

Intergenerational Mobility over Nine Generations: Evidence from Poland, 1800-1984

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Abstract

We reconstruct the kinship network of the Polish social elite in the last two hundred years. We study the kinship links up to the 6th degree of kinship and find that direct (1st degree) linking strongly overestimates the degree of social mobility. Intergenerational mobility was low and stagnant until WW I, then it gradually increased in the 20th century. Family formation strongly influenced the persistence of social status. Our findings show that social mobility is a multigenerational process.

Introduction

We use mass genealogical data to study elite persistence in the long run. To identify the Polish social elite, we rely on the Polish Biographical Dictionary (pl. Polski Słownik Biograficzny, hereafter: PSB). The PSB collects the biographies of the most important people in Polish history across a wide range of fields, e.g., politics, economy, social activism, culture, art, and science. The PSB has been published since 1935, and it's based on the collective effort of three generations of Polish historians. Out of 28,500 people listed in the PSB, 18,800 died after 1800. The size of our sample corresponds to 0.01% of the population.

We reconstruct kinship links using *Wielcy.pl* ("The Great"), a genealogical database of the Polish social elite developed since the early 2000s. *Wielcy.pl* includes over 1.2M entries – people listed in the Polish Biographical Dictionary, descendants of the Polish nobility (deputies of the reformative Great Parliament of the late 18th century), people with obituaries printed in the Polish press before World War II, and their relatives. The database does not rely on the submissions of volunteers; since its inception, it has been developed and curated by Maria Minakowska. This allowed for achieving a broad coverage of the studied population and high record linkage rate

Results

We study kinship links between successive generations of the Polish elite, and demonstrate that the direct family links represent only a minority of family relations linking the elite over time. 1st-degree kinship (parent-child) accounts for only 17–25% of all sixth-degree kinship links, while second-degree ties (grandparent–grandchild) represent roughly 30–40%. (Figure 1) This implies that studies relying only on parent–child links tend to overestimate intergenerational mobility, because distant relatives contribute significantly to elite persistence.

Social mobility is a multigenerational process. Members of the elite without a kin in the previous generation of the elite, may have relatives in the more distant generations. For example, in 1984, 83% did not have a kin in the 1961 generation (see Table 2). However, only 67% did not have an elite kin in any of the previous generations. descendants of the 1800 elite appear even in the 1984 generation. (Figure 2)

