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Social polarisation at the local level: a four-town comparative study

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Abstract

The concept of polarisation, where the extremes of a distribution are growing and where there is a missing or shrinking ‘middle’, has attracted recent interest driven by concerns about the consequences of inequality in British society. This paper brings together evidence of economic, spatial and relational polarisation across four contrasting towns in the United Kingdom: Oldham, Margate, Oxford and Tunbridge Wells. Deploying a comparative community analysis, buttressed by quantitative framing, we demonstrate the need to recognise how local social processes vary amongst places that on the face of it display similar trends. We show how local polarisation plays out differently depending on whether it is driven ‘from above’ or ‘from below’. Across all four towns, we draw out how a ‘missing middle’ of intermediaries who might be able to play roles in cementing local relations poses a major challenge for political mobilisation in times of inequality.

Keywords: Community studies; Inequality; Polarisation; Segregation

JEL Code: R0, P5

Introduction

It is widely known that the UK has seen a remarkable increase in inequality over the last half century. In the late 1970s, the UK was one of the least unequal nations in the world measured by income and wealth disparities, in large part attributable to high and progressive taxation on income and inheritance (Atkinson 2015; Jenkins 2016; Piketty 2014). Since the 1980s, income inequality in the UK has grown substantially, especially during the Thatcher regime, and it has persisted at a high level since the turn of the 21st century. These inequalities are increasingly seen as driving wider processes of social and political polarisation (e.g. Savage et al 2015), with growing political volatility and the Brexit referendum regarded as a result.

A dominant trend in recent analyses of these developments has been to show how polarisation takes a linked social and geographical form, and especially how marginalized and ‘left behind’ locations are distinctive from more prosperous and dynamic, urban centres, including but not confined to London (see Goodwin and Heath 2016; Ford and Goodwin 2016; Hobolt 2016). This research analysis, important though it is, runs the risk of collapsing social divisions onto geographical maps and more particularly neglects how polarisation may be happening within as well as between specific localities. We argue for greater attention to the social dynamics within localities, and their role in driving social polarisation in contrasting ways. Local social dynamics not only create important

differences between towns, that on the face of it display similar processes of economic and spatial polarisation, but also crucially within specific localities. More specifically, we show how local polarisation plays out differently depending on whether it is driven ‘from above’ or ‘from below’. We innovate by using a mixed method approach that links comparative qualitative studies with quantitative analysis. This permits us to recognise ethnographically how social relations ‘on the ground’ need to be carefully unravelled and not simply read off from broader trends.

Our paper proceeds as follows. Our first section sets out our mixed methods comparative community study methodology. We explain the dimensions by which we conceptualise social polarisation, set out our mixed methods approach to exploring these dimensions, and introduce the four case study towns. The second section explores quantitative evidence on economic and spatial polarisation, whilst the third section discusses the relational aspects of polarisation that emerge from our ethnographic accounts, nuancing these simple aggregate patterns. The concluding discussion draws together these different evidence bases, the absence of mediating ‘middles’, and the political implications for localities in times of increasing inequality.

1. A mixed methods comparative community analysis of social polarisation

Economic, social and relational polarisation

Social polarisation within specific locales can have a greater impact on proximate economic and social relationships, people’s identities and daily lives, than is revealed by abstract concepts such as the Gini coefficient or income shares. Whereas inequality may describe the width of a continuous distribution of outcomes that may be shrinking narrower or growing wider, polarisation is a situation in which the extremes of a distribution are growing, and where there is a missing or shrinking ‘middle’. Currently, the recent growth of research interest in inequality has focused especially on the ‘top end’ of the super-rich and elites (Piketty 2014) which has complemented the long history of social research on the poor and marginalised at the other end of the distribution (e.g. Townsend 1979). By contrast, there is less research on the substantial proportion of people who are located in the middle levels of the distribution. Although a number of largely folk terms talk about the ‘missing middle’, ‘decline of the middle class’, and the ‘squeezed middle’, these are not subject to as much systematic focus from inequality researchers as those at the top or bottom of society. The ‘missing middle’, and its relationship to those at the ‘top’ and the ‘bottom’ is a major lacuna which our paper seeks to remedy.

We need to recognise at the outset that social polarisation can be framed from economic, spatial and relational perspectives. In economic terms, polarisation is typically investigated through the changing shape of the distribution of structural outcomes, such as income or occupational class. Much has been written about the polarising labour market of the last two decades in high income countries, in which mid-skill and mid-pay jobs are declining, whilst at the other ends of the spectrum high-skill and low-skill jobs are both increasing

(Goos and Manning 2007). This work shows us that there is an increasingly 'bimodal' distribution, with many people at the top and the bottom, a declining proportion left in a 'hollowed out' middle. Marcuse describes it thus:

"The best image...is perhaps that of the egg and the hour glass: the population of the city is normally distributed like an egg, widest in the middle and tapering off at both ends; when it becomes polarized the middle is squeezed and the ends expand till it looks like an hour glass. The middle of the egg may be defined as intermediate social strata... Or if the polarization is between rich and poor, the middle of the egg refers to the middle-income group... The metaphor is not of structural dividing lines, but of a continuum along a single dimension, whose distribution is becoming increasingly bimodal". (1989: 699)

Social polarisation also invokes the notion of spatial segregation, a concept established by Chicago School sociologists from the early 20th century (Savage and Warde 1993). It has been given regular attention by US sociologists examining the segregation of African Americans into distinct city neighbourhoods (Johnston et al. 2003) but has also included the study of segregation by income or age (Reardon and Bischoff 2011; Sabater et al. 2017). Thus, we might say that a city is polarised in terms of the distribution of certain social groups into certain locations. On the other hand, polarisation might refer to diverging social outcomes between neighbourhoods - the idea that the gap between the 'best' and 'worst' neighbourhoods is growing wider, for example in terms of health, income, wealth or educational outcomes.

From a relational point of view, we might observe polarisation as the increasing withdrawal of a population into two (or more) groups that live essentially parallel lives with few networks or connections between them. This is the kind of perspective which is best studied from within a revived 'community studies tradition'. Community studies was a powerful research repertoire in the UK from the 1950s to the 1970s, and examined what Stacey (1960) in her study of Banbury, famously called a 'local social system'. Researchers sought to unravel how different social groups co-existed, mingled, interacted and organised hierarchies within small scale relatively bounded environments (Savage 2010). However, community studies declined following the criticism that in an increasingly urbanised and globalised environment it was not possible to delineate distinctive "local social systems" (Saunders 1981). Some currents became more specialised within anthropology (Rapport 1993; Edwards 2000; Cohen 1983; MacDonald et al 2005), with ethnographies focusing on particular communities or even subsections thereof. Similarly, a different tradition of sociological and geographical research centred largely on specific neighbourhoods - such as gentrified locales (Butler and Robson 2003), or specific middle class neighbourhoods (Savage et al 2005).

Our take on the tradition of community studies follows Pratschke and Morlicchio (2012) in calling for a complex and carefully contextualised analysis of the ways in which economic 'generative mechanisms' interact in different towns. We express caution about the dominance of perspectives which present 'over-insulated' views about local areas. Young

(1999), for instance, uses the metaphor of the ‘cordon sanitaire’ (23), to show how cities are materially and culturally divided and how, within sequestered areas, gentrification can result in rich and poor living ‘chic by jowl’ (9). Butler and Robson (2003:93) prefer the analogy of tectonic plates to capture the reality of radically different lives played out in the same London streets. Whilst these descriptors may be insightful, they do not capture the complexity of difference and interaction in towns, or recognize the significance of interactions between different groups living in proximate locations. Following the lead of researchers studying migration and race and ethnicities (Gilroy 2004; Rishbeth and Rogaly 2017; Rogaly and Taylor 2011; Tyler 2012;), we see places as simultaneously demarcated and convivial.

