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Mike Savage & Michael Vaughan

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DURABILITY IN INEQUALITY DISCOURSE IN THE UK PUBLIC SPHERE, 2008–2023

Mike Savage  and Michael Vaughan 

In this paper, we reflect on how the development and mutations of debates on economic inequality since 2008 reveal striking features regarding the nature and dynamics of the UK public sphere in a time of intersecting crises. We show how economic inequality is an important case study. We draw attention to the dynamic qualities of public debate in the period 2008–2015, in which there was major cross over between academic research, intellectual debate and public engagement. Even though this debate has become less vibrant since 2015 and has been substantially disrupted by “culture war” discourse, it has not been completely closed down. We argue that economic inequality issues have endured through the stabilisation by which key institutional agents have made it a central part of their field positioning. Our contribution is to offer a counterpart to pessimistic conceptions of the public sphere by drawing attention to the durability of economic inequality discussions even after the initiating crises which inspired these discussions have faded.

KEYWORDS economic inequality; Occupy Wall St; public sphere; duration; field dynamics; “Culture Wars”

Introduction

In this paper, we reflect on how the development and mutations of debates on economic inequality (which we mostly shorten to the “inequality debate”) since 2008 reveal striking features regarding the nature and dynamics of the UK public sphere in a time of intersecting crises. We take this specific topic of inequality as a means of reflecting on broader theoretical arguments posed by recent literature in this tradition. Our contribution will be to draw attention to the issue of *duration* (on which see Savage 2021): the extent to which critical debate can be sustained over time, even after initiating conditions which inspired these discussions have faded. We see this focus on public sphere dynamics *over time* as offering a valuable complement to studies which focus on the quality and dynamism of the public sphere in specific, possibly short-lived, situations.

Here, we contest the dominant view that public debate has become transient, short-lived, with a limited half-life. Although originating intensities may decline, we draw attention to how the durability of inequality itself continues to call an affected public into existence, increasingly stabilised within field dynamics which give them their own durability and endurance. To be sure, we are mindful that this incorporation into field dynamics can limit the more expansive and politically subversive aspects which came to the fore during originating crisis moment—nonetheless it is unduly pessimistic, even defeatist, to see this as a complete eradication of the issues at stake. We thus argue that the seriousness

and durability of inequality over time contain the Deweyan potential to call a public into existence.

In the first part of our paper, we lay out how our focus on duration extends the public sphere debate, before going on in the second part to briefly lay out our research methods. We then turn to the heart of our analysis, in the third section by showing how the public debate on economic inequality took off in the immediate period after 2008. Key elements that public sphere theorists prize and value, did indeed exist: notably extensive cross fertilisation and generative debate across diverse audiences, invoking very different kinds of media and communications platforms, which do on the face of it, suggest that for several years an effective public debate around the significance of inequality did indeed take place. We therefore echo the argument that crises can bring key issues into focus and so expand the terms of public discussion, which can lend legitimacy to peripheral voices and particular forms of expertise (Rauchfleisch, Vogler, and Eisenegger 2021) as well as trigger processes of public sphere resilience and adaptation (Trenz 2023).

But we then move on to consider the more recent period since 2015, where on the face of it, there is support for a more pessimistic perspective. There is evidence that the inequality debate becomes closed down, narrowed and deflected along various axes. This is most clearly marked by the political success of the “populist” right. We will show that our respondents could recognise and comment on this shift. On the face of it, this could support the claims of theorists arguing for the fragmentation and less effective functioning of the public sphere.

The fourth and final section of our paper takes up the analytical question of duration. Here we identify how elements of the inequality debate were stabilised, so that they endured across both the “rise” and “fall” periods. We present a more cautiously optimistic perspective, noting the way that although the terrain of the inequality debate has shifted, it has not gone away. There are elements of durability that also need to be recognised. Even given all the efforts of powerful interests who would like to see economic inequality disappear from discussion, there is no complete closing down or elimination of the issue. We tentatively suggest that fragmentation in the public sphere does not necessarily close down the prospects for debate but instead changes the terms in which it can be conducted. When agents, ideas, organisations and individuals can straddle fragmented spheres, they can in fact operate in powerful ways to mediate diverse constituencies. Thus, rather than the public sphere operating as some kind of open agora, it depends on mobilisation across boundaries and communities which are fragmented but can be linked through skilful “cross over” mobilisation.

Duration and the Public Sphere

The concept of duration is the entry point in our paper to explore the intersection between inequality dynamics and the public sphere. We briefly want to introduce how duration is dealt with in these respective literatures, before considering how it might generate competing expectations for the particular case of post-2008 inequality discourse in the UK.

