

Has Oxbridge always been the key centre of elite formation?

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Henry – recently retired corporate lawyer

‘Complete Rubbish! I’ve never considered myself to be one of the elite. I consider myself, justifiably or not, to have been a successful professional. I don’t consider that elite... this belief that there is an elite that can dominate society, I have considerable doubts about that....If you are a successful lawyer, a successful banker or whatever you are within your profession, yes you have a fair amount of push, but do you have a general influence? No, none at all..’

How has Britain's elite changed over the last 125 years?

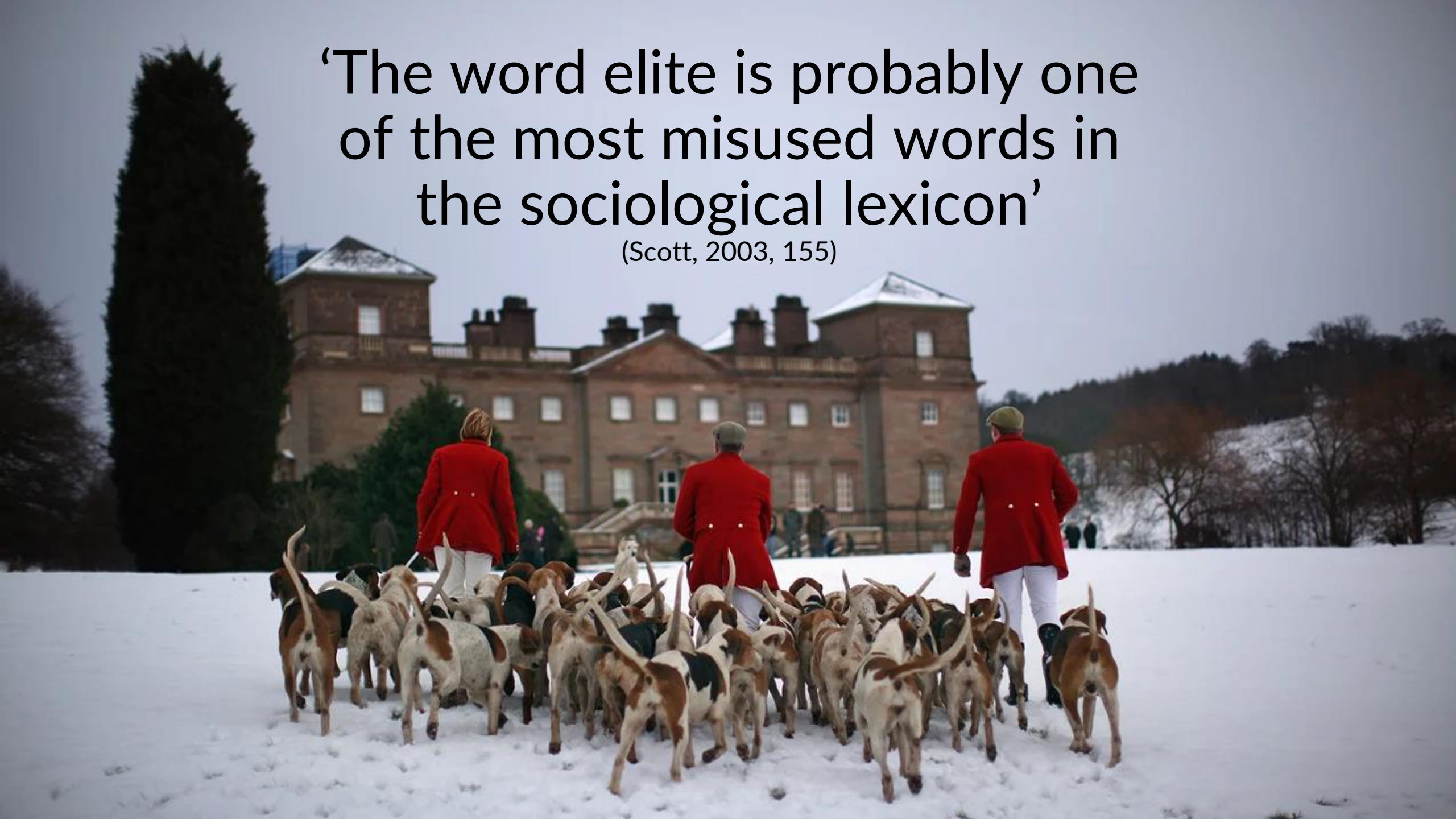




What is the role of elite universities
in that broader story?

‘The word elite is probably one
of the most misused words in
the sociological lexicon’

(Scott, 2003, 155)



‘Those with disproportionate access to, and control over, a range of economic, social, cultural and political resources’

KHAN, SHAMUS. ‘THE SOCIOLOGY OF ELITES’. ANNUAL REVIEW OF SOCIOLOGY 38, NO. 1 (2012): 361–77



WHO'S WHO 2016



168th annual edition

Dictionary of most 'noteworthy and influential' individuals

Compiled annually for 120 years

0.05% of UK population

Primarily documents a 'positional' elite

Data on schooling, university, clubs and recreations

WHO'S WHO 2016



168th annual edition

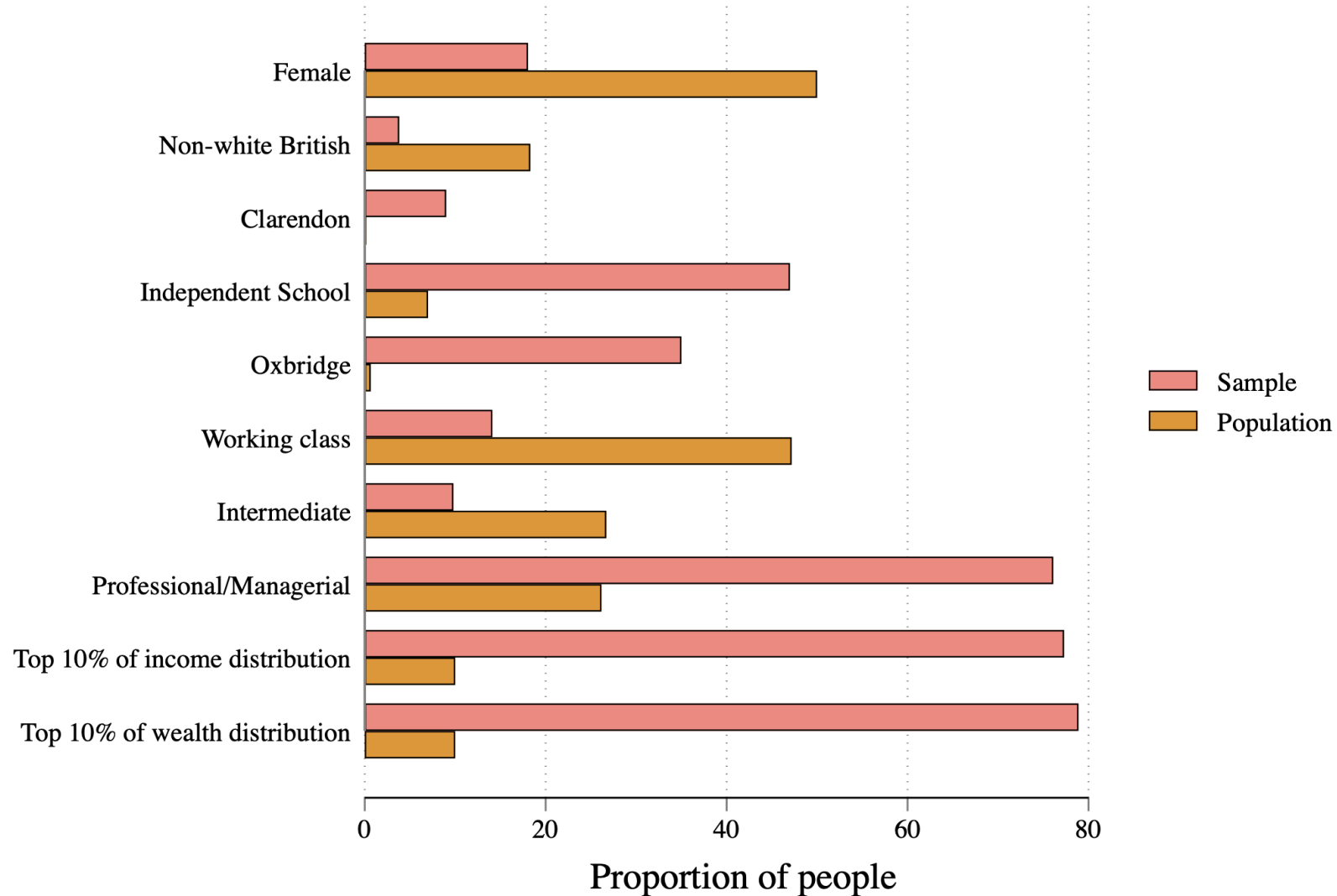
A Consecrated Elite

50% included automatically based on position (e.g. MPs, Ambassadors, Judges, FTSE100 CEOs)

50% selected by advisors based on reputation (e.g. perceived positional impact on British society)

Inclusion marker of consecration in its own right

So, who are the contemporary British elite?



Research Design

Longitudinal Mixed Methods

Quantitative

- Historical catalogue of Who's Who (N = 130,000)
- Probate records 1855-1995 (15m) + genealogical records (n = 60,000)
- Survey of current Who's Who entrants (N = 3280)
- Archive of BBC Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs* (N = 2500)

Qualitative

- Secondary analysis of 70 interviews in British Library 'National Life Stories' series (matched to *Who's Who*)
- 100 interviews carried out by us and our post-docs
- Interviews organized into four birth cohorts
 - (1900-1920, 1920-40, 1940-1960, 1960-today)

Pushing Back on Being 'Elite'

'I would not consider myself in any way shape or form establishment or elite' (Aiden, civil service)

'I mean you know I sort of recoil inside at the idea that I could be that person, I mean I spent all my life fighting elitism' (Alex, politics, power elite)

'I'm very cleared eyed about this, I'm not part of the elite at all. I have very limited influence and almost no power' (Samantha, business, power elite)

Struggling to be ordinary



Narratives of Opening up

'The truth is there's been masses of [social mobility]...so when I was young the number of top jobs were very limited. Nowadays there are so many top jobs there are plenty of ways in which you can move up. I mean if I was thinking about a certain elite from the 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s then a really large number of people would've got their through a boarding, yes a boarding school. And that would be a way you would identify people...now you wouldn't dream, I mean I can't imagine, sort of asking what school someone went to' (Duncan, Policy/Politics, power elite)

Deflecting Privilege

Victoria: I'm certainly not, I mean upper middle, I don't know what you call it. I mean [my father] probably thought himself as upper class but communist. You know I don't particularly...I don't think of myself as a class, but I'm clearly not working class or lower class. And I, you know, I don't particularly want to think about class, but I must have come from privileged background...I mean do you think I've got a slightly?...I mean I'm sometimes slightly shocked when I hear a recording of my voice that it sounds a bit upper...

Int: It's got a middle class sound, but it doesn't sound super posh to me.

Victoria: Well, good, well I don't want it to (Victoria, Higher Ed)

Family Fortunes

Are elite's narratives of opening up correct?



