Steven Durlauf: Hello everyone and welcome to The Inequality Podcast. This is Steven Durlauf. I'm absolutely delighted to introduce Aaron Reeves and Sam Freidman, both professors of sociology at the London School of Economics and authors of a absolutely splendid study, *Born to Rule: The Making and Remaking of the British Elite*. This is really one of the most outstanding studies that I've read in the 10 years and I say that without exaggeration. It's a remarkable study of the nature of the current British elite and I'm going to be blunt and say it's a study that economists would never have written. In other words, it comes from different methodological and conceptual perspectives and that's part of the particular value for economists and so Aaron and Sam, thank you so much for joining us.

Aaron Reeves: Thank you.

Sam Friedman: Lovely to be here.

Durlauf: So I wanted to start by asking you to give an overview of the main themes of the book. Sam, could you sort of identify the main arguments you want listeners to know?

Friedman: Our book has sort of three main arguments to it in a way. The first is one of the things that we noticed from speaking to very influential people in the UK. We did around 150 interviews ourselves with top position holders was something striking really about the way they sort of made sense of their trajectories. Most of them were very keen to outline their sort of meritocratic credentials and in so doing kind of tell a story of their ordinariness. Key to that ordinariness was a sense that they had sort of risen from humble origins and that they had a kind of normal everyday cultural life in terms of their hobbies and pastimes and interestingly, you know, often in telling that story of their ordinariness sort of cast themselves against the kind of earlier snobbish British elite, which, you know, they saw in very different terms as a sort of closed, chummy, old-school kind of elite. And we were really interested in that sort of story of kind of meritocracy.

The interesting thing was we also had in our data kind of interviews from elites born at the earlier 20th century, a very different kind of narrative emerged from those people, you know, who are quite sort of happy to outline how advantaged their origins have been often sort of look-sure-rated in a sense of their sort of cultural distinction, their sort of high brow orientation. And so the first sort of puzzle in the book is really this one of elite self-presentation and a very strong story of change over time, which we then wanted to sort of interrogate quantitatively and really the second part of the book is sort of saying, well, does that measure up? Does that story of an opening, more open and meritocratic Britain, hold up? And here we turn to our sort of main data set, which is the entire historical catalogue of who's who, which is a sort of longstanding library of those reaching the top positions in British society. And we looked at really whether people have achieved those positions over

time by their schooling and their wealth origins. And really, there a very different story emerged. We saw one of enduring sort of social exclusivity over time. In particular, the ability to reach these positions if you are from a very wealthy background and also the sort of enduring power of very elite private schools and their ability to kind of propel their, their alumni into elite positions.

The book sort of really sort of tackles or tries to grapple with this kind of disconnect between how elites see themselves and the stories they tell themselves and the British public about contemporary Britain and how it's changed versus what we see when we analyze patterns of elite reproduction over time and that sort of leaves us with this last question which we address in the book, which is, why are elites so keen to convince us of their ordinariness? And here our argument really is that recent rises and economic inequality, particularly the sort of pulling away of elites and the very wealthy in Britain over time, have made contemporary elites kind of insecure about their legitimacy, sensitive perhaps to public concern that they are unduly motivated by self-interest. And in this context, the kind of public expressions of ordinariness that we were seeing in our data and perhaps the way you tell your backstory and the way you express your cultural taste and the way you articulate your meritocratic legitimacy, that perhaps represents a logical strategy of impression management.

We did have a series of experiments in that vein which showed that actually elites who successfully convinced the British general public that they have risen from humble origins or have mainstream cultural taste are more likely to be viewed sympathetically. They're seen as more relatable, more intelligent, more hardworking, even to some extent more competent. The sort of argument that we come to in a way is that there is a symbolic market for ordinariness in contemporary Britain.

Durlauf: So might I ask you then to talk a bit about the background theories and conceptualization of elites? I ask partly because even though economists have written papers which have the word ‘elite’ in it and talk about different aspects of population, subclasses that are elites, I don't think it's an actual kind in most of the reasoning, at least on my team. Aaron, I was hoping you could say something about the general definitions you're using, in particular, the distinction draw between positional and reputational elites.