In the now proliferating studies of economic inequality, there has been a vital attention to the need to consider long-term trends, over decades and indeed centuries. These have proved vital for challenging short-term perspectives. Piketty’s (2014; 2020) work has been of great importance here. Here duration generally figures as the compounding

force of the past and as an explanatory mechanism for the perpetuation and deepening of inequality. In Piketty's (2014) highly influential formulation $r > g$, it is only the cumulative force of inequality over time which can explain patterns of inequality today—as visualised by sparklines of inequality levels over many decades. Working within a more sociological tradition, Tilly's work in *Durable Inequality* (1998) also made a strong case for dynamics over time, arguing that it is the repeated interplay between unequal access to resources and socially constructed categorical groupings in society which creates and entrenches key relationships of domination. Post and de-colonial scholarship has also insisted on the long-term and enduring effects of imperialism, colonialism and slavery which do not simply disappear in the immediate aftermath of abolition and de-colonisation (e.g. Bhabra 2014; Satia 2020).

The public sphere literature, however, has not sufficiently embraced this concern with the long term and duration, though two different approaches can be discerned. Firstly, there is an argument about the long-term decline of the public spheres, driven largely by the transition toward more fragmentary, ephemeral and affective structures of communication (Bruns 2023; Gerbaudo 2022; Papacharissi 2016; Staab and Thiel 2022). Key arguments emphasise that durability of debate is likely to be undercut by digital transformations, which generate networked publics which are generally more transient and ephemeral; this could be interpreted as the decreasing power of the communicative past over the present: "the power affective publics attain is of a *liminal, transient nature*" (Papacharissi 2016, 320). For Reckwitz, "we are dealing with a logic of social fragmentation at the individual and the group level, which has resulted in the formation of increasingly singularised subjects and communities." *Since they are primarily constituted affectively, their half-life is usually limited.* The "compulsory social orientation towards the particular can," therefore, not only "lead to an erosion of the general" but also generates "*collective entities that are characterised by an 'affective actualism' and are relatively unstable precisely because of this*" (Reckwitz 2020, 193; Staab and Thiel 2022, 137). It has also been argued that "The most visible consequence of this crowd logic is the 'turbulence' of the social media public sphere" (Margetts et al. 2016); "*new actors can rapidly emerge and then often fade away at the same speed*" (Gerbaudo 2022, 130). From this perspective, the decreasing durability of public sphere networks might be expected to pull away from the mounting challenge of underlying inequality, leading to a pessimistic projection of ever-decreasing democratic efficacy.

There is an alternative, though largely neglected, way in which duration figures in conceptualisations of the public, however, in particular connected with the work of Dewey. Here, duration is seen to be a property of the problems which call publics into existence, and so in a sense enduring and entrenched problems are a necessary if not sufficient precondition for the formation of publics. In Dewey's words: "Indirect, extensive, enduring and serious consequences of conjoint and interacting behavior call a public into existence having a common interest in controlling these consequences" (Dewey 1927, 126). An example Dewey uses in his work to illustrate such a problem is the persistence of indirect consequences of private remedies to personal injuries, e.g. through escalating blood-feuds, which "brought a public into existence" (17). It should be clear from this example, then, that the relationship between durable problems and formation of corresponding publics is far from mechanistic, let alone the effective representation of those publics in political institutions, and can be a fitful and uneven process. Indeed, Dewey's writing in the interwar period described exactly such an intermediate position, where the public was "inchoate"

and “bewildered” by its inability to attain effective political representation. Nevertheless, in this alternative perspective the existence of durable, serious problems—a category which inequality seems to fit comfortably—is in essence the constitutive condition for the public itself.

Dewey’s framing may seem to be dated, but in some respects, Pierre Bourdieu (2000) can be seen to have worked up this phenomenological heritage in pointing to the power of fields to stabilise and consolidate tensions and inequalities. This framing helpfully acknowledges how entrenched divides continue to have the potential to an (even potentially inchoate) public into existence. We can now proceed to reflect on how our case study bears on these different theoretical possibilities.

Researching the “Inequality Debate”

Although our reflections here are influenced by our own experiences (notably Mike’s role as founding co-Director of the Ill between 2015 and 2020), we are not here mainly drawing directly on our immediate observations. We have conducted 18 in-depth semi-structured interviews to date with varying participants and “stakeholders” in the inequality debate. These include journalists, politicians, activists, campaigners and professionals. We chose interviewees based on people who have deep experience and understandings of public opinion and public debate about inequality, while combining different perspectives (such as journalists and activists) to highlight points of consensus and disagreement. Naturally, since these respondents are all engaged in some way or another in inequality discourse they can only reflect on issues which they see as insiders. We do not seek to comment on how more representative groups of the UK population view inequality, though this is obviously of great importance (to some extent is captured by research in psephology and attitudinal studies). For our purposes, as we are concerned with the internal dynamics of the inequality debate we wanted to get an understanding of how key agents and stakeholders view their effectiveness over recent times, and we think that our interviews have been useful in teasing this out. Of course, we need to bear in mind the specific interests and positions taken by various proponents.

