

From Aristocratic to Ordinary: Shifting Modes of Elite Distinction

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Abstract

How do elites signal their superior social position via the consumption of culture? We address this question by drawing on 120 years of “recreations” data ($N = 71,393$) contained within *Who's Who*, a unique catalogue of the British elite. Our results reveal three historical phases of elite cultural distinction: first, a mode of aristocratic practice forged around the leisure possibilities afforded by landed estates, which waned significantly in the late-nineteenth century; second, a highbrow mode dominated by the fine arts, which increased sharply in the early-twentieth century before gently receding in the most recent birth cohorts; and, third, a contemporary mode characterized by the blending of highbrow pursuits with everyday forms of cultural participation, such as spending time with family, friends, and pets. These shifts reveal changes not only in the contents of elite culture but also in the nature of elite distinction, in particular, (1) how the applicability of emulation and (mis)recognition theories has changed over time, and (2) the emergence of a contemporary mode that publicly emphasizes everyday cultural practice (to accentuate ordinariness, authenticity, and cultural connection) while retaining many tastes that continue to be (mis)recognized as legitimate.

Keywords

elites, distinction, elite culture, taste

How do elites signal their superior social position via consumption of, and participation in, particular types of culture? This question has long been central to sociological thought (Elias 1939; Goffman 1959; Simmel 1957; Weber 1915). Two perspectives dominate: (1) social emulation models posit that elites achieve distinction by continually developing ever-more expensive and elaborate tastes to guard against the imitation strategies of aspirational outsiders (Simmel 1957; Veblen 1899), whilst (2) (mis)recognition models posit that distinction pivots on elites' ability to impose as legitimate their own arbitrary categories of cultural perception and appreciation (Bourdieu 1984). Either way, the

idea that elites use culture to mark themselves off from lower social classes is a foundational assumption motivating scholarship on cultural consumption. Yet despite this theoretical importance, the empirical basis for such claims lags behind. In this article, we identify, and attempt to address, three problems in the voluminous literature on elite distinction.

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First, conceptualizations of elites frequently lack precision. Elites are numerically too small to show up on the sample surveys normally used to research cultural consumption and therefore, when invoked, are typically represented by broad proxies such as big-class occupational groups or advanced education (Coulangeon and Lemel 2007; Friedman and Laurison 2019; Peterson and Simkus 1992; Savage et al. 2015). Put simply, we know of no large-scale quantitative investigation of specifically *elite* cultural taste ever conducted in sociology.¹ Second, proponents of different theories of elite distinction assume these generalize across time and space. Yet the empirical observations from which concepts such as emulation and (mis)recognition emerged are rooted in snapshots of particular national contexts at particular moments in time (Daloz 2009). To meaningfully unpack the historical specificities of such theories, we therefore require a longitudinal lens that can examine how elite culture changes over time. Finally, work on elite distinction faces methodological challenges. In particular, the vast majority of empirical analysis proceeds from survey or interview data where people report their cultural preferences anonymously. Yet, as Daloz (2009) notes, a fundamental component of elite distinction is “display”—the presentation of one’s cultural self in a public or interactional setting. This micro-political dimension is difficult to discern using conventional methodological tools.

We address each of these problems by drawing on a novel data source—the cultural “recreations” expressed by entrants within *Who’s Who*, an unrivaled catalogue of the British elite. *Who’s Who* documents a more *precise* elite, based on a selection of the .05 percent of the UK population that occupy the highest, most influential, and most prestigious occupational positions. We also have access to the publication’s entire *historical* database, which provides data on the cultural preferences of around 70,000 entrants born between 1830 and 1969. Finally, as *Who’s Who* is a public document, these data provide unique insights into how elites present their cultural selves *publicly*; not necessarily what they actually “do”

culturally but how they deploy their tastes in social life to signal their position.

Our analysis begins by identifying a mode of aristocratic elite culture, dominant in the late-nineteenth century, that was forged around the leisure possibilities afforded by landed estates (e.g., shooting, hunting, horse riding, polo, sailing). Here elites achieved distinction via the emulation of lower yet aspirational social groups, who largely deferred to their authority as inherent cultural paragons. We then show how this mode was threatened at the turn of the twentieth century. “Nouveau riche” industrialists began to buy their way into high society, and existing aristocratic elites, battling economic upheaval, were unable to guard against this pecuniary emulation. Next, we show how a new generation of elites—influenced in particular by the Bloomsbury intellectual collective—adapted to this threat. Positioning itself against the philistinism of aristocratic modes, this new cohort championed a set of emerging “high” cultural forms (e.g., theater, ballet, classical music, abstract art) that went on to define elite culture in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. This new highbrow mode was successful in delivering distinction, albeit via a different mechanism. Rather than relying on an ascribed cultural legitimacy, as in the emulation model, highbrow elites instead focused on generating a widespread (mis)recognition, via the state and allied institutions such as the BBC, of the inherent value of their own tastes and recreations. Again, though, this mode of elite culture was eventually questioned. Beginning in the 1950s, the supremacy of highbrow culture was threatened by shifts within the art-world that initially challenged the highbrow aesthetic and later legitimized certain popular cultural forms; generational value change that precipitated a decline in snobbery and deference (to elites); and the emergence of a managerial culture where access to a broad cultural repertoire functioned as a key resource.

The final part of our analysis explains how once again elites adapted to these threats, diversifying their cultural profiles and increasingly blending highbrow (and some aristocratic) recreations with popular tastes and a range of

everyday practices, such as spending time with family, friends, and pets. We interpret this contemporary mode as pursuing dual aims. First, it continues to be distinction-seeking, with popular tastes still tilting toward more legitimate artists. However, the growing expression of everyday recreations, we argue, also signals something beyond distinction, and peculiar to the particular moral threats facing contemporary elites. As elites pull away economically, they face increasing suspicion from wider publics that they lack prosocial motives and, in turn, authenticity and moral character. The public expression of such “ordinary” everyday practices, therefore, with their intrinsic rather than extrinsic reward association, acts as a way to plug this authenticity-insecurity.

Our analysis not only reveals important changes in the contents of elite culture but also shows (1) how the applicability of emulation and (mis)recognition models of elite distinction has changed over time, and (2) the emergence of a contemporary mode of ordinary elite distinction that publicly emphasizes everyday cultural practice (to accentuate ordinariness, authenticity, and cultural connection) while retaining many tastes that continue to be (mis)recognized as legitimate.

THE ROLE OF HISTORY IN UNDERSTANDING ELITE DISTINCTION

Emulation versus Misrecognition

Elite distinction, “the necessity for dominant social groups to display cultural signs of superiority to signal their upper social position” (Daloz 2009:28), is a foundational concern in the sociology of culture and taste. Many major theorists have addressed the issue in some form, ranging from a focus on conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899) to fashion (Simmel 1957), court society (Elias 1939), the presentation of self (Goffman 1959), social closure (Weber 1915), and taste (Bourdieu 1984).

Two broad theoretical models dominate the conversation. The first, evident in the early sociological theorizing of Tarde (1903),

Simmel (1957), and particularly Veblen (1899), centers on the role of social emulation. This is premised on the idea that people generally seek to imitate others socially superior to themselves by adopting their cultural tastes and recreations. In response, elites engage in a process of what Veblen called “invidious distinction,” differentiating themselves by continually developing ever-more expensive and elaborate tastes. This establishes respectability within their own milieu and guards their position from the “pecuniary emulation” of lower, yet aspirational, social classes. At the same time, emulation theorists also point to the limits of this dynamic. Key to this is the *scarcity* of elite recreations, which traditionally carry strong economic barriers to entry. But, as Tarde and Simmel point out, there are also cultural barriers to entry, and attempts to mimic elites are often categorized as crude. Simmel (1957), for example, argued that as fashion trends “trickle down” to less advantaged groups they are often “vulgarized” and lose their ability to signal eliteness.² An exemplar of this, discussed in multiple empirical contexts, is the bind experienced by the “nouveau riche.” Although these upwardly mobile individuals may have the economic capital to adopt elite culture, they continually reveal their social origins by the “mistakes” they make in their execution of taste, or the insecurity of their conduct (Harvey and Maclean 2008; Needell 1987; Sampson 1994).

The second model of elite distinction, and significantly more influential in contemporary sociology, centers on the role of (mis)recognition (Bourdieu 1984). Here socially subordinate groups do not so much emulate elites’ culture as misrecognize their categories of cultural appreciation as legitimate. It is thus not that elites themselves are considered inherent cultural paragons, as in the emulation model; rather, they have the ability to generate widespread belief in the inherent value of their own tastes and recreations. This is achieved, according to Bourdieu (1984, 1993), by elites occupying pivotal positions in society that allow them to establish and impose the legitimacy of certain forms of culture (Accominotti et al. 2018;

DiMaggio 1982; Khan 2012b). Two “agents of legitimation” are particularly important: the state, which plays a central role in consecrating culture via funding and subsidy but also actively embeds and canonizes certain cultural items in educational curricula, and cultural intermediaries, that is, tastemakers in the media, nonprofit sector, and cultural industries who generate belief in the value and prestige of certain cultural goods (English 2008; Purhonen et al. 2018). In this (mis)recognition model, then, elites have the resources at their disposal to imbue their own cultural preferences with widespread legitimacy that can then be used by themselves, and dominant social classes more generally, to demarcate themselves from other groups; elite tastes, in other words, become “widely-held high-status cultural signals” that operate as a socially valuable form of cultural capital (Lamont and Lareau 1988:156).

There are important connections between these theoretical strands. Both position elites as arbiters of taste with hegemonic capacities, for example. Yet they are also different in terms of how they see elites realizing distinction from other social groups. For Veblen, the pursuit of elite cultural distinction is a fairly conscious and intentional process. Groups within a status hierarchy largely accept the ascribed origins of class division, and therefore distinction and emulation are both logical attempts to either maintain one’s position or achieve upward mobility. In contrast, Bourdieu (1988:783) argued that his conception of elite distinction is mediated by habitus and therefore not necessarily intentional or voluntaristic. Moreover, where emulation theory arguably rests on a deference to elites, whatever the contents of their culture, (mis)recognition instead emphasizes how elites mobilize—intentionally or not—a widespread consensus around the intrinsic value of their particular tastes and recreations.

Complexities of Time and Space

Among the social theorists espousing these two models of elite distinction there has been a striking tendency toward generalization. As

Daloz (2009) notes, there is a clear intention in the work of Veblen and Bourdieu, in particular, to offer theories that transcend time and space.