Reeves: It's really important to say that there's actually a really wide variety of different models that people have when they come to conceptualize elites. And in some ways actually this particular body of work emerges in some ways out of kind of moving against some trends within economics actually to sort of focus I think on very affluent people, the sort of top 1% as being a kind of proxy for eliteness. And we think there's something interesting there and it's worth pursuing. But it's definitely true, at least in Britain, that many

powerful people are not necessarily in that group. And so we do want to kind of come at a version of eliteness that is thinking about power and there are different ways of trying to capture who has power. And for us as sociologists I think in particular we care about economic resources but there are lots of other resources which matter. So we can think about cultural, political, social resources too. And typically different models of eliteness have emphasized one or other of these different kinds of power. Indeed some people are particularly interested in kind of the power that sits behind the power. So Karl Marx for example, famously was focused on the capitalist class who had the power to influence politicians. So sometimes there's relational forms of power that operate together.

I think the other big question about models of eliteness is to do with degrees of circulation. So some people see elites as being a relatively stable group whose power persists particularly across generations. Others see a high degree of circularity in terms of new elites coming to dominate as society changes as new resources come to be more powerful within society. And I think the final thing there may be to say about this is something about elite institutions. So it's not just elite people often elite individuals or individuals are powerful because they have positions within certain institutions which contain power. And here we can think about those institutions as serving a variety of different functions. So there could be sieves that sift people that allow some people in and other people not. They can be temples which provide a kind of degree of consecration. They provide forms of knowledge or understanding that become critical to operate in a particular world. And I think as academics we recognize this function of bestowing a kind of knowing that that enables us to operate in certain worlds. And then they can also be incubators which inculcate certain dispositions, characteristics, traits that become really important in the operation of power. And we can think about individuals perhaps who come to power who violate those norms and how that can be quite jarring within a particular political economy if those individuals haven't been kind of inculcated in the right norms and dispositions in terms of how we think about power should operate and function. So there's a variety of different models which operate in terms of what elites look like but also at the same time different kinds of models of the institutions too.

Durlauf: So I want to extract a few points that I think are particularly valuable and distinguishing in what I call the sociological versus economic perspectives. One is power. In other words, thinking about the location of individuals and the economic, political and social structures, not in terms of the resources they command, the wealth constraint in our jargon, but really the influences they have along many more dimensions. And I think that that's one of the important cases where economics will be enriched by trying to think about power as fundamental to both ends in terms of flourishing well-being and in terms of its consequences feeding back into the traditional economic measures. The second was a

little more prosaic is that I think part of what you said speaks to the historical discrepancy between the way that intergenerational mobility has been studied across disciplines. And so I would with many counter examples, and I'm trying to be one of them, sociologists focus on occupational mobility across generations or class mobility, status mobility, whereas economists have been much more focused on income mobility. And by implication, the latter is the perspective which is thinking about the command of resources in terms of utility maximization, the usual inner temporal things that people wish to maximize, whereas the former has to do again with a structure in which those are hierarchies and there are influences / powers that are qualitatively different. And that seems to be kind of an important way to proceed.

The other thing I was going to say is in the distinction between sieves, temples, and incubators, that's an intriguing case for again one can draw contrast between how you're thinking versus what I'm irrigating the right to claim as the economists perspective. The sieves in economics are modeled in terms of matching processes and so trying to develop theories of who goes to what college, that's the standard. Temples, much of the way you discuss it, you know we call human capital accumulation in other words that there's something that's being endowed there. A subtly can be that the fact of completing a college or being admitted can be a signal about something. And so but I put that in the spirit of the temples. In other words the process of being there and getting through it endows an individual. The third incubators is one where I think there is a more of a qualitative gap in the sense that the idea that part of the process of going through institutions is the inculcation, the development of the norms, the skills, the modes of behavior that will lead to success that we don't…it's not been as emphasized. And so I go into all that really did, you know both try to draw the contrast but to emphasize the you know the potential for for synergies there.

So I did want to then turn to the issue of meritocracy and in which the book provides positive and normative claims. So I was hoping you could elaborate how you're thinking about the extent to which one wants to use these broad terms such as, Britain being meritocratic etc.

