

Not ‘my economy’: A political ethnographic study of interest in the economy

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Abstract

Some political economists explain the apparent downplaying of the importance of economic issues in political events such as Brexit with reference to the growing anger or despair people on low incomes feel about the economy. This ‘everyday political economy’ article draws on an ethnographic study conducted between 2016 and 2018 with residents of an English city to explore what people think about the phenomenon of the economy. It reveals significant differences in how interested high- and low-income participants are in the economy and its role as a bedrock for welfare. Low-income participants are more negative about the economy, particularly contesting politicians’ claims that it is distinct from the human sphere, when they view it as controlled by the rich. However, reasoning is based on post-2008 crisis economic conditions, and any lack of interest in the economy may be more calculative and temporary than is often assumed.

Keywords

Brexit, depoliticisation, economic perceptions, economic self-interest, elite economic narratives, ethnography, everyday political economy, political behaviour, political disengagement, precariat, studying across, understanding of the economy

Introduction

How politicians talk about ‘the economy’ in broad terms is important. Many political economists have studied politicians’ speeches closely, concluding that while they continue to frame the economy as having the potential to benefit all, in recent years, they have added the element of the economy as governed by global and impersonal forces beyond their control (Burnham, 2001; Fawcett et al., 2017; Hay and Rosamond, 2002; Watson, 2018). Economic inequality and insecurity have risen, but mainstream politicians claim they cannot rectify those problems, leading low-income voters to become alienated from discourse about the economy (Blyth, 2013; Hay, 2013). Guy Standing (2011, 2014) argues many people on low incomes are in a state of either anger or despair about economic issues. As a result, some withdraw from politics altogether while others

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turn to politicians who do not offer detailed economic programmes, but focus on cultural policies or simplistic economic fixes.

However, in the absence of easily accessible and naturally occurring speeches by everyday actors about the economy, we have not so far done enough work to reveal how they do in fact react to politicians' narratives about the economy. This article draws on empirical research in the everyday political economy (EPE) tradition to explore how ordinary people are conscious of, acquiesce to or contest politicians' narratives (Elias and Rethel, 2016; Stanley, 2014; Stanley and Jackson, 2016). I used ethnographic methods in order to listen to how people speak about the economy at length and in their own homes. By studying 60 residents of two contrasting districts in the same city, I reveal how beliefs vary. Are the low-income participants in a state of anger or despair about the phenomenon of 'the economy'?

In what follows, I set out the substance of how participants react to three main themes in elite constructions of the economy. The first theme relates to interest in the economy, with low-income participants showing less. The second theme relates to whether participants see the economy as the bedrock of welfare, which low-income participants do less. The third theme relates to acceptance of the elite construction of the economy as governed by impersonal forces beyond the reach of human agency. Here the views are most strongly divergent; while higher income participants tend to accept this construction, lower income participants see the economy as 'rigged by the rich'.

Regarding *how* they express these views, participants from both groups often give reasons and show they calculate. The accounts of low-income participants are less coloured by emotion than Standing and others suggest. In the absence of similar studies from 10 or 20 years ago, it is difficult to judge how everyday actors' perceptions of the economy might have changed over time. However, I evaluate what participants say about the key events that have affected their perceptions, the 2008 crisis and the distinctive decade following, of high employment combined with stagnant or declining incomes and greater insecurity. I argue that the economic conditions and elite narratives in the decade leading up to this fieldwork may have suppressed low income participants' interest in the economy. Different economic conditions, whether positive or negative, might encourage low-income voters to re-engage with economic issues, even if they continue to resist economistic and depoliticised framing of them.

In the next section, I set out the EPE approach and existing empirical research on constructions of the economy. Then I explain my methods. In the section on 'Everyday constructions of 'the economy' I set out how interested research participants are in 'the economy', followed by a section on how long-standing their (dis)interest is. In the conclusion I suggest future research agendas and what this research implies for perceptions of the economy in the COVID-19 era.

The literature

Political economists chart the historical evolution of 'the economy' from being a verb denoting management of resources to an object (Tomlinson, 2017; Tooze, 1998). Governments from the Second World War onwards harnessed new methods of accounting and planning to pursue their burgeoning ambitions to control the economy. They learned to present it not just as an object, but as an object synonymous with nationhood, to increase voter attachment to it (Mitchell, 1998). The construction of the economy changed as governments shifted from Keynesian demand management to a neoliberal paradigm

and increasingly absorbed and deployed the rhetoric of globalisation (Hall, 1986; Hay and Rosamond, 2002). Some claim that governments of all parties over the last three decades have sought to depoliticise the economy, putting it beyond contestation (Bourdieu, 2002; Burnham, 2001; Fawcett et al., 2017).