In structuring our interviews, we first asked open-ended questions about the peaks and troughs of inequality discourse’s salience and character over the post-2008 period. We then supplemented this with specific prompts about the effects of several high-profile media events which have already been identified in the literature as having an influence on discourse, such as the Occupy movement (Gaby and Caren 2016) and the publication of Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Grisold and Preston 2020; Rieder and Theine 2019). We note that these cases represent very different kinds of intervention in public debate, with Occupy as much operating as an illustration of the new potential for digital and social media to enable inclusive mobilisation networks (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Kavada 2015), compared with Piketty’s (contested) mobilisation of scientific capital. Yet they share a status as landmark events in the post-2008 inequality debate, and we were interested in asking interviewees about what if any longer-term impacts they had on shaping discourse. In addition, we asked interviewees about two other high-profile media events from this period which have been the subject of less academic research: the publication of *The Spirit Level* by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett in 2009; and the BBC’s Great British Class Survey in 2013. We also asked respondents for other key media

events, pieces of research, or protest events which were influential over the whole period in question.

Before commencing, we need to make some points of clarification about our case study. Firstly we are especially interested in the debate on *economic inequality*, though we also emphasise that one of our interests is to recognise potential overlaps with other inequality issues, notably sexism and racism. Indeed, we were interested in how the multiple elements of inequality discourse operated together, or possibly were part of the fragmentation processes that public sphere theorists discuss. Secondly, we focus on the UK debate, which is empirically more manageable for our purposes, but of course recognising that this national debate is connected to global issues in various ways, and indeed this was an issue that we wanted to explore in our interviews.

We are not presenting this case study dispassionately: we are interested in this question because we both work directly in the “inequality space,” and indeed from the LSE’s International Inequalities Institute which seeks to steer the public conversations as well as academic research in this area. We think it is vital that the inequality debate is one of the central subjects for public discussion and we want to reflect on how best to achieve this in the future. So in this respect, we have very practical interests in the issues we investigate here as we want the inequality debate to be central in public and political discussion. This also means we are directly positioned within this field and we are not able to present ourselves as outside observers (and nor would we wish to).

The Trajectory of the Inequality Debate in the UK: Is There a “Rise” and “Fall”?

There was wide agreement amongst our interviewees that 2008 marked a striking turning point and that the issue of inequality which had little or no previous traction in public debate suddenly came into view.

So maybe in 2007 working on my PhD, I remember the senior economist at the think tank I was working at told me- stop going on about inequality. I was trying to get them to do more work on inequality about what was happening within cities in the UK. And he was like, stop going on about it. If you want to be taken seriously as an economist focus on growth and if you want to be a nice person focus on poverty- no one cares about inequality. *But I think what 2008 did, and then quite a few things after that with the Occupy movement and the Spirit Level book and the kind of sudden reawakening around the issues of inequality was that all of the gut feelings I'd had about this being a bad thing and kind of just became more solidified and more accepted.* And so I think it's just since 2008, it's just probably, I mean, it's just strengthened my views that this is something, a major, major challenge for not just this country but globally for most countries. (Activist)

(I became a journalist in) ... March, 2007, something like that. And at the time it was largely seen as quite a sedate job, a sinecure, the kind of job that you give someone just so they find their way around a newspaper and then they go off and do something else. And I remember one of my colleagues saying to me, it is Sherry Drinker's corner. You put your slippers on and you just write about globalisation or whatever, and then you toddle off home. *Actually, as you know, within a few months, Northern Rock fell over and then Bradford and Bingley, and then there was a full scale banking crash.* And so it was

an incredibly busy time. And one of the things that was particularly interesting in that role is that I was helping to basically set the paper's policy or thinking on the issues of what to do about the banks, the bank sector, banks' bonuses. *I mean your sense of there being a 15 year development of these issues that basically started in the banking crash, I think is right.* (Journalist, *The Guardian*)

These two quotes are exemplary of wider perception that the 2008 financial crash was important not simply because of its dramatic economic impact but because it disrupted expectations and assumptions—and notably it did so because it seemed to interrupt “normal” expectations about long-term economic trends being largely smooth and predictable. By shattering temporal assumptions, it was able to be a paradigm-busting episode from which inequality could gain a footing in public debate—in one journalist's words, it is the “origin point” for the inequality discourse which followed, through to the present day.

Figure 1 presents a graphical overview of how our respondents talked about the contours of discussion between 2008 and the present day. There was a large consensus that the 2010–2015 period was marked by a set of influential intellectual interventions which indeed provoked considerable public discussion. We asked about four of these in our interviews and it is useful to say a few words about each of them. It is now familiar to see Occupy Wall Street as having catalytic importance, as a social movement with clear links to analytical debate. The term “We are the 99%” drew directly on the work of economists who had developed a percentile distribution analysis of inequality in the previous decade. The anthropologist David Graeber was also a major force in this movement, especially in the UK.

One of the striking features of this period was the very unusual way that academic research crossed over into public debate. A widely referred to instance was Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's book *The Spirit Level*, with the important subtitle *Why Inequality is bad for everyone*. This was an epidemiological study comparing the effects of inequality on numerous measures of life chances and well being, demonstrating how more unequal nations were less healthy. Its reception was huge. One journalist interviewee reflected

The Guardian I think went to town on Spirit Level when it came out. We ran, I remember it very well. One of my colleagues convinced the editors to run a double page spread, unpacking some of its arguments and using some of its graphics. I remember that very, very clearly. And I remember too that Ed Milliband as a result, no, not necessarily as a result, result of the Guardian coverage, but as a result of it being in the air, got on board with its arguments very quickly. So Marmot's work on health inequality became really much referenced.