Friedman: Meritocracy is fascinating here in the sense of, firstly, what it means to the people in these positions in the first place. This is a concept I think that people reach for very readily and search for a way of making sense of their own life that can be conceived of as meritocratic and that that is sort of central to the narratives that they tell and I think you know partly we are getting those narratives in the interviews that we did with them. But I think you also have to remember that these are people who are largely public facing elites who are very often asked to account for themselves in public life. And so I think the types of

narratives that we were getting about meritocratic legitimacy are probably also being echoed in all sorts of profiles that are written about them or that they write about themselves in the various forums that they have at their disposal. And as I said I think what's particularly interesting in the British case is a sense of trying to position one's origins in a way that allows you to tell a particular upward story that gives you meritocratic legitimacy. And this is often about sort of searching into your extended family history for a kind of story of working class, striving and, therefore, upward mobility that interestingly was often not necessarily about the way that sociologists or economists would think about origins which is your own parents and your own upbringing. But usually in the interviews that we did, you know, much longer extended family history. Whether people are doing that intentionally or not is something I don't think we can discern as sociologists but I think it's certainly significant in the sense that you know what it does is it sort of acts to allow these people to tell a story that gives the impression of perhaps more upward social mobility in British society than is actually the case. And that's again where this more objective element I suppose of discerning the degree of meritocracy in Britain comes in and that's where you know some of the longitudinal analysis of sort of the power of wealth origins, the power of elite schooling comes into play. And just you know some of the stats there for example you know if you were born into a family in the top 1% of the wealth distribution you've consistently been about 20 times more likely to reach who's who than anyone else born in a similar cohort. If you've been to one of the top nine Clarendon schools that some of your listeners might have heard of, places like Eton and Harrow, very sort of storied elite schools in Britain. You still today have about 50 times more likelihood of reaching these positions.

So I think in our terms some of these make a mockery I suppose in some way of a claim that Britain is meritocratic. Yes these schools in particular are associated with high levels of educational attainment but there were many other schools that have nothing like this propulsive power that achieve just as good educational attainment for their students.

Durlauf: So I think that meritocracy is actually another example where economists and sociologists have always had different perspectives and there's valuable complementarities to try to pursue, at least in my experience in talking to social scientists bring up the topic that you think about meritocracy sociologists typically have a very negative reaction and in other words they think that it's relationship to reality is, shall we say, problematic and furthermore again stereotype. You're trying to give you a regularity of view that it becomes it's a rationalization for inequalities as opposed to an explanation of inequalities per se. Economists I think the default is supportive. The thought experiment in the back of an economist mine often is you give me a population, a group of people and you give me a set of institutions they can be firms and jobs or they can be universities and high school graduates and there's a matching problem and so how do you match them? You

know under certain assumptions that I think economists often believe which has somebody to do with the marginal product of an elite school with a highly skilled high school graduate if that's true, and I garbled that. In other words, the evidence the case that it's more productive in terms of the overall match of high elite schools and I'll call it an elite educational achievement up to that time, then an economist would say that is efficient and therefore it is meritocratic.

The evidence that in fact the matches of a pair of high-highs and low-lows is more productive than a high-low and a low-high, the evidence of that actually is not so strong. There's a recent study by Jesse Rothstein and Zach Bleemer about what we know about colleges and they concluded that that's more of a myth than an empirical fact so I think the economist model has something in the back about that's not correct. I think a fundamental difference is that economists think conditionally and sociologists think unconditionally with respect to meritocracy. So one question is I look at a bunch of 17 year olds and given all the differences in their life courses—the quality of their high schools, etc.— at that point in time if I want to do the matching and I simply want to maximize the average educational achievement, I'm going to call that conditionally meritocratic matching. A different question is how do I do the matching at every stage of the life course so that over time I have the highest educational attainments for the population?

Once you say it that way, then the answers become…you know I've written on it, the thing I've been pushing on, so-called the prospective meritocracy which is you get a different answer. In other words you would ask questions about how the matches at the college level influence students in terms of the incentives they face to work hard in school, how it's going to affect them when they enter the labor market and the consequences for their children, etc. and you get a completely different vision. In other words what would be in the efficiency sense maximizing attainment and so I say all of that because I think that the differences actually do come down to not having the same models in one's head and I think the same facts. That seems to me kind of an important area where sociologists and economists I think have a lot to offer each other.

So I'm thinking about this, you brought up a very important issue which was kind of the the persistence of elites. Another was the idea that there was a process by which high wealth for example is then mapping into elite universities which is of course mapping into elite power status, wealth status, etc. I bring that up because I was hoping you could elaborate some of the discussion you had about the porousness of elites with respect to race and gender and also talk kind of about the implications that you were drawing there.

