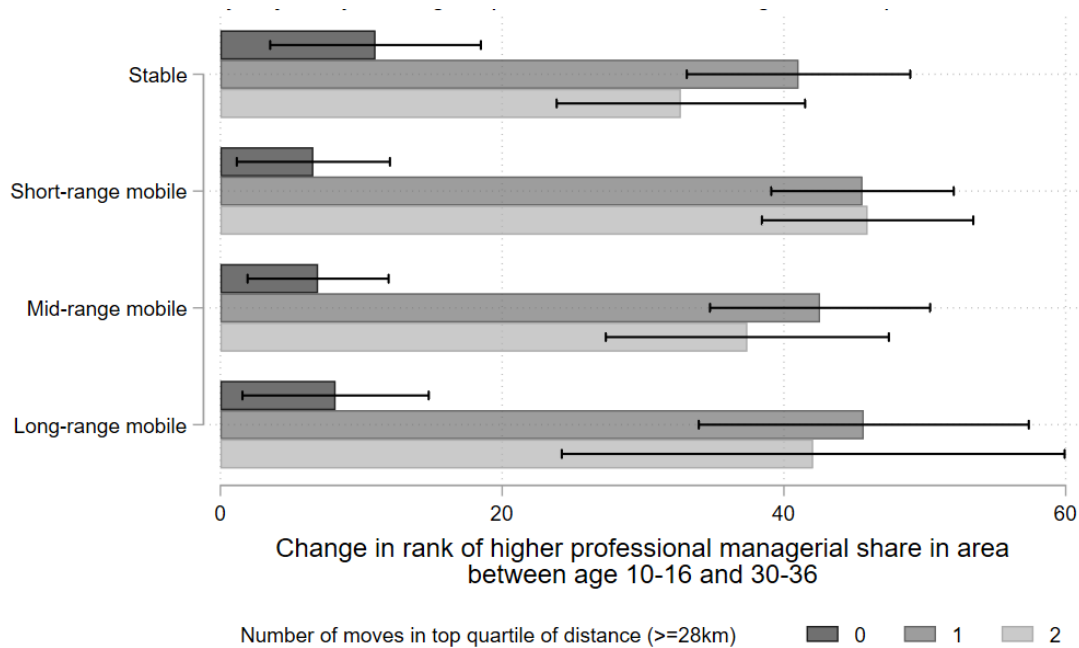
4.3.2 How long-distance moving modifies the association between social mobility trajectory and area of residence

Here we combine the analysis of geographical mobility (long-distance moving), social mobility trajectory and changes in relative affluence of area of residence. To measure changes in the affluence of an area we look at changes in the area rank. We break this down by social mobility trajectory. Figure 17 shows the change in rank of higher professional managerial share by social and geographic mobility trajectory (number of long-distance moves (>=28km) between censuses).

All individuals with higher professional and managerial occupations on average end up in areas with greater shares of professional managerial people when they are aged 30-36 compared to when they were 10-16 years old. This is the case even for those who have not moved long distance (average increase in

rank of about 10) suggesting that those who end up in professional managerial occupations tend to be located in areas where the local labour market is improving relative to the rest of the country.

Figure 17: Change in rank of higher professional managerial share of area by number of long-distance moves and mobility trajectory into higher professional and managerial occupations



Source: ONS LS

People who move long-distance end up in higher ranked (more affluent) areas than those who do not move. Specifically, those who move area once or twice see an improvement in rank of about 40 (out of 341), suggesting that individuals with professional managerial occupations are moving to more affluent areas than the places in which they started out.

However, there are no differences in the extent to which long-distance moves improve the rank of the area someone lives in based on people’s social class background. The implication is that those who are long-range mobile into professional managerial occupations do not end up in areas with a similar class composition to those who are intergenerationally stable (hence even if they engage in long-distance moves, they do not ‘catch up’). Hence, the stable remain in more exclusive areas.