A mixed methods approach

This article brings together processes of economic, spatial and relational polarization into a holistic perspective given focus by local comparative community study. Our study focused on four English towns with very different histories, trajectories, geographies, and identities, but with close relationships to larger cities - three of them to London and one to Manchester. They provide an important analytical comparison since the first two - Margate and Oldham - would typically be considered economically depressed areas, whereas Oxford and Tunbridge Wells are by many measures among the most prosperous places in the United Kingdom.

Margate is a seaside town of around 60,000 people in the county of Kent, 80 miles by road and an hour and a half by high speed train from London. The collapse of the once reputable tourist industry led to the repurposing of the many hotels and guest houses into poor quality houses of multiple occupancy, homing vulnerable populations and economic migrants seeking work in the salad factories and struggling tourism. The Turner Contemporary art gallery was opened in 2011 with the aim of kickstarting a new cultural economy, bringing money via cultural tourism and encouraging middle class ‘creatives’ to move to the area. Around 90% of the population identify as being White British, though there is a significant population of Eastern European origin living in the central Cliftonville West area. The town has a history of electing right-wing, usually Conservative, politicians. Thanet, the local authority that covers Margate, was the only council to be controlled by the UK Independence Party (UKIP). It took power in 2015, losing it to the Conservatives by 2019. Margate is a stronghold for Brexit voters – 64% of voters in Thanet voting to leave the EU on a 73% turnout. UKIP leader Nigel Farage used the area for his rallying calls and conferences, as well as the constituency seat he contested (but failed to gain) in the 2015 election.

Oldham shares many characteristics with Margate, albeit with a different trajectory. Situated at the foot of the Pennine hills in north-west England, Oldham is 9 miles by road and 30 minutes by tram from central Manchester, with a population of around 100,000 in the immediate urban area. The town’s birth and growth was built on the industrial revolution, situating it as a principal global manufacturer of cotton yarn. The textiles and engineering industries, for a long time dependent on migrant and female labour, declined catastrophically during the twentieth century due to processes of automation and offshoring to lower wage countries. This has left the electronics firm Diodes amongst the only

companies in Oldham employing skilled labour, whilst the warehouse distribution centres often located in former cotton mills are a major provider of unskilled work. As in Margate, there have been recent attempts to regenerate Oldham (e.g. through developing a tram line to Manchester and building a 'cultural quarter'). Just over half the population identifies as White British, and a third as Pakistani or Bangladeshi. There is a striking pattern of residential settlement by ethnic group, with areas that have less than 10% White British residents sitting next to areas with over 90% White British residents. Oldham tends to return Labour politicians - 45 of its 60 council seats are held by Labour, as are both its Parliamentary constituencies. It is an example of a Labour area that voted to leave the EU in 2016, 61% voting for leave on a 68% turnout.

The other two towns are ostensibly prosperous. Oxford is a city in southern England, 60 miles by road and one hour by train to the west of London, with a population of around 160,000 living in the urban area. It is internationally known for the University of Oxford, but has a separate history as a car manufacturing town. This division between 'the factory and the city' (Hayter and Harvey, 1993) amplified the divisions between 'town and gown' that had long existed. With the decline of employment in manufacturing, Oxford's growth and success became firmly underscored by the knowledge economy, the universities now being the prime economic players in the city. Yet, this story of economic success betrays long-standing inequality and deprivation. Oxford has three large peripheral suburbs built as social housing estates for people working in the car factory, dominated by a white working class population with a sizeable minority of people of African-Caribbean descent. Housing in the city is in short supply and notoriously expensive, and homelessness has been a very longstanding concern. The presence of two large universities means that it has a very young population and its ethnic diversity is driven in part by the large number of international students and academic staff - two thirds of the population identify as White British, 12% as other White and 12% as Asian. The city typically returns Labour councillors and a Labour Member of Parliament in the East, though north and west Oxford has traditionally been the territory of the centre-ground Liberal Democrats. One of the strongest remain areas, 70% voted to remain in the EU on a 72% turnout.

'Royal' Tunbridge Wells is a town also in Kent, 40 miles by road and 45 minutes by train from London, with a population of 60,000 living in the urban area. The town was established in the 17th century due to its iron-rich mineral spring and became an attraction for the aristocracy who chose it as a convenient base for leisurely pursuits, growing in popularity as a resort town through the 18th and 19th centuries. It remains a popular cultural, tourist and retail destination, and attracts high income London commuters due to its high-status grammar schools, high quality housing stock, proximity to London and access to the countryside. Very high property prices and the lack of young adults generate a rather 'unbalanced' demographic profile. Whilst professionals earn London salaries, areas of social deprivation also exist - one area to the north of the town centre features among the most socially deprived 20% of areas in England. The majority of the population (86%) identify as being of White British ethnic origin, 6% other White and 4% of Asian ethnic origins. Tunbridge Wells has, traditionally, been a Conservative stronghold; the current council is heavily dominated by Conservative politicians, and has been controlled by them since 1998. In the 2016 referendum, the wider local authority area voted 55% to remain in

the European Union on a 79% turnout; it was the only such area to vote remain in the whole of Kent.

Statistical methods

Evidence of economic and spatial polarisation is drawn from descriptive analysis of official statistics, namely income, occupational class and area deprivation. For income, we analyse the gross equivalised household income distributionⁱ from 'Pay As You Earn' income (labour income paid by an employer) and cash benefits (such as child benefit, unemployment benefit and disability benefits), provided by the Office for National Statisticsⁱⁱ (ONS). It does not include income from self-employment, property income or other investments. It is 'equivalised' household income, adjusted to account for the size of the household (larger households needing higher income to meet their needs). For occupational class, we use the three class version of the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) at the 2011 England & Wales Census.

For area deprivation, we analyse data from the 2015 Index of Multiple Deprivation that measures multiple social deprivation within neighbourhoods ('Lower Super Output Areas' or LSOAs) using indicators of income poverty, unemployment, education, local services, housing and crime. This ranks areas relative to all other areas in England (e.g. 'among the most deprived 1% of areas'). For the purposes of the quantitative analysis, our towns are defined by the built-up urban area (strictly, the ONS 'Built-up area subdivision'), but income data is only available for the larger local authority area which (excepting Oxford) includes some rural areas outside the towns.

Ethnographic methods

Whilst census and neighbourhood statistics are widely used to examine social divisions, they cannot capture the intricate ways that people live, work and interact in the community. Here, it is essential to combine our statistical analysis with ethnographic methods central to the school of community studies. For a period of at least twelve months we had four designated ethnographers trained in either or both sociology and anthropology working in each fieldsite: Jill in Oldham; Sarah in Margate; Luna in Tunbridge Wells; and Insa in Oxford. We also employed locally-based research assistants who helped us collect and analyse the data in Oxford and Tunbridge Wells.

This qualitative research captured the views and experiences of a number of groups residing and working in the towns, namely: residents from disadvantaged working class communities; the town's economic elites (if any) and business people; artists; local authority frontline workers and professionals; as well as young people aged 18 and over who had grown up in the towns. Here, we focus predominantly on the data from the towns' marginalized communities as well as those in the 'squeezed middle'. We devised an open-ended questionnaire that would allow us to cover broad themes in interviews and focus groups, including: people's experiences of community life; of divisions and tensions in the town; of politics and change; and of their hopes and thoughts for the future. Before each interview, we gave participants a chance to ask us any questions and all participants signed a consent form. As we got to know our fieldsites better, we revised the questions to make them speak to each of the town's unique challenges and concerns.

