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BOOK REVIEW

Simon Kuper, *Chums: How a Tiny Caste of Oxford Tories Took Over the UK*

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Every time one thinks that British politics could not sink any lower, it plumbs new depths. When a chancer like Boris Johnson has the keys to 10 Downing Street, something has gone badly wrong with the body politic. He makes his predecessor — Theresa May — seem like a political giant, while May's wooden and ineffective premiership did much the same for the reputation of her predecessor, David Cameron.

One thing that Johnson, May, and Cameron have in common, apart from their membership of the Conservative Party, is that they are all graduates of the same university: Oxford. Indeed, as Simon Kuper notes in his highly entertaining study, eleven out of Britain's fifteen postwar Prime Ministers went to Oxford. The exceptions are three who did not attend any university (Winston Churchill, James Callaghan, and John Major), and one (Gordon Brown) who is an Edinburgh graduate. Britain is not so much a democracy as an 'Oxocracy'.

Evidence of Oxford's importance is that 'it's possible to tell the story of British politics in the last twenty-five years almost without reference to any other university' (pp. 2–3). Kuper, a *Financial Times* columnist, studied History and German at Oxford and knows whereof he speaks. As he watched an array of Oxford-educated Leavers and Remainers on TV the morning after the 2016 Brexit referendum, it struck him that today's British ruling class is rooted in the university he knew as an undergraduate. "So how", he asks, "has Oxford captured the British machine? And with what consequences?" (p. 3).

The first of these questions is one to which *Chums* purports to provide an answer, but both the question and the answer are more than a little curious. A naïve reader of *Chums* might come away with the impression that dominance of Oxford is a relatively recent phenomenon but that is far from being the case. From a total of 55 British Prime Ministers since 1721, no fewer than 28 were educated at Oxford and 14 at Cambridge. Cameron, May, and Johnson are by no means the first hat-trick of Oxonian Prime Ministers. In the late nineteenth century, Gladstone and his two successors were not only educated at Oxford but at the same Oxford college, Christ Church, which has so far produced 13 British Prime Ministers.

Kuper is preoccupied with two Oxford institutions: the Oxford Union debating society and the PPE degree. A small number of Prime Ministers but a large number of British politicians and journalists studied PPE — Philosophy, Politics, and Economics — at Oxford. According to Kuper, "the Union (as well as the PPE degree) is a large part of the explanation for why Oxford produces so many prime ministers" (p. 58). However, while the PPE degree has only been in existence since 1920, Oxford has been turning out British Prime Ministers for a much longer period. To the extent that Oxford 'captured the British machine', this happened long before the period covered by Kuper's study. If he only grasped Oxford's dominance while watching TV coverage of the 2016 referendum, he has not been paying attention.

No doubt many budding politicians were members of the Oxford Union, but they mostly joined because they had political ambitions rather than vice versa. Most undergraduates steer well clear of the Union. The PPE degree produces so many politicians and journalists because it has a reputation for producing politicians and journalists. Kuper is good at identifying correlations, but correlation is not causation. He describes Oxford as "an independent variable shaping British power" (p. 25) but Oxford only shapes British power because it is one of the two universities to which many members of what Kuper calls the "ruling caste" prefer to send their offspring. Social class rather than Oxford is the pertinent explanatory variable, and Oxford's influence is largely epiphenomenal.

Kuper is on more solid ground when he describes his book as 'an attempt to write a group portrait of a set of Tory

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Brexiteers – overwhelmingly men – from the traditional ruling caste who took an ancient route through Oxford to power' (p. 4). These Tory Brexiteers included Johnson, Michael Gove, and Daniel Hannan. Kuper rightly highlights Hannan's importance as the intellectual voice of Brexit, but this hardly justifies the claim that in the 1980s and 1990s 'Oxford began to hatch a revolution: Brexit' (p. 104). Indeed, Kuper concedes that most Oxford graduates probably voted Remain in the 2016 referendum. One study found that 75% of MPs supported Remain and that only 5% of MPs with PPE degrees supported Leave.[1] Classicists were the most pro-Leave, but the sample size is small.

Kuper is aware that people like Hannan were 'atypical in their beliefs' and that 'the Tory Brexiteers were a minority even among Oxford politicos in the 1980s' (p. 4). This puts paid to the project of pinning the blame for Brexit on Oxford or its PPE degree but it does raise an interesting question: what accounts for the views and political style of the Tory Brexiteers? This is not a question to which Kuper offers an answer but some of his remarks are suggestive. Ideology, he asserts, "has rarely been a major driving force of the British ruling caste" (p. 89) but Hannan and Gove were already fervent Thatcherites as undergraduates. Lack of seriousness is another alleged attribute of the British ruling caste, but nobody could accuse Hannon of a lack of seriousness, as distinct from a lack of judgement, about the European issue.

Judging by Kuper's account, Hannan and his coterie were not just seriously Eurosceptical but fanatically so. It was their fanaticism rather than their Oxford education, which kept them going until they succeeded in radicalizing the Conservative Party and, to an extent, the British electorate. Oxford did not radicalize Hannan, but it failed to deradicalize him. Brexit, as Kuper memorably describes it, was "an anti-elitist revolt led by an elite: a coup by one set of Oxford public schoolboys against other" (p. 162). The Brexiteers were, in some respects, like the 1930s Cambridge spies: 'though both betrayed Britain's interests in the service of Moscow, the Brexiteers did it by mistake' (p. 165).

Kuper recycles many familiar tropes about Oxford in general and PPE in particular. The Oxford interview, he claims, tests one's "ability to speak while uninformed" (p. 7). Not surprisingly, I do not recognize this description from my personal experience of conducting Oxford entrance interviews for a 20-year period including Kuper's time at Oxford. Most PPE admissions tutors ask candidates to work through logical or mathematico-economic puzzles at interview precisely because this format discourages bullshitting.

Student essays, Kuper suggests, are hurried and superficial, and students learn to bluff their way through tutorials. It is true that Oxford undergraduates write far more essays (between one and two per week) than students at most other British universities. However, as Kuper would soon discover if he had experience of other UK universities, fewer essays with more time to write them does not necessarily produce better results.

In the final analysis, none of this matters if Oxford is not the key to the political developments that concern Kuper. There is a serious book to be written about how and why the establishment split over Brexit and the radicalization of the Conservative Party by a relatively small band of right-wing ideologues who happen to have been educated at Oxford. This is not that book.

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[1] Are PPE graduates ruining Britain? MPs who studied it at university are among the most pro-Remain | LSE BREXIT