Reeves: Yeah I think this is a really important dimension of what we're able to tease out here and I think there's sort of two big story lines, which is on both of those dimensions,

there has been some change, though the change has been more significant for women than it has been for elites of color, for example, in the the British context. So I'll just say something briefly about both of those trends. So basically there's always been some women who have occupied elite positions within British society and I think it's really important to stress that this isn't that there's always been women who have had lots of power, either through being, you know, kind of different family relationships that would have given them positional power in terms of elite reproduction but these are women who perhaps had academics or ran charities or business leaders. You know these sorts of positions have been there, but they've become more common in recent years. So among new entrants to who's who, about 33% are women currently and that really kind of took off in the 1980s forward. Among elites of color, partly because of imperial legacies there have always been elites of color in who's who, so we have you know very senior members of the Indian civil service for example who would have automatically been included in who's who. And again over the last few years that has changed somewhat and we've seen an increase in the number of people from a variety of different backgrounds that have entered into the elite, but these are much smaller numbers than they have been for in terms of gender and in particular we can see some intersectional differences here. So black women for example make up the smallest of those kind of intersections in our analysis and the implications of this I think are really to think through what this means for the changing demographic of elites and what elites think and want to accomplish and at a very high level what we see is that both women and elites of color tend to have a slightly different political orientation from elite who have traditionally been in British society but it doesn't mean that that is uncontested or kind of monolithic. That there's actually a very diverse set of opinions of views within those different groups and I think it's not necessarily the case that they will all be able to produce the kinds of changes that they might want to see either and so while women might for example want to be more progressive in terms of a variety of political and economic outcomes, their ability to sort of enact that is constrained somewhat partly by their morality position, but also by the kind of mechanisms we talked about earlier about being incubators in terms of elite positions and how women and elites of color actually enter these positions and the kinds of dispositions and habits they take on as a result of moving through those institutions. So there has been change though that's not as much as we might want on any of those dimensions.

Durlauf: So I thought we might turn then to politics and policy and I wanted to talk about politics in the following sense because you know a very important theme of the book, of course, is the desire of elites to portray themselves as having meritocratic outcomes and as you emphasize, trying to emphasize the non-aristocratic histories in their trajectories. So I guess one thing I want to just to clarify was the timing of their transition.

Friedman: Yeah I mean I think there's sort of two elements here we have I think there is a much longer period of what's often called in the UK the decline of deference which really sort of begins from the sort of late 50s onwards which I think is a kind of a questioning of the class status quo. In the UK the class system and the cultural trappings of that and the sort of idea that you know that people should accept the place that they are born into and that, you know, that is a kind of fixed aspect of British society and much more of a kind of I think a sort of questioning of the inherent superiority of culture associated with the aristocracy and the upper class and we also see, I think, at this time you know sort of incursions in popular culture. Forms of legitimacy being assigned to traditionally working class, forms of music, my PhD was all about comedy which is another area where you see some of this. As a result, there's a longer process where perhaps people are wanting to sort of distance themselves from a kind of older version of British society where you are...your origin is your destiny to some extent and perhaps a kind of socialization of kind of meritocratic norms where you perhaps want to tell an upward story. I think the argument, the more concrete argument, that we make about the currency of ordinariness in British society is one which we see as linked to the pulling away of those at the very top in the last 30 or so years where we think the distinct currency of that sort of expression of ordinariness has begun to have more resonance in this period because the general public perhaps has you know there's more of an emphasis that the public may be questioning the legitimacy morally of those in positions of power who are seen as increasingly sort of pulling away. And so these expressions of ordinariness are a way of trying to sort of forge a sense of cultural connection amid that kind of pulling away.

Durlauf: You brought up the culture of deference and how it's changed. A narrative that appears in, at least in some, histories I've read is that on the lower frequency World War One was essential. And again I'm a little embarrassed to talk about British history with two of you, but that this in a watershed because the level of sacrifice of the population changed the nature of the social contract. And so one could think of that as you know one enormous event. You could then think of, of course, the econd World War as having the same flavor to it. And so I was curious partly about the interplay of what I'm calling these lower frequency events for the social contracts of fundamental exchanges with the more, the higher frequency one which is the inequality.

