Culture wars and the making of authoritarian populism: articulations of spatial division and popular consent

David Featherstone

'Levelling Up' and popular militarism are two ways of mobilising spatial divisions to secure consent for right-wing populism

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As Daniel Trilling has argued, although the exact meaning of 'culture war' is often disputed, it is best thought of as 'a political technique for gathering a disparate group of people with conflicting, even contradictory, interests into your camp'.[1] Positioning culture wars as a political technique is a useful way into thinking about what work they seek to do and achieve; and it also points to a way of analysing them. In particular, it resonates with the argument by theorists

of populism such as Ernesto Laclau that populist politics seeks to shape a divided political terrain.[2]

This article explores the relationship between culture wars and populism through a consideration of the ways in which particular imaginations and uses of space are deployed as a means of producing a divided political terrain. It also discusses the relationship between culture wars and what Stuart Hall termed 'authoritarian populism': the article draws on Hall's argument that 'new forms of statist authoritarianism' sustain themselves through a 'steady and unremitting set of operations designed to bind or construct a popular consent'. This is a mode of politics which is central to the agenda of the current Conservative Party, but also has deep foundations in contemporary politics on the right in Britain.

Here, I also consider the ways in which culture-war techniques are being used as part of an attempt to secure key aspects of what John Clarke, writing in *Soundings* in the wake of the 2019 election, termed 'the Boris Bloc'.[3] This term refers to the diverse political constituencies that were assembled together as supporters of the Conservatives in this election, which are partly held together through a fusion of racialised discourses of whiteness as victimhood. This is combined with a broader rightist political agenda, particularly through attacks on the figure of 'the woke' (this being the latest iteration of similar assaults in this vein, going back to terms such as the 'loony left' and 'political correctness'). The 'shape-shifting' politics of the right as it seeks to construct consent through the techniques of authoritarian populism is evident in the centrality of culture-war discourses within the 2022 Conservative Party leadership contest. As Nesrine Malik has noted, the leadership contest has underlined just how entrenched the culture wars have become on the political right.[4]

The particular focus of this article is a consideration of two particular elements within the culture-war discourse in Conservative politics, each of which depends on and mobilises different spatial divisions. The first section deals with the role of 'Levelling Up' discourses, while the second part explores the Tories' increasing emphasis on 'impunity' for British soldiers.

'Levelling Up', spatial divisions and whiteness as victimhood

'Levelling Up' has been central to Conservative discourse in the post-Brexit period and ostensibly refers to an attempt to challenge entrenched regional inequalities.

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It is essential to recognise, however, that 'Levelling Up' does not work solely as a depoliticised set of ideas around regional planning, but has often been articulated and narrated through key elements of culture-wars rhetoric. The rhetoric around Levelling Up has positioned inequality in relation to the unequal geographies of the UK, whilst denying the role of successive governments and neoliberal capital in its generation. It also racialises these issues through centring invocations of the 'white working class' in relation to understandings of the 'left behind' in specific deindustrialised regions of the UK. The way Levelling Up has been constructed as a project has also, primarily, been related to England, with considerably less resources being allocated to the devolved parts of the UK.[5]

Lisa Nandy has recently argued that the 'voices in the Tory Party' who have sought to advance a 'Levelling Up' agenda have been 'roundly defeated', and that 'the ugly truth of this is on full display as leadership contenders vie for the mantle of Margaret Thatcher - promising tax cuts for the wealthy and more managed decline across Britain.'[6] But Nandy's invocation of 'Levelling Up' only serves to emphasise that this is a set of political discourses that is likely to continue to structure debates, on both the centre left and right. While Nandy and other Labour politicians such as Andy Burnham have critiqued Tory discourses of 'Levelling Up', they have often done so in ways which broadly accept the Conservatives' framing of the debate: both Nandy and Burnham have argued that Labour needs to deliver on this agenda. Accepting these broad terms of debate has significant political consequences, as I discuss here. Firstly, it forecloses a positioning of 'Levelling Up' in terms of broader uneven geographies of power. Secondly, abstracting regional inequalities from these broader dynamics enables the centring of alternative racialised discourses and explanations.

This has implications for the ways in which Levelling Up is challenged and contested.

