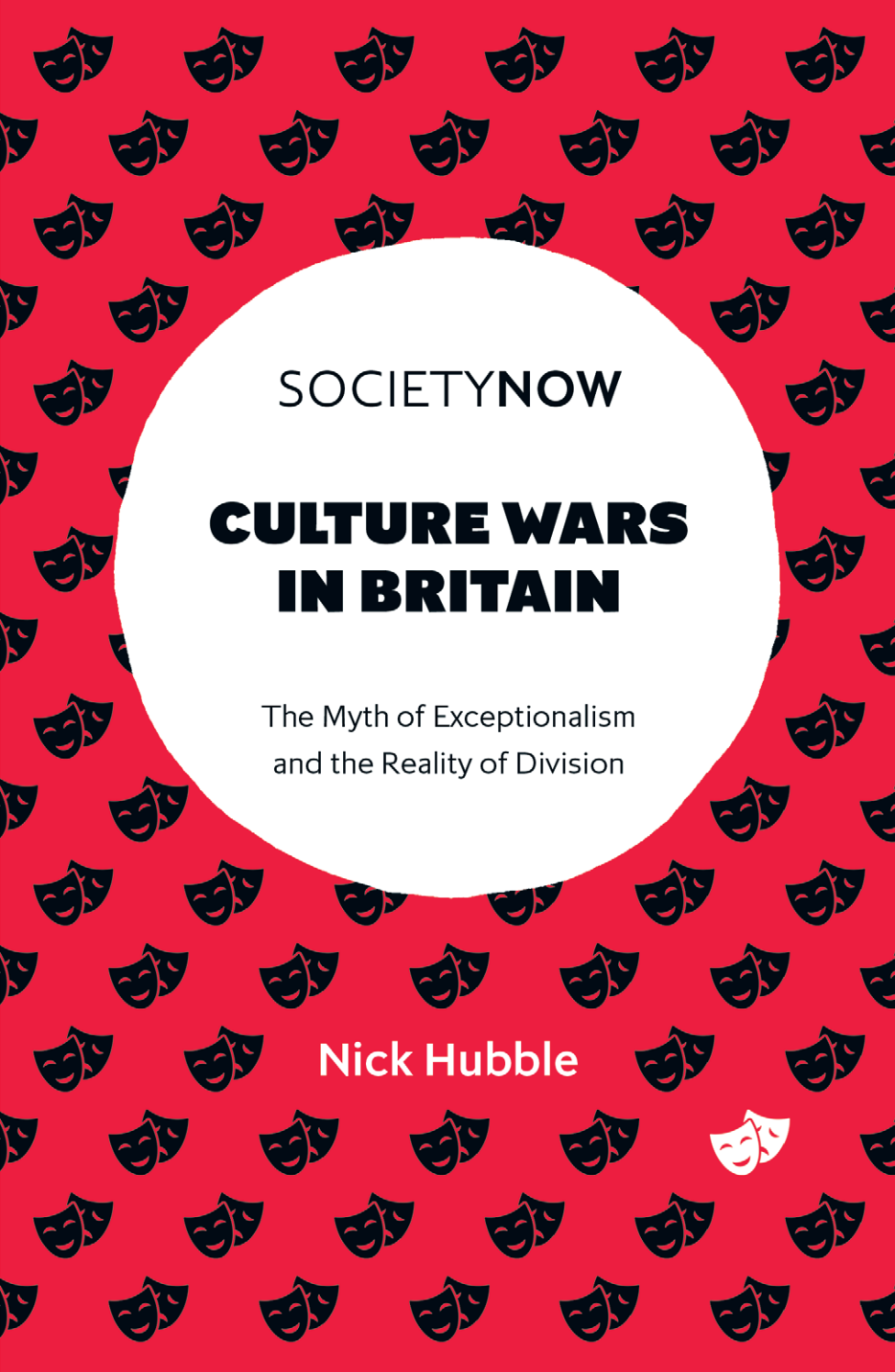




SOCIETYNOW

**CULTURE WARS
IN BRITAIN**

The Myth of Exceptionalism
and the Reality of Division

Nick Hubble

CULTURE WARS IN BRITAIN

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CULTURE WARS IN BRITAIN: THE MYTH OF EXCEPTIONALISM AND THE REALITY OF DIVISION