Reeves: Yeah I think that's right I mean I think it is true that the first world war did some work to undermine that that that culture of deference that Sam mentioned. I mean obviously what's happening particularly in the first two years you know, particularly up to 1915, where officers were living with working class men, for example, in the trenches and that these interactions I think both led to a decline of deference, but also to some extent a rise of class resentment too when those leaders proved to be, not in all cases, but in many

cases inept or perhaps snobbish in their attitude towards the people that they were supposed to be leading. So I think they're absolutely played a played an important role. I think alongside that actually is another kind of wider political process, which was the expansion of suffrage. And this is in part changing the set of wider publics that certainly are seen to be accountable to and obviously applies especially to political elites, but I think there's a kind of a wider sense of sort of deepening of democracy across society not just in the political sense that's happening through the 20th century that's also playing into this. And where I think Sam's right here, is that that came to a head in a really quite profound way in the 1950s and 1960s, in that it became a much more acceptable kind of cultural discourse to be very critical of those who had inherited power and privilege, and, actually to some extent, there was a valorization of working class people and working class experience that emerged out of that moment which we think kind of contributed to this general sense that this symbolic market for all you know it's = emerged or started to flourish in that moment. We think it probably didn't exist before World War II though the Colonels that would lead to that transition, I think were, some of those were in place.

Durlauf: And so this is a related question, which I'm simply ignorant about, movements about gender and racial inequality in the 1960s so again for the American case, in thinking about the porousness of elites, the Civil Rights Movement and the, you know, the women's liberation with feminist movements, I think are a important part of the story and they had the substutive consequences they'd limit that—well you could say we're moving backwards in the United States but let me leave that aside—it did alter the bounds of debate. So things that are completely inacceptable today were acceptable 60 years ago, and I don't know if there's another story one wants to tell in terms of evolution of elites in the United Kingdom's case.

Reeves: Yeah I think on this I think what's crucial when we're least—on gender first, I'll say something about race in a second—is that what we see is that there was a clear in terms of gender a clear similar movement right in the in the 60s and 70s, really kind of critical movement the sort of question the structure of power in the UK. And for us what's I think really important about that is that it was really the generation of women who grew up under the auspices of that kind of, what we might call second-wave feminism. They were the ones who sort of ended up moving into elite positions. It wasn't so much that that critique created space for women in the 60s and 70s per se. What we really start to see is it's in the 80s when women are sort of coming away or perhaps were born in the 40s and 50s who are sort of emerging into these elite positions in small numbers. It really, as I said, sort of takes off from there so in some ways that critique opens up the space for decisions to be made in terms of a kind of pipeline of women who might get to these positions of power and

privilege, which are you know when usually typically people in their 40s and 50s are entering these kinds of positions.

On the race side, it's actually a little bit later than that, and I think it's really different for us because you know it was the 60s and 70s, 50s to some extent that actually the kind of inmigration of people from former colonial countries that started to infiltrate Britain. And actually I think for many years while there may be many discourse that was sort of flowing over from the US was having an impact here. I think it was much later that that sort of kind of anti-racist element in British society took hold, if it ever did. I mean, there's a question about whether we had that moment in quite the same way as the US did and I think there were definitely like demographic, as well as other dynamics, which meant that the British story is a little bit different from the US on that dimension particularly.

Durlauf: So might we then turn to your policy recommendations in other words, you make a lot of a number of important arguments there. So could you sort of identify the ones you think most important to communicate?

Friedman: You know, we've got some pretty radical solutions that we put forward I think they are meant to be provocative, but I think you know we have thought carefully about them. And I think some of them are really trying to address these issues that we've been talking about around elite persistence and the ways in which certain types of institutions really, sort of, have always and continue today, to I think sort of propel those from elite backgrounds into eventually elite positions. In particular we sort of focus on the role that private secondary schools play in the UK. The key recommendation is we sort of look at the role that elite universities seem to play in the UKm and really you know it's clear to us that you know you can't really enter one of these positions today without a degree from one of the sort of top universities. We use a different sort of moniker in the UK, Russell group, which is a group of leading universities perhaps somewhat similar to Ivy League in the US. One of the reasons why those from very wealthy and higher class backgrounds tend to have such a chance of reaching elite positions is that private schools are able to deliver their alumni into these universities. And so our proposal is that you cap the number of students that can reach these elite universities to the percentage that they represent in the population as a whole which would hugely mean reducing the number of private school students that are able to get to these elite universities. Places like the London School of Economics where Aaron and I teach, this would this would mean a reduction of something in the region of you know 20 or 30 percent of students. And by imposing that at the level of the university you reduce the incentive for parents to channel their wealth into very high fees for private schooling and instead would, you know, perhaps move their children into the state sector. That's the sort of idea there.