Some claim low-income voters contest these elite constructions strongly and that the manner of this contest has grave implications for political life. Guy Standing (2011, 2014) categorises 'the precariat' as a dangerous class.¹ Experience of low pay and insecurity causes them to feel 'detached' from mainstream economic affluence and they become deeply and negatively emotional in their responses to political talk about the economy. Their anomie (despair) and anger amount to a kind of abandonment of reasoning: they become 'politically infantilised' (Standing, 2011: chapter 6). This is a long-term process over the neoliberal decades, with the 2008 crisis and the 'austerity era' exacerbating the 'trends unleashed by globalization' (Standing, 2014: 31).

The deep-rooted nature of this process is reflected in Standing's (2014: 31) argument that members of the precariat have rejected the blandishments of social democracy as well as neoliberalism, because social democrats focus too much on the value of productive labour, a concept that no longer has meaning. It follows that any future charter for improving conditions of the precariat cannot be just about improving their material conditions, but also their opportunities for creativity and community. The theme of low-income voters becoming more emotional about politics in ways that displace or trump rationality is also present in some of the anti-politics literature (Flinders, 2017).

Standing's account is of low-income voters rejecting mainstream talk about the economy. But other accounts have centred on the surprising level of acceptance of some political elite narratives, particularly regarding the need to cut government spending in order to reduce government debt. Here, voters accepted austerity because they were duped, at least in the early years; they had a common sense perception of the need to reduce debt in their own households which governments were able to play on to convince them that debt must be reduced at the national level (Blyth, 2013; Gamble, 2013).

Whether duped or infantilised, political economists often base their conclusions about people on low incomes on inferences from political debates and voting behaviour, supported by heroic extrapolation from survey evidence. As Liam Stanley and Richard Jackson argue, because political economists see elites as 'the carriers of ideas and the main agents of change', they have not conducted as much in-depth empirical research as they should into the beliefs of everyday actors. The aim of EPE is to rectify what has up until now been 'methodological elitism' within the field, to undertake a research programme to advance understanding about what perceptions voters do hold (Stanley and Jackson, 2016).

Kerkvliet's (2005) distinction is the basis for this approach. He argues that as well as official and advocacy levels of politics there is an 'everyday' level. 'Everyday' is where people live and work, where they either 'embrace, adjust to, or contest norms and rules' (Kerkvliet, 2005: 22). How people make sense at the everyday level of terms used in politics, like 'the economy', is key to understanding which elite ideas and concepts resonate and seem legitimate and why. The EPE approach often adopts ethnographic methods because they enable us to listen closely in settings that are as close to the everyday as possible (Stanley and Jackson, 2016).

In this article, I draw on the EPE approach of Elias and Rethel (2016: chapter 1 and conclusion). They in turn draw on the lineage of Hobson and Seabrooke's (2007) initial everyday international political economy (EIPE) approach. EIPE aims to explore how,

through defiance, mimicry or habit-informed behaviour responses to elite constructions, everyday actors could affect the economy. Elias and Rethel (2016) drop the ‘international’ to widen the research agenda and move the focus towards how everyday actors view their national governments, rather than global political economic actors.

There is a rich body of scholarship in anthropology and sociology exploring how people see the economy in their everyday lives: how they see money, reciprocity or unpaid labour (Folbre, 2008; Hann and Hart, 2011; Zelizer, 2010). But these scholars study everyday actors as social or economic agents, thinking about money or deciding what to spend, rather than focusing on how people think about the economy as they walk into a polling station. Examining how people relate to political talk about the economy is a different project to exploring everyday economic activity, because it involves abstract conceptualisations of the economy.

Jack Mosse (2018) is one of the few other political economists to have studied everyday constructions of the economy, from an economic imaginaries perspective. He studies four groups of people in London at roughly the same time, between 2016 and 2018, as I was doing my fieldwork on the south coast. He compares how Treasury officials, journalists at a financial magazine and financiers themselves view the economy compared with the low-income residents of the Andover estate in North London. Similar to low-income participants in my study, the 34 Andover estate residents are overwhelmingly pessimistic about their own economic lives and see the national economy as a negative phenomenon. They do not feel connected to it and see it as constructed according to norms and rules that benefit wealthier people. They contest the elite construction of the economy as governed by impersonal forces, seeing it as rigged.