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AfD	Alternative für Deutschland
AI	Artificial Intelligence
BLM	Black Lives Matter
BSA	British Social Attitudes
DEI	Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
ECHR	European Court of Human Rights
EDI	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
EEC	European Economic Community
EHRC	Equality and Human Rights Commission
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GLC	Greater London Council
GRA	Gender Recognition Act
ILEA	Inner London Education Authority
ILP	Independent Labour Party
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer or Questioning
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Aromantic, or Agender and other individuals
LLM	Large Language Model
MO	Mass Observation
MRP	Multilevel Regression and Post-stratification
NHS	National Health Service
PR	Proportional Representation
SNP	Scottish National Party
UKIP	United Kingdom Independence Party
UN	United Nations
WHO	World Health Organization

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PREFACE

I was born in an NHS hospital in May 1965, 20 years after the Second World War. Greater London, comprised of 12 inner and 20 outer boroughs (including my native Bromley), had come into being only weeks before. Britain's wartime leader Winston Churchill had died back in January, a few days after the House of Commons voted to reorganize secondary education. Consequently, I would go on to attend a comprehensive school between 1976 and 1983. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom's higher education provision was in the process of being extensively expanded, by the addition of 'plate-glass' universities, such as Essex, where I would study as an undergraduate between 1989 and 1992, and Sussex, where I would gain my postgraduate degrees between 1995 and 2002. 1960s Britain was changing and everyone knew it.

But this wasn't the first time that Britain had changed, nor would it be the last. My parents were both the youngest children of mid-to-large-size prewar families. They both had older brothers who served during the war. My dad's parents were both born in 1899. While my grandmother worked in a munitions factory, my grandad fought in the First World War, came home and was unemployed, before getting a job with the Metropolitan Water Board and a London County Council House. He reached the position of foreman before he retired in the 1960s. Following the 1944 Education Act, my dad

(born 1935) passed the Eleven Plus, and went to a grammar school, leaving at 16 with 5 O levels to work in a bank. My mum (born 1940) went to a secondary modern, leaving at 15 to train as a dietitian, but, when that didn't work out, arranged a day of interviews for office jobs in London and was able to take her pick. This was 1956. Britain had full employment, and the postwar years of austerity were over.

Social and sexual attitudes were already rapidly changing when my parents married in 1962. By 1970, when my sister was born, the death penalty had been abolished, divorce liberalized and abortion and homosexuality legalized under certain conditions. In 1973, at a time when some of the older teachers at my primary school were still regularly reminding us how lucky we were not to have to speak German, Britain joined the 'Common Market' of the European Economic Community (EEC). Not that I ever went to Europe as a child apart from a 4-day trip with a church youth group. We spent our family holidays in my uncle's static caravan near Hailsham. In 1976, when I started at my local comprehensive school, Britain was, according to some metrics, the most socially equal country in the world. It was no longer a country where people needed to keep to their place according to class or gender. Our teachers, especially the younger ones, were conscious of the fact that they were educating their students for a new society.

In 1979, Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party came to power and instigated a further raft of economic and social changes. By 1983, when I sat my A levels, Britain had 3 million unemployed. I turned 18 just in time to vote differently to my Tory-supporting parents. Over the next few years, as I embraced causes such as anti-apartheid, unilateral nuclear disarmament, lesbian and gay rights and the miners' strike, our social and cultural values diverged. Making friends from other parts of Britain while studying Zoology at

university in Bangor – where the native language wasn't English but Welsh – made me realize how suburban my perspective on life was. Even so, I couldn't handle being away from home and dropped out.