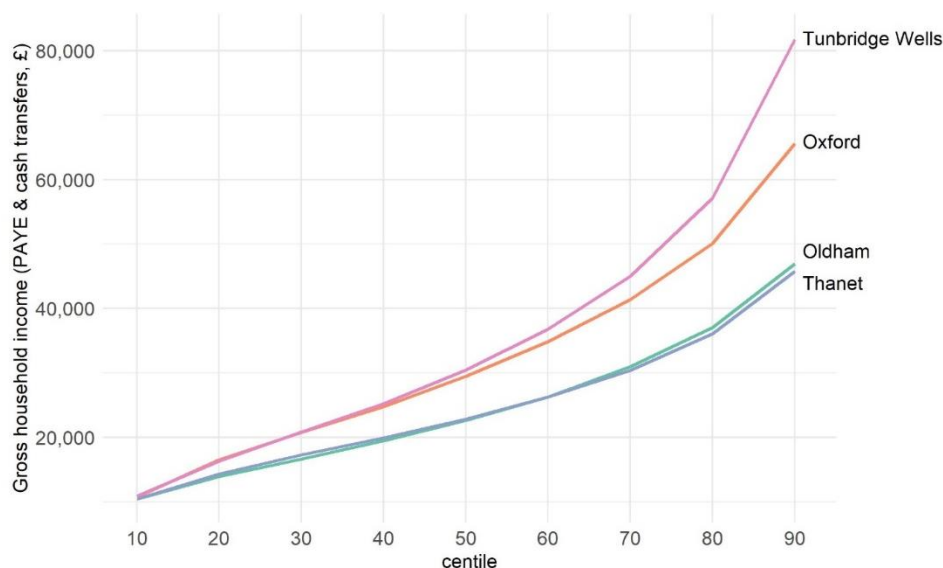
To build trust with individuals we visited and spent time in places where we would meet potential informants. Our fieldsites spanned community centres, foodbanks, local authority offices, housing associations and ranged from police stations to business conferences and people's homes, cafes and pubs. In order to ensure consistency across the research sites, we held regular meetings and, to the extent that this was possible, visited each other's fieldsites. In the later stages of the data collection, we also held workshops with the statistical team to discuss the different types of data collected. In total, we conducted 38 recorded interviews and 5 focus groups in Oxford; 39 recorded interviews and 8 focus groups in Margate; 34 interviews in Tunbridge Wells; in Oldham, 12 focus groups, and 11 recorded interviews; and countless more hours were spent collecting data by way of participant observation and informal interviews.

2. Economic and spatial aspects of polarisation

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We will show that economic and spatial polarisation takes varying forms in our four case studies and that we need to be attuned to these dynamics to properly comprehend how polarisation plays out 'on the ground'. We will lay out the statistical patterns first, before turning our attention to the ethnographic data.

Figure 1 shows a percentile plot of the estimated gross household income distribution in 2015/16, in the four local authority areas that encompass the towns in our study. The vertical axis shows gross equivalised household income from 'Pay As You Earn' income and cash benefits. The horizontal axis shows the centile of the distribution. For example, the 90th centile of the income distribution in Thanet is £46,000. This means that ten percent of households in the Thanet area have incomes of this or higher. At the other end of the distribution, the 10th centile income means that ten percent of households have this income or lower.

Figure 1: Decile plot of household income distribution, tax year ending 2016

Source: Admin-based income statistics, England and Wales: tax year ending 2016, Office for National Statistics

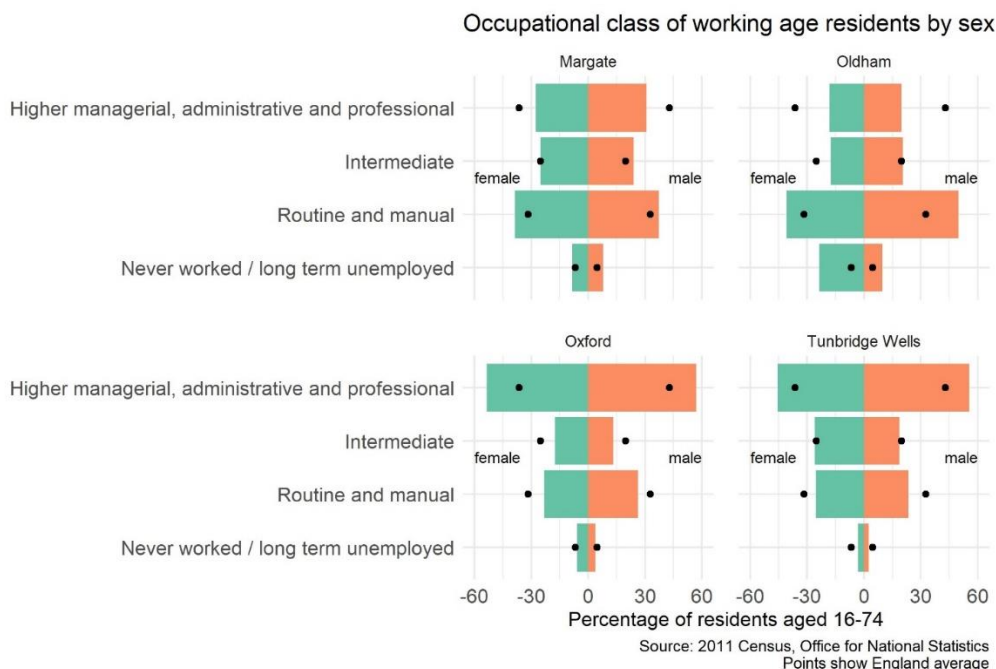
Three features of the distributions stand out. First, the income distributions in Thanet and Oldham are strikingly similar, with close similarities also between Oxford and Tunbridge Wells. Second, there is no evidence of an obvious 'bimodal' distribution with a hollowed out middle - if this were the case, there would be a distinct 'kink' in the middle of the chart. Instead, the lines are smooth showing a classic 'log normal' distribution of income, with some low incomes, many people grouped around a central value, and a minority with high incomes stretching away from others.

Third, the extent of this 'stretching away' is evident to a much greater extent in Oxford and Tunbridge Wells. The top ten percent of households in Tunbridge Wells have (equivalised) incomes of £82,000 or more, in Oxford their incomes are £66,000 or more. In Oldham and Thanet the equivalent figures are £47,000 and £46,000. Consequently, the gap between rich and poor is much greater in Oxford and Tunbridge Wells, where the 90th centile income is 6.1 and 7.5 times the 10th centile income, compared to 4.5 and 4.4 in Oldham and Thanet. On the other hand, 10th centile incomes are remarkably similar across all areas, between £10,400 and £10,900 per annum, though incomes at the 20th centile diverge significantly between the areas. This is reflected in very different estimated rates of income poverty in the urban area of the four towns: 9% in Tunbridge Wells, 11% in Oxford, 24% in Margate and 30% in Oldham (estimates from the English Indices of Deprivation 2015, compared to 15% England average).

Figure 2 shows the breakdown of the working age population in each town by class (NS-SEC). In these charts we are including people who lived in the immediate urban area of our towns, rather than the wider local authority area. Regrettably, the latest available data is from the 2011 Census, some eight years before much of our fieldwork took place; whilst

this gives an interesting comparison at that point in time, we cannot be sure how these patterns have evolved since