Probate

Record of the estate of someone who died

Records kept between 1855 and 1995

Scraped all of this data (18m records)

We match probate with *Who's Who* to identify those in top 1% of (probate) wealth distribution

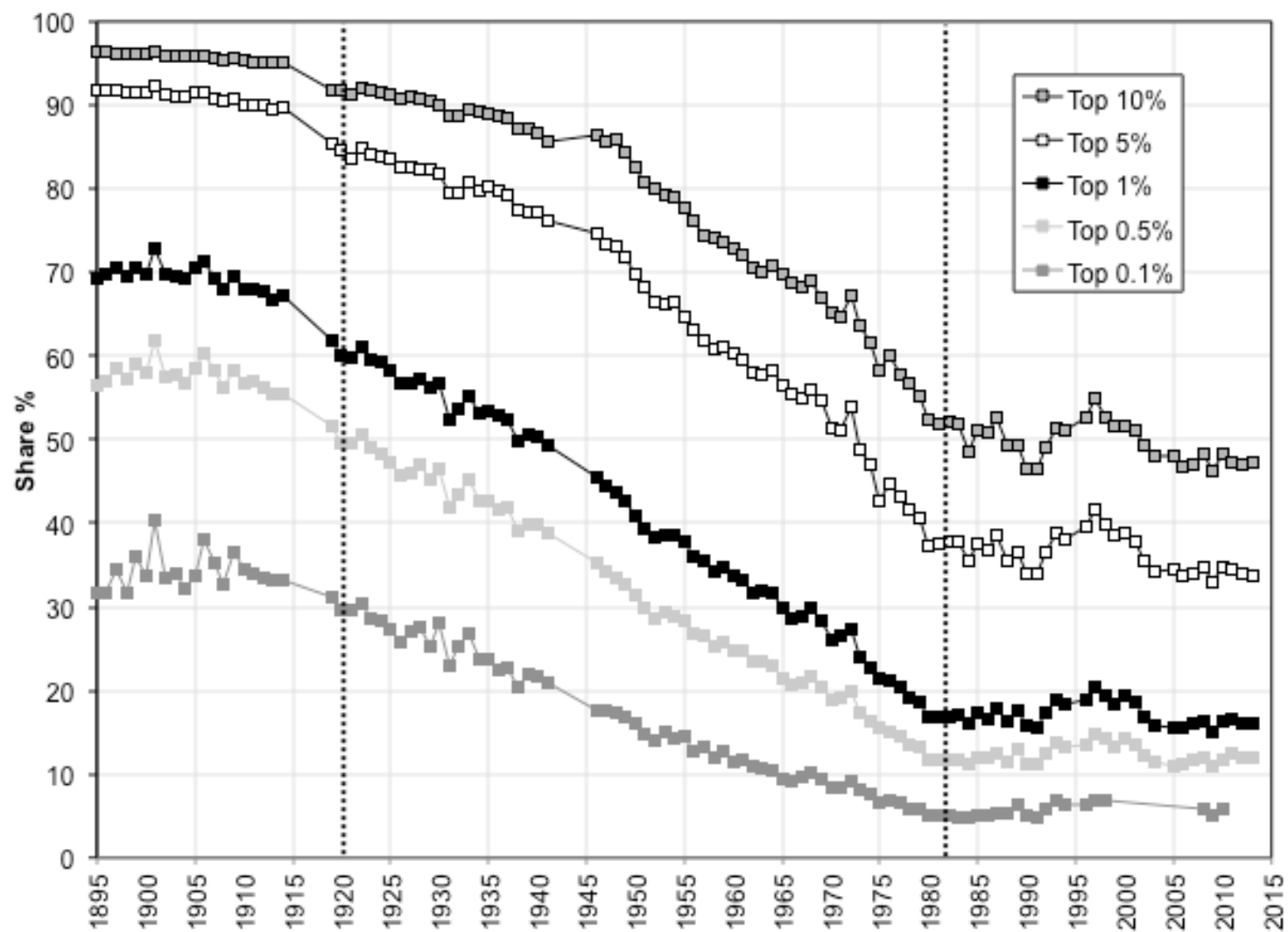
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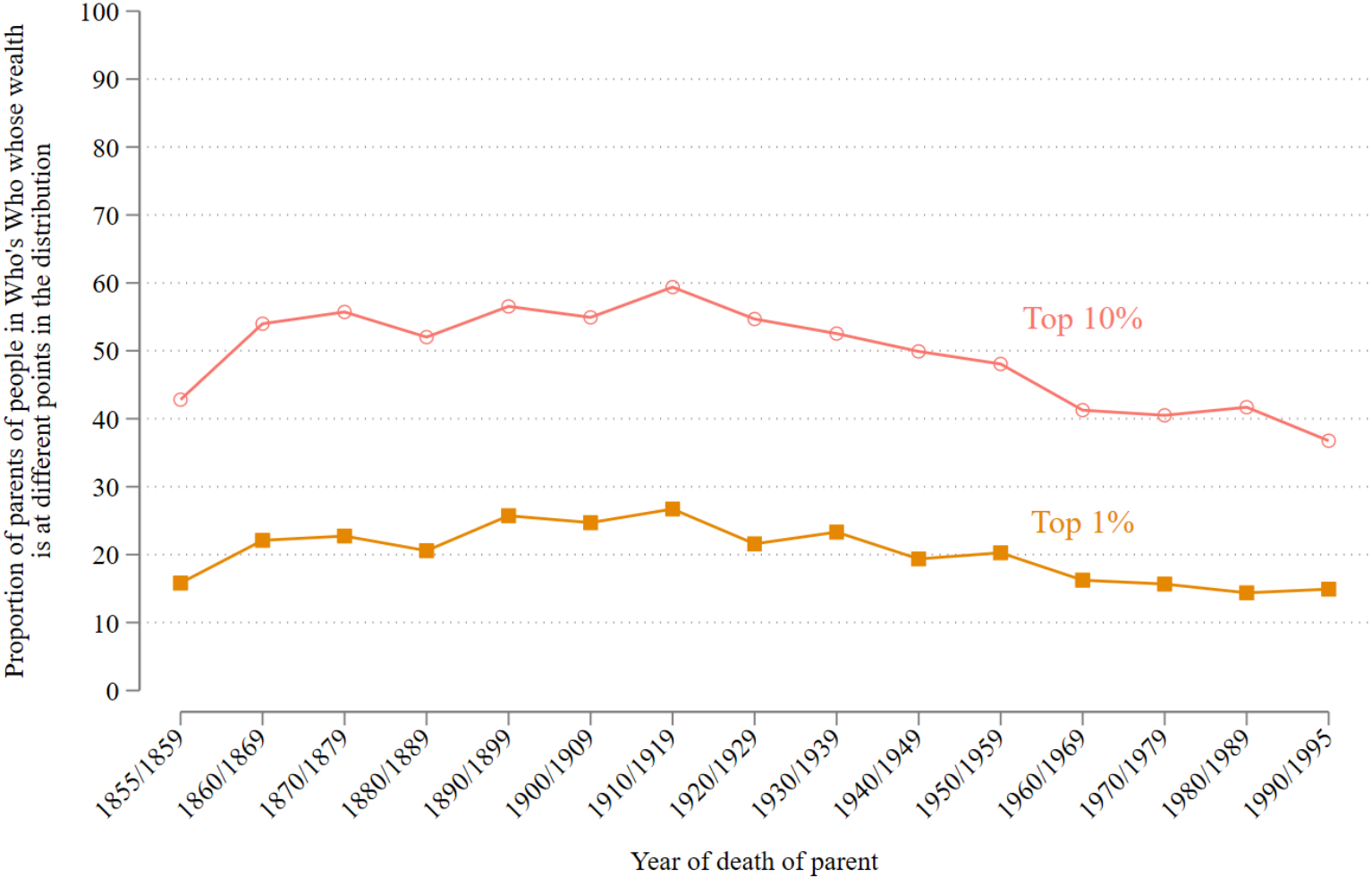
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The dramatic equalization of wealth



Elite reproduction has declined (a bit)



