

What is 'the economy'?

In a city on the south coast of England one evening, just after the 2016 referendum on the European Union, Diane talks about the economy at the offices where she works as a cleaner. She is on the top floor in a corridor overlooking the housing estate where she grew up and where her mother still lives. She is in her early thirties, married with four children. She is composed and, at times, reticent. She describes how just before the 2008 financial crisis her husband was earning high wages as a painter and decorator so they decided to buy a house. A few months later the crash happened and his earnings dipped almost straight away. They 'struggled on' trying to make the payments but realised they would have to sell at a loss to avoid repossession. Nearly ten years later she is working two minimum-wage jobs, as cleaner and care home assistant, having to work 'vice versa' with her husband. 'Vice versa' means that because childcare is too expensive, when she is at work he looks after the children, and when she comes home he leaves for work. They are still thousands of pounds in debt, in a debt management plan, chipping away at it. She describes the debt as a 'black hole' and says they will never go back 'that way' to homeownership again.

Some weeks later, a few streets away from where Diane works, four women meet in one of their houses. They are close friends and two of them are mother and daughter. When they are talking about how people on low incomes or benefits like them manage, Linda explains that she knows people, alluding to her daughter Misha sitting opposite, who prioritise spending their last cash on hair extensions rather than food. Misha replies that when she asks her mother or brother to lend her £20 for hair extensions they say no, whereas if she gets the extensions done and then asks them to lend her money for her children's food, they say yes. She adds: 'That's the way I run my economy!' Misha later admits she does not think she will ever get out of debt or stop going further in.

In the autumn, in the same city a mile to the south, Rachel, sitting at her kitchen table, says her upbringing was frugal but secure. As a child she 'knew that there was money behind us, if that makes sense, it just wasn't an obvious thing'. She is still frugal and disapproves of debt, having no debts apart from her

mortgage. However, she knows a lot about finances and has a small pot of savings she invests.

I think I've reached a stage where I know what [money] I have. I know where it is... I do have a few little shares of my own that I kind of speculate a bit on. That's money that I know if I lose it, that's okay.

Rachel says she is interested in 'the economy' and 'follows' it. She follows interest rates, exchange rates and the fortunes of the private sector where her husband works.

There is a gulf between Diane and Misha's economic experiences on the one hand and Rachel's on the other. Diane and Misha were forced to move to the cheaper edge of the council house estate where they grew up, into the insecure private rented sector. By definition, waged work is minimum-waged work. They are both in debt. In contrast, Rachel is financially secure living in a house worth several times what she paid for it and drawing on pensions in early retirement. Diane and Misha experience 'the economy' tangentially but powerfully. It hit Diane directly in 2008 and it hits them both, in the shape of minimum-wage rates, in-work benefits and social services, on a day-to-day basis. In contrast, Rachel actively *follows* 'the economy', speculating on it.

In Brexit Britain, talk about 'the economy' dominates. From the 2016 referendum on membership of the European Union until the 2019 election, the main theme was how much 'no deal' or softer versions of Brexit would damage the economy (UK Government 2018). At the time of writing, these arguments about the economic effects of different future relationships with the European Union look like they will continue to run even after the decisive Conservative election victory of 2019.

What people believe about 'the economy' is therefore key to understanding politics. The orthodox view is that people believe 'the economy' is more important than any other issue in the sense that they vote for the policies that will make either their households or the country better off (Duch and Stevenson 2008; Lewis-Beck et al. 2012, 2013). Some political economists and political behaviour scholars believe that, broadly speaking, 'the economy' and economic issues are still the most important issues in politics. They argue that in the 2016 referendum, low-income Leave voters may not always have voted for what they believed would make them better off, but they were motivated by issues that could more broadly be considered economic: anger at the faltering recovery from the 2008 crisis, rising economic inequality and austerity, feeling shut out from the benefits of globalisation or, even more broadly, alienated by years of the needs of 'the economy' being presented as trumping everything else (Berry 2016; Colantone and Stanig 2016; Dorling 2016).

However, an increasingly dominant narrative is that those who believe 'the economy' is important support Remain but that 'cultural' goals drive some to

support Leave even though it will cause 'economic self-harm' (Legrain n.d.; Owen and Walter 2017). This narrative stems in part from polling, such as that done in the weeks before the 2016 referendum by the British Election Study, asking people what 'the most important issue' was in helping them decide how to vote. Overwhelmingly, those intending to vote Leave came up with the word 'immigration', while those intending to vote Remain came up with the word 'economy' (Prosser et al. 2016). This division is echoed in the title of John Curtice's (2016) analysis of the referendum result and in many other publications and media commentary as 'two poles'. Since 2016, attaching importance to 'the economy' seems to have become a fault line or cleavage in its own right. In the 2019 general election, a greater proportion of working-class people voted Conservative than Labour (McDonnell and Curtis 2019), despite the fact that Labour claimed to offer more economic policies directed at them. Some argue that this is not a temporary phenomenon, that whatever components go to make up 'Brexit identities', they may be stronger than party political ones (Hobolt et al. 2018), reflecting a deep change in the nature of British politics.

