

Social Exclusion, Social Isolation and the Distribution of Income

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Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion

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Editorial Note and Acknowledgements

Brian Barry is currently Professor of Political Science at LSE (but will be taking up a position at Columbia University, New York, from September 1998). This paper was originally presented in October 1997 at a CASE seminar on social exclusion. The author is grateful to seminar participants for their comments and to Robert Goodin, John Hills and Julian Le Grand for comments on an earlier draft. The work forms part of the Centre's research, which is supported by the Economic and Social Research Council.

Abstract

It is worth distinguishing social exclusion from social isolation, defining social isolation as the phenomenon of non-participation (of an individual or group) in a society's mainstream institutions, while reserving 'social exclusion' for the subset of cases in which social isolation occurs for reasons that are beyond the control of those subject to it. First, it is likely that different causal processes are at work producing on one hand social exclusion and on the other the voluntary social isolation of, for example, a religious community. Second, even if there are reasons for concern about both voluntary and involuntary social isolation, there are reasons for concern about social exclusion that do not apply to voluntary social isolation.

The familiar form of social exclusion affects those who are unable to participate in the institutions patronised by the majority. There is also, however, exclusion of the majority by a minority who are in a position to opt out of the mainstream institutions: the epitome of this is the 'gated community'. Social exclusion is a violation of the demands of social justice in two ways: it conflicts with equality of opportunity and is associated with an inability to participate effectively in politics. An alternative account of what is wrong with social exclusion is that it undermines social solidarity. Voluntary social isolation has the same effect, but is less likely to have such adverse consequences. In particular, the logic of competitive electoral politics is liable to lead to public policies that discriminate against stigmatised minorities.

The relation between social exclusion and the distribution of income is not the same in all societies because it depends on the extent of commodification and the relative costs of public and private services. However, for a society such as that of Britain, it seems plausible that to avoid the social exclusion of a minority it is necessary for nobody to have less than half the median income, and that to avoid the social exclusion of the majority it is necessary for only a few to have more than three times the median income.

'Age Concern is increasingly concerned about poor pensioners becoming excluded from society and the widening gap between rich and poor. Already the top 10 per cent live on £600 or more a week, nearly 10 times the weekly income of the poorest 10 per cent. But while the basic state pension remains linked to prices rather than earnings, this gap is likely to widen, at least while half the adult population make no private pension arrangements. Age Concern says: "If the range of income, top to bottom, is soaringly wide, then society loses cohesion. It becomes impossible for everyone to mix on reasonably equal terms and to have a sensible share of the normal accoutrements of social life."'¹

'The most prominent policy trend of our time is the pulling away of elite people from shared, publicly funded programs; and as soon as programs get defined as 'welfare', they can be gutted even further... The United States faces a fork in the road as the new century dawns. If conservatives (in both major parties) have their way all of our tax and social policies will soon be reconfigured to facilitate elite separation from everyone else. We will have private, market-based opulence for the top fifth, and more and more private and public squalor for everyone else.'²

I What is Social Exclusion?

The thought is often expressed that 'social exclusion' is no more than a relabelling of what used to be called 'poverty'. However, although there is no doubt a close association between economic stratification and the phenomenon of exclusion within a society, it seems clear that in principle social exclusion can occur between groups that are not significantly distinguished from one another economically. Thus, while the Jewish immigrants who came to Britain from eastern Europe were poor to begin with, their descendants moved in large numbers over a few generations into the professions and commerce. When I was

1 'Don't Make Me Beg for a Decent Wage', *The Observer*, 15 March 1998, p.16.

2 Theda Skocpol, 'Toward a Popular Progressive Politics', *The Good Society*, 7(3), Fall 1997, pp.22-3, quotation from p.23.

growing up in the west London suburbs in the nineteen forties, the local Jewish minority was neither perceptibly better nor worse off than the average. Even so, the prevailing view in the rest of the community was that Jews were 'clannish', and if they were this was no doubt a response to the casual antisemitism to whose existence I can attest from knowledge of the attitudes of my own relatives and neighbours.

The continuation of the story, however, suggests that social exclusion tends to become attenuated and eventually disappear in the absence of group economic inequality - unless a distinctive way of life maintains social barriers. Unquestionably, Adolf Hitler made a grim contribution (though this did not, I judge, really occur until after 1945) by making the overt expression of antisemitic sentiments unfashionable. But this could scarcely explain why the out-marriage rate among the two-thirds of British Jews who are not Orthodox is currently running at about fifty per cent, thus raising fears in some quarters for the disappearance over a few more generations of a non-Orthodox Jewish identity. At the same time, the Orthodox out-marriage rate is much lower and this reflects the more general tendency for Orthodox Jews to form distinct communities, including in some cases the maintenance of separate religious schools.

Should this count as social exclusion? A parallel question can be asked at the level of the individual. Is a recluse in good mental and physical health with an average income to be regarded as socially excluded? Let me approach this question by suggesting that we should always look at apparently voluntary self-exclusion with some scepticism. The evaluation of any voluntary act depends on the quality of the choices on offer: that the action chosen appeared to the agent preferable to the alternatives available at the time does not tell us much. Thus, an individual or the members of a group may withdraw from participation in the wider society in response to experience of hostility and discrimination. Here, the actual withdrawal is voluntary but the context within which it occurs still makes it a case of social exclusion, understanding by this a process by which individuals or groups are excluded against their will. Taken in context, the exclusion is no more voluntary than is the departure from a job of somebody who resigns one step ahead of the sack.

