Rethinking elites in British sociology: *Great* Britain as a House-Society

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Abstract: This article outlines a novel conceptual framework to examine English society's ruling institutions. Usually called 'The Establishment', the term has been a thorn in the side of analyses of class, status and power in British sociology as it stands between polemic and an explanation for England's peculiar exaggeration of status over class. Drawing upon Lévi-Strauss' concept of a 'house-society', the article rethinks how England's ruling institutions are called upon to do two things at once: disguise political-economic interests through the language of kinship *and* naturalise status and belonging. English society's ruling institutions are overdetermined in the call to create legitimate and exclusive membership to something, perhaps anachronistically, called '*Great* Britain'. Tracing this to the origins of English class nomenclature in early modern political thought, the article applies this framework to a discussion of Eton College and the Etonians' relationship to our present political crisis.

Introduction: why *Great* Britain as a house society?

3rd March 2022 saw a thoroughly unexceptional British Conservative MP knighted. Arise, Sir Gavin Williamson. On the podcast *The Rest is Politics*, former Conservative MP Rory Stewart and former political aide, Alistair Campbell, agreed that Williamson was an inauspicious choice for a knighthood, largely because his time as Minister of Education was

marred in controversy over his handling of GCSE and A Level results during the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only this, but Williamson is also not a natural member of the so-called British 'Establishment': born to Labour Party voters working in modest professions, Williamson had a comprehensive school education, and took a degree in Social Sciences from the University of Bradford. So why did he want, more than deserve, this honour? Rory Stewart said:

> It is a nostalgic confidence trick. [...] It is a weird thing going on in people's minds where they somehow imagine that if they are called a knight - maybe I'm pushing this too far - they're almost becoming a member of King Arthur's court... (Stewart & Campbell, 2022a).

To the born Conservative, Rory Stewart, the function of the honours system is not solely to transform social status but to, in the language of kinship, naturalise it: the recipient becomes a descendant of the mythical court of Camelot, England's ancestral origins. Even if he calls it a 'confidence trick', Stewart has identified an important pattern of thought in English society: social membership is premised upon individual alliances to 'houses' (such as an honours system) that are granted the power to create pseudo-kinship ties of descent from society's origins. Stewart views the honours system as organised around what Lévi-Strauss (1988) called 'house based' principles, the dynamics of which this article claims animates England's ruling institutions and class categories. It has been said that 'Britain' is an odd country given its anachronistic emphasis on pre-modern status symbols in its class nomenclature (Cannadine, 1998; Nairn, 1988). This article argues that we can understand the oddity of these arcane status symbols by appreciating England's unique passage to capitalism and the forging of its ruling, 'Establishment' institutions (Meikins-Wood, 1991; cf. Davidson, 2003). We need to view so-called 'Establishment' institutions as being called upon to do two things at once: naturalise social status and exaggerate political-economic differences.

I say England, not Britain, because the 1707 Act of Union did not produce a unifying national self-consciousness, but instead resulted in "a composite *ancien régime* yoking England, Scotland and Ireland together in a monarchy that was constitutional rather than absolutist, imperial rather than territorial." (Anderson, 2021:42) If we do speak of the nationalism of Britain, as Anderson (2021) suggests, it is *Great* Britain to which we are referring. The conflation of Englishness with Britain always requires the prefix *Great*, for *Great* Britain was an upper-class English project, as evidenced by 'view from the top' histories (Colley, 1992). But as contemporary historians have argued, prior to imperial dismantling post-1945 there was no such thing as a 'British nation' (Synder, 2018; Edgerton, 2018). Instead, as Edgerton (2018) argues, Britain c.1900-1945 was 'a country with no name': a free-trading global economy, and a rich and populous Empire, certainly, but not a cohesive nation with a collective identity. As Empire unravelled in the twentieth century, a myth arose of the nation as old, wise, and always-there (Synder, 2018). Thus the latter half of the twentieth century saw the founding cultural idioms of Englishness in Britain face not only a crisis in political-economic global prominence, but a much deeper identity problem: England was unable to easily (re)affirm its cultural hegemony over Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (Nairn, 1981). In what follows I illustrate that it is England's upper class that can offer sociologists an important perspective on the odd use of class, forged with pre-modern symbolism and often steeped in national idioms, which function to exaggerate political-economic inequalities.

To build this argument, the article is structured as follows. First, I introduce the problem that the English upper class have posed for UK sociology, then offer Lévi-Strauss' concept of a house-society as an antidote. Second, this house-society framework shall be contrasted with how sociologists have previously tried to explain their ruling institutions through the perspective of 'The Establishment'. By tracing the Establishment problem to the origin of English class nomenclature in early modern political thought, the article applies the alternative

house-society framework to a discussion of Eton College and Etonians' relationship to our present political crisis. It is demonstrated that in the case of England's ruling institutions they are being called upon to act as models for societal unity and provide a vision for the future of *Great* Britain.

