Inequality

Communities, places and inequality: a reflection for the IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities

Ash Amin

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Introduction

This article reflects on the connections between community and inequality, prompted by evidence gathered for the IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities, which reveals the persistence of severe and multidimensional inequality in the UK in the 21st century. The evidence exposes marked disparities of wealth and income, health and well-being, education and attainment, and political participation, differentiated by class, gender, age, race and region. The Review may conclude that in the modern and prosperous UK, working-class men and women, some racialised minorities, the young, and places beyond the South-East have fallen behind, while the better-educated, wealthier and connected classes in the Home Counties and prosperous cities have pulled away. Its commissioned research is revealing that, in the course of time, swathes of people and places have become trapped in poverty and disadvantage, confronting multiple deprivations, inopportunity, and inadequate welfare protections. A portrait is emerging of an unequal and divided UK, the patterns mirrored in the demography and geography of response to Brexit, with 'left-behind' people and places expecting a better outcome from a post-austerity and post-EU political economy. Amid the many questions of cause and response raised, one that is raised by the fine-grained evidence showing different groups of people and places faring better or worse against various measures of inequality concerns how far group characteristics and dynamics shape well-being outcomes as sources of vulnerability or resilience. Are community and inequality connected, for example, in the form of particular types of social ties or spatial affordances that are enabling or disabling? And, if so, what kind of community-based interventions might help to build social capability and resilience and with what degree of success in tackling embedded inequality and persistent disadvantage?

Government thinking in the UK in recent decades has certainly drifted towards recognising the role of communities, sometimes ahead of clarity on their meaning, virtues and limits in addressing inequality. If, towards the end of the last century, a corrective based on income redistribution, universal welfare and state planning gave way to one placing emphasis on individual initiative and market mechanisms, this century has seen growing government interest in the middle ground between state and market to tackle inequality. Recognition of civil society has been evident in New Labour's Third Way, which included initiatives in 'depressed' areas to enhance local partnerships, civic capability and community cohesion (after the 2001 race riots in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham; see Home Office, 2001); in the Cameron government's allusions to 'Big Society' civic obligations and responsibilities, soon swept away by austerity cuts after the 2008 financial crisis (Power, 2012); and in the promises of the May and Johnson administrations to tackle the neglect of left-behind people and places exposed by Brexit, through levelling up measures including community empowerment initiatives (Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022). Preceding such government interest, there exists a long tradition of civic and local advocacy for communities favouring targeted social policies, bottom-up initiatives and community involvement while also expecting wider public policy measures to tackle multiple forms of deprivation and inequality. Community activists and civic organisations have leant towards multi-scalar, composite, pluri-actor and participatory approaches to bolster the left-behind. In contrast, government interest in communities has tended to see the options as a trade-off, sometimes as reason to move away from the legacy of distributive justice and universal entitlements towards an approach based on assessing merit and building capabilities, and sometimes as reason to blame the falling-behind for their situation or conversely to recognise the specificity of their needs. Here, while communities have come

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to the fore as prime actors in the politics of spatial equity and social cohesion, they have done so either as casualties of inequality in need of support or as sources of their own misfortunes in need of behavioural amendment.

Community and social ties

Such ambiguities are compounded by definitional imprecisions, depending on whether communities are understood as collectives of common fate, shared identity or elective choice. The social categories of disadvantage identified for the IFS Deaton Review (e.g. youths, women, minorities and the white working class faring badly in work, education or welfare) hardly exist as communities in the stronger sense of displaying shared identities and affinities. They are broad and dispersed social collectives facing similar fates and not communities whose group pathologies are somehow involved in the experience or mitigation of inequality. Their predicaments are less likely to be resolved by attempts to reinforce them as communities of minorities, women, workers or youths, than by general economic, health, education, labour market and fiscal policies attuned to differences of class, gender, race and generation. Following the distinction that Ferdinand Tönnies made in the late 19th century between *gemeinschaft* (local communal society) and *gesellschaft* (impersonal associational society), these subjects would benefit from *gesellschaft* public policies of the Treasury, Department for Work and Pensions or the Home Office, as well as the educational and health systems targeted towards the disadvantages faced by distinctive collectives of common fate.