But is it the case that Remain supporters, with disproportionately high incomes and having spent more years in education, care more about 'the economy' than Leave supporters? In this book I argue that we cannot answer questions about how important people believe 'the economy' is if we do not know what they understand by that term in the first place. What goes through people's minds when they hear politicians talk about 'the economy'? What goes through their minds when surveys ask them how much importance they attach to it? Do people as diverse as Rachel, Diane and Misha understand the term 'the economy' in the same way as each other or in the same way as the political scientists asking and interpreting survey questions understand it? Are understandings of this term changing? It may seem common sense that everyone understands 'the economy' is 'to do with money' just as society is 'to do with people'. But such definitions are too shorthand. In the words of one of the founders of public opinion studies, Walter Lippmann, we need to know what pictures go through people's minds when they hear terms and how the pictures vary (1922:18). In the case of the pictures that go through people's minds when they hear the term 'the economy', we know surprisingly little.

Conducting ethnographic fieldwork starting just after the 2016 referendum and continuing into 2018, I asked: how do you understand the term 'the economy' when you hear politicians and media commentators talk about it? The following chapters are about sixty people living in a city on the south coast of England and how they see 'the economy', how it links with their lives and what they understand about different aspects of it, such as trade or the economic effects of migration. The fieldwork was conducted in the two years following the 2016 referendum but reveals more of an underlying understanding of 'the economy'. It was conducted in one city but includes people from as many backgrounds as

possible: the marginalised *and* the frequently heard, men and women, old and young. It was conducted with an open mind about what understandings might emerge and whether there would be patterns in understandings. It is part of a broader movement to engage in the messy and often inconclusive business of exploring meanings. It does not aim to provide direct answers to why people vote the way they do, but it does aim to enhance understanding of how they might be picturing ‘the economy’ as they do it and, in doing so, raises some questions about taking categories like ‘the economy’ and ‘economic’ for granted.

Understandings of ‘the economy’

How do people understand what the term ‘the economy’ means? Tim Mitchell has said ‘the economy’ is a ‘concept that seems to resist analysis’ (1998:84). At the same time, it is a taken-for-granted concept with many assuming people instinctively understand it in the same way. If we take the case of mainstream politicians, who dominate the media presentation of ‘the economy’ and frame what people like Rachel, Diane and Misha will hear if they come across that media commentary, this sense that everyone out there understands what they mean by the term ‘the economy’ comes across in a powerful way.

The official version: taking ‘the economy’ for granted

Over the period when the fieldwork for the book was conducted, from the 2016 EU referendum through a general election and the Brexit negotiations into 2018, politicians from all parties were constantly talking about ‘the economy’ and urging people to vote for the sake of it. Moore and Ramsay’s analysis of media coverage during the referendum campaign shows ‘the economy’ was ‘the most referenced political issue’ (2017:40). There are some differences in how leading Leave politicians, including Nigel Farage, approached it. He tended not to raise ‘the economy’ proactively but concentrated on criticising economic experts and ‘Project Fear’ or linking any concerns about ‘the economy’ to the problem of immigration.¹ But analysis of public announcements by politicians from the Labour and Conservative Parties² indicates they raise ‘the economy’

¹ From a Nexis search conducted on 26 January 2018 of all UK newspapers in the period 1 April–23 June 2016 for references to ‘Farage’ and ‘the economy’. See also Moore and Ramsay (2017).

² Extracts selected from the top 20 results in two separate Nexis searches, conducted on 27 September 2018, searching for UK national newspaper references for ‘Cameron’ OR ‘Osborne’ OR ‘Hammond’ OR ‘Corbyn’ OR ‘McDonnell’ AND ‘the economy’ from 1 April 2016 until 27 September 2018 and again on 1 April 2019 for the preceding six months, substituting ‘May’ for ‘Osborne’.

more proactively, and that in some respects they talk about it in the same way, not just in the 2016 campaign but also in the years since, including in talk about 'the economy' not related to Brexit.

The two key elements in the understanding of Labour and Conservative politicians are that 'the economy' is a term that everyone understands – a neutral phenomenon – and that it is distinct from the rest of human life.

First, despite advocating different economic policies, Conservative and Labour politicians use 'the economy' as an *umbrella term* and often do not feel the need to define it further. In April 2016, according to Conservative Chancellor George Osborne spearheading the Remain campaign, 'the economy' is something that can 'grow' and contract. He says 'it's good news that Britain continues to grow, but there are warnings today that the threat of leaving the EU is weighing on our economy'. He describes 'the economy' as 'strong' in the speech, pleading 'let's not put the strong economy we're building at risk, and vote to Remain on June 23' (Dathan 2016). In some speeches Osborne spells out what 'the economy' encompasses – 'people's income and jobs' (Settle 2016) – but politicians often dispense with such detail and Prime Minister David Cameron backs Osborne on the same day by saying simply 'it is right; leaving the EU would pose major risks for the UK economy' (Settle 2016).