The problem of the English upper-class

Often thought of as a neglected topic in UK sociology, England's historic upper-classes have long been of interest for sociologists of wealth, power, privilege and stratification (Reeves & Friedman, 2021; 2017; Clancy, 2020; Friedman & Laurison, 2019; Shrubsole, 2019; King & Smith, 2018; Smith, 2016; Bond, 2012; Griffiths et. al., 2008; MacDonald, 2004; Scott, 1982; Giddens & Stanworth, 1974; Guttsman, 1963). However these studies present us with the same problem of an honours system: an upper-class defined by idioms of traditionalism and status exclusivity ought not to exist in advanced modern societies. "Social stratification", writes MacDonald, consists of "class relations, status relations and command relations. Modern societies are primarily characterised by the first of these, *but Britain probably displays more of the second than some other societies*." (MacDonald, 2004:108, emphasis added) More appropriately, England's upper-classes have occupied a peculiar place in historical accounts on the origins and nature of capitalist societies in European modernity (Anderson, 1964, 1968; Nairn, 1964, 1988; Brenner, 1976; Weiner, 1985; Meiksins-Wood, 1991). Capitalism in England arose from its landed classes, not an urban bourgeoisie as Marxian historical materialism claims (Meiksins-Wood, 1999; 1991). Because of this "[t]he English ruling class faced a historically unprecedented task." (Meiksins-Wood, 1991:37) In the Marxian formula, capitalism tends to do away with so-called 'feudal fetters', but in England those very 'feudal fetters' remain, namely in those sociological mechanisms highlighted in the previously cited studies: primogeniture orchestrating inherited capital (Shrubsole, 2019), kinship-based models

of hereditary privilege from monarchy (Clancy, 2020) to the public school system (Reeves & Friedman, 2017), through the high-professions (MacDonald, 2004; Friedman & Laurison, 2019), and the honours system.

So how do we explain our problem without explaining it away? Presently we are accustomed to treating our conceptual problem as a 'culture' problem. As Britain transitioned to capitalism without a revolution in its class structure, not only does it over-invest in anachronistic aristocratic status practices and symbols, but this very culture is used to explain its post-war economic and imperial decline (Weiner, 1985; Anderson, 1964; 2020). Thinking that traditionalism is incompatible with capitalism underestimates the nuances of conservatism in British political thought, as Valluvan's *Clamour of Nationalism* (2019) explores. As Valluvan (2019:95f) argues, sociologists ought to be attentive more to the mediation that tradition is called upon to perform: what gets marked out as tradition, such as knighthoods, ought to be understood as political acts directed toward framing a specific notion of continuity within a nation's history so as to legitimate present political desires and needs.

Therefore we are trying to look at two things which we could distinguish analytically, but conceptually are one and the same. As much as sociologists are looking into, say, the monarchy or the public school system as symbols of Britishness and belonging, they are also examining how those same institutions are central to the reproduction of economic inequalities (Clancy, 2020; Smith, 2023). The present article claims that viewing England's ruling institutions as houses, in Lévi-Strauss' sense, overcomes the either/or. For houses, in Lévi-Strauss' sense, are institutions granted the status of 'moral persons' which draw upon idioms of kinship (of descent, inheritance and ancestry) to exaggerate and sediment political-economic power and interest.

Lévi-Strauss' 'Concept of the House'

Lévi-Strauss' concept of the house is a theory of social organisation: it asks, how do social groups create members (Godelier, 2018; Lévi-Strauss, 1988; 1983)? To detect a house-society, anthropologists contend that one works backwards from native idioms for membership (Gillespie, 2000:23f; Cartsen & Hugh-Jones, 1995). *Great* Britain's national and Establishment institutions are either figuratively, or literally, houses: from Eton College, where Etonian carries a very specific connotation in social life, to National Trust (NT) properties standing for 'the nation'. When Lévi-Strauss (1988) referred to house-societies, his meaning was always idiomatic even if he was referring to literal houses (as with NT properties). I employ the same meaning here, for houses refer to the perceived sources of society's origins and specificity (Helms, 1998).

Lévi-Strauss (1983) first had recourse to conceiving of some societies as 'house-societies' when the connection to their origins became hard to discern and sustain. Exploring the masks and myths of First Nations peoples in the Pacific Northwest of the Americas, Lévi-Strauss saw how they were intimately related to resolving problems of their social organisation: "Each type of mask is linked to myths whose objective is to explain its legendary or supernatural origin and to lay the foundation for its role in ritual, in the economy, and in the society." (Lévi-Strauss, 1982:14) A mask was two things at once: on the one hand, it was about the allocation of economic resources; on the other, it was related to kinship – of descent, affiliation, and residence.

But given the structure of this inheritance, Lévi-Strauss observed that in these societies many contradictory kinship practices prevailed. These societies were, *prima facie*, cognatic but at times emphasised one descent line, (usually patrilineality), more than the other. But at other times they placed emphasis on the maternal line. At one time they were exogamous, at another endogamous. Sometimes they would emphasise descent, sometimes alliance to other families.

Making sense of this confusion, Lévi-Strauss (1992:182) notes that kinship was being used to "disguise all sorts of socio-political manoeuvres..." These (economic and political) "real interests" (Lévi-Strauss, 1982:187) have their source in how these groups trace their ancestry:

> the basic units of social structure seem shaped by a supposed descent from a mythic ancestor who built his home in a definite place, even if this village community later left its ancestral land to unite with other communities of a similar type, without, however, losing the memory of its origin. (Lévi-Strauss, 1982:164)

Kinship was as much about who people are related to, as it was about affirming continuity in political-economic status. As such, they shifted from thinking about who they are in relation to people, to instead objectifying their relations to another in relation to 'thing', a 'house', that stands for ancestral connection if that connection can be perceived in one or more kinship idiom (Lévi-Strauss, 1988).

