

Example essay from a university student on the topic on inequalities

How far do you agree that attempts to explain the growth in social and spatial inequalities in contemporary Britain must look to the economy rather than to policy?

In real terms, standards of living in the UK have risen by an average of 1.3% per year over the past 30 years, and absolute poverty has fallen. However, over the same period inequality has risen according to the most commonly used measure, the Gini coefficient, which is at its highest since the 1940s (Brewer *et al* 2007). This means that despite the overall increase in economic growth, households suffering from deprivation have not been lifted out of poverty, resulting in a maintained low quality of life for some sectors of society. Someone's level of wealth relative to others is arguably equally important as their absolute wealth, as the former impacts upon their self confidence and social participation. Relative poverty in the UK has risen consistently since the Conservative government took over in 1979. This is largely because incomes of the richest 5th of society have risen rapidly (around 1.5% per year) compared to the poorest 5th whose incomes have fallen. The reasons for this are many and varied, with poverty being a difficult concept to define and explanations for trends multi-dimensional and complex. In this essay, I will begin by attempting to define poverty since it can be used as an effective proxy for inequality in general. Next I will identify three scales which have been used for explaining the trends and distribution of poverty, in relation to economics or policy-making. Finally, I will conclude by suggesting that the structure of our economy ultimately drives inequality, but distributions of wealth can be drastically changed by policy.

When talking about poverty, one needs to define the level of deprivation being used for discussion, since people have very different ideas about what may constitute being poor. Firstly, people have come up with absolute measures of poverty, which lay out certain guidelines required for a person to live. An example of this would be calorific intake required per day. However, absolute measures have been criticised as being too simplistic for the varied needs of today's society. After all, there are basic geographical variations in needs, for example the level of shelter required to keep someone safe and comfortable would depend upon the climate, their access to clothes and so on. Furthermore, does a basic survivable existence constitute a sufficient human life? Surely people also have the right to a level of education which is expected by the society in which they live so as to partake in social activities? So this has generated a relative definition of poverty, whereby we could define someone as poor as 'lack of resources... to have the living conditions and amenities which are customary... to the society in which they belong'. (Townsend 1979). So the wealth level which defines someone as poor will vary dependent upon the society. But the problem with relative definitions is that they are quite general as it is difficult to say what is regarded as the norms of society. Also, critics have said that Townsend's definition merely explains that societies contain inequality, not that anyone is necessarily in poverty.

So, the more compromising definitions have tried to incorporate hybrid ideas of both absolute and relative measures. These recognise certain universal needs, such as

food, shelter and education, but accept that the means needed to obtain these will differ across societies (Pain et al 2001). For example, in the western world a computer may be a pre-requisite to becoming educated to the level necessary for partaking in general activity and social norms, whereas in the third world it is not. The dictionary of human geography (Johnston et al 2000) provides a working definition of poverty as 'a condition experienced by many people who have a shortage of financial and other resources, which means that they are likely to face difficulties in obtaining and maintaining sufficient nutrition, adequate accommodation and long-term good health.' Hybrid definitions have been criticised for the non-specific nature of the universal needs, meaning only the relative parts of the definition are practical. However, one must accept that poverty is not a fixed concept, and is bound to vary dependent upon an individual's viewpoint.

Since the Conservative government took power in 1979, poverty in Britain has risen. To explain these trends, three scales of analysis emerge (Pain et al 2001). Firstly, the individual level: the idea that a person's laziness, lack of intelligence and low self-confidence may be responsible for their inability to gain work. This simplistic idea has historically appealed to the middle classes as it removes responsibility from them onto the poor themselves. Although these factors will have a small influence, this is a very simplistic explanation. The emergence of specific trends and predictable patterns of poverty is proof that there are broader reasons than at the individual level. For instance, we can highlight the north of the UK as containing a higher proportion of people in poverty than the south. Within this there are spatial concentrations of poverty in urban as opposed to rural areas, particularly in areas historically associated with labour intensive industries.