In his speech to the Conservative Party conference in October 2016 the subsequent Conservative Chancellor Philip Hammond warns of a 'roller-coaster' ride for Britain's economy and promises to 'grow the economy', contrasting it now with its state in 2010 at the end of the Labour period in government when it 'looked out for the count' (Hammond 2016). But despite contesting claims about the effects of Conservative economic policies, Labour politicians adopt the same approach of using 'the economy' as an umbrella term that does not require defining. In June 2016 Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn warns, 'it's not good for our communities or your families if we are running a weak economy' (Swinford 2016) and, just before the 2017 general election, Labour Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell spells out his vision for 'a big deal to upgrade the economy' (Bartlett 2017).

Second, politicians' talk about '*the* economy' uses the definite article combined with images of growth or contraction and gives the impression of something that is a phenomenon of itself and separate from the rest of human activity. This links with the idea that 'the economy' is about impersonal forces, the demand and supply of goods and money. As Hammond argues, in October 2016, it is 'post-Brexit Britain's economy' that faces a 'daunting challenge' (Wilkinson 2016), as if it is not us that do.

This approach to the use of the term 'the economy' has not changed since the referendum. For instance, in February 2019 Labour economic spokesperson John McDonnell says his party's support for any Brexit deal will be contingent on it protecting 'jobs and the economy' (ITV 2019) while supporters of Prime Minister May's deal say it will do just that (Thomson and Sylvester 2019).

The core argument of this book is that there is an ‘official’ version, but not everyone understands the term ‘the economy’ as presented in that version, that some people resist it and that different groups of people seem to understand the term in different ways. At least two broad understandings emerge from the fieldwork, and they dominate the rest of this book, but, before setting out what they are, I want to trace back to the roots of the official version and alternatives to it, because doing so helps to contextualise what emerged from the fieldwork.

I argue that the official version presented by mainstream politicians is echoed by the media and economists and also many political scientists, those interpreting how important ‘the economy’ is to people when they act politically. In essence, even though Labour politicians like John McDonnell advocate socialist economic policies and draw on heterodox and neo-Marxist economics (2017), they frame ‘the economy’ in a way that is similar to their Conservative counterparts and based in the sense of ‘the economy’ as an umbrella term for a universally understood phenomenon that is distinct from the human sphere.

The formal economy

Before the late nineteenth century, economists might have spoken, as Adam Smith did, about an invisible hand of the market, but they saw the economic sphere, where people trucked and bartered, as linked with other human spheres like politics and society (Smith 1999, 2000). However, late nineteenth-century ‘marginalist’ economists like William Jevons and Carl Menger put the discipline of economics on a more formal footing. They developed ‘scientific’ laws that they argued governed the operation of economies, such as the iron law of wages and the theory of comparative advantage (originally proposed by David Ricardo [1817] 1996; see also Watson 2005, 2012). Loren Lomasky describes these laws as ‘below surface’; they cannot be observed or understood by an untrained eye (2008:471). Abstractions and models are necessary to learn how they might apply to real-world conditions. Only trained economists, drilled in the laws until they lose their more ‘common sense’ thinking, can fully understand how ‘the economy’ works. These economists’ ‘economy’ consisted of impersonal forces, distinct from the human. They were the first to use the definite article that is now so instinctive for politicians, talking about ‘*the economy*’.

In the twentieth century the marginalist economists became dominant to the extent that to this day the majority of economists describe themselves as neoclassical and accept the fundamentals such as the laws, even if they sometimes disagree on other aspects such as whether to adopt Keynesian or monetarist approaches (for a critique see Earle et al. 2017). They became influential within the civil service and government. It also suited politicians to talk about ‘the economy’, in the twentieth century increasingly synonymous with ‘the national economy’ (Tooze 1998), as two world wars and technological and

industrial advances increased their ambition to control more aspects of people's lives (Mitchell 2008a; Tomlinson 2017).

The formal or neoclassical approach of treating 'the economy' as a universally understood term for impersonal forces also permeates some fields in political science. Like mainstream politicians, many political scientists seem to assume people understand what 'the economy' means, treating it as a given. For instance, political scientists routinely phrase survey questions with the term 'the economy' in them as if it is just an umbrella term that does not need to be defined further. The British Election Study (2017) asks simply:

How well do you think the present government has handled the economy?
Do you think immigration is good or bad for Britain's economy?

