

## **Introduction: The Battle for Britain and conjunctural thinking**

And our mission is to deliver Brexit on the 31st of October for the purpose of uniting and re-energising our great United Kingdom and making this country the greatest place on earth ... Our children and grandchildren will be living longer, happier, healthier, wealthier lives. (Boris Johnson, 25 July 2019)

I started work on the issues that form the core of this in 2018. Since then, the UK has had four Prime Ministers, left the European Union (with some details still to be sorted out...), experienced a sterling crisis, entered a period of unprecedented economic hardship, joined in a global pandemic and was – fleetingly – described as “the best country in the world to be a black person” (Kemi Badenoch, MP). There have been various stories told about this political and social turbulence and its alarming acceleration in mid-2022. Some centre on the fractious fortunes of the Conservative Party. Others have pointed to the dislocations of Brexit, following the referendum over whether to remain in the EU (2016). A different story identifies the global financial crisis of 2008 (and its after effects, including austerity politics) as the point of entry. Meanwhile, other accounts have traced the origins of our present troubles to the liberalisation of global trade, inaugurated by the Reagan-Thatcher alliance in 1979-1980 and often described as the beginning of “neoliberal globalisation”. In this book, I explore how all of these moments – and more – came together and were condensed in our current conflicts. Rather than focusing on one story, I suggest that it is vital to examine the ways in which these stories are entangled both with each other and with still longer histories to make these different moments possible.

I examine how these different moments are connected with, and contribute to, a wider *Battle for Britain*, one that is distinctively marked by the rise of political-cultural movements committed to British/English nationalism. I stress *political-cultural* since these conflicts extend well beyond what is conventionally understood as politics – into arguments about who “we” are (the nation, the people), about “our history” (and how to memorialise or protect it), about how Britain might be “Great” again. This battle – or, more accurately, this series of battles – is animated by the ways in which politics, culture and power are inextricably entangled in the struggles over how the way forward might be constructed – in the light of the proliferating crises, contradictions and conflicts.

What I offer here is an approach through *conjunctural analysis* – an approach central to one version of Cultural Studies that has been important to my own work over a long period and has become a focus of renewed interest in recent years (for example, the double special issue of *New Formations*, published in 2019). My starting point is to treat a “conjuncture” as a distinctive configuration of time and space: it is a *spatio-temporal* phenomenon.

Conjunctures have distinctive trajectories driven by the multiple social relations and dynamics that are compressed and condensed within their specific temporal and spatial frame. By *condensed*, I mean to convey the sense of being squeezed together under pressure so that they entangle and interfere with one another. Such dynamics drive a further multiplicity: the proliferation of crises, tensions, antagonisms and conflicts which give the specific conjuncture its distinctive character and trajectory. I will come back to this approach in more detail but think there is some value in grounding this starting point in my own encounter with conjunctural analysis.

## **A mugging gone wrong? Coming to conjunctural analysis.**

In 1973, I was a postgraduate student at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham and part of a working group on youth subcultures (whose work eventually became *Resistance Through Rituals*, Hall and Jefferson, 1976). In 1973, three young men from the Handsworth area of Birmingham were given exceptionally long sentences for a robbery that was described in court (and in much of the media coverage) as “a mugging gone wrong”. The young men were known to another student at the Centre – Chas Critcher – who also worked at an advice centre in Handsworth. He suggested that we might do something to help the campaign against the sentences, utilising our limited expertise about criminal justice, the media and the treatment of crime and deviance. We collaborated to produce a short, cyclostyled, pamphlet – entitled *20 Years – for the Paul, Jimmy and Musty Support Committee*.

This triggered a much larger – and longer – programme of collaborative work that began from the Handsworth events and *contextualised* them in multiple ways, from the history of the term “mugging” to the networks of definition that connected police, politicians, courts and the mass media. The analysis then expanded to a wider framing – the social, economic and political-cultural history of Britain and its descent into crises of different kinds. That hyphen between political and cultural will be a recurring feature of the book: Cultural Studies has stressed the importance of an analytic framing that sees politics and culture as always entangled, rather than as separate fields. The two terms are connected through their mobilisations – and contestations – of power, enmeshed in relations of domination and subordination, marginalisation and exclusion and more.