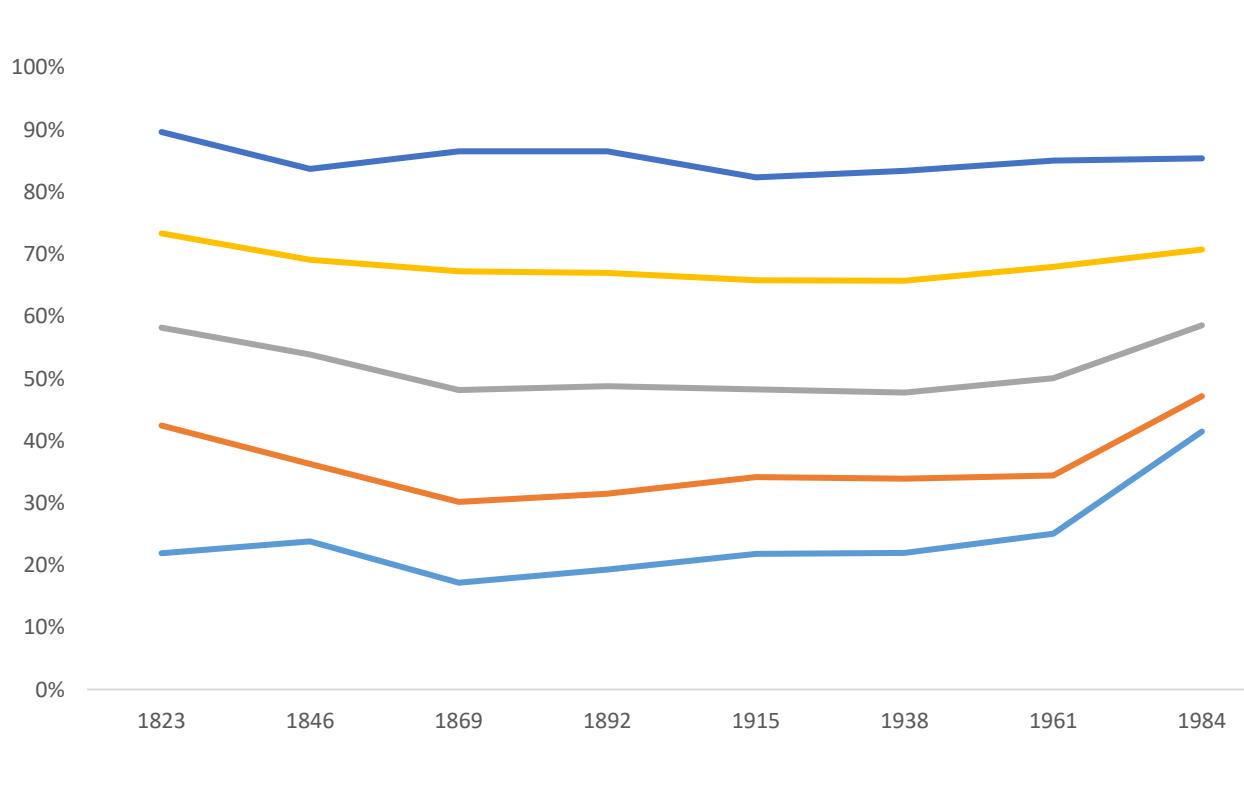


Figure 1. Contribution of kinship at a given degree to the total number of sixth-degree kinship links.

