

# Broken societies

## Inequality, cohesion and the middle-class dream

Danish academic **Christian Larsen** challenges traditional accounts of social cohesion by arguing that the degree to which society is considered 'broken' depends largely on how citizens *perceive* the status of their fellow citizens.

*'There is no evidence that the ethos of a people can be changed according to plan. It is one thing to engineer consent by the techniques of mass manipulation; to change a people's fundamental view of the world is quite a different thing, perhaps especially if the change is in the direction of a more complicated and demanding morality.'*

**Edward Banfield<sup>1</sup>**

Many people in the UK – from politicians to ordinary citizens – have a growing sense that society is falling apart. In common with many other affluent countries in the world, there is an increasingly regular refrain that something is 'broken'. This essay argues that this feeling should be understood primarily as just that – a feeling. One commonplace view is that the underpinning cause of this lack of social cohesion can be found in the real world, that individualisation, urbanisation and the breakup of the nuclear family are leading to a reduction in day-to-day social interaction, in turn undermining social cohesion. More recently it has become fashionable to link the feeling of social dislocation to growing ethnic diversity or increasingly corrupt or unrepresentative political institutions.

I reject both these explanations. Instead, I believe the root of the problem is that any sense of social cohesiveness is intrinsically tied up with the perception of living in a meritocratic society with a strong, accessible middle class. In countries like the UK and US, as it has become hard to believe in the liberal dream of a meritocratic, prosperous, middle-class society, so too it has become difficult to resist a feeling that society has broken down. This essay explains why this is the case by contrasting the experiences of the UK and US with those of Denmark and Sweden.<sup>2</sup>

### SCANDINAVIAN TRUST VERSUS ANGLO-SAXON SUSPICION

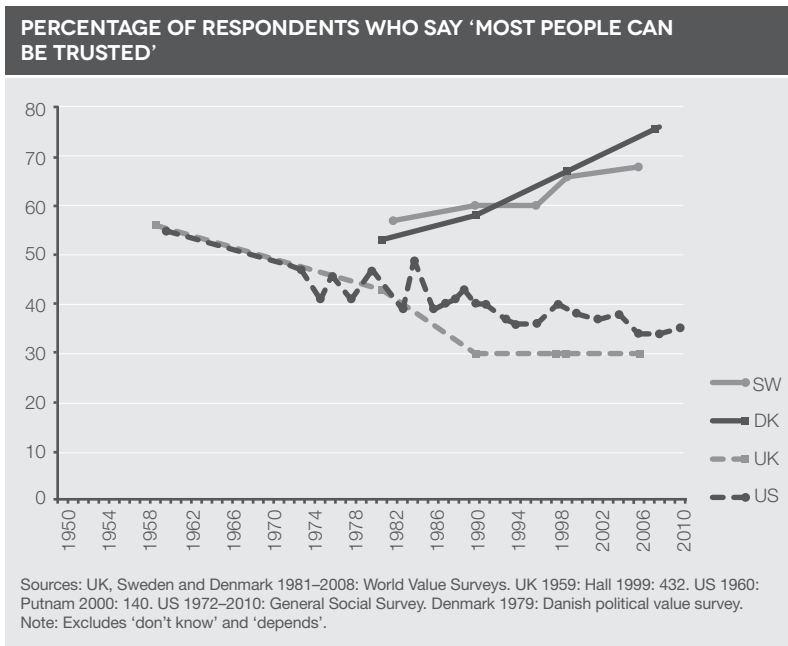
Social cohesion as a term is undefined and unclear. In my work I do not take it to refer to the 'glue' or 'bonds' that hold societies together – the definition

<sup>1</sup> Banfield E (1958) *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, Glencoe: The Free Press, p158

<sup>2</sup> This essay is based on the author's book *The Rise and Fall of Social Cohesion: The Construction and Deconstruction of Social Trust in the US, UK, Sweden and Denmark* (2013, Oxford University Press).

which is often used by policymakers, academics and ordinary citizens alike. Instead I define social cohesion as the belief held by a country's citizens that they share a moral community, which enables them to trust each other. This trust of unknown fellow citizens – sometimes known as 'generalised trust' – has been the subject of significant scholarly interest and we have a good understanding of its importance. We know, for example, that political systems, economic systems and diverse societies tend to function better when generalised trust is higher. We also know that, in general, trust levels are very stable over time. However, there are a few remarkable exceptions to this rule. Figure 1 shows the dramatic divergence between the experiences of the US and UK on the one hand and those of Sweden and Denmark on the other.