Yet a comparative analysis of elite literature suggests strong limitations to such claims. In terms of place, for example, studies across a number of national contexts have questioned the assumption that subordinate groups necessarily imitate the culture of elites (Weatherill 1996). In France, for example, during the *ancien régime*, Royon (2002; cited in Daloz 2009) argues that the provincial aristocracy accepted that they would never have the financial wealth to mimic their peers in Versailles, so instead built a counter-model of cultural value situated in opposition to the decadence of the Court, emphasizing honor and moral purity. Similarly, Fleming and Roses (2007) show that, in the pursuit of cultural uplift and antiracism, the Boston Black Brahmins carefully imitated the aesthetic sensibilities of the city’s Anglo-American elites, while at the same time working to successfully introduce and normalize black artistry.

Other scholars point to the limitations of emulation and (mis)recognition models in capturing the historical development of elite culture, particularly in terms of how its currency may have shifted at different points or how its specific contents may have changed (Elias 1939). For example, Hanquinet, Roose, and Savage (2014) note that Bourdieu’s concepts of (mis)recognition and cultural capital rest heavily on a particular modernist reading of highbrow aesthetics that is strongly connected to both the temporal period and the national context in which Bourdieu was writing—France in the 1960s.

Elites without Elitism: Enter the Omnivore?

In recent years, some scholars have even questioned whether elite distinction is still taking place at all. Central here are studies documenting the rise of the elite cultural omnivore, who eschews a purely highbrow cultural palette and instead happily grazes on both highbrow and popular forms of culture (Bennett

et al. 2009; Peterson and Kern 1996). Some interpret the coming of the omnivore as evidence of (at least a partial) dissolution of symbolic boundaries, and a signal that elites no longer use culture to pursue distinction from lower-class groups (Bennett et al. 2009; Chan 2019; Erickson 1996; Warde, Wright, and Gayo-Cal 2007). Examining the social and political attitudes of omnivores, Chan (2019), for instance, finds empirical support for the argument that omnivorousness is associated with tolerance, cosmopolitanism, and openness to new cultural styles.

Yet the significance of omnivorousness for debates about elite distinction is strongly contested. In particular, two alternative interpretations have emerged. The most developed of these counters that omnivorousness simply represents the evolution of elite distinction (based on (mis)recognition), first via the selective consumption of consecrated or legitimate objects of popular culture (Bauman 2007; Johnston and Baumann 2009; Kuipers 2015; Regev 1994; Skeggs, Thumim, and Wood 2008) and, second, via the transposition of the aesthetic disposition to popular cultural forms (Flemmen, Jarness, and Roselund 2017; Friedman 2014; Jarness 2015; Khan 2011; Lizardo and Skiles 2012).

Other analysts take a different tack, arguing that omnivorousness *does* indicate a meaningful cultural shift, but one reflecting a wider “meritocratic turn” among elites who are increasingly keen to distance themselves from ascribed advantage and instead play up their “ordinariness” and “normality”—particularly in public settings (Jarness and Friedman 2017; Khan 2012a; Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst 2001; Sherman 2018). Hahl, Zuckerman, and Kim (2017), for example, focus on the distinctive appeal of lowbrow tastes for elite omnivores. They argue that elites suffer from an inherent insecurity about their moral legitimacy. To offset potential public concern that they are only motivated by extrinsic rewards such as status or power, elites develop preferences for what they perceive to be more “authentic” low-status culture. Hahl and colleagues (2017:830) argue that as such culture is “produced without any

awareness that it might impress elite audiences as aesthetically sophisticated, elites generally assume it was produced in a spirit of disinterestedness with respect to highbrow standards, and thus in pursuit of intrinsic rewards rather than extrinsic rewards.” By adopting lowbrow tastes, contemporary elites thus attempt to mitigate their insecurity about perceived inauthenticity by borrowing, and profiting from, the perceived authenticity of lowbrow cultural forms (Reeves 2019).

Yet although multiple scholars have suggested important rejoinders and critiques to theories of elite distinction, such studies contain limited empirical scope. Historical work, for example, has relied largely on secondary sources (Annan 1991; Cannadine 1999), and the voluminous literature on the elite omnivore has been constrained by the fact that, numerically, elites are too small to show up on the kind of standard sample surveys normally used to measure cultural consumption (Savage and Williams 2008).

The reality, therefore, is that we actually know very little about the specific tastes of elites, how these may have changed over time, and the implications of potential shifts for theories of elite distinction. In this article, we draw on a unique data source—120 years of data contained within *Who's Who*, an unrivaled catalogue of the British elite—to move forward our understanding of these questions. *Who's Who* not only contains biographical data on its entrants but also, crucially, asks them to input their “recreations,”³ providing us with data on the recreations of around 70,000 entrants born between 1830 and 1969.

STABLE AND EXPANSIVE: THE CASE OF THE BRITISH ELITE

Before we move to our analysis, it is important to explain both our choice of empirical case and our conceptualization of elites. Britain represents, we argue, a particularly rich site from which to study changes in elite culture. There are two reasons for this. First, elites in Britain were less bruised than other European elites by the political and economic upheavals of the past two centuries, and this

comparative stability lends itself to the kind of longitudinal analysis we undertake here (Cannadine 1999; Savage and Williams 2008). Britain's aristocracy were certainly embattled by piecemeal reform and economic shocks in this period, but they did not face the kind of violent revolutions or wholesale expropriation of elite institutions that so profoundly altered elite culture in countries like France and Germany (Cannadine 1999). Instead, the structure of the British elite—in terms of both its occupational makeup and the schools and universities from which it has traditionally recruited its members—stayed remarkably stable over time (Reeves et al. 2017). The British case, then, provides a unique lens on elite cultural change that is far less muddled by abrupt ruptures in the ruling classes or by radical reconfigurations of elite institutions.

Second, Britain's colonial past means it has played an outsized role in the development of elite culture in many other national contexts (Lange, Mahoney, and vom Hau 2006). Colonial power, in particular, exerted a profound influence on the instantiation and development of elite culture throughout the Commonwealth (Potter 2012). And more widely, British elites have played a key role in the spread of arms-length public arts bodies (e.g., the Arts Council model in Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore), the proliferation of now global sports (e.g., cricket and rugby), and the dissemination of particular models of education (e.g., exclusive, fee-paying schools) (Mangan 2013; McDevitt 2004; O'Brien 2013). In this way, understanding changes in British elite culture offers important insights into how and why shifts in elite culture may have taken place elsewhere (Dooling 2005; Levine 1988).

WHO'S WHO: A CONSECRATED AND PUBLIC-FACING ELITE

Although elites are frequently invoked in cultural consumption research, they are rarely properly defined and conceptualized. Across

the literature, for example, they are variously operationalized as individuals in high-status occupations (Peterson and Simkus 1992), with advanced levels of education (Coulangeon 2017), or with superior stocks of "capital" (Savage et al. 2015). These definitions are broad, sometimes including up to 10 to 20 percent of national populations, and therefore lack the specificity of definitions formulated by elite theorists (Scott 1991).

In this article, we draw on a tighter theoretical conception of elites that represents a powerful cross-fertilization of particularly "positional" but also "reputational" definitions. Mosca (1939) famously argued that elites are best understood as "ruling minorities," empowered through relations of authority and usually occupying formal top positions in organizational hierarchies (Scott 1997, 2008; see also Mills 1956). Other scholars have argued that elites are more usefully identified in reputational terms as people *thought to be* powerful by those "in the know" (Hunter 1953) or as individuals occupying some form of centrality in high-status networks (Ellersgaard, Larsen, and Munk 2013).

We base our analyses on *Who's Who*, the leading biographical dictionary of "noteworthy and influential" people in the UK, which has been published in its current form every year since 1897. *Who's Who* primarily documents a positional elite: 50 percent of entrants are included automatically upon reaching a prominent occupational position. These positions span multiple professional fields (see Part B of the online supplement for a list of automatic appointment positions). For example, Members of Parliament, peers, judges, ambassadors, FTSE100 CEOs, Poet Laureates, and Fellows of the British Academy are all included by virtue of their office.⁴

The other 50 percent of entrants are selected each year by a board of long-standing advisors. This part of the selection process is shrouded in mystery and the subject of much media speculation (Paxman 2007). To address this, we conducted two interviews (in May 2017 and November 2019) with Katy McAdam, Head of Yearbooks at Bloomsbury

and coordinator of the selection process. McAdam explained that the selection process is not influenced by politicking and entries cannot be purchased:⁵ “It’s our job to reflect society, not to try and shape it.” McAdam underscored that advisors make decisions at a series of annual board meetings where they are provided with short biographies of a long-list of potential entrants (compiled by *Who’s Who* editorial staff) who have recently achieved a noteworthy professional appointment or who enjoy sustained prestige, influence, or fame. Each potential entrant is discussed in turn by the board and inclusion is based on a majority vote. Individual board members have the power to veto any single decision if they wish. McAdam declined to provide further information about the board, such as their demographic makeup or average tenure, arguing that “the continued integrity of the publication depends on the total anonymity of the advisory board.” This non-automatic component adds an important “reputational” dimension to the selection process, with *Who’s Who* making assessments of importance based on a person’s perceived impact on British society (Part C of the online supplement includes details of the changing occupational makeup of *Who’s Who*).

Although *Who’s Who* may make selections based on a mix of positional and reputational grounds, all entrants are then united by inclusion itself, which acts as a marker of consecration in its own right. Indeed, *Who’s Who* does not simply catalogue individuals who attain particularly prominent positions or reputations, but it further adds to this recognition by publicly constructing them as important through their inclusion. In this way, *Who’s Who* plays a uniquely performative role in reflecting and actively constructing a national British elite that is widely recognized throughout British society. This legitimacy has been demonstrated in a number of ways: the book has long been considered the most valid catalogue of the British elite among elite scholars (see, e.g., Griffiths, Miles, and Savage 2008; Heath 1981; Kelsall 1955; Kirby 2016; Miles and Savage 2012; Stanworth and Giddens

1974), new entrants continue to be the subject of widespread national media attention (Fitzwilliam 2010; Paxman 2007), and the book’s title has passed into everyday parlance as a casual byword for eliteness.⁶

There are three additional reasons why *Who’s Who* is a particularly useful source for understanding elite culture. First, it is the only data source we know of that is both specifically focused on elites and provides data on cultural tastes. Second, the recreations data are unusual because they are based on a free-text question, where entrants are free to input whatever they like. This means responses are not limited to the normal seven or eight formal categories of taste or participation normally found on standard surveys and may include usually-neglected everyday forms of cultural participation (Miles and Gibson 2017). Finally, *Who’s Who* is unique in that it is very much a *public* document. In this way, the expression of recreations within its pages does not necessarily indicate what elites actually do culturally. Instead, it is more powerful as an expression of how they perform their cultural selves, publicly, and especially to the other elites who most likely read the book (Reeves, Gilbert, and Holman 2015).