Suppose, however, that we are satisfied that we have a case of genuine self-exclusion by an individual or a group. Shall we call this social exclusion or not? The answer depends, I take it, on what we want

to do with the concept. I believe that many people want the concept of social exclusion to be defined in such a way that social exclusion is always going to be a bad thing. But the idea of social exclusion as a bad thing is itself one that is capable of bearing more than one interpretation. Is the point supposed to be that social exclusion is necessarily bad *for the people excluded* or would it be sufficient if it were bad in some other way - for example, as a threat to social stability?³

I suspect that this question is rarely pressed because there is a tendency to assume too readily that anything counting as social exclusion under one conception will do so under the other as well. Genuine self-exclusion challenges that identification if one believes that it might in some circumstances be a good for the people who exclude themselves but a bad from some more comprehensive viewpoint. For what it is worth, the ESRC's statement of the 'thematic priority' under which CASE is funded appears to lean to the broader conception: 'Understanding the processes by which individuals and their communities become polarized, socially differentiated and unequal, together with the rapid social changes that disrupt traditional forms of social cohesion are of great concern and forms an urgent research agenda.'⁴

A camel has been described as a horse designed by a committee. Whatever committee designed this definition of social exclusion has endowed it with even more protuberances, to the point at which it ends in total grammatical collapse. However, what the committee appears to mean is that the subjects of concern are polarization, social differentiation and inequality. (The bits of the statement left over can then be reassembled to say that understanding the processes by which these phenomena come about constitutes a research agenda whose urgency derives from the significance of the phenomena themselves.) It is possible that the third item in the triad, 'unequal', is intended here as a code word for 'poor'. As it stands, however, the definition would make a wealthy socially-differentiated group whose members were quite happy to exclude themselves into a case of social exclusion.

It should be said, however, that such a broad conception of social exclusion would not find support among the participants in CASE. At a

3 In certain cases, of course, it may be agreed that being excluded is bad for those excluded but nevertheless that their exclusion is justifiable. An obvious example would be those properly sentenced to a term in gaol.

4 Economic and Social Research Council, *Thematic Priorities Update 1997*.

meeting early in 1998, something like a consensus emerged on the idea that social exclusion should be construed as something that was done to people rather than something they might choose to do themselves. Thus, a proposed definition of social exclusion put forward by Julian Le Grand began as follows: 'A (British) individual is socially excluded if (a) he/she is geographically resident in the United Kingdom but (b) for reasons beyond his or her control, he/she cannot participate in the normal activities of United Kingdom citizens, and (c) he/she would like to so participate.'⁵

I want to postpone until sections III and IV the question of what is wrong with social exclusion. However, it is possible to say here that, whatever the answer to that question may be, voluntary and involuntary social exclusion are at any rate sufficiently different to be worth distinguishing conceptually. We may wish to conclude that there is nothing wrong with voluntary social exclusion. But even if we do not do that, we may very well still conclude that the cause for concern about the self-exclusion of individuals or groups is not the same as the cause for concern about exclusion that arises from processes over which the individual or group has no control. I shall therefore follow the Le Grand formulation and define social exclusion so that only involuntary exclusion counts. However, the broader phenomenon pointed to by the ESRC - a lack of social cohesion, whatever its sources - should also be recognized. I propose to use the term 'social isolation' for it, on the understanding that groups can be isolated from the rest of society as well as individuals.

Social isolation is thus defined so that it may be either voluntary or involuntary. In other words, social isolation encompasses social exclusion but is not confined to it. Needless to say, social isolation (in both of its forms) is to be conceived of as a variable: an individual or group is not simply socially isolated or not but is rather more or less socially isolated. One of the objectives of further work must be, indeed, to establish the various dimensions among which social isolation is to be measured.

There is one unresolved conceptual question left by what has been said so far. Although it may seem at first sight a rather fine-drawn issue, it actually goes to the heart of what is wrong with social exclusion. Let us imagine a group whose members choose to be socially isolated, but

5 Julian Le Grand, 'Possible Definition of Social Exclusion', paper circulated at CASE meeting at Cumberland Lodge, 5th and 6th January 1998.

now add that they would be unable to break out of social isolation (for whatever reason) even if they wanted to. Clearly, the social isolation of this group is overdetermined. But does this entail that it does not suffer from social exclusion? Recall the definition put forward by Julian Le Grand from which I quoted above. According to this, a British individual would count as socially excluded on the basis of inability to 'participate in the normal activities of United Kingdom citizens', but only with the proviso that 'he/she would like to so participate'. This definition has the implication that our group cannot be said to be socially excluded, even though it meets the condition that its members are unable to participate for reasons (as Le Grand specifies) beyond their control. I am not happy about this, for reasons that I shall explain.

One reason for having qualms about the result has already been raised: the difficulty in determining that the self-exclusion is truly voluntary where it is apparent that attempts to integrate would be rebuffed. But I think the objection would survive the satisfactory resolution of that difficulty. If you would be refused membership in a club on the basis of your religion, race, ethnicity or sex, common sense suggests that you are excluded, in the sense that you are subject to an exclusionary policy. Even if you claim - turning (Groucho) Marx on his head - that you would not want to belong to any club that would not let you in, that does not alter the fact of exclusion.

From the most narrowly-conceived utilitarian point of view, being prevented by forces beyond your control from doing something you do not want to do anyway has no moral significance. (The only reason why it might be thought to matter is that you could change your mind later.) But this fails to recognize the legitimate complaint that, say, blacks have when confronted with a 'whites only' restaurant or hotel even if they have no wish to avail themselves of their services. I therefore posit that individuals or groups are socially excluded if they are denied the opportunity of participation, whether they actually desire to participate or not.

Of the three elements in the ESRC's conception of social exclusion (which I have now relabelled social isolation), I have pulled out polarization and social differentiation. The omission of the third, inequality, is deliberate. For inequality is, as I have argued, a conceptually distinct phenomenon. The relation between social isolation and inequality should be a possible topic for investigation, but it cannot be if the concept of social isolation is defined so that inequality is an

aspect of it. Two groups - for example Flemings and Walloons in Belgium - can be roughly equal in power or status while at the same time being polarized and socially differentiated. Conversely, a community (especially one of a traditional kind) could be socially integrated but still be marked by quite large inequalities of power and status.