Figure 2: Occupational class of working age residents by sex, 2011 Census

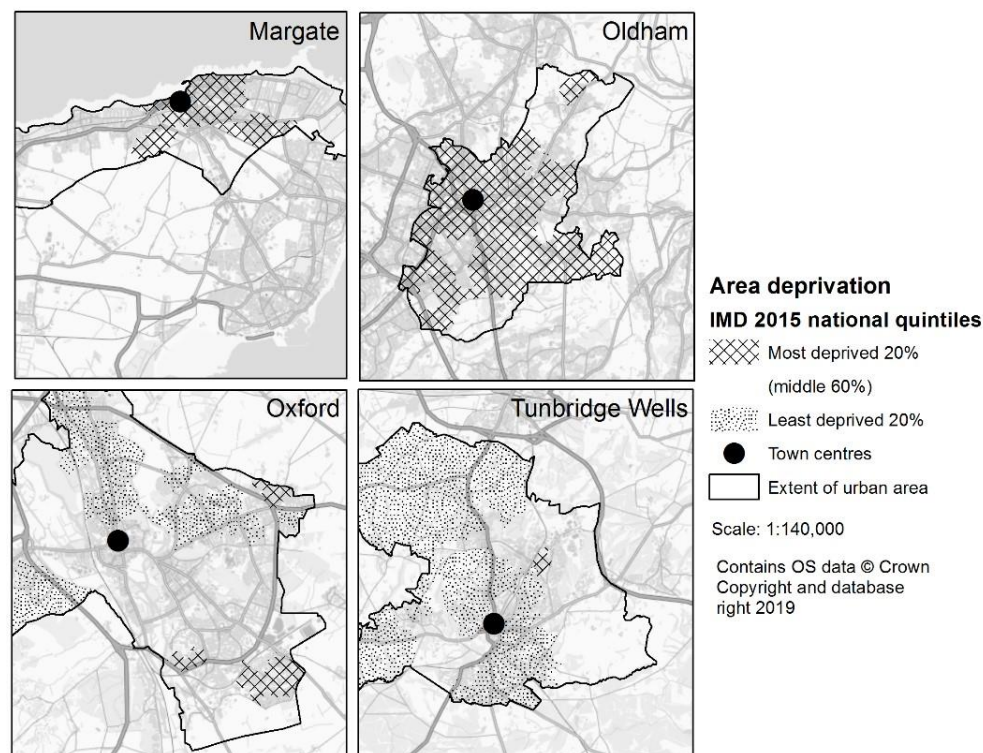


Source: 2011 Census, Office for National Statistics. Points show England average

The 2011 distribution of occupational classes for England shows something of a polarised distribution - there is a lower proportion of people in the second 'intermediate' class than there are in the first or third classes. However in Oxford and Tunbridge Wells it is the 'managerial/professional' group that stands out as being overrepresented relative to the other two. In Margate and Oldham the reverse is true - again, some evidence of the polarised distribution, but with the third 'routine/manual' class overrepresented.

The maps in figure 3 show the classification of small neighbourhoods (LSOAs – 'lower super output areas') according to the English Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) 2015. The hatched areas are those that among the most deprived 20% of areas in England; the dotted areas are among the least deprived 20%.

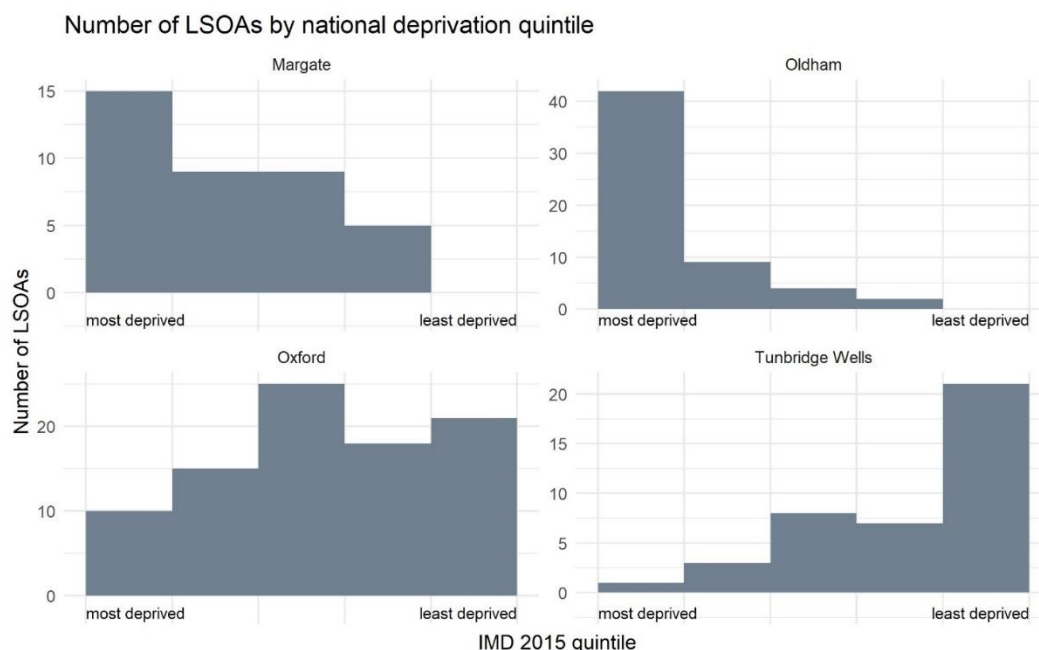
Figure 3: Index of Multiple Deprivation 2015 for 'Lower Super Output Areas'



There are very different patterns of neighbourhood deprivation in the four towns. First, the intensity of area deprivation in Margate and Oldham is much greater - each has a significant number of neighbourhoods in the 1% most deprived in England, whereas Tunbridge Wells and Oxford have none. Second, the most deprived parts of Margate and Oldham are the town centres, whereas in Tunbridge Wells and (for the most part) in Oxford, the most socially deprived areas are on the periphery, outside the town centres.

In figure 4 we show the distribution of neighbourhoods according to the IMD. Areas to the left are among the most deprived, areas to the right among the least deprived in England. Margate and Oldham have an overrepresentation of neighbourhoods that are in the 'most deprived' quintile of the IMD, and none that are in the least deprived quintile. Tunbridge Wells has one area that is in the 'most deprived' quintile but an overrepresentation of areas in the 'least deprived' quintile. In Oxford the distribution is much more even.

Figure 4: Number of 'Lower Super Output Areas' by national deprivation quintile, Index of Multiple Deprivation 2015



Source: English Indices of Deprivation 2015, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

In summary we can distinguish two different patterns of economic and spatial polarisation within our four towns. Margate and Oldham are both areas in which deprivation concentrates in the town centre, and inequality (and polarisation where it is evident) is being driven from below. By this we mean that the areas are characterised by high levels of poverty, intense social deprivation and a higher than average proportion of people in the lowest 'routine/manual' occupational class, with little evidence of very high incomes at the top end and a missing population of people in the 'managerial/professional' class.

Oxford and Tunbridge Wells exhibit the opposite pattern, where inequality is driven from above and people experiencing social deprivation are pushed to the periphery. Rates of income poverty in both towns are below the national average, but incomes at the top of the distribution are very high (even excluding self-employment and investment income). Again, there is some evidence of polarisation in terms of occupational class, particularly in Oxford, but again this is driven at the top of the distribution where there is an overrepresentation of people in the highest status 'managerial / professional' class.

However, all the towns have diverse populations – and we need to recognise this mingling as a central feature of local social dynamics. It follows that we need to return to an older 'community studies' paradigm that different groups co-mingle, interact, and engage in local social relationships, and that these relations can be crucial for understanding community relations within towns.

3. Relational aspects of polarisation

Devaluation and a localized sense of belonging

Having set out our account of economic and spatial polarisation, we turn to consider ethnographically the quotidian activities in the four towns. Different kinds of people living in the same towns, residing in various neighbourhoods that compose them, do not come with equal value. Tyler (2013), discusses the ways in which marginalized groups are 'laid to waste' (Bauman 2004) and how this process works through the production of 'labor precariousness', which produces 'material deprivation, family hardship, temporal uncertainty and personal anxiety' (ibid.: 24–5); 'the relegation of people to decomposing neighborhoods 'in which public and private resources are dwindling; and heightened stigmatization 'in daily life as well as in public discourse' (ibid.: 24–5)'. Skeggs (2004) similarly reminds us that these processes are never just physical but involve processes of symbolic devaluation too (Glucksberg 2014). All four fieldsites provide examples of the damage that is caused to people and their communities in this process, as sometimes entire towns – in the case of Oldham and Margate – and at others, particular neighbourhoods (usually the outlying housing estates) – as in the case of Oxford and Tunbridge Wells – come to be seen as places of both abject failure and paternalistic control.