The Spirit Level sold over a quarter of a million copies and helped spark off the formation of a charity, *The Equality Trust* devoted to spreading the message of the book. A film was produced and in the words of several interviewees became a staple of “dinner party conversation.”

I found extremely useful at the dinner table to bring out and say, well actually no, just by creating more and more wealth, we are not solving the problem, that the creation of the wealth is linked to the problem of poverty and powerlessness and all of the things that we are trying to tackle because that wealth comes with immense influence. (Activist)

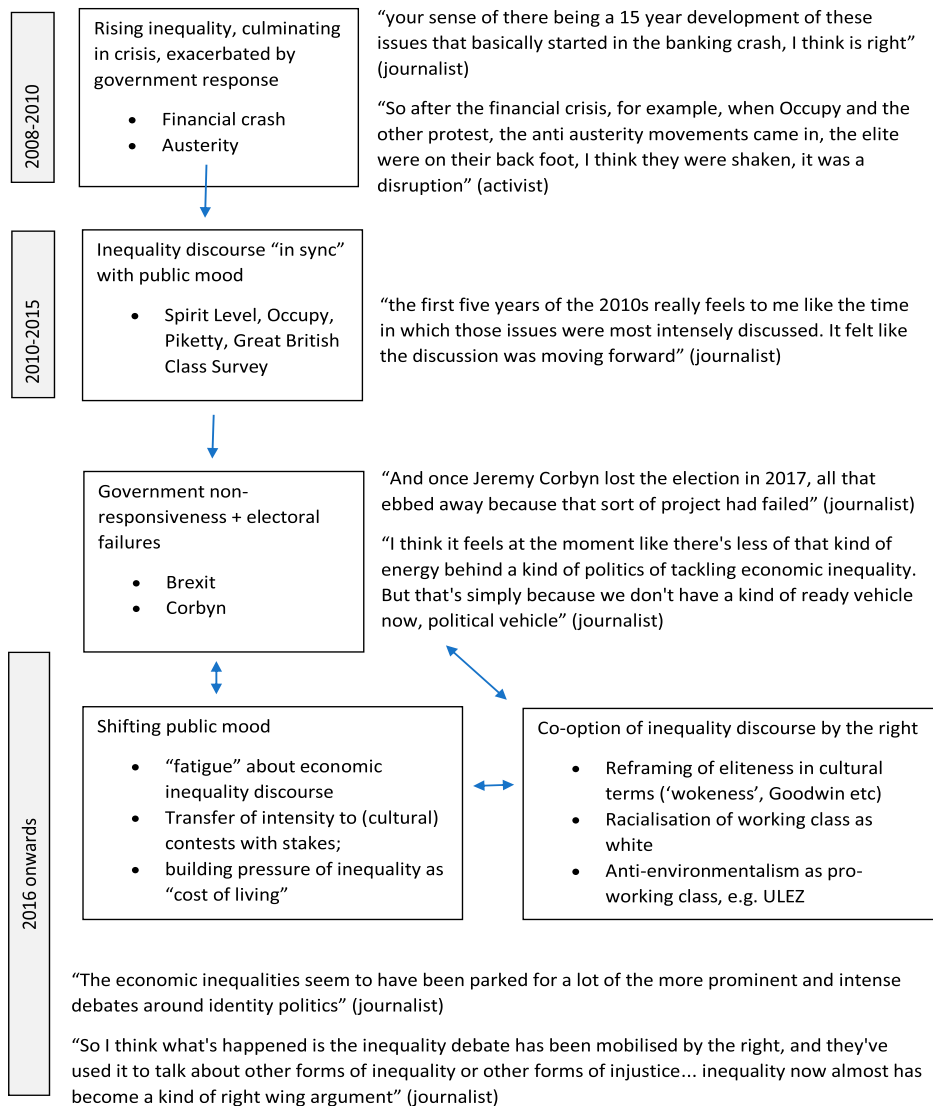


FIGURE 1.
Overview of inequality discourse, 2008–2023.

Another example of this cross over concerned debates about social class, which in previous decades had largely been confined to academic sociologists and a few policy makers. Yet in 2013, the BBC promoted the Great British Class Survey (full disclosure: Mike was one of the directors of the academic research underpinning the study). The smart interactive web devices and a slick media campaign saw dramatic public interest, with 9 million Britons clicking on the “class calculator” to see what class they were supposed to be in. For over a week, the sociological analysis of social class dominated public debate, an unprecedented situation reflecting the febrile state of public interest.

