



Future Identities: Changing identities in the UK - the next 10 years

DR12: How does Economic Inequality Impinge upon Notions of Identity?

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1. Introduction

Inequalities in incomes and wealth have increased during the past three decades. Wealthy minorities have gained a much larger share of total resources. Equality of opportunity has declined. These trends seem likely to continue, unless there are fundamental changes in policies or in social norms. Social identity rests on comparisons between one's own group and others. In recent years the barriers between the middle mass and stigmatised poor out-groups have been growing stronger. It is unclear whether this trend will continue under austerity or whether a 'tipping point' will be reached after which class solidarities will reassert themselves, leading to greater conflict between the mass and more privileged groups. Inequality is associated with higher levels of crimes of violence, economic crime, social disorder and political protest, and lower social cohesion and well-being.

2. Trends in inequality

Economic growth during the post-war period in the UK has led to higher living standards and the rise of a mass consumption society. Incomes rose at roughly the same rate for most population groups and rather more slowly for those at the top during the period up to the mid-1970s, leading to overall convergence. Since then, rates of increase have tended to diverge, with the most rapid growth among the highest income groups and those at the bottom falling behind. Inequalities in wealth followed a similar pattern with a slight lag.

This pattern may be summarised in terms of four overall trends: economic inequalities tend to ‘fan out’ for the mass of the population as those with relatively higher and lower incomes move away from the median (Figure 1). Secondly the incomes and wealth of small minorities of the very rich have grown very much more rapidly than those of the mass, the top ten per cent increasing their income share by half, the top one per cent doubling it and the top 0.1 per cent tripling it since the late 1970s (Atkinson et al. 2011: Figure 2). Thirdly, at the very bottom, poverty shows a different pattern, initially stabilising, then rising very rapidly in the mid and late 1980s, followed by stability and a slight fall in the early 2000s (Figure 3). Fourthly, spatial inequalities in income and wealth have grown more marked since the 1970s: average incomes are lower in the North, the Midlands and some parts of Wales and the poorer areas of large cities (Dorling 2005, Figure 6.4) and poverty has become increasingly concentrated in these areas (Fahmy *et al.* 2011, Figure 1). However the numbers of wealthy people in lower income regions are also relatively low so that inequality differs in kind between areas, with the affluent South on some measures more unequal. London is an exception, with an increasing concentration of both poverty and wealth leading to much greater inequality.

All four trends influence identity: the first is relevant to the everyday life experience of the mass of the population, the second to the distribution of power and of personal security in society, the third to divisions in social identity between the mass and the poor and the fourth to the way these divisions affect different localities.

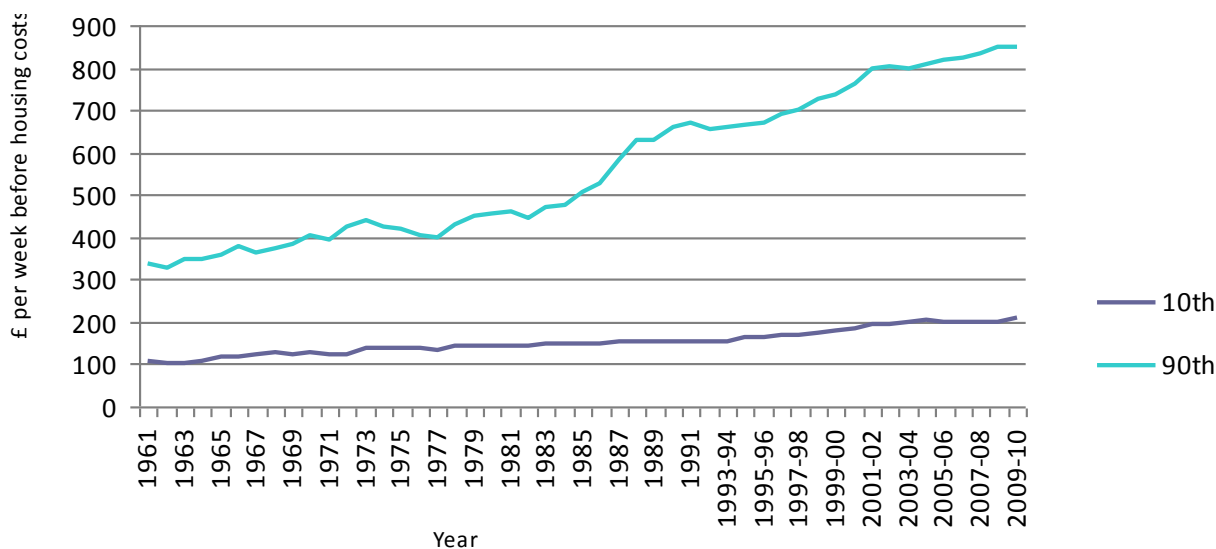


Figure 1: Income growth, selected percentile points

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Note: Graph showing the rising income inequality expressed as equivalent monetary amounts for a typical childless couple (£ per week before housing costs)