Across all our fieldsites, there was a strong sense that certain populations and the places that they inhabit did not count as 'proper' and were written out of the dominant narratives of the towns. There is a complex and riven process of claiming 'moral ownership' of towns. Typically, we found that devaluation and stigma was most strongly experienced by the towns' (by now largely post-industrial) working class populations. Accents in Oldham were thought to sound 'poor', 'working class', 'common' and 'rough' by those living in the region. People in Oldham spoke of how, when meeting outsiders, they did not want to give away where they were from, for fear of being judged. Sue, for example, a white working-class woman put it in the following words: ...If somebody says, "Where do you come from? You're like--, I just say, "Near Manchester, rather than Oldham'. Another woman called Martha, now in her thirties and living in South Manchester recounted what it was like for her growing up in Oldham:

So, when I was growing up, I would say, I would not be proud of being from Oldham and I would never like to admit that I was from Oldham. And my brother and I would pretend that we were from Manchester because we spent all our time in Manchester, all our social time.

But it is not just in Oldham where words associated with the town invoked images of being rough and common. The Margateonians were proud of, and nostalgic for, the town's past, but not its present – concerned about the crime, the homelessness, the dirt, and the litter. In both Oxford and Tunbridge Wells, residents who lived on the peripheral housing estates spoke of how their neighbourhoods were devalued, and seen to be 'held apart' from their towns more generally. In Tunbridge Wells, the large housing estates are located barely more than half an hour's walk from the wealthy town centre, yet, they feel a world apart. Jack, a white working class resident who had lived on one of the town's estates for his entire life, spoke of how people like him were constantly ridiculed for their manners and

habits, including for eating badly, going to McDonald's and so on, 'not cooking as 'proper' people would. Similar stories were recounted in Oxford, on the Blackbird Leys estate, Oxford's most notorious and largest post-war housing estate located 4 miles from the town centre. Joe, a black working class man who had grown up and lived in Blackbird Leys all his life spoke of how the estate had only ever counted in Oxford's imaginary as its poor and destitute 'other'.

Both Jack and Joe's descriptions of their respective estates – and the people who live in them – reveal an acute awareness of the larger structural inequities and long-standing historical trajectories that have created stigma. Older residents spoke of how the faltering of industry (in Oldham and Oxford) and tourism (in Margate), as well as the uneven expansion of a deregulated service sector, had failed to provide adequate replacement jobs for people who were caught in zero-hour contracts. In Tunbridge Wells, Oxford and Oldham, older people also lamented the fact that variously, their children and grandchildren will never be able to afford to live near them because of affordability, a lack of social housing, and the dire need of 'good' jobs. Younger people expressed a sense of hopelessness with regards to their own futures, a sense that the towns that they had been born into and grown up in did not offer them the opportunities that they needed to get on in life. They spoke of being 'stuck' and 'trapped' in their towns or conversely unable to live there even if they may want to. This was perhaps most strongly expressed in Oxford, where the visibility of wealth, a world-ranking University and the promises of a knowledge-driven economy were plainly unachievable to them. Across all four fieldsites, the shift to austerity politics since 2010 has added further pressure. Both Oldham and Oxford were chosen as part of the government's early pilot schemes for the roll-out of Universal Credit, acting as testing grounds for the remainder of the country (Koch, no date). Residents and local authority officials in all four towns blamed Universal Credit for rising levels of food poverty, rent arrears, evictions and mental health problems.

And yet, stories of being devalued are only half of the picture. Pathologizing portrayals of marginalized people as subjects of 'lack' could also be turned on their head. Across all four sites, residents also expressed a sense of pride associated with working-class histories and which continued to live on in the memories of particularly older residents. These stories of an industrial past, offered an alternative source of value, a way of rewriting people's relationships to – and claiming a sense of ownership over – the towns they lived in. In Oldham, this tended to be expressed by white residents who are more central to 'official' 'industrial' narratives, from which South Asian workers have for the most part been historically excluded. Amy, a white Oldham resident hints at the trauma of industrial decline in the town, 'Well yeah, most of my family worked in the mill, and I suppose that's nostalgia really, when the cotton industry died I think Oldham died.' In Margate, despite a frequently repeated narrative of a town that had suffered economic and social decline, nostalgia for the bustle and vibrancy of working class tourism served to anchor contemporary community identity. Over a lunchtime pint, retirees Trevor and Bill explained: 'it was a really thriving area, every one of these places down here, all the hotels and they were full, till the end of September they were full, this pub on a Friday evening, this time of the year you would be standing in line, little bit piano over there, everybody would be singing.' Finally, in Tunbridge Wells and in Oxford, neither of which are commonly remembered in dominant societal imaginations for their industrial past, people told tales of the place as one of industry, of

clay pits and of brickworks, and of timber merchants and light industrial units (Tunbridge Wells), as well as memories of the ‘Cowley works’ when estate residents used to work in the factories (Oxford).

In addition to stories of an industrial past, people expressed more mundane forms of belonging to the places in which they lived. Informal networks of redistribution have been at the forefront of both the ‘classical’ community studies (Young and Willmott, 1957) and more recent anthropological (Edwards, 2000; Degnen, 2005; Mollona, 2009; Tyler, 2012; Glucksberg, 2014; Koch, 2018) and sociological (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012; Mckenzie, 2015) work of the working classes. Likewise, across our fieldsites, people spoke of how much they liked living in their communities and that they would not want to be anywhere else. There was much talk of mutual interdependence, of helping each other through the difficulties of everyday life, drawing on the intense familiarity and networks of informal mutual aid that come from having lived in a place for a long time. In other words, what mattered was the density of social capital that bound people together. In Oldham, South Asian women in the CHAI project group, though suffering both casual and more serious racism often on a daily basis, still felt Oldham to be their home. Sama expressed this in terms of the everyday ‘...the best thing about Oldham is the close-knit community’. Similarly, for all the complaining about Margate, the townsfolk – across all constituencies – loved the sea, the sunsets, the parks, and the diversity of the area. They were happy to live there and did not intend to leave. It was their home of choice rather than of necessity: a place that evoked strong affection and attachment.

In Oxford, residents contrasted what it was like living on the Blackbird Leys estate to other neighbourhoods in town that they considered to be ‘snobbish’: as Jess, a young mother of two said, when the council had offered her a house that required her to move off the estate into a more middle class neighbourhood, she had cried for days: she feared that nobody on her street would talk to her, that ‘it wouldn’t have the same friendly feel’. Other residents spoke with fondness of the close-knit relations between the white and established African-Caribbean communities on the estate. Residents expressed a sense of local belonging by taking researchers on walkabouts: Insa’s research assistant Sasha, herself a long-standing resident and community activist on the Blackbird Leys estate, was taken on a walking tour by Steve, a resident and the cleaner of the local community centre. Steve had eleven siblings, most of whom still lived nearby. During the walking tour, he went to look for a stolen bike belonging to a friend by calling on neighbours, friends and various family members. In so doing, he was also consciously communicating to Sasha a particular image of his ‘estate’ as a community that took pride in ‘taking care of its own’ through self-policing. In Tunbridge Wells, Jack who was introduced above, similarly walked Luna down the streets where he spent his childhood, showed her the windows of the flat he lived in when he was child and then pointed out where his family was, nearby, in a tightly knit web: ‘My aunty used to live there; my mum used to shop there, and play bingo there’.