What of material inequality? I have already argued that a group may be socially isolated (voluntarily or involuntarily) in the absence of any distinctive profile among its members. If inequality is not a necessary condition of social isolation, is it a sufficient condition? William Julius Wilson suggests that it is: 'The more unequal the distribution of scarce resources among groups in a society, the more differentiation there is in group social participation in the institutions of society and in group culture.'⁶ This seems right, but it is important to emphasize that 'scarce resources' need to be understood here very broadly, and not simply identified with personal income after taxes and transfers.

We cannot treat money income as a proxy for command over scarce resources because the effects of any given degree of inequality in money incomes will be mediated through the workings of social, economic and political institutions. The same spread between the amounts of money in the pockets of different people may have different implications for social isolation depending on, roughly speaking, the degree to which overall opportunities to do things and get things reflect the possession of money. Suppose we take the set of institutional arrangements in a society as given. Then it should be possible to hypothesize a connection between the distribution of income and the degree of social isolation. But this still leaves inequality and social isolation as distinct concepts. Failure to maintain this distinction would make it impossible to ask precisely the kinds of question I want to ask here.

II Stratified Social Exclusion: The two thresholds

It will scarcely have escaped notice that what was said earlier about the experience of Jewish immigrants to Britain has some bearing on Commonwealth immigration in the postwar period. I know only

6 William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The inner city, the underclass and public policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p.136.

enough about this subject to be aware that all generalizations are foolhardy. However, there still seem to me to be two points worth saving from the discussion in section I. The first is that 'voluntary' withdrawal into the comforts of the community is a characteristic response to the experience of hostility and discrimination. The second is that, even where social exclusion has its roots in religious, ethnic or 'racial' differences, the achievement of educational, occupational and economic parity between groups is an important counteracting force.⁷

Important as these questions are, however, they are not the focus of this paper. My purpose in touching on them at all is simply to provide the background for my own inquiry by showing how it fits into the wider picture of social isolation. What I am primarily concerned with is the relation between inequality and social isolation. My two opening quotations suggest in broad outlines the ways in which the two are connected. Thus, the quotation from Age Concern posits a relation between poverty and social isolation in as far as, beyond some point, lack of money makes it 'impossible for everyone to mix on reasonably equal terms'. Since this means that there are many interactions from which pensioners are excluded involuntarily as a result of poverty, this clearly constitutes social exclusion.

My second quotation, from the American sociologist Theda Skocpol, brings in another way in which inequality is relevant to social isolation. If the wealthiest fraction of a society feel that they can afford to insulate themselves from the common fate and buy their way out of the common institutions, that is also a form of social isolation. Is it also a form of social exclusion? It seems to me that it is. While it may be said that the very rich have the opportunity to exclude themselves from common institutions, what has to be added is that their wealth enables them to erect barriers that keep out their fellow citizens. Hence, the situation is one in which a minority is in a position to exclude the majority.

It must be admitted that social exclusion is conventionally thought of as something that happens to a minority. But I can see no good reason for limiting its scope in this way. Surely, the South African *apartheid*

7 Compare William Julius Wilson's argument, in relation to the United States, that 'sentiments for integration and interracialism tend to emerge when the struggle against racial inequality appears hopeful'. Conversely, 'sentiments for racial separation and racial solidarity tend to emerge when minority race members perceive the struggle against inequality as hopeless...' (*ibid.*, p.127).

regime could be described as (among other things) one in which a twenty per cent minority of whites excluded the rest of the population from access to the most significant educational, occupational and political positions.

Everyday linguistic usage supports the claim that social exclusion can be the lot of a substantial majority. An exclusive club is one that is highly selective in admitting members, an exclusive resort is one that few can afford to stay in, an exclusive neighbourhood is one that few people can aspire to live in, an exclusive school or clinic is one that few can attend, and so on. Indeed, the social exclusion of the majority might be seen as acquiring physical shape in the so-called gated communities that have multiplied in the United States during the past twenty years. It is hard to imagine a more concrete embodiment of the social segregation of the elite than a residential area which can be entered only by the inhabitants and their invited guests, all others being turned away at checkpoints by armed guards.

Of course, a necessary precondition for the creation of a gated community is the existence of a large homogeneous neighbourhood: there is no point in barring the gates if some of the barbarians are already inside them. But the American genius for finding ways in which money can be used as a social sifting device has already done this all over the country. The cliché that the United States has more social equality than Europe probably is - and certainly in the past was - true if by that we mean that Americans in different educational and occupational positions in the status hierarchy are less differentiated by accent, bearing, mode of address, clothing, leisure activities, and so on. Yet at the same time, despite this or perhaps even because of it, there is an enormous desire to control the forms of association so as to create homogeneous shopping centres, eating places, schools, medical facilities, and so on.

The key to all this is, of course, location. The homogeneous housing tracts required to make gated communities attractive to the inmates have been deliberately created by public authorities, using their zoning powers to decree that whole areas must contain only single-family housing on large minimum-sized lots. Even in the absence of formal barriers, the local police understand that their primary duty is to keep a watch out for interlopers. I can provide some anecdotal evidence for this, drawn from my experiences when renting a house in just such a suburb of Pittsburgh about thirty years ago - a time, it is necessary to

point out - before jogging came in. My habit of walking around on roads dedicated to the internal combustion engine (no pavements, needless to say) was sufficiently out of line with local norms to result in my being more often than not discreetly shadowed by a patrol car. I was, I may add, never challenged to prove my *bona fides* by the police, but I attribute this to my finishing up at a house containing a manifestly wholesome and regular wife and small child.