The Clarendon Schools



Eton



Harrow



Westminster



Rugby



Charterhouse



Merchant Taylors



St Paul's

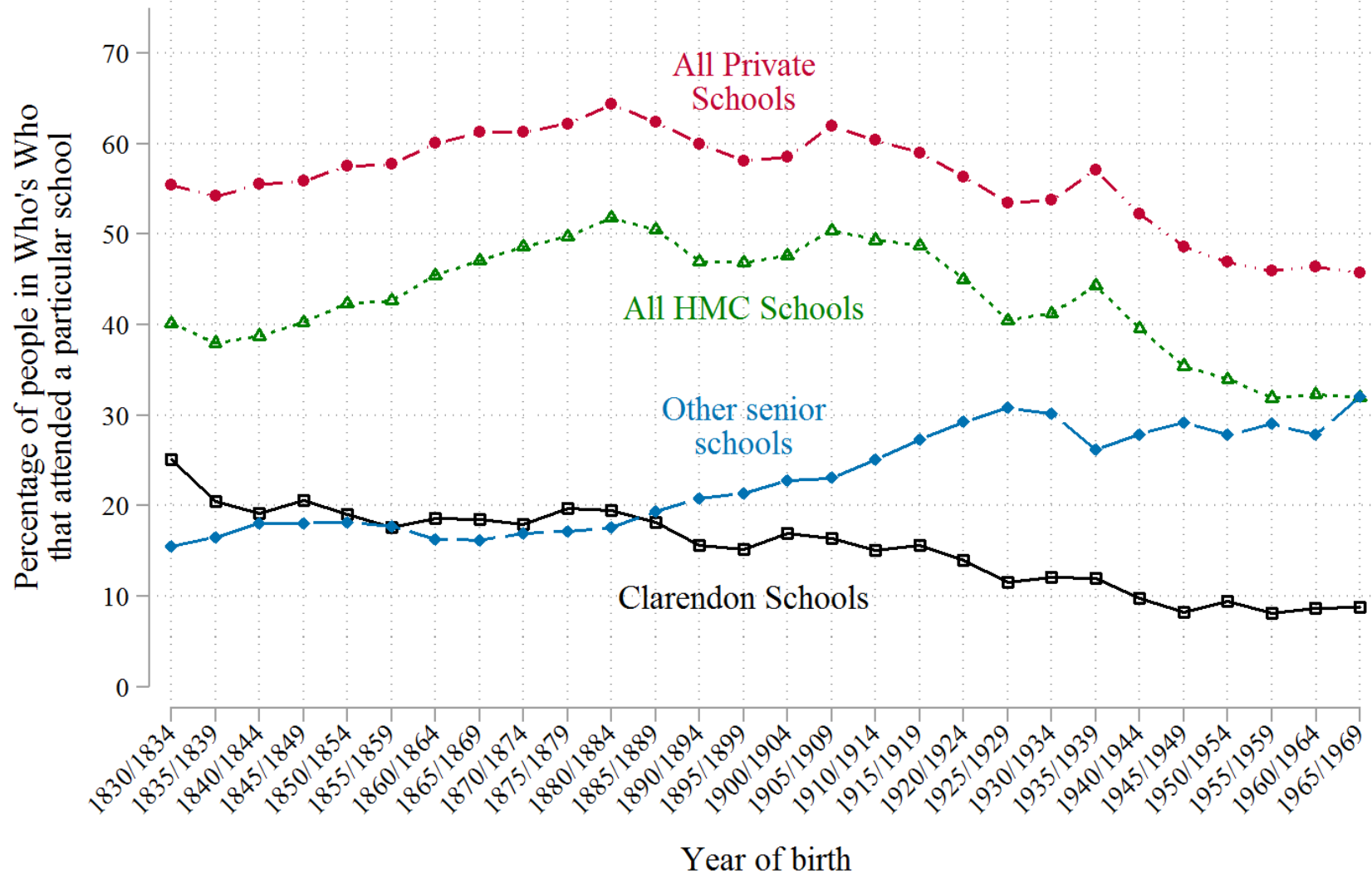


Shrewsbury

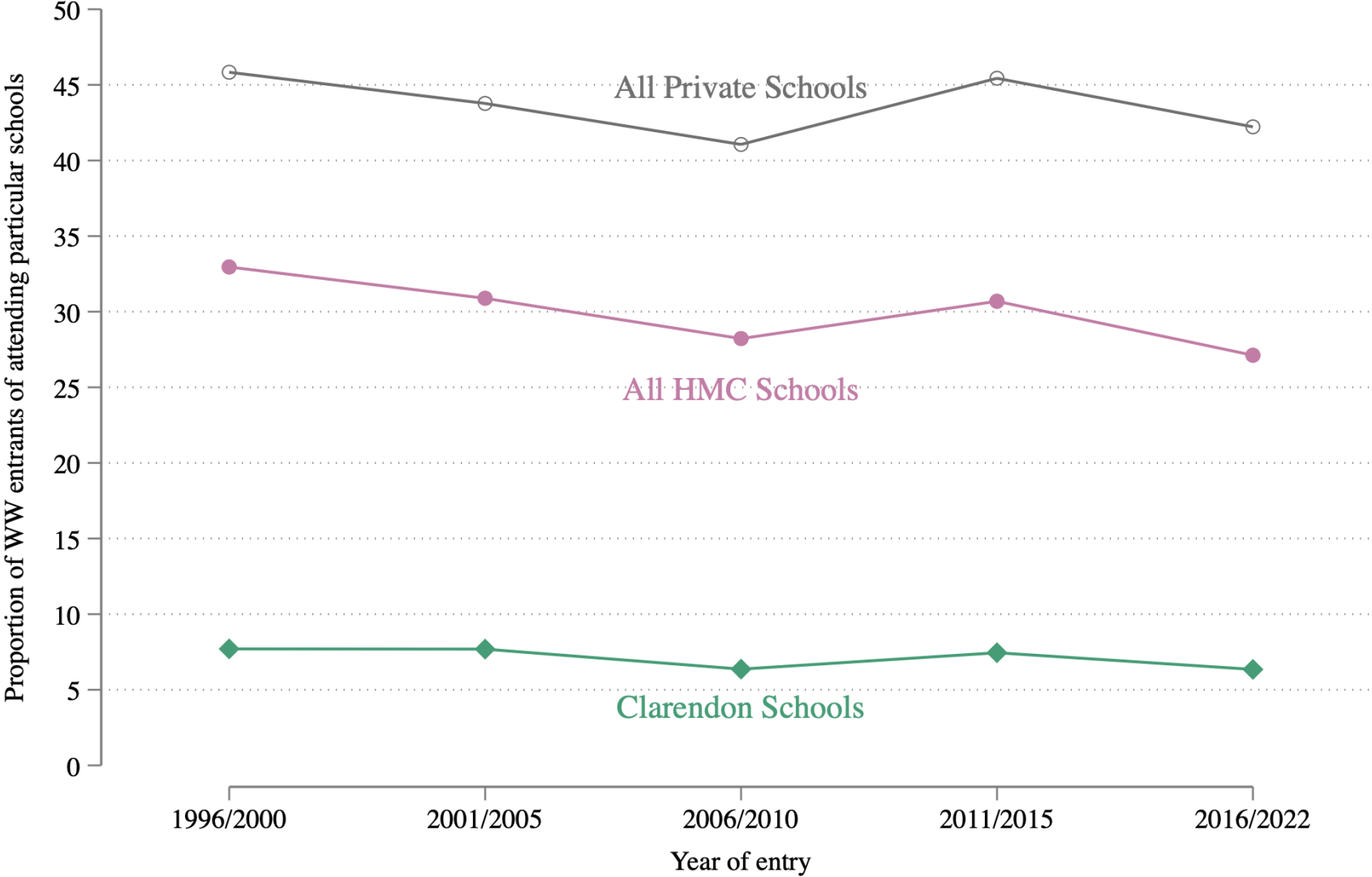


Winchester

The Decline of the Old Boy, 1897-2021



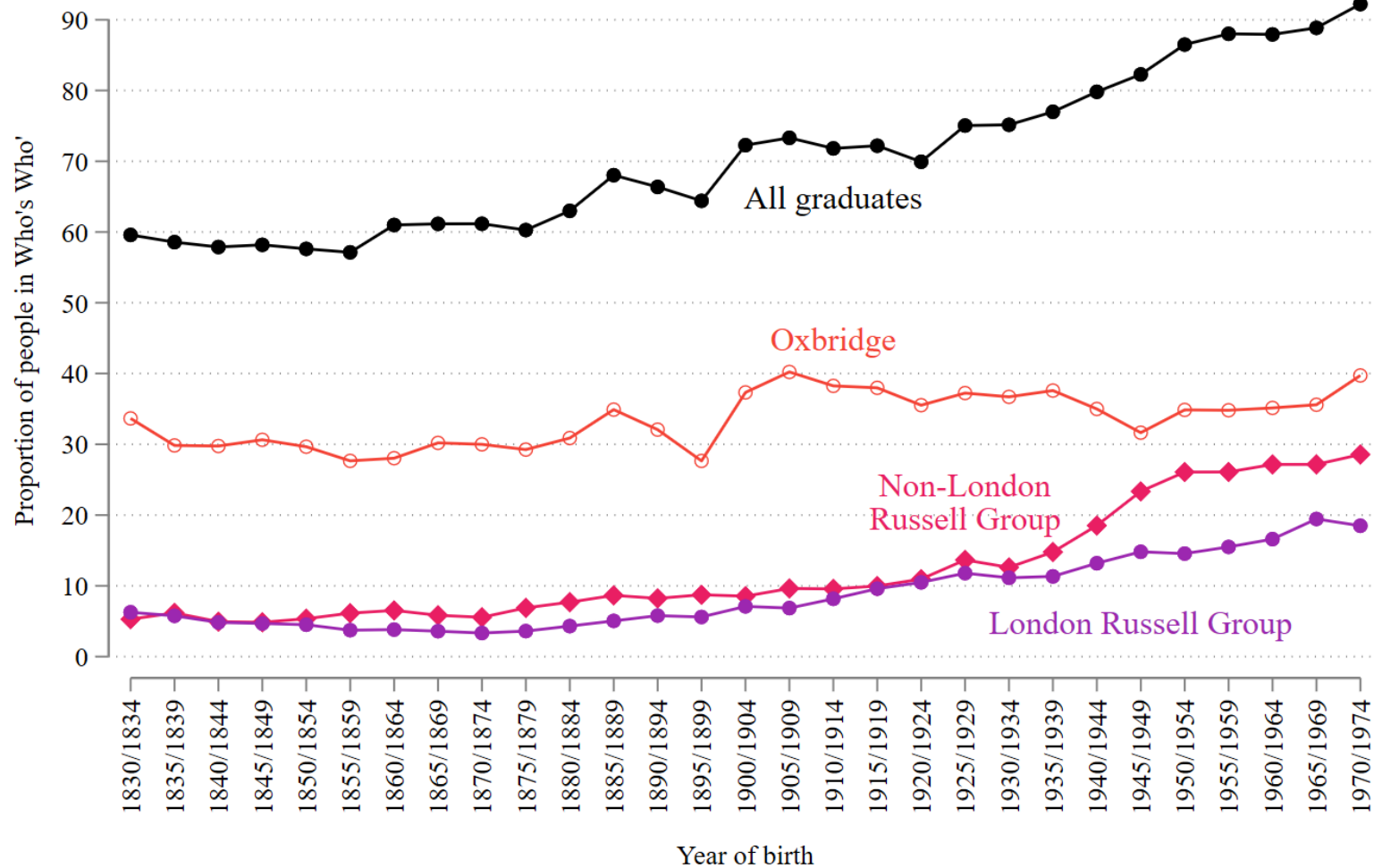
The persistence of the old boy, 1996-2022



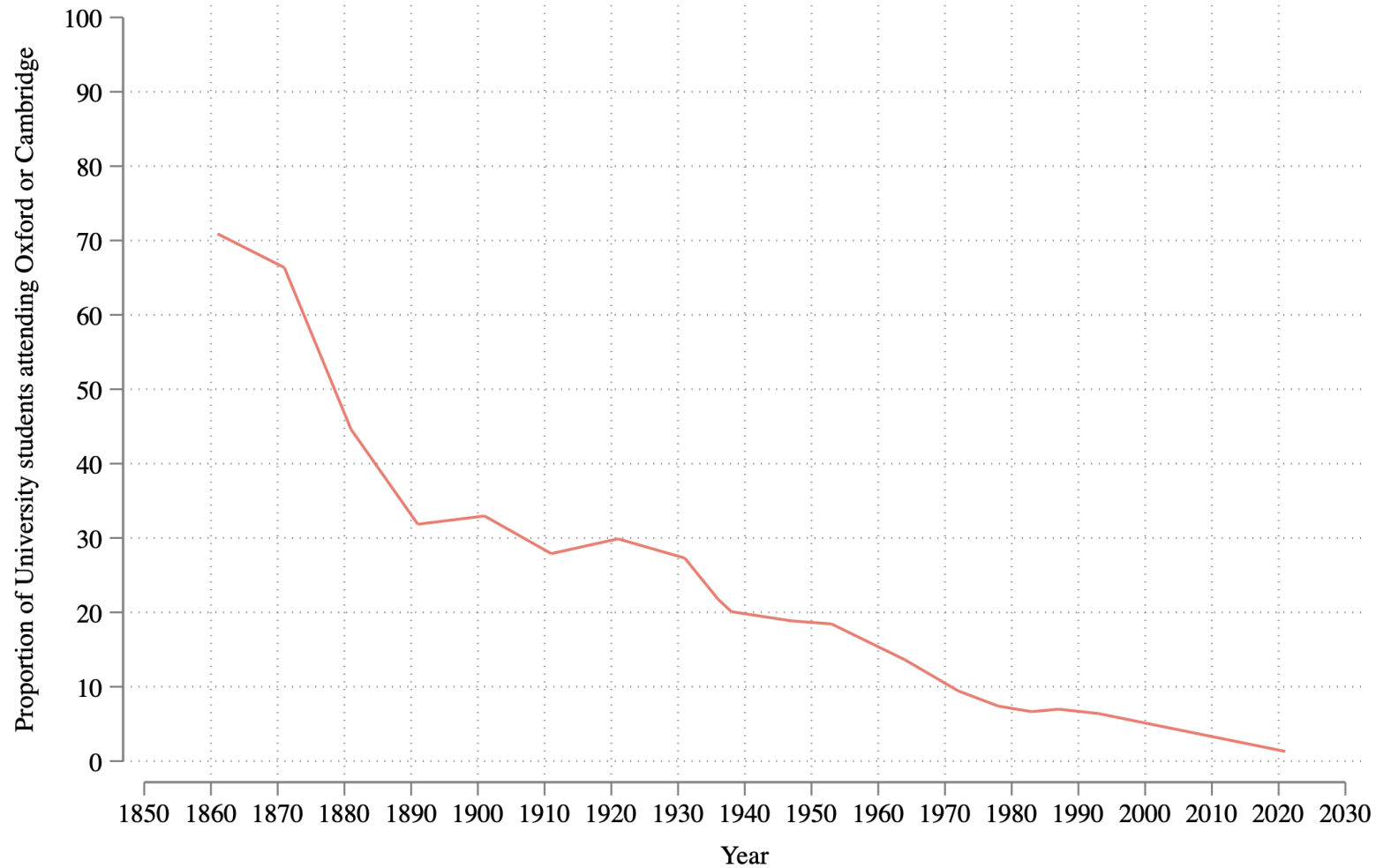


What about Oxbridge?