In the stronger sense, communities are groups of people sharing affinities of interest, kinship, place, culture or religion, whose group characteristics and propensities affect individual and collective well-being. This is claimed by the literature on social capital, civic participation and communitarianism, which identifies certain group dispositions as sources of trust and mutuality, resourcefulness and creativity, and economic and social support. The nature and strength of community bonds are considered to shape mental and physical states, responses to adversity or opportunity, and preparedness for the future, with open and plural ties considered to be more conducive than closed and homogeneous ties. The influential work by Granovetter (1973) on the contact networks of American job-seekers, for example, observes differences of outcome between networks of strong and weak ties. It finds that workers with diverse and looser contact networks are more successful in looking for work than those with fewer but stronger contacts that offer the comfort of personal familiarity but limited job opportunities. Similarly, in his work on trust, Putnam (2000) concludes that close-knit and inward-looking communities in the US possess the bonding capital that keeps them intact and mutually supportive in hardship and adversity, but lack the bridging capital possessed by outward-looking communities that provides them with the means to seek out opportunities, cultivate relationships, and realise their ambitions. This is how Putnam might explain why the educated middle classes immersed in many social networks are more successful in their endeavours than people locked within their own communities. In contrast, research on religious and ideological or diasporic communities, which are largely non-territorial in nature, but embedded in local congregations, suggests that although such communities may display an inwardness of shared faith, belief or cultural identity, as large organised groupings they are also able to offer opportunities for personal advancement (Furbey et al., 2006). For example, members can sometimes access dedicated education, finance, care and shelter (common in Jewish or Islamic networks) as well as the help of better-off peers offering advice, work or mentorship. In these communities of shared belief or origin, when structured as societies, the securities of belonging are bolstered by tangible provisions of care, raising interesting questions about the form and significance of *gemeinschaft* provisions oriented for *gesellschaft* needs.

At the edge of strong meanings of community relating to internal dynamics, there lies a body of work valuing civic participation. Putnam (1993), and also Fukuyama (1996), drawing on Alexis de Tocqueville's early 19th century observations on the nature of democracy in the new America, have examined the outcomes of people becoming involved in social, cultural and political associations. They argue that, historically, people in places nested in clubs, associations, volunteer organisations, public service, and other areas of civic engagement, have come away with broadened outlooks, strengthened capabilities and enlarged social worlds; all three serve to enhance well-being and future prospects. Finding ways to encourage and bolster civic participation emerges as an important way of connecting bonding and

bridging capital, with clear implications for contemporary efforts to address inequality, directed towards building associational opportunities and participation in left-behind places. Similarly, work on elective communities finds that experiments of collaborative endeavour and shared living enable learning, provide gainful activity and facilitate empowerment through collective doing (Etzioni, 1993). Here, the emphasis falls on the communitarian, suggesting forms such as cooperatives, community gardens and communes premised on co-ownership and collaboration as sources of well-being and opportunity based on the shared returns of joint endeavour. Policy thinking here veers towards local communal and participatory ventures of various kinds to help lift people and places out of hardship and disadvantage.

These strands of thought, in turning to community bonds and civic engagement, add a relational dimension to accounts of well-being that turn to opportunity structures and individual capabilities. They recommend finding ways of strengthening weak ties, bridging social capital, civic participation, communalist ventures, and faith or diasporic attachments. They offer fertile concepts and grounded examples to sustain policy interest in community cohesion as a way out of marginality and disadvantage, adding direction and detail to hitherto vague governmental invocations. Yet, in these possibilities lurk also dangers of expecting too much from 'community' in addressing inequality, as do risks of pathologising particular types of places, social behaviour and association (Amin, 2005). It can become all too easy to blame atomistic or divided places and people without community ties or with the 'wrong' kind of ties (e.g. tight, inward-looking bonds) for their predicament, when they are the casualties of inequalities in the labour market, in welfare and fiscal distributions, in gender and racial recognition, in regional resource allocations, and in market selections. These same inequalities often work to the advantage of prosperous people and places, propping up a connective capital that alone does not explain social and spatial well-being and resilience. Invocations of community in its various guises can turn into moral judgements of worth, expecting the left-behind to mimic the associative practices of the well-off, assessing how deserving they are of other forms of policy support, and forgetting that, for many people, extant community ties and obligations – however capacious – are a burden to escape from with the help of initiatives allowing them to become free agents. These critical observations suggest that community-building policies should be considered as adjuncts to other market and *gesellschaft* measures to tackle inequality and should also be explored experimentally and without binding expectations.