Some political scientists even argue most people also have the same goals for 'the economy'. They want it to be 'healthy' or 'growing' and will vote for the political party that has the best reputation for 'managing' it without necessarily applying the same partisan scrutiny to their economic policies as to their other policies (Stokes 1992:143). However, I argue that the participants in the fieldwork for this book suggest that people do not share such a common sense of what 'the economy' is or should be and that any common understanding that did exist may have declined in recent years, leading to people approaching political scientists' questions about 'the economy' with a growing dissonance.

Some economists and political scientists do research aspects of people's understanding of 'the economy', such as what 'healthy' or 'growing' mean (Stiglitz et al. 2010), or whether rising economic inequality and problems related to the 2008 crash have modified how much of a 'valence' issue 'the economy' is (Borges et al. 2013). However, generally, political scientists have not done as much empirical research into the pictures that go through people's minds when they hear the term 'the economy' or answer political scientists' survey questions about it as they have some other concepts, such as immigration (Wong 2007; Ford 2011; Skey 2011; Blinder 2015; Tonkiss 2016; Pilkington 2016). Political scientists have tended to leave open study of what 'the economy' means to anthropologists and economic sociologists and psychologists (Moscovici 1988; Roland-Levy et al. 2001; Polanyi 1978, 2001; Zelizer 2010; Graeber 2012; Hann and Hart 2011).

Does this lack of curiosity on the part of some political scientists reflect taken-for-granted assumptions about what 'the economy' is? Many who support the formal neoclassical idea of 'the economy' as distinct from human life also argue it is an objectively determinable phenomenon. In essence, there is only one true version of 'the economy', discerned most accurately by the experts, neoclassical economists themselves (Caplan 2001, 2008). The corollary to this approach may be a lack of open bottom-up research into plural understandings of 'the economy' because of an underlying assumption that people either understand the objectively determinable economy or they *lack* understanding of it, reflected in much

work by economists on voters' folkloric or naïve beliefs (Caplan 2008; Leiser et al. 2010).

The economic relations and provisioning versions

In some political science fields, anthropology and economic sociology, there are two main alternative approaches to the formal approach, which I draw on at points in this book and briefly outline here.

The first emphasises 'economic relations'. Some political economists working from a more critical tradition argue that the formal understanding does not reflect how far 'the economy' depends on economic and social *relations* (Mitchell 1998, 2008a; Tooze 1998; Bourdieu 2002; Watson 2005, 2012, 2018). In essence, the impersonal forces are not so impersonal. They point to the framing of 'the market' as a thing particularly in the last four neoliberal decades (Crouch 2004; Watson 2018). Globalisation has contributed to an elite narrative of 'the economy' as beyond human control – as Bourdieu put it 'beyond contestation' (2002) – or depoliticised (Burnham 2001). 'The economy' is presented as having needs that are more important than social goals. This framing masks the extent to which 'the economy' is about people and how their social and political relationships are structured.

Some have argued there was always likely to be a backlash both against the rising economic inequality of the neoliberal decades and successive governments' depoliticising strategies. The backlash could take the form of rejection of the official version of 'the economy', or distrust in economic expertise, or both. For these political scholars, the backlash manifested in low-income people supporting Leave in 2016 because, despite thinking 'the economy' was important, they rejected the 'official version' of it spearheaded by politicians in the Remain campaign who epitomised a neoliberal and depoliticised approach that had not benefited them (Berry 2016; Colantone and Stanig 2016; Dorling 2016; Watson 2017).

The second, sometimes related, alternative to the formal version is an understanding of 'the economy' as 'provisioning'. Karl Polanyi (2001) pointed to the fact that the word 'economy' comes from the Ancient Greek for household economies: 'oikonomia'. Polanyi called such early and 'pre-capitalist' or 'pre-market' economies *substantivist* economies, because they were based on the idea that people needed to 'provision' for life and the way they provisioned was based on their social ties. In substantivist economies people relied on ideas about reciprocity, redistribution and social status, not just profit, and therefore 'the economy' was less distinct from social spheres of life than in the formal version.

Some feminist scholars argue provisioning more closely encompasses how women understand 'the economy'. More so than men, women's work is often unpaid and seen as outside the formal sphere. Feminist economists (Ferber and Nelson 2003) have drawn on the substantivist approach, as has Power in her

understanding of 'the economy' as social provisioning (2004). She prefers the term 'social provisioning' to 'provisioning' to denote 'that at its root, economic activity involves the ways people organize themselves collectively to get a living' (2004:6).

Many who propose that we do see 'the economy' as provisioning, or would if the dominant framing of it was not as formal, are advocating for a more ideal kind of economy. Contemporary anthropologists Hann and Hart argue that 'the economy' should be seen as a *human* economy because 'in the end everyone should feel "at home" in a world that has been made by markets' (2011:170). Similarly to those political economists who believe there will be a backlash against neoliberalism, Polanyi (2001) believed that the neoclassical or formal approach was socially damaging. Followers of the 'formal' neoclassical approach claimed it was inevitable that when societies became 'market-based', their economies would become disembedded from social ties and that this was a natural and sustainable state of affairs. But Polanyi argued people will become desperate or angry enough to try to fight back, having what he called counter-movements against any economy that was 'disembedded' from society.