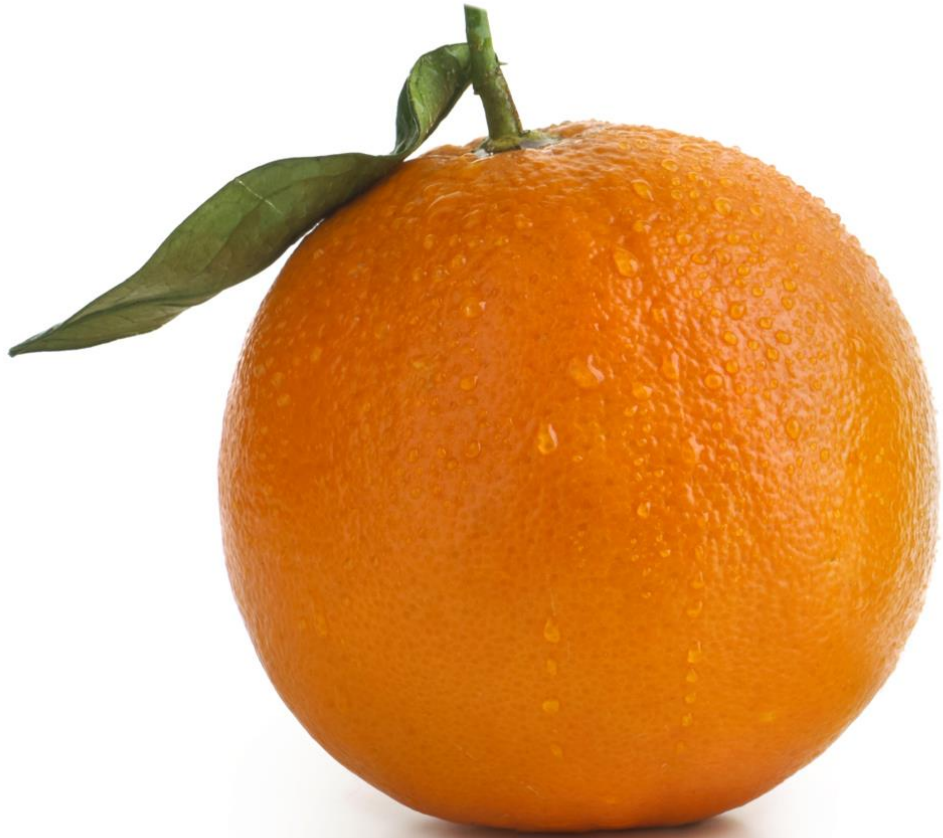
Oxbridge is over-represented and it has remained stable within the British elite



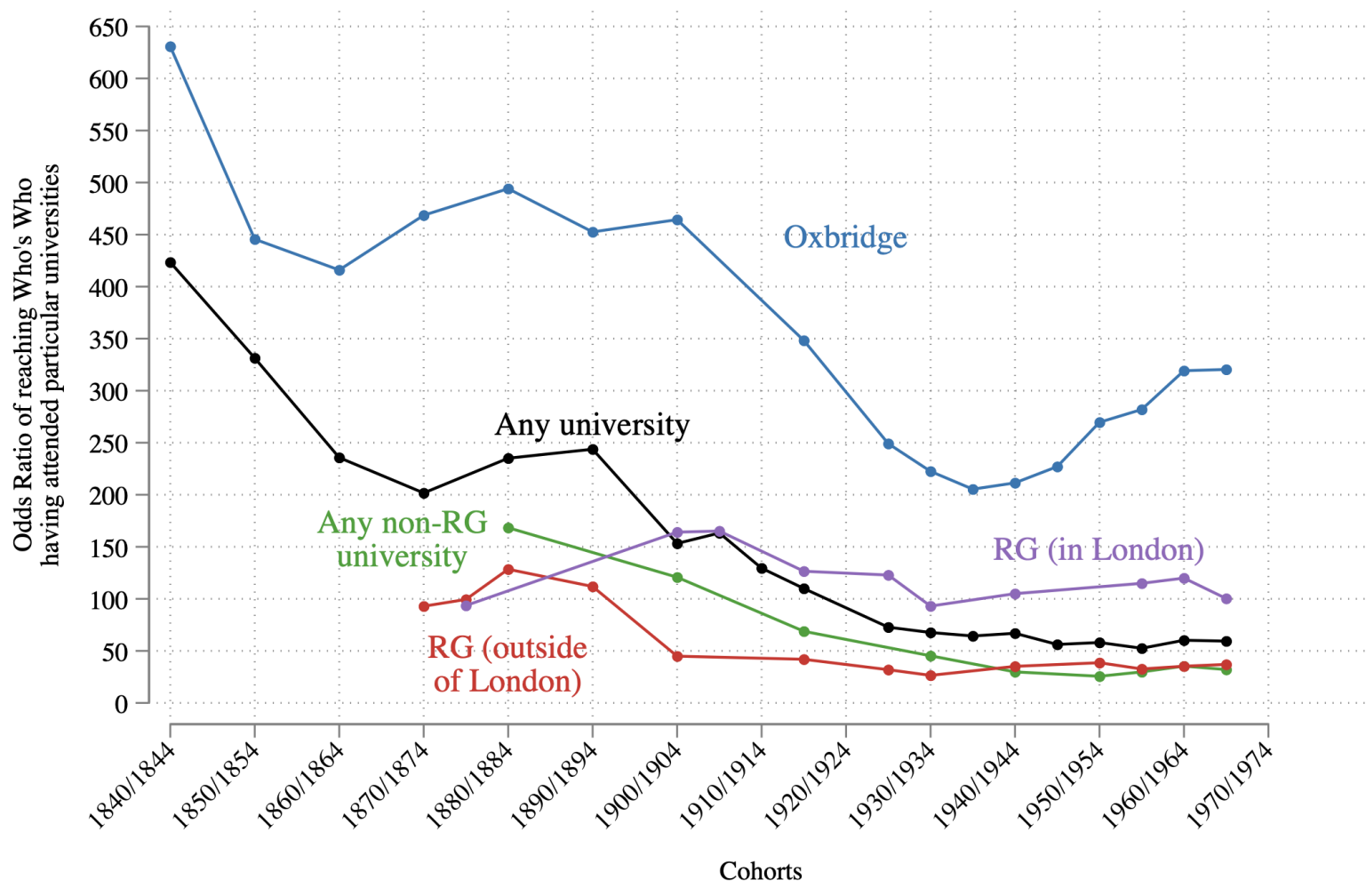
Oxbridge has declined as a proportion of all students



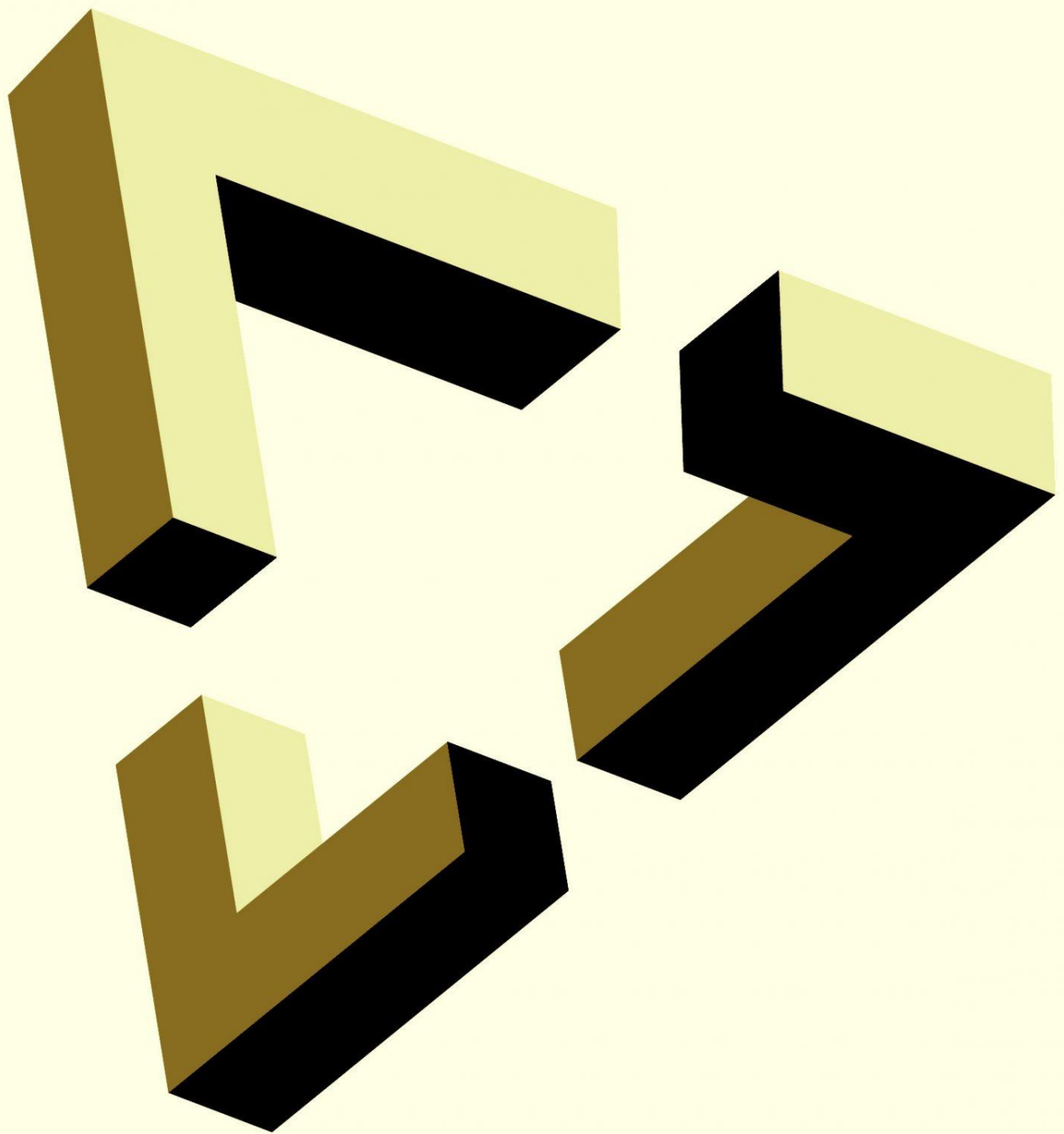
What's the right comparison?