Our historical approach was framed as a “conjunctural analysis” – a term borrowed from readings of the early translations of selections from Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci, 1971). Two themes particularly engaged us: first, Gramsci’s distinction between the organic and the conjunctural and, second, his attention to how dominant social groups rule by exercising “leadership” or “hegemony” – constructing forms of consent, rather than just dominating by force or coercion. Arguments still rage about these words (see, for example, the discussions in Koivisto and Lahtinen, 2012, on conjuncture and Worth, 2015, on hegemony). But what became known locally as the “Mugging group” borrowed and bent them to a distinctive purpose in what eventually became *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts, published in 1978). For us, the particular conjuncture was constituted by the trajectory of the post-war settlement: the political-cultural consensus solidified around a combination of managed capitalism, full male employment, expanded consumption and a welfare state – and the ways in which it came apart.

The central chapters of the book trace the fortunes of that settlement, as the consent of subordinate or subaltern groups eroded into proliferating forms of dissent and conflict. We drew out how ‘consent’ was fractured and undermined in the face of different crises and the tightening hold exercised by the state over social fractures and dissent of various kinds, from rebellious youth to industrial militancy. In the process, a political-cultural consensus centred on a sort of social democratic capitalism gave way to increasingly repressive measures and their legitimation through projections of a “law and order” crisis. We pointed to the rise of what we called “authoritarian populism” – a political-cultural strategy that

became the foundation for Thatcherism (and a concept that was central to Stuart Hall's subsequent work on Thatcherism, 1979; 1988). Authoritarian populism combined an attempt to recreate 'consent' from a narrower social base: the "right thinking", socially anxious, culturally traditionalist, sections of the middle and working classes summoned as the 'people' against their enemies: militants, extremists, criminals of all kinds but especially young black men, engaged in "mugging". This last point is important because one crucial theme of the book concerned how these condensed crises became *racialised* and, as we will see, questions of 'race' are rarely far away from political-cultural conflicts in the UK.

### ***Policing the Crisis and its legacy***

*Policing the Crisis* underpins this book in many ways, providing its orientation, its way of problematising the present and many of its conceptual and analytical starting points. The book was much discussed and debated (e.g., Jessop et al; 1984 and Hall's reply, 1985; Sumner, 1981). It continues to be a significant point of reference within Cultural Studies and beyond (e.g., Hart 2019) and thirty-five years on, a second edition of the book was produced (2013). In this book, I am once again concerned with how culture, politics and power are entangled. It is oriented to questions of how (multiple) relations of domination and subordination are reproduced, legitimated and challenged. It explores the question of consent and asks whether the accumulation of challenges to political authority are bringing us – again – in sight of a "crisis of authority" and a related "crisis of the state":

It is with the posing of this problem - the 'problem of authority' - that our analysis can no longer remain at the level of analysing ideologies of crime... The 'problem of

authority' directs us to a different level of analysis, a different terrain of social organisation: as Gramsci put it: "A 'crisis of authority' is spoken of: this is precisely the crisis of hegemony, or general crisis of the State." (Hall et al, 1978/2013: 175)

In what follows, I explore how crises in the UK continue to be suffused with questions of 'race' and consider the recurring temptations of using the state coercively to divide 'the people' from their 'enemies' – and to discipline those enemies. The state is a crucial site for the construction and solidification of authority, leadership –and hegemony. In relation to the state, *Policing the Crisis* drew heavily on Gramsci:

Through the state, a particular combination of class fractions - an 'historical bloc' - was able to propagate itself throughout society - bringing about not only a unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity, posing all the questions around which the struggle rages, not on a corporate but on a "universal" plane, and thus creating the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate groups. (Hall et al., 1978/2013: 201)

This book will also pursue the puzzles of how 'historical blocs' are put together and come to present themselves as embodying 'the people' and promise a way forward from our present troubles to the "sunlit uplands" (a Winston Churchill phrase, much borrowed by Boris Johnson and his Brexit fellow travellers). Doing so demands paying attention to some of the changing conditions (and conceptualisations) in which such issues are now posed. This includes thinking again about the state, beginning from Gramsci's suggestive observation that "the life of the state can be conceived as a series of unstable equilibria" (1971: 182).