What all this suggests is that a society marked by a combination of a market economy and liberal democratic institutions is liable to have two thresholds of social exclusion. The lower one divides those who habitually participate in the mainstream institutions from those who are outside them. The upper threshold is the one that divides those in the middle from those who can detach themselves from the mainstream institutions. Looking to the USA, where both thresholds are more sharply defined than in Britain, we see that in a curious way those below the lower threshold and those above the upper one are a mirror image of one another. Thus, the inhabitants of the inner city ghettos receive little police protection; the inhabitants of gated communities need little because they employ their own security guards. As in Britain, there are those who make little contact with the publicly funded schools as a result of truancy and early dropping out; there are also those who make little contact because they attend private schools. Those at the bottom do not take part in ordinary democratic politics (even to the extent of voting); those at the top do not need to because they can gain direct access to decision-makers by contributing financially to Political Action Committees and other lobbying organizations. Health care in the USA has a lower threshold that excludes about twenty per cent of the population from the sort of treatment available to others, but there is no clear upper threshold because the rest get whatever they (or their insurers) are willing to pay for. Conversely, Britain has no lower threshold but an upper one defined by possession of private insurance. The deterioration of the National Health Service would lead to the extension of private or occupational insurance and a closer approximation to the American situation.

The United States is further along the road of social exclusion than Britain, to a large extent because its system of financing public services results in their quality in each area reflecting far more directly the level of prosperity in that area. The effect is that, even when the wealthy do use public services, this is still a form of social exclusion because these

services are for their exclusive use and thus create no sense of common fate with those living in less wealthy areas. For example, Henry Huntington arranged for a small municipality to be carved out in the area surrounding his estate in a then undeveloped part of what is now Greater Los Angeles. This area, the City of San Marino, has from the start contained only large and expensive houses. This enables the city to provide excellent services, including high quality public education. But this kind of collective provision among the rich is a phenomenon that connects with the ‘theory of clubs’ rather than with any conception of the universal entitlement of the citizens of a country to share in a common system of public services.⁸

Nevertheless, neither Britain nor the United States is, in geographical or historical perspective, an extreme example. Every country in Latin America (to mention only one part of the world) has both lower and upper thresholds that create far more differentiation in life chances (including life expectancy), in actual ways of life, and in relation to the major institutions. Similarly, when Disraeli wrote in 1845 of ‘two nations’, it was certainly more true than it is now that there was ‘no intercourse and no sympathy’ between the rich and the poor and that they enjoyed, as he claimed, different breeding, different food, different manners and different laws.⁹ (Disraeli, incidentally, omitted for his own political purposes those in the middle: in my terms, ‘the rich and the poor’ who made up his ‘two nations’ were those above the upper threshold and those below the lower.) However, if we focus on the subset of societies that are liberal democracies, the United States and Britain will appear as being marked by a relatively large amount of stratified social exclusion. This matters because, when we ask what is wrong with social exclusion, we may conclude that in some respects it depends on the nature of the society within which it occurs.

III What’s Wrong with Social Exclusion? (1): Social exclusion and social justice

8 For a discussion of the relation between the ‘theory of clubs’ and social exclusion, see Bill Jordan, *A Theory of Poverty and Social Exclusion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), esp. pp.62-9.

9 Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil or the Two Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, The World’s Classics, 1981), pp.65-6 (originally published in 1845).

As the last remark suggests, there are two possible ways of tackling the question: 'What's wrong with social exclusion?' One is to ask what is wrong with it in general terms and the other is to ask what is wrong with it in Britain, or in countries similar to Britain in the relevant respects. (That, of course, entails a determination of the respects that are relevant.) Many of the things that are wrong with social exclusion are wrong with it everywhere. Most of the forms taken by social exclusion in contemporary Brazil or early Victorian Britain are simply bad in a more egregious way than the forms taken by it in contemporary Britain. However, we should be prepared to consider ways in which social exclusion (and perhaps also voluntary social isolation) run into special objections in market-orientated liberal democratic societies.

I shall set out the case against social exclusion under two main heads, discussing in passing how far the case extends to voluntary social isolation. The first count against social exclusion is that it violates the value of social justice. The second is that it violates the value of social solidarity. I shall take up the first in this section and the other in the next.

Let me begin, then with the argument from social justice. It need hardly be said that the concept of social justice is controversial. I shall resist the temptation to articulate the main grounds of dispute and develop my own theory. Instead, I shall put forward a minimal conception of social justice that is nevertheless sufficiently rich to explain why social exclusion is unjust. This is a conception of social justice as equality of opportunity. It is not, of course, wholly uncontroversial. But it is one to which all three major political parties in Britain at least pay lip service, even if they are not prepared to endorse its practical implications. It has, moreover, a good deal of intuitive plausibility, because it makes room for individual human agency to make a difference to legitimate claims, while at the same time maintaining that brute bad luck - disadvantages for which people cannot reasonably be held responsible - should give rise to legitimate claims for aid, redress or compensation (as appropriate).

One of the reasons for persistent disagreement about the implications of equal opportunity is that it is not straightforward where the boundaries lie between on one hand the things for which people can properly claim the credit (and hence the associated rewards) or be assigned the onus (and hence the associated losses or penalties) and on the other hand those that are to count as a matter of good or bad

fortune. One particular bone of contention is on which side of the boundary natural endowments fall. I myself believe that the only coherent answer is that they are a matter of good or bad luck. However, in order to move forward on as narrow a front as possible, I shall not press that claim. The upshot if we drop natural endowments from the sphere of luck is, roughly speaking, as follows: the principle of justice as equal opportunity holds that people who are equally able (in terms of native talent) should do equally well, unless they make voluntary choices that result in their faring differently. To illustrate the force of the second clause, imagine two people who graduate with a qualification in law of exactly equal quality. If one opts for a high-pressure career while the other prefers a job that leaves a lot of time for playing golf and gardening, it is not unfair according to the principle of justice as equal opportunity if one makes more money than the other, because both faced the same set of options.¹⁰

It is apparent that no contemporary society comes very close to implementing fully the principle of justice as equal opportunity. At the same time, it can be said that, while there is some variation among them, all contemporary liberal democracies do quite well by historical and contemporary standards. This is scarcely accidental, since only a tiny minority of societies in the history of the world have ever accepted equality of opportunity as an aspiration. So long as the notion of justice as equal opportunity functions as a touchstone for public policy, there is at least some chance that a demonstration of failure to achieve it in a certain area will have some long-term political impact.