IFS <http://www.ifs.org.uk/fiscalFacts/povertyStats>

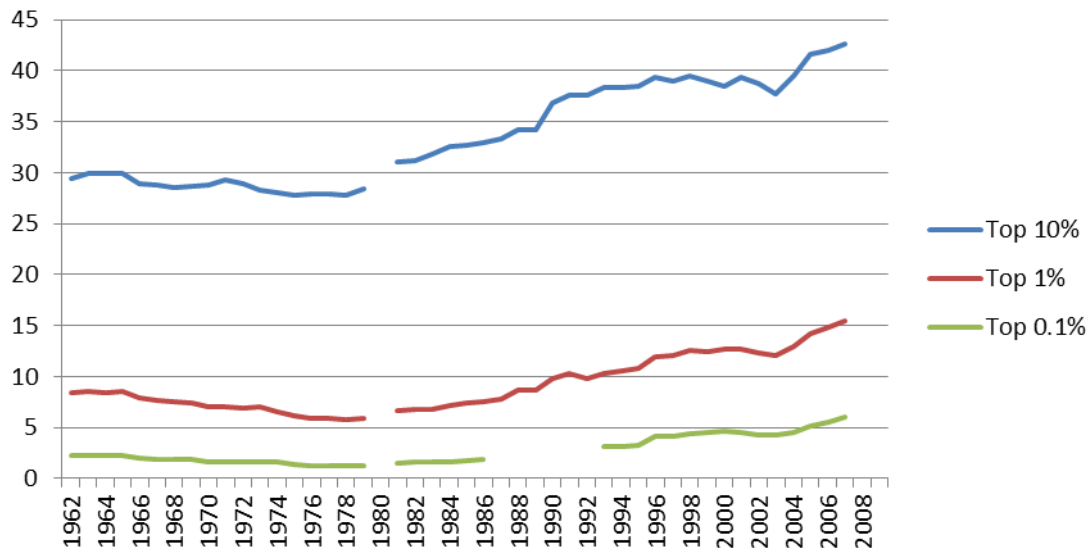


Figure 2: Top incomes as % all incomes

Note: tax units before 1990, adults thereafter
World Top Incomes Database

<http://g-mond.parisschoolofeconomics.eu/topincomes/#Database:>

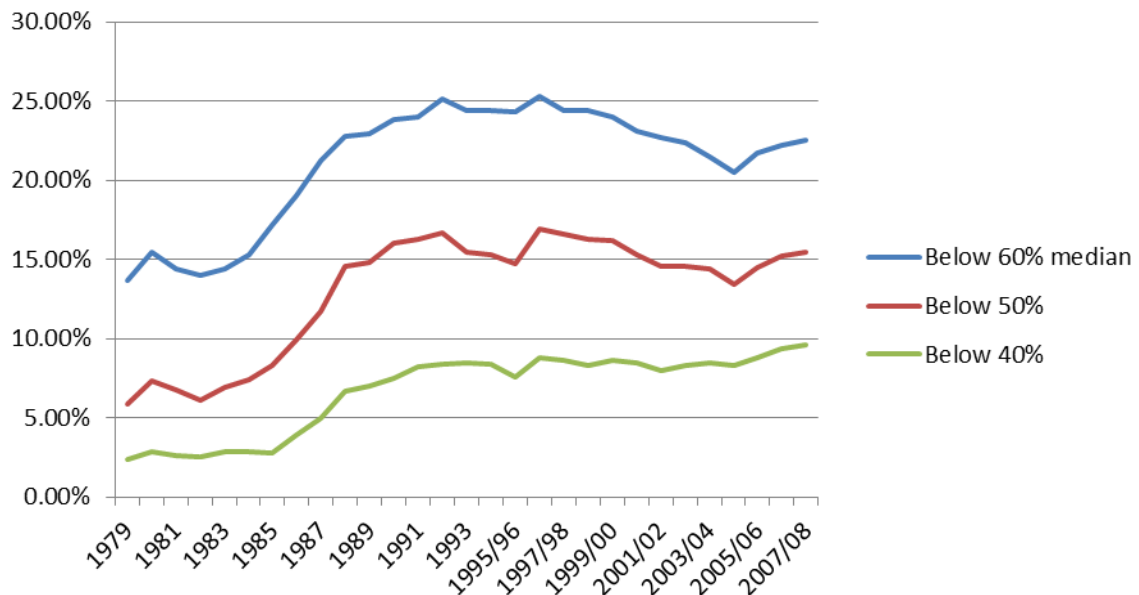


Figure 3: Percentage in Poverty

Note: Percentage of people in households below income thresholds after housing costs.

Source: FRS, extended before 1994/5 by FES <http://www.ifs.org.uk/projects/127>

Data on the distribution of wealth is less reliable than that for incomes. HMRC information indicates that personal wealth declared for tax purposes roughly doubled from four to eight per cent of incomes between 1977 and 2007 and that the holdings of the most wealthy increased more rapidly than this (Atkinson, Figure 9).

The trend to greater inequality in the UK has been more rapid than that in other European countries, but slightly behind that in the US (Atkinson 2005). Between 1999 and 2007 a range of measures focused on lower income groups (tax credit, minimum wage and guaranteed minimum pension) and greater access to occupational pensions reduced the incidence of poverty to some extent.

Equality of opportunity between income groups appears to have improved between the 1950s and 1970s, although the evidence is limited and most discussion rests on observations at only two points in time (Blanden and Machin 2007). It may well have declined thereafter (BIS 2011, Hills *et al.* 2009). There is some indication that the recession has arrested the dispersion of incomes for the mass of the working population, but not the deterioration in the position of non-pensioners on benefits, especially families (IFS 2012). Nor is it likely to halt the trend to growing inequalities in wealth (Glennerster 2012, 234). The longer-term trend to inequality appears likely to reassert itself as growth returns.

Since future developments are uncertain, we will discuss three scenarios in this paper:

- i. A return by 2015 to the long-term trajectory of three per cent annual growth and low unemployment envisaged in March 2012 by OBR (OBR 2012);
- ii. Continued stagnation, high unemployment, widespread insecurity and a 'lost decade' as the main European economies continue to falter; and