Divisions and differences

If people in the neighbourhoods narrated a sense of belonging and ‘connectedness’, this should not romanticise working class communities or assume a unitary view of all four towns: evidence of division and tension was stark, and expressed in different ways across our fieldsites. In both Oxford and Tunbridge Wells, working class residents tended to

narrate such antagonism towards the town's wealthier or well to do people, including the landed elites who had long formed part of the towns' business and political establishments, the comfortable middle classes and the commuters from London. Residents expressed frustrations about particular urban planning projects or regeneration initiatives that were experienced as unilaterally benefiting the rich and typically also 'outsiders', including commuters who had moved down from London. In Tunbridge Wells, this was exemplified by a £77m development project for a new theatre intended to 'bring the West End to Tunbridge Wells'. On the estates, residents expressed frustration and anger about such investments: 'This town is not for local people, it is only for the rich', Jack had told Luna. 'There's nothing in this town for the people of Sherwood' [name of the estate he is from]".

Similarly, in Oxford, various regeneration and property development projects were commonly perceived to benefit only the wealthier parts of the population. At the time of fieldwork, a development project that had attracted much discussion concerned the recently opened Westgate shopping centre, a multi-million-pound covered shopping mall in the centre of the city which housed a range of mostly high-end high street brands and expensive restaurants on the roof terrace. According to the developer of the site – Landsec – the shopping centre is worth £400m from residents alone, and rises to £700m when tourists and commuters are included. But for many town residents, the prices were simply beyond their means. For them, the local council's approval of the shopping centre was proof of a tight imbrication of the business elites with the local Labour-run council. Both were constructed as a common enemy that failed to look after local people and their needs by promoting investment opportunities that were designed to 'smarten up' the town for wealthy tourists and elites. Sue, a white working class resident and former housing activist who had now gone 'under the radar' for fear of having her universal credit benefit payments stopped if caught, explained the Westgate development in the following terms:

The council make a lot of money out of property developers and that's why they pushed through the Westgate Centre against every--, all the consultation, against everybody that was asked, they relocated vulnerable adults from their sheltered housing in order to build a fricking shopping centre that is absolutely going to bankrupt the rest of Oxford city centre. All the other shops in Oxford city centre that can't afford to be in the Westgate Centre are losing business hand over fist, the Covered Market [an old market area in Oxford city centre] is a ghost town, but the council, Labour city council, will do that because they're--, they have a very neoliberal attitude towards planning decisions.

Estate residents mentioned that they do not ever go to the shopping centre – not only because they cannot afford it but as an act of resistance: to reject what was not in their views built for local people of the town. But it was not just the shopping empires in the city centre, that working class residents avoided. 'It's always been an us and them', is how Joe who had grown up on the Blackbird Leys estate explained to Insa. 'Growing up, you wouldn't go beyond the bridge [demarcating the boundary of the estate] because it was clear that this was a different world'. Many estate residents rarely went into the city centre other than for work or other necessities, even if their estate was only located a few miles away. Certain neighbourhoods in town – including Summertown, located in the north – that

predominantly house the University establishment could be almost ‘taboo’ areas to venture into, with people saying that they would have no reason to go.

To say that in Tunbridge Wells and Oxford divisions were articulated along the lines of local residents versus the council and business elites is not to say that intra-class tensions did not exist, especially with respect to ethnic and racial communities. In Oxford, for example, particularly the older working class populations sometimes spoke of how migrant workers, in particular Eastern Europeans, were given preferential treatment. Long queues at the pharmacy, extended waiting periods for doctors’ appointments, and insufficient housing could be blamed on ‘foreigners’. However, there were also many people who called these out for being ‘racist’. Moreover, on the estates, ties between the local Caribbean and white working class communities were strong and during the period of fieldwork in 2017 and 2018, several grassroots initiatives were active on the Blackbird Leys estate both in support of people affected by the ‘Windrush scandal’ and for refugees. The former council leader explained that the relative absence of racial tensions in Oxford was a positive unintended effect of its dire housing crisis: because housing was so unaffordable in the entire town, migrants tended to be ‘pepper potted’ around the city, thus preventing ‘ghettoization’ and creating the space for diverse ethnic and racial communities to meet.

By contrast, in Margate and Oldham, where such spatial segregation was more evident, residents much more frequently narrated local divisions in terms of intra-class and ethnic/racial tensions. In Margate, the local white working class population routinely expressed resentment towards the large group of predominantly ‘marginal whites’ (Garner, 2007) – which, since 2008, has largely included economic migrants from countries of Eastern Europe, predominantly Poles, Slovaks and Czechs, many of whom are Roma. White working class people routinely reported feeling threatened by this influx, being made to feel like they were the foreigners in their own town as the streets and places they called their own had been ‘taken over’ by others. Christine, for example, a white English woman in her seventies said:

I mean, there is a big influx of the immigrants and that as well, in our market, you can’t help but see them. Singly, or two or three of them together, fine, but when you see crowds of them together, you know, it does get a bit much. I’m not racist by any means at all... you know? It’s changed the whole demographics of it, it really has... I feel like an outsider.

There was, like in Oxford and Tunbridge Wells, a nuance to this overarching narrative, however, a distinction was often drawn between types of immigrant - the ‘hard working’ and the ‘non-deserving’ - a recognition that migration brought some clear advantages, but also an easy scapegoat/explanation for personal difficulty, attached to a belief that the white indigenous population had a greater entitlement to services. Some people also recognized that working class migrants were undertaking work that the local population would not do, but this was blamed on structurally low wages and unfair competition rooted in freedom of movement, not that the ‘locals’ were lazy. And there were attempts to call out racism too. One woman described how, concerned about the lack of opportunities for the local children, she contacted the council for support and then set up a community group and applied for funds to bring the communities together. This is what Charles, a white working class resident in Margate told Sarah:

I am fed up ... I just can't stand racism and there is so much racism in this area ... so much racism ... everybody blames all the migrants that are here ... yes they are here and yes they have been ghettoized ... but that's not their fault...take this road... the bottom end is the poor end, and top is the posh end .. I live in the top end, but in the bottom end there are flats with 20,10, 15, 20 flats, all bed sits in each house, and they are all refugees or Europeans that have come from a different country, etc. They get the blame for everything ... absolutely everything ... and it frustrates me ... I point out often enough that 97% of refugees and asylum seekers work and pay taxes ... 97% are not the problem ... but if you only take 3% that's what people focus on but if you take 3% of British people in the same position they are exactly the same ... the fact is that there is a higher percentage of British workers out of work than 3%.

In Oldham, the major topic of conversation was austerity and precarity but this was sometimes refracted through the lens of racism and migration. The scarcity of everyday resources and services - the relentless austerity 'attack' on mundane but important aspects of everyday life by central government engineered through the local state is evident in the conversational narratives Jill experienced in focus groups. These service cuts produced resentment amongst all sections of the working class, both white and South Asian, who feel 'others' are accessing those resources unfairly, with the Roma people who have recently settled in Oldham bearing the brunt of the current wave of racism.

The missing mediators/middle

In our statistical analysis we showed that all our four towns had 'middles' in terms of large numbers of people with incomes intermediate between high and low earners. However, although we resist the argument that any our towns can simply be characterized in statistical terms by the 'top' or 'bottom' groups, we were struck by the lack of effective engagement between varying local populations. One aspect is the extent to which different ethnic populations, especially in Margate and Oldham, generally had little to do with each other, residing in differing parts of towns and with limited intermediation between them. We see this as linked to a wider process of the lack of intermediaries who are able to navigate and able to stake out common public needs which might unite local town dwellers. This issue speaks to a wider discourse about a 'squeezed middle' which was clearly present in Oxford and Tunbridge Wells and impacted upon the capacity of a middle-income group to bridge the gaps between the top and the bottom and between different communities.