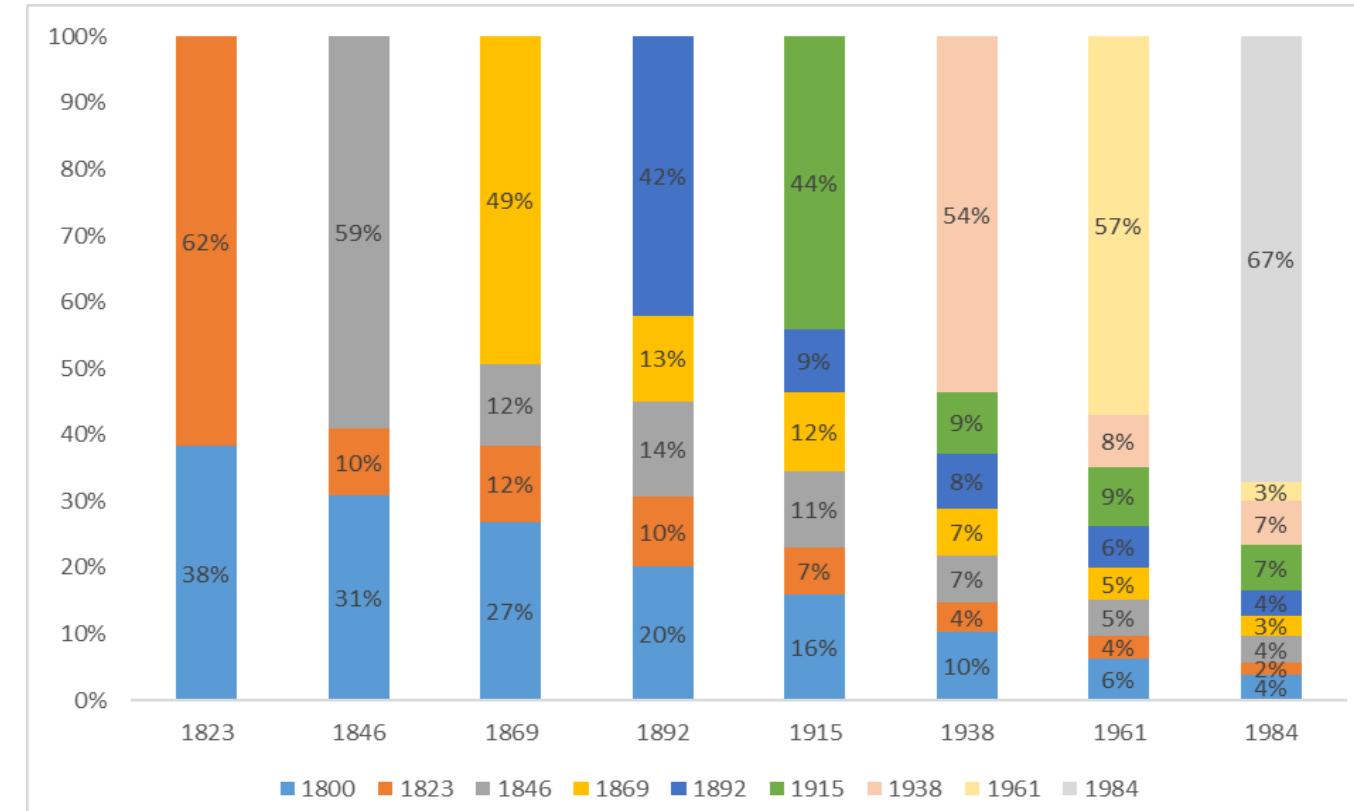


Figure 2. Multigenerational composition of the elite (generation of the earliest elite kin up to the sixth degree).

Results

Intergenerational mobility was low and stagnant in the 19th century, it gradually increased in the 20th century. In the long 19th century, 34–39% of people included in the PSB had a relative in the PSB one generation earlier. Social mobility increased only slightly after WW I: in the 1938 generation, 31% of the elite had a relative in the previous generation's elite. Similarly, WW II and the transition to state socialism initially also had a limited impact on top-end social mobility. In the 1961 generation, 28% of individuals had relatives listed in the PSB from the prior generation – a figure only slightly lower than in 1938. In the case of the 1984 generation, this share dropped further to 17% (Figure 3).

We examine not only the inheritance, but also the transmission of social status. Throughout the 19th century, approximately half of the elite succeeded in transferring their status one generation forward. Status retention slightly decreased at the beginning of the 20th century, although 43% of the elite of the 1915 generation had a relative in the elite of the 1938 generation. World War Two and the transition to state socialism transformed the social system, with only 22.4% of members of the prewar elite having a relative in the elite of the next (1961) generation. The full effects of the structural change can be observed in the case of the 1961 generation, in which only 5.83% transferred their position in the elite to the future generation

Status retention was substantially higher among individuals who had themselves inherited elite status. (Figure 3)

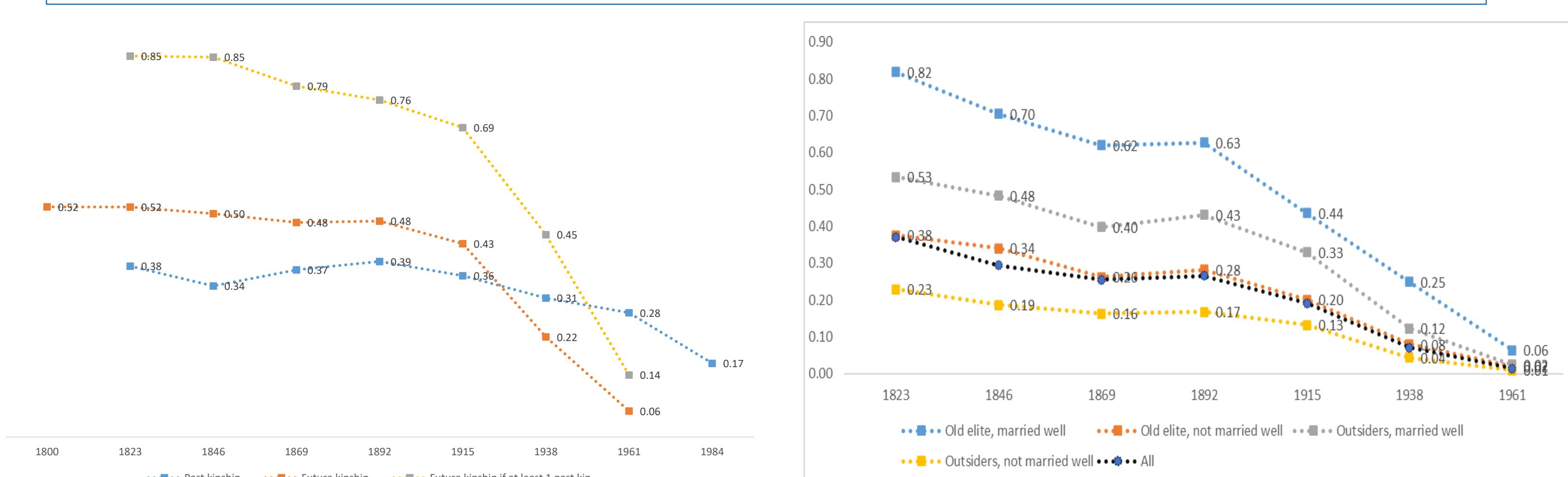


Figure 3. Intergenerational persistence of the elite.

