

Dorling, D. (2017) What is Great about Ourselves: Letter in reply to David Goodhart, London Review of Books, Vol. 39, No.21, November 2nd, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v39/n21/letters>

What is Great about Ourselves

David Goodhart suggests that levels of inequality in Britain have remained essentially unchanged since the 1990s ([Letters, 19 October](#)). This can be argued only by those who ignore the rapidly rising income and wealth of the best-off 1 per cent. That alone now makes the UK the most economically unequal country in Europe by OECD measures. Goodhart suggests that spending on social security is much higher now than it was in the 1970s, but he ignores both the near full employment and very low income inequality back then: the UK was the second most economically equal large country in Europe (after Sweden). Housing costs were also much lower and fairer. Public spending was lower because less was needed. Even so, Goodhart doesn't mention that public spending today is much lower in Britain than in almost every other Western European country.

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Somewhere in the midst of David Goodhart's cross response to Pankaj Mishra, he defends his argument that 'group cultures ... do still matter.' Half a century ago, the anthropologist Fredrik Barth summed up what a generation of sociologists and anthropologists had learned from the empirical study of people living in multi-ethnic situations: the idea of a common culture is a chimera. What gives a group of people a sense of sameness is agreement on who they are not. The shared 'cultural stuff' is neither here nor there: the action happens on the boundary where small markers of difference identify the people 'we' are not. The markers change as contexts change, and the other group that gives our sense of 'us' also changes: what is constant is the process of boundary-making. Goodhart's vapid pop sociology is itself an exercise in this kind of boundary work; it is in no way an analysis of it.

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