Reeves: Trying to think about this this problem of elite reproduction in terms of wealth, and one of the stories in Britain as will be well known I think probably to your listeners, is the wealth inequality in Britain has gone down tremendously since the end of the 19th century. The rise of home ownership in particular and the growth of pensions have both driven that trend to a large extent. And what's remarkable I think about our data is that, despite that pronounced reduction in wealth inequality as a society as a whole, we've seen those at the very top retain their ability to propel their children into those top positions and so as a result of that, one of the things that we potentially propose to try and address this is implementing some kind of wealth tax. And we already have inheritance tax in the UK, I think much like the US, and for us well that's an effective mechanism at redistributing wealth in a particular kind of way it doesn't get at the challenge that we see in terms of elite reproduction because the mechanisms through which wealth is advantaging the child of an affluent person are happening while their children are young, right, and by the time that that person has aged and then passed away and then the wealth is being taxed at that moment, it's sort of too late in order to kind of really affect the particular processes that we're talking about here. And so we think one mechanism through which we might address this problem of elite reproduction at the very top of the wealth distribution is to try reduce that gap of the top to the middle basically.

Friedman: Perhaps one last one is to tackle the sort of status hierarchy that exists between British universities. We haven't talked a huge amount about this so far in the discussion, but you know the book talks also about the incredible sort of hold that Oxford and Cambridge Universities have had over elite recruitment in the UK over time. And, you know, the premise for that much like the US is that you know Oxford and Cambridge act as these very effective meritocratic sorting houses. At undergraduate level in particular, they are incredibly selective you know as a result you know they are sifting the most talented students. However, one huge issue in the UK is that there are massive inequalities in who applies to Oxford and Cambridge in the first place.

There are many factors involved in that, one of them is a perception I think for many that these are not institutions that are for certain types of students or that those students don't necessarily feel that they are for them. In the northeast of England, you know traditionally a less sort of advantaged area of the UK, only 12% of state school students who achieve the top, top grades would apply to Oxford and Cambridge. If you look at London and the students achieving the same grades, 40% apply to Oxford and Cambridge. So our sort of aim to try and address this issue or this inequality is to remove applications entirely for Oxford and Cambridge, and propose a system in which you know the best performing students in the country are put into a lottery. This would allow Oxford and Cambridge to sort of randomly select students from that group and, you know, then contact those

students regardless of whether they applied in the first place and say we want you. And of course you know many of those students might have their reasons for not taking up the place, but we think that might be an important way of sort of particularly addressing regional inequalities in who gets to benefit from an Oxford education.

Durlauf: So let me divide those into kind of two categories. The issue of the wealth tax of course is, I'll say, a triumph for economist in the sense that when, you know, Thomas Piketty's book came out, the idea of a wealth tax was about—and you can include me in the category—economists thought it was utopian, but now it's, you know, there's going to be a referendum in the state of California. Europe is engaged in active debates, and so you know the issues you brought up in terms of the effect in the life course of wealth inequality is an actual reason to want to address that.

There, I think one question is the extent to which one can ameliorate the consequences of the wealth inequality. So arguments for the—again this is the American case—providing high quality early childhood education for less advantaged families. There's huge disparities there. This is the Heckman Research Program, is one example. The gross disparities that exist in resources for schools in public schools in the United States because of the role of local taxes as a second. So I wanted to completely complement the with the 'E' in this— I'll give an 'I' but also in 'E'— that another way to think about the wealth inequality disparities is are there dimensions where one can ameliorate the consequences and at least in the American case, I think that there's some on the table.

But more generally I think you brought up really, you know, two essential dimensions of the process by which students are matched to universities which you know are profoundly consequential matches in terms of the life course. The caps on the on the private high schools, the caps can be meritocratic in the following sense, which is: why it's really the—I don't know how many students are at Eton—is that if you tell me there's 200 in a graduating class, let me just stipulate that, or 200 go to Cambridge, do I think the 200th person is really going to be a lot, you know somehow have better skills, going to do better in the elite school than the places in northern England, for example? That doesn't sound like a very strong argument, when other words one can interpret the caps in a very meritocratic fashion as they respect the limits to the information that's available from children from the elite families because part of the what these wealthy family families do is they put their children in a position to communicate their potential, and therefore the upper tail gets to communicate in a different way. So I think that there's a lot of ways to think about the way that one proceeds in terms of setting the admissions that simply respect the fact there's a lot of privileges and benefits to being from certain families, which they desiccate the informational content of the achievements of those students.