Those who see 'the economy' as in some way socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1971), rather than as an objectively determinable reality as neo-classical economists among others do, may be more open to the possibility that different people might have different understandings of it. This is the approach I have taken in this book. I did assume that understandings would vary in some way, but was open to what emerged from the field. I argue below that elements of all three of the understandings I have described here – the formal, economic relations and provisioning – emerged in various ways in participants' understandings of what 'the economy' means in Brexit Britain.

Asking directly

Before setting out the understandings that emerged from this fieldwork, I briefly describe the fieldwork and who the participants were.

My methodological approach is interpretivist ethnographic (Bevir and Rhodes 2015). Interpretivists argue that we should keep an open mind about what patterns in understanding, if any, might emerge. Therefore I decided to recruit participants from the fullest possible range of backgrounds. I interviewed people from age 18 to 80, spread roughly equally over the decades, and equal numbers of men and women. I interviewed them in two districts with contrasting income levels to make sure I talked to people in a range of economic circumstances. One district, where Diane and Misha lived, was to the north of the city's university and I gave it the pseudonym 'Hill District' and the other, where Rachel lived, was to the south of the university, with the pseudonym 'Church District'. My participants numbered sixty, small enough that I could talk to them in some

depth and large enough that if very dominant trends emerged they might be representative of something in the general population, at the least worthy of further ethnographic or larger-scale study.

I chose to conduct the research in one city with a population of around 250,000 on the south coast of England. There is often commentary about the marginalised or left-behind in northern parts of England or Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. However, those living in the Southeast are not all wealthy (Boswell et al. 2018). The city was a thriving port with industries. Older residents describe working on the docks valeting cars, for the tugboat companies and at large foundries and car factories. A large proportion of those employed now work in what are described as elementary jobs, in factories or warehouses and the large retail sector. The city has been hit hard by rising economic inequality and the decade of austerity, becoming more deprived so that now one third of its children grow up in poverty.

The city still has a stock of council housing but there are acute shortages and long waiting lists because many residents cannot afford the high private rents, let alone the property ladder. In the last twenty years the biggest change to the population has been people moving into it from other European countries; between the 2001 and 2011 censuses the 'other white' population increased by over 200 per cent, from 5,519 to 17,461. There are suburbs of the city people call 'little Poland' or 'Russia'. This city contains two universities. On the university-subsidised buses long-term residents look on with closed expressions at young and well-dressed students from all over the world. I chose this city to research in before the June 2016 referendum but it demonstrated how unusual it was compared with other southeastern cities by narrowly voting to Leave.

This study's research design is based on an ethnographic sensibility that I describe in Chapter 2. Many political scientists and political economists deduce why people voted the way they did from the data on economic conditions they face or the demographic features they have, but at some stage research that asks people directly what they *believe* about 'the economy' is also necessary. Ethnographic methods are likely to be more effective than surveys in advancing knowledge about the beliefs of those groups in society whose experiences are furthest away from most political scientists. McKenzie argues in her ethnographic study of working-class Leave voters that studies like hers are necessary because most political scientists either do not understand working-class narratives or misrepresent them (2017).

There is a particular need for ethnographic research into understandings of 'the economy' because it is such a nebulous concept. Many people struggle to put into words what they think 'the economy' means. Someone can use their everyday sense of justice to extrapolate to justice in the more abstract sense because at all levels justice is about the human realm. But 'the economy' is a more

dualistic concept than society or justice. People I talked to were conscious that while they felt highly emotional about their personal economies, which were very much in their human domain, affecting things like their emotional relationships profoundly, they could not so easily translate these feelings to the abstract level of 'the economy'. Therefore, whenever I asked the direct question 'how do you define the economy?' I got thin responses along the lines of 'to do with money' and usually not much more (see also Norrish 2017). In the fieldwork for this book I got people talking in greater depth about 'the economy' by asking about their economic life stories and about features of 'the economy' they might have experience of, such as employment and debt, as well as the general term 'the economy' itself.

The participants' 'formal' and 'rigged' versions

I set out to research from the bottom up, open to the possibility that I might find lots of understandings of 'the economy'. I simplify what the following chapters reveal to be complex, but the core conclusion I drew from the fieldwork was that the understanding of participants in the low-income district was different to that of those in the high-income district. High-income participants seem to share the formal neoclassical understanding of 'the economy'. However, lower-income participants understand 'the economy' in a way that does not fit with either the formal or provisioning version, but is arguably close to the 'economic relations' one. The overwhelming sense of 'the economy' they have is that it is rigged by the rich. Perhaps surprisingly, people from each district shared an understanding regardless of which parties and economic policies, or sides in the referendum, they went on to vote for. As Cramer observes, people see 'the economy' through the lenses of their own experiences of it (2016:chapter 1).