While alternating periods on the dole with dead-end jobs, I was inspired by the radically diverse politics of the Greater London Council (GLC) until the Thatcher government abolished it in 1986, following a sustained culture war of fabricated press stories mocking its anti-racist and pro-LGBT policies. I also broadened my cultural horizons by watching European films with subtitles on Channel Four, which had been launched in 1982. I remember my dad once asked me during one particularly obscure late-night offering, 'Is this any good, Nick?' I didn't know. I had no criteria at that time by which to make an informed assessment. I knew I wanted it, though, whatever it was.

But even then, I didn't go to Europe. Instead, Europe came to me. While working at a local Shaftesbury Society FE college as a classroom assistant on a community programme scheme, which paid me £20 per week on top of my social security benefits, I met a West German volunteer on her gap year. During the golden year of 1989, in which the world turned on its axis and the Berlin Wall fell, I gained an A level in English Literature in evening classes and a partner for life.

My mum's last words to me as I left home (the second time) that autumn to go to university, age 24, were 'don't fornicate', despite (or possibly because of) the fact that I was going together with my girlfriend, who had decided to study in the United Kingdom. Some would say that maybe my mum had a point. By 1992, when we graduated, my girlfriend was pregnant, I was unemployed and we were still unmarried. But the times had changed; it didn't stop us living our lives. Our oldest child was born, we completed various postgraduate

degrees (with the benefit of cheap credit), we eventually got married and had a second child.

As the Britain of the 1990s segued into the 2000s, once more under a Labour Government, it seemed as though the dark days of the 1980s had finally been banished to the past. Greater London regained an elected governing body. Scotland and Wales acquired assemblies, which later became parliaments. In England, the cross of St George began to flourish in public even as the football team became increasingly multiracial. But Britain also became embroiled in the American War on Terror, fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq, despite millions of us marching in opposition.

In the aftermath of the 2007-08 global financial crisis, the UK government changed at the end of the decade and introduced austerity economics in a conscious evocation of the immediate postwar period. We went on demonstrations against the cuts. In 2012, university tuition fees were raised to a staggering £9,000 per year. Same-sex marriage was legalized with public support. The tectonic plates of British social and cultural life continued to shift.

By now, my wife and I, both full-time academics, and our three children were living in Wales, where I voted yes in the 2011 referendum for increased legal powers. I supported the yes side from afar in Scotland's fiercely contested independence referendum in 2014, then watched some of that intensity spill over into the 2015 UK General Election, which the Conservatives won in part by running on a specifically English manifesto in England. The final act in this open emergence of division was the UK European Union membership referendum of 23 June 2016. On a personal level, the result for both myself and my wife, who didn't even have a vote despite having lived in the United Kingdom since 1988, was devastating.

Far from living in some hypothetical ‘bubble’, we knew plenty of people who voted ‘leave’, including my dad and my best friend in academia, alongside various acquaintances, relatives and old school friends. My mum, however, voted remain, and thus my parents cancelled each other’s votes out. Was there ever any tension between my wife and I and my dad resulting from this? There were a couple of touchy moments but no more than one might expect in normal family and friend gatherings anyway.

My experience of the leave voters I knew was that they voted for what they thought were good reasons and that, by and large, they were sympathetic of problems that this might have caused others and, for example, took a supportive interest in my wife’s progress in applying for a British passport. For all that our social and cultural values might be very different, in both the case of my dad and my academic friend, there was a tacit agreement that the relationship was more important than those differences; indeed, it wasn’t even a question.

Until that point, as we shall see, the term ‘culture wars’ had hardly been used in the media in a British context. Such matters were treated as an American phenomenon. Of course, attitudinal differences were tracked as part of the British Social Attitudes survey and political polling more generally. Focus groups had played a major role in New Labour’s strategy from the mid-1990s. A correlation between liberal values and the yes vote in the Scottish Independence referendum was observed and appeared again in relation to the remain vote in the EU referendum. But even in 2017, after the outcomes of both the Brexit vote and Donald Trump’s victory in the 2016 US Presidential Election, it was not yet apparent how to politically leverage these cultural divisions. Hence, the disastrous General Election campaign fought by the Conservatives under Theresa May in 2017.