METHODS

In November 2016, after extensive discussions with Oxford University Press and Bloomsbury Publishing—the two publishing companies producing *Who’s Who*—we successfully brokered access to all data collected by the publication since it began including full biographical details in 1897.

Who’s Who contains two separate but connected data sources: (1) *Who’s Who* and (2) *Who Was Who*. *Who’s Who* is the current directory of every individual included in the published version of the book. Over time its entrants have consistently represented approximately .05 percent of the UK population (or 1 in every 2,000 people).⁷ When a person included in *Who’s Who* passes away, their record is transferred into *Who Was Who*. We combine these datasets and treat them as

one data source, referring to it collectively as *Who's Who*. Our analysis focuses on the 71,393 individuals⁸ who describe their recreations (for details of the changing demographic makeup of *Who's Who*, see Part D of the online supplement).

We analyze the recreations⁹ data using two different methods. First, we used dictionary methods to identify the proportion of people born in a given cohort who reported participating in a particular activity by directly counting the number of times certain terms were reported. To do this, we began, inductively, by focusing on words used more than 100 times across all individuals. We then looked at the main trends among these commonly cited terms, identifying three large clusters of recreations, or cultural modes (what we call “aristocratic,” “highbrow,” and “ordinary”) that share similar trajectories across time and accord with historical and sociological literature on elite cultural consumption. As discussed in Part F of the online supplement, the vast majority of entrants used at least one of the key words coded in this analysis (for more information on our hand-coding procedure, see Part F of the online supplement).

However, there are several limitations to dictionary methods. First, although our analysis covers a high proportion of all words used, it does not categorize every word used in entries. We may thus overlook patterns in the data that exist beyond our hand-coded categories. Second, dictionary methods may struggle to reveal changes in entrants’ *combination* of recreations because they ignore the relationship between words. That is, by focusing on “shooting” we may fail to capture how this term is used in relation to other activities, such as “sailing” and “golf,” which together may represent a distinct mode of culture.

To address these issues, we use our second method—a semi-automated content analysis procedure (ReadMe)—to re-examine the trends in how *Who's Who* entrants report their recreations over time (Hopkins and King 2010). Here we initially hand-coded 600 entries, marking whether respondents reported interests in our aristocratic, highbrow,

or ordinary categories. We then recorded all possible combinations of these categories; for example, a respondent may blend highbrow activities (“the arts”) and the everyday (“spending time with my family”). Once completed, we plugged the hand-coded entries into a machine learning algorithm that then read the rest of the entries and calculated the proportion of entries (within a margin of error) in each single or combined category. We validated this method by testing how accurately it estimated our coding framework. To do this, we hand-coded an additional 600 entries and then used the first set of hand-coded entries to predict the second set. Readme is very successful, predicting the right proportions to within a few percentage points of the hand-coded results. We then again used the first set of hand-coded entries to calculate the proportion of all entries in each category for entrants who turned 20 in a given period in *Who's Who* (1850 to 1859, 1860 to 1869, . . . , 1980 to 1989).

This supervised approach addresses some of the problems of dictionary methods, but it still proceeds analytically from the investigator’s own hand-coding of recreational categories. In Part G of the online supplement, we therefore use an unsupervised structural topic model to assess whether similar trends can be observed using a totally undirected approach. The advantage of this approach is that it means categories or topics emerge inductively from the correlational structure of the data. Reassuringly, the unsupervised topic model mirrors closely the results reported in the next section (for more details, see Part G of the online supplement).

Finally, to provide a more granular analysis of elite *musical* taste, we combine *Who's Who* with another unique historical data source—the archive of *Desert Island Discs*, a radio show broadcast on the BBC since 1942 (Brown, Cook, and Cottrell 2017; Dean et al. 2018; Thurman 2012). The format of the show is straightforward. Each week a “castaway”—usually a noteworthy and influential elite person—is asked to choose eight songs or pieces of music they would take with them if they were

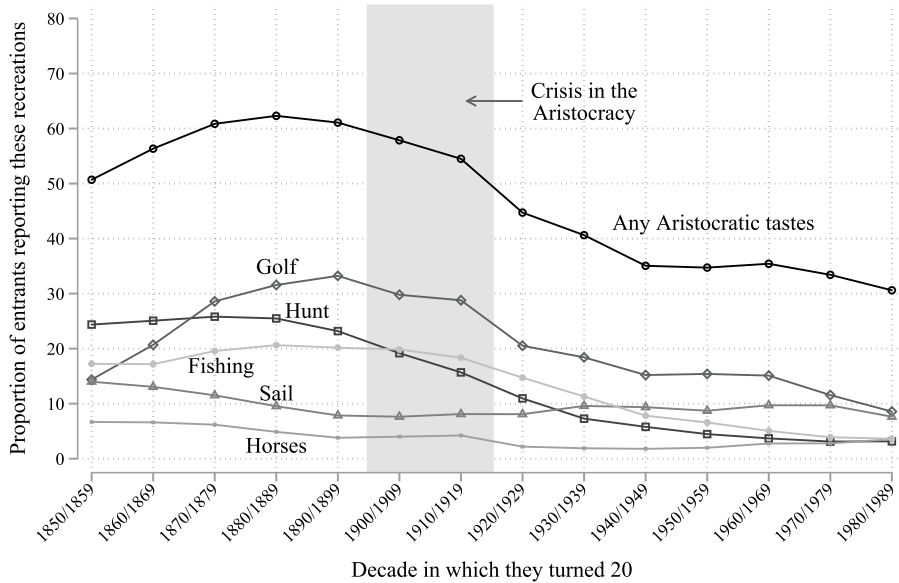


Figure 1. The Ascendancy and Decline of Aristocratic Culture

Note: The top line is the summation of all the activities reported in the figure and all other Aristocratic words listed in Part F of the online supplement.

to be stranded on a desert island. As over 60 percent of the people who have appeared on *Desert Island Discs* are also in *Who's Who*, we are able to merge the two datasets to provide a more granular analysis of the music tastes of around 1,200 *Who's Who* entrants.

RESULTS

The End of the Aristocratic Era: 1900 to 1920

Our analysis explores the changing recreations of *Who's Who* entrants transitioning into adulthood between 1850 and 1989. We display entrants' preferences according to the decades in which they turned 20, as we know that people's cultural tastes tend to mature and stabilize in early adulthood (ter Bogt et al. 2011; Holbrook and Schindler 1989; Smith 1994). As we will show, we see three major shifts in the contents and dominant mode of elite culture over this time period. First, we observe the initial ascendancy but swift decline of what we call "aristocratic" culture. As Figure 1 shows, early entrants show a high propensity for hunting, shooting, fishing, sailing, yachting, rowing, horse-related activities (e.g., horse riding, horse

racing, polo, dressage, eventing), and golf. This reflects the fact that throughout the nineteenth century "[t]he foundations of elite social life were firmly laid in the country" (Henry 2007:320). Dominant groups would congregate at the landscaped estates of the landowning aristocracy and take part in activities like hunting, shooting, and fishing (Cannadine 1999). These activities were also institutionalized via the "Season,"¹⁰ a set of regularized events in the elite social calendar that dominated the leisure time of the aristocracy and the landed gentry (Horn 1992; Scott 1991). Participating in the Season required vast economic resources and therefore throughout most of the nineteenth century these economic barriers ensured that aristocratic practices remained the preserve of the traditional landowning elite.

But, as Figure 1 shows, at the turn of the century the dominance of this aristocratic culture began to wane. Two processes are central in understanding this decline. First, American (and to a lesser extent British) industrialists, who had amassed fortunes often surpassing even the wealthiest landowners, gradually began to buy their way into high society. They purchased country estates, rented townhouses in central London,

acquired the libraries and art collections of bankrupt aristocrats, and married the children of the landed gentry (Rubinstein 1981). Many traditional landowners certainly complained about these parvenus, dismissing them as “social scum and nouveaux riches” (Cannadine 1999). Yet they lacked the means to prevent their gradual infiltration. For example, the proportion of women from outside the landowning classes presented at court¹¹ grew from 10 percent in 1841 to over 50 percent by the end of the nineteenth century, and by 1914 there were 50 American peeresses,¹² up from four just a few decades earlier (Cannadine 1999).

The nouveaux riches entered aristocratic social circles in part because of their superior wealth. But their ascent was also facilitated by a concomitant process of economic decline among the British aristocracy. From the 1880s onward, a series of economic and social shocks weakened the position of the landed elite, leaving them vulnerable to interlopers and making it harder for them to participate in the Season (Horn 1992). In particular, the cost of labor combined with falling agricultural prices left many of the great estates bankrupt, forcing aristocratic families to sell off large sections of their land (Beckett 1986).¹³ The upwardly mobile only deepened this crisis. Very soon after the “foreign” invasion, for example, the popularity of the Season declined precipitously (Scott 1991). The old elite found the extravagance of the arrivistes distasteful, and many parvenus found aristocratic practices “rigid” and “intolerably stuffy” (Cannadine 1999). A reconfiguration of elite social and cultural life began to take place, with the social and cultural centers of Britain moving from the counties to the cities, and London in particular.

The Rise of Highbrow Culture: 1920 to 1950

At the turn of the twentieth century, at the same time as the hold of aristocratic culture began to wane, we begin to see in our data the increasing importance of “highbrow” cultural activities. As Figure 2 illustrates, starting around 1920, before slowing down after

1950, we see a marked increase in preferences for theater, classical music,¹⁴ literature, opera, and the arts. Alongside these more formal types of cultural participation, we also see a greater proclivity for certain outdoor recreations, such as hiking.