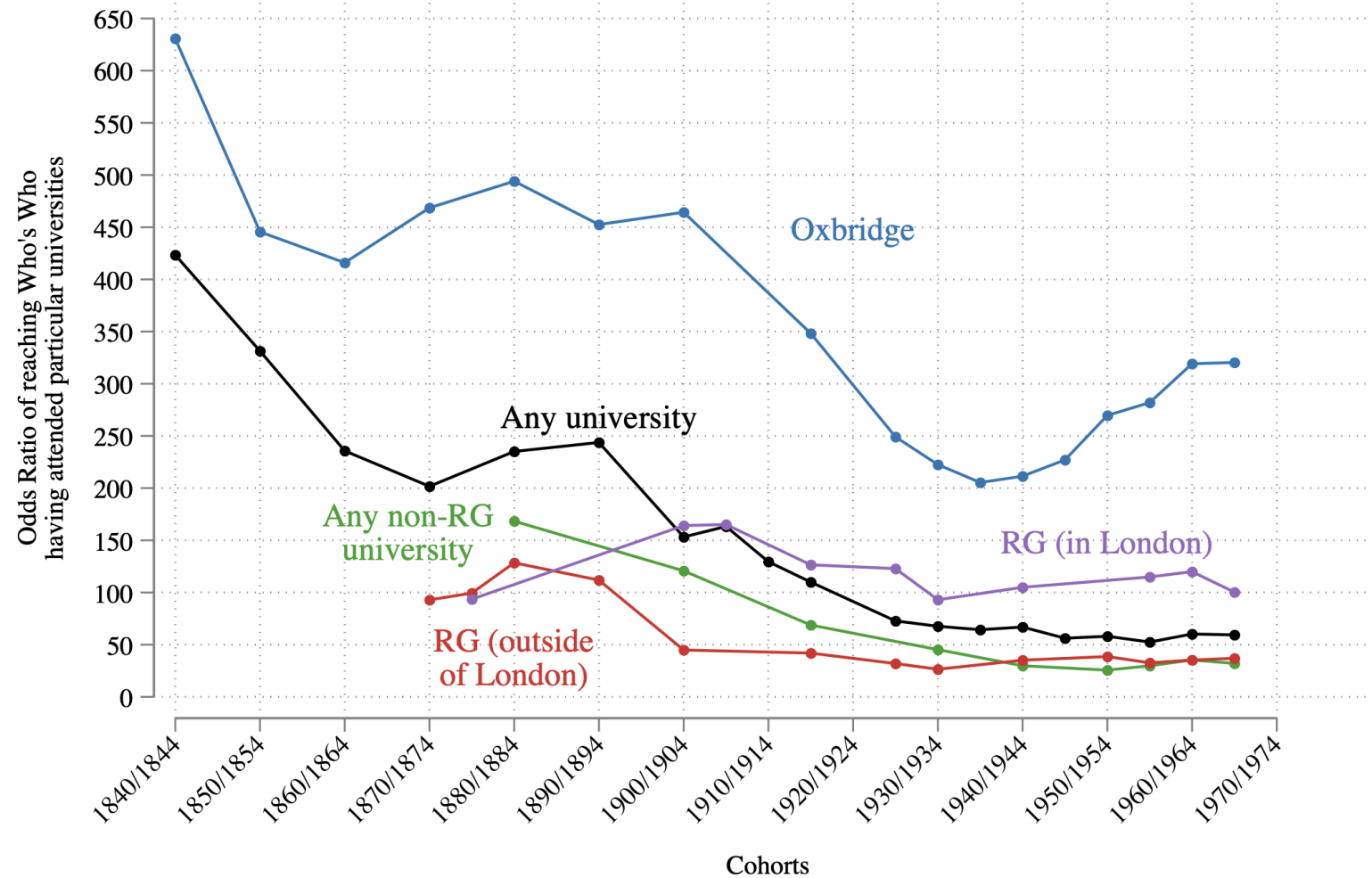
The fall and rise of Oxbridge



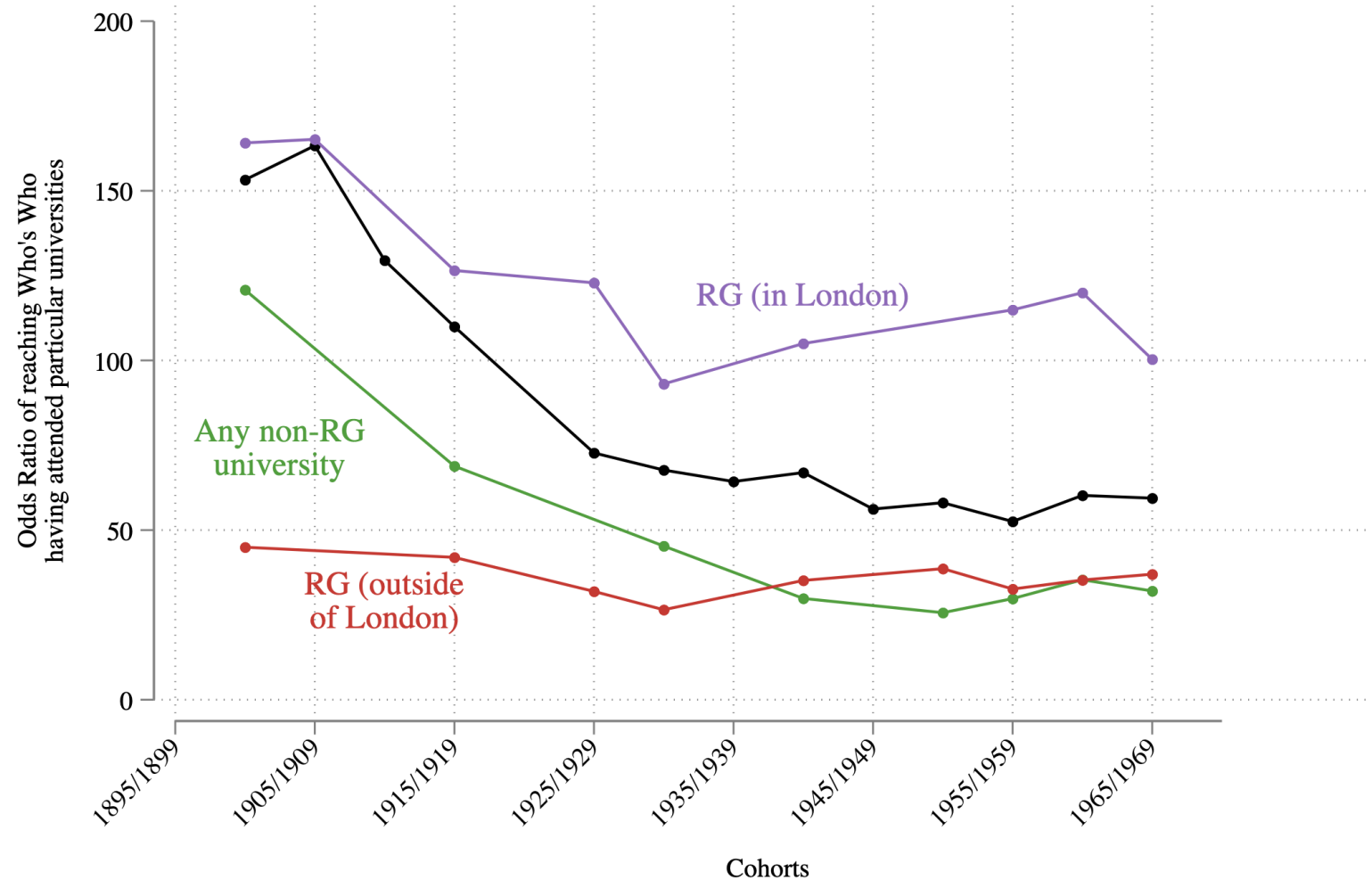
Is there a
'golden
triangle'?



Oxbridge in a different world



But, the London-based Russell Group Unis are extremely successful



The Oxbridge Myth



Sir David Steel (1916-2004)

I then I think already decided to go, follow my brother up to Univ., to Oxford. But I didn't get a scholarship... But I did get some sort of exhibition, which I think helped my parents a bit [...] but it was an academic thing, I mean it wasn't anything... Because maybe it was...it was an exhibition to Univ., so...except there were quite a number of people; Rugby had quite a connection with Univ. at Oxford. So, then I went up...

So it could have been a sort of closed Rugby...

Closed Rugby grant, yes, I think it was, yes. So it wasn't all that...



Sir David Steel (1916-2004)

Well, I have to admit what you gather, that I was no great scholar[...]

College Univ., it hasn't got that reputation quite now, but at that stage had a reputation as being 'the pub in the high'[...]

I used to go and have to spend Sunday afternoon with tea with one or the other of [his 3 aunts who lived in Oxford]. And they, I'll never forget one of them sort of saying, 'I hear you're doing so well', and I think it was Mr Beveridge then, Mr Beveridge saying, 'You're so good at putting down drink in Univ.', which was a nice phrase[...]

Yes, cricket, I played cricket, I played for the university... I was a member of the Vincent Club, but I mean that merely comes with being a sportsman[...]

But the greatest fun, I enjoyed it, and I remember my brother loved every minute of it too.





Hugh Peppiatt

I said, "how is everything, Basil?"

Now, Basil Bridgewater, says to me, he says, "Ah", so he said, "It's all changed. It's all changed."

I said, I said, "What do you mean?" I said to Basil, "No, no bottles about?"

"Sir, there are hundreds of bottles, but they're all milk bottles!"



Hugh Peppiatt on the decline of nepotism

Martin Hunter was 'the son of my housemaster at Winchester, which, of course, is why he came here. He came to the firm. **He was interviewed by my father, and, after half an hour of talking about sailing, and his father, my housemaster and cricket, another important subject, my father put his hand out and said, "Well!"** And Martin said he sat up, and he, he straightened his tie, because, you know, "Well", was going to lead into the real questions. "Well", said my father, "when do you want to start?" (LAUGHS) So that was what ... **A typical interview story of those days, of course.'**

'**Freshfields had fallen behind in size**, and had relied on the traditional methods of people coming knocking on the door, and the, the someone at the Club, or the school saying, **"Could you take my boy?"** And, of course, it was soon found that was **an extremely inadequate way'** to recruit



Cambridge
Colleges

‘the new agenda of social equality’

Hard Work



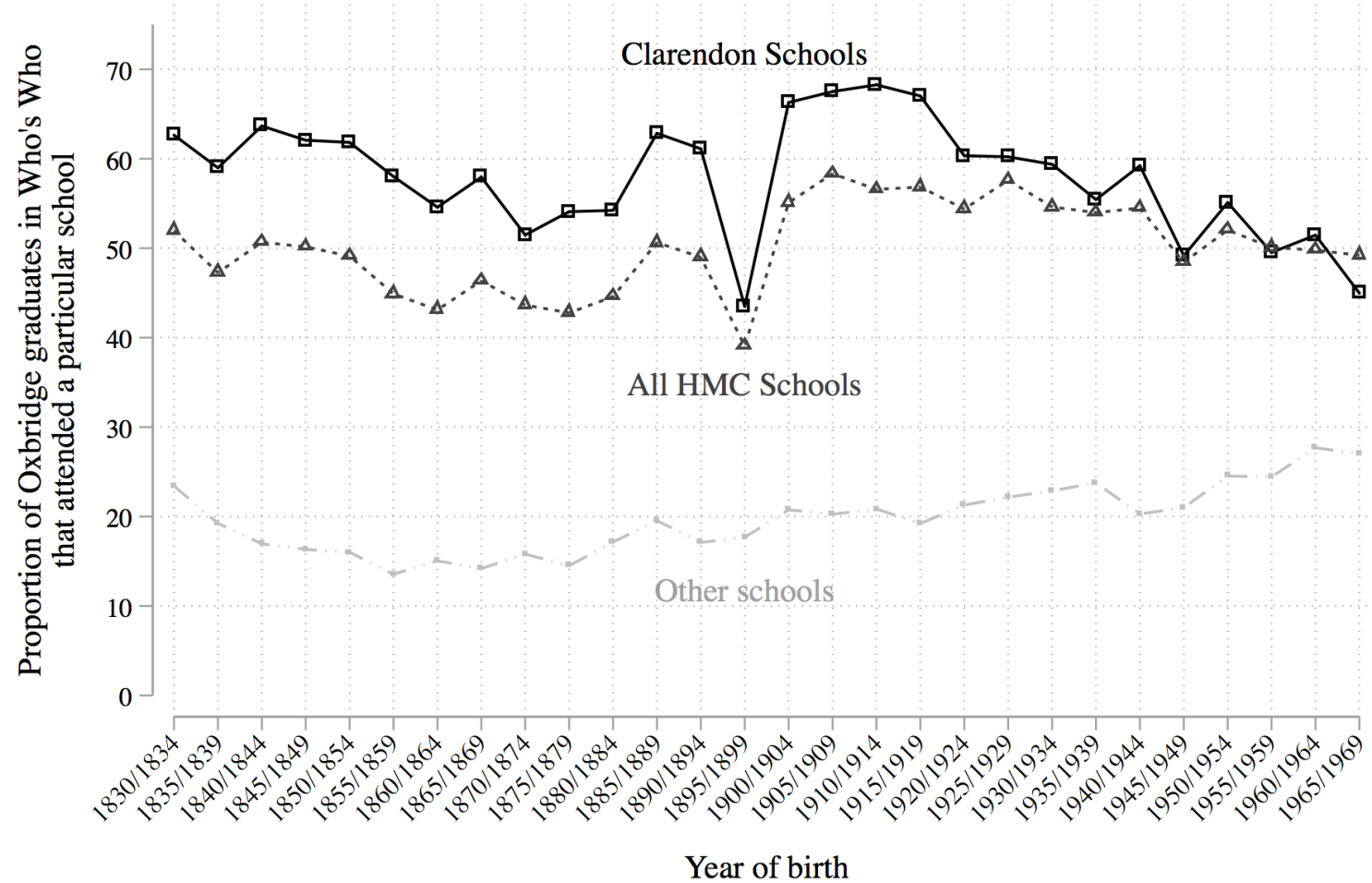
The end of certainty



The two Oxbridges



Oxbridge attendance among people in WW



The two Oxbridges: schools

Different Groups	1910 Odds Ratio	Now Odds Ratio
<i>Baseline: People who have not been to Clarendon or Oxbridge</i>		
Attended Oxbridge but did not attend Clarendon school	136.80	88.33
Attended Clarendon but not Oxbridge	270.78	68.00
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The two Oxbridges: Wealth