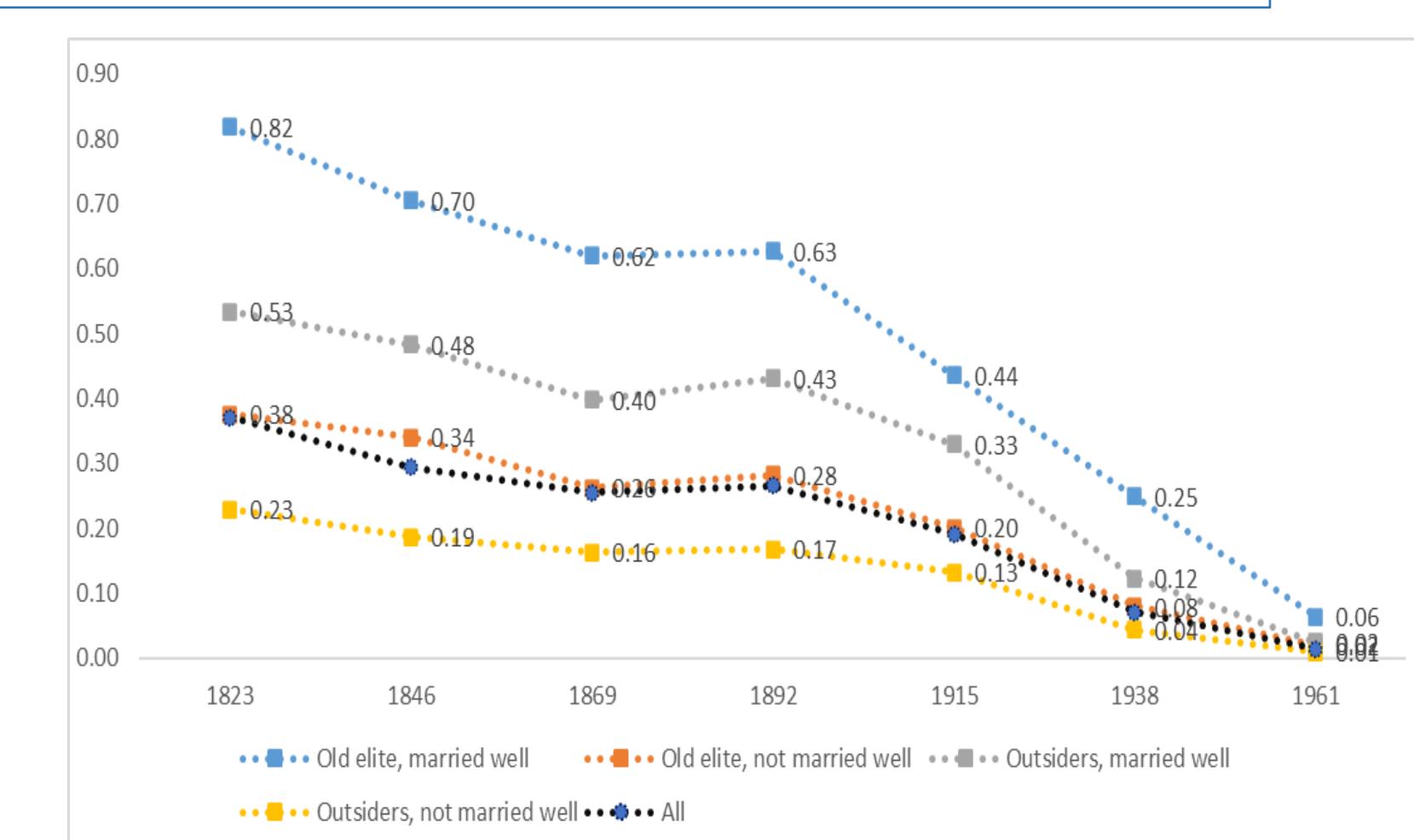


Figure 4. The persistence of the social status: old elite vs. outsiders, the importance of marriage. (Share of observations with at least one kin in the next generation of the elite).

We find that marriage significantly shapes the social outcomes of offspring. Members of the old elite who married well were 2–4 times more likely to have children listed in or closely linked to the elite. In contrast, outsiders who did not marry well were approximately 40% less likely to transmit elite status to their children. Notably, outsiders who married well had a higher likelihood of status transmission than members of the old elite who did not – by a margin of 30–50% (Figure 4). The assortative mating gradually declined since the early 19th century. (Figure 5).