- iii. An intermediate scenario of sluggish growth (one to two per cent) and moderate unemployment as implied in the EU's 'Report Card' (EC 2012).

Under the first, unless there are fundamental shifts in public policy and in social norms, the longer-term trends identified above appear likely to continue. Under the second, living standards for the mass will fall, and at the same time the gap between 10th and 90th percentile stabilise. Bottom-end incomes will decline more rapidly under the impact of benefit cutbacks and un- and sub-employment. Top-end incomes will continue to escalate. Wealth will become of greater importance. Under the third, developments will be positioned midway between the other two.

3. Drivers of inequality

The trend to economic inequality is the outcome of several interacting factors, with commentators from different backgrounds placing the emphasis variously. Mainstream economists tend to stress the increasing return to skill resulting from technical advance, higher levels of education and the broader dispersion of education standards across a more globalised labour market, and more intense competitive pressures on the less-skilled (Green 2006, Atkinson 2007). Those emphasising social conflicts highlight the trend since the late 1970s for an increasing proportion of the value-added in national economies each year to go to capital and a smaller proportion to employees (Glynn 2006, Bailey 2011, 34-5). A growing stream of work in political science focuses on the shift towards 'winner-takes-all' politics, as wealthy minorities are able to exert more power over distribution (Hacker 2011; Hacker and Pierson 2010; BIJ 2012). Other analysts point to the capacity for those with particular assets or status (for example in property, finance, sport or celebrity) to charge higher 'rents' for their position in a larger, more unequal market (Irvin, 2008, 25-6). More holistic theorists argue that social, psychological, political and economic factors interact, so that prevailing norms (Akerlof 1980) and government policies (Huber and Stephens 2001) may curb market pressures for inequality (Atkinson 1999, 23-4). One crucial difference is whether the trend to greater inequality is seen as more or less inevitable or as capable of moderation by policy or by social factors.