	5% of Oxbridge students come from top 1%	10% of Oxbridge students come from top 1%	15% of Oxbridge students come from top 1%	20% of Oxbridge students come from top 1%
	ORs	ORs	ORs	ORs
Different Groups				
<i>Baseline: People who have not come from top 1% and have not attended Oxbridge</i>				
Attended Oxbridge but did not come from top 1%	77.73	82.17	86.98	94.84
From top 1% but did not attend Oxbridge	11.46	11.87	12.3	12.75
From top 1% and attended Oxbridge	409.44	192.29	127.01	92.39

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Sir Peter Daniell (1909-2002)

I went to Trinity... And we knew everybody. And the sort of annual intake used to be - I mean I'm talking in very general terms - **sort of 10 Etonians, 8 Rugbyans, 8 Wykhamists, 5 from Marlborough, 4 from Tonbridge. The whole lot...** Where if you went to the House, I'm talking only of Oxford, Christchurch. I mean **a great friend of mine went there and he never knew anybody but Etonians the whole way through his Oxford career.**

Meeting these boys from State schools, I mean that must have been quite a new social experience for you?

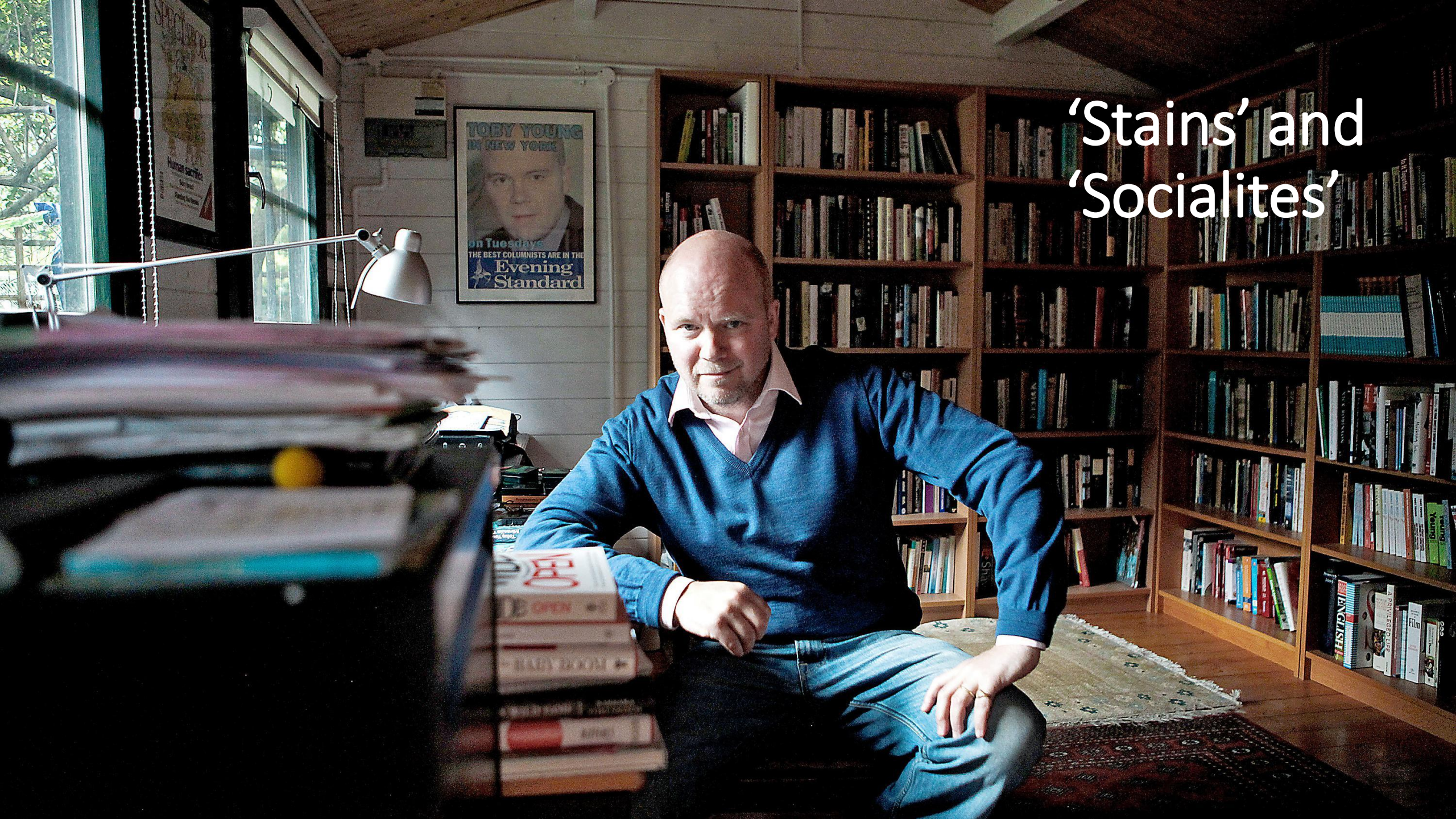
Yes, up to a point. **And of course slightly different accent and that sort of thing, affected one a bit.** But - there weren't an awful lot of course. But the ones that were there were on the whole pretty bright individuals and very nice ones you see. And I think **on the whole they were rather carefully chosen.**

Sir Peter Daniell (1909-2002)

And what sort of people had an influence on you there, other than perhaps your colleagues and friends you made?

Well there was one Don in particular had a tremendous influence on me, a man called **Philip Landon**. Who was a bachelor and he lived in college. He was a snob and he very much - **cultivated the Etonian clique so to speak**. But he was a delightful man, he taught law. He didn't teach me, but he - he had a tremendous influence on what one did and things like that. And I used to go and play bridge in his rooms and things like that, you know. And one got to know him very well. Liked him enormously.

'Stains' and 'Socialites'



Gautam (born 1964)

So, I found the first, **the first few months quite a culture shock**, because although [college] was a very, very left-wing college, **it was also very public school-y**. I think it had the second highest state to public school pupils in the university after Christchurch. So, although the politics and the college were very left-wing, it was socially quite exclusive and quite cliquey.

And so, it took a bit of time to kind of find my feet. And also, **coming from a state school background that didn't have that kind of natural confidence**, which I think a lot of the public school applicants kind of had naturally. And so, I kind of felt a bit overwhelmed, but I didn't feel that confident.

I think towards the end of the first year, **I started making more friends, including friends from public schools**, which got me into kind of wider friend circle within Oxford, particularly St. Paul's; I made a very good friend from St. Paul's who kind of introduced me to his friend circle who were, because St. Paul's has such a big Oxbridge entry, he had mates in every college and they're a nice group of people.

British elite perform ordinariness
(drawing distinctions with an
aristocratic past)