Methods

Mosse (2018) and non-academic studies in this area (Norrish, 2017) show how asking people to talk about what the over-arching concept of ‘the economy’ means to them poses challenges. When the researcher asks people to ‘define the economy’, answers are often thin. I used two approaches to encourage participants to elaborate. First, I asked them about their economic life stories. Second, I adopted the social representation approach for researching abstract or technical concepts like the economy; I identified the features of the abstract concept people might be more familiar with (Moscovici, 1998; Roland-Levy et al., 2001). By studying the features of the economy politicians tended to mention when they did go beyond the shorthand term, and adapting these into ‘everyday’ language, I identified eight that dominated political talk about the economy: employment, government spending and taxation, trade, inflation, debt, banking, and the economic effects of migration.

The selection of these eight features reinforces my caveat that this research design was not wholly ‘bottom up’. Specifying these eight features and using them as prompts is likely to have skewed the research away from revealing more gender-based patterns. Nevertheless, by asking participants about these eight features as well as the economy itself, they spoke at length about a subject that initially some of them thought they would find hard to talk about.

I engaged in some participant observation, tenants and community centre meetings, striking up conversations with residents outside their homes and shops. However, I knew that I would not be able to rely on participant observation alone, because people do not often break into spontaneous conversations about the economy. I therefore chose to supplement participant observation with semi-structured interviews (Wood, 2009), with

three focus groups of interviewees towards the end. Forty of the 60 interviews were in participants' own homes. Nevertheless, this study falls short of being a full ethnography, due to the heavy emphasis on interviews, and instead it can be best described as interviewing 'with an ethnographic sensibility' (Pader, 2006).

I follow anthropologist Laura Nader's advice to study people from a range of backgrounds simultaneously, in order to get a more accurate sense of contrasts and similarities between groups. Some call this 'studying across' social divides, in contrast with studies that exclusively focus 'down' on low income or, more rarely, 'up' on the wealthy (Bowman, 2009). I used LSOA data² to identify one high- and one low-income district of the city. The high-income district was in a leafy conservation area of mainly graduate, professional owner occupiers. The low-income district fell within the second decile of 'most deprived' areas in the country. I interviewed 30 people from the low-income district, only three of whom earned above the Office for National Statistics (ONS) measure of the median equivalised household disposable income.³ I interviewed 17 from the high-income district, only 2 earning below the median income. The remaining 13 participants came from just outside the districts.

Of the total 60 participants, 36 earned below the median income and 24 earned above. A small study like this one cannot claim to be representative. For instance, nationwide, many may cluster around the median, whereas my 'high income' participants tended to combine well above median income and assets. Therefore, what I am illuminating may be more at the two extremes.

Of the 39 offering a political affiliation, 13 were right or centre right, 6 in the centre, 19 left or centre left, and 1 green. Nearly half the 60 participants were women. The ages of the participants ranged evenly across decades from 18 to 80. I provide further details about methods in Killick (2020) and the demographic features of participants in the Supplemental Appendix.

Everyday constructions of 'the economy'

In the wealthy district, even those residents like Michael, whose salary in the university sector may not have been as high as some of his business executive neighbours, says 'we've always been financially stable'. Most bought semi-detached and detached houses over a decade ago and have seen their prices appreciate. In Michael's case, 'the notional value of the house has gone up by twenty times'. Knowing they have been sitting in appreciating assets contributes to how often they use words like 'comfort' and 'security' to describe their lives.

In the lower income district, participants describe working lives that have been much less secure. Only a couple have stayed in the same occupation all their lives. The rest have been forced by the city's de-industrialisation to move, as Standing (2011) describes, from secure work into unskilled work on increasingly casualised contracts. For instance, Elliott, now in his 70s, started as a skilled worker in shipyards. However, as they closed, he was forced to move into more dangerous and lower skilled nuclear decommissioning work. He left that work because of its potential health damage. But, by his 50s, the only work available to him, such as driving and security, was via agencies on short-term contracts. He feels he ended his working life with a lower status than he expected at the start. Several of the younger participants have only ever known casualised contracts, whether for estate agents, care work or plastering. Finding decent affordable housing is a struggle. Only a couple have mortgages, although at least two lost homes following the 2008 crisis. The rest rent and

expect to rent indefinitely. Council housing on the large estate is prized and children forced out by the lack of availability once they become adult resent having to leave. Low-income participants do not use the words ‘comfort’ or ‘security’ about their economic lives.