Community and place

It should be clear from the preceding discussion that communities are both rooted in place as well as dispersed. However, with social inequality in the UK increasingly manifesting as a territorial problem affecting entire settlements (from neighbourhoods to towns and cities) beset with enduring multiple deprivations, it is not surprising that, in policy discourse, place and community have become interchangeable terms. Interest in community-based solutions has tended to turn to ways of building, reinforcing and expanding local social ties, encouraging civic and associational participation, and improving local welfare, service and recreational provisions. Such proposals resonate with the literature cited above, but could better heed insights on the value of bridging capital, weak ties, elective and organised communities, and plural networks, mostly all of which involve trans-local geographies of affiliation. Here, the focus falls on social and spatial extensions of community that expand the radius of search, opportunity and support. They could also, in acknowledging the practical limits and moral freight of welfare improvement 'by community', consider other ways in which place – understood as a set of public goods in the broadest sense – affects material and psychological well-being. The strong overlaps between left-behind people and left-behind places merit exploration in this direction, a step taken in the Government White Paper on levelling up. In a consideration of places as communal resources, these overlaps have four connotations.

The first concerns the degree to which places function as centres of economic opportunity and welfare security, reflected in the spread of decent work, economic variety, affordable housing, functioning services and welfare protections. Over the decades, the UK has seen a steady erosion of the asset base of places located beyond the shrinking geography of growth and productivity concentrated in London and a handful of other cities. There are far too many areas with economies that are neither provisioning nor dynamic, infrastructures and services that are dysfunctional, and housing and welfare systems that

are deficient. Chapters for the IFS Deaton Review reveal the geographic scale and fine-grain of some of the economic inequalities, which, if interpreted as asset deprivations, would suggest the need for systematic upgrading of local infrastructures, services and supply environments to attract and hold investment as well as enable and empower communities. This is a challenge of ensuring not only that local asset upgrading programmes are coherent, integrated and sustainable, but also that they are not undermined by public policy decisions reinforcing the spatial concentration of investment, skills and capability in asset-rich regions (e.g. via lax planning controls or fiscal and locational incentives). Questions inevitably arise as to how many asset agglomerations an economy can tolerate and what kind of local build-up is most productive, but to make the case for asset slack, redundancy and variety is to propose social robustness and spatial preparedness in the face of economic uncertainty and change (Martin et al., 2016).

A second connotation of considering place as public goods relates to the impact of the built and natural environment on well-being. This aspect has become all too clear during the COVID-19 pandemic, evidenced by the positive effects on mental and physical health of green and open spaces, breathable air, dampened traffic, vibrant street-life, safe transport infrastructures, and living spaces conducive to well-being. Conversely, it is known that the stresses and mental health of people living in cramped and insalubrious housing in neighbourhoods and cities that offer few green and quiet spaces, and do not have a general atmosphere of calm, pleasantness and sociability, have been made that much worse by these conditions during the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has amply confirmed research in architecture, psychology, and environmental and urban studies that reveals the reciprocities of habitat, body and mind that are involved in shaping subjectivity and well-being (Rose and Fitzgerald, 2022). It shows that the aesthetics of place affect the physical and mental health of residents as well as their sense of belonging and ability to face the future. This suggests important possibilities for 'levelling up', based on attending to the details of housing quality, the home environment, the circulations of air, light and sound, and the design of infrastructures, services and public spaces. In such interventions, considerable economic opportunities also arise for people and providers who are involved in making and maintaining the local habitable environment.