The house, therefore, does not belong to the individual members but the individual members belong to the 'house' (Godelier, 2018:178). The house is, says Lévi-Strauss borrowing Marxian terminology, a fetish as it is a projected relation between present and past members which bears no substantive relation to descent, inheritance, alliance or residence. Instead, house-societies utilise the language of kinship to effect claims to belonging and status, if only in 'illusory form' (Lévi-Strauss, 1988:156). Lévi-Strauss would insist that his theory of kinship was a contribution to a Marxian theory of superstructures, but when it came to house-based kinship he would rearrange the famous Marxist formula. In house-societies "the ideology departs more markedly from the infrastructure" (Lévi-Strauss, quoted in Godelier, 2018:182). House societies are semi-complex structures of kinship: they arise in "a situation where

political and economic interests, on the verge of invading the social field, have not yet overstepped the 'old ties of blood', as Marx and Engels used to say." (Lévi-Strauss, 1982:186)

In classical Marxian theory, a house-society is one that has not fully transitioned to advanced capitalist modernity, where kinship structures are complex – so 'old blood bonds' play less of a political role in the organisation of social relations – and class (and not kin) has more influence on life chances and is conceived exclusively in economic terms. In 'semi-complex' conditions Lévi-Strauss sees house-societies as involved in a form of economic organisation that is defined by a form of capital accumulation and class interest, but where capital and class are being disguised in the language of kinship (Lévi-Strauss, 1982). I put matters in this way as it is important in highlighting a problem facing sociologies of elites and the upper class introduced above: England did not follow the passage of classical Marxist historical materialism (Meiksins-Wood, 1991).

'Old blood ties': the problem of 'The Establishment' in British sociology

Anthropologists have been critical of the claim that modernity witnessed the waning of social, political and economic importance to kinship (McKinnon & Cannell, 2013). After Piketty's *Capital* (2014), the imbrication of kinship with capital obliges us to treat kinship as essential to the long-term dynamics of capital accumulation in major Anglo-European societies (Yanagisako, 2015). The mid to late-twentieth century, which in Britain saw the lowest level of economic inequality, was much more an aberration than our present moment which has witnessed wealth inequalities comparable to the late Victorian period (Burrows et. al., 2017). Rather the normal state of capitalist societies is the predominance of past accumulation over the present, overwhelmingly channelled through inheritance, gifts and endowments for kinsfolk (Piketty, 2014). This holds for our understanding of house societies: far from being stuck between 'elementary and complex' kinship, the 'semi-complexity' of house societies is

central to capitalism's dynamics. Combining class-based interest with kin-orientated idioms of belonging is one of English capitalism's pristine social forms.

This background feeds the perspective brought to bear on England's upper class by mid to late-twentieth century sociologists. Giddens & Stanworth's collection *Elites and Power in British Society* (1974), Guttsman's *The British Political Elite* (1963) and Scott's *The Upper Classes* (1982) take as their starting point that England's ruling institutions are propped up by hierarchical principles, and an ideology of deference to an ascriptive aristocracy. Elite institutions become fundamentally shaped by this aristocratic ethos and their ranks are closed, relatively speaking, by way of the elaborate aristocratic kinship networks which stretch across high offices and institutions. To these authors, kinship is an aberrational (pre-modern) feature of England's (stymied or incomplete) passage to modernity. They come to this perspective by examining what has popularly become known as 'The Establishment' problem: in England, official power is orchestrated by informal social ties.

While 'The Establishment' may be, to some, inadequate for sociological purposes (e.g. Savage, 2015:307-309), sociologists of elites claim they frequently find the need to refer to it. The Establishment, to them, is a short hand for a Weberian sociological problem: how political, economic and social power overlap in England (MacDonald, 2004). But often one finds tautology in the understanding of 'The Establishment' institutions, as I explain below. Two reasons account for this tautology: first is the tendency to define kinship against class, and a second is to mistake the identity of members of 'Establishment' institutions for the identity, and sociological coherence, of the ruling or upper-class. Mid to late-twentieth century sociologies focused on the descent line, not the projection of relations onto a 'house' (Lévi-Strauss, 1988:155). In so doing these sociologies envisaged the upper echelons of British society not as 'houses' (in Lévi-Strauss' sense) but as, to use an alternative kinship form, a

corporate group (Fortes, 1969). While houses are defined by a fetish of continuity between past and present members, a corporate group is one where the identity of all members and the identity of the corporation are one and the same.

As stated in the introduction, these sociologists point to the oddity that status in high British office prevails over 'class'. Establishment institutions show a remarkably intricate concentration of social relations connected often through inter-marriage or hereditary privilege, even though the holding of these offices is not premised upon inheritance or ascription. So, these sociologies claim that a high degree of social cohesion in the structure of relations between Establishment institutions has as its "main support" a "kinship system …marked by a high degree of homogamy." (Scott, 1982:158) Thus "[t]his status group – the establishment", writes Scott (1982:158):

> emerged as an important social and political force during the nineteenth century, and has been seen as a central element in the 'antique' or 'patrician' character of the British state. Attempts by members of the establishment to marry off their children to those who are eligible socially, economically and politically guarantee the perpetuation of a homogamous and intensive kinship network.

Scott has discerned a connection between kinship and capital, but not in the manner of the Lévi-Straussian framework. Lévi-Strauss points to a blurring and disguising of political-economic interests in the language of kinship, while Scott is presupposing a series of kinship alliances through which official power is exercised. Scott's argument is that kinship alliances allow for social integration and recruitment into a 'status group' (Scott, 1982:160f). Such alliances do not allow for non-allied entrants and, as a result, establishes a pseudo-hereditary 'upper-class' around the public school, Oxbridge and the high professions. In-between kinship and office, there is what Weber called status honour which, in Britain, has been called the

gentlemanly ethos, or public-school manner. An ethos that "[w]ithout any consciously intended bias, the established old boys sponsor the recruitment of each new generation of old boys." (Scott, 1982:169) Viewed in this way, the 'Establishment' does not explain the imbrication of kinship and capital, status and class, but rather explains it away in a circular movement. Kinship begets office, office begets kinship.