I think the good thing about the British class survey was that of course people could fill in their details and that makes it interactive. There was also quite a few things around that time as well where the IFS had done this thing where you could put in how much money you earn, you could see where you fell in the distribution. And so there was a lot of people being like, “oh”, and we did that in that channel four shows, asking people how much they got paid and where they thought they fell in the distribution. And then being like, “no”, someone on 60 grand going, I guess I’m somewhere in the middle, like “Nope, you’re in the top 15%” or whatever. So I think it probably just helped draw people into a lot of the activity around that period and make it, put them in it rather than it be something that’s happening, a theoretical issue. And then again, it got a lot of press coverage and rethinking class, it generates conversations and radio call-ins. (Activist)

Yeah, I did. Yes, I did this (the GBCS class calculator). I was a big fan of that project . . . it just seems to have a, I dunno whether it’s unique or not, but it definitely occupies a different space than say, class in America is obviously important, but just the flavour of it is different. And how we embody and show class in the UK has just always always fascinated me. (Activist)

We can see in these examples, the remarkable potential for “cross-over” in which issues taken up in public debate were linked to research, and in which certain figures sought to straddle fields of engagement. Rather than simply being experts in specific defined arenas, the capacity to go beyond professional norms which was important. This was especially the case with some academics, for whom the inequality hook provided leverage to operate in transverse ways. The anthropologist David Graeber was frequently mentioned as a central influence:

I think when you mentioned Occupy, that made me think of David Graeber . . . (Inequality professional)

I started reading his tweets and looking at the stuff he’d written. I think it was before I did my master’s at the LSE a couple of years before that and thought how refreshing he was and how he came at things so differently, which made, it was that kind of imaginative, think outside the box, that kind of thing. Sort of anything goes type. (Activist)

Yeah, he was super visible and gave a lot of, there was a tent outside St Paul’s. It was kind of like an open university tent sort of thing. And I know he was there a lot and there was some real intellectual thinkers that had been brought into that space . . . (Activist)

He was an amazing thinker and he was gone too soon. A difficult character. I think it’s also fair to say . . . just that sort of antagonistic freak plus, plus just being unfazed by just presenting a different line of thinking in strong terms. (Activist)

Within this ferment, the economist Thomas Piketty was also seen as a disruptive force, as an academic able to move outside a purely academic environment—as a “rockstar economist.” Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty First Century* in 2015, was unprecedented in being a long research monograph which also obtained dramatic public traction, yet which also, in deliberately denigrating the ability of economists to effectively handle the analysis of

inequality—sought to open up wider currents of debate. Our respondents were nearly unanimous in seeing it as a key force:

It's a book that everyone bought and put on their shelves and no one actually read, which is a shame because Piketty is a fantastic writer. (Journalist, *The Guardian*)

within my bubble it was really big. It was a real game changer and it was in the main-stream discourse, which made it important to us as well. (Activist)

one thing that Piketty did do in a way that was stronger than *The Spirit Level* is that it slap bang brought it into FT and into that kind of intellectual space by people that are very centrist who were like, here's a serious economist with a very thick book and a lot of data. (Activist)

the work Piketty did around inequality, even though in a public debate way, it wasn't like, "great, everyone's reading Piketty." I mean not many people they say have actually read the whole thing, but *I think it flowed out ...* (Activist)

This was huge. Yeah, this was hugely important I think ... but just that he by name, cut through well beyond academia to certainly in the policymakers circles that I was working within at the time, that was really important in terms of the substance of the thinking. (Activist)

However, after 2015, this "golden period" of the inequality debate rapidly receded. Our respondents unanimously reflected on the difficulties of sustaining, deepening and extending these concerns since 2015. Politically, the Brexit referendum was a turning point, amplified by the electoral success of the Conservative Party. This was compounded by discussions about how the proliferation of "culture war" discourse, and the targeting of "experts" as out of touch and remote played into public debate. There was considerable discussion about the deliberate targeting of inequality campaigning, notably the increasingly hard line taken by the Charity Commission regarding the acceptable levels of campaigning work that charities could legally do. Some respondents also reflected on the changing levels of interest that political leaders had in promoting inequality issues. Ed Miliband was regularly endorsed as being very attentive to the inequality debate and in seeking to position the Labour Party in relationship to this thinking. This era has now ended. The defeat of Corbyn's Labour Party in 2017 and 2019 was seen to be decisive and several respondents reflected on the lack of interest in inequality across political parties:

I can't remember the last time I heard a front bench politician talk to me about Piketty, refer to Piketty. And I would guess actually if I do think around a Labour front bench, I can't even think of how many politicians would even be likely to ... (Journalist, *The Guardian*)

Another theme was the skill of the political right in seizing popular discontent linked to inequality discourse but twisting it for very different political ends.

I did this lecture ages ago and I was trying, when Brexit happened and Trump got elected and people were like, what is going on here? We've worked this hard. And I think one of

the things that the movement did fail to do was that we made people angry about inequality, but we didn't really give quite clear policy apart from tax the rich a bit more I mean, I used to do this, I used to do this game when I do lectures about this where I would take parts of the speech from Trump, Bernie, Farage, and Corbyn, and the first part of the speech was the same, and no one could tell. People would think, oh, that's Corbyn, it was Trump (Activist)

There was discussion about how race was positioned by right-wing parties as a device to weaken wider discussions of inequality, notably by the construction of the "white working class" as somehow left behind and ignored.