This compelling image of the formation of settlements (moments of equilibrium) and the dynamics through which they become unsettled or destabilised always feels to me like a productive starting point for thinking about present troubles.

One other thread from my Cultural Studies past also runs throughout this book. This is Raymond Williams distinction between “epochal” and “authentic historical” types of analysis (1977). His concern about the tendency of epochal analysis to over-reach into the analysis of concrete historical moments has provided me with a foundation for resisting the temptation to define the present as an Epoch or an Age of something or other (neoliberalism, globalization, populism, nationalism, rage, etc.) which represents a distinctive break from the Past. He distinguished between “epochal analysis” in which a cultural system has “determinate dominant features” (such as feudal culture or bourgeois culture”) and “authentic historical analysis” in which it is necessary to examine “the complex interrelationships between movements and tendencies both within and beyond a specific effective dominance (Williams, 1977: 121). That is, there are two different types of analysis that should not be conflated. I think that Williams’s “authentic historical analysis” is s close to “conjunctural analysis” not least because of the way he insists that “authentic historical analysis” requires us to think beyond the ‘dominant’ to examine the other movements and tendencies in play:

We have certainly to speak of the ‘dominant’ and the ‘effective’, and in these senses of the hegemonic. But we find that we have also to speak, and indeed with further differentiation of each, of the ‘residual’ and the ‘emergent’, which in any real historical process, and at any moment in the process, are significant both in

themselves and in what they reveal of the characteristics of the 'dominant'. (1977: 121-2).

For me, this has always been a critical point of analytical leverage. Williams reminds us that dominant formations are always accompanied by others, particularly the *residual* (what he described as the persistence of questions that cannot be answered in the terms of the dominant) and the *emergent*, which he identified as the rise of new questions and new demands that were, however, always at risk of being absorbed – or incorporated – into the dominant. In the present, we might distinguish, for example, between 'residual' attachments to welfarism (and, indeed, statism) in the face of the destruction of the public realm and 'emergent' movements concerned with the climate catastrophe, or the claim that Black Lives Matter in the face of racist policing and penal policies (in the US and elsewhere). This triangulation of the political-cultural field (dominant-residual-emergent) forms a useful device for thinking about the heterogeneity of the conjuncture and escaping the temptation to focus on the dominant formation alone (see most discussions of neoliberalism, for example). Characteristically, Williams makes the framework even more demanding by suggesting that analysis should also "recognize the complex interrelationships *between* movements and tendencies" (my emphasis). That is, the 'dominant' is itself a contested formation as it is composed of different elements and tendencies and different forces contend to lead it and give it shape and direction. At the same time, that dominant formation is always engaged in the political-cultural work of subordination: aiming to actively residualise the residual ('this is just old-fashioned thinking') while trying to either marginalise or incorporate the emergent.

I keep returning to Williams because he offers a suggestive way of framing the discordant and unsettled relationships between different social forces and their political-cultural struggles. The conjuncture, then, forms the landscape for thinking about “the complex interrelationships between movements and tendencies” and the political-cultural work of assembling – or *articulating* – different social groups into political blocs. This political work aims to construct and sustain forms of social authority, leadership or even hegemony.

These inheritances provide some of the orientations for the book. But I hope it will become clear that the book is not simply a reworking of the work of the 1970s, either empirically or analytically. The conjuncture is different and emergent intellectual resources both problematise some of the formulations of *Policing the Crisis* and provide new – and productive – ways of assessing what is going on. Some of these concern questions about what Gramsci delicately calls “social groups” (fundamental and otherwise). These are typically decoded as social classes but in what follows I will deliberately – *wilfully*, perhaps – exploit the ambiguity created by Gramsci’s phrasing to ask what social groups might be in play in contemporary struggles over hegemony – not least because of the continuing salience of arguments about ‘race’ and racialised divisions in this conjuncture.