In the next three sections, I explore how participants reacted to the three themes of interest in the economy, the economy as bedrock for welfare, and the impersonal forces governing the economy. I used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013) to identify and analyse the dominant themes in participants’ talk. I follow the practice of some ethnographers (Bryman, 2012: 624–625; Cramer, 2016: 77; Sandelowski, 2001), of sometimes specifying how frequently participants used terms.

Interest and ‘needing to know’

At the core of how politicians talk about the economy is an assumption that all voters will be interested in the economy. But in order to have an interest in something, there has to be a sense of what it is. So I start this section by setting out how participants see the phenomenon of the economy and how familiar it is to them, before exploring how interested they are and why.

Interest in what? Most high-income participants are not surprised that I am doing research into a subject they say is important. They see the economy as an objective phenomenon to do with growth, the FTSE (Financial Times Stock Exchange) and trade figures, as reported by economic commentators, that everyone *should* be interested in. They relate to the version of the economy they hear on the media and believe it tracks their personal economic lives in macro terms, tending to assume it does the same for others. David, a retired doctor in his 70s, sees the economy as represented by the ‘graphs’ they show on the economic news. He believes some other ‘less educated’ people make less effort to understand what is a complex phenomenon. A Remain voter in 2016, he says voters who read the Sun absorbed ‘attractive’ messages for instance about sovereignty that ‘didn’t have the word economy anywhere in them’.

The interviews from the low-income district are on average as lengthy as those from the high-income district. Yet the high-income participants mention the term ‘the economy’ three times more often, indicating they feel more at ease with it. They put the stress on the second word like politicians do – ‘the *economy*’. When asked directly whether they feel ‘connected’ to the economy, they feel they ‘lack control over it’, but do feel ‘part of it’ and ‘involved’.

In contrast, one sign of lower income participants’ greater sense of detachment from the economy is that they tend to distinguish between ‘*my* economy’ and ‘*the* economy’ putting the stress on the first word of the term. They are interested in their own, but express less interest in the national version. For instance, Clare, aged 18, lives with her single parent mother on disability benefits. When I ask Clare what the term ‘the economy’ means to her, she says ‘talking about money and things’, her own economic circumstances, ‘you don’t necessarily think, “oh yes, this is *the* economy!”’

Jean expresses a similar distinction between her own economic life and the national economy. Now in her 70s, I interview her in the one-bedroom council flat she shares with her husband. After a life-time of often hard manual work, they live on the state pension without getting into debt and Jean budgets efficiently and creatively for her and her family. There may have been deprivations, but due to her close budgeting, she is proud that they ‘got through’. At one point, I mention the economy and she says,

I don’t know a lot about *the* economy really [her emphasis]. [Turns to husband] Do you? [No, no].

The way she says *'the economy'*, as an alien concept she finds so surprising to be asked about that she seeks affirmation from her husband, is in marked contrast to the vivid and confident way in which she has been describing her personal economic circumstances.

Low-income participants tend to see what the economy represents as less objective and more variable in the light of personal circumstances. For instance, when I comment to health care worker Gary that he seems to understand a lot about *'the economy'*, he says he thinks he knows a lot about how it relates to him *'but for somebody else it might be a totally different thing, the way it relates to them'*. At one point, Linda, a carer in her 50s, comments that rich people will know and seek out *'what's interesting to them'* but that may be different from *'what's interesting to us'*. Gary's and Linda's comments carry the sense that rather than the economy affecting everyone in the same way, people's connections to it and interest in it will be different, in part based on divergent self-interest.

Self-interest and 'need to know'. Why might a participant be interested in political talk about the economy? When I ask high-income participants about the eight features of the economy, they have a lot to say about most of them because they feel affected by them; whether employment, taxes or the banking sector. They often express a strong self-interest in the economy, because of their shares, mortgages or jobs in the business sector. Whether or not they have expressed a direct self-interest, they tend to also say that they are interested in the economy as if it is to be expected or taken for granted, even if they sometimes go on to say they find it hard to understand. Half of high-income participants say they are especially interested in the economic news; they see it as more weighty, more worthy of respect than purely political news. For example, Rebecca, in her 50s, says often she does not understand the economic news and regrets that she relies on family members to explain it to her. When that section of the news comes on, she does not think *'oh whoopee!'* and find it as enjoyable as listening to news on education that she does understand, but she makes an effort because she thinks she should. While economic news could be negative, it could equally be positive. Also, high-income participants are more inclined to believe that the news might help them to take action, either by moving money around or by voting for policies they believe will make a difference to their lives.