There is certainly evidence, therefore, of a burn out, co-option, or general weakening of the inequality discourse in public debate since around 2015. Our interpretation suggests two interrelated mechanisms contributing to this weakening: firstly, the lack of what Dewey would term effective representation in the political system, as repeated diagnosis of the problems of inequality failed to be met with commensurate action at the national level; and secondly, increasing contestation about which inequality should be the target of that inchoate public's problem-solving, particularly through the strategic focus of the political right on alternative conceptions of the problem of inequality, like fusing nativist politics to a racialised myth of the working class as white. One way of interpreting this is that the centring of inequality as a major public issue allowed the political right to mobilise by pointing to privilege in "culture war" terms—a trend exemplified by the interventions of academics such as Eric Kaufman and Matthew Goodwin. So, there is an argument that the apparent fracturing of inequality debate testifies to the way that the issues have endured but have been subject to political capture. In the final part of this paper, we reflect on duration more specifically.

Mediating Devices: How Inequality Discourse Is Modified, but Also Endures

Having laid out a basic chronology of the inequality debate in the UK—and one that was largely agreed upon by all our respondents—we now take a more analytical approach to consider the specific mechanisms which have allowed inequality to persist in public debate—even amidst the multiple challenges which respondents identified. We reflect on continuities and the durability of some—but not all—of the motifs which were powerful in the 2010–2015 period. In other words: what, if anything, remains in the public sphere after a period of intense crisis has passed, when the underlying issues have not been resolved (and in fact intensified)?

We suggest two linked resources which were embedded in the UK public sphere during the high period of discursive mobilisation in 2010–2015, and which still contain significant latent power even during a phase when there are limited prospects of being meaningfully listened to by political decision-makers. These sources are iconic (re-)framing devices which allowed the framing of debate to be reworked so that it could be re-embedded in more stable field positions. Thus, the dynamism of the 2008–2015 period, including the role of crossover agents which was initially disruptive, could then be given an enduring place by being re-embedded in new fields, where the stakes of retaining inequality as a key motif remained.

Our starting point draws out a telling difference between the relative durability of the four specific interventions we asked about (the Occupy movement; Piketty; *The Spirit Level* and the Great British Class Survey). A crucial issue was the ability to mobilise iconic visualisations and graphics which could thereby straddle networks

And it was great because even people who had probably read five pages of *Capital in the Twenty First Century*, you could drop Piketty and you could show a graph or a key stat and instantly you had academic credibility for a point you wanted to make about economic inequality. I know that sounds horribly coarse, probably to an academic. (Activist)

Crucial to this success was the graphic deployment of percentile distributions (see the discussion of the power of visualisations in Halford and Savage 2017). These had already been deployed in Occupy Wall Street where they were seen to be key to the communicative success of the movement

Yeah, I think for me it did crystallise the 99%. We are the 99 and that was really helpful in my mind in saying it's not all of these different factions and groups and different levels of inequality. It isn't between us, these groups, it's between us and them. (Activist)

They rather sort of highlighted this notion of the 1% ... I think it has been mainstreamed if you like. (Activist)

And it provided quite a sort of an easy shorthand, the 99%, to centre inequality ... (Activist)

Respondents made the same point about graphic clarity and the ability to crystallise a message that could thereby resonate widely about *The Spirit Level*

And there was a lot of statistical criticism of the graphs, but it did kind of literally draw the lines and the correlations between higher inequality and worse social and political outcomes ... (Activist)

There is an interesting contrast here with the GBCS, which was successful at the time, but failed to establish a core, iconic, visual. Indeed, the focus on the interactive class calculator operated in a very different way as it allowed users to question and indeed de-stabilise the interpretation of class proffered in the study itself (see the discussion by Savage et al. 2015, Chapter 1). Thus, although an interest in class was stimulated, this did not allow any stabilisation of what social class might entail.

A further iconic visual was the one produced by Oxfam depicting the number of billionaires who owned as much wealth as half of the world's population. Several respondents emphasised the communicative power of this campaign

The thing is as well is to get that kind of traction of the billionaire statistic, for example, on everything that you go out with ... Oxfam first came out with one of the first, the tax havens report in 2000. (Activist)

Oxfam's putting out these numbers every year. You could see ... I was at this conference ... and there was this spike every January when Oxfam started doing their Davos moment, the spike in how much inequality was mentioned in the press. (Activist)

Significantly, we find that there is a broad familiarity with these iconic heuristics and the normative arguments about inequality which they encode. At times this almost verges on overfamiliarity, as demonstrated by the below quotes from two different journalists, which shows how embedded such problematisations have become in public debate:

we'll publish Oxfam's annual, X many billions have been taken by billionaires away from developing world countries, blah, blah, blah. (journalist)

we'd like to kind of hold up a headline that says X billion pounds is the gap between pay for the richest 10 people in the country versus the bottom 50% or something. (journalist)

The point about these iconic visualisations is that they provide "exemplars" (to use Thomas Kuhn's phrase), which allows them both to critique older framings, and also provide the potential to be mobilised within alternative paradigmatic fields. And this is precisely what happened: key agents came to seize on inequality as an icon which gave them a distinctive identity to situate themselves against competing organisations. The two key players here were the *Guardian* newspaper and third-sector organisations, especially Oxfam which were seeking a distinctive role and identity.