For comparability, we also measure the correlation of „past” and „future” kinship. For the multivalued variable (number of relatives, including zeros), the correlation was at 0.70 for the 1823 generation, 0.61 for the 1915 generation, 0.47 for 1938, and 0.25 for the 1961 generation. In the case of a binary variable, the correlation is biased downwards because all records with any kin have the same value. For the 1823 generation, the correlation coefficient is at 0.54, and for 1915, it is at 0.3951. Then it stagnates at 0.37 in 1938 and declines to 0.21 in 1984

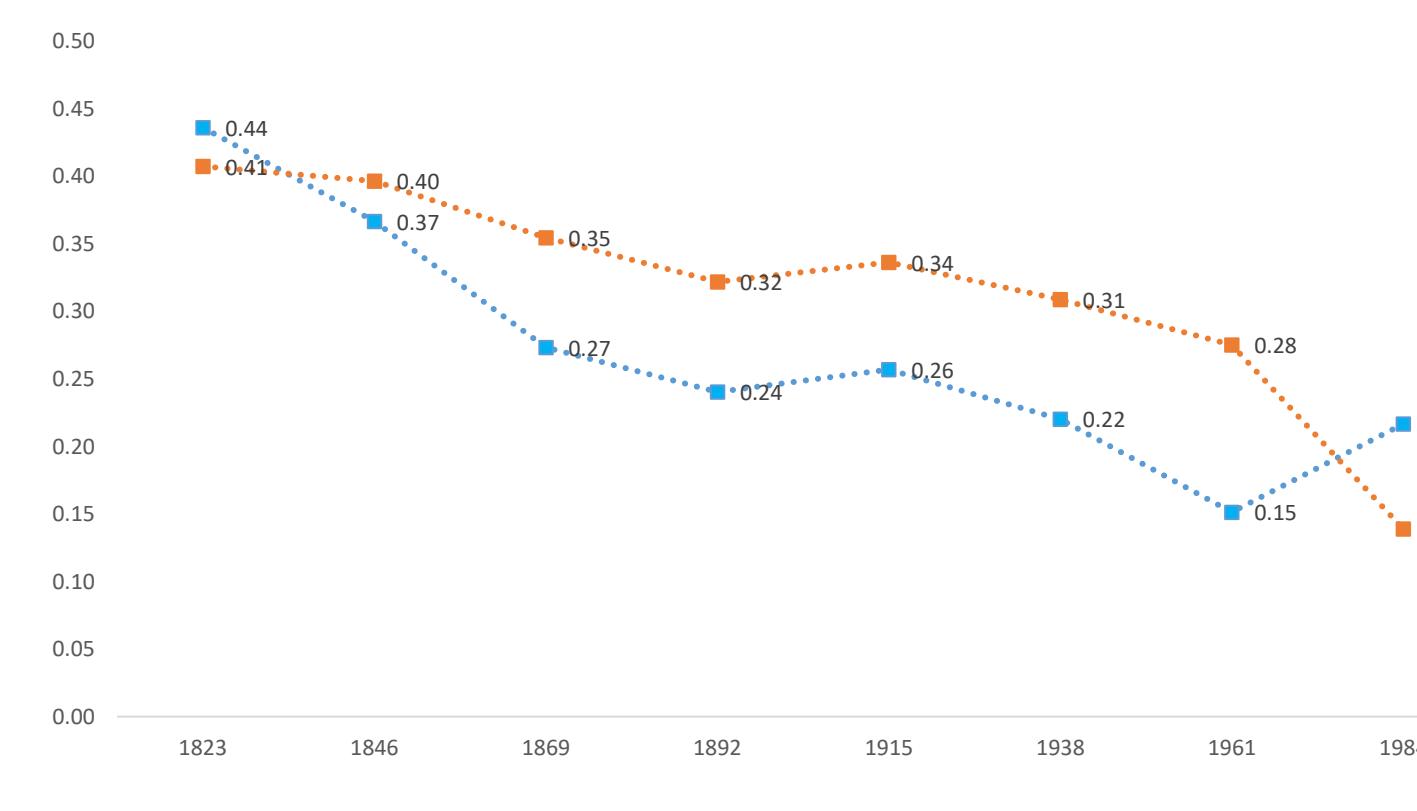


Figure 5. Kinship correlation.