Thirdly, in an expanded understanding of 'community', we can think of places as a social commons. In urban research, there is growing evidence that in places that are marked by high levels of civic and joint initiative, and where people are at ease with difference and diversity, the communities make better use of their social power than in places where social isolation, cultural indifference and spatial disregard prevail.[2] For example, many multi-ethnic neighbourhoods – poor and well-off – have become places of convivial coexistence, plural mobilisation and shared sense of place (Back and Sinha, 2018; Rogaly, 2020). They are not cohesive communities, but spaces of juxtaposed variety and also common place attachments that bring diverse interests together from time to time. While the latter is never guaranteed, its possibility illustrates the fine line between community bonding and place bonding, which in left-behind areas in the UK could be reinforced by encouraging 'commoning' experiments such as cooperatives and social enterprises offering work and fulfilment through collective effort and joint ownership, or social infrastructures offering meaningful forms of encounter and collaborative effort (e.g. sports, leisure and training programmes; Klinenberg, 2018).

Finally, thinking of places as a social commons raises important questions about institutional authority and power, premised on the assumption that distributed and collaborative forms of governance offer benefits of pluralised authority, institutional slack and collective intelligence, including that at grass-roots level. So far, the government approach to levelling up has been top-down, imagining a conduit of power radiating outwards from Whitehall, new government offices in the regions, revived Regional Development Agencies, powerful city mayors and corporate champions. While this approach to area regeneration offers the promise of might and resource, and the spectacle of urgency, it shows little interest in an expanded local institutional base mobilised for the common good through basal interactions. If it assumes the shires and most prosperous cities to be well served by plural institutions and civic energy, it seems not to think of left-behind places in the same way, as potential coalitions of

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[2] See writing on 'urban buzz', multicultural cities, and publications of the Brookings Institute on the cultural dimensions of vibrant cities.

responsibility harnessed from existing sites of public knowledge and governance, including elected local authorities, community and third-sector partnerships, civic associations, and public institutions such as universities. Area regeneration could make room for urban and regional political assemblies, bringing together diverse interests and stakeholders, working with or alongside the centres of power envisaged by the White Paper on levelling up, to democratically develop plans put up for funding and local approval. This is one way in which local specificity and difference could come to the fore in regeneration thinking, which has become formulaic; at the same time, the assemblies could build local 'institutional thickness' and democratise authority (Amin and Thrift, 1995; Thompson, 2021).

Conclusion

The observations in this article on the strength of community ties and on local communal resources have a bearing on the findings of some chapters submitted to the IFS Deaton Review. In their chapter on political inequality, Beramendi, Besley and Levi (2022) argue that while disparities in political participation match those of social and economic power, they also reflect differences in social perception of the degree of inclusiveness of the democratic process. The authors link political equality to how well the rules, norms and practices of politics give equal consideration to all members of society, such that those who are better off, educated, older or professional in the UK may be more politically active because they feel connected, heard and entitled, while the young, poor, less-educated and certain minorities may be less so because they feel disregarded and excluded. While this observation leans towards changes to make the democratic process more open, honest and inclusive, it connects with arguments here on the value of bridging capital, civic participation and neighbourhood involvement. Opportunities to connect with different others, join organisations, and participate in local cooperative ventures might provide the disenfranchised with a means to engage politically.

In the chapter on wage inequalities, Overman and Xu (2022) find evidence of wage precarity across the space economy, noting that while low-income households in the most prosperous cities face higher housing and amenity costs, there are mitigations offered by an economic buoyancy that can provide wider and better job opportunities. These mitigations are found to be absent in many areas of the UK that have been locked into low-wage and precarious work for some time, without a labour market of skilled work and high-wage employment permitting graduate retention, income accumulation, and virtuous economic feedbacks. Overman and Xu propose the creation of well-paid, high-skill work in selected left-behind cities so as to replicate the labour market dynamism, economic buoyancy and agglomeration effects serving the UK's prosperous cities. While new urban growth poles may provide a way forward in reducing wage inequalities, the place dynamics noted in this article identify benefits arising from upgrading the asset and institutional base of the left-behind areas in broad terms and from encouraging cross-community ties and civic and collaborative ventures. This pathway might not yield high-skill, high-wage employment in the short term, but it would begin a process of area regeneration able to attract better-quality economic activity, retain local talent, unlock social initiative, and build institutional capacity. There is merit in thinking of area regeneration as a form of place upgrading that encourages future enterprise.

