

The Myth of Meritocracy – An Interview with Sam Friedman

Sam Friedman is Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics and Professor II at the Centre for the Study of Professions at Oslo Met University. He has published widely on social class, social mobility and elites, and recently co-authored *The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged* (Policy, 2019). He is currently working on a new book with Aaron Reeves (2024, HUP) looking at the historical development of the British elite.

Jon Baldwin: With Daniel Laurison you have elucidated the notion of a class pay gap^{li}. Can you say more about this?

Sam Friedman: In the past academics and policymakers interested in social mobility have fixated on access – who gets into top occupations. The problem with this is that it implicitly suggests that the baggage of our class origins somehow disappears once we enter the workplace. We wanted to shift the debate – from getting in to getting on. And what we found was striking. In contemporary Britain, it quite literally pays to be privileged. Even when those from working-class backgrounds are successful in entering the country's elite occupations, they go on to earn, on average, £6,400 less than colleagues whose parents did "middle-class" professional or managerial jobs – a nearly 16% class pay gap. This is exacerbated for women, people with disabilities, and most ethnic minorities. Each face a distinct double disadvantage. Women from working-class backgrounds, for example, earn on average £19,000 a year less in elite occupations than men from privileged backgrounds, and the figure is even higher for non-white women.

Jon Baldwin: It seems that the quantitative data (supporting the intuition of most people in the field) has had significant policy effect?

Sam Friedman: On policy, I think there is both a good news and a bad new story. I think we were certainly successful in getting a lot of employers to start taking class seriously. For example, we championed the widespread collection of workforce data on class background using a common methodology, which has allowed a wide range of employers to both interrogate their internal class composition, the class pay gaps or class ceilings that might exist around career progression, but also to see how the class backgrounds of their staff intersect with other characteristics such as race and gender. This collection of workforce data has also led to growing recognition that positive change in removing class barriers largely requires collective responsibility and collaborative action across a profession, with firms across the television, accountancy, legal, engineering and financial services professions all beginning to work in concert to tackle class-origin gaps in career progression. Many firms have even taken the important step of publishing class background data publicly and some, such as the BBC and ITV, have gone further, setting targets to increase the representation of those from working-class backgrounds at senior management level.

But I recognise these are not only small wins but can also be problematic when folded into the celebratory narratives that often surround professional employers' social mobility strategies. After all, these interventions may be a *necessary* part of tackling class inequality in professions, but they are certainly not *sufficient*. This, fundamentally, is because they only address one aspect of class inequality; namely, equality of opportunity and the fair allocation of rewards within the workplace. But as a range of my colleagues in sociology have all highlighted in recent years, this narrow focus on social mobility is not, and cannot

be, the solution to class inequality. Indeed, as Nicola Ingram and Sol Gamsu have recently pointed out¹, discussions about the relationship between professions and inequality must engage with the work professionals *do*, as well as *who they are*. Here they point to the paradox that the professional firms taking class most seriously, internally, are arguably the same ones accentuating class inequalities in the work they do *externally*. Similarly, as the excellent work of Louise Ashley² has demonstrated, many professions are directly implicated in driving the kind of high pay that has contributed so profoundly to growing income inequality in many Western countries. In this way, it is clearly important to recognise that organisational social mobility agendas sometimes act as a form of cultural legitimisation, allowing professional employers to align themselves with egalitarian values while obscuring their role in perpetrating class inequalities in society more broadly.

Jon Baldwin: You investigate the drivers of the class pay gap and effects of privilege in Britain's elite occupations (with Daniel Laurison) in *The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged*^[1]. What are these drivers and key features?

Sam Friedman: When we first started talking about our findings many people, particularly white men in senior management, posited a meritocratic explanation for the class pay gap. Perhaps, they suggested, the privileged simply have higher rates of educational attainment? Maybe they just work harder, or perform better at work? These are plausible mechanisms that deserve careful scrutiny. And some are indeed part of the story. Education does explain some of the gap. Those from privileged backgrounds tend to have higher qualifications and attend more prestigious universities, both of which are associated with higher earnings. Yet significantly, even Oxford and Cambridge, supposedly the ultimate sorting houses of academic ability, do not wash away the advantages of class origins. Graduates from privileged backgrounds still go on to earn £5,000 a year more than their working-class peers. Other important mechanisms are also at work. The privileged are more likely to work in London, in large firms, and in professions such as finance – all of which are associated with higher pay. But most importantly, even when we adjust for all these factors, along with a range of conventional indicators of merit – such as hours worked, training and experience – still half the class pay gap remains. This is worth underlining; even when those from working-class backgrounds are similar to their advantaged colleagues in every way we can measure, they still earn significantly less.

To get at this missing portion of the class pay gap we turned to qualitative data – 175 interviews across four elite firms, including in television Channel 4. These revealed a number of common drivers. First, we consistently saw the profound advantages afforded to those who can draw upon “the bank of mum and dad”. This kind of financial patronage is pivotal in propelling careers forward, particularly in precarious areas like the cultural industries. Here money acts as an important early career lubricant, allowing the privileged to manoeuvre into more promising career tracks, resist exploitative employment and take risky opportunities – all of which increase their chances of long-term success. In contrast, those

¹ Friedman S, Laurison D, Macmillan L (2017) Social Mobility, the Class Pay Gap and Intergenerational Worklessness: New Insights from the Labour Force Survey (ed Social Mobility Commission). London: Cabinet Office.