Indeed, even after that election, the Conservatives were still committed to making progressive reforms to the 2004 Gender Recognition Act and carried out a public consultation on this in 2018. This was another subject of personal importance to me because since 2014 I had been publicly identifying as nonbinary. I expected that, once the reform of the GRA proved successful, legal recognition of nonbinary identities would follow. However, that wasn't to be. A new stage in the culture wars was coming.

Following May's replacement by Boris Johnson in 2019 and the Tories' subsequent General Election victory in December of that year, conscious discussion of the culture wars in Britain suddenly took off. In 2020, there would be over 500 British newspaper articles focusing on the existence or nature of culture wars in the United Kingdom.

The sudden emergence of a powerful ideological narrative claiming that a silent majority of ordinary people were throwing off the shackles imposed upon them by a metropolitan elite would have been a culture shock under any circumstances. However, its combination with the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the entrenched social and economic inequalities in the United Kingdom, was surreal. Despite the fact I was working from home, rather than being furloughed, I still had plenty of time to reflect on this process by which the progressive values I had believed in and lived by had suddenly become portrayed as some sort of rootless virus, like COVID-19 itself.

Of course, other people were also thinking about these matters, and the evidence suggests that some people in positions of power in institutions, such as the BBC, actually took these criticisms on board and concluded that they had allowed themselves to become out of step with ordinary people. Suddenly, they felt guilty for imposing their own elite values. I guess being out of touch with ordinary people might

be a potential worry for those who have been to elite schools and universities, especially for those who might think they are inherently more privileged than the wider public. However, I don't know for sure because I didn't go to an elite school or university, and I've never considered myself inherently privileged over the wider public. Therefore, I didn't internalize guilt for being part of some sort of conspiracy to impose liberal values upon an unwilling public. Or, indeed, succumb to the belief that any such thing had happened.

Instead, I started investigating how social change works if we assume that it is not simply imposed on a passive population by enlightened reformers but rather driven by the needs and desires of ordinary people. In investigating this matter by analyzing diaries, memoirs and other forms of life writing, including autobiographical fiction, what I discovered was a much longer and deeper British culture war dating back until at least the First World War.

As has long been understood, that war shattered the old hierarchical Victorian class system and collectively empowered ordinary working people such as my grandparents. However, a focus on the economic and political aspects of this class system has often precluded appreciation of how much of this struggle was fought over cultural terrain. Viewing social change through the prism of a century of British culture wars reveals a history that radically differs from the standard historical narratives of both right and left. Relating this longer history to the ongoing post-Brexit explosion of culture wars in the United Kingdom has turned into a major project, of which this book is the first instalment.

Why am I telling you all this? There are several reasons.

First, I am not going to pretend to be neutral in my personal beliefs because I think that's particularly unhelpful in relation to the broader topic of cultural values and the conflicts that arise from them. Nobody is genuinely neutral in

these matters; indeed, the insistence that there is some sort of objectively fair middle ground in the culture wars causes far more harm than the acceptance of there being genuine division. There is no magic solution. We are not going to return to some mythical British common culture. We urgently need to learn to live with difference.

Second, as this book will demonstrate, self-reflexivity – the capacity to think about oneself from the outside and then use this understanding to shape one's actions – is characteristic of how people live in the modern world and shape their lives in accordance with the society around them. Self-reflexivity is what allows us to assess social norms and decide whether we want to find ways of living outside such conventions. Without conscious self-reflexivity, there is no possibility of finding a new cultural pattern of living which might better accommodate difference. I've tried to incorporate some of my own self-reflexivity into the process of writing this book.