Thus, in both Oxford and Tunbridge Wells, local authority workers and professionals were concerned about the pressures experienced by, and subsequent lack of, a middle range income group of residents who sat between the wealthy elites and the local working class populations. In Tunbridge Wells, this 'squeezed' middle was articulated in both generational and economic terms, especially in middle class circles. There was a remarkable absence of people aged between 18-40 as people tended to leave the city for university education and return to settle with families later on in life. The squeezing process was also articulated in economic terms: people in middle-range incomes often could not afford to live in the town, since obviously they were not eligible for social housing, and so they lived in the surrounding villages. Their positions were clearly more comfortable than those of the working class people we encountered above. But, at the same time, they lacked the

economic means to keep up with the wealth. This is how a middle-class and self-ascribed left-leaning professional working described her experience of living in the town:

When my children were at school I understood a lot more about TW than I had ever. When my youngest was in primary school, I felt we were too posh for the school; my accent was not right at the school gate, we would occasionally go on holiday, my partner and I worked. Then she moved to secondary school, and all of a sudden we were too poor: she did not have a horse, or an iPad, and her phone was not top of the range; we were not holidaying in Europe every few months, and having a 'proper' holiday somewhere further afield in the summer. It was like being always slightly off kilter, there was never a middle ground to hold on to. Or if we were the middle ground, we were definitely in a minority.

In Oxford, similar anxieties over the lack of a middle and its shrinking role were explained to Insa. Local authority officials were acutely aware of the fact that the town was unaffordable for middle-range income people working in the public health, charity, University administration and business sectors, with 40,000 people commuting from surrounding villages and towns into the city on a daily basis. A white female professional in her mid-thirties who worked in a managerial role in a middle-sized charity and who had lived in Oxford for nearly fifteen years talked about the challenges she faced. She was renting a shared house, together with a housemate in the health care sector, and did not have the money to move out, let alone dream of being able to buy a property to live in. This could make her feel resentful: 'Sometimes it's hard' she said, 'I work so hard and then I see my neighbours who live in a council house and don't have to pay their own bills or council tax and they have a gardener come from the council – and I have to do everything on my own and pay for it myself'. Linda, a white comfortably middle-class woman in her late fifties, also expressed concerns about the 'squeezed middle'. She and her husband lived in an owner-occupied house in a nice part of town, but they were acutely aware that rising property prices meant that the same privileges no longer existed for their University-educated children:

I think there are people like us who bought our houses ages ago when it was still relatively affordable and we're sitting fat and happy and, you know, we're fine, and we'll probably just, you know, hang in there, but at the kind of the buy-in level, there's just fewer people. So, you know, little houses in Jericho [a formerly working class area but now one of the most expensive areas of the town], are just going for these amazing sums of money and it's changing things. And so, I would--, I guess, it's just my impression, that there are fewer people in Oxford in the middle and that we're becoming more kind of wealthy people and really desperate people.

The 'missing middle' further conditioned town politics in interesting ways. In Tunbridge Wells, there was a lack of progressive politics/political initiatives in what has always been a Conservative party-run constituency. In Oxford, the situation was somewhat different, it being a Labour-dominated constituency and a 'liberal' University town. Grassroots activism and initiatives flourished including a recently formed housing cooperative; a community land trust project; and the 'make space' project, a social enterprise that reclaimed under-used buildings in the city and rented them out to local groups at a non-for profit rate. These projects, often consciously presented as alternatives to a neoliberal housing market, also faced much resistance, including from private developers with large capital behind them

and a conservative rural lobby opposed to more housing. But their educational capital and social networks also meant that activists were able to tap into national political agendas and to use them for their own purpose. However, projects such as these also tended to be highly selective in their class-specific nature – doing nothing, for example, to address the crisis of social housing faced by the local working class populations (or for that matter having any close relations with them).

By contrast, in Oldham and in Margate, the story played out somewhat differently again. There, the middle was not ‘squeezed’ but rather completely absent, often by choice – although, each town has, in recent times, gone down a distinctive and different ‘culture led’ trajectory. In both towns, middle class professionals have tended to live outside of the city centre. But in Oldham, ‘the middle’ whilst mostly living in the ring around the city centre and rural areas around Saddleworth, travel to work both in the town and in the north-west region, and still participate both in more old-fashioned forms of civic culture such as choirs and amateur theatre, initiatives in the newly regenerated institutions as well as in groups campaigning around social issues from a multicultural perspective. As an ‘inland’ town, historically not a tourist destination, its aim is to create a ‘culture for all citizens’ around recently developed institutions (library, Gallery Oldham, museum, sports and leisure centre) and those in development (Arts and Heritage centre) as well as the repurposed Old Town Hall in the town centre, now an Odeon cinema with added cafes and restaurants. This, however, has not prompted a move into the town centre by the creative classes.

In Margate, regeneration initiatives also concentrate on arts-led projects but follow a different path. Over the last years, and particularly following the art-led regeneration strategy that saw the opening of the Turner gallery, there was an evident influx of the ‘creative classes’ moving down from London, attracted to the town because of its ‘edginess’, its ‘buzz’, as well as its affordability. Margate was seen to offer an ‘authentic’, London-like experience, but without the cost or the commodification associated with advanced gentrification. It was regarded as an unspoiled territory on which to play out a creative life, distinct from conventional middle-class values. The ‘new creatives’, who referred to themselves as ‘dfi’ – ‘down from London’ – imagined Margate as a place to be ‘discovered’, a sort of terra nullius, free to be shaped in accordance with their artistic endeavours. Damian, an artist from London, who had moved to Margate in recent years, explained what attracted him to the town:

I now adore Margate and I sort of fell in love with it when I got off the train really... being on the beach was good ... the feeling of space and emptiness was really nice ... felt really exciting ... and I sort of like derelict things and so it was very atmospheric ... so it was a good mix between desolation and friendship I suppose ... it's multicultural and its contemporary... like I walked down there the other day and there were...clearly families of all different ethnic backgrounds ... and then there were girlfriends holding hands ... there were camp gay guys chatting with their friends ... there were straight couples ... there were lads out ... you know there were people there with their kids ... and it was like ... this feels like the modern world ... feels like Modern Britain...

In Margate, the appropriation of the areas for creative endeavours occurs in numerous ways: not only are the hipster spaces exclusive, but the other shops and cafes can be

confidently inhabited by the new residents – who enjoy ‘an occasional fry up’. The ‘new’ middle in Margate (similar to the ‘squeezed’ middle in Oxford) is not breaking down divisions with the existing local working class population but reinforcing them, and it is doing so by actively shaping local power imbalances. Thus, the journeying in, and consumption of, ‘other lives’ is one way only; the trendy cafes with their high prices and organic foods have a discrete clientele. Interestingly, however, the local working class population in Margate does not seem to resent the presence of the ‘new creatives’ in town. In marked contrast to the resentment that was articulated by Oxford and Tunbridge Wells working class residents towards the wealthier strata of their towns, there was a sense that these ‘creatives’ were welcome, certainly more so than the Eastern European migrants who had recently arrived. A white second hand shop keeper put it in the following words:

Oh yes I mean ... they are a better class of people....They are a mixture of people moving down from London they are buying up big houses in these roads ... they've sold up in London and buying property here ... we've noticed lots of designers and artists, very creative people and they like the quirky, unusual things... ones that are what I call serious buyers ... that might just come in and buy a kitchen cupboard, they are London people... we sell a lot for beach huts ... and people that are doing AirBnB.

One reason for the relative absence of a critical discourse towards the ‘creatives’ might be that the arrival of these classes has not (yet) driven up property prices and started displacing local people in the way that it has done in Oxford and Tunbridge Wells. In other words, the absence of a ‘direct’ threat that is represented by the arrival of these creative classes means that their presence can be re-interpreted through a lens of ‘smartening’ the area, which appeals to the local white working class population, particularly against the backdrop of the widespread resentment they feel towards Eastern European migrants who are frequently perceived to be dragging down the ‘tone’ of the place. It is hence possible that in the future, as more and more ‘creatives’ arrive in Margate, and accelerated gentrification of the neighbourhoods starts driving up housing prices, local discourses around who is welcome and who is not might well become more explicitly focused upon the wealthier ‘elites’. Whether or not this might create new avenues of solidarity – a shared consciousness as it were – between the English white and immigrant populations remains to be seen.