Figure 1



The intriguing finding is that the share of 'trusters' has decreased dramatically in the US and UK. In 1959, 56 per cent of British respondents said that most people can be trusted; in the latest World Value Survey, this figure was down to 30 per cent. In 1960, 55 percent of Americans said that most people can be trusted; now it is 35 per cent. In Denmark and Sweden, by contrast, the share of 'trusters' has increased. In Denmark, it shot up from 47 per cent in 1979 to 76 per cent in 2008 (the highest level ever measured in any country). In Sweden, the share went up from 58 per cent in 1981 to 68 per cent in the latest World Value Survey.

What explains this divergence? What socioeconomic changes have shaken these countries from stable levels of trust? Why have American and British people become less trusting and Danes and Swedes more so? My answer is that the level of economic inequality within a society profoundly shapes how we perceive the trustworthiness of fellow citizens.

## THE IMPACT OF POVERTY AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

It is not a new idea that the decline in trust in the US and UK is linked to increased economic inequality. Robert Putnam, in *Bowling Alone* argued that:

*‘Social capital and economic inequality moved in tandem through most of the twentieth century ... The last third of the twentieth century was a time of growing inequality and eroding social capital ... The timing of the two trends is striking: somewhere around 1965–70 America reversed course and started becoming both less just economically and less well connected socially and politically.’*

**Robert Putnam<sup>3</sup>**

Neither is it a new idea that greater levels of trust in Denmark and Sweden are linked to their possessing higher degrees of economic equality. However, the challenge has been to understand exactly how these trends are actually linked.

I propose that the link has to do with how different trends in economic inequality have shaped how citizens have come to ‘imagine’ their fellow citizens. In particular, different trends have different impacts on views of the relationship between the ‘middle’ and ‘bottom’ of society. Changes in levels of economic inequality have little impact on people’s personal feeling of belonging to ‘the middle’: most Americans, Britons, Swedes and Danes (still) think of themselves as being in the middle of society. But when asked about the position of fellow citizens there is a big difference between the four countries. Many Americans and Britons (especially those born in the 1970s) have come to believe that most fellow citizens belong to the untrustworthy ‘bottom’ rather than to the trustworthy ‘middle’ of society. In stark contrast, the opposite pattern is found in Sweden and Denmark. This tendency to think differently about fellow citizens matters: if the (perceived) middle think most fellow citizens belong to ‘the middle’ rather than to ‘the bottom’ or ‘the top’ then they are much more inclined to trust most people.

**“Many Americans and Britons have come to believe that most fellow citizens belong to the untrustworthy ‘bottom’ rather than to the trustworthy ‘middle’ of society.”**

## THE TRUSTWORTHY ‘HARDWORKING FAMILIES’ OF THE MIDDLE

The argument that we trust those in ‘the middle’ and not those at ‘the bottom’ or at ‘the top’ is supported by social psychological studies. Across 19 countries studied by Susan Fiske, those interviewed systematically associated ‘the middle’ with traits such as honesty, moderation, tolerance and helpfulness.<sup>4</sup> So it is significant that 82 per cent of Danes and 66 per cent of Swedes believe that they live in a society where most of their fellow citizens are in the middle. In the US and UK, that number is 42 per cent and 38 per cent respectively.

The reason people trust the middle like this is, in part, to do with being more positive towards ‘people like us’ – our own group. But this is not the whole explanation: even those at the bottom and at the top of society

<sup>3</sup> Putnam RD (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon and Schuster, p359

<sup>4</sup> Fiske ST (2011) *Envy up, Scorn down*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation

trust the middle. Another explanation is those in the middle of society are seen as having little to win and a lot to lose by cheating. Why would they risk the reputational damage of being caught cheating? Anthropological studies support this notion: 'It is those in the middle of the social spectrum, vying with one another for slight precedence in social affairs, who are most concerned about gossip and most vulnerable to its consequences.' Again, in contrast, those less concerned about gossip 'tend to be persons who are insulated from the social, political, and economic consequences of gossip either by their wealth ... or by their accepted marginal social status' (Merry 1997: 48).<sup>5</sup>

I would also argue that how 'the middle' is constructed in broader public debates matters. The very notion of social cohesion often takes as its point of departure the imagined heyday of the hardworking, law-abiding white married couple with two children of the 1950s and '60s. This can be seen in the language of 'middle Britain' and its 'hardworking families'. It is easy to observe how those outside the middle are often defined by how they deviate from this stereotype.