I started interviews with economic life stories and people's experiences of employment. Employment and provisioning are characterised as 'struggle' in the lower-income Hill District and 'comfort' in the higher-income Church District. Hill District participants have been forced to adapt to the changing employment environments in ways that those in Church District have not.

In the higher-income Church District, people understand 'the economy', as the formal neoclassicals do, to be a broad umbrella term for impersonal forces that have the potential to benefit. They use the terms 'economy' and 'economic' often and with ease and a sense of familiarity. They sometimes talk about '*our* economy', as if they feel they belong to it and it is benign. For them 'the economy' is an umbrella, and a large one encapsulating many different aspects; prices, trade, employment, interest rates and exchange rates interact with each other and they see their own provisioning as connecting with the 'the economy' at many points. They have self-interest in following it closely, as Rachel does, to

speculate in shares or anticipate mortgage rates. They recognise the potential for 'the economy' to be a positive force.

In contrast, for low-income participants such as Diane and Misha, everyday economies are intense struggles. The official economy affects their employment and living conditions in powerful ways but there are other aspects of the official economy, such as shares or even baseline interest rates, which they believe do not affect them directly. Therefore, they do not feel strongly connected to 'the economy' as a whole and the conception of it as an umbrella for forces that interact with each other does not resonate.

Many of the low-income participants in this book express little interest in following 'the economy' closely and may even believe following it will threaten their emotional wellbeing. They are more reluctant to use the term 'the economy' in talk about 'the economy', reflecting greater unease with how it is used in the official discourse. They do not share the sense of '*the economy*' as an impersonal phenomenon distinct from the human, because they believe powerful interest groups, often characterised as 'the rich', control it; 30-year-old Misha is one of many who say something along the lines of 'the rich write the rules'. I asked about underlying aspects of 'the economy' like austerity and the EU referendum issue of migration. Low-income participants are bitter about how rigged austerity was, how disproportionately it hit them. On migration, many see the lack of economic research into or politicians' concern about the localised effects of migration on their wages, their employment contracts or their social housing as a form of rigging by economic experts. These experts claim there will be benefits from migration to the 'overall' economy but those benefits never seem to trickle down to them. I suggest low-income participants may dissociate themselves³ from the official version of 'the economy' in part because of what they see as the experts' lack of willingness to conduct localised research on the effects of migration.

Where does 'the economy' begin and end?

If participants contest what the term 'the economy' means, what else does this suggest? In talk about 'the economy' they also reveal something of where 'the economy' begins and ends for them and how it begins and ends in different ways for different people. This fieldwork raises questions about how political scientists categorise, and whether and how political scientists do it fits with how ordinary people do. I briefly outline three issues here that I expand on in later chapters. First, how should we approach categorising what is economic or non-economic? Second, is 'the economy' important to people? Third, are understandings of 'the economy' changing?

³ Also see Lisa Mckenzie (2017) for an analysis of working-class Leave voters' 'dissociation' from the Remain campaign talk about the economy.

Entwining

Many scholars researching understandings mention forms of 'entwining'. Neoclassical economists believe people should not bring their moral or cultural beliefs into their economic reasoning – in effect should *not* entwine them (Caplan 2001, 2002). The only question that should be in someone's mind when deciding how to act economically or which politicians' economic policies they should support is 'will it achieve efficiency?' (Haferkamp et al. 2009). If they vote for efficiency they are more likely to achieve a cultural goal like fairness because everyone will prosper, whereas if they try to pursue fairness rather than efficiency, they will not get either. Economists despair that many people do in fact bring moral or cultural beliefs in to their economic and political reasoning, and they have survey evidence that those of lower income and the less educated do it more (Bazerman et al. 2001; Blinder and Krueger 2004; Leiser et al. 2010; Gangl et al. 2012).

Political economists writing on austerity have also claimed moral and economic 'entwining' occurs. I outline what they say about entwining to make a general point about categorising. Blyth (2013) and Gamble (2013) argued that, at the height of 'austerity acceptance' most people found personal debt morally repugnant, which made them susceptible to seeing government debt as morally repugnant and therefore a serious economic concern. The public had a dominant common sense that entwined their moral feelings about debt with their economic reasoning about government debt and the need to reduce it. Some political ethnographers also argue there is some entwining of economic and moral reasoning. One of the most illuminating ethnographies from the bottom up of beliefs about 'the economy' in the area of redistribution is Katherine Cramer's study of what the voters of rural Wisconsin believe about state funding programmes (2016). Cramer's starting puzzle is the question: why do people in Wisconsin (and elsewhere in the USA) increasingly vote against state spending plans, even when they might directly benefit from them? She notes this tendency is stronger in rural areas than in cities. She believes what emerges supports social identity theory – that people identify with a group, rural residents, and are suspicious or resentful of another group, urban residents, in part 'othering' them all, but in part othering them because aside from being urban they are also more likely to be black or minority ethnic. However she takes issue with those political scholars like Thomas Frank (2007) who explain rural America's rightward shift solely in terms of people becoming more attached to their cultural and religious values. She says this misses the point that both economic and cultural values are involved; rural residents 'intertwine economic considerations with social and cultural considerations in the interpretations of the world they make with one another' in a 'politics of resentment' (2016:7).