Particularly influential in understanding this shift is a generation born between 1900 and 1929 who were heavily influenced by the Bloomsbury Group, an intellectual collective that came to define a new mode of elite culture (Annan 1991; Griffiths et al. 2008; Savage 2010). Many of this new elite cohort were educated at the same institutions as earlier generations, such as elite public schools and Oxbridge, but they were strongly critical of the “philistinism”¹⁵ of leisured aristocratic culture, where one “plays cricket, is scratch at golf and has a fine seat on a horse” but is also likely to be suspicious of “anyone who knows about art, music or literature” (Annan 1991). Instead, they embraced a set of emerging high and metropolitan cultural forms—abstract art, theater, and ballet—promulgated by prominent Bloomsberries such as Virginia Woolf,¹⁶ D. H. Lawrence, and Roger Fry. As poet Ezra Pound proclaimed in 1918: “the old aristocracies of blood and business are about to be supplanted by the aristocracy of the arts” (Rose 2001:435).

What united these new elite cultural practices was arguably a particular modernist aesthetic premised on a “disinterested” privileging of artistic form over emotional function (Kant [1790] 1987). Highly influential in disseminating this was the philosopher G. E. Moore (1903) and particularly his book *Principia Ethica*. Moore emphasized the importance of “beauty” in properly realizing “the good life” and came to have a profound influence on the Bloomsberries and other tastemakers (Skidelsky 2013). However, the Bloomsberries were not snobs in the classic exclusionary sense. In fact, their vision was that elite culture should play a “civilizing” role in society. They believed art had the ability to change the human character, but to do so, to bring about human flourishing, people needed to adopt the “right” kind of stance. Under the influence of Moore’s work, the Bloomsberries and others began to institutionalize this vision. In

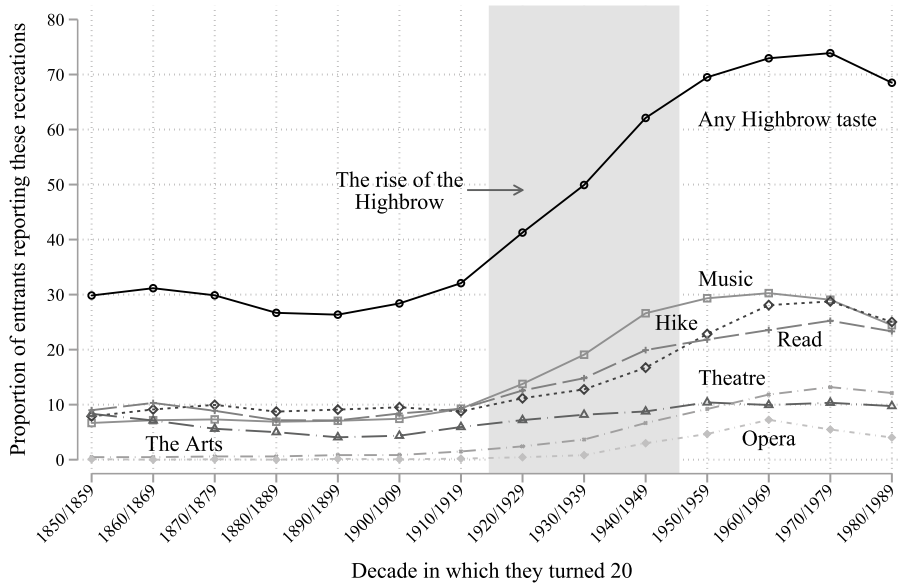


Figure 2. The Rise of Highbrow Culture

Note: The top line is the summation of all the activities reported in the figure and all other Highbrow words listed in Part F of the online supplement.

particular, they had an enormous influence on the ethos of a number of emerging cultural institutions. For example, one of the most prominent Bloomsberries, the economist John Maynard Keynes, was the first head of what is now known as the Arts Council (the main public body responsible for administering state funding to the arts). In this role, Keynes reduced support for local cultural activities and argued stridently that “it was standards that mattered” when it came to the state-sponsored promotion of culture¹⁷ (Mulgan 1996; Skidelsky 2013).

The influence of the Bloomsberries can also be seen in the early ethos of the BBC, and particularly its first director, John Reith. Reith explicitly rejected the lowbrow populism of American broadcasting and instead, like Keynes, turned his focus to “standards.” He aired classical music, theater, poetry,¹⁸ and elite sports, while shunning football, and argued that the BBC’s core mission should be to share “all that is best in every department of human knowledge, endeavour and achievement” (Potter 2012:23; see also Mulgan 1996).

This belief in the civilizing force of high culture also informed efforts to standardize educational curricula. By 1950, for example,

students were required to pass a humanities subject to receive their School Certificate (the first generalized, pre-university qualification). The humanities had long been valued in elite schools, but this formalized and expanded the importance of certain subjects, such as English literature and art history, and in so doing explicitly connected knowledge of high culture to educational attainment (Elliott 2011; Hewison 1995).

One further striking finding emerges from this highbrow period. Among *Who’s Who* entrants who turned 20 between 1900 and 1950, the propensity to report one’s recreations increased dramatically, from around 40 percent to about 80 percent of entrants.¹⁹ Clearly, as the institutionalization of highbrow culture gathered pace, so too did the propensity of elites to express their own, increasingly highbrow, tastes in public.²⁰

The Decline of Deference and the Rise of the Elite Omnivore, 1950 to the Present

Although highbrow tastes and recreations appear to dominate elite culture in the early to middle part of the twentieth century, our data

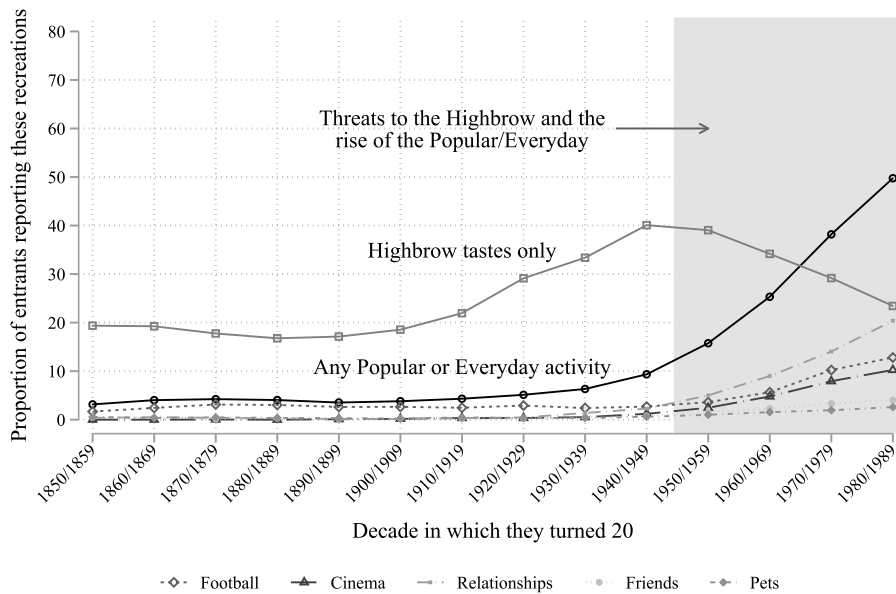


Figure 3. The Rise of Popular and Everyday Recreations

Note: The top line is the summation of all the activities reported in the figure and all other Popular/Ordinary words listed in Part F of the online supplement.

also show an intriguing break in their supremacy in the 1950s and 1960s. Figure 3, for example, shows that the proportion of entrants who expressed *only* highbrow recreations began to fall in the 1950s.

Historical accounts emphasize several factors in understanding this decline, including shifts within the cultural and creative industries that initially challenged the disinterested aesthetic and later legitimized certain popular cultural forms (Bauman 2007; Featherstone 2007; Lena 2019; Peterson and Kern 1996; Regev 1994);²¹ generational value change that precipitated a decline in snobbery and deference to elites²² (Morgan 2018; Savage et al. 2015; Sayer 2015); and the emergence of a managerial culture where access to a broad cultural repertoire functioned as a key management tool²³ (DiMaggio 1987; Lizardo 2006; Scott 1991). Certainly, the decline coincided with important shifts within many of the institutions that had previously been so instrumental in generating belief in the supremacy of highbrow culture. The BBC, for example, and to a lesser extent the Arts Council, began to change aesthetic course, increasingly promoting, programming, and funding more popular cultural content (Hewison 1995).

Yet Figure 3 not only details a move away from the dominance of highbrow culture, it also shows, from the 1950s onward, a rise in preferences for more “popular” cultural forms, such as football and cinema, and ordinary or everyday cultural practices, such as spending time with family, friends, and pets. These ordinary recreations may not be superseding more conventional elite pursuits (with the exception of relationships, they are not challenging highbrow activities in terms of popularity), but their significance to our analysis is rooted more in their *integration* with traditionally dominant modes of elite culture. Figure 4, using the semi-automated content analysis described in the Methods section, shows how emerging modes increasingly involved retaining a penchant for more traditional forms of elite culture and, at the same time, combining these with more popular and ordinary forms. The British elite, in other words, appears to have become increasingly omnivorous over the past 50 years.