² <https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/highly-discriminating>

who lack the insulation of family money described the day-to-day of making a living in these areas a kind of economic chaos, or as one actor put it, “like skydiving without a parachute”.

Yet a helping hand does not always push from behind or below. In many elite occupations, support is more likely to come from above. And instead of economic it is often social – in the form of sponsorship. This process is simple; a senior leader identifies a junior protege and then, often operating beneath formal processes, is able to fast-track their career by brokering job opportunities, allocating valuable work or advocating on their behalf. This was particularly common at the accountancy firm we researched, where most partners talked openly about “bringing through” younger staff to the partnership. And while this was often presented as innocent talent-spotting, we found that sponsor relationships were rarely established on the basis of work performance. Instead, they were almost always forged, in the first instance, through a sense of class-cultural affinity – shared humour, taste or lifestyle. And, as senior managers across our case studies were themselves overwhelmingly from privileged backgrounds, this acts as another way that progression is rigged in favour of the privileged.

Jon Baldwin: You consider employment in television, accountancy, architecture, and acting. what might be said about the academic profession?

Sam Friedman: Our analysis showed that U.K. academia is strongly skewed towards those from privileged class backgrounds. Not only are approximately 60% of academics from backgrounds where their parents were doing middle-class professional/managerial work (compared to around 30% in the UK workforce as a whole) but even when those from working-class backgrounds successfully ‘get in’ to academia they struggle to ‘get on’. Specifically, they face a significant class pay gap of around £6,000 a year compared to their more privileged peers. More research is needed to unpack the drivers of the academic class pay gap, but my hypothesis would be that many of the drivers we uncovered in other areas also apply to academia. One of the key things that emerged from our analysis elsewhere, for example, was that in work areas where there is heightened ‘ambiguity of knowledge’ – i.e. when it is particularly unclear and contested what expertise or merit looks like - not only do those from privileged class backgrounds tend to excel because their embodied cultural capital tends to be misread as merit, but those from working-class backgrounds also tend to sort out or away from these types of jobs. In our interviews, those from working-class backgrounds would explain that that they did this because essentially the ‘rules of the game’ were particularly opaque in these areas and they didn’t really understand what they needed to do, in terms of demonstrating competence, to get a job or get promoted. Instead, they often opted for more technical or operational jobs where they felt the skillset needed to get ahead was clearer. I think this kind of class sorting may also apply to academia. Not only is there generally very high ambiguity of knowledge in academic work, particularly in terms of what ‘good’ scholarship looks like, but there may also be interesting class sorting within the profession. For example, does ambiguity of knowledge play a part in people deciding to do quantitative versus qualitative research, or choosing to specialise in social theory rather than social policy?

Jon Baldwin: In the context of a major TV company, you discuss how working-class ways of being and culture are appropriated by the upper middle-class as a way to make

money and cachet from authenticity. You raise the notion of 'studied informality' – can you illustrate and expand on this?

Sam Friedman: Merit is conventionally thought to have a fixed nature – indicators are objectively measurable and equally recognised by all. But a key theme running through our research is that supposedly objective measures of merit are often actually received, assessed and valued very differently according to how they are performed. Some performances “fit”, in other words, and others do not. To understand “fit”, it is first important to understand the dominant behavioural codes that prevail in elite occupations. These are rooted in the history of these occupations, in what type of people have done this work in the past and how, over time, they have been successful in embedding their own ideas about the “right” way to be at work. In accountancy, for example, and particularly in spaces such as the City (of London), the historical residue of an overwhelmingly privileged (white, male) majority is an enduring emphasis on corporate “polish” – encompassing formal dress and etiquette, interactional poise and an aura of gravitas.

In television, though, this stuffy idea of polish holds little sway. Instead, most told us they had chosen television because the culture was informal – that this was a key sign of TV’s openness. However, the more we delved into this informality, the more we began to understand that it is not a social leveller at all; on the contrary, it constitutes a very subtle and intricate code. In particular, we identified two dimensions of what we termed “studied informality”. First, this requires a particular package of self-presentation – casual but hip dress (there was a lot of discussion about the right kind of trainers), a “knowing”, often ironic humour (who knows when to swear in meetings, put their feet up or mock their managers), and a level of familiarity (hugs and kisses rather than handshakes) not normally associated with the professional workplace.

There was also another component – a particular highbrow way of talking about television. This was exemplified at the broadcaster during the “creative assembly”, where programme ideas were discussed in front of the executive team. The laudable aim of this weekly meeting was to bring staff together from different backgrounds to initiate what the chief creative officer described as a “collision of different ideas and perspectives”. Yet interviews revealed that the concept had dramatically backfired. Far from disrupting existing hierarchies, the assembly had become a crucible of the already anointed; a gladiatorial encounter where the discussion of television programmes simply acted as a vehicle for commissioners to underline their cultural prowess, jockeying to drop cultural references, or showcase an ever-more arcane mode of aesthetic appreciation. “It’s sort of a game of showing off,” one senior commissioner explained. “I’m like, how ... why are we talking about Of Mice and Men in relation to a programme about lie detectors?”