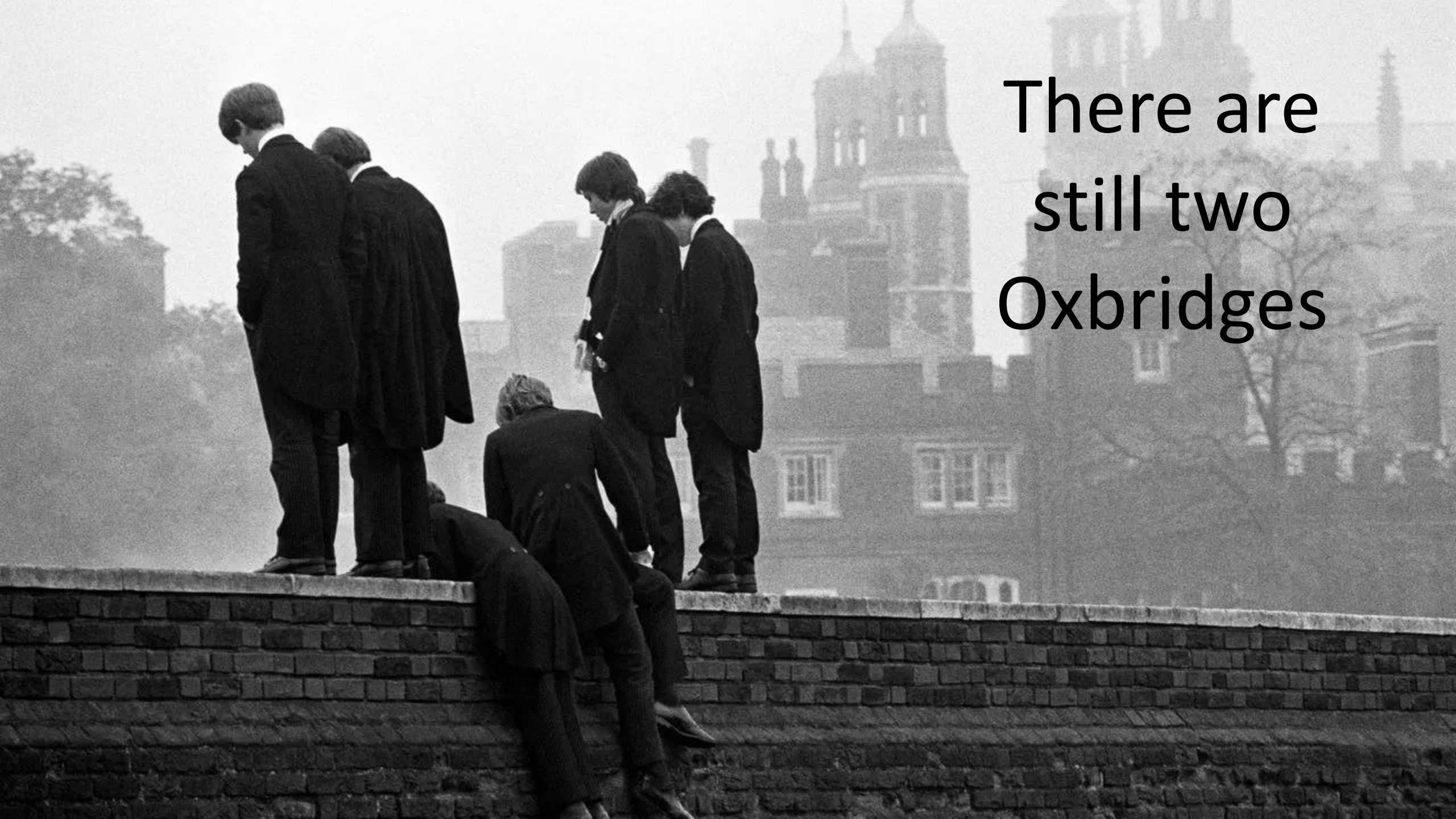


A high degree of continuity

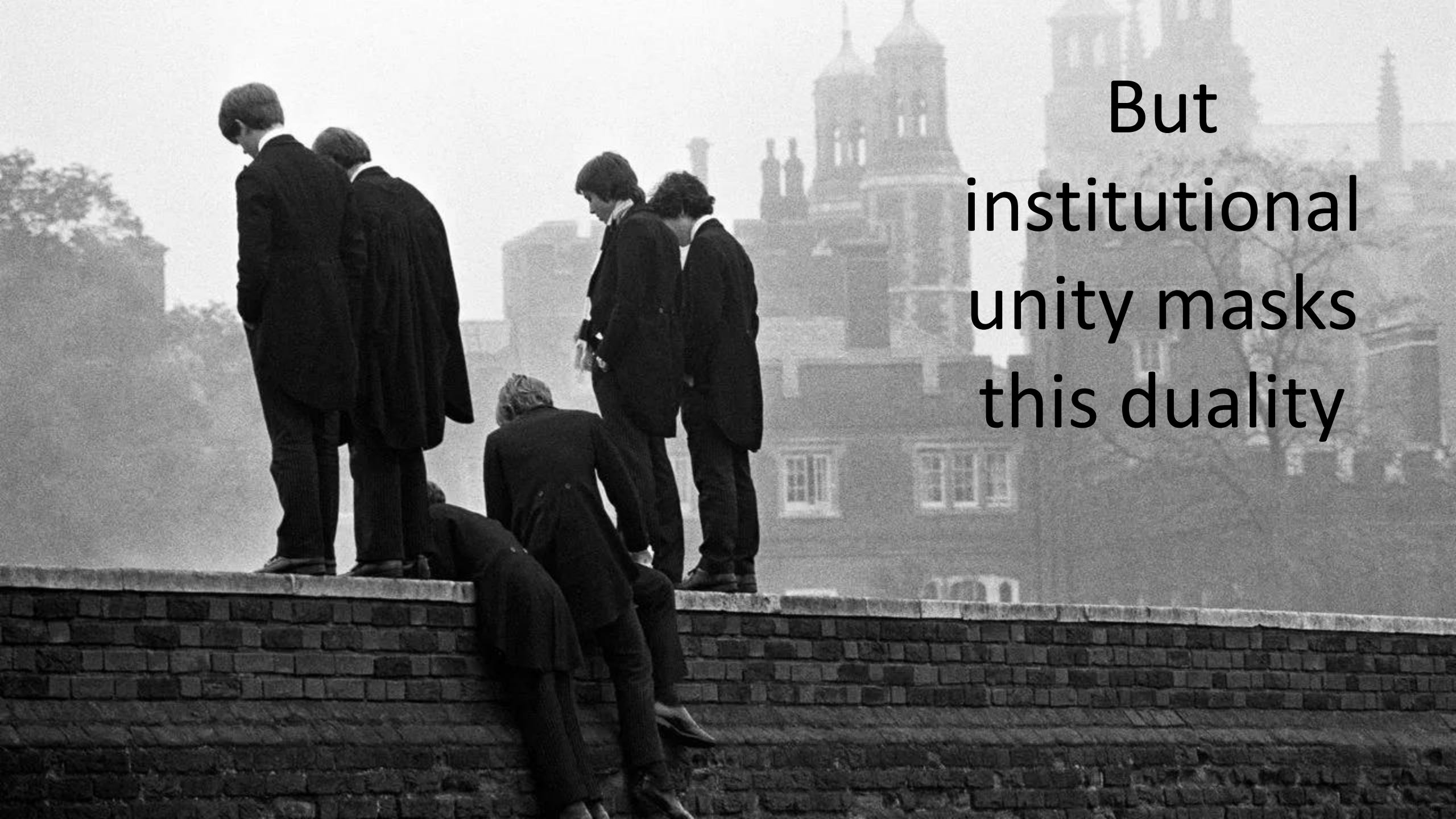


Cambridge
Colleges

The role of elite universities is complicated

A black and white photograph showing a group of students in traditional Oxfords (dark suits with white shirts and ties) standing on a brick wall. They are looking out over a cityscape, which includes a prominent building with a large tower and spire. The scene is captured in a cinematic style with soft lighting.

There are
still two
Oxbridges

A black and white photograph showing a group of men in dark suits standing on a brick wall. They are looking out over a cityscape. In the background, a large, ornate cathedral with multiple spires is visible. The scene is somewhat hazy, suggesting a misty or overcast day. The men are positioned in a line, with some standing and others leaning against the wall.

But
institutional
unity masks
this duality

Measure class origins of household



Eradicate applications and randomly recruit above an attainment threshold (adjusted regionally).