Third, I offer this synopsis of my story, which is not unusual for British people of my age in some respects but less common in others, because one thing we need to remember when talking to each other is that people's cultural values and attitudes are generally underpinned by their lived experiences. When we touch upon core beliefs and personal values, we are dealing with passions that run stronger than opinions on abstract political positions. In this respect, the story of the culture wars in Britain is the story of our lives and how they have changed over the course of the last 100 years. We should all take the time to think about that.

I would like to acknowledge the support of the Leverhulme Trust, who awarded me a Research Fellowship during the academic year 2023-24 for my project, 'Self-reflexivity, Class Consciousness, Culture Wars and Social Change in Britain'. Thanks to the respective conference organizers for allowing me to present on my research at 'Crisis, Continuity and

Change: the British Sociological Association Annual Conference', 3–5 April 2024; and at '(Re-) Drawing Borders: When and Where was the United Kingdom?', Centre for British Studies, Humboldt University, Berlin, 12–14 December 2024. I have also benefitted from arguing about ideas with colleagues at Brunel and giving my professorial lecture, 'Culture Wars and Social Change in England' on 23 April 2024. More generally, I need to acknowledge my good fortune over the years to have spent so much time productively discussing related ideas with academics, writers and critics in social science, modern and contemporary literature and science fiction circles.

Thanks to all the editorial and production staff at Emerald Press for making writing this book such a rewarding and agreeable process. I would also like to express my gratitude to the three anonymous readers of the proposal for this book, who raised good points and gave helpful advice.

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT ARE CULTURE WARS?

The most common response I have received from people on telling them I am writing this book is ‘what are culture wars?’ This is entirely understandable because the idea of culture wars is a very recent addition to British social and political discourse. According to researchers from Kings College London, UK press articles using the term rose from just 21 in 2015 to 534 in 2020 (Duffy et al., 2021). In part, this rapid conceptual shift was due to attempts to understand what had happened in 2016 with the EU referendum and the election of Donald Trump for a first presidential term in America. Since then, we have grown used to a diet of opinion columns and phone-in shows discussing issues such as cancel culture, 15-minute cities, 20 mph zones, free speech at universities, personal pronouns and gender-neutral toilets.

Nevertheless, there remains considerable scepticism in Britain as to the idea of culture wars and whether they are just an import from America that doesn’t really apply to the United Kingdom. It should be noted that maybe a quarter of those newspaper articles from 2020 took the position that culture wars are either overblown by the media or manufactured for political reasons. Even these sceptical articles were divided with the right-wing press seeing the left as having overstated the existence of culture wars in its

obsession with ‘identity politics’, while the left-leaning press tended to depict the political right, especially the post-2019 Conservative government, as weaponizing culture wars to distract attention away from the hardship and inequality that their economic policies were causing.

The recent example of Liz Truss, the shortest-serving prime minister in British history bears out the superficial truth of both these characterizations. For instance, her decision not to appoint a Minister for Women in her cabinet was branded ‘disappointing’ even by fellow Tory MPs ‘after a leadership campaign in which Truss repeatedly used the word “woman” to brandish her anti-woke credentials in the so-called culture wars’ (Topping, 2022). The implication is that Truss expressed performative outrage over the threat posed to ‘women’s rights’ by trans people while she was trying to get elected but then demonstrated that she was not really bothered after all. Instead, she was interested in enacting a textbook neoliberal tax-cutting budget, which turned out to be disastrous and resulted in the Tories subsequently having to reverse all the measures in order to restore calm to the markets and prevent a run on the pound. After leaving office in ignominy, she made little effort to apologize and instead returned to blaming ‘woke culture’ for the state of the economy. From a Conservative point of view, Truss’s obsession with identity politics was just further evidence of her unsuitability for holding power.