The point here is that although those at the top valued this code, most others admitted in anonymous interviews that it had little connection to the actual work, or to the mainstream programmes being made. This matters because it illustrates how the self-presentational baggage of a privileged class origin is frequently mistaken in elite occupations as a marker of a person’s talent, ability or potential.

We also found that behavioural codes are particularly important in certain areas of work. In environments such as television commissioning, for example, the success of the “final

product” is hard to foretell, and therefore the knowledge and expertise of the professional is inherently ambiguous. Presenting or performing the right image, then, becomes integral as an act of persuasion, a proxy for a competence that cannot be reliably or definitively demonstrated in the moment.

Jon Baldwin: In the epilogue you make suggestions for employers wishing to make their workplaces more representative of the society we live in. There is the proposal to take intersectionality seriously considering the double disadvantages faced by women and people of colour from working-class backgrounds. Another is to ban unpaid and unadvertised internships as this often advantages those from privileged backgrounds who can rely on the ‘Bank of Mum and Dad’ and hence perpetuate privilege. Another is to lobby for legal protection. The Equality Act 2010 ensured legal protections for a range of minority groups but did not include class or socio-economic background. Can you say more about this and other pertinent suggestions?

Sam Friedman: I am interested in thinking about what pragmatic policy solutions there might be to advocate for in this space - and I think I am policy pragmatist, ultimately – as we hopefully head toward a change of government. And one thing that, while certainly no panacea, strikes me as a step in the right direction, would be the implementation of the ‘Socioeconomic Duty’ originally contained within the Equality Act of 2010. This section both speaks to equality of opportunity in making class origin a protected characteristic, but also goes significantly further, requiring government and all public bodies to ‘have due regard for ‘reducing inequalities of outcome, especially as they relate to socio-economic disadvantage’. Obviously what exactly this means in practice is somewhat vague but, at least as a symbolic move, this would represent a significant rhetorical shift in policymaking away from a focus solely on social mobility towards a broader emphasis on class or socio-economic inequality

There has been significant impact of your research. Channel 4 Television made changes that have seen a 20 per cent increase in the number of staff recruited from low socioeconomic backgrounds and opened up the conversation across the sector in its continuing drive to demonstrate leadership in making change in social mobility within the industry. What can be done to ensure the policy decisions regarding class made by Channel 4 (and others) do not do so just nominally and in the interests of their brand. We are aware of green-washing and white-washing, could there be a form of class-washing?

See answer above on policy.

Jon Baldwin: The journal is looking at UK film / tv and class– do you have any observations or comments here?

Sam Friedman: This sounds really exciting. There is a real need for more research in this sector. One area I would be interested in finding out more about is the role of class in shaping freelance careers in film and television. For example, one finding that emerged from a survey we ran with PACT is that freelancers and those working in small independent television companies are more likely to come from privileged backgrounds. It would be interesting to interrogate why this is the case.

Jon Baldwin: Many thanks. What are you currently working on, and what is on the horizon for you

Sam Friedman: I am currently finishing book with Aaron Reeves (out Autumn 2024) investigating the British elite. Bringing together the entire historical database of Who's Who, genealogical records, probate, survey and experimental data, and over 200 in-depth interviews, we analyse the 120,000 individuals that have shaped Britain over the last 130 years. We also dig further to identify a distinct British power elite who combine both positional and economic power and represent just 0.01% of the UK population. The story we uncover about these elite groups has broadly three parts. First, we explore how these people seek to present themselves, particularly in public, as ordinary and meritocratic, and strongly set themselves against what they perceive as a stuffy, closed, and snobbish, 19th century British elite. This contemporary performance of ordinariness matters, we show, because there is a strong symbolic market for ordinariness; the British public are markedly more sympathetic toward elites who they perceive as down-to-earth. These claims to ordinariness are also sociologically significant because they directly contradict what our analysis reveals about who the British elite really are. Notably, we show that despite the enormous changes to British society that have taken place over the last 130 years, the traditional channels of elite reproduction remain remarkably intact. Specifically, elite origins, private schooling, and an Oxbridge degree, continue to provide extraordinary advantages in getting to the top. Why does this continuing elite reproduction matter? In the final part of the book, we answer this by arguing that inequalities in who reaches the elite have an important bearing on the way the elite collectively thinks and acts. Here we show that not only do elites from advantaged backgrounds tend to have more conservative and right-leaning policy preferences but historically they have put these into practice in distinctive ways. It is here that we also demonstrate the importance of distinguishing a power elite, demonstrating that this inner circle is also markedly more right-wing than others in the British elite. We thus not only provide a forensic empirical exploration of the British elite, but we also argue that this elite can and should be re-made through the political choices we, as a society, make.