Social exclusion conflicts with equal opportunity in at least the following two ways: first, social exclusion leads to unequal educational and occupational opportunities; and second, social exclusion actually constitutes a denial of equal opportunity in relation to politics. I shall take these points up in turn. Both thresholds of social exclusion come into play in creating unequal educational and occupational opportunity. Below the lower threshold, there are socially isolated areas in the inner cities (especially in the USA) and large housing estates that are geographically as well as socially isolated (especially in Britain). In some

10 Julian Le Grand expresses the same idea in terms of the concept of equity. Thus, he writes that 'a distribution is equitable if it is the outcome of informed individuals choosing over equal choice sets'. Julian Le Grand, *Equity and Choice* (London: Harper Collins, 1991), p.87 (emphasis suppressed).

of these areas, very few people are engaged in full-time permanent legal employment, and the result is that the usual word-of-mouth flow of information about job opportunities is almost entirely lacking. What William Julius Wilson says of the American inner city applies to all such situations:

‘Inner-city social isolation makes it much more difficult for those who are looking for jobs to be tied into the job network. Even... where job vacancies become available in an industry near or within an inner-city neighbourhood, workers who live outside the inner city may find out about these vacancies sooner than those who live near the industry because the latter are not tied into the job network.’¹¹

Lack of job opportunities among the adults in an area tends to depress scholastic motivation and thus contributes to poor educational outcomes that condemn the next generation to extremely limited job opportunities in their turn. Even if it were said that truancy or lack of effort are ‘chosen’ by children, the environment in which such choices are made is far too compromised for them to be assimilated to the choice of the leisure-loving lawyer. Rather, they are themselves part of a self-reproducing process of unequal opportunity.

Of course, poverty is in itself a barrier to equal educational opportunity. A hungry or malnourished child is unlikely to be good at concentrating on school work. The lack of a quiet room in which to study at home (and, increasingly, a computer) makes homework unattractive and difficult. Also, to repeat a point made earlier, the more closely the resources of a school district reflect its tax base, the more underfunded schools in poor areas will be. However, the concern here is not with unequal educational opportunity in general but specifically with the role played by social exclusion in it. And here it is the social homogeneity of schools created by social exclusion that is significant. An abundance of research suggests that children with middle class attitudes and aspirations constitute a resource for the rest. A school without a critical mass of such children therefore fails to provide equality of educational opportunity to its pupils.

The social homogenization of schools is greatly increased by the withdrawal of wealthy parents from the state system. Above the upper threshold of social exclusion, the same people live, work, play and marry together, and the perpetuation of privilege is smoothed by the

11 Wilson, p.60.

public school/Oxbridge connection. In stark contrast to the lack of a network providing access to ordinary jobs that afflicts those at the bottom, those at the top are automatically enrolled in a network that offers inside information about and access to the most desirable and lucrative jobs that the society has to offer. Thus, equality of opportunity is eroded from both ends: some have too few opportunities, others too many.

So far I have been looking at ways in which social exclusion leads to a violation of the demands of social justice as equal opportunity. I now want to suggest that social exclusion can in some circumstances actually constitute a denial of social justice. The line of argument here starts from the familiar idea that there are some rights whose enjoyment is unconditional, for example the right to a fair trial. Others, like the right to vote, are dependent on status (generally, it is necessary to be an adult citizen), but it is not necessary to have done anything especially meritorious to enjoy them. The right to vote can be lost as a result of being convicted of a sufficiently serious crime but is in other respects universal. So is, in principle, the right to participate more broadly in politics.

As before, it can be pointed out that inequality may have a direct effect on the ability to exercise such rights. The opportunity to get a fair trial is closed to those who cannot afford high quality legal representation in the absence of a well-funded system of legal aid. Similarly, it is scarcely necessary to point out the many ways in which opportunities for disproportionate political influence flow directly from the ability to make large financial contributions and from possession of other resources such as ownership of media of mass communication. Once again, however, my concern here is with the more limited question of the relation of social exclusion to social justice.

Let me pursue this question by focusing on political participation. It is surely not controversial that liberal democracies can fulfil the promises that they hold out to their citizens only if the opportunity to engage in political activity extends beyond the mere right to vote once every four or five years. This must include the ability (not formally but really) to take part in the work of political parties and other organizations concerned with public policy, to take part in lobbying and consult with local councillors or MPs, and so on. The inability to engage in these activities is an aspect of social exclusion, so here social exclusion is in itself a form of social injustice in that it is a denial of

opportunities that should be open to all. Clearly, genuine opportunity to engage in politics on equal terms has certain material preconditions. Such preconditions are not met, for example, in the case of an unemployed single mother on an out-of-town housing estate who cannot afford costs of political activity such as babysitting, transport and meals out.

There is a link between exclusion from politics and other kinds of social exclusion in that political networks tend to grow out of social networks. This is especially important for the workings of block associations and community associations or the kind of informal organization that forms to obtain, say, a controlled crossing between a school and a housing estate. To the extent that the interests of the socially excluded are congruent with those of the socially active in relation to these matters, the outcomes may not be any different from those that would have come about if they had participated. But we cannot safely assume that the interests of the socially excluded are not distinct, even in neighbourhood politics. And in any case, the point that *de facto* first and second class citizenship is in itself objectionable, even if it does not affect outcomes.