Other relevant factors include:

- The rise of the service sector, which displaces the substantial working class incomes available from skilled and semi-skilled manual work with a distribution between low-skilled (retail, personal care, call-centre) and high-skilled (financial, legal, education and health service) work;
- Population ageing, which reinforces the lifetime component in wealth inequalities (Glennester 2012); the trend for women to move into full-time work and to marry men in the same income band, reinforcing the effect of labour market inequalities (Esping-Andersen 2009); and
- The decline in taxes on capital and on higher income groups symptomatic of winner takes all politics. This trend is most marked in the US but has some purchase in the UK.

4. Identity

Identity refers to the distinctive characteristics that define an individual (Weinrich and Saunderson 2003, 54). However, individuals also use characteristics to recognise each other and to classify other people in terms of their membership of social groups. The concept bridges the uniqueness that is a necessary part of personhood and the common features which enable people to categorise each other, interact and participate in society. A voluminous literature in psychology, social psychology, sociology and psychology (for example: Hyman, 1942, Kelly, 1952, Festinger 1954, Sherif 1954, Tajfel 1978, Merton 1968, Runciman 1966, Brown 2008, Parkin 1979, Barth 1969, Putnam 2000) supports four main points:

- Individual identity is bound up with comparison with others and with self-categorisation as a member of a social group (Tajfel and Turner 1981);
- Group membership may lead to inter-group comparisons which value members of one's own group against others and reinforce group solidarity, closure, inclusion and exclusion (Oakes 2001);
- More recently, social scientists have emphasised the extent to which individuals may compare and categorise themselves along multiple dimensions so that they may hold a number of identities by, for example, social class, region, faith, gender, family status, ethnicity and political orientation, at any one time (Brown 2008, 311-5);
- The extent to which groups form normative barriers between outsiders and insiders varies greatly, influenced by such factors as cross-group contacts and how far membership of multiple groups enables contact with a wide range of individuals and bridges between different identity groups (Dryzek and Braithwaite 2000, Brown 2008, 341-60).

These points suggest that the comparisons people make in establishing their social identities, the factors influencing which dimensions of identity dominate in relation to economic inequalities and the extent to which the resulting identity groups are more or less closed will be central to the way in which they feel about and behave towards others. The range of comparisons available in relation to inequality is considerable and diverse. Here we will discuss explicitly economic groupings, ethnic diversity and trends in economic comparisons. We will then consider opportunities and risks and possible outcomes.

5. Economic Comparisons

Two factors are relevant: the range of comparison and the values underlying judgements of fairness. A considerable body of attitude research and of media analysis indicates that most people are unaware of the scale or the extent of increase in social inequality (Svallfors 2007, Kenworthy and McCall 2007). Comparisons tend to be made with those with whom individuals come into contact either in everyday life or through the mass media. The distant rich (or poor) bulk smaller in comparisons than immediate neighbours or co-workers (Hills 2001, Orton and Rowlingson 2007). Group identities limit people's capacity to compare across the full range of economic inequalities.