From the point of view of the left, by making ‘wokery’ the bogeyman for an economic disaster that she was responsible for, Truss had given the game away: “Woke” is an empty concept, a bogeyman that exists to shift the blame and distract from the right’s own failures. Once upon a time, when Tory ideology didn’t work, they blamed Brussels; now they blame the woke’ (Elledge, 2023). Such opinions have fed into the shared anti-identity politics that has increasingly taken hold

across mainstream politics and the media in 2020s Britain, as I discuss in Chapter 5. However, as the legal adage tells us, ‘hard cases make bad law’. In other words, an extreme example – as Truss certainly was by anyone’s standards – is a poor basis for generalization.

Moreover, very few people know what woke means. Following Trump’s second presidential inauguration, my 90-year-old dad texted me to ask, ‘Nick, can you tell me what WOKE means? Is it not a nice word?’ I replied, ‘It has a varied history, but it’s mostly being used by the media and politicians to mean PC, as in politically correct’. Certainly, phrases in the British press such as ‘woke liberalism’ or ‘woke ideology’ are often used to signify a similar meaning to ‘political correctness gone mad’, an idea that was embedded in popular consciousness in the United Kingdom following the relentless press attacks on the politics of the Greater London Council (GLC) in the 1980s. The origins of the term lie the phrase ‘stay woke’ from the blues musician Lead Belly’s 1938 song ‘Scottsboro Boys’ about the nine black teenagers tried for the rape of two white women in 1931; a case which prompted a sustained international campaign in their defence, and which became a cultural landmark. In theory, describing someone as woke suggests that they are concerned with racial and social justice. In practice, however, the term is overwhelmingly used in the United Kingdom by right-wing politicians and press to attack people who oppose racism, especially in the wake of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.

Identity politics is another term with an American history that has come to be used in an overwhelmingly negative sense in Britain; the left are nearly as prone as the right to use it as an attack. The concept originates with the Combahee River Collective, an organization of black feminist thinkers and organizers founded in 1974 (Sarkar, 2025, pp. 29–31). In a

statement published in 1977, they declared that ‘we believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression’ (Author Admin, 2012).

This argument that politics come out of people’s own identity has been repeatedly misinterpreted by sections of the left as advancing sectional interests – such as the interests of black women or lesbians – over the interests of the working class as a whole (Richmond & Charnley, 2022). In fact, the statement was advancing a sophisticated argument that only by first mapping how racial, gendered and sexual oppressions are interrelated with capitalist exploitation does it become possible to understand how we might move beyond those systems of oppression and exploitation:

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives.

(Author Admin, 2012)

In this sense, a person’s self-reflexive understanding of their own lived experiences is a precondition for fully understanding the possibilities for all that might arise from political struggle. It’s not, however, a precondition for becoming involved in political activity in the first place. Participation in various political activities, whether that’s a strike or an environmental campaign, might well be the starting point for deeper examination of an individual’s lived

experiences. One reason why identity politics is demonized from across the political spectrum, is that it threatens the traditional power hierarchies of both left and right by returning power to individuals, who are involved in collective struggles.

Another misconception of culture wars results from confusing them with American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington's 1990s 'Clash of Civilizations' hypothesis that future wars would be fought not between nation states but between cultures. 'Clash of cultures' was sometimes used as an alternative title for the idea that conflict would occur between supposedly culturally incompatible civilizations, such as between the West and Islam. The fact of continued fighting between nation states, such as the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war, indicates the limitations of Huntington's idea. For a while, though, it was very influential, forming one of the intellectual justifications for the ultimately unsuccessful US War on Terror waged between 2001 and 2021.

Although they sound similar, culture wars have nothing to do with the 'Clash of Civilizations', being concerned with divisions *within* a culture, rather than *between* them. Some people clearly just find the idea of a binary conflict driving so much human behaviour as too simplistic, regardless of whether it's within or between cultures. However, this is to miss the point that we can use 'culture wars' as an analytical concept to explain what is happening in society without necessarily having to accept their binary zero-sum logic or take sides. Unless, that is, one is given no choice because they find themselves in a persecuted minority caught on the wrong side of a real-life full-on culture war.