This last point highlights the complicated and often tendentious relationship between Cultural Studies (especially in its Birmingham variant) and varieties of Marxism. Birmingham Cultural Studies was profoundly shaped by Marxism, especially by borrowings from Althusser and Gramsci in the early 1970s, but also via Marxist historiography (including recurring connections and arguments with E.P. Thompson) and literary theory (Raymond Williams). Indeed, questions of the role of culture in class domination and resistance

dominated the 1970s (for me, at least). But this was always a rather strained relationship, with more orthodox Marxist critics challenging both our apparent tendency to become pre-occupied with ‘superstructural froth’ and our failure to deal adequately and fully with Marxist political economy (see, for example, the critique of authoritarian populism and *Policing the Crisis* by Jessop et al, 1984; and Donaldson, 2009, on “post-Marxist” uses of Gramsci). In return, we tended to resist what we saw as economistic, functionalist and reductive versions of Marxist analysis that paid little attention to things ranging from the complexities of state formation to the significance of cultural forms and practices as sites of political struggle. By the end of the 1970s, Cultural Studies was being stretched to think about social relations beyond class – especially by feminist approaches to gender and social reproduction (e.g., *Women Take Issue*, Women’s Studies Group, 1976) and by work on racialised divisions and their centrality to the British, as well as global, architectures of domination (*The Empire Strikes Back*, CCCS, 1982).

Yet *Policing the Crisis* is hardly a straightforward starting point for this book. Firstly, it was a profoundly collaborative effort of thinking and writing, and I have argued elsewhere that conjunctural analysis was not an approach that could be easily undertaken by a single researcher: “No one scholar can grasp the multiplicity of forces, pressures, tendencies, tensions, antagonisms and contradictions that make up a conjuncture” (2017: 84). I continue to believe this: as a result, this book is a necessarily *thin* version of a conjunctural analysis, not least in the context of the pandemic which dislocated my plans for collaborative working. Despite my gratitude to the people drawn into conversations and comments on drafts, it cannot get anywhere near what a fully collaborative process might have delivered.

Secondly, this book is profoundly *argumentative*: it takes issue with a range of approaches, analyses and arguments in order to establish the case for a conjunctural analysis. This sometimes takes the form of pointing to misjudgements; for example, the tendency to ignore the role middle class voters played in the vote for Brexit in favour of simplifying – if not tabloid-like – contrasts between the liberal/cosmopolitan middle classes and the nationalist working class (sometimes as heroes, sometimes as villains). But my arguments and interpretations more often take the form of what someone (thankyou, Bob xxx ) once described as my *contrarian* or “yes, but” style of thinking: yes, that matters, but it's not the only thing... we need to understand how it co-exists and interacts with X, Y and Z. Conjunctural analysis places a premium on thinking about multiplicities and how heterogeneous processes, forces, possibilities come together in contradictory, often uncomfortable, ways to make certain things possible. A more generous way of framing this process is that it bears the marks of what David Scott has called Stuart Hall’s style of “clarifying” through conversation:

Clarification is a way of approaching thinking – and learning – that aims to make us more aware of what we are thinking or doing ... That is to say, clarification involves endlessly saying the *next* thing, never the last thing. Clarification therefore does not presume the possibility of resolution; on the contrary, there is no presumption of closure, only successive provisional resting points along the way where we gather our thoughts for further dialogic probing. (Scott, 2017: 16, italics in original)

So, quite a lot of the book is devoted to saying “yes, but” and to teasing out the important ways in which different dynamics are complexly entangled in the conjuncture. At a recent Cultural Studies conference (<https://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/cmnh/2022/08/26/whats-happening-to-culture-studies-online-event-14-16-september-2022/>), I was among those castigated for an excessive – and nostalgic – attachment to “complexity” when the present moment demanded a more streamlined clarity or simplicity of analysis. I am old enough to think that this has *always* been the argument (at least since the mid-1970s): the current crisis – whatever it may be – demands a clear and timely response. I am not convinced on both empirical (clarity that is wrong is not helpful) and analytic grounds. Wendy Brown once argued for the necessary “untimeliness” of critical thinking and I think she is correct to insist *both* that “critical theory cannot let itself be bound by political exigency” and that critique must “affirm life, affirm value and, above all affirm possibilities in the present and the future” (2005: 15). I hope this book contributes to that ambition, in however small a way.