Unpacking the Elite Omnivore

The question, of course, is what does this omnivorousness mean for contemporary

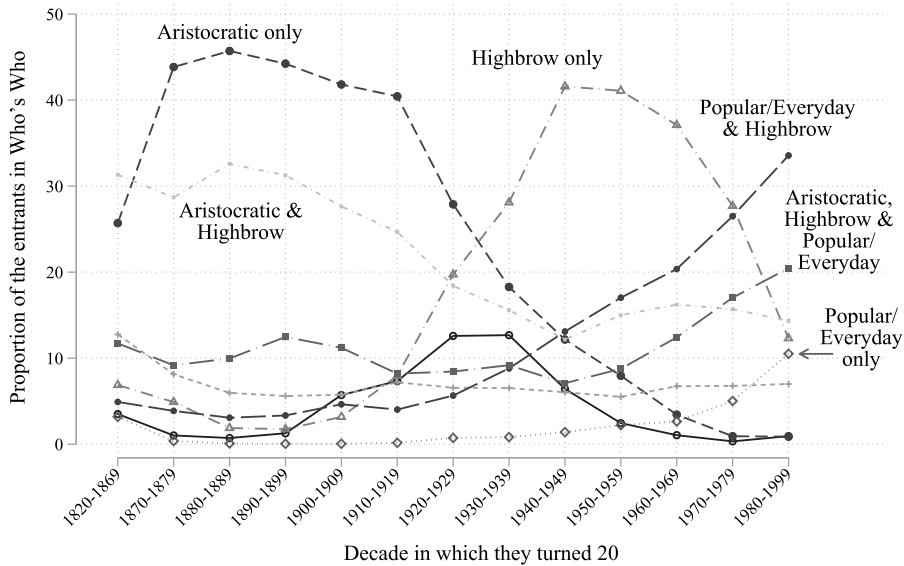


Figure 4. The Rise of the Elite Omnivore

Note: These estimates were calculated using ReadMe after both authors hand-coded 600 responses. The solid black line with hollow circles at the bottom of the graph is the proportion of people who reported participating in ambiguous activities, such as gardening. The dashed gray line with + signs measures the combination of the aristocratic and the ordinary, but this never really reaches above 10 percent of responses.

debates about elite distinction? Although this is difficult to definitively answer with quantitative data, the unique nature of the way recreations are expressed in *Who's Who* can provide some clues. In particular, many people in *Who's Who* choose to report their recreations in ways that go beyond simply listing types of recreations: they actively “play with the form” of their entry, describing their interests in a knowing, humorous, or slightly ironic way. Salient examples include “sailing, opera, gardening, perfecting espresso coffee” (Professor Azriel Zuckerman, academic), “applying Wittgenstein” (Anthony Ash, senior civil servant), “tennis, guitar, cycling, skipping, herb-surfing, dendron-leaping, portaceneare” (Richard Addis, journalist), “loud music, strong cider” (Jonathan Ashley-Smith, senior civil servant), and simply “[the] usual” (Admiral Sir Edward Ashmore, Chief of Naval Staff). Such entries represent subtle acts of distinction, with entrants demonstrating their aesthetic confidence to knowingly play with the form. In Figure 5, using the

same semi-automated content analysis described earlier, we estimate the proportion of people in each cohort expressing their recreations in this way over time. Strikingly, such playing with form is largely nonexistent among entrants who came of age before the 1950s, but in more recent cohorts it has become far more common.

Although significant, this practice is only ever evident among a minority of *Who's Who* entrants; the reporting norm remains whole art forms or cultural practices. This makes analysis of omnivorousness difficult. Many cultural forms, such as music,²⁴ are ambiguous and need further specification to interpret in terms of legitimacy. To address this, we merge *Who's Who* with data from *Desert Island Discs* (described in the Methods section) to provide a more granular analysis of the music tastes of 1,200 *Who's Who* entrants. Two findings emerge.

First, we code artists into genres and examine how the songs played on *Desert Island Discs* changed over time and by birth cohort.

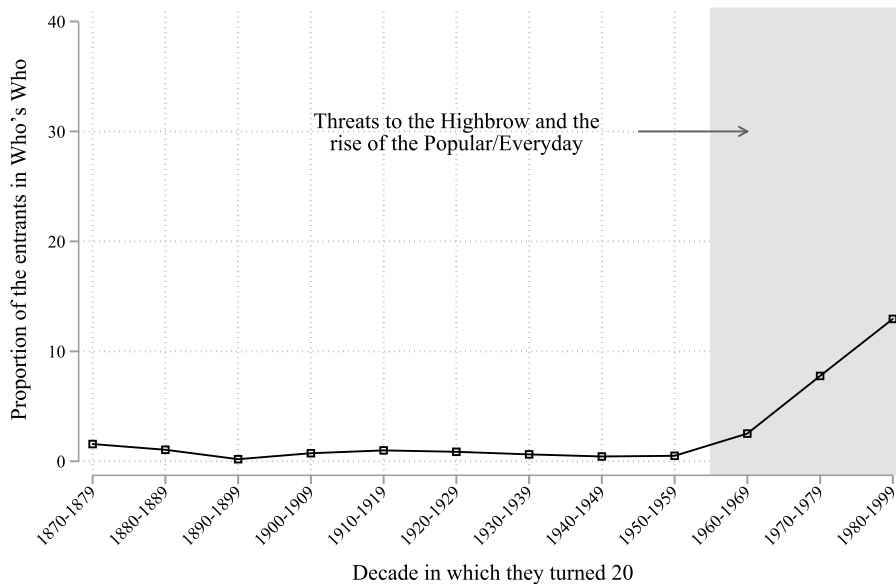


Figure 5. The Rise of *Who's Who* Entrants "Playing with Form" in the Recreations Entry

Note: These estimates were calculated using ReadMe after both authors hand-coded 600 responses.

This genre-based analysis echoes the trend toward omnivorousness shown in Figure 4. Specifically, the vast majority of entrants play at least one piece of highbrow classical music, but the percentage who play classical music *and* tracks from less legitimate genres, such as pop, rock, folk, electronic, world, and country, grows significantly over time. For example, among entrants who turned 20 between 1896 and 1939, 10 percent combined classical music with other genres. In contrast, among entrants who turned 20 after the 1960s, over 40 percent combined tracks from classical and more popular genres.

Second, we go further to examine the legitimacy of the popular music being played. Specifically, we examined the critical-acclaim of musical artists by analyzing their average score on the music website Metacritic, which aggregates reviews of albums. Figure 6 shows that the artists played by *Who's Who* entrants are consistently more legitimate, in terms of their mean Metacritic score, than the average musical artist.²⁵ Indeed, they are consistently in the top quartile. This indicates that although contemporary elites may be increasingly integrating popular cultural forms into their cultural

repertoires, the individual artists they prefer still tilt toward the legitimate and consecrated.

The omnivorousness we identify may be partly explained by elites adopting tastes for more legitimate popular artists. However, it is important to recall that many of the non-high-brow recreations that emerge in Figure 3 are not forms of conventional cultural consumption. In fact, most are more ordinary or everyday forms of cultural participation, such as spending time with family, friends, and pets, that are not normally considered in debates about cultural omnivorousness (Miles and Gibson 2017). It is also striking that among the most recent entrants to *Who's Who* it is these everyday recreations that are rising most significantly, and much faster than tastes for popular culture. Figure 7 unpacks this rise to look at the role of both cohort and period effects. Two patterns emerge. Younger cohorts are far more likely than older cohorts to report these everyday recreations, but such reporting increases for all cohorts over time—particularly among entrants who were added to *Who's Who* after 2000. This suggests the rising expression of these distinctly ordinary recreations is not just about the generation in which elites grew up,

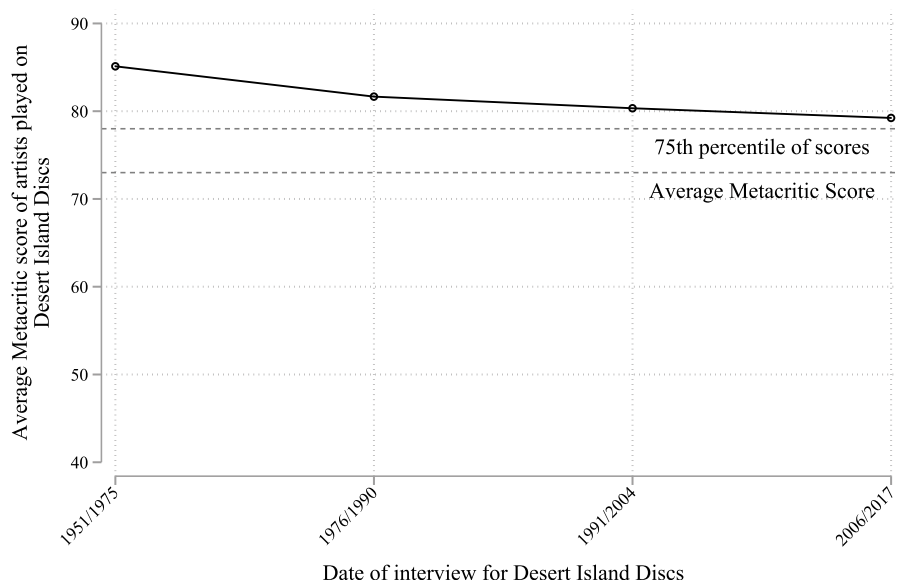


Figure 6. The Critical Acclaim of Music Chosen by *Who's Who* Entrants Appearing on *Desert Island Discs*

Note: The average Metacritic scores were collected by hand and represent the average rating across all of an artist's albums.

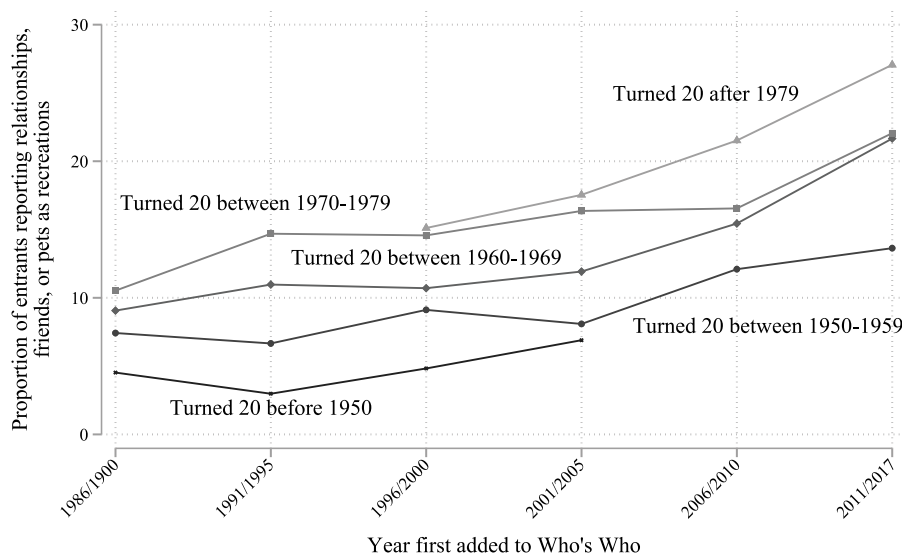


Figure 7. The Rise of Everyday Recreations since 1986

Note: The year *Who's Who* entrants were added to the volume is only available for individuals added after 1986.

but also the distinct period in which they enter *Who's Who* and are asked to present their cultural selves in this very public way. Our results

thus point to an intriguing period effect in the foregrounding of ordinariness that affects all entrants to *Who's Who* from the 1990s onward.²⁶

Limitations and Robustness Checks

It is important to acknowledge that our results raise a number of theoretical and methodological questions that our data do not allow us to fully address. First, we lack systematically collected data that would allow us to compare the recreations of *Who's Who* entrants to the wider UK population, or to see how this relationship may have changed over time. This has clear implications for discussions about elite distinction, which rest on both the demonstration of class-structured differences in lifestyle as well as evidence that lower social classes emulate, or recognize the value of, elite tastes.