I ask, does everyone tend to ‘intertwine’? Cramer chooses to study the rural areas only, vast as they are in a state like Wisconsin, so we do not see whether the urban residents also intertwine their moral and economic reasoning in this way. I have argued that lower-income participants in this research see ‘the economy’ as rigged by rich people rather than impersonal, which might at first glance indicate that they are bringing their cultural reasons in more than higher-income participants. However, on the whole, contrary to the economists’ studies I mentioned earlier, lower-income participants in this study do not bring cultural reasoning in more than higher-income participants. In talk about other issues such as debt, higher-income participants generally were more moralistic than lower-income participants. Higher-income participants, including Remainers, are as conflicted about ‘how economic’ their vote was in the EU referendum as lower-income participants suggesting the contrasting word clouds were always a simplification and that ‘entwining’ may be happening for people from all social backgrounds.

Categorising

This book raises questions about how people categorise what is economic from what is not. Economic anthropologist Graeber says we have to look at the moral and social bases of concepts such as debt, so central to the modern economy, and the central aim of his book is to investigate the ‘moral basis of economic life’ (2012:13). Cultural political economists Best and Paterson argue it is necessary to accept political economic phenomena as potentially having a cultural dimension due to their human element. However, they admit, such categorising is a complex business. Once scholars start to attempt it they may find how they categorise one sphere, such as economic, may then impact on how they define another (2010:21). This book does not contribute to theoretical discussion about categories, but, by describing everyday actors’ understandings, it does at least increase the pressure on political scientists to be consistent in the application of categories.

For instance, is there consistency in the categorisation of opposition to migration? While the political economists I mentioned who still see ‘the economy’ as important tend to assume at least some of the opposition to migration is economic, some political scientists have argued that it should be seen primarily as a ‘cultural’ phenomenon. Inglehart and Norris are key theorists in this debate who I argue underplay the importance of economic drivers of opposition to migration. They adopt the Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2014 approach of categorising political parties that are ‘against immigration’ as demonstrating cultural rather than economic values (2016:32) and, even when they do ask specifically whether immigration is good or bad for a country’s economy, code answers to that question as a cultural rather than economic attitude (2016:45). In Chapter 5 I expand on

how participants in this study understand opposition to immigration to be more economic than Inglehart and Norris suggest. I raise the question: is there an element of being too influenced by the neoclassical economists' consensus that migration benefits 'the economy'? When people dispute that line of economic reasoning, arguing that they believe migration damages 'the economy', or at least some aspects of it, are some political scientists re-categorising what they would see as economic arguments as cultural arguments simply because they are the 'wrong kind' of economic arguments?

Relatedly, how should 'distrust' of expertise be categorised? Distrust is a dominant theme running throughout this book. The fieldwork in this book does support much other evidence that distrust cannot be categorised as primarily cultural, also having an 'economic' element.

Importance and changing understandings

At the start of this chapter I mentioned how prominent the debate about the importance of 'the economy' is. Do the understandings I describe throughout this book shed any light? First, because this book is about getting people to talk about 'the economy' in natural settings using their own words, it does enhance knowledge about the ways in which 'the economy' is important to people. I argue the fieldwork suggests 'the economy' is important to people whatever their income level, but that it means different things to different people.

Second, many scholars suggest that understandings of 'the economy' are changing and that this is due in part to the nature of 'the economy' itself during the neoliberal decades. It is hard to judge whether understandings of the term 'the economy' or how people might be entwining are changing, in part because there are few comparable ethnographic studies of this in past years to draw on. However, the strength of the sense of 'the economy' as rigged in the fieldwork for this book does indicate some greater degree of contestation compared with the past. The fieldwork also suggests that underlying understandings of 'the economy' are slow to change. At the start of interviewing in July 2016, whether Leave or Remain, participants were in a state of shock about the referendum result. From then until the final interviews in May 2018 the EU referendum was by far the dominant political issue, with other peripheral strands coming and going, such as winter NHS crises. Perhaps surprisingly, there was not much movement between 2016 and 2018 in beliefs about 'the economy' in relation to the European Union. The strong Leave interviewees in July 2016 were still adamantly Leave in the September 2017 focus group. There was more movement in belief in one of the other focus groups but it was by non-voters (from a pro-Leave to a pro-Remain position), so maybe they felt more able to change. On Brexit-related economic issues, despite media mention of trade, for instance, going from the level of superficial during the referendum campaign to acres of intense coverage

of in-depth negotiations by 2018, participants' underlying understanding of that economic issue was not much affected by the passage of that time. This book is about understandings of 'the economy' in a time that is dominated by Brexit, but the underlying understanding seemed to have its roots in other past key events and watersheds, like 2008 as a harbinger of debt and austerity or 'the Thatcher years' in the minds of those aged sixty and over.