In contrast, low-income participants see themselves as connecting with the eight features of the economy at fewer points. Many do not have savings and most have never had access to bank loans or mortgages. Many who borrow are forced to do it from pay day loan companies whose interest rates bear little relation to those of the Bank of England. Of the eight features, they connect most powerfully with the feature of employment.

Participants on lower incomes tend to see the economy as likely to have negative effects on them. About one quarter of low-income participants, particularly those under 30, do not express any negative or positive judgement about the economy. But of the remaining three quarters who do express a view, all express a negative one. Linda, a carer on benefits in her 50s, points to the cards representing the features of the economy; they will have negative and depressing effects on her and people she knows.

All your little things you've got [the eight cards], that is a circle and there is a little human being in the middle of that circle and, bit by bit, he hits every single level of what you've said. You know, he goes through that in his lifetime and he experiences every single bit, every word there [on the cards] he'll experience, and it's just so sad.

While debt, inflation or taxation might be viewed as negative by everyone, she also interprets phenomena like employment, government spending and trade as negative as well.

Low-income participants tend to detach from economic commentary because the news is rarely about anything that will benefit them, more likely to be about a new cut to social spending which will hit them. Therefore, there is actually no good reason to seek it out. A common expression that they use is that they only seek out what they think they 'need to know' in order to cope on a day-to-day basis.

'Need to know' is usually expressed in a matter of fact or indifferent way without much emotion. Diane, in her 30s, works two minimum wage jobs as well as caring for her children. She says she has little time to watch TV and does not waste any time she does have on watching the news. As she is in debt management and part dependent on benefits, complex and depressing to navigate, she has to judge what she should spend scarce time and energy learning. If something like a benefit is likely to affect her, she gets her 'claws into it', but otherwise she ignores it. She reflects on this when she says she avoids learning about Universal Credit because she has been told it will not affect her.

We've got people talking about it, like it's going on to Universal Credit so we were told today, but we don't claim [Universal Credit], so we don't need to know. Unless we need to know we're not really into it all.

Diane sees 'need to know' as a survival mechanism, which helps her through what she describes as a day-to-day struggle.

Even for those with more time than Diane, 'need to know' prevents worry. Jean, in her 70s, is proud of how she has survived, phlegmatic and self-contained. She will not take notice of government debt or speculate about pension rises. Equally, when I ask about inflation, which she does think affects them, she says,

Oh, don't talk to me about inflation. We just carry on, don't we? We carry on. We've got a set amount of money coming in and if you've got to pay you've got to pay, haven't you? It doesn't make any difference, does it? [Husband: 'true'.] He [Chancellor of the Exchequer] gives us a rise in our pension all right, then you look around and you think '[the shopping] wasn't that much last week'.

When referring to the broader economy, she says it is mainly 'the shopping that is the trouble', causing them to scrimp and making them worried they will have to give up her husband's car. But apart from the prices in shops, Jean cocoons herself from the broader economy adding 'we are quite good in our own little way, but we don't bother, we don't bother at all'. It is this attitude that has got her through with some peace of mind.

Julie, in her 60s, articulates how seeking out economic news is 'upsetting':

I might get a morning paper once a week, but I certainly wouldn't specifically go into anything to do with finances because I probably think they're going to upset me if I do.

Standing (2011: 20) argues that members of the precariat either tend to express anger or anomie. Anomie is 'a feeling of passivity born of despair' or 'listlessness based on repeated defeat'. These participants might be sad about their own and their neighbours' economic lives, but they are more rational about why they turn away from commentary on the economy than Standing's definition suggests.

The economy as the bedrock for other goods

If there appears to be a perception on the part of low-income participants of a weaker self-interest in the version of the economy mainstream politicians tend to talk about, how do they react to the construction of the economy as a source that other goods flow from?

In the high-income district, there is a sense that we should all be cheering the economy on and that it is the bedrock, for instance, for social policy. Richard, now retired, served in the navy for a while and is a lifelong Conservative. He demonstrates his support for 'the economy' by saying straight away that he sees the economy as a ship and as 'the national state of play, largely'. He describes the troubles the economy got into in the 2008 crisis as a trouble for the nation more generally and believes it may have 'reminded' people how important the economy was. His tone as he talks about the economy is warm and he says he feels connected to it. His neighbour, Harry, is similarly well disposed. He is an auditor in the public sector, but says he sometimes wishes he had gone into business. From the side-lines, he hopes 'the economy' will do well. He thinks the economic news is 'very interesting and I like to hear success, I want to hear success for everyone's sake'.