To Scott (1982), Establishment institutions are being treated as if they belong to certain members as found in corporate groups, not the members who belong to the house (as in house-based kinship forms). Unlike a house-society, a corporate group consists of a legal order whereby groups which oversee goods and services in the public domain organise themselves based upon a system of inheritances drawn from the private or domestic domain. Control of public office is modelled on that of patrilineal descent. Acting in public offices and institutions, these corporate groups draw upon connections to patrilineal ancestors. Those who belong to the corporate group either trace their ancestry to the patriarch(s) or through inter-marriage alliances that draw on this patrilineal connection. But as this is a public, legal order of association, the corporate group takes on the status of 'juristic person' or 'first person plural' (e.g. 'The Crown'), becoming defined by the purpose for which persons are associated, not the associates themselves. The Crown, the Church, Law, the Public School etc. are envisaged in this sense as they define the association of persons under specific rights, duties, and obligations, or an 'ethos' which indexes the patrilineal ancestry of the founders.

Notice the circularity at work here:

1. The kinship strata (a) that make up the association of persons in the 'corporate groups' of the establishment become personified as a 'juristic person' (b).

2. The 'juristic person' (b) becomes the spectral presence of members' kinship, ancestry and alliance, in the form of their association's purpose (crown, church, school etc.) (a).

3. This purpose of association finds its way into the ethos (*habitus*?) of the 'juristic person' (b), itself a spectral refraction of its kinship strata (a).

The problem with this tautological vision of England's 'Establishment' is that it suggests that sociologies of an upper-class can only be understood by their decline. Once the underlying continuity of kinship ties can no longer be discerned, the ethos or *habitus* of its members must be anachronism; an empty idiom; a zombie concept. "For just as the individual's personhood cannot be extinguished except by death", writes Fortes (1969:305) of a corporate group's continuity over time, "so a corporate group cannot normally be extinguished except by the death of all its members…"

With this in mind, empirical sociologies of establishment institutions (or 'houses') in the early twenty first century present sociologists with a further problem: we find evidence of a decline *and* persistence of Establishment institutions preserving privileges through the public school system (Reeves & Friedman, 2017), Westminster clubs (Bond, 2012), culture, arts and heritage sectors (Friedman & Laurison, 2019; King & Smith, 2018; Smith, 2016; Griffiths et. al., 2008) and officer corps in military regiments (MacDonald, 2004). These studies emphasise a form of dispersion (King & Smith, 2018): the institutions of the Establishment remain significant, but upper-class members act more as 'nodes' in social networks as membership is more diffuse and diverse. For instance, Griffiths et. al.'s (2004) analysis of the arts sector, drawn from *Who's Who* directories, demonstrate a shift in culture being defined and overseen by a gentlemanly ethos – European high culture is prized, patronised and legitimated through a network of public-school and Oxbridge educated persons in key non-governmental positions – to a diffusion of this gentlemanly network. The other side of this diffusion and dispersion is hyper-concentration and insularity. Take Bond's (2012) analysis of Westminster club membership, also drawn from *Who's Who*. Bond points to hereditary and life-peers who are

Old Etonians (OE) not only being more likely than non-Etonian peers to join clubs but more likely to join the same clubs. Such homophily among OE Lords index social immobility and persistence of such 'corporate groups' in Establishment institutions.

Instead of trying to measure continuity or change, we get a clearer view when we consider the data source for these sociologies: *Who's Who*. Since 1849 *Who's Who* has sought to catalogue those "who, through their careers, affect the political, economic, scientific and artistic life of the country." (*Who's Who*, 2003, quoted in Collini, 2006:475) Collini detects four criteria which themselves reflect historical epochs, "birth, office, achievement, and celebrity." (Collini, 2006:475) Thus, *Who's Who* witnesses not only contradictory criteria of inclusion, but it reflects the very tautology of 'corporate groups': inclusion in *Who's Who* is taken as evidence of elite status, while elite status is conferred by *Who's Who*. How are we to break this circle? As Lévi-Strauss (1988) argued, when elite relations and identity become defined by contradictory inclusion criteria, we ought to examine how social relations have been objectified in institutions that "solidify, if only in illusory form," (Lévi-Strauss, 1988:155) these contradictory principles into a seemingly unitary entity: a house (of which *Who's Who* ought to be considered an adjunct). We need to move then from an analysis of the substratum of kinship to kinship as an idiom, a fetish of continuity in discontinuity able to reconcile the spectral presence of an upper-class's decline and persistence with the vicissitudes of capital.

From 'The Establishment' to House-Society

Unsatisfactory as 'The Establishment' is as a sociological concept, it does refer to a problem in need of explanation. Instead of viewing it in Weberian terms, we ought to think of 'The Establishment' problem as referring to what Meiksins-Wood (1991:43) calls the 'missing idea of sovereignty' in English political discourse. By sovereignty she means "the idea of an absolute and indivisible locus of political authority and specifically of legislative power."