The best study I know of the relation between social networks and political efficacy is that carried out by Jane Mansbridge in a Vermont town that she called Selby.¹² 'Town' is a political designation : the town of Selby consisted of a village and outlying areas. The town administration (elected at a meeting once a year) is not in the habit of sending out written communications to residents, and individual candidates (there are no parties) are equally unforthcoming. This creates a systemic division between insiders and outsiders. 'Itinerant town criers like the mailman and the garbageman bring the news to the people back in the hills only sporadically, while villagers hear it every day... Villagers say of a local political question that they "discussed it down at the store". Villagers do not make appointments with town officials; they just "run into them down at the store".' Thus, 'a part-time farmer who holds a small town office [and lives up a back road] complains that: "There's too much that goes on before town meeting that we don't know about unless we're part of it. They're slack in presenting all the information you need to function properly."' ¹³

12 Jane J Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), p.103.

13 *Ibid.*

Although New England ‘town’ politics are not exactly like the politics of neighbourhood organizations and the like, because the ‘town’ decides on issues such as schools and roads, the phenomenon of insiders and outsiders is a familiar one. Indeed, party politics at local level is often an outgrowth of social networks. The main difference is that in Selby a good deal could be done to foster wider participation without any change in social relations. (The problem is that those who run the existing system has no incentive to introduce more formal and open procedures.) In more inherently informal politics, by contrast, there is less scope for weakening the link between location on a social network and political efficacy. Preventing social exclusion is therefore the only route to the prevention of political exclusion.

IV What’s Wrong with Social Exclusion? (2): Social exclusion and social solidarity

The conception of social justice utilized in this paper is sensitive to individual choices. Because of this, social injustice is connected to social exclusion as against the broader phenomenon of social isolation. Even where voluntary separation from the wider society leads to diminished job opportunities, this still does not involve a denial of social justice, because the restricted opportunities themselves arise from a situation that itself came about as a result of choice.¹⁴ Similarly, voluntary withdrawal from political participation (arising, for example, from religious beliefs) does not constitute social injustice, because all that is required is an opportunity to participate.

In this respect, social justice and social solidarity are differently related to social exclusion. For social solidarity is, as we shall see, undermined by social isolation, whether it takes a voluntary or an involuntary form, though (as I shall suggest below) its ill-effects may well be more serious when the social isolation takes the form of social exclusion. By social solidarity I mean a sense of fellow-feeling that extends beyond people with whom one is in personal contact. At the minimum, it is the acceptance that strangers are still human beings, with

14 Left unresolved by the assertion in the text are cases in which the choices of adults (e.g. to send their children to a separate school that provides a poor education or gives instruction in a minority language) restrict the subsequent opportunities of the children. I shall deal with this difficult question in *Culture and Equality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, forthcoming).

the same basic needs and rights; at the maximum, it is (in Benedict Anderson's terms) an 'imagined community'.

It is undeniable that social solidarity exists, and also that it is more or less strong in different times and places. This suggests that it has social causes, and the connection that I want to make with the absence of social isolation is that a significant factor in strengthening and solidarity is the experience of common institutions and more generally shared experiences. Thus, anyone who lived through the Second World War will be able to attest to the immense increase in social solidarity that occurred in that period. The most plausible explanation is that the shared risks created by the Blitz gave large parts of the civilian population a sense of shared vulnerability to random events, while the army and the evacuation of children from the cities brought together people who would not otherwise ever have been on intimate terms. The universalization of social provision also originated in response to wartime conditions. 'Thus it was believed in 1939 for example, that only the poor would need government aid if their homes were bombed, and the rest could look after themselves; the responsibility for the bombed-out was therefore laid on the Assistance Committees. Naturally the belief and the arrangements both disintegrated with the first heavy raid on London.'¹⁵

An alternative explanation that might be offered is the unifying effect of a common enemy. But there are reasons for thinking that the importance of this can easily be exaggerated. The First World War also provided a common enemy, and indeed far greater hysteria about the 'Hun' was whipped up in the press and the politicians than against the real evils of Nazism. Yet there was very little discernible development of a sense of social solidarity. The elections following each war are instructive in this regard: in 1918, the coalition that had fought the war was rewarded with victory, largely on an externally-orientated platform of vindictiveness towards the defeated powers; in 1945, the Conservatives who had had a majority were thrown out, and a Labour government elected on an almost entirely domestic platform of social and economic reforms. The reason for the difference is, I suggest, that in the First World War, the lives of the civilian population was very little affected (zeppelin raids were an insignificant threat) while the experience of the soldiers in the trenches was so far out of line with the

15 Anthony Crosland, *The Future of Socialism* (London: Jonathan Cape, rev. ed. 1965 [1956]), p.98.

propaganda fed to civilians that it actually opened up an unbridgeable gulf between them.

There is another reason for thinking that the heightened sense of social solidarity during the Second World War was not solely (or even mainly) created by a common enemy. If that were so, we would expect the sense of solidarity to disappear when the enemy was defeated. But (as the point about the 1945 election illustrates), it survived in a gradually attenuating form. We would, of course, expect such an attenuation as those who were exposed to the experience of the Second World War died and were replaced by others who had not.

Conversely, the whole course of public policy in Britain in the past twenty years (and I see no sign of it changing) has tended to undermine solidarity. Thus, to return to the opening quotation from *Age Concern*, by decoupling benefit and pension levels from incomes and increasing them only in line with inflation, the government has ensured that a large proportion of the population are subsisting at much less than the level at which social integration is a possibility. Competition for shares of fixed and inadequate resources has been deliberately imposed on institutions such as schools and universities whose lifeblood should be cooperation. The decline of standards in public health care and education have led to an increased desire to opt out, while a phenomenal increase in the ratio of the incomes of the top ten per cent of the population to the median has made it possible. Private provision of security has been a growth industry.