Drawing on these spatial trends, the next scale which may explain poverty is community level; the idea that a group of people create their own 'cycle of poverty' (Lewis 1969). This theory suggests that the cultural norms of a community can exclude an area from participation in activities which result in higher paid jobs. As an area becomes known for low achievement or social status, employers and investors are likely to be biased against recruiting from the area. Furthermore, lowered expectations of the next generation exacerbate this trend as they are not exposed to good role models and high aspirations. The community explanation has some importance in explaining the trends of poverty. However, this internal focus neglects the wider social and spatial processes created by a capitalist society which force people into poverty.

A more multi-dimensional theory is the structural approach, which takes into account the role of policies and economics in shaping inequalities. The first reason is an economic one: wage differentiation. Low skill and low wage jobs are essential in a capitalist economy for the replaceability and cheapness of the labour required by businesses. These sorts of manual, low skill jobs often have no or few promotional prospects, so by the time couples wish to have children, the level of income is still low. Additionally, jobs of this sort may undermine health, be demeaning, and offer no gain in status or knowledge. Economic restructuring in recent times has reduced the demand for manual labour as low skill jobs tend to become located abroad in

response to global competition. This has negatively affected British working classes, heightening income differentiation.

A second structural reason for inequality is the social life and housing of the poor, this can be greatly influenced by policy. As housing types tend to be concentrated together (partly because those of a higher status can use their influence in the council to keep richer areas segregated) poorer neighbourhoods develop issues associated with deprivation such as vandalism and poorer services. As services such as schools and public transport are worse in poorer areas, in reflection of political bias towards middle class voters, people are less able to alter their social status by accessing better jobs. Furthermore, services in poorer areas are often the first to be cut by governments, for example in the Thatcher years. Then the community level idea of the 'cycle of poverty' will exaggerate this spatial segregation, reducing the ability of those in poverty from being socially mobile.

It is important to note one additional factor within the structural theory: social oppression. Poverty is not a homogenous force which could affect any person equally. Instead, it is cross-cut with many social factors which influence discrimination such as gender, racism, class, age and geographical area. For example, pensioners' incomes have become less divided since the Labour government came to power in 1997, whereas child poverty has deepened. The extent to which social oppression has an effect can be influenced by policy e.g. the equal opportunities act of 1976.

There are other ways in which the welfare state can counteract tendencies towards inequality. For example, job seekers allowance for unemployed people prevents them from entering debt and allows them to maintain a reasonable standard of living whilst searching for new jobs. In countries with a stronger nation state, such as Scandinavian countries, the wages of the unemployed are proportionally higher than in liberal Britain, resulting in a less divided society and reducing the potential for an emerging underclass. There are also policies which aim to allow more social mobility, although changing societal norms tends to take many years. University access is seen as a key way of allowing social mobility for people of any background, with universities strongly encouraged to accept applicants indiscriminately from a variety of backgrounds. In 1968 there were only 200,000 students, by 2000 there were over 2 million (HESA 2006), around a third of all 18/19 year olds. The government decided that university should be available for anyone with the motivation and ability. Via the student loans company, and the availability of means-tested bursaries, they have expanded the intake of students to include a far more diverse group of people, although deprivation of the housing area remains a hugely influential independent variable in the likelihood of a person becoming a student (Dorling et al 2007).

In conclusion, I think the existence of social and spatial inequality in the UK can initially be explained by the economic functioning of a capitalist society. Capitalism essentially relies on divisions into the traditional labels of working and middle class as the latter invest in labour from the former. Recently, economic restructuring associated with globalisation has increased unemployment among the working

classes, stimulating the growth of inequality over the past 30 years. However, policy can greatly exacerbate or diminish these differences. For example, the lack of useful services in a poor area will further segregate poor people from the norms of society. On the other hand, schemes which encourage re-distribution of income, such as benefits, help to lift people out of poverty. Despite growth in the economy, relative poverty has risen due to economic restructuring and policies of the state. The dramatic increase in inequality began with the Thatcher government in 1979, where new policies favouring privatisation benefited those who were already wealthy, as they could afford private services, whilst the poor had to manage with floundering state services. Despite policy which aims to reduce poverty from the Labour government since 1997, trends have slowed but not reversed. Policy does have an enormous impact upon how wealth is distributed, and whether it is easy for people to change their level of wealth via social mobility, but Labour have still been unable to reduce inequality. So I must conclude that over-riding economic factors ultimately drive inequality more than policy.

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