(Meiksins-Wood, 1991:43) Continental political philosophy and classical sociology has a tradition where modernity's societal fragmentation and differentiation is unified by way of state sovereignty (Meiksins-Wood, 1991:43ff). What accounts for this conceptual absence in English political philosophy is the curious passage England took to capitalism: the English had no need to think of sovereignty in indivisible, centralised and absolute principles because they had "a self-confident propertied class well equipped in practice to meet any challenge to its ultimate power…" (Meiksins-Wood, 1991:45)

In the place of sovereignty's conceptual absence, it was the language of class (or 'sorts' in early modern nomenclature) that filled such a gap in the operation of political power. In his 1583 *De Republica Anglorum*, English courtier Sir Thomas Smith divides English society into a series of sorts: "gentlemen, citizens and yeoman artificers, and labourers." Smith's graded hierarchy is deceptive: this is not a feudal ideology premised upon a metaphysic of a Great Chain of Being or divinely ordained principles that naturalises hierarchy. Smith's *De Republica* sets England apart from a monarchy and aristocracy, claiming it to be a democracy "where the multitude doth rule…" The term multitude is crucial to negating any sense of higher being or power. A multitude is a collective which retains the plurality and singularity of members. As Mazzarella (2010:707) puts it, "[t]his is possible because multitudes obey their own immanent law. …they refuse mediation through anything outside themselves." Smith calls that multitude a 'commonwealth'.

The commonwealth is a model for the order of degrees or 'four sortes' of England coupled with its economic interests. Smith was describing a commonwealth not in terms of ownership of property (e.g. Macfarlane, 1978), but the social relations of expropriation (Meiksins-Wood, 1991). A commonwealth refers to relations which are economic (or we would see them as such) but steeped in the language of kinship. As Wrightson (2002:82) notes,

the early modern economy was one where "[f]orms of economic association …overlapped conceptually with those of kinship." This fusion of kinship with economic interests is not unusual for pre-modern economies, but what is odd in the English case is that this fusion of kinship and capital finds its way into our so-called modernity. Sir Gregory King's (1696) *Natural and Political Observations and Conclusions upon the State and Condition of England* has been claimed to be one of the earliest measures of social stratification by wealth and income (Stone, 1997). But not only does King's table mirror Smith's division of English society of 'four sortes' exactly, his stratification of wealth is impossible to comprehend without conflating 'old blood bonds' and economic and political interests.

[TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE].

King's placing of 'temporal/spiritual lords' at the top of his table seems to suggest that blood and income fuse: nobility is the fusion of kinship and capital. But such a fusion is deceptive. As any English snob knows: where your money comes from is always encompassed by where you have come from, historically. King's table shows us that the fortune of traditional statuses (e.g. noble titles) takes precedence over present wealth, and the empirical measures of 'how much' wealth are known in relation to the terms of traditional status. For as one can see in Table One, King's conflation of status with class (blood ties with life fate on the market) runs into contradiction: merchant traders earn the same as esquires but rank lower; merchant traders earn more than persons in office, and gentleman, but rank lower; freeholding farmers earn more than clergymen but are worth less; would-be gentlemen (in 'science and liberal arts' (university students/professors)) earn more than some freeholding farmers or the same as clergymen but rank lower than 'Gentlemen'.

Writing of King's table, Michael McKeon (1987:165) says:

It is as though status categories persist here as a vestigial remnant of a mode of thought which, however useless in the definitive description of contemporary English people by class, still appears quite indispensable.

He is only half correct, however. He is correct to see status categories as part of longstanding English snobbery. But the critical point is that the 'vestigial remnant' of old blood ties in the measures of class are how economic interests 'borrow and subvert' the language of kinship (Lévi-Strauss, 1983). It is only the modernist assumption that class prevails over status (honour, blood, ancestry, etc.) that precludes us from appreciating that we are dealing with a house-based society. For a house-based society refers not to the symbolic conception of society but rather the organisation of social relations at a particular point of political-economic complexity (Gillespie, 2000; Lévi-Strauss, 1983). It is because English society organically moved from feudalism to capitalism without a 'great transformation' that its class categories have never given up conflating class (in the narrow economic sense) with 'class' in the idiomatic sense. Class, in that idiomatic sense, is traditionalism. Or, in the words of the editor-at-large of *Country Life*, class is "a matter of birth…", a facet of nature: "genetically programmed into the metabolism of any normal functioning individual from these islands…" (Aslet, 1997:158) In its English idiom, class is old blood ties mixed with economic fortunes so much so that "people filtered up and down by a sort of osmosis." (Aslet, 1997:158)

When Perry Anderson (1964:40) wanted to define the ruling ideology of Great Britain's upper class, he called it "a miasma of commonplace prejudices and taboos" ordered around the cultural principles of 'traditionalism' and 'empiricism' found in its ruling institutions. "Traditionalism and empiricism … fuse as a single legitimating system: traditionalism sanctions the present by deriving it from the past, empiricism shackles the future by riveting it to the present." (Anderson, 1964:40) What Great Britain's ruling institutions and its conceptual

language of class share is this traditionalism-empiricism axis: one's economic fortune is encompassed by one's birth. As such, we ought to treat the conceptual language of class and the ideology of Establishment institutions as evidencing that "situation where political and economic interests, on the verge of invading the social field, have not yet overstepped the 'old ties of blood'..." (Lévi-Strauss, 1982:186) To illustrate this further, I turn to an institution that is often treated as evidence to all that is antique with Great Britain.

The Idiom of the House: The case of Eton College

It is an unwritten rule in British society that one must be an Old Etonian to write about Eton. Two pieces concern us. Christopher de Bellaigue's 'Eton and the making of a modern elite' (2016) contrasts his time at Eton in the 1980s with its present status as a school for a new multi-racial and inter-national plutocratic class. And in his *LRB* Diary 'These Etonians' (2019), James Wood reflects on his school days with many Old Etonians who have since come to the forefront of British public life after the Brexit Vote. Examining these two pieces, I want to highlight a rift between capital and kinship which, seemingly, only Eton College can overcome. The idioms of kinship and capital reflect Anderson's 'traditional-empiricism' axis. Kinship, on the one hand, is an idiom used to mark what is 'tradition'; capital, on the other hand, is an idiom used to measure or mark change, disparities and disjuncture in reference to kinship idioms.

