

Forty years ago, class defined us in Britain. Now it's we who define our class

Kenan Malik, *The Observer*, 24 September 2023

More Britons call themselves working class, but they are also increasingly liberal, a new survey reveals

[...] It is 40 years since the BSA launched its first survey of social attitudes, and this year's report focuses on how British society has changed over that time. Often forgotten in debates about "social conservatism" is that what today we consider to be conservative or liberal is very different from that of 40 years ago. On issues from gender roles to same-sex marriage there has been, in the words of the psephologist John Curtice, "a near-revolution in the country's cultural outlook and social norms". Contemporary conservative beliefs about gay rights or the relationship between race and British identity would have seemed outlandishly liberal in the 1980s.

This "onward march of social liberalism", in the words of a previous BSA report, has enmeshed with shifting attitudes to class in complex ways that have served often to distort perceptions of that liberalisation. "We are all middle class now," the former Labour deputy leader John Prescott claimed in 1997. We are not, either objectively or in our self-perceptions.

The BSA survey shows that people today are more likely to declare themselves working class than they were in the mid-80s at the height of Margaret Thatcher's assault on the unions. This is true not just of the mythicised "white working class" but also of ethnic minorities, who are more likely to identify as working class than white Britons, of women, and of young people, too.

How we perceive class boundaries has, however, dramatically changed. Education is now a more discriminating class signifier than occupation. To be "working class" is defined less by whether you are in a white-collar or blue-collar job than by whether you went to university. While 60% of people who left school with a GCSE or less identify as working class, just 28% of university graduates do so.

No longer does the workplace, or the trade union, or the community bind people together, infusing them with a sense of common purpose. Class is perceived less as a collective identity than as a personal disposition, not so much an economic or political marker as a cultural identifier.

People who identify as working class are more leftwing (on issues such as the redistribution of wealth and the significance of class conflict) than those who view themselves as middle class. They are also, however, less liberal and more sceptical of immigration. This might provide weight to the postliberal argument about the significance of a socially conservative working class with values distinct from those of the liberal elite. It is, however, not so straightforward.

For a start, the working class, like the rest of society, has also become more liberal on social issues, even if less so than the middle class. The BSA uses a "libertarian-authoritarian" scale, based on attitudes to issues such as the death penalty or "traditional values". A majority of working-class people (56%) are on the "libertarian" rather than the "authoritarian" side of the divide.

Working-class attitudes to immigration have also become more liberal. The BSA defines respondents as "pro-" or "anti-" immigration depending on the degree to which they view it as "bad or good" for Britain. Working-class respondents have over the past decade become increasingly pro-immigration, and those pro and anti are now almost evenly divided, 48% to 52% (where have we seen that ratio before?).

Contrary to conventional wisdom, it is not that working-class people have become more hostile to immigration but that liberalisation within the working class has moved at a slower pace than within the middle class. Nor does polarisation exist simply between the working class and the liberal elite but lies within the working class, too.

At the same time, what the report calls "class awareness" dampens hostility to immigration. Working-class respondents who are more concerned by inequalities and think it more difficult to move between classes—that is, those who have a more politicised view of class—have more positive views about immigration and are more leftwing.

Those who see fewer barriers to social mobility, and so are less concerned with inequalities, are more negative about immigration and more rightwing. Another way of reading this is that those for whom being working class is a cultural identity are likely to be more rightwing and more hostile to immigration whereas those for whom it is more a political marker lean to the left and are more welcoming of immigration.

The BSA report adds to the wealth of data that has accumulated in recent years providing for a more nuanced understanding of working-class attitudes to social issues, including immigration. The distinctions it draws between cultural and political identities, and between class "identity" and "awareness", are important, both in shaping policy and for engaging with voters.

As Oliver Heath and Monica Bennett, authors of the survey's chapter on social class, observe: "People who are concerned about class inequalities in Britain may be more receptive to economic policy proposals that seek to limit the influence of big business and of the rich and powerful than they will be to policies that seek to blame immigrants for squeezing the labour market and making economic conditions more difficult for British workers."

That is a significantly different approach from the claim that politicians can appeal to working-class voters only by embracing social conservatism and hardline immigration policies. It is a lesson the left would be wise to heed.