One journalist made some interesting comments about the GBCS, which he was not enthusiastic about, partly because he saw it as too much of a BBC product.

I worked at the BBC for quite a while for the best part of the decade, and the BBC did with that class survey exactly what I expected BBC to do, which is turn it into a fun game that you can play to see where you land up on the pecking order.

It is not incidental that s/he had become famous as a *Guardian* journalist. Indeed, the *Guardian* newspaper played a key role in promoting the inequality discourse. One interviewee also discussed the way that the *Guardian* promoted *The Spirit Level*. Another *Guardian* journalist reflected on the fact that the editor of the *Guardian* invited his 15 senior journalists to a private meeting with Piketty so they could reflect on the lessons from his book.

Why was the *Guardian* so keen to push this line? As the criticism of the BBC class survey testifies, they wanted to differentiate themselves from the BBC, as part of the wider field dynamics within UK journalism. Here the inequality hook proved an important tool for this purpose. There would always be limits about how far the BBC itself, with its contested and sensitive public funding status, could effectively take leadership. In fact, they took up the Great British Class Survey project as part of their "citizen science" agenda which they were well disposed to lead with given their high profile and public service remit. It is interesting that despite journalists frequently referring to the impact of the GBCS in causing public discussion in 2013, attempts to encourage the BBC to repeat it in some form have signally failed.

If the *Guardian* could differentiate itself from the BBC by highlighting inequality, it also needed to distance itself from the conventional business-oriented press such as *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph*. Inequality proved a perfect hook here, as it addressed economic issues in a way that serious newspapers were supposed to do, but with a different slant from the usual growth-oriented and business cycle models that prevailed in the established broadsheet press. Another journalist spoke interestingly of how the *Guardian* navigated this terrain

Guardian will ... extensively discuss inequality and the drivers of inequality. We will quote all the main organisations that disapprove of inequality But equally, we will also report extensively on GDP and how GDP has either grown or contracted. And the message being that GDP growth is good, GDP contraction is bad And that's very much guided by the American model.

Thus, it can be argued that inequality proved to be an important—and enduring—part of The *Guardian's* field positioning—also reflecting its unusual economic position, buttressed by the Scott trust and thereby also insulated to some extent from commercial imperatives, allowed it to seize the “inequality hook” as part of its durable position within the journalistic field. This remains to the present day and can be seen to now be a core part of its identity and positioning within the field.

The *Guardian* is an interesting case as it differs from other media organisations where inequality was a “passing fad” and did not become part of the longer-term identity. Thus, Channel 4

Yeah, I mean, I remember Channel four, they did this kind of in-studio—because this was 2014 and because inequality was so vogue—they went, we've got to do something. And they got Richard Bacon to present this show, and I was the geeky stats person and it was a live audience and it was really well done, *but the fact ... they would not do that now* (Activist)

Within civil society and campaigning space, the re-positioning of Oxfam was very significant.

it's interesting to me how many NGOs now talk quite openly about economic inequality. Oxfam, which is a huge NGO in this country, it's got a huge name recognition ... But they did all that work around Davos year after year, and they will talk openly about economic equality (Journalist, *The Guardian*)

As with the *Guardian*, Oxfam found the inequality discourse useful to position itself within the civil society field. Its own brand had to some extent been sullied by its historical, and contested, role as a conventional poverty alleviation charity. One of our respondents even referred to it as a “colonial construct” (Activist) in which “as you can imagine, most Oxfam people are middle class and come from Oxbridge or Russell group and parents, fathers in the military, et cetera, et cetera.” The enduring centrality of inequality as part of Oxfam's agenda was made stark during the coronavirus pandemic, which the organisation branded “The Inequality Virus” in its major report. We have already referred to the power of Oxfam visuals in “stabilising” the inequality message, and the success of this was an important lever for them to differentiate themselves from other third-sector organisations, NGOs and charities. The public legitimacy of Oxfam has been badly damaged by its own scandalous practice, notably the sexual abuse cases of its staff uncovered in Haiti and Chad, this may have encouraged it to pursue more of a campaigning agenda to distance itself from its highly problematic development work. Certainly, we were reassured that Oxfam continues to target inequality as a major campaigning issue in the future.

Conclusions: The Inequality Debate and the Public Sphere

We have shown that the trajectory of inequality debate presents a double-edged perspective towards the health of the public sphere. Between 2008 and 2015, a critical issue—

inequality—cross-fertilised into public debate in a dynamic form which challenged conventional economic framings and generated social movements alongside intense debate. This was not a “planned” process, in which a few agents deliberately strategised to introduce this discussion: rather, it came out from the disruption and turbulence caused by the 2008 financial crash, allowing a range of “cross over agents” to become highly effective.