Reflecting upon the innovations of headmaster Simon Henderson to promote social mobility through an Eton education, de Bellaigue (2016) asks: "What happened …to the Eton I knew when I was a pupil in the late 1980s – a school so grand it didn't care what anyone thought of it…?" Aside from a diversity of intake – "there are more brown, black and Asian faces around" – nothing has changed much: uniforms remain uniform, ancient rooms and muddy fields are where learning takes place, and the male only intake and boarding houses means Eton remains a place of "solidity, immobility – anything but dynamism." And yet the

Etonian ethos, in the twenty-first century, says provost William Waldegrave, "is that this school will continue to produce the prime minister, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and entrepreneurs of all sorts, but that three-quarters of them will be here on bursaries." (quoted in de Bellaigue, 2016) So, de Bellaigue (2016) asks: "'which is the 'real' Eton?' – the laboratory for progressive ideas about social inclusion, or an annexe to Britain's heritage industry – the answer is, of course, 'both'."

Eton is being imagined as a synecdoche for *Great* Britain: a school in Berkshire will produce a ruling class, from politicians, to clergymen, to the super-wealthy. But more significant is *how* Eton College is being imagined in two guises. On the one hand de Bellaigue is mobilising the idioms of capital (enterprise, wealth and ambition) that refer to the present, while at the same time he draws upon idioms of kinship: Eton College is conceived as a noble house which comes to define its members, not the other way around.

de Bellaigue finds it useful to think of Etonians in three ways: scholarship boys, new money and globally diverse plutocrats, and "a third group" who "fights for survival: old "Eton" families who have been sending boys to the school for generations." *"Eton" families*: families defined by the house who can, through the kinship idiom, claim symbolic belonging more than the idioms of capital devoid of such ancestry. Old Eton families have been steadily declining:

> This group dominated the Eton I attended in the 1980s, when the school was still a barely-selective rite of passage for the descendants of Britain's Edwardian upper and upper-middle classes […] The percentage of pupils at the school with an OE father went down from 60% in 1960 to 33% in 1994 to 20% now. Eton has gone from being an heirloom handed down through the generations to a revolving door (de Bellaigue, 2016)

Loss in terms of members is one thing, what is being lost is another. For de Bellaigue the diminishing presence of OE families at Eton College witnesses itself in the loss of eccentricity:

> Eton used to have a strong sideline in rebels and oddballs. [...] The value of such people is hard to quantify; their achievement doesn't show through in the exam results, but in the diffusion of a spirit of irreverence and scepticism. (de Bellaigue, 2016)

The stand-out eccentric was history master Michael Kidson:

> a lop-shouldered historian who terrorised us in thrilling, beautiful, confident English, threw blackboard rubbers at boys who offended against syntax and grammar – I got one in the head for pluralising "protagonist"... (de Bellaigue, 2016)

Eccentricity may be hard to quantify, but what it can do is allow de Bellaigue to announce the protracted death of an English ruling or upper class and its replacement with an Eton defined by money, brains and ambition. An Eton education, now, is an education where one gets ahead by studying ahead: more Etonians attending Oxbridge is due to more rigorous and diverse education (not their ancestry, nor eccentricity). But notice that the only individuals who could be eccentrics are those from OE families; those who bring us closer to an Eton of then (as it truly was). What is being lost is not Englishness, but England (or *Great* Britain) itself. Eccentricity evidences that belonging to houses is a substitute for the absence of a 'society' or 'sovereignty'.

Two months after de Bellaguie's piece appeared in *The Economist*, the Brexit Vote saw a knife-edge 52% majority tip the scales of British politics toward the right and, in the ensuing years, witnessed multiple old Etonians pushed to the forefront of British political and cultural life. James Wood's 'These Etonians' (2019) captured this and reworks the same house based

idioms found in de Bellaguie's piece. 'These Etonians' seeks to define those Etonians dominating British public life after Brexit. Wood calls them *born* Etonians:

> The born Etonian was at one with his heritage. The quickest way to ascertain a boy's natural Etonianess was to find out if his father had gone there. Plenty had. Then I would start my plebeian social arithmetic. If his father went there, then thirty or so years earlier his grandparents had had the money to send his father there. So, his grandfather was probably an old Etonian. Which meant that sixty or so years earlier his great-grandparents had had enough money… It was dizzying, climbing backwards along the branches of these golden family trees. (Woods, 2019)

Wood's 'plebeian arithmetic' is another way to reframe the house idiom of 'houses defining membership' as a logical, if illusory, descent tree: Wood may well be right to count backwards from the Etonian now to the Etonian then, but how sure can he really be? His example is that he could trace his classmate David Cameron's OE heritage back to Cameron's great-great-great-grandfather William Mount (1787-1869); but what Wood is also doing is conflating inherited capital with inherited belonging through the language of descent (whether he is correct is another matter).