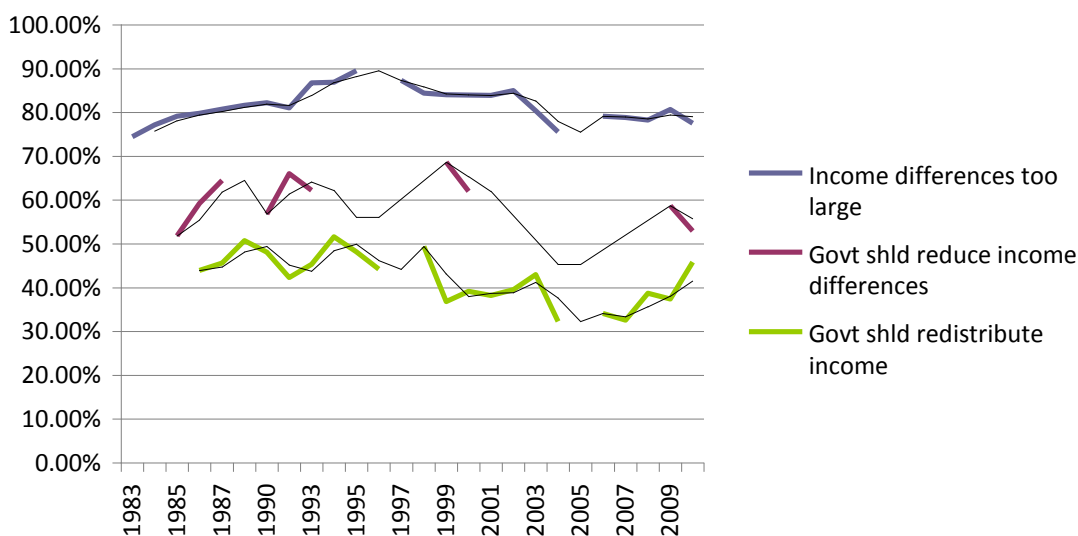


Figure 4: Attitudes to income inequality and redistribution

Note: Author's calculations from <http://www.britsocat.com/>

Most people support greater social equality and some redistribution, but these attitudes are not strongly held (Sefton 2005, Taylor-Gooby and Hastie, 2002). Figure 4 shows that while large majorities believe inequalities are 'too large' (top line), many fewer believe governments should reduce income differences (middle line) and fewer still that they should redistribute (bottom line), although support for this view grew recently. Rewards are seen as justified by differences in ability and effort and by property rights, so that grievance at inequality and support for strongly redistributive policies are both limited. Figure 5 shows how far people believe benefits for the unemployed are too low, and conversely, the extent to which they think they are too high in the context of current unemployment rates. As can be seen, most people believed benefits were too low when unemployment was high in the 1980s and early 1990s. As the labour market improved, attitudes switched. Interestingly they are not now becoming more generous, despite the sharp rises in unemployment since the recession. This finding is reinforced by attitude data and analysis of political discourse (IPSOS-Mori 2011, 22; Taylor-Gooby 2012a Figure 1).

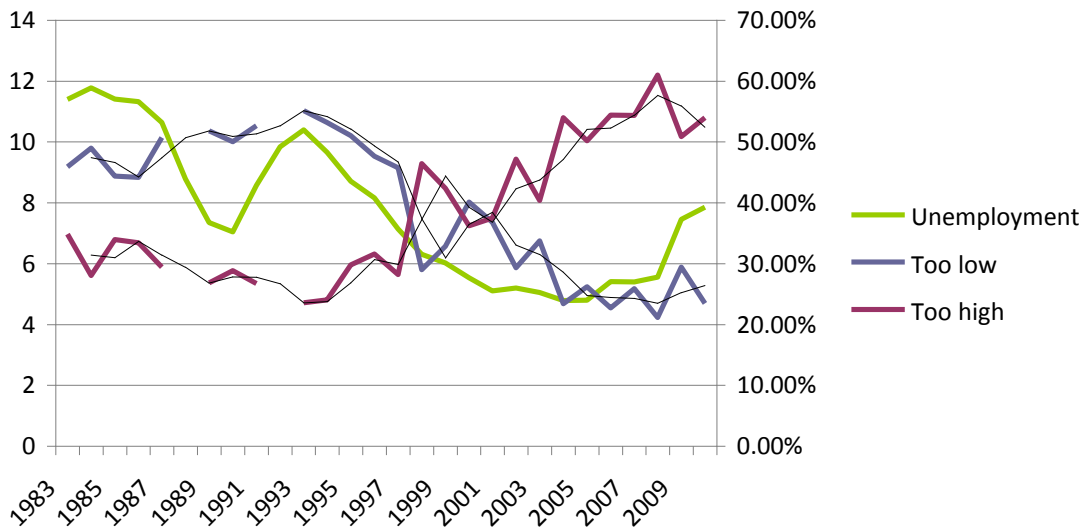


Figure 5: Unemployment Rates (LH scale) and Attitudes to Benefits (RH scale)

Note: Unemployment % total labour force from WEO Database

Figure 6 charts the relationship between poverty levels and attitudes to inequality. As poverty rose during the 1980s to plateau in the mid-1990s, the numbers believing income differences were too large also increased. Both indices fell during the early 2000s. Poverty is now rising and will rise further (IFS 2012). However concerns at inequality remain stable. The proportion supporting more spending on the poor has fallen to half the level of the late 1980s. Unpublished 2011 data indicates that the decline continues¹. The identity barriers between middle mass and poorer out-groups are growing stronger and sympathy is in decline.