Framing inequality as geography

'Levelling Up' is used to refer to an amorphous set of agendas seeking to rectify the entrenched regional inequalities of the UK, but with a specific focus on England. There have been a number of critiques of this approach, not least for its lack of serious engagement with longstanding issues of regional inequality. A key issue here

is that 'Levelling Up' is invoked in ways which frame these issues outside of the uneven relations of power that result in spatial inequalities. As geographers such as Doreen Massey have argued for years, the uneven geographies of the UK do not just happen, but are actively produced and reproduced, often through decisions and processes which actively favour already well-off regions, primarily, though not exclusively, the South East.[7] This framing also ignores the inequalities that exist *within* areas such as the South East, which are presented as uniformly wealthy and successful. Meanwhile neoliberal discourses of competitiveness pit different regions against each other.

'Levelling Up' is deployed in ways which actively ignore the role of successive Conservative Party policies and administrations in producing precisely the regional inequalities and disparities that Levelling Up is allegedly seeking to rectify. It is a political agenda that serves to distance the Conservatives from their culpability in terms of these long-term inequalities, and has helped to shift the debate away from an engagement with the ways in which these inequalities were shaped through neoliberal policies and logics, as well as more recent policies such as austerity, where cuts have disproportionately impacted poorer areas of Northern cities. As a 2019 Centre for Cities think-tank study noted, it is the poorest areas that have borne the brunt of council spending cuts: 'Local authority spending has fallen nationally by half since 2010, with areas such as Liverpool, Blackburn and Barnsley facing average cuts twice that of their counterparts in the more affluent south'.[8] There are also significant questions about the level of commitment to any serious redistribution of resources in geographical terms, especially given Rishi Sunak's recent boast about how, as chancellor, he had done his best to switch funding away from 'deprived urban areas'.[9] Further, where resources have been funnelled to parts of 'the North', they have often been targeted at newly Conservative-voting constituencies.[10]

In practice, 'Levelling Up' has also been allied with policy agendas which by their nature serve to deepen inequalities rather than to challenge them. As John Tomaney and Andy Pike have noted, although the government's focus on 'Levelling Up' investment in public research and development as a way of stimulating tech-based entrepreneurship has some potential for tackling the concentration of public investment in London and the South East, it may also have 'the perverse effect of widening the gap between big cities and their hinterlands in the Midlands and

north'.[11] Tomaney and Pike also draw attention to the ways in which 'Levelling Up' has been linked to the government's 'Free Ports' strategy, which, they suggest, has been freighted with 'vastly inflated' expectations.

In the 2021 budget Rishi Sunak announced the creation of eight new free ports, essentially Special Economic Zones which serve as de-regulated spaces with low taxation: businesses in these spaces will benefit from tax breaks including 'no stamp duty, full rebates for construction and machinery investment, five years of zero business rates, and lower tariffs and customs obligations'.[12] Despite claims that the effect will be to make port areas such as South Shields 'the Dubai of the West', the more likely outcome, as Quinn Slobodian suggests, is that they will shift existing jobs into these enclaves, as companies chase the tax breaks they offer.[13] In many ways the freeports represent a continuation of longer trends of deregulation in relation to port spaces. Tony Topham noted in the early 1970s that the establishment of ports in areas outside those covered by the Dock Labour Scheme were being used to challenge the power of dockers' union organising.[14] Such lineages indicate the continuities of the Conservatives' current 'Levelling Up' policies with the longer-term spaces of neoliberal regulation.

They also emphasise a problem with arguments by Burnham and Nandy that Labour should, according to 'Levelling Up' policy, follow the logic that poorer regions in the UK should strive to be essentially the same as wealthier regions, foreclosing any scrutiny of the relations between such regions. And this focus also closes down any engagement with the different political trajectories that are currently being shaped by councils like Preston, where a focus on Community Wealth Building is generating progressive alternatives. As Rhian E. Jones has recently argued, the Labour Party leadership has tended to ignore the alternatives being put forward by local leaders, groups and communities in neglected or 'left behind' areas, which are 'not only achieving central aspects of what "levelling up" promises, but doing so with more progressive principles and intentions than those that underpin the Tory-led project.'[15]

More centrally for the purposes of this article, by signalling a desire to deliver on 'Levelling Up', key Labour politicians have tended to abstract the term and its logics from Johnson's broader authoritarian populist politics. It would be more helpful if they understood it for what it is - an attempt to shape a particular populist narrative about regional 'inequalities' in terms which seek to secure the 'Boris bloc'.