Although data on cultural consumption in the UK before the start of the twenty-first century are rare, here we draw on two studies—carried out at the beginning (Mass Observation 1939) and the end (Young and Willmott 1973) of our second “highbrow” stage of elite culture—to partially address these issues.²⁷ We then compare these early analyses with two datasets from our third period: Bennett and colleagues’ (2009) mixed-methods study of class and culture and official statistics collected as part of the Taking-Part Survey (Reeves 2015). As Figure 8 shows, throughout much of the twentieth century clear differences exist between the cultural preferences of *Who's Who* entrants and other social class groups. In particular, highbrow taste was far more prevalent in *Who's Who* than in other groups, including even the professional middle classes (a finding also confirmed by Bennett et al. 2009:251–3).²⁸

The second limitation of our results concerns the possible gap between what elites say they do in a public document like *Who's Who* and what they actually do in practice (Jerolmack and Khan 2014). For example, Holmqvist’s (2017) ethnographic work confirms that elites often publicly emphasize investment in friends and family, yet in practice actually spend less time cultivating such relationships, due to busy work schedules and reliance on paid childcare. However, we should reiterate that our primary focus is not

so much changes in elite cultural *practice* but changes in elite cultural *distinction*; in other words, how elites *deploy* their recreations in public to signal social position or, in this case, moral legitimacy. In this regard, we believe the public-facing dimension of *Who's Who* provides unique insights into the performative dimension of distinction.

Normally, performative or interactional aspects of distinction are thought to be best tapped using ethnographic methods (Jerolmack and Khan 2014). Yet ethnographic observations tend to be rooted in specific sets of interactions between particular people located in particular settings (see, e.g., Khan 2011). What distinguishes our data is that elites are communicating their cultural tastes not to specific interlocutors, with all the contextual idiosyncrasies that flank such interactions, but to an audience of generalized others. This context, we argue, provides an important vantage point from which to understand elite distinction as a communicative process. Specifically, it may compel elites to foreground their “honorable” (Pugh 2013) cultural selves, that is, to curate their recreations in such a way that presents them in an admirable light or “which incorporate and exemplify the official accredited values” (Goffman 1959:19).²⁹

A third limitation of our analysis is that its focus on *all* entrants runs the risk of masking recreational heterogeneity *within* the British elite. Yet, as we explore in Part I of the online supplement, there is a surprising degree of homogeneity across potentially important subsamples. For example, we find only very small differences in cultural practice between individuals who enter *Who's Who* by virtue of their position and those who enter through the selection panel, or between those who attended an elite private school and those who did not. There are, however, potentially important differences by occupation. For example, members of the military are consistently more likely to participate in aristocratic practices, whereas people from the cultural industries are much more likely to participate in highbrow activities. Importantly, however, although there are occupational differences in the popularity of

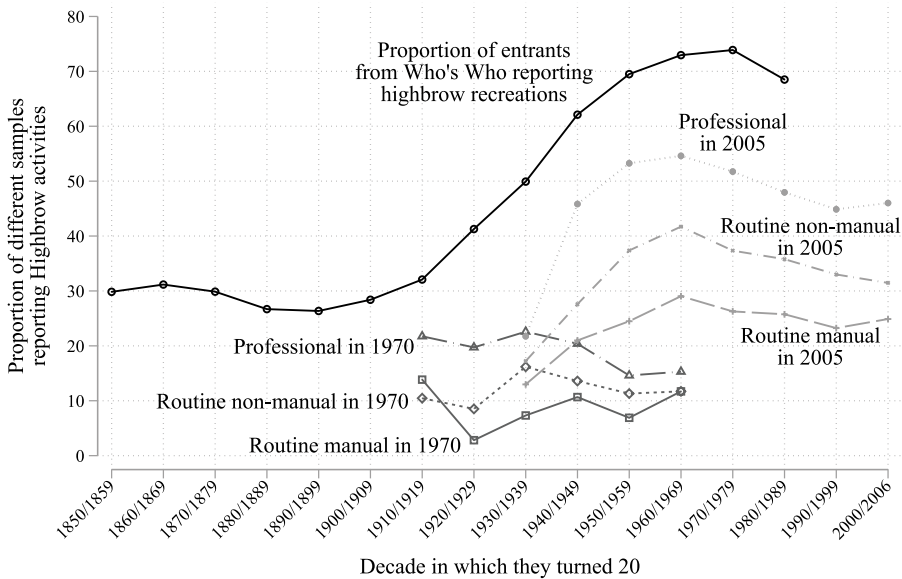


Figure 8. Elite Highbrow Consumption Compared to Other Social Class Groups

Note: The solid line is taken from Figure 2 and captures the proportion of people in *Who's Who* who reported participating in highbrow culture. The dark gray lines are the proportion of people in each social class/cohort combination in the 1970 London survey ($n = 1,928$) conducted by Young and Willmott that reported their "best" recreation activity as something highbrow (e.g., theater, painting, or sculpture). The light gray lines are the proportion of people in each social class/cohort combination in the 2005 Taking-Part Survey ($n = 28,117$) conducted by the Arts Council that reported consuming highbrow activities (e.g., art exhibitions, theater, opera).

cultural modes, the patterns of change between these modes are similar across all fields. Finally, we also see important differences between men and women. Women in earlier cohorts were far less likely to participate in aristocratic activities but were far more likely to participate in highbrow activities. Men eventually catch up with women, but this suggests women may have acted as first-movers in terms of the highbrow mode.³⁰

These distinct patterns of cultural practice among certain social groups suggest that the rise and fall of different modes of elite culture may be connected to changes in the social composition of *Who's Who*. We examine this in Part J of the online supplement. First, we conducted a matching analysis, using coarsened exact matching, to identify a subset of people in *Who's Who* that possess a similar set of characteristics across different cohorts; we then reweighted these matched groups to smooth differences in the size of the groups over time.

Following the patterns of heterogeneity mentioned earlier, we matched on gender, social origin occupation, selection type, and a range of other variables (for more details, see Part J of the online supplement). Second, we conducted a counterfactual analysis that focuses more precisely on changes in occupational structure by estimating what the recreations of those in *Who's Who* would have been had the amount of entrants from different occupational fields remained unchanged (see Part C of the online supplement). Reassuringly, both the matching and counterfactual analyses indicate that accounting for changes in the composition of *Who's Who* over time leads to only very minor differences in our results.

Finally, *Who's Who* only details entrants' recreations in the last year they provided data, and therefore it may neglect changes in taste that occurred over the life course. To partially address this uncertainty, we explore the degree to which recreation entries changed

over time by hand-coding the recreations data for 1,761 records that were included in both the 1988 and 2016 versions of *Who's Who*. As shown in Part K of the online supplement, there is little change in the recreations reported by individuals over time, suggesting tastes largely stabilize by this point in the life course, and so any bias introduced by this aspect of the data is negligible.³¹

DISCUSSION

In this study, we have used a combination of dictionary methods and computational text analysis to examine patterns of elite cultural consumption over time. These methods are not unusual in sociology, but they have only rarely been used to analyze historical sources containing unstructured text. In this way, we hope our analysis may act as a blueprint for researchers interested in interrogating the multitude of other unstructured historical documents where elites may have left distinct textual traces (Khan 2012b). We believe such methodological tools may also be useful to cultural consumption scholars, who have hitherto largely relied on survey or interview data to uncover patterns of practice. Here we hope our use of *Who's Who* illustrates the gains that flow from investigating more fine-grained sources that are now more accessible in the digital era. Not only can such sources help fill empirical gaps in our understanding of the tastes of specific groups, such as elites, but they may also begin to shed light, as we do here, on the elusive but pivotal “display” dimensions of cultural distinction.

Our results reveal three distinct stages of elite culture in the UK over the past 120 years. First, we see a dominant mode of aristocratic practice forged around the leisure possibilities afforded by landed estates (e.g., shooting, hunting, horse riding, polo, sailing), but which waned significantly in the late nineteenth century. Second, we find a highbrow culture dominated by the fine arts (opera, classical music, theater, literature) that increased sharply in the early twentieth century before beginning to gently recede in

the most recent cohorts. Third, we find a contemporary mode increasingly characterized by the blending of aristocratic and particularly highbrow pursuits with more everyday forms of cultural participation. These shifts not only suggest important changes in the nature and content of elite culture but they also chart, as we go on to argue here, important shifts in the nature of elite distinction.

Why History Matters for Elite Distinction

Two theoretical concepts dominate sociological analysis of elite distinction: emulation and (mis)recognition. In this article, rather than adjudicate between these approaches, we show that *both* have operated in the UK context. To understand this we argue that history is key. Although both concepts were purported, by their architects Veblen and Bourdieu, to transcend time and space, our analysis indicates that their capacity to explain the sociological significance of elite recreations in a UK context depends very clearly on the temporal period being examined.

At the end of the nineteenth century, when our analysis begins, elites exercised distinction via the practice of an overtly aristocratic mode. Key to this was the *scarcity* of such recreations, whereby strong economic barriers to entry endowed activities like hunting or polo with a sense of rarity that set elites apart and acted as grounds on which they enacted social closure. At the same time, notions of ascribed class position prevailed in Britain, with the aristocratic elite enjoying a widespread, although not complete, deference in the eyes of other social groups³² (Cannadine 1999; Scott 1991). Entry to elite circles in the first period of our analysis, then, largely rested on what Veblen called “pecuniary emulation,” that is, one’s economic capacity to take part in, and ape, the cultural practices of existing elites. Yet this model of elite distinction, premised on exclusivity and deference, was threatened by the wide-scale influx of nouveau riche industrialists at the end of the nineteenth century. Many traditional landowners resented these

parvenus, but there was no formal way to exclude them. Economic capital was the only real barrier to entry, and with the landed estates increasingly struggling economically, the old aristocratic elite lacked the economic means to enact the kind of “invidious distinction” documented by Veblen in the nineteenth-century United States.