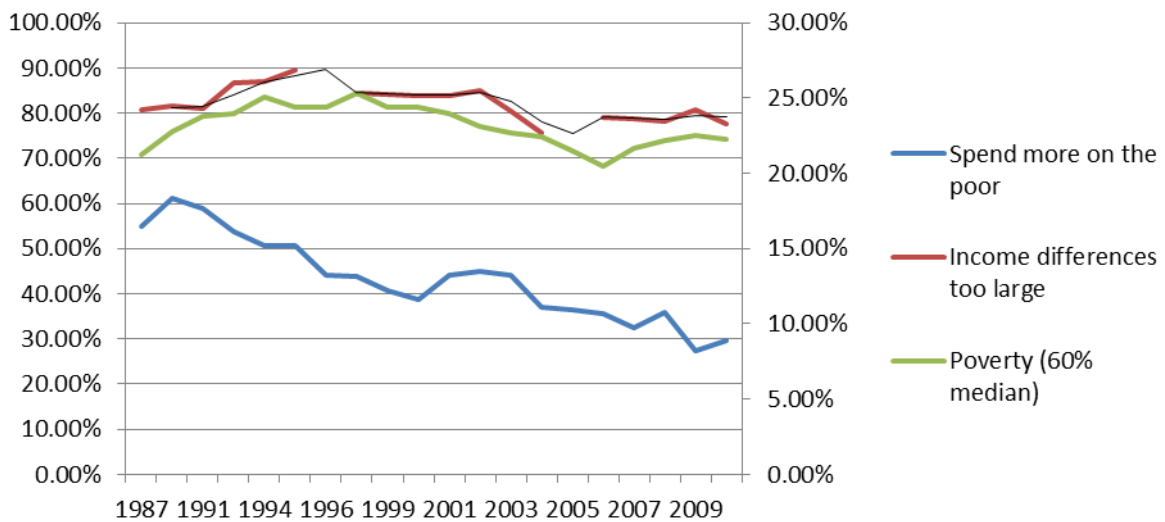


Figure 6: Poverty (RH scale), perceptions of income differences (LH scale) and support for more spending on the poor (LH scale)

¹ Personal communication from NatCEN (30.5.12)

6. Ethnic and other cultural divisions

Economic inequalities may also have indirect effects on identity, to the extent that economic differences are associated with other divisions such as those between ethnic groups or regions or areas in cities. Ethnicity is an important and salient basis for comparison and can provoke strong exclusive cleavages. These can be extremely complex depending on the balance between integration and multi-culturalism in official policies and in popular practice (Modood 2012). Regional differences between prosperous South and deindustrialised North or differences between inner-city and suburban residents also play a role in identity. Spatial elements in identity, as in inequality, have grown much stronger during the past half-century. This is shown in social trust, social participation and voting behaviour. To the extent that these differences are widely perceived they may also form the basis for grievances.

7. Changing bases of comparison

Economic inequalities may also have indirect effects on identity, to the extent that economic differences are associated with other divisions such as those between ethnic groups or regions or areas in cities. Ethnicity is an important and salient basis for comparison and can provoke strong exclusive cleavages. These can be extremely complex depending on the balance between integration and multi-culturalism in official policies and in popular practice (Modood 2012). Regional differences between prosperous South and deindustrialised North or differences between inner-city and suburban residents also play a role in identity. Spatial elements in identity, as in inequality, have grown much stronger during the past half-century. This is shown in social trust, social participation and voting behaviour. To the extent that these differences are widely perceived they may also form the basis for grievances.

A number of analyses of social change point to shifts in social identity. Post-industrialists emphasise a secular trend for the social class solidarities associated with industrial society to decline and liberal individualism to predominate. Post-materialists argue that, as societies grow richer, there is a long-term shift away from material goals towards individual self-development and self-realisation (education, democratic engagement, spiritual and green social movements, Inglehart 1997). Post-modernists stress the choices people perceive in their social lives as a result of the decline in importance of traditional social divisions and the expanding range of identities open in family life and leisure through new media and in the acceptance of different sexual, ethnic, and faith identities (Giddens 1990, Merton 1968). More empirical analyses point to the greater range of choices in adolescence (Furlong and Cartmel 1997), work, family formation, maintenance and trajectories (Lewis 2009), work and retirement (Vickerstaff 2007). Partisan loyalty has become less fixed and political identities more fluid (Stoker 2012).

All three approaches suggest that social class divisions are becoming less important in popular consciousness, as Figure 7 illustrates. The majority of the population sees themselves as 'working class' with the remainder 'middle class' (less than one per cent upper class), but as 'middle income', with most of the remainder 'low income' (less than five per cent 'high income': Britsocatt 2012). This trend is reflected in voting: the proportion voting by class has fallen steadily from 63 to 41 per cent between 1964 and 2005 (Pattie and Johnston 2009, 466), with region and place playing an increasingly important role.