### **Structure of the Book:**

#### **Chapter 1: *Nations, Nationalisms and the conjuncture.***

Brexit exemplified the ways in which the national question became central to contemporary political movements; yet it needs to be revisited in the space between “methodological nationalism” and “methodological globalism”. My exploration of the spatial aspects of the spatio-temporal formation of the conjuncture starts from conceiving places as the nodes of multiple spatial relationships (following Doreen Massey). Concretely, this is developed through an examination of the transnational relationships that dominate the formation of

Britain (exemplified in the *figures* of America, Empire and Europe). These are difficult, ambivalent and contested relationships as the recent struggles over Europe indicate. At the same time, the unstable formation of the 'United Kingdom' has become increasingly unsettled by Brexit and its aftermath. Internal and external relationships have been recast by the rise of a distinctive variant of English Nationalism.

## **Chapter 2: *Turbulent Times: the making of the present.***

Just as the place of the conjuncture is complicated, so is the challenge of telling its time. Conjunctures are formed in the intersection of different temporalities and are shaped by their different rhythms. The chapter begins and ends with the *longue durée* of the environmental catastrophe – and its rapidly quickening pace. The chapter also argues for attention to the long and unfinished trajectory of the postcolonial and its interweaving with the profoundly contested field of the social. Here differences, divisions and inequalities of different sorts have been de-naturalised and made politically contestable – and resisted by 'restorationist' strategies. A quicker rhythm is evident in the temporality of the successive transformations of the 'UK economy' from failed Fordism to failed neoliberalisation and into the stagnations of rentier capitalism. Finally, political time is marked by the shifting attempts to manage these fields, their intersections and their accumulating crises, in which Brexit forms a distinctive rupture. Political time, however, also involves the articulation of nostalgias of different kinds, from Empire to Fordist relations of work and welfare.

## **Chapter 3: *Accounting for Brexit***

Brexit is a distinctive – if long drawn out – moment in this conjuncture. For some, it marks a turning point as a new configuration of forces, identities and possibilities is established (captured in Sobolewska and Ford’s image of Britain as ‘Brexitland’, 2020a). For others, it resembles an unfinished transition, an “interregnum” that is marked (in a much-quoted phrase from Gramsci) by the “variety of morbid symptoms” that arise “when the old is dying and the new cannot be born”. This chapter critically examines three ways in which Brexit has been accounted for:

- as a variant of a wider contemporary shift towards populist politics;
- as a revolt against neoliberal globalisation;
- and as the revenge of the “Left Behind”.

Each provides reasons for thinking conjuncturally, especially about social antagonisms, social forces and their political-cultural articulation and mobilisation. The chapter draws attention to the symbolic struggles and their mediations through both social media and the “tabloidization” of the Brexit conflict. Ideas of the “Left Behind”, however, link popular, mediatised and academic arguments in important ways and provided one route to the “rediscovery of class” in the moment of Brexit.

#### **Chapter 4: *Thinking relationally: Class and its others***

The moment of Brexit heralded a renewed interest in the working class as an oppositional force. This chapter argues that there are both empirical and conceptual problems at stake in this rediscovery of the working class. Empirically, it neglects the powerful role played by

sections of the middle classes (the ‘suburbs and shires’) in bringing Brexit about.

Conceptually, it raises difficult questions about how to think of a working class in de-industrialised, de-collectivised and de-socialised settings. More importantly, perhaps, the pursuit of this working class has too readily *imagined* it as a white working class (in the UK and elsewhere, notably the US). The chapter asks when the working class became “white” and how this identity became politically mobilised. The chapter concludes with an argument for a more expansively relational understanding of social forces – as complexly classed, raced, gendered and embodied – as a precondition for thinking about the dynamics of political mobilisation and de-mobilisation.