Those Etonians born c.1960-1970 have now come to the forefront of British politics alongside a resurgence of imperial nostalgia in public life (Mitchell, 2021). Here the language of imperial and economic decline is pervasive: for the Brexiteers, Etonian and otherwise, the latter half of the twentieth century has been a steady, managed decline of economic prominence, where imperial history stands not too far from this story. All OE histories - from Jacob Rees-Mogg's *The Victorians* (2019)*,* Boris Johnson's *The Churchill Factor* (2014) to Kwasi Kwarteng's (2011) *Ghosts of Empire*, and the political manifesto *Britannia Unchained* (Kwarteng et. al., 2012) - circle around a vision of the late-nineteenth century as the zenith of

industrial capitalism and imperial dominance in British history. This is where idioms of kinship and idioms of capital fuse and dissipate. Post-war economics, imperial decline and the resurgence of imperial nationalism through Brexit is, for Wood, intellectually to be laid at the door of de Bellaigue's forgotten English eccentric, history master Michael Kidson:

> 'They were GIANTS in those days', Michael Kidson…used to intone about the Victorians. And we are just dwarves on a shrunken island? […] As a generation, we understood that, if we weren't exactly managing decline, we would certainly not be pioneers of expansion. We inhabited a different world from that of our parents and grandparents. (Wood, 2019)

A classmate of Wood, that other English eccentric, Boris Johnson, will not let this suffice. Interviewing Jonhson in 2021 for *The Atlantic*, Tom McTauge says that the prime minister's "mission… is to restore Britain's faith in itself, to battle the "effete and desiccated and hopeless" defeatism that defined the Britain of his childhood." Defined by the twin ambitions of imperial revival and a 'view from the top' class structure (Virdee & McGreever, 2018), the Brexit project is a project informed by an OE family's narrative of imperial 'decline and fall'. A political-economic project which rests upon a revival of the same idioms of kinship and capital in modified form. "I think that history - societies and civilisations, and nations - can rise and fall, *and I think they can go backwards*", said Boris Johnson in *The Atlantic* profile (2021, added emphasis).

So far we have been tracing how a certain portion of England's upper-class think. But we can square this idiomatic thinking with stratification analysis of Britain's public school system. Reeves & Friedman's (2017) analysis of *Who's Who* entrants from 1897 to 2016 tells a story of decline *and* persistence. They find

that someone born in 1847 who attended a Clarendon[i] school was approximately 274 times more likely to end up in *Who's Who* than someone born in the same year who did not attend one of these nine schools (Reeves & Freidman et. al, 2017:1148).

By 1965-1969 the Clarendon public school system had shrunk in its propulsive power; one is only 67 more likely than the wider population to appear in *Who's Who* presently. The culprits for the decline are educational reform and the waning power of military, religious and imperial office in the British Empire (see Cain & Hopkins, 2015; Anderson, 2020). But the persistence of Clarendon school pupils in *Who's Who* by the early twenty-first century remains significant: between 5 and 10 per cent of *Who's Who* entrants from 2001-2016 are former public school pupils, and Clarendon alumni are 94 times more likely to enter *Who's Who* than their non-Clarendon peers. By the early twenty-first century, if we combine this sociological picture with the vision of England promoted by the OE families, we see not so much decline and fall but, rather, a decline, fall and going-backwards, from the point of view of the OE families.

Today the 'originary arithmetic' of the 'Born Etonian' has combined with the world of extreme wealth and diverse origins (of race, class and nation), to arise phoenix like from the ashes of Empire, in the hope to found Empire 2.0 from the descendants of the previous imperial drama. One way to underline the power of this house-society perspective is to notice how classical sociological hypotheses fail when it comes to Eton College. In *Privilege* Khan (2010) explores how a new monied American elite has emerged predicated upon individualised talent, merit and skill at St. Paul's, a major private school in New Hampshire. So much so that the Mayflower elite that make up America's *de facto* aristocracy are treated with suspicion and contempt by the majority of the pupils; they belong to a bygone world. Khan explicitly compares St. Paul's with the entitlement model of the British public school system which preserves the power of the OE families over the newer entrants. But this is not quite the case,

as we have seen here. Instead we have seen two accounts which suggest a decline in social and economic prominence of the OE family, but nevertheless a confirmation of the power of membership criteria through house-based thinking. Given the shift in the political-economic landscape, one would expect a circulation of elites model to occur with Eton College, as Khan demonstrates for St. Paul's. Or if membership criteria of the OE families prevail, one would also expect newer entrants to Eton College to be treated with exclusion or social ostracism by OE families. When one looks at the recent Conversative government, neither has occurred. Kwasi Kwarteng (b.1975), the former Chancellor of the Exchequer and son of Ghanaian migrants, attended Eton College as a King's Scholar, and became a member of exclusive dining society, The Pitt Club, while at Cambridge University. Indeed Kwarteng is so well socialised in the house-based idiom that Tristram Hunt's review of *Ghosts of Empire* (Kwarteng, 2011) witheringly concluded: "This… is a Namierite interpretation of empire where what matters most is what house at Winchester the governor went to" (Hunt, 2011), whilst Rory Stewart, Kwarteng's former Eton classmate, defended him as "an eccentric" when questioned about his 'weirdness' on the podcast *The Rest is Politics* (Stewart & Campbell, 2022b).

Following Valluvan's (2019) suggestion to examine the mediation of traditional idioms, we can now say that the house idiom of descent is essential to how the future of '*Great* Britain' is being envisaged. It is one way in which political leaders 'think' about 'British' society. The early decades of the twenty-first century appear to offer a mixture of inherited privilege and imperial renaissance as the only story about the future. *Britannia Unchained*, the 2012 manifesto written by Kwarteng, Raab, Patel, Truss (the UK's Prime Minister between September 6th – October 25th 2022) and Skidmore, is an instance of this: their vision of unchained global economic prominence is one where Britons forgo the humanities, children (unless they can outsource childcare and schooling), employment law restrictions, and embrace long working hours and commuting distances. At first glance it may appear that *Britannia*

Unchained is nowhere near the aristocratic history of class. But, in reality, one could only be a successful economic agent in the mould of *Britannia Unchained* if one was an Old Etonian. From decline and fall, the idioms of kinship and capital moves us instead toward a picture of fall and rise from the cloisters of Eton.