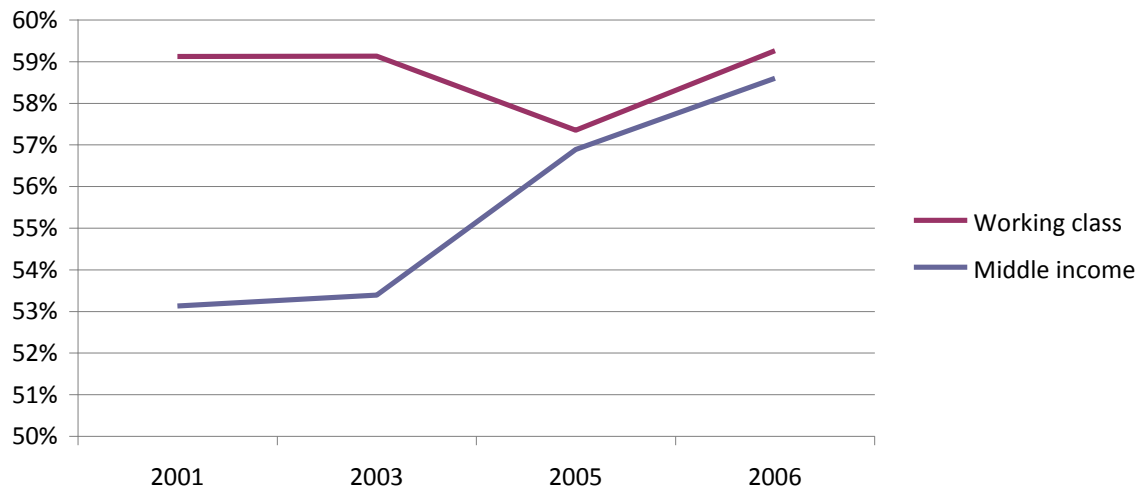


Figure 7: Class and income

Set against this is evidence that the attractions of an imagined freer, more open social sphere may be confined to more advantaged social groups. A major study of 44 societies indicates that trends to greater inequality are associated with stronger, not weaker class identities (Andersen and Curtis 2012). Other recent work suggests that inequality is associated with increased political polarisation but also with greater disengagement from voting by lower income more left-wing groups (Pontusen and Rueda 2010). Traditional class solidarities may have grown weaker, so that the mass of the population shares a group identity, with the poor excluded. However, inequality at a certain level does impact on identity. This has implications for a possible reversion to class identities, with conflict between the mass and the wealthy.

8. Opportunities and risks

These points fit with the theoretical literature on the complexity of group reference and identity in modern societies. They suggest that a great deal depends on which of a range of group memberships dominates for an individual in constructing economic identity, and that this may vary across society and among different groups. For many, the dominant comparisons may be downwards. A perceived division between those who support themselves through paid work and the stigmatised poor, believed to depend on social benefits, may shape attitudes. Stagnation and austerity, however, will tend to make divisions in living standards and in opportunities more obvious. Growing and more obvious social inequalities may nourish conflicts between those who see themselves as have-nots and those they see as haves.

The extent to which the UK follows Scenario I, II or III will have an effect on the degree of openness or closure of social identities. We suggest that a return to growth (Scenario I) will allow the divisions between wealthy minority, middle mass and poor to harden. Economic inequalities will be seen primarily as the outcome of contribution through paid work, so that, the poor are increasingly an excluded 'underclass', while comparisons upwards are more limited.

Scenario III, sluggish growth, implies that divisions and barriers between identity-groups will strengthen more gradually. Under Scenario II, the 'lost decade', class differences in income and life-chances will become more obvious. As unemployment rises for a minority, but insecurity affects the lives of the mass of the population more harshly, interactions will increasingly bridge between middle and bottom. This raises the possibility of a 'tipping point'. The barriers between these identity-groups may weaken as class identities strengthen and become more political identities. The antagonism towards the distant rich of the 'Occupy' movement may become more widespread and the trend for sympathy for the poor to dwindle be reversed.