#### **Chapter 5: *Building blocs: towards a politics of articulation.***

Developing the previous chapter’s understanding of social forces, this chapter draws on Hall’s concept of *articulation* to argue for a view of political mobilisation as accomplished through selective and contingent articulations. Rather than claims about decisive shifts in the political-cultural landscape, the chapter suggests that contemporary populisms and nationalisms have involved a distinctive practice of ‘vernacular ventriloquism’ as they imagine and project distinctions between the “people” and their “enemies”. The Leave campaigns for Brexit developed a distinctive British populism (entwined with English nationalism) that assembled a particular *bloc* for the referendum, articulating many forms of loss, grievance and frustration. Stabilising this bloc has proved challenging: its coherence was challenged by the Corbyn-led Labour Party in the 2017 General Election which voiced different popular anxieties and desires. It was, however, reassembled in the ‘Boris bloc’ of 2019, although, by 2022, this was coming apart, partly because of its internal contradictions

and partly because of the proliferating crises that the Conservative government had to confront.

### **Chapter 6: *An accumulation of crises***

The continued accumulation of crises suggests that the Brexit moment has not given rise to a stabilised social and political-cultural equilibrium. Rather the pace of accumulation has increased as long running crises acquire increasing urgency (the climate catastrophe) and encounter deepening ones (the intensification of inequality), while the challenge of making the spatial, scalar and sovereignty imaginaries of Brexit *materialise* has proved difficult, both internationally and domestically. New crises kept arriving, from the pandemic to international conflicts, and from economic instabilities to the many forms taken by the deepening climate catastrophe. Meanwhile, finding ways of sustaining and subsidising capital, at least since 2008, has expended public resources on private wealth (through taxation, subsidy and contracting out, for example). This accumulation of crises has been shadowed by a rise of 'counter movements' challenging dominant political norms and narratives.

### **Chapter 7: *"The best country in the world": race, culture, history.***

Many of these accumulating crises were exacerbated by the pandemic. Covid-19 exposed the hollowed-out nature of the British state and was followed by failures of the favoured models of subcontracting. Although successful vaccination programmes averted some of the crisis (and partly rescued the government's reputation), other troubles became apparent.

Central among these was the concentration of risks of infection and death among racialised minorities. The visibility of such inequalities coincided dramatically with the killing of George Floyd (not least in the global resonance of the phrase “I can’t breathe) amid a series of ongoing challenges to racialised inequalities (attacks on the *Windrush* generation, racist policing, and more). The government attempted to deflect, delay and displace these challenges, not least into the register of ‘culture wars’. The idea of ‘culture wars’ poses important questions about the relationships between culture and politics, in which different intersections of politics, power and culture are mobilised – and contested. As I have already suggested, the (shifting) relationships between politics and culture are vital to understanding this conjuncture.

#### **Chapter 8: *Holding it together? The coercive turn and the crises of Party and Bloc***

However, the strategy of recasting challenges into “culture wars” was only one element of a much larger repertoire. The Johnson government (like others) sought to ‘retool the state’, aiming to shrink democratic capacities and to enlarge policing powers. State centralisation, anti-democratic strategies, deepening authoritarianism and a narrowing conception of “the people” dominated – and return us to the problematic of ‘policing the crisis’. This chapter explores the ways in which the condensed crises and proliferating disaffection and dissent created instabilities that profoundly unsettled both the Conservative government (and Party) and the dominant bloc.

#### **Chapter 9: *Unstable equilibria: the life of the state***

In this chapter, I argue that the current crisis of the UK state has three distinctive, although interconnected, aspects. First, there has been a *crisis of capacity* involving the state's ability to manage social, political, environmental and economic disorders. Second, a *crisis of legitimacy* has condensed varieties of anti-state scepticism alongside a deepening popular mistrust of politics and politicians. Third, this is linked to a *crisis of authority* in which the dominant bloc has found it harder to command popular support for its projects, policies and promises. Reflecting on the changing UK state formation and the problems it has encountered, I pose the question of what it means to "perform like a state" in the light of its worsening performance problems.

#### **Chapter 10: *The Battle for Britain – and Beyond***

The concluding chapter reflects back on some of the organising themes of the book and its approach to conjunctural analysis. It explores the relevance of particular ideas taken from Gramsci that have been used to address the present moment: the conjuncture, interregnum and counter hegemonic possibilities. I consider some of the ways in which the current field of the political is being shrunk and rendered inhospitable. In response, I explore lines of thinking opened out by geographers in terms of "countertopographies" and topological "power-geometries". The chapter concludes by considering how the practices of reimagining, repairing and rearticulating might be ways of approaching the challenge of creating other futures.