The second issue you brought up was the…was this issue of cultural barriers and there uh Caroline Hoxby and Christopher Avery published a paper, it must be about 12 years ago, where they developed what they called the undermatch hypothesis. They got the universities, actually they had test takers in the state— I don't know if you know the study or not. But for the listeners, what they found was thousands of low income, high-test scores high school students that weren't going to elite schools and so the mystery was, given the fact there were scholarships available, why they weren't going. One answer, of course, is they simply worked from a world where you do the applications and so they actually found that there was—if memory serves me correctly—some predictive content, it was less likely you'd be in that category if you grew up near a university. And so if you go to Chicago in the spring, there's buses of students being brought to the campus and it's actually simply to have students from less advanced places walk around and say this is a place that matters.

I think this is a very under undervalued issue. The active imagination that is required for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to see themselves in an elite university. I mean I used to you know— I sometimes joke when I'm teaching. I sometimes ask my students, do my children have any choice about going to college? Well you could say yes, I'd never said you have to go, but if your father's a professor, all your family friends are the children of professors, they were in a world where this was not, this was simply, it was a default. That seems to me fundamental in terms of opening up and about—again it's meritocratic–and at the worst, it's making sure that people are fulfilling their potential as it were.

So might you say something about your view on comparisons between the United States and the UK. As you know, part of American exceptionalism is a profound belief in equality of opportunity, a unique version here so I'm smiling when I say that. But I do want you to say something about US/UK comparisons.

Reeves: I mean I think neither Sam or I are experts on the US and so we definitely tread carefully in terms of chatting about this. But I think at one level it's absolutely true, I mean, that the UK is and was a class of written society. It's class is incredibly important here in a variety of different dimensions. I think the nature of how that's worked has certainly changed, even the ways in which people talk today will look very different than they would have done in the past. The kind of class signals would have altered in terms of how their performs as a living standard have risen perhaps. Certainly the gaps between parts of the income distribution in terms of the performance of class might have changed somewhat. But I think all of the evidence that at least that I'm familiar with which suggests it continues to be incredibly powerful in a variety of different ways. And in that respect, I think there probably are a number of similarities to the United States. Not necessarily in that the actual manifestations of class difference will look exactly the same. There will be different cultural

inflections, which different class positions in the United States would have that would not look necessarily quite the same way as the UK. I think class is intersecting with a bunch of other dimensions in the US that perhaps would look different from the British case, but the idea that coming from socioeconomic disadvantage is having a profound influence on opportunities that will play out in the rest of your life I think to my understanding is still something that's profoundly true I think the difference, perhaps, is how that's conceptualized within the US and how that has been conceptualized in the in the UK. But in practical terms, I think there aren't necessarily huge, huge differences in the concrete manifestations of these differences. So I think, the point here I think is to say that the kind of surface level looks different, but the underlying structures I think are operating in quite similar ways.

Friedman: I've done some work with a colleague Daniel Laurison, who's from the US, about the US where we were looking at a phenomenon that we studied in the UK of class origin, socioeconomic origin pay gap. Not necessarily in elites but in sort of higher professional and managerial occupations, and, you know, just to sort of reiterate Aaron's point, we found sort of pay gaps by class origin fairly similar sort of magnitude in both the US and the UK. I think the difference, as Aaron mentioned, having now done quite a lot of interviews with people in both contexts, including most recently in the US firm, is the degree to which people connect their trajectory to their class origin in the way they make sense of their life. And I think you know I'm quite surprised, I suppose coming from a UK perspective. In the UK, people sort of routinely reach for elements of their background in my experience to make sense of why things have or haven't happened in their life, and that can be you know people coming from fairly privileged backgrounds and from fairly disadvantaged backgrounds.

My experience in the US is that that's very different. Whether that stuff is actually shaping outcomes, as Aaron says, I think is probably not as dissimilar as people think but the degree to which it is something that people, sort of, reach for in terms of how subjectively they think about their lives is really very different.

Durlauf: One of the things I noted in the book was that you actually discussed your own family backgrounds. I was very struck by that. You know I could well be wrong, as I don't necessarily read the introductions to books. I don't ever recall that type of discussion in an economics study of this type and I may, again, I may be wrong on this. I don't recall them in sociology books by in large, so I wanted you to talk a bit about the decision to do that.