9. Impacts on wellbeing, social cohesion, crime and protest

A considerable literature has developed in relation to **well-being** in recent years (Easterlin 1974, Blanchflower and Oswald, 2004). This shows that the relationship between average well-being in societies, measured by levels of happiness reported in social surveys, and level of economic development is not linear, but subject to diminishing returns (Easterlin *et al* 2010, 22463). Nonetheless, divisions within societies are associated with well-being: ethnicity, gender age, relative and absolute income, in order of importance, all contribute to reported happiness (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2002, 1381). A substantial tradition points to the effect of perceived rather than actual inequalities in contributing to a sense of grievance. This implies that greater inequality will damage happiness, through its effect on identity-divisions rather than through a direct income effect.

A number of writers argue that inequalities damage **social cohesion**. This work uses both cross-national data (which shows that, among developed countries, more equal nations are more cohesive Wilkinson and Pickett 2009, 51-7; Newton 2006) and national analysis (which show that the more groups perceive inequalities the less they trust others, Uslaner 2008). Short-run social changes during the period of economic stagnation and austerity may slow the growth of inequalities among the mass of the population but allow the gaps between the mass and those at the bottom (unemployed and dependent on benefits) and at the very top (with greater access to globally footloose investments) to expand. Better-off people are increasingly spatially segregated from poorer groups, and use different schools, shops and media. Empathy declines. More broadly, greater inequality results in lower levels of civic participation and engagement (Lancee and Van de Werfhorst 2012, Rothstein 2005 ch. 4).

Many people in employment appear to define their own identity downwards, in relation to unemployed people, so that the appeal to 'hard-working families' as against 'dependants' has become the small change of political discourse. One indication of a hardening in the division between workers and non-working poor since the crisis is the rapid increase in use of the denigratory term 'scrounger' in the media since 2009 (Jones, 2011, Taylor-Gooby 2012a Figure 1). Another is the decline in support for better benefits for unemployed people and more spending on the poor despite the increase in unemployment and in poverty of recent years.

Crime is a broad category and the relationship between it and economic inequality is unsurprisingly complex. More unequal societies show higher levels of violence and lower levels of social trust (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009, 134-7). A recent study of panel data across England and Wales from 2002 to 2007 shows that 'income inequality and unemployment are important explanatory variables for crimes motivated by economic gain, but do not offer much explanatory power for other types of crime' (Wu and Wu 2012, 3765). The more society moves towards Scenarios III or II the more likely is a rise in violence and economic crime.

Political protest is again complex, including all forms of extra-constitutional politics from demonstrations to riots to terrorism. Links between economic identity and the anti-capitalist and 'Occupy' movements are made explicitly by those who seek to attack what they see as the undemocratic power of the distant rich (Berkeley Journal of Sociology 2012). Comparative studies show a link between increased poverty and welfare state cutbacks, and urban disorder (Ponticelli and Voth, 2011, Taylor-Gooby 2012b). Terrorism may be associated with identity differences to which economic factors contribute. Religion, ethnicity and national identity

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appear to play a larger role in relation to recent bombings. These points suggest that, as in the case of crime, the link between economic inequality and political responses depends on the kind of behaviour under discussion and on opportunities for legitimate protest, but is likely to be exacerbated by austerity and inequality.

10. Conclusions

Economic inequality appears to affect social identities directly, through the comparisons that people make with the economic circumstances of the other groups they recognise and the rigidities of barriers of exclusion and inclusion which form the parameters of identity. The impact of inequality depends to a considerable extent on awareness of the scale of and trends in inequalities, and the range of comparisons employed, and is mediated by social values. There appears to be substantial ignorance of the extent and rapid growth of inequalities. Social values appear to offer only limited support for redistribution and to stress divisions in entitlement by desert. A number of theoretical approaches suggest traditional class solidarities have declined during the past four decades and that society is perceived as more fluid and open, with the main division lying between a middle mass and stigmatised poor. Austerity, stagnation and inequality may initially strengthen this barrier, but inequality appears likely to produce a return to class identities and associated political conflicts, which may direct antagonisms upward. Economic inequality damages well-being and social cohesion, increases crimes of violence and economic crime and encourages political protest, disorder, riots and possibly extremism.

The forces that have increased inequalities in income and wealth and promoted poverty in recent years appear likely to continue, unless there is a fundamental redirection of public policy or shift in social values. To the extent that stagnation and austerity reduce the growth in inequalities in market incomes but increase inequalities between the mass and those at the bottom and the very top, identity divisions and possible resentment between most people and minorities of rich or poor seem likely to grow stronger, stimulating protest, conflict and social malaise.

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