## THE UNTRUSTWORTHY BOTTOM

In contrast to the perception of the upstanding citizens of society's middle ranks, the bottom of society is associated with dishonesty, sadness and the potential for aggression (Fiske 2011). Given this, the divergence between the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian countries matters: 57 per cent of Americans and 55 per cent of Britons think they live in a society where most people are part of 'the bottom', whereas in Sweden and Denmark the figure is 30 per cent and 12 per cent respectively. Again this can, in part, be explained by in-group/out-group feelings, rational thinking about incentive structures (that the poorest face fewer disincentives to cheat), or the framing and language of public debate.

Here, 'framing' is particularly salient. For my recent book, I searched 1,750 newspaper editions in the US, UK, Sweden and Denmark for stories about poverty and welfare recipients. It is not only the perceived size of 'the bottom' that matters, it is also a matter of 'the bottom' being constructed differently in the four countries. For instance, racial components to perceptions of 'the bottom' in the US are well-researched, but comparisons with the UK, Sweden and Denmark provide new insights. Most importantly, British media content suggests that the social construction of 'the bottom' in the US is not simply a matter of race. In Britain, although 'the bottom' was primarily presented as being white, one finds the same stereotypes as in the US. Looking at men, this meant notions of untrustworthiness, laziness and being irresponsible fathers. The UK's more generous welfare system led to some greater focus on benefit fraud, but otherwise the stereotype is very similar. The picture of women is largely the same: the American stereotype of the black 'welfare queen' is replicated almost identically, race notwithstanding, in the UK media. And the common American perception

**“The very notion of social cohesion often takes as its point of departure the imagined heyday of the hardworking, law-abiding white married couple with two children of the 1950s and '60s. This can be seen in the language of 'middle Britain' and its 'hardworking families'”**

5 Merry SE (1997) 'Gossip and scandal' in Klein DB (ed) *Reputation: studies in the voluntary elicitation of good conduct*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press

of the young people of ‘the bottom’ – personified as uncontrollable gang members – is found in the British media too.

In Sweden and Denmark, the media present an altogether more positive portrayal of the bottom of society. They are generally shown as trustworthy, peaceful and not in opposition to a national moral community. The only exception to this positive view was in articles about immigrants.

Here too, however, there were important differences between the US and UK on the one hand and the Scandinavian countries on the other. It is true that increased ethnic diversity is a challenge in Denmark and Sweden, and while overall levels of trust increased during periods of relatively high immigration, there are underlying issues. Asked in postal surveys about non-western immigrants, the British, Danish and even Swedes are as hostile to ethnic minorities as non-black Americans are towards black Americans.

However, a noteworthy difference appears in the scale of misperceptions of the size of the ‘problematic group’. The average American thinks that black people make up 30 per cent of the population – the real number is around 13 per cent. The average British person thinks that non-western immigrants make up 25 per cent of the population – the real number is 4–6 per cent. In Sweden and Denmark, by contrast, the estimates were much closer to the real figure of around 6–7 per cent. And this does matter: in all four countries I found that those who thought ethnic minorities made up a sizeable share of the population had less trust in most people. Thus, part of the explanation for high trust levels in Sweden and Denmark is that ethnic minorities are perceived as just that: minorities.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MOBILITY

So far this essay has focused predominantly on economic inequality in terms of levels of income and wealth inequality. These shape the perceptions that people have of the middle and bottom of their societies. But the connection between economic inequality and trust is more complicated than this: perceptions of social mobility and just how meritocratic a society is matter too. In short, the middle is more likely to trust people at the bottom – even ethnic minorities – when they are optimistic about their country becoming a ‘middle-class society’. The prospect of those at the bottom ‘moving up’ in society might positively influence peoples’ perceptions: if upward social mobility is likely then everyone, including those in the lower echelons of society, could be imagined to have more to lose by being caught cheating.

US data shows that those who are optimistic about the future are much more likely to trust fellow citizens than pessimists. Furthermore, the effect of optimism about society seems to have stronger effects than optimism about one’s own life chances.<sup>6</sup> It is not a matter of how people perceive their own incentive structure but rather of how a ‘bright future’ alters the imagined incentive structure of the normally untrustworthy bottom. This is

**“In the UK, for example, the discussion about ‘broken society’ has probably helped to further break society.”**

<sup>6</sup> Uslaner EM (2002) *The moral foundations of trust*, Cambridge University Press

why scepticism about the potential emergence of a middle-class society lowers levels of trust: the large middle comes to think that if those at the bottom have little chance of moving into the middle then the bottom has more to gain and less to lose by cheating.