What followed this decline was not just a new elite culture but also a new mode of elite distinction. To understand the strong rise in preferences for high culture in the early twentieth century, it is thus imperative to consider the processes of legitimation, institutionalization, and ultimately (mis)recognition that flanked the adoption of this highbrow mode (Levine 1988). This is not to say there was not some (mis)recognition of aristocratic culture, or that highbrow culture did not feature at all in the lifestyles of earlier elites. But what is distinct about this period were the concerted efforts of a distinct set of elites, operating in the fields of politics, education, and the cultural industries, who not only acted as early adopters and first movers³³ in relation to this new, more joined-up, highbrow cultural repertoire but were also central in institutionalizing its value,³⁴ establishing the Arts Council (Upchurch 2004),³⁵ consecrating high culture through the education system,³⁶ and acting as tastemaking cultural intermediaries³⁷—critics, journalists, publishers, scouts, agents, marketers, and so on—invested with the ability, through newspaper reviews and awards, to control the public discourse on culture (English 2008).³⁸

The point to underline here is that together these agents of legitimation were successful in producing an unprecedented (mis)recognition of the inherent value of highbrow elite culture.³⁹ It is also telling that this move toward a distinctly highbrow elite culture dovetailed with a marked increase in the proclivity of elites to *report* their recreations in *Who's Who*. As the legitimacy of elite culture grew, it became more important to the way elites presented their biographies in public.

By combining our results with a range of historical sources it is therefore possible to discern elite distinction based on both emulation

and (mis)recognition at different points in recent British history. It is also worth noting that the periods in which each of these models dominated coincide with the periods in which Veblen and Bourdieu staged their own interventions. In this way, our analysis not only underlines the importance of history for understanding elite distinction, but it more broadly stresses the importance of considering the historical context from which theoretical concepts emerge.

Toward a Contemporary Theory of “Ordinary” Elite Distinction

Although we find evidence of both emulation and (mis)recognition at different points in the twentieth century, which is more useful for understanding the contemporary recreations of the British elite? Here we would begin by acknowledging that we detect at least a residue of *both* theoretical modes today. For example, aristocratic recreations continue to be practiced by nearly 40 percent of current *Who's Who* entrants (see Figure 1), and an enduring nostalgia and reverence for the leisured aristocracy, and the attendant “gentry aesthetic,” remains strong in sections of the British population (Smith 2016).

Having said this, we would argue that (mis)recognition remains the more useful of the two models for understanding contemporary modes of elite distinction. At first glance this may seem at odds with our findings, particularly the gentle decline in highbrow recreations we observe among individuals coming of age from the 1950s onward, and the concomitant rise in more popular and everyday forms of cultural participation. This of course connects strongly with a wider literature on the rise of the “cultural omnivore” (Peterson and Kern 1996; Peterson and Simkus 1992) and the argument that such eclecticism threatens Bourdieusian processes of (mis)recognition (Chan 2019; Erickson 1996; Warde and Gayo-Cal 2009).

Yet many other scholars have refuted that the cultural omnivore is constitutive of a pluralist shift in cultural consumption. As Lizardo

and Skiles (2012) forcefully argue, omnivorous consumption of popular culture is entirely compatible with a Bourdieusian framework, as in most cases the actual mode of consumption simply represents the transposability of the aesthetic disposition to cultural objects not originally produced with an aesthetic intention (see also Jarness 2015), or a highly selective consumption of “quality” popular culture (Bauman 2007; Entwistle and Rocamora 2006; Johnston and Baumann 2009; Kuipers 2015; Regev 1994; Skeggs et al. 2008).

One theme that emerges from this literature, however, is that the aesthetic mode of cultural distinction may be changing. Whereas the traditional aesthetic disposition—notably through the model of the Kantian aesthetic—celebrates withdrawal, distance, and discernment, and classically places audiences in a relatively passive and distant position, emerging modes of consuming popular culture often use a more performative, knowing expression of cultural aptitude—an aesthetic of engagement, exhibition, and ease rather than absorption and introspection (Hanquinet et al. 2014). (Mis)recognition, in other words, may still be taking place, but it now rests on conceptions of legitimacy that have been extended to many popular cultural objects and artists, and new “ways of seeing.”

Our results compel us more toward this interpretation. In particular, we see the apparent omnivorousness of elites not so much as evidence of the dissolution of cultural boundaries but of two quite different processes. First, we see evidence of the kind of “knowing” orientation to culture. As Figure 5 shows, we see a marked increase in the number of entrants “playing with the form” of the recreations’ entry, using humor and wordplay. This may partly reflect broader cultural shifts toward self-expression and individualism (Buchmann and Eisner 1997; De Keere 2014), but we read it more as an example of the transposal of the aesthetic disposition—a self-conscious and knowing attempt to distance oneself from highbrow modes of distinction-signaling, yet still conducted to showcase a certain aesthetic ease (Khan

2011). Second, we find that legitimacy still plays an important role in understanding the popular preferences of elites. By connecting *Who’s Who* entrants to their more granular musical preferences, as expressed on *Desert Island Discs*, we see that their tastes are significantly more consecrated than the average pop artist. This suggests further support for the argument that contemporary elites continue to pursue distinction via careful expression of the “right” cultural tastes.

Yet although we interpret contemporary British elites as distinction-seeking, we also follow the recent work of Hahl and colleagues (2017) in arguing that contemporary expressions of elite cultural identity fulfill another function: authenticity-seeking. Hahl and colleagues make this argument in relation to elite cultural tastes that are not necessarily legitimate but are considered to be produced with an intrinsic, and therefore authentic, motivation. We extend this beyond popular culture to show its relevance to a wider set of everyday cultural preferences—most notably spending time with friends, family, and pets. Such everyday cultural participation is almost always absent from cultural consumption survey data, yet as illustrated in Sherman’s (2017) ethnographic work, it is pivotal to provide a richer, more complete understanding of elite lifestyles (or, in this case, how elites wish to present them in public).

The everyday recreations we identify here also share important properties with the popular culture analyzed by Hahl and colleagues (2017). In particular, they are activities widely perceived to be prosocial, pursued for intrinsic rather than extrinsic rewards, and not associated with the highbrow aesthetics synonymous with Bourdieusian processes of (mis)recognition. We thus argue that elites’ increasing proclivity to register these everyday recreations in public represents another means through which they seek to establish their authenticity, normality, and ordinariness (Savage et al. 2015; Sherman 2018), and ward off moral suspicions that their highbrow or aristocratic tastes may position them as snobbish, status-seeking, and aloof.⁴⁰

We would thus summarize the contemporary mode of “ordinary elite distinction” in the following way. First, it relies on the public display of some cultural forms, objects, artists, or recreations that *are* (mis)recognized as legitimate. However, such legitimate preferences are rarely articulated in isolation. In fact, they are knowingly positioned alongside more everyday cultural practices that are largely unrelated to hierarchies of legitimacy. This combination, however, is distinct from dominant interpretations of cultural omnivorousness, which tend to posit such blending as indicating either a dissolution of cultural boundaries or the transposal of the aesthetic disposition. Instead, we argue that the expression of everyday cultural preferences performs an important signaling function for elites. This is partly, as Hahl and colleagues (2017), Ljunggren (2017), and Sherman (2017) note, about establishing individual moral worth and plugging an authenticity-insecurity that elites feel *vis a vis* the wider public. Yet we would extend this to argue that the pursuit of such authenticity is still ultimately connected to securing distinction. As many studies demonstrate, non-elites, and working-class groups in particular, often distinguish between elites whom they see as “decent” and “accommodating towards others” and elites they see as “snobbish” and “look down on others,” with the former clearly valued over the latter (Friedman 2014; Jarness 2015; McKenzie 2015).

It is thus not so much that elites are viewed with suspicion because they are elite; rather, it is their perceived smugness, elitism, and contemptuousness that rouses negative reactions. In this way, it is possible to see the public expression of everyday preferences as a means of accentuating cultural connection and ordinariness while retaining the cultural differences traditionally tied to elite distinction. In other words, the careful manufacture of ordinary self-presentation is effective in securing distinction because it means actual cultural boundaries between elites and others—as well as the potential privileges and advantages that accrue from practicing lifestyles that continue to be (mis)recognized as legitimate—are not questioned, as individuals

in lower class positions no longer see the highbrow elements of the elite taste palette as status-seeking (Jarness and Friedman 2017). This is what Bourdieu (1991:68) called “strategies of condescension”: in downplaying difference, elites can “derive profit from the objective relations of power” in the very act of obfuscating the relation.

One additional point is worth making. Our analysis indicates that the rise of ordinary elite distinction—marked by the twin pursuits of distinction *and* ordinariness—is most clear cut from the 1990s onward. This coincides neatly with the pulling away of the top 1 percent of the income distribution in Britain, which continued to rise following the more general increase in inequality through the 1980s (Piketty 2014). Of course, this is only an association and it is unlikely that all entrants in *Who's Who* are members of the 1 percent. Yet we would speculate that these patterns may be plausibly connected. Put simply, as elites have pulled away economically from other social groups, there is evidence that they have become increasingly insecure about their moral legitimacy, and increasingly sensitive to public concern that they are only motivated by extrinsic rewards (Hecht 2017; Sherman 2018). In this context, the connotations of ordinariness that accompany practices such as spending time with family, friends, and pets may act as an effective means to shore up moral legitimacy and signal authenticity in an era of rising inequality.

Authors' Note

Sam Friedman and Aaron Reeves are joint lead authors of this article and both contributed equally.