Conclusion: understanding the local dynamics of polarisation.

Our statistical analysis distinguished two dynamics – one of inequality driven from the top and one of inequality from the bottom; linked to social deprivation concentrating in the town centre versus one of social deprivation being pushed to the periphery. Our ethnography both differs from and speaks in important ways to the statistical picture. On the one hand, economic and spatial polarisation do not always fit the narratives of stigma, of belonging and of a missing ‘middle’ that we encountered in each fieldsite. In each of the towns, we found that local working-class populations experience a strong sense of stigma, but that they, in turn, also narrate feelings of belonging and identity to their towns that are often grounded in very localized relationships of conviviality and care. Moreover, the perhaps most arresting finding that comes out of the ethnographic data is the absence of a strong middle – of a middle-range, middle income group of people – and the ways in which this

'gap' both forecloses but also opens possibilities for particular groups and individuals to fill the space and to shape local politics in particular ways.

But there are also important differences between our case studies, and here it is vital to link our ethnography to the broader picture of economic and spatial polarisation and to pay closer attention to how one informs the other. First, a key difference in our ethnographic data relates to the more nuanced ways in which people narrative division and tensions in their own towns and what claims of 'moral ownership' are attached to it. In both Oxford and Tunbridge Wells, working class residents feel alienated, and that their towns – in particular the town centres – do not cater for the likes of them. This is linked to antagonism articulated towards the towns' establishments, including the business and academic elites, those with landed wealth, and the commuters who travel to London for well-paid professional jobs. Such divisions come to the fore in the towns' respective investments into cultural and development projects that the local populations perceive as being of no benefit to themselves. By contrast, in Oldham and Margate, residents do not relinquish moral ownership of their towns in the same way. In Margate, particularly white working class British residents are more likely to consider the town's centres as rightfully theirs but they also sometimes complain that immigrants or 'foreign' others have taken over as the preferential beneficiaries of welfare.

The differences between Oxford and Tunbridge Wells which have experienced polarisation from above (with social deprivation concentrated in the peripheral neighbourhoods), versus Oldham and Margate where inequality is driven from below (and deprivation in the town centres) has created different structures of visibility and 'feels' about the towns. In Oxford and Tunbridge Wells, wealth is highly visible in the form of property developments, cultural investments and, in Oxford, the University located some distance away from where local working class populations live. Different forms of regeneration in each, whilst welcome, mask the economic and spatial alienation that residents on outlying estates might experience towards a town centre which they may not even be able to afford to visit, thus experiencing an inability to assume moral ownership over the town as a whole. At the same time, a lack of moral ownership can generate unexpected forms of (inter-ethnic) solidarity, such as in Oxford where de facto policies of 'pepper potting' immigrants around the city, and long-standing co-habitation of white and black people on peripheral housing estates have also produced a shared sense of 'us' and 'them'. In comparison, despite considerable investment in regeneration projects, significant wealth is not visible in much of Oldham and Margate. In these places, a reverse pattern of economic and spatial polarisation – including white working class residents' proximity to the towns' centre and greater segregation by ethnic group – might well explain their desire for moral ownership in the face of a racialised narrative of loss and abandonment.

Statistical data on polarisation also elaborates our ethnographic observations with respect to the 'squeezed' or 'missing' middle. Perhaps our most arresting ethnographic finding pertains to the relative weakness of a middle group of people who can 'mediate' the gap between opposite ends of the economic spectrum. This 'missing middle', in turn, is conditioned by broader processes of polarisation. In both Oxford and Tunbridge Wells, polarisation from the top has created a situation whereby those on a middle-range salary are effectively 'squeezed out': both unable to get on social housing register lists and to buy

into the local housing market, these people experience a precarity – and an anxiety that comes with it – that is specific to their particular class position. Meanwhile, in Oldham and Margate, polarisation from the bottom has meant that the same problems of unaffordability do not arise. Here, middle income people often choose to live outside of town out of their own volition, partly because, as we have seen, the town centres are very deprived. While in Oldham, this has reinforced the solid working class make-up and reputation of the town, Margate has recently seen an influx of the ‘creative classes’ from London who are escaping high property prices in London and feel attracted to Margate for its ‘edginess’.

The ‘missing’ or ‘squeezed’ middle conditions town politics in different ways. Historically, the ‘middle’ was associated with strong civic political and institutional mechanisms that have not only captured the interests of a broad middle-class but also spoken on behalf of those less privileged than themselves. Mediating institutions like trade union movements or local Labour parties represented the interests of workers, town residents and their bases. These mediating institutions have been weakened over the last decades, with the onset of neoliberal policies in the 1980s, the attack of labour movements and the dismantling of Labour’s traditional left position. Today, our ethnographies reveal the feelings of anxiety and precarity among those in the ‘squeezed’ feel, in both Oxford and Tunbridge Wells as they are no longer able to enjoy the comforts enjoyed by the baby-boomers. They also furnish an insight into the fraught and often rather highly selective projects that this lack of a stable middle gives rise to in each of our towns. In Oxford, middle-class activists and campaigners mobilise their cultural and educational capital to put forward agendas for addressing the local housing crisis that are often highly selective. Similarly, in Margate, the recent arrival of a new class of creatives has begun to fill the gap of a middle-income strata. Yet again, this group only acknowledges the town’s working class populations to the extent that they can aestheticise difference and poverty as a form of creative ‘edginess’.

This is not to deny, of course, the efforts put in place to try to retain a middle and to form solidarity movements, often against the grain of austerity and housing pressures. We found this to be particularly the case with respect to initiatives that attempt to bridge ethnic and racial tensions between different communities in their towns. In Oldham, for instance, the attempts to shore up a middle include initiatives by the local Labour group and the Interfaith Forum, which bridge various religions and a myriad of civil society organisations, which attempt to keep ‘the centre’ together in a spirit of solidarity. It is precisely these groups that are vital in bringing together communities who may otherwise be marked by mutual suspicion or a lack of understanding, reinforced in the case of Oldham or Margate by long-standing patterns of spatial segregation of different ethnic and racial groups. In Oxford, which does not suffer from ethnic and racial segregation to the same extent, several more grassroots initiatives are active, including around those affected by the ‘Windrush scandal’ as well as support for refugees. However, these organisations and initiatives, faced with funding pressures and austerity climate, can also struggle to build a sustainable platform for action, let alone expand into broader movements.

How then can inequality and polarisation be re-politicised? In the context of a weak or squeezed middle, what does it take to start thinking about alternatives for mobilising collective energies across different communities that can redress growing polarisation? We can tentatively point to several ideas that can be taken from our mixed-method analysis that

may provide a starting point for such a debate. One is to reverse processes of economic and spatial polarisation through economic, housing and social policies that will begin to close the gap between ‘the bottom’ and the ‘top’. Second, we need to be mindful of how patterns of spatial polarisation feed into forms of moral ownership and dispossession that have the potential both to bring together but also to divide populations in towns. Third, local mediating institutions need to be strengthened that can link the educational and social capital still enjoyed by those in the middle with the material concerns and forms of grassroots solidarity among the most hard-pressed social groups in Britain today.

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ⁱⁱ These are experimental ONS statistics, the only current data on the income distribution in these areas. ONS requests reproduction of its disclaimer: "The admin-based income statistics (ABIS) bring together data from the Pay As You Earn (PAYE) and benefit systems to derive estimates of net and gross income. The ABIS are defined as experimental, because both the income measure and coverage are currently incomplete; therefore, these statistics have limited use for decision-making. Instead, the ABIS demonstrate the potential to produce small area income statistics from administrative data and allow some interim evaluation to be made (taking their partial coverage into account)."