Unfortunately, a lack of data makes this thesis difficult to investigate fully. Currently, the four countries we are looking at do not differ much in perceived fairness of social mobility – despite the fact that social mobility is much higher in Denmark and Sweden than in the US and UK. However, what is clear is that *perceptions* about social mobility matter for trust. Those who believe in equal opportunities to get ahead have more trust in fellow citizens than those who do not believe in meritocracy. Thus, decreased trust in the US and UK and increased trust in Denmark and Sweden is also influenced by changes in perceptions of social mobility over time.

It is worth emphasising that these conclusions focus largely on the importance of perceptions and misperceptions. This is because social cohesion, especially as measured as trust in unknown fellow citizens, is primarily a cognitive phenomenon. Trust and distrust are judgments depending on citizens' perceptions of their society. This is not to say that the 'real' society does not matter. Indeed, many of the perceptions discussed in this essay contain a kernel of truth. It is true, for example, that the middle of society has shrunk and the bottom of society has expanded in the US and UK. There is also a kernel of truth in the belief that the middle of society has increased and the bottom of society decreased in Sweden and Denmark. But it is important to recognise how these socioeconomic conditions influence society through public discourse fuelled by the mass media, politicians and even social scientists. In the UK, for example, the very discussion about 'broken society' has probably helped to further break society.

## HOW TO FIX A 'BROKEN SOCIETY'

There are good reasons for scepticism about political attempts to influence levels of trust in society. At the top of this essay, I cited Banfield's classic study of what he labelled a 'backward society', making the point that trust levels are hard to influence. Even so, what would a trust-building strategy look like? Some might advise politicians to facilitate public engagement in civil society, to reduce immigration, or to foster uncorrupt and accountable institutions. But based on experiences of our four countries, I would prioritise lowering levels of poverty and economic inequality and better articulating the demographic and socioeconomic realities of society.

The problem in the US and UK is that it is difficult to win popular support for policies that reduce poverty and inequality once highly negative stereotypes about those at the bottom of society have been established. In such circumstances it is much easier to win elections on policies that 'fix society' by punishing the poor. As a result, both the US and UK seem to be caught in vicious circle. Popular perceptions of immigration reinforce these problems. By contrast, in Sweden and Denmark it is politically difficult *not* to fight increased poverty and inequality, because voters perceive fellow

**“The problem in the US and UK is that it is difficult to win popular support for policies that reduce poverty and inequality once highly negative stereotypes about those at the bottom of society have been established.”**

citizens as people belonging to the middle – and even those at the bottom are seen as deserving and peaceful. So, the sociological and pessimistic viewpoint is that politicians merely adapt to public opinion.

However, my work also supports a more optimistic viewpoint – that social cohesion is strongly connected to political narratives about living in a meritocratic, middle-class society. In the countries for which we have the data, a population with a majority of ‘trustees’ can only be found where there has been a combination of strong economic growth with a political narrative about establishing such a meritocratic, middle-class society which everyone in ‘the bottom’ has the opportunity to join. The economic boom and political projects of liberalism and social democracy of the 1950s and ‘60s form the background for the high trust levels found in the early measurements in all of the US, UK, Denmark and Sweden. The US had ‘the American dream’ along with a political programme that declared ‘war on poverty’; Britain had the ‘Beveridge plan’; Denmark had a ‘Denmark for the people plan’; Sweden had the famous ‘Peoples’ home’. Trust levels in the Nordic countries have moved from high to extremely high because these political projects are perceived to have been realised and protected. Trust levels in the US and UK fell from high to low because these political projects are perceived to have failed.

In Denmark and Sweden, the political challenge is to establish political projects about how the meritocratic middle-class society can be upheld and its benefits extended further still. In the UK and US, the political challenge is to establish political projects about how it can be restored. In all four countries, there are challenges that tempt politicians to take a conservative stand: low growth, increased inequality, the breakup in family structures, increased ethnic diversity. The guiding star is the imagined societies of the 1950s and ‘60s: the society that was. However, increased social and ethnic diversity is also a fantastic opportunity to restore social cohesion by retelling the progressive liberal and social democratic meta-narratives about equality and equal opportunity. After all, it is a great story that our children might be able to live in a real meritocratic, middle-class society.

**Christian Albrekt Larsen is a professor at the Centre for Comparative Welfare Studies, Aalborg University, Denmark.**

**“By contrast, in Sweden and Denmark it is politically difficult *not* to fight increased poverty and inequality, because voters perceive fellow citizens as people belonging to the middle – and even those at the bottom are seen as deserving and peaceful.”**