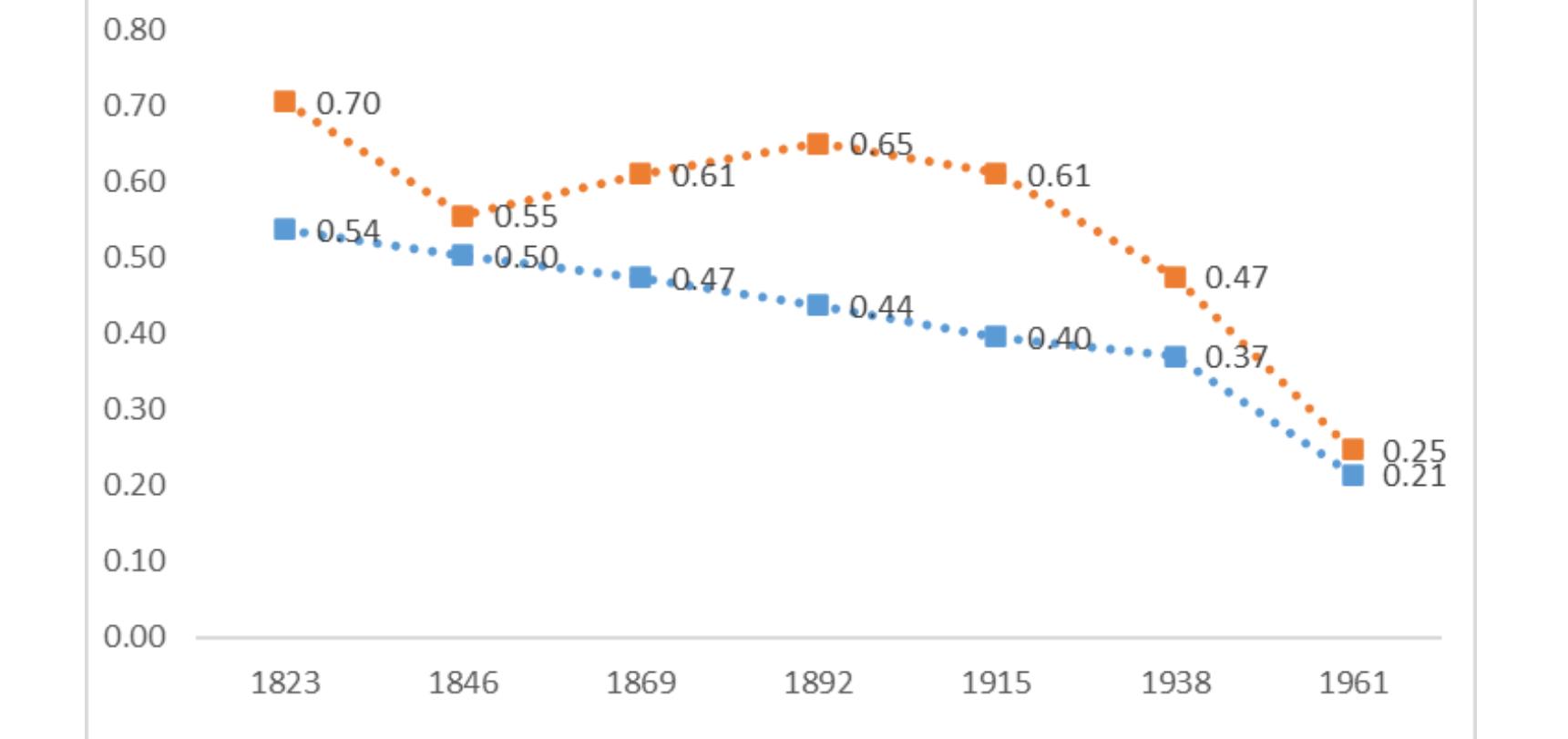


Figure 6. The correlation between the past and future kinship.

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Paper



Conclusions

High society is a complex web of family relations, not a sum of patrimonial dynasties. Thus, large-scale genealogical data and a network perspective are crucial for the study of intergenerational elite reproduction. Family formation & distant relatives matter!

Social mobility remained low and stagnant throughout the 19th century, rising gradually in the 20th century – especially under advanced state socialism, when cohorts who completed their education after the war began to form the new elite