There is little doubting that the “golden age” of the inequality discourse has faded, and to some extent, this can be interpreted through the terms of reference introduced by writers drawing attention to fragmentation and narrowing of the public sphere. Certainly, in reflecting on the period since 2015, it is easy to find examples of how this debate has been limited, closed down and obscured. In the face of a lack of effective political representation of the incipient public coalescing around the problem of inequality, and the strategic focus of the political right on cultural inequalities, it is true that a certain bewilderment has characterised the public after 2015. Nonetheless, the inequality debate has not been completely shut down, and it still retains some kind of public hold. There is a sense of *modulated durability*: inequality is not an issue which has “gone away” or somehow been completely removed from wider debate: indeed the appeal of movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter indicate how these arguments can resonate and cross-fertilise with related currents of thinking seeking to make inequality visible. The salience of economic inequality as a frame for understanding the unevenly distributed costs of the coronavirus pandemic in public discourse reinforces this impression of the modulated durability of the inequality debate (Odriozola-Chéné et al. 2020; Sitto and Lubinga 2020).

In reflecting on the mechanisms which are able to drive forward the inequality debate in 2023, we are struck by the need for mediating forces which able to span otherwise fragmented domains. In the previous section we discussed this by reference to the importance of communicative devices—graphs, visualisations, formulae—which could readily be transmitted. This argument reminds us of Latour’s invocation of the importance of inscription devices. Inequality devices, notably those associated with percentile distributions, are part of the communicative culture.

These devices allowed a number of key institutional agents to reposition themselves within fields, by claiming identities associated with inequality issues. We have traced this especially strongly for the *Guardian* newspaper, where inequality allowed it to differentiate itself from its rivals in the BBC and the establishment broadsheet press. The same can also be said for the role of Oxfam within the field of civil society: in seeking to re-position itself away from its older “colonial” charitable framing, seizing inequality as its banner proved very useful—and despite legal attacks that it has weathered—it remains so. There are no doubt other examples of how inequality has assisted with internal field positioning, such as in academic disciplines (for instance in helping to establish the sub-field of “public economics”).

This is all underpinned by the durability and in key ways, intensification of inequality itself. The daily, often mundane inequalities generated during the COVID pandemic and the “cost of living crisis” makes this all very clear. Inequality persists and accelerates in generating the kind of mobilising grievances which provide the lightning rods for new publics to form, such as mutual aid collectives during the pandemic or participants and supporters of the increasing industrial action of recent years. The racialisation of economic inequality is attracting increasing interest and concern (notably Khan 2020), with growing emphasis on breaking down silos by which academic economics has not sufficiently engaged with categorical divides, notably around gender and race. There is a steadily growing interest in

wealth inequality as an underpinning driver of economic inequality which links public and academic concerns (e.g. Savage 2021). These are hopeful currents which testify to the ongoing potential of the inequality debate to drive public agenda. Public discourses may be more fragmented but are potentially growing even more combustible as time progresses. It is important here to centre the human experience of inequality in the UK over the period we have discussed, particularly to qualify any sense that the modulated durability of the inequality debate has been without cost. Recent research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation suggests that destitution in the UK, defined as a lack of access to basic needs like shelter and food, has been increasing at an accelerating rate over the past five years, and now includes around one million children (Fitzpatrick et al. 2023). Although we argue for evidence of a kind of public sphere resilience at a macro-level in terms of developing infrastructures for future publicness, we are mindful of the call by Banaji (this issue) for narratives around resilience not to obscure the “weathering” effect that ongoing crises and deprivations have, particularly on minoritised communities who are denied equal access to a public sphere in the first place.

In conclusion, we call for a moderately optimistic perspective. Even though the golden age of public debate on economic inequality between 2008 and 2015 has receded, we have argued there has been no simple “closing down” of the inequality debate, because it has become a significant feature of the identity of campaigners within specific fields of action. Thus, inequality served to destabilise established intellectual and discursive fields during 2008–2015 and succeeded in inserting inequality as an anomaly which needed attention. Even though this moment was bound to fade, these concerns have been domesticated into alternative field positionings which have proved to be enduring. To be sure, this process changes the vibrancy and intensity of the earlier period, defining it in more established forms. Nonetheless, we hope that our case study indicates that a focus on endurance and durability provides a valuable means of extending our appreciation of the ongoing prospects for the public sphere.

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ORCID

Mike Savage  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4563-9564>

Michael Vaughan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3582-3296>

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Mike Savage (corresponding author) is Martin White Professor of Sociology at the LSE where he was founding co-Director of the International Inequalities Institute and now convenes their research theme on "Wealth, Elites and Tax Justice."
E-mail: M.A.Savage@lse.ac.uk

Michael Vaughan is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the LSE's International Inequalities Institute. He completed his PhD at the University of Sydney on the contentious politics of international tax, and then worked as a postdoctoral researcher at the Weizenbaum Institute for the Networked Society in Berlin.