The findings in this book support much of the work of those political economists who argue the effects of the neoliberal decades and rising inequality were likely to change underlying understandings of 'the economy' so that people now see it as less benign, having less of a potential to benefit them than before. It also suggests that such underlying understanding as we apparently have in Brexit Britain may have been developing and changing for some time.

Plan of the book

In Chapter 2 I expand on the interpretivist ethnographic methods I use. I also introduce the districts and the participants in this study. For readers interested in greater depth on ethnographic methods I provide more detail in the Appendix. I explain how the interviews contain questions asking people about their 'economic life stories' and, to help get round the 'nebulous' nature of 'the economy', some questions on aspects of it, such as understandings of employment, debt, government spending, taxation, inflation, banking, trade and the economic effects of migration.

The theme of Chapter 3 is 'employment', or what Polanyi called 'provisioning'. It explores how people in the two districts make a living and how central this is to understandings of 'the economy'. In the low-income Hill District, when people tell their economic life stories there is much talk of 'managing', insecurity and radical job changes. Work is hard. There is a range of beliefs about unemployment and a lot of personal experience of unemployment and the reality of the unemployment figures. In the high-income Church District, while younger participants feel insecure as they face the future, those over forty who have been professional feel 'secure' and 'comfortable'. In Church district there are more detached views about unemployment although, strikingly, there is also distrust of government employment figures.

Chapter 4 explores what participants understand about the related issues of personal and government debt, government spending and taxation encompassing beliefs about austerity. This chapter yields some initial insights into how participants entwine cultural and economic reasoning. It also raises questions about the claims that people are so lacking in understanding that they are attracted to simple ideas.

Chapter 5 explores the themes linked by their dominance in the referendum campaign and post-referendum 'negotiation' period, of trade and the economic effects of immigration. Participants' understanding of trade is 'sketchy'. I explore understandings of migration, starting by outlining two planks in the cultural thesis of scholars like Inglehart and Norris, that opposition to migration was the most important issue for Leave voters and that opposition to migration is a largely cultural phenomenon. I consider neoclassical economists' assumptions that migration is overwhelmingly positive for economies and how that thinking permeates some political scientists' work. From the fieldwork I reveal a complex picture of how 'economic' opposition to migration is. I explore beliefs about the effects of the largely EU-originating migration into the city on employment conditions, wage levels and other resources like social housing. In many political works, people who oppose migration are believed to fear the 'Other'. However, the concept of the 'Other' is more varied in this book, as I show in Chapter 5. For some people the others are the 'less educated', for some they are 'older' people and for some they are 'the experts'.

In Chapter 6 I tackle what participants understand by the term 'the economy' as a whole, drawing on both their thin answers to the question 'how do you define "the economy"?' and the sense they have given throughout the rest of their interviews or focus group talk. 'The economy' itself is a 'hollow' word according to one participant, and a divergence emerges between the low-income and high-income districts. I explore the parameters of trust of economic expertise.

Chapter 7 concludes. I argue that while factors like political beliefs, education, gender and age shape understandings of the official economy, income or economic experiences appear to shape them the most. It is likely that the gulf in understandings has widened in recent decades and 'the economy' is now a more contested term than it used to be.

In Chapter 8 I suggest these findings have implications for political behaviour studies because lower-income people may be more reluctant to label their political behaviour as 'economic' and they may approach survey questions using the word economy as if it is a given with a greater degree of dissonance than they did in the past. I develop the argument that some political behaviour writers may have mistakenly taken people's reluctance to use the term 'the economy' as a sign that they do not care about economic issues and their cultural beliefs have become relatively more important. The findings raise questions about how political scientists categorise what is economic and what is cultural or moral. In general much scholarship implies that low-income people bring moral or cultural considerations into their economic reasoning more than high-income groups do. Throughout this book there are as many instances of high-income participants bringing in cultural reasoning as of low-income participants. I suggest that many

political scientists both exaggerate and unjustifiably ‘problematise’ low-income participants’ cultural reasoning. Therefore, I make a case for ethnography that includes people from a cross-section of backgrounds, rather than exclusive reliance on ‘sectoral’ ethnography, which explores usually marginalised groups in isolation. When a subject is as taken-for-granted as ‘the economy’ appears to be, then reflection on what it means should be from all quarters.