Conclusion

I began with a conceptual problem. On the one hand, analysis of ruling institutions is about stratification: measuring material inequalities. But on the other, in *Great* Britain, it is also about how a society legitimates membership. The house-society perspective shows how these processes are one and the same as houses have the role of uniting past and present, capital and kinship, and maintaining stability for class positions into the future (see Smith, 2023). In this regard, the present paper underlines the central ethos behind Degnen & Tyler's special issue of *The Sociological Review* (Vol. 65, No. 1: 2017): one can neither understand the economic inequalities, nor the idioms or symbols of belonging which circulate and inflect the self-understanding of "(*Great*) Britain", without examining them in tandem (Degnen & Tyler, 2017). As elite research has found kinship central to the making of extreme wealth, from family offices to the professionalisation of trusted servants, the worlds of sociology and social anthropology are fusing (see Knowles, 2022:227ff; Harrington & Strike, 2021; Glucksberg & Burrows, 2016)

More specifically, in using the house-society perspective I propose we need to think of England's upper class in idiomatic terms, and not in Weberian or Marxian terms, or even Bourdieusian terms of habitus, field and capitals. *Great* Britain is a house that is handed down to some, not others. Because English society never had a centralised vision of sovereignty, its ruling institutions had the dual obligation to make members *and* exaggerate inequalities. As

Meiksins-Wood (1991:37) said: "one of the typical paradoxes of English history is that the special needs of capitalism were met by reinforcing old ideologies."

Therefore the house-society perspective offers an alternative to the Bourdieusian perspective that prevails in UK sociologies of class. The Bourdieusian perspective has offered incredible empirical insight into the limits of social mobility in British society, from educational outcomes, cultural activities, and professional advancement in the upper echelons of society (Savage, 2015; Reeves & Friedman, 2017; 2021; Friedman & Laurison, 2019). However, the house-society perspective questions the empirical relevance of Bourdieu's concepts of 'habitus, capital, field' for *Great* Britain's upper-class. Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1986) asked: How can French society retain an aristocracy of culture while claiming to be a (educational) meritocracy? But France is not a house society, and *Great* Britain is. For a house-society, the question is: How can the answer to present crises of capitalism be found in ancient institutions? We have seen how previous accounts of the Establishment have been mystified by the tricks of houses as they endorse circular arguments, from office (field), education and kinship (capital) to ethos (habitus). But, as Bourdieu (1977:29) warned, it is a mistake "to slip from the model of reality to the reality of the model." The house is a fetish of continuity amidst discontinuity. Therefore the house-society offers a conceptual framework which explores how power operates on (and not only through) elites (Cousins et. al. 2018). Questions for the house-society perspective are: how, and in what way, are idioms of status being asked to exaggerate political-economic inequalities and naturalise belonging? What role does 'exaggeration/naturalisation' have when it comes to a vision of society as such? How far are class positions imprisoned by their own modes of thought?

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Appendix:

Gregory King's estimate of population and wealth, England and Wales, 1688

Number of families	Ranks, Degrees, Titles, and Qualifications	Heads per family	Number of persons	Yearly income per family
160	Temporal Lords	40	6,400	2,800
26	Spiritual Lords	20	520	1,300

800	Baronets	16	12,800	880
600	Knights	13	7,800	650
3,000	Esquires	10	30,000	450
12,000	Gentlemen	8	96,000	280
5,000	Persons in Offices	8	40,000	240
5,000	Persons in Offices	6	30,000	120
2,000	Merchants and Traders by Sea	8	16,000	400
8,000	Merchants and Traders by Sea*	6	48,000	200
10,000	Persons in the Law	7	70,000	140
2,000	Clergymen	6	12,000	60
8,000	Clergymen	5	40,000	45
40,000	Freeholders	7	280,000	84
140,000	Freeholders	5	700,000	50
150,000	Farmers	5	750,000	44
16,000	Persons in Sciences and Liberal Arts	5	80,000	60
40,000	Shopkeepers and Tradesmen	4½	180,000	45
60,000	Artisans and Handicrafts	4	240,000	40
5,000	Naval Officers	4	20,000	80
4,000	Military Officers	4	16,000	60
511,586		5¼	2,675,520	67
50,000	Common Seamen	3	150,000	20
364,000	Labouring People and Out Servants	3½	1,275,000	15
400,000	Cottagers and Paupers	3¼	1,300,000	6.5
35,000	Common Soldiers	2	70,000	14
849,000		3¼	2,795,000	10.5
	Vagrants		30,000	
849,000		3¼	2,825,000	10.5
511,586	Increasing the Wealth of the Kingdom	5¼	2,675,520	67
849,000	Decreasing the Wealth of the Kingdom	3¼	2,825,000	10.5
1,360,586			5,500,520	

Source: *Two Tracts* by Gregory King, ed. G. E. Barnett (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1936). Accessed from https://www.york.ac.uk/depts/maths/histstat/king.htm (January 25th 2021). King's table is reproduced in Richard Stone (1997) *Some British Empiricists in the Social Sciences, 1650-1900*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p.87.

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[i]   The 'Clarendon' schools are nine English public schools which, since the passing of the 1868 Public Schools Act following the Earl of Clarendon's commission, have become significant in the making of an English ruling elite.