Friedman: Yeah I mean I think there's two reasons really why we shared that. I think the first one is that when we were reflecting on the collaboration between ourselves, it felt like quite a relevant aspect of our working relationship. We are from very different backgrounds. I'll

let Aaron talk about his own, but I'm from a fairly privileged background. My dad was an economist actually. My mom was a social worker. Youu know, I had, I grew up in a very large detached house. I went to a private school. Aaron's from a very different background. and I think that in thinking about the questions we wanted to ask and the interpretations, actually, of some of particularly the qualitative data, the tension—productive tension—that emerged from how our own background shaped our understanding of that data I think was really marked and interesting and therefore sort of compelled us to write about it.

I think the second element is that when you ask these sort of questions we wanted this to be a book that crossed over to some extent and that sort of people outside of academia would read, both within academia, but perhaps in particular beyond. When people write about these sorts of issues around mobility and class and elites in the UK, there is a sort of politics of positionality in who you are—who you are and whether you are authorized to write and think about these issues. And we, I think, wanted to be fully transparent in that vein about who we are.

Reeves: I agree with what Sam said. I think there's something both useful for the working relationship that we've had in terms of the different experiences that we have had in terms of trying to get to be both. I mean we work at the same institution now and both professors of sociology and I think that there's something valuable about those different trajectories which have taken us to that point. And also I think in terms of a book that invites people to reflect on their own background and I think while Sam and I are not included in \ the particular volume that we analyze for this data, I think there's probably an argument that that we are elite in some dimension that certainly others would look at us probably and think that we're elite. And so perhaps it also felt maybe appropriate for us to do a bit of reflection, and thinking about those kinds of processes in terms of ourselves as well I think that that was really important. And like Sam said, I think this is always a somewhat interesting thing to talk about in terms of the book that we've written, but yeah I come from a slightly less advantage background than Sam, but I think also that we also have family histories that move in different kinds of ways. So there was a period of my life when I was raised by a single mum for the most part of my life and we were in a difficult financial situation, but in the middle of my teens my mum had gone to university and she had become a teacher and she had married someone. And so our position became more stable and so I think that that kind of advantage certainly helped me in terms of getting access to some of the things that have happened later. I think it would have been much more difficult if if our lives hadn't had become a little bit more through the kind of later period of my teenage years. So I think that these things really matter, and I think Sam's right that reflecting on that certain number of difference functions for us.

Durlauf: I could go on for another two hours with both of you. I'm really grateful for the conversation. Aaron and Sam thank you very, very much.

Reeves: Okay, thank you.

Durlauf: So this has been Aaron Reeves and Sam Friedman discussing aspects of elites, the nature the reproduction. I think the conversation, as you know, has a number of important themes. One of them is the importance of thinking about elites as opposed to the tail of an income distribution. So early on the distinction was drawn between the 1% and the sorts of positional and reputational elites that are represented in the British who's who. It's a very fundamental distinction because Aaron and Sam are focusing on issues of power, issues of authority, role models, many different dimensions you can think about in terms of their significance in the society all of which are part of what is necessary to understand if we're going to talk about what inequality ultimately means in terms of differences in the way that one individual commands resources influences others and can exercise power.

The second thing I wanted to emphasize was the richness of the methodological approach. In other words, it's a combination of really detailed interview work as well as extensive quantitative analysis and this type of richness, as I said at the beginning, I don't think it's a book an economists would have written. It's not that no economist would do this, so much is that there was a philosophy there of social science that I wanted to emphasize which was the respect for the richness of qualitative knowledge, almost you know ethnographic knowledge ,almost in this case along with quantitative methods that I think obviously makes for the most compelling work.

The Inequality Podcast is a production of the Stone Center for Research on Wealth Inequality and Mobility at the University of Chicago. I want to end the podcast with thanks to the people who really make it happen. First, I want to express deep appreciation to our producer and engineer Shane McKeon who oversees every aspect of the process of creating these podcasts and really does just a splendid job. Second, I'd like to thank our Assistant Director Nina Gray for production oversight and the role she plays in bringing the podcast to fruition. And finally, I'd like to thank Grace Kolavo who's the Executive Director of the Stone Center who basically does everything in terms of making the Center work. You may get in touch with us at stonecenter@uchicago.edu. Thank you so much for listening.