4.4 London calling

We now consider how residence in the capital affects our observed patterns of upward social mobility and change in area composition. London has been shown to be a ‘regional escalator’ offering much faster career progression than elsewhere.⁹⁷ Our analysis illuminates the relationship between social and geographic mobility,⁹⁸ taking residence in London into account. We examine all respondents at age 30-36, hence each cohort is measured in a different census year: 1955-61 in 1991, 1965-71 in 2001, and 1975-81 in 2011. Figure 18 shows the fascinating way that living in London at different age groups

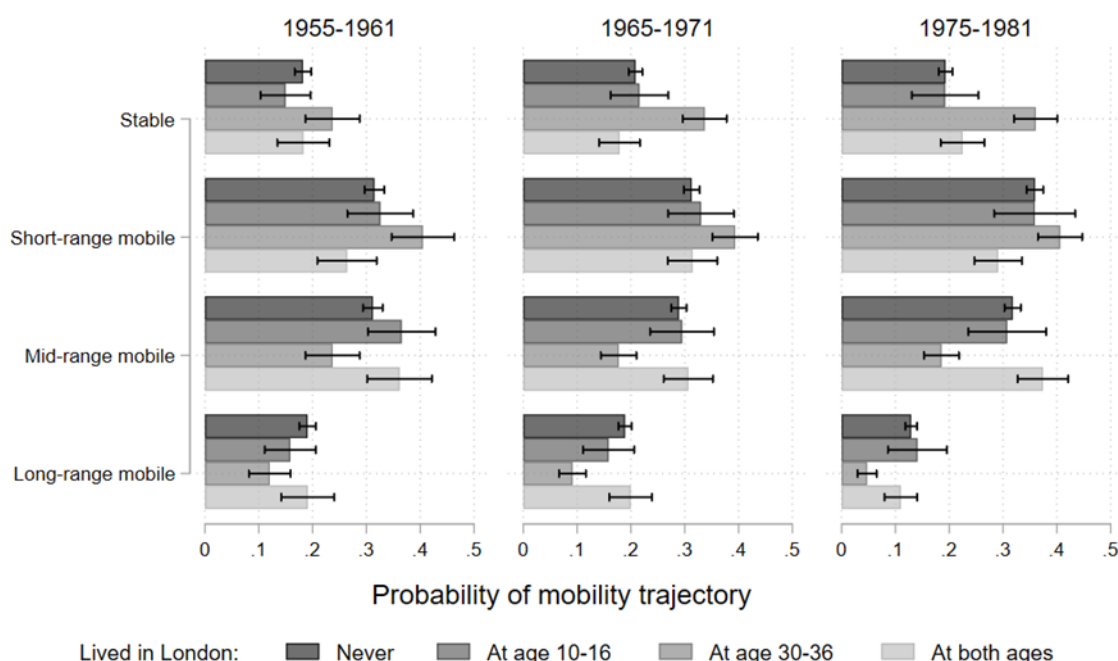
⁹⁷ (Champion et al., 2014)

⁹⁸ Note that the migration rate for 16–24-year-olds, which was 112 moves per 1000 population in 2008, was more than double the ‘all age’ migration (51 per 1000) (Smith and Sage, 2014).

becomes a more crucial feature of social mobility trajectories into the occupational elite over time. Although the patterns are subtle, they are telling. The graph breaks the four different mobility trajectories down according to whether those with highest social class occupations never lived in London, lived in London only from the ages of 10-16 (whilst at school), or only aged 30-36 (probably for employment reasons), or have always lived in London.

For the oldest cohort, there are relatively muted effects by which living in London is related to social mobility trajectories. Of those who were stable elites, there was little difference in the proportions of those who had never lived in London, left London after spending time there in school, or by contrast had always lived in London – though there was a slight tendency for those who were in London at age 30-36 but not at age 10-16, to be over-represented compared to these, presumably reflecting the location of employment opportunities.⁹⁹ Those who were short-range mobile also share this propensity to be in London during their adult working lives (ages of 30-36) but having lived outside of London while at school (at age 10-16), meaning they have moved to London. By contrast the mid-range mobile, appear more likely to have moved out of London by age 30-36, or to have always lived in London, implying that their mobility prospects were slightly enhanced by moving away from London, or by having always lived in London. In contrast to their stable and short-range mobile peers, the mid- and long-range mobile were least likely to have achieved their occupational success by moving to London for their adult life (age of 30-36).