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Notes

- Recent quantitative archival analyses by Accomnotti, Khan, and Storer (2018) and Hoffman (2019) have fruitfully addressed issues of cultural consumption, although each are limited to just one arena of consumption—opera and literature, respectively. Similarly, Majima and Warde (2008) look at elite consumption in Britain, but their data restricted their ability to examine patterns of cultural taste or cultural participation.
- There are some significant differences in how these authors viewed social emulation. For example, Simmel argued that new fashions do not necessarily emanate from elites but can spring from certain sections of the middle classes.
- Part A of the online supplement includes an image of a typical *Who's Who* entry, including a recreations section.
- Who's Who* also includes hereditary members of the aristocracy (Dukes, Marquesses, Earls, Viscounts, and Baronets).
- In certain countries, including the United States, there are long-standing concerns that some entrants pay for inclusion in *Who's Who* (Carlson 1999).
- Who's Who* is widely used as a noun denoting “a group of the most important people involved in a particular subject or activity.” In the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, the most prominent synonym for the term is “elite” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/who's%20who>).
- The size of *Who's Who*, relative to the UK population, has remained remarkably stable over time. The 1905 edition of *Who's Who* had around 16,500 entrants, accounting for about .04 percent of the UK population. *Who's Who* has expanded in size over this period, but it still only constitutes about .05 percent of the UK population.
- Nearly 80 percent of current entrants report their recreations but, as discussed in the Results section, this has increased significantly over time. The average age that individuals are included in *Who's Who* is 50, but this is only available for the past 30 years.
- It is conceivable that our results could be affected by changes in the meaning of the word “recreation” over time. However, as Part E of the online supplement explores, we find only subtle changes in dictionary definitions of the term over time.
- The Season began in May with the Royal Military Tournament (shooting) and continued with the Epsom Derby (horse racing), Ascot (horse racing), and the Fourth of June events at Eton (Cricket). In July, there would be Polo at Hurlingham and the Henley Regatta. From August onward, events would move toward the country, with hunting becoming the focus until the Oxford-Cambridge boat race (Scott 1991).
- Young women were presented at court when they reached what was commonly regarded as marriageable age. Only those young women who were nominated by someone who had previously kissed the hand of the King/Queen were eligible, and this occurred when you were presented at court. Nomination was not enough, however, you also had to be regarded as “pure,” and this reflected the social status of the nominee (MacCarthy 2006).
- A peeress is the wife of a peer and therefore a wife of a member of the House of Lords (Scott 1991).
- Between 1876 and 1976, for example, Lord Leconfield sold off 90 percent of his 110,000 acres, and the Earl of Carlisle was left with only 3,000 acres, after previously owning nearly 80,000. These are not anomalies, according to Cannadine (1999). Almost all Britain's major families suffered under the same economic pressures.
- Although music is largely expressed as a generic preference in *Who's Who*, follow-up analyses of music taste in *Desert Island Discs* (as we will detail) reveal that, in this period, entrants' music tastes were overwhelmingly dominated by classical music.
- This was often expressed in terms of a disdain for middlebrow culture, which was generally (at least implicitly) connected to the nouveau riche. As Virginia Woolf (1942:199) said, the middlebrow pursues “rather nastily . . . money, fame, power or prestige.”
- Virginia Woolf (1942:196–97) outlined the stratification of “brows.” At the top is the “highbrow,” “he is a man or woman of thoroughbred intelligence who rides his mind at a gallop across country in pursuit of an idea.” At the bottom, conversely, “low-brow is of course a man or woman of thoroughbred vitality who rides his body in pursuit of a living at a gallop across life.”
- As a later Chairman of the Arts Council, Lord Goodman, remarked, “a dose of culture could turn hooligans into citizens” (Mulgan 1996:207).
- Key here was the BBC's *Third Programme* (1946 to 1967), which broadcast for six hours every evening on BBC Radio and was dedicated to disseminating the highbrow arts (Annan 1991; Rose 2001).
- This rise is not merely an artefact of the changing composition of *Who's Who*. As explained in Part H of the online supplement, a detailed matching analysis comparing people born in different periods but who were otherwise similar (i.e., they were the same sex, attended the same school and university, came from similar family backgrounds, and worked in the same field) still shows a significant difference in likelihood to volunteer recreational information over time.
- This trend is illustrated in Part H of the online supplement.
- Postmodern, pop art, and, in a British context, social realist movements began to question disinterestedness, instead championing a more playful or socially

- engaged aesthetic (Featherstone 2007; Hanquinet et al. 2014; Huyssen 1986; Lena 2019). At the same time, the legitimacy of previously lowbrow art forms such as cinema and rock music began to grow. Emerging cultural intermediaries worked to define and consecrate objects and artists and establish an intellectualizing discourse that allowed emerging generations of elites to adopt an aestheticized appreciation (Bauman 2007; Lena 2019; Regev 1994).
22. The Nazi brutalities of WWII initiated a widespread reappraisal of multiple forms of group prejudice, and in this context the classist connotations of highbrow cultural snobbery became increasingly taboo (Hewison 1995; Morgan 2018; Savage et al. 2015; Sayer 2015). New generations of elites were keen to differentiate themselves from the elitism and prejudice of their parents' generation and instead espoused, at least in public, a more inclusive cultural ethos (Lena 2019). There was also a broader opening up of class boundaries, with significant increases in cross-class marriages (Henz and Mills 2018), absolute upward mobility (Goldthorpe 1987), and access to elite occupations (Heath 1981).
 23. The post-war period saw the rise of large bureaucratic organizations across the public and private sectors (Freeguard et al. 2017). *Who's Who* entrants coming of age in the 1950s and 1960s increasingly reached elite positions by rising up the managerial ranks, rather than via the accelerated old-boy pathways associated with earlier periods (Scott 1991). Such middle-managerial roles required new skills, particularly the capacity to build relationships with staff at different rungs of the organizational hierarchy. In this context, a more omnivorous taste palette functioned as an important management tool. Highbrow tastes may aid and strengthen relationships with senior staff, who are often from privileged backgrounds, but popular tastes provide an important interactional device—"fodder for least common denominator talk" (DiMaggio 1987)—for making "bridging" social ties with lower-tier staff from less privileged backgrounds (Erickson 1996; Lizardo 2006).
 24. Other notably polysemic terms include "reading" and "television."
 25. There are limitations of using Metacritic to judge critical legitimacy. The aggregation of reviews is only available for reviews posted online, and this influences scores in various ways. First, it means we likely *underestimate* the critical legitimacy of many artists, such as the Beatles and Bob Dylan, whose earlier acclaimed albums do not have a score. Instead, these artists' scores are based on their more recent albums, which are often reviewed less favorably. Second, Metacritic only allows us to see the critical legitimacy of artists in the present rather than their legitimacy when entrants on *Desert Island Discs* were playing their works. This may upwardly bias artists who experienced a significant lag between releasing early albums and receiving acclaim for them (e.g., Radiohead, Velvet Underground, and The Stone Roses). However, this concern is mitigated by the absence of Metacritic scores for most such earlier albums. In short, although Metacritic may not be an ideal source for assessing the temporality of critical legitimacy, it likely provides a conservative estimate of the legitimacy of artists played on *Desert Island Discs*.
 26. Significantly, this trend does not appear to reflect wider shifts in the UK. For example, time-use research conducted in Britain over a similar period illustrates that UK residents are generally *not* spending more time with friends and family than in the past (Gershuny and Sullivan 2019).
 27. The first study, carried out by the social research organization Mass Observation in 1939, asked 379 respondents a series of open-ended questions about class, including their views on their own and others' recreations (Hinton 2008). The second study was part of Young and Willmott's (1973) classic analysis of "The Symmetrical Family."
 28. The qualitative components of Mass Observation's and Bennett and colleagues' studies also reveal an interesting shift in *attitudes*. For example, Hinton (2008) demonstrates that in 1939 a clear reverence for highbrow culture pervaded narratives across the class spectrum. By 2005, such popular belief in the value of highbrow culture had clearly declined substantially. Bennett and colleagues' (2009:252–3) interviews indicate that familiarity with high culture is still strongly valued by the upper-middle classes, but they argue that it is "not obviously recognised elsewhere."
 29. There remain limits to our understanding of how elites curate their cultural identities in public. For example, it is impossible to know the demographic coordinates of the audience for *Who's Who*. Similarly, our results also raise questions about what aspects of cultural identity may be withheld in such public declarations, particularly the more visceral sentiments of judgment that elites often express in less public settings (Jarness and Friedman 2017; Pugh 2013).
 30. These results should be viewed with some caution, however, because the women included in this earlier period were often skewed to particular occupational fields, such as literature, and may not be representative of other elite women in the period whose occupational positions would later guarantee entry.
 31. It is also worth acknowledging that the semi-automated method used to estimate the proportion of entrants who play with the form may contain some measurement error. The algorithmic procedures underlying these estimates are, unsurprisingly, limited in their capacity to capture the subtleties of irony and humor.
 32. Although we do not have primary empirical data demonstrating that lower social groups emulated

- elite culture, it is a reoccurring theme in a range of historical sources (Annan 1991; Cannadine 1999; McKibbin 2000; Scott 1991). Note, too, that notions of deference were augmented by tabloid media preoccupations with documenting and glamorizing “the Season” (McKibbin 2000).
33. If the rise of cultural institutions, such as the BBC, school curricula, universities, and the Arts Council, were crucial in the dissemination of this new highbrow mode, we would expect there to be especially high levels of highbrow practice among individuals working in the education and culture sectors. This is what we see in Part L of the online supplement. These “cultural leaders” have a much higher likelihood of expressing highbrow preferences and, at least to some extent, acted as early adopters. For example, individuals born in the 1880s and 1890s (like Keynes, born 1883) adopted highbrow practices much more rapidly than other elites, who subsequently responded by following suit in later 1890 to 1920 cohorts.
 34. Ideas about the curative power of high culture were more actively institutionalized during this period, but they already had a long history, dating back to the creation of the British Museum and the 1845 Libraries Act.
 35. As Mulgan (1996:197) notes, the aim for architects of cultural policy in the 1930s and 1940s was to “wean the public away” from popular culture and “widen their horizons” through high culture.
 36. Here arts and humanities subjects, such as English literature, music, drama, and art history, not only promoted high-art forms to the general population, but they more generally encouraged students to use the critical aesthetic lens of disinterestedness.
 37. The art critic, Roger Fry, for example, was a key tastemaker. In 1910, Fry organized an exhibition titled “Manet and the Post-Impressionists,” bringing together Gauguin, Manet, Matisse, and Van Gogh (Annan 1991). So important was the exhibition that Virginia Woolf later proclaimed: “On or about December 1910 human character changed.”
 38. In Part M of the online supplement, we explore the articles in the review sections of major British newspapers (i.e., *Financial Times*, *The Times*, *The Economist*, and the *Telegraph*) over time, and the proportion of these articles that cover highbrow culture (e.g., theater, opera) and popular culture (e.g., comedy, television). The size of review sections increases fairly steadily throughout the twentieth century, except during WWI and WWII, but the cultural forms covered changes. Initially, the review section is dominated by highbrow culture, but from the 1950s forward we see the rise of more popular forms (Purhonen et al. 2018). These data broadly reflect the general trend we see in the *Who’s Who* data.
 39. See note 28 and Hinton (2008), which demonstrates a clear reverence for highbrow culture pervaded narratives across the class spectrum in 1939.
 40. Sherman (2017:92–96) terms this the “cultural logic of legitimate entitlement,” that is, elites downplay ostentatious public displays of eliteness and instead emphasize investment in family and domesticity to establish a connection to the ordinary and normal habits of the middle-class.

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