My aim in writing this book is to challenge this scepticism concerning culture wars in Britain, not because I am a 'culture warrior' who enjoys arguing about the EU or trans rights, but

because they have been an inevitable part of the ongoing social change that has characterized human existence since the industrial revolution. The way to mitigate the supposed toxicity of the culture wars is to spread the understanding of them as a long-term historical process, rather than as something recently imposed by either left or right.

Therefore, this introduction will continue by considering some of the ways that the culture wars have been defined and thought about. Following that, I briefly discuss the convergence between UK and US culture wars since the 2024 General Election, which has only grown more apparent with the inauguration of Donald Trump for his second term as US president. The next section provides a brief account of the history of culture wars in America, highlighting points of similarity and difference with the United Kingdom. This approach continues through a further section on 'Gender, Cultural Change and Authoritarian Populism' discussing research showing that women's lives have been at the forefront of the transition from the materialist values of an industrial society to the post-materialist values of a post-industrial society. Finally, I go on to outline some of the ways that aspects of the American culture wars crossed the Atlantic during and after the 2016 EU membership referendum, and how they interacted with ongoing longer-term British culture wars. I also look at some of the existing literature on culture wars in Britain, which has mainly appeared only in the last 5 years.

I should say at this point that in referring to Britain and British cultural values, I am talking of the island of Great Britain, which is divided into the three nations of England, Scotland and Wales, across which values may differ as well as be shared. It should be noted that while one legal jurisdiction covers both England and Wales, there is and always has been a separate legal system in Scotland. When referring to the

United Kingdom, I am talking about the political nation state, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, which has been in existence in its current form for barely a 100 years. I am aware that a section of the population in Northern Ireland consider themselves to be British but also that others who live there consider themselves to be Irish (and some see themselves as both). At the various points in this book where I'm explicitly discussing devolution and national differences, I shall endeavour to be clear and specific in my use of terminology.

WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT CULTURE WARS

The main ways that culture wars have been defined and thought about are chiefly derived from American academics. In his 1991 book, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, sociologist James Davison Hunter referred to the late-19th-century *kulturkampf* arising from Bismarck's efforts to turn Germany into a unified nation state, and argued that it was a historical reference point for what had been happening in the United States since the 1960s. He defined the culture wars as an irreconcilable clash between the differing values and worldviews of 'cultural conservatives' – those with a commitment to absolute truth and a clear and authoritative set of rules defining acceptable behaviour and our understanding of what is good and evil – and 'cultural progressives' – those with a rational and subjective commitment to a relativist conception of truth that is understood as continually unfolding (Hunter, 1991, p. 46). Rather than argue that politicians cynically use symbols of the culture war for their own ends, Hunter suggested that it was actually contemporary culture

wars which establish the parameters of political debate and the positions that politicians could take up within them.

Another useful set of models and concepts for framing the culture wars is provided by the work of the comparative political scientists Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, who is British and began her career in the United Kingdom before moving into US academia. Inglehart first posited a 'silent revolution' in the 1970s by which materialist values concerned with economic and physical security began to give way to post-materialist values concerned with individual free choice and self-expression (Inglehart, 1977). Across successive generations, these post-materialist values have spread in conjunction with liberal attitudes to race, gender and sexuality, and fluid social identities that are no longer rooted in faith, family and nation. During the 21st century a tipping point was reached when the holders of traditional values, concerning race, gender, sexuality and morality in general, found themselves in the minority, triggering a cultural backlash and authoritarian reflex (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

The work of both Hunter and Inglehart and Norris has been important for the academic analysis of culture wars in Britain, but caveats are often included to the effect that British and American contexts are different. I will consider these arguments in more detail over the course of this introduction, but first I want to introduce a third set of ideas around the nature of cultural interactions and conflict between different generations, social groups and genders that was initially developed in 1930s Britain and remains relevant.

In 1935, the British anthropologist Gregory Bateson pointed out that the same kind of 'culture contact' that triggers 'profound disturbance' between different societies, such as when a tribe in New Guinea first encounters Europeans, is