Why should we care about social solidarity? I shall offer two answers, one of which makes it intrinsically valuable while the other makes it instrumentally valuable. In saying that social solidarity is intrinsically valuable, I do not wish to be taken to mean that we are dealing with something whose value somehow transcends its value to individual human beings. Rather, all that is intended is that human lives tend to go better in a society whose members share some kind of existence. Aristotle said that to live outside society one would have to be either a beast or a god, and we would not altogether miss the spirit of that remark if we were to identify those below the lower threshold with the beasts and those above the upper threshold with the gods: one group lack the capacity to participate in the common institutions while the other group have no need to. This, it may be argued, is not good for the characters of those in either group.

The theme could clearly be developed much further, but I hope I have sketched in the way in which that development might be carried through. Let me now then turn to the alternative, instrumental argument for the significance of social solidarity. In essence, the argument is that - especially in liberal democratic societies - social justice is more likely to be realized through politics the higher the level of social solidarity that there is in the society.

The connection suggested here between social exclusion (or more broadly social isolation) and the denial of social justice is different from that discussed in the previous section. Nevertheless, there is an interaction between them. Thus, I argued that an aspect of social exclusion is inability to participate as equals in politics. This obviously reduces the relative political influence of groups below the lower threshold of social exclusion. Suppose, however, that lack of resources did not prevent them from punching below their weight, in relation to their numbers. Their distinctive interests would still tend to be neglected as a result of social isolation.

The reason for this is that, even if everybody in a polity had equal power, there would still be winners and losers. Who wins and who loses depends on the alignment of interests. It must be emphasized that there is nothing whatever in the structure of liberal democratic politics that has any built-in tendency to ensure that the interests of all will be taken into account or that the demands of social justice will be met. If anything, the opposite is true: the surest way for a politician to maintain power in a democracy is to find some way of dividing the electorate into two unequally sized parts and identify with the majority. In the longer term, this process is liable to become one of self-reinforcing antagonism that leads to resistance and to repression in response, and ultimately threatens the survival of democratic institutions. This is why liberal democracy is such a rare phenomenon.¹⁶

The significance of social isolation in all this is simply that the lack of empathy between the majority and socially isolated minorities makes it easier for ambitious politicians to advance their careers by

16 'What is ordinarily thought of as ordinary democracy is inadequate in societies in which Group A, with 60 per cent of the seats, can, under most democratic systems, shut out Group B, with 40 per cent. In such conditions, democracy is more the problem than the answer to a problem.' Donald L Horowitz, 'Self-Determination: Politics, philosophy and law', pp.421-63 in Ian Shapiro and Will Kymlicka (eds.), *Ethnicity and Group Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), NOMOS XXXIX, pp.450-1.

demonizing and ultimately dehumanizing these minorities. The lethal potential of this process has been illustrated only too many times in the twentieth century. The social isolation of any group makes the incorporation of its interests into political programmes more problematic. This is true for voluntary isolation as well as for isolation that is forced on a group. However, social exclusion is more dangerous, simply because the processes that underlie social exclusion are frequently the same as those that lead to stigmatization.

I am especially concerned in this paper with stratified social exclusion. The application of what has been said so far to this is straightforward. The dynamics of electoral competition in a society that is stratified along socio-economic lines (rather than being divided primarily along lines of ethnic or other communalistic conflict) drive political parties to compete for the 'middle ground'. This means that the perceived interests - or, more broadly, concerns - of the median voter will be close to the position of the majority party, if there is one. In a multiparty system, it will be close to the position of the median party, which will have a very strong position in any process of coalition formation, because it will have to be included in any majority of ideologically contiguous parties. Everything therefore turns on the concerns of the median voter.

What has been said so far suggests that the more attenuated the bonds of social solidarity become, the less inclusive the concerns of the median voter will be. The socially excluded will thus be failed by democratic politics. To the extent that the median voter pays attention to those below the lower threshold of social exclusion it is liable to be in their capacity as threats to his or her prosperity and personal safety. The result - most clearly evident in the USA but with Britain tagging along - is an increasing resort to coercion, in the forms of 'workfare' and a more and more extensive use of the criminal law as an instrument of social control.¹⁷

V Conclusion: Social exclusion and the distribution of income

The argument of this paper has been that social exclusion is a phenomenon distinct from poverty and also distinct from economic

¹⁷ See Jordan, chapter 6 (pp.189-221) on 'The politics of enforcement'.

inequality. Nevertheless, there is an association between the dispersion of incomes and social exclusion, but it is not a straightforward one because the relationship is mediated by the experience of common fate, through the sharing of common institutions. The significance of personal income for the capacity to share in common institutions depends on the accessibility of those institutions to all on a free or heavily subsidized basis. Thus, to take a simple but often overlooked illustration, in a society in which much of life is lived in outdoor public spaces - squares and parks, for example - social isolation will be less than it would be if everything else were the same but the climate and social mores were not conducive to outdoor living.

Schools and health services that are free to all users similarly make personal income levels less important, provided their quality is uniform and high enough to make the free institutions the ones that are used by the vast majority of the population. The importance of public transport in this context can scarcely be exaggerated. As a way of making it true that there is 'no such thing as society' (in the sense of solidarity) the promotion of the private car at the expense of public transport could scarcely be improved upon. The private car is an enemy of solidarity as much as public transport is its friend. The private car isolates people and puts them in a condition of competition with other road users (including pedestrians) at any rate where traffic is congested, as in almost all urban areas. As congestion gets worse, standards of civility decline: it is noticeable, for example, how much more reluctant car drivers now are to stop for pedestrians in London, in comparison with only ten years ago. 'Road rage' has become a recognized pathology of drivers and it is impossible to believe that the deterioration of social relations on the road does not have any spillover into the rest of life.