High-income participants say that beyond their own financial self-interest, a healthy economy is the basis for a healthy society. They spontaneously mention how much of a 'foundation' the economy is. Jane, who has worked on a high wage in medicine all her life, calls it 'a central thing which is serving the country as a whole'. Michael, another retired professional, says he is conscious having a 'strong' economy is important because

It matters a lot in our lives in all sorts of ways. Healthcare, social care and education and so on . . . I understand that what happens in this country, particularly to our young people, depends on whether we have a strong economy.

Rebecca calls it is 'the bedrock of everything else'.

The goal of a healthy or growing economy is presented by most politicians as likely to lead to benefits for all. High-income participants seem to agree with this, whichever party or particular policies they think should be followed to achieve that health. Some do complain that the 'playing field' of the economy is not as level as it once was and are critical of the extent of austerity. However, some of them still conclude that some reduction in government spending was necessary to reduce debt, for the sake of the economy and in order to get back to generous social spending at some future date.

The lower income participants are in some ways divided according to age in how they see the relationship between a healthy economy and other goods. Those on state pensions do not tend to believe there is a strong link between the generosity of the state pension, as one example of social policy, and positive economic indicators. Returning to Jean and her husband, living on the state pension, Jean does not follow the economic news because she says,

We know we're going to get no more money than what they give us, the state give us, so what's the use of it you know? They say 'oh yes we'll give you £7 extra a week'. Well where does that £7 go? The rent and the community charge, it's gone – that's how it goes, believe me.

She is not interested in how 'the state' makes the decision on state pension rises. In her experience, the rises have always been too small, but at the same time, she does not anticipate radical cuts.

The second low-income group is younger, with children. By the time of the fieldwork for this study, many younger low-income participants were angry and despairing about the effects of the cuts on them and their neighbourhood. When they ‘dread’, as Gary does, hearing the news, it is specifically in the context of cuts that seem aimed at them, at their top up tax credits, bedrooms and local social services. Their comments about government debt are often that it is not as serious as personal debt or the effects of the austerity cuts. They are less inclined than high-income participants to believe that the economy has to return to some state of health before social policy can become more generous.

The experience of low-income participants of austerity falling so disproportionately on them rather than the rich may have devalued the politicians’ argument that a healthy economy is the bedrock of social policy (for a more detailed discussion, see Killick, 2018). They believe that governments have used arguments about the economy as a smokescreen for cuts that affect the poor in order to avoid hurting the rich. Rosa works in a school in the council estate where she grew up. She fears social breakdown and jokes that people should be keeping an axe handy in their cupboards for when it happens. Her comment reflects the bitterness about austerity:

At the start of the recession they say ‘oh we’ll have to be in a recession because we can’t afford the national health system, but, hey, let’s throw a few billion pounds into the stock market so the rich don’t get poorer, and we’ll just take all the money from the poor and let them be poorer’. I do feel that has been done in the last few years, big time.

The economy as governed by impersonal forces

Here, I explore how participants reacted to the elite construction of the economy as a technical, impersonal domain distinct from the rest of human life.

As I outlined before, high-income participants tend to see the economy as potentially beneficial and the bedrock from which other goods flow. However, they also see it as a phenomenon that is to some extent beyond human agency, as in their often unprompted references to it being technical or hard to understand. They show they accept this construction of the economy in how, even though they sometimes profess not to understand the ‘graphs’ on the economic news, they draw on these images when they are trying to define what the economy is.

In contrast, when low-income participants mention economic data, then it is in the context that it does not represent forces, but people. Rosa defines ‘the economy’ as ‘rip-off Britain’. Like wealthier David, she does not feel she fully understands the graphs but, unlike David, she is critical of what they portray. She watches some of the economic news, but she is not really interested in the stock market news, which she describes as ‘what’s going up and what’s going down’, because the graphs are just ‘a ruse’. Those presenting them say ‘oh we’ll show you’, but

Actually that ain’t what it’s really built, based on. It’s built on graft, isn’t it? Someone, somewhere, is grafting for those peaks, and it ain’t the managers.

Gary is in his 40s and now works in the health sector after a range of jobs including the army, foundries and retail. He is the only wage earner for his partner and their two children and works extra hours on a training course to get promotion ‘for their futures’. Gary believes ‘people involved with finances’ drive the economy, rather than people like him.

One example he gives of how the broader economy seems to operate is that ‘somebody will say something negative on the TV, and then people involved with finances react negatively to it, like the pound’.