This article's observations on community and place ties are especially pertinent to the chapter on race and ethnicity.[3] The authors of this chapter note the multiple and persistent deprivations – of wealth, income, health, housing, education, type of work, and discrimination – faced by the Bangladeshi, Pakistani and black Caribbean populations of England and Wales. While they take care not to blame these sub-populations, echoing thinking on bonding social capital, they see ties of place and community reinforcing deprivations in the form of traditions discouraging Muslim wives to go out to work, patterns of family cohabitation or ethnic segregation encouraging cultural inwardness, a peer culture of low expectations among young black Caribbean men, and neighbourhood dysfunctionalities preventing social advancement.[4] In contrast, they show that the Indian and Chinese populations of England and

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[3] This chapter is currently in its draft version, and in the process of being finalised for publication (Mirza and Warwick, 2022).

[4] Perhaps the introverted ties prevent looking outwards, but it is worth considering that they provide a form of pooled defence and assurance against a host of racial and ethnic exclusions and discriminations perceived to stand in the way (ironically, this is

Wales as a whole have done well over time across most indicators of well-being, ending up above the white British average in terms of earnings, secondary and higher education, housing equity and professional attainment. This success could be interpreted as the result of virtuous connections of bridging and bonding capital as well as asset acquisition, allowing well-off Indian and Chinese individuals to expand social networks and move to places offering many amenities, thanks to their education, enterprise, equity and professional advancement, but also to draw on strong ties of faith or ethnicity. Perhaps their experience illustrates the reciprocities identified here between strong and weak ties, opportunity access, and enabled place in addressing inequality.

In drawing the distinction between place and community, an opportunity arises to look beyond the quality of interpersonal networks in socio-economic advancement. Closed communities may have something to learn from open and evolving communities and organised faith or ethnic groups that make resources available to their members, in the way of the last example cited above. But the local environments in which individuals and communities find themselves also matter, with possibilities for well-being arising in having access to a rich opportunity and connective base. In this article, this has been defined as a supply-rich environment of educational, economic and infrastructural provisions to build capabilities as a form of economic preparedness; investment in a natural and built environment for healthy and convivial living; mobilisation of social energy through civic, communal and cooperative activity; and expanding institutional pluralism, autonomy and democratic authority through new political assemblies. Tackling social and spatial disadvantage in this way, it has been argued, also opens possibilities for well-being beyond the standard model of a boosted private sector chasing productivity gains that often fail to trickle down to the poor (or a model of state handouts that fails to stimulate initiative and capability). If the article began with defending national and local interventions that directly address the paucities of housing, income, work, education, health care and security that confront poor neighbourhoods (alongside measures to strengthen communities), it ends with a 'commons' perspective on making livelihoods and meeting needs in left-behind areas. It looks beyond a regeneration model proposing mayors in 20 cities focusing on high-tech growth and agglomeration economies, to one based on economies of cooperation, shared assets and social power. It does so not in order to confine left-behind places to the social economy (or community ties) with modest offerings while the prosperous areas bask in Big Growth and government expenditure, but as one among many options that local assemblies can consider in evaluating the relevance of the standard models of area regeneration.

In turning to place, finally, the argument has not been for any substitution of central interventions that directly improve the well-being and resilience of the left-behind – wherever located – through fairer distributions of income, work, education, health care, housing and legal access. The choice between investing in individuals, communities or places is not a trade-off, but about finding better precision in a political economy committed to economic and social justice, attentive to the distortions of unregulated markets, concentrated wealth and distributional inequity. Support for the people and places left behind makes no sense without dues from the wealthy who benefit from entitled privileges, market reforms that minimise exploitation, insecurity and precarity, changes to the rules of ownership and authority that work only for the few, and regard to the balances of fiscal and budgetary distributions that punish those most in need. In venturing such suggestions, my intention is to simply suggest that social and spatial empowerment efforts should not be undermined by inequalities generated by the ways of markets, public expenditure, fiscal decisions, property ownership, and a lot more. It would be perverse to think that under the settled rules of political economy, the UK can go forward through levelling-up interventions or, for that matter, initiatives to reduce the class, gender and ethnic inequalities of wealth, well-being and participation identified by the IFS Deaton Review.

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also the case for white working-class men and women who are resentful of being left behind in a modern UK, and further disadvantaged by weaker ties of bonding capital in their places of isolated living).

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