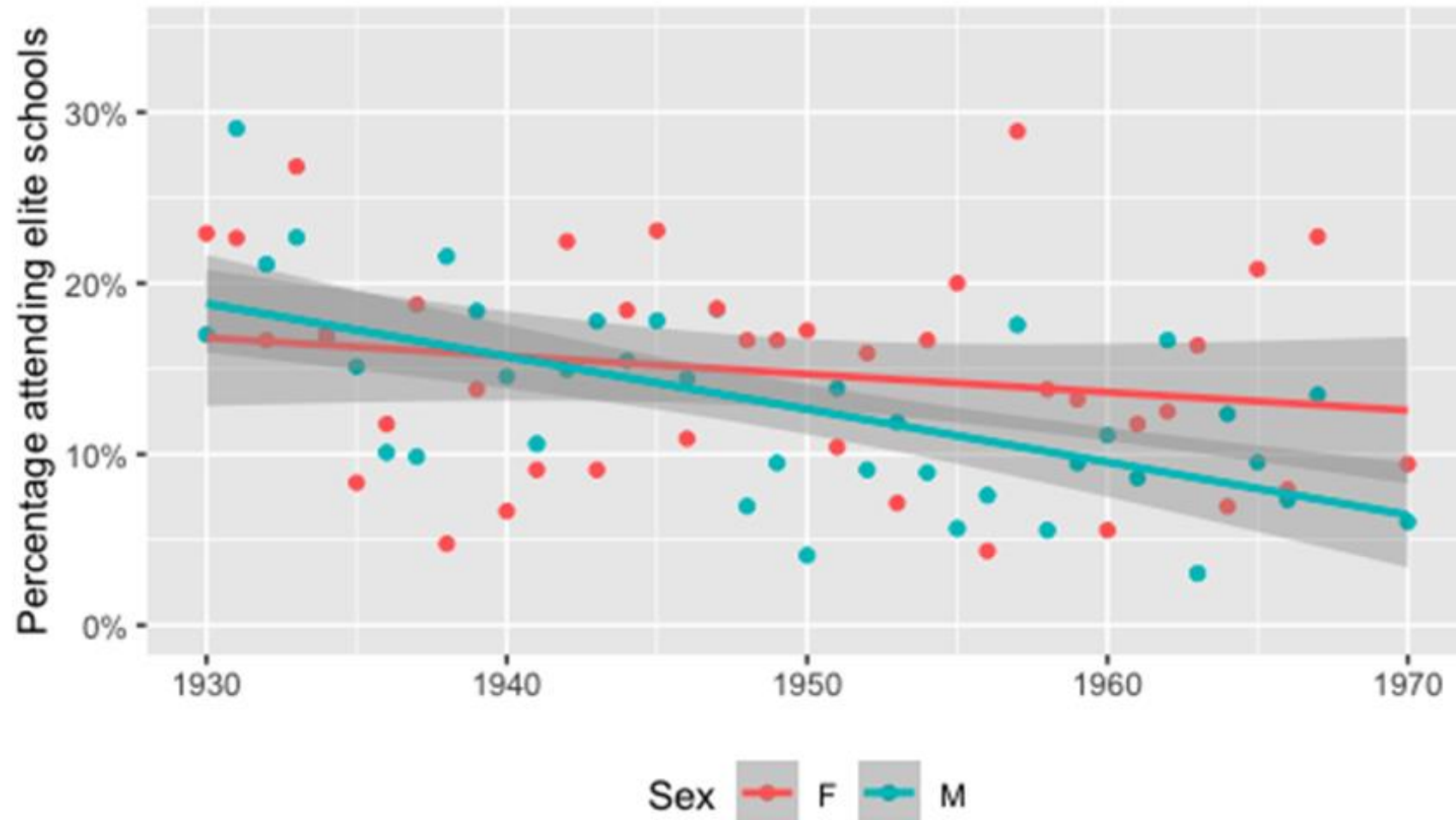


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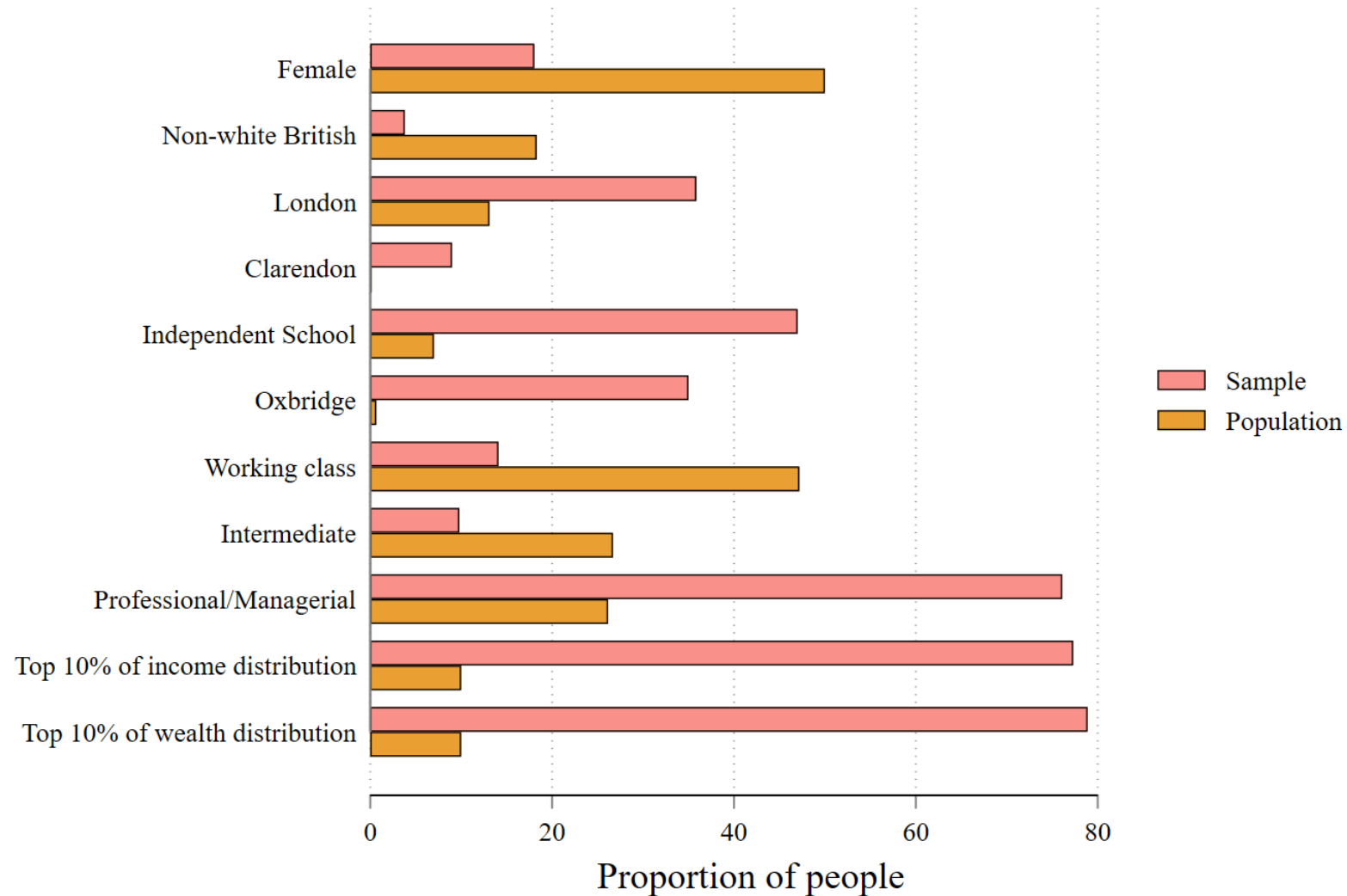
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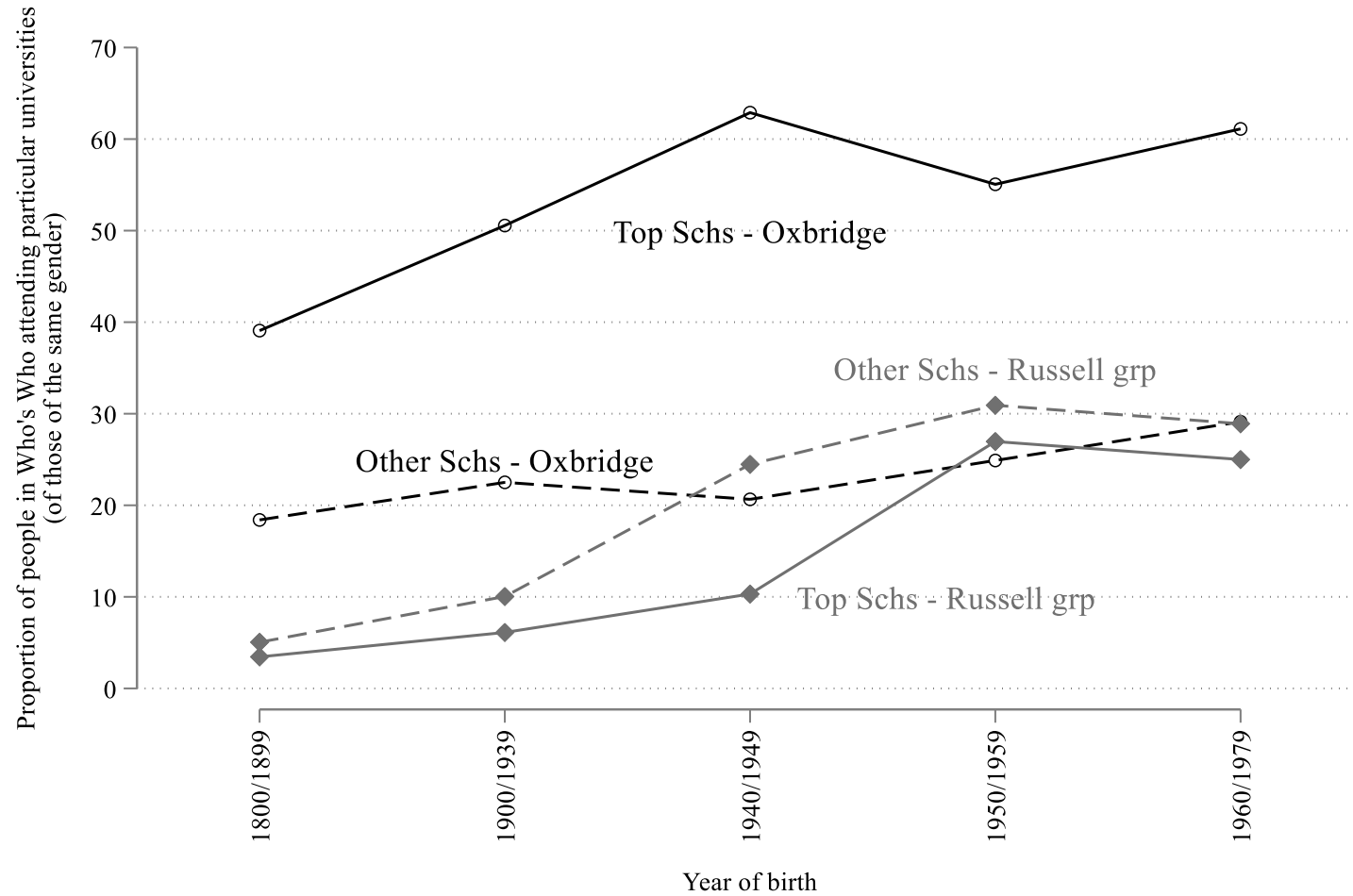
Proportion of Oxford students attending elite schools over time



So, who are the contemporary British elite?



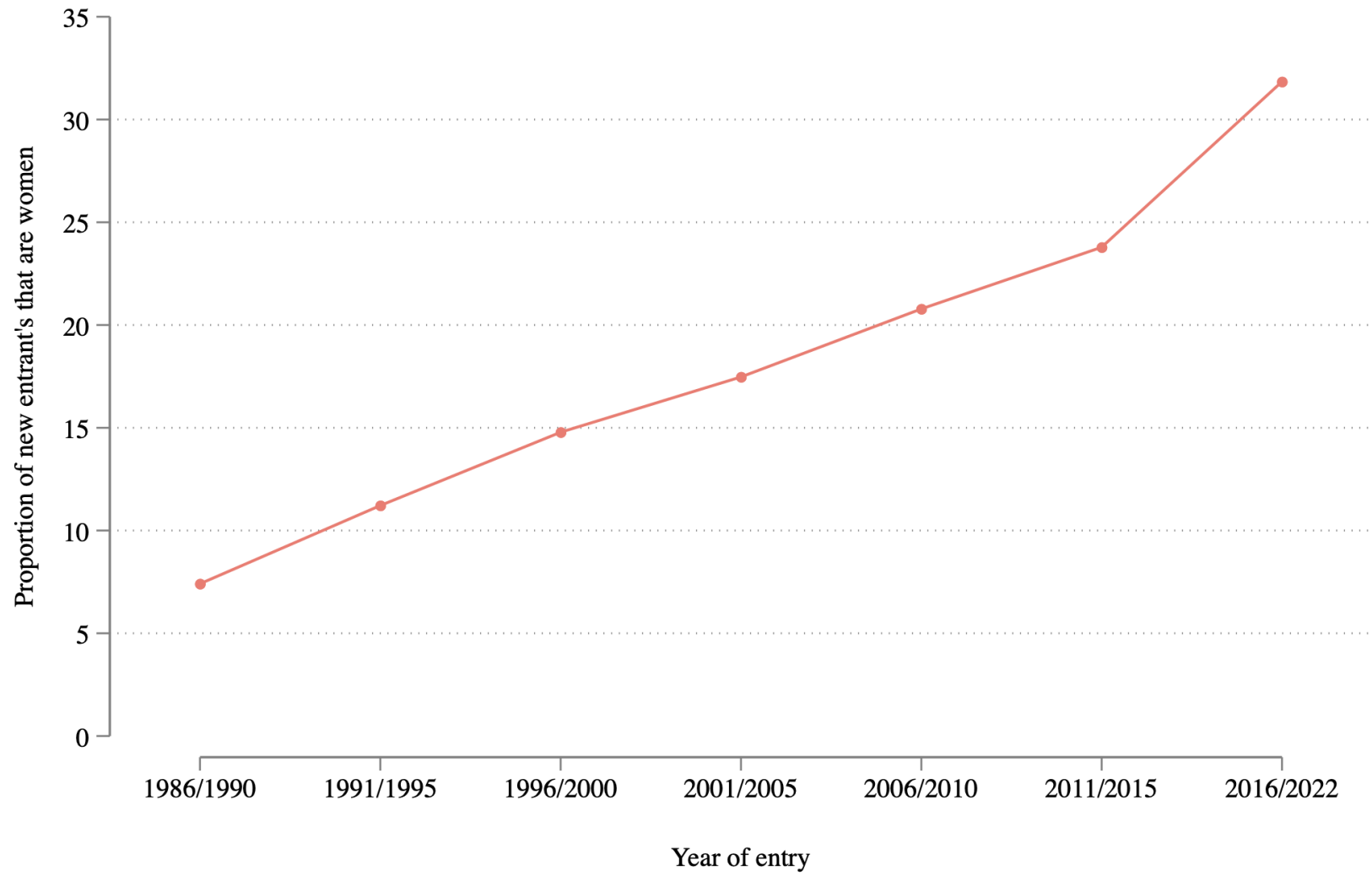
Oxbridge attendance among women, given school background



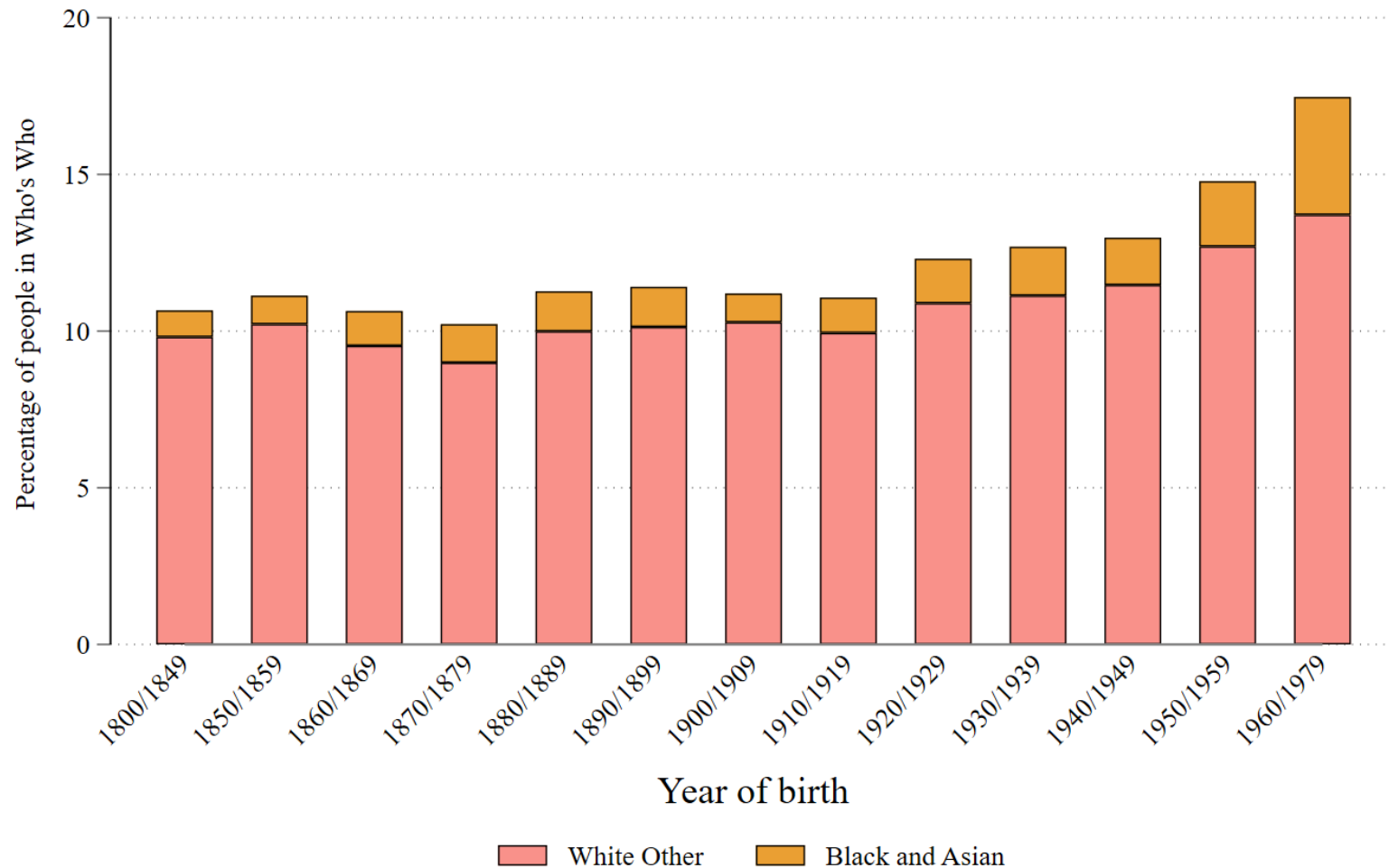
The return of the 'Bright Young Things'



Proportion of new entrants to Who's Who who are women



The vast majority of the British elite are white



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Who are the ruling elite?