Figure 18: Social mobility trajectory into higher professional and managerial occupations by cohort and residence in London at ages 10-16 and 30-36



Source: ONS LS

If we consider the younger cohorts, these patterns strengthen over time, and reveal a growing significance of moving to London after a childhood (aged 10-16) elsewhere for those who are stable in elite occupations. Of all people with elite occupations born 1975-1981 who were not living in London at age 10-16 but did so at age 30-36, which we can infer will be a peak time for elite earnings as well as future

⁹⁹ Note that these differences are not statistically significant.

promotion prospects to the most senior ranks, a tiny proportion - 5% - have been long-range socially mobile, whereas over a third are stable, and a staggering three quarters are either stable or short-range mobile. For this generation, moving to and living in London at age 30-36 and working in an elite occupation is overwhelmingly associated with being from privileged background, significantly more so than used to be the case for the older cohort. For those declining number who are long-range socially mobile, they are most likely to move out of London in their later life, the implication being that their career success is the opposite of the Dick Whittington story: many poor kids have to leave London in order to get on. Alternatively, they achieve social mobility having never lived in London in the first place, or by having spent their childhood in London already and staying there through adulthood.

Therefore, the people who achieved social mobility success, are unlikely to have moved to London for their adult lives. By contrast, it is those from privileged backgrounds who are able to make the journey to London to pursue their elite careers. These findings support Friedman and Macmillan's research which showed that domestic migrants to London are disproportionately from advantaged class backgrounds.¹⁰⁰

To conclude, including whether someone has lived in London in our analysis corroborates the story that long-range upward social mobility into highest social class occupation is not linked to geographic mobility. The 'missing link' between geographic and social mobility which Mike Savage discussed in earlier research,¹⁰¹ is still missing in this data. Instead we find evidence for a link between geographic mobility and the reproduction of social class advantage.

¹⁰⁰ (Friedman and Macmillan, 2017)

¹⁰¹ (Savage, 1988)

Conclusion

In this report we have shown how the economic pulling away of top earners is having a powerful – though subtle – effect in changing social and cultural relationships in the UK. However, our initial finding runs counter to Piketty's provocation about the return to the inherited elite class of the belle époque. Although top earners tend to be aware of their advantages and articulate a sense of confidence and ease, they are not very different from most Britons in endorsing meritocratic views and their leisure and lifestyle activities are not very distinct either.

Why is this the case? Partly this reflects the fact that the economic elite is not entirely closed to outsiders. Upward mobility into elite occupations is possible, even though the odds are stacked in favour of those who come from privileged backgrounds. The issue which stands out for us is the role of London as the elite epicentre. One of the most striking changes in elite formation today compared to Victorian times is that whereas the aristocracy and gentry were a landed class, based in their rural and provincial seats, today's elite is thoroughly metropolitan and more specifically London based.

This helps explain the meritocratic paradox that Mijs has unravelled in which growing inequality is associated with a shift towards meritocratic beliefs. Increased elite economic power has gone alongside a general endorsement of meritocratic ideas, despite evidence of social closure to elite positions in terms of gender, race and class. Precisely because elite geography is so concentrated on London, those within its environs may not see themselves as especially fortunate, as Hecht has found – since they are surrounded by numerous other people like themselves. Similarly, most of the UK population, living outside London may not be in a position to directly compare themselves with elite London locations of which they know little. This is a world away from the 'upstairs-downstairs' world of the country estate in which local residents of different hues would inevitably gain a clear visible sense of the local hierarchy. Social and geographical distance reinforce each other.

Our analysis of geographic and social mobility into elite occupations from the LS demonstrates that long-distance geographic moves are associated with having a privileged class background: while a large majority of intergenerationally stable individuals have moved long-distance at least once, a large majority of those who were long-range socially mobile into elite occupations have never done so. Therefore, we show that geographic mobility is associated with the reproduction of social class advantage, instead of a common feature for those who have achieved upward social mobility. As we have seen, long distance upward mobility need not entail moving geographically.

Rather, in line with other sociologists (such as Toft on Oslo, as well as Friedman and Laurison) we see elites as extremely spatially aware and with a cultural geography focused firmly on London. The capital is a crucial arena for elites and has strengthened its position as the elite epicentre. Moving to and living in London at age 30-36 and working in an elite occupation is overwhelmingly associated with being from a privileged background, and significantly more so in the younger generations than the older cohort (comparing cohorts 1955-1961, 1965-1972 and 1975-1981). We have seen how 'ordinary' Londoners who move into elite occupations actually tend to move away from London in order to accomplish their ascent. By contrast, those who come from privileged backgrounds stay in London, or move to it. And, since London is where the rewards are highest, so it is that the best plums on the tree are kept for these privileged people.

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