It is striking how many low-income participants spontaneously say, in defining the economy or explaining why they think it is a negative phenomenon, that it is about ‘the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer’. Martin is a Conservative voter working in the security sector and closer to the median income than most other low-income participants. Nevertheless, as for most other low-income participants expressing a view, for him ‘the economy’ links with inequality.

[The economy is] good, bad and indifferent (laughs). I think it varies. It depends how you look at it. You look at some people and you just wonder how they survive. They are living literally every day wondering where their next penny is coming from. And then you look at another side of people and they haven’t got a care in the world. They probably wouldn’t even know how much money they’ve got in the bank.

Many low-income participants argue the rich get richer because ‘they write the rules’ for the economy and rig it in their favour. They cite recent tax avoidance cases, executive pay (particularly in the banks) and how little the rich have been hit by austerity. When the economy is growing, it benefits the rich more, and, when it is contracting, it costs them less. They take it for granted the rich write the rules. One focus group of low-income participants agree with Shelley’s comment that ‘the rich’ are always looking at ‘right, we want to keep our riches so we will make this rule, we’ll make that rule’. In another focus group of older low-income participants, Elliott and George make these comments to Beverley when she says she wants the government to spend her taxes where she wants:

Elliott: But they don’t.

George: No they don’t. They spend it where they’re looking after their rich friends.

Elliott: Where it suits them, look after themselves and then you’re left with whatever is left down the line.

It is significant that in the course of talk about the economy, those on low incomes mention groups of people, such as the rich or poor, three times more often than those on high incomes. Whenever social groups were mentioned, by far the most popular terms for them were ‘rich’ and ‘poor’, not, for instance, middle class and working class. As well as believing social groups were more significant when discussing the economy, of the social groups those on low incomes mentioned, they mentioned the rich more than the poor.

Even when they are frustrated with differences of opinion among economists, high-income participants acknowledge that economic expertise about the mysterious forces might be necessary. They are sceptical about some statistics, such as those on unemployment, but tend to trust statistics to a greater extent than those on low incomes.

In contrast, low-income participants are deeply distrustful of ‘economic experts’, seeing them as helping politicians and rich individuals to rig the system. As Shelley says, ‘they are experts for the rich’. Robert, in his early 50s and having been forced into job changes during his working life from printing through retail, reflects a commonly held belief in the low-income district when he says

I don't think [the experts] actually probably see things from the grassroots. They commentate on the City's view and the City's view is, nine times out of ten, not what somebody who is at the coalface, how they see it.

Misha, in her early 30s, believes experts and politicians make pronouncements about what someone on benefits ought to be able to live on without ever having 'lived our lives'. Robert says that instead of focussing on the price of bread or milk, the politicians and statisticians focus on 'averages'. Robert did not believe the average national wage was close to the city's average wage: 'oh yeah, "the average wage in this country is £25,000." Yes maybe, but in reality in [our city] it's not'. Many low-income participants felt there was too much 'generalisation' which airbrushed out their below average experiences. Their distrust of economic expertise was deep-rooted and one reason they said they did not follow economic news closely.

How long-standing?

So far, the Standing thesis of low-income economic detachment from the economy seems to fit. Low-income participants either do not recognise or contest the elements of the economy as something to be interested in and as a base for other goods. However, to make the leap to the second stage of his argument, that they have become politically infantilised as part of an inexorable process, one element we should consider is what participants say about how long they have felt like this about the economy.

Participants would have had to be over 40 to have long adult memories of pre-2008 economic conditions. A few over 60, in describing their economic lives and employment patterns mention de-industrialisation under Margaret Thatcher. For them, the gradual slide into lower status and security was a long-term phenomenon. For those few over 40 spontaneously mentioning the intervening period of New Labour governments, references tended to be favourable. For instance, this is when Rosa as a single mother benefited from retraining and there are positive references from a few to Sure Start centres and the previously higher levels of support for schools and social services.

However, the event that came most readily to mind for the largest proportion of low-income participants, whether because it was relatively recent or actually most significant, was the 2008 financial crisis. All low-income participants over 30 make some reference to the crisis. The crisis also loomed large in the high-income district. There the tone was sometimes angry, but more often sad that, by behaving badly, some financial experts had devalued the economic system as a whole. In the low-income district, the anger runs deeper and is more personal. Gary sums up the sense that 'we paid for it' over and over, in the initial use of taxpayers' money to bail banks out and in the austerity aftermath. Julie, retired clerical worker, says despite the 'economic wrongdoing', banks were not punished. To elaborate on her definition of the term 'economic', she says 'the bank thing's economic, all those years ago' pulling a face to indicate they tarnished the word.