Conversely public transport is the most effective way there is of creating conditions of common fate. (It is no accident that the standard metaphor for common fate is 'all in the same boat'.) Most public services allow some room for manoeuvre: the 'sharp elbows of the middle classes', their knowhow and self-confidence in dealing with bureaucracies, may be able to come into play to secure advantages within a public system of health care and education, for example. But public transport is the great leveller. Even where (as with some trains and planes) those who can afford it can travel first class, they still have to go on the same vehicle as the hoi polloi. If the service is unreliable, they suffer along with everybody else.

All this means that there is no universally valid generalization to be sought: the relation of social exclusion to the distribution of income will depend on the way in which institutions are set up. However, there are, in societies such as our own, obvious material conditions that have to be satisfied to avoid social exclusion. The most basic is a place to live: those with 'no fixed abode' (whether sleeping rough or moving between shelters and hostels) are excluded from most forms of participation, including all those elementary social processes that require a mailing address. For many purposes, a mailing address needs to be supplemented by a telephone, as Tony Atkinson has recently emphasized: 'A person unable to afford a telephone finds it difficult to participate in a society where a majority do not have telephones. Children are not invited out to play because neighbours no longer call round - they call up. Letters do not allow the same contact with relatives who have moved away. A person applying for a job may not be called for an interview since he or she cannot be contacted directly.'¹⁸

But much more is required as the material basis for full participation in the life of one's society. To go out in public so as to take part in social and political events, it is necessary to be respectably clothed, by the prevailing standards in one's society; to have access to good public transport, and otherwise (as on some isolated housing estates) the price of a taxi or the money to run a car; to be able to return hospitality, buy a round of drinks or a meal out, and so on. Similarly, to be able to get and hold a job, it is necessary to be respectably clothed and to have access to some reliable means of transport to the place of work.¹⁹ Widely used indexes of 'poverty' take it as being represented by an income half that of the median. It seems plausible that something like this income is also necessary for full participation.

What about the upper threshold of social exclusion? If we assume that a liberal society cannot actually prohibit people from opting out of common services such as the public school system or the national health service, the upper bound on incomes is whatever level makes it financially feasible and (in relation to alternative uses of the money)

18 Tony Atkinson, 'Social exclusion, poverty and unemployment', pp.1-20 in A B Atkinson and John Hills (eds.), *Exclusion, Employment and Opportunity*, CASEpaper 4, p.14 (London School of Economics).

19 Atkinson points out (*ibid.*, p.15) that 'to compete for a job, it is today not enough "to avoid being shabby", which was the criterion applied by Seebohn Rowntree in 1899'.

attractive to opt out. This depends on two factors, both of which can be manipulated by a government determined to ensure the conditions of social solidarity. The first is the quality of the public services. Obviously, the higher the quality (and therefore the more expensive) the public provision, the more it will cost to improve on it by going into the private sector. A wider disparity of incomes can therefore be tolerated (other things being equal), the higher the quality of public services. But in practice, of course, the high rates of taxation necessary to finance high quality public services are themselves unlikely (as in Scandinavia) to leave many people with enough disposable income to enable them to do better privately.

This is the demand side of the equation. Public policy can also influence the supply side. So, for any given quality of the service provided publicly, it is possible to make it more or less expensive to obtain a significantly superior quality privately. For example, private schools may or may not be given charitable status: if they are, that is in effect a gift from everybody else to those who opt out of the public system, and a society committed the pursuit of solidarity would not make such a gift.²⁰ This is not a question of discriminating against the private sector, but merely not discriminating in favour of it. Again, consider the stipulation in the Canadian health care system that employees have to be either entirely in or entirely out of it. Since this would rule out the British practice of moonlighting by consultants who are already in receipt of an almost full time salary from the National Health Service, it would make it more expensive to run a private system of health care along with the public one. The Canadian experience suggests that a high quality health care system with this proviso built into it can virtually drive out private alternatives.

Despite all these complexities, let me hazard a guess that, provided the quality of public service reaches at least tolerable levels, those with incomes up to three times the median will give priority to the purchase of superior versions of the private goods that are within reach of those with an income around the median: a bigger house in a more desirable neighbourhood, a fancier car, longer or more frequent holidays in more exotic locations, and so on. Unless public services are so deplorable that anybody who could possibly afford it would escape

20 It has been estimated that tax relief on investment income amounts to more per head of a pupil at Eton than the average amount spent on a pupil at a state school.

them, it is only at some level above three times the median income that opting out of the common institutions will begin to look attractive. If this is so, it follows that social solidarity can be maintained (so long as the quality of public services meet the minimum conditions I have stated) provided that the ratio of the top income to the bottom income in the society does not exceed six to one.²¹ We are not, however, dealing here with an all-or-nothing phenomenon. Social solidarity may be able to survive a small minority rich enough to opt out of common institutions. Thus, Swedish social solidarity during the most egalitarian period was not apparently undermined by the existence of a few very wealthy families which owned a large part of Swedish industry.

The upshot of this paper is that a government professing itself concerned with social exclusion but indifferent to inequality is, to put it charitably, suffering from a certain amount of confusion. It is true, as I have emphasized, that public policy can make a difference to the impact that any given degree of inequality has on the extent and severity of social exclusion. Nevertheless, in any society in which the great bulk of goods and services are allocated through the market, and in which even those provided publicly can also be bought privately, there must be a close connection between inequality and social exclusion.

21 David Miller has speculated that a spread of eight to one is the maximum compatible with what he calls social equality, a concept which is in essentials the same as what I have called social solidarity. David Miller, 'What kind of equality should the Left pursue?', pp.83-99 in Jane Franklin (ed.), *Equality* (London: IPPR, 1997), p.97.