After 2008, low-income participants note the official high employment levels. However, they often know young relatives who have been forced to stay at college by the raising of the participation age or to go back to train because they cannot find jobs. They are sceptical that their children and grandchildren will find skilled or reasonably well paid jobs at the end of them. They characterise the return to casual work as 'Victorian', like standing around at the docks. They note over and over, as a matter of fact, that those in work are finding it harder and harder to pay the bills, reflecting the stagnant real wages

post 2008, which in many of their cases have been compounded by benefit cuts to represent significant income loss. They take it for granted people are 'struggling'. They are fearful of pay day loan debt and, since the 2008 crisis, several have been forced to enter debt management schemes.

Conclusion

The EPE empirical research agenda into perceptions of the economy is at an early stage. While ethnographic methods are valuable, they have the shortcoming that they are only of small numbers. We need to do more research in three areas.

First, this study shows how people think in one south coast city, and while it echoes some of what Mosse (2018) found in London, we need to conduct more ethnographic research in other regions. Second, while I could draw on what participants said about past events, I could not directly compare this study to a comparable one in the past to get a sense of whether people were more positive or interested in the economy before 2008. We should conduct these kinds of studies at regular intervals to track how beliefs change. Third, surprisingly, participants from similar income backgrounds shared a broad sense of what they think the economy is regardless of which party they tend to vote for. But this study did not probe in sufficient depth how perceptions of the economy affected voting behaviour, and further ethnographic research on that relationship would be valuable.

This article highlights pronounced differences between high- and low-income voters in their interest in the economy, their acceptance that it is the bedrock for other social goods and its susceptibility to human agency. The research design, drawing respondents from two very different districts, allowed these differences to emerge starkly. To some extent, differences by age, reflected in historical reference points, also emerged. Different research designs are likely to bring out other differences, notably between men and women.

The article challenges the view that economic detachment leads people to change how they see themselves as political actors in such an emotional way as to amount to abandoning of reasoning. Participants on low incomes are highly emotional about their own economic lives. But they react to the broader economy in what they see as understandable, rational ways. They reason, in the sense that they give reasons relating to their economic circumstances and lives that by their tone of voice and expression, seem reasonable to them. While some are angry, for instance at the bankers, often they are indifferent or matter of fact, which is distinct from an emotion as strong as Standing's (2011) characterisation of despair. Low-income participants calculate the price of paying attention, what is in it for them. Therefore, the judgement that they have abandoned calculation about material forces is premature.

They assess economic conditions pertaining to the decade following the 2008 crisis, which as we have seen since with COVID-19, can change dramatically. These findings suggest low-income citizens may have switched off economic issues in a decade when talk of slowly recovering GDP, reductions in the national debt and high employment levels did not add up to good news for them. The switching off may have contributed to support for more non-economic issues, like those that are perceived to have driven support for Brexit. But I also suggest the switching off may not be the permanent or inexorable feature of British political life that is sometimes portrayed in literature on the effects of neoliberalism or depoliticisation.

As I analysed the fieldwork in 2018, I speculated whether a return to more positive economic conditions might make some low-income participants pay more attention both

to the economy and claims of politicians about it. If economic growth increased or coincided with more obvious benefits for low-income voters, would they feel more connected? As it turns out, COVID-19 means we are set for the opposite, the most negative conditions of recession and high unemployment. However, it is notable that elite narratives about the causes of economic stress are much less abstract than in the aftermath of the financial crisis, and the depoliticising rhetoric has been toned down as the government intervenes more. And, if my argument is correct, that disengagement from the economy is reasonable and calculated rather than inexorable and emotional, even though the news will be depressing, its more direct relevance to people's lives might lead to some COVID-induced re-engagement with the economy.

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Supplementary Information

Additional supplementary information may be found with the online version of this article.

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Notes

1. Standing's precariat is an amalgam of three groups: working class people in insecure work, immigrants, and young people working in casualised sectors, some of whom may be graduates. I did not encounter enough of his third group in my study, young insecure graduates, to feel justified in using the term 'precariat' and instead use the term 'low income', which I expand on in the Methods section.
2. LSOAs are Lower Layer Super Output Areas, geographic areas, used by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) to measure deprivation.
3. The Office for National Statistics (2019) median income of £28,400 in the financial year ending 2018 is a measure of people's household disposable income, equivalised, meaning that they take into account that

households with more people will need a higher income to achieve the same standard of living as households with fewer members. The median income in the city was roughly in line with the national one.

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