Racialised constructions of geographical inequality

A key way this narrative functions is through particular racialised constructions of geographical inequality. This is related to the broader discourses around 'the North' and class politics which have been dominant in the wake of Brexit and the collapse of the 'Red Wall' in the 2019 election. In recent accounts, class, and particularly class politics in the North of England, has been primarily constructed through a narrative of '"indigenous white working-class" victimhood'.[16] As Akwugo Emejulu has argued, an 'unstated campaign strategy of the Leave campaign was to re-imagine Britain and Britishness (but really Englishness) as white in order to make particular kinds of claims to victimhood which would highlight economic inequality without challenging neoliberalism'.[17]

These constructions of victimhood are shaped through pernicious notions of a 'white working class' that are allied to, and constitutive of, what Sivamohan Valluvan refers to as an 'incendiary racial nativism'.[18] Conservative discourses around 'Levelling Up' mobilise such notions of victimhood and whiteness to construct geographical disparities and divisions in racialised ways. As Kaveri Qureshi and Nasar Meer note, the Sewell 'report' into Race and Ethnic Disparities empties 'ethnicity into geography and class'.[19] The 'report' contends that geographic inequality is 'in simple numerical terms' an 'overwhelmingly White British problem'; and argues that 'it is the poorer White people, outside London, who are the largest group to be found in areas with multidimensional disadvantages, from income to longevity of life'.[20]

It is this reductive geographical approach that structures the broader terms of debate in relation to 'Levelling Up'. 'Poorer White groups' are constructed as 'uniquely disadvantaged', and 'Levelling Up' is positioned as both responding to, and cultivating, this sense of whiteness as victimhood. Thus the report argues that:

> There is a sense of stagnation about the fate and life chances of poorer White groups, which is less the case with ethnic minority groups. Until the recent focus on the 'left behind' towns and 'levelling up', there was no national narrative encouraging the advancement for this group in the way there has been for ethnic minorities.[21]

Here, divisive spatial imaginaries and divisive forms of racialisation are mapped on

to each other. In particular, the construction of spatial inequality as a 'white British problem' emphasises the way in which regional inequalities have been reframed and over-coded through racialised language and discourses.

These debates have been shaped in ways that attack ideas of multiculture which offer a very different way of thinking about the racial politics of class. Further, spaces in the north of England have tended to be constructed as uniformly socially conservative, rather than spaces where there is the possibility - as there is everywhere - that issues of social difference can be negotiated in generative ways. Thus Anoop Nayak and Carl Bonner-Thompson, in a discussion of young people's relations to dominant forms of gender and sexuality politics in a post-industrial community in the north-east of England, have argued that their practices suggest that they are, at least in part, involved in reconfiguring community norms.[22] Yet these assumptions about geographically based conservatism have been further entrenched by the limited, stereotyped and whitened constructions of 'the North' that have been central to Keir Starmer/Labour's simplistic response to the collapse of the Red Wall seats.[23] This raises a set of questions about the ways in which the relationships between spatial divisions, culture wars and authoritarian populism might be differently understood, and I attempt to engage with these in the next section.

Authoritarian populism and spatial divisions

Nesrine Malik has argued that we are prevented from understanding the potency of the culture war by 'optimistic progressives', who are keen to explain that it is 'a big misunderstanding' to see danger in culture-wars rhetoric that mobilises a racialised sense of Englishness: these 'polite incrementalists' assert that things are getting better, and are keen to point out that most people's sense of patriotism does not take this form. However, such approaches ignore the extent to which 'the right is creating its own new stories'. The culture war is not about winning a debate through factual disputes; it is 'an aggressive political act with the purpose of creating new dividing lines and therefore new and bigger electoral majorities'.[24]

As Malik convincingly argues, central to the idea of the culture war is the aggressive fomenting of political divisions. Such divisions are not being mobilised by the right in an ad hoc way: they are intended to support an increasingly authoritarian-populist political project - though one which takes different

dimensions and forms at different times. Stuart Hall used the term authoritarian populism in the context of early 1980s Britain, drawing attention, as I noted in the introduction, to the ways in which consent is elicited for authoritarian right-wing agendas.[25] The term is prescient, and is helpful for making sense of the current conjuncture in various geographical contexts, but it has a particular applicability to the current rightist politics of the Conservative Party.[26] Hall's framing is also helpful in its understanding of the creation of such 'popular consent' and support as an ongoing process, shaped through particular histories and geographies.

Thinking through the relationship between culture wars and authoritarian populism allows us to see how they are co-constituted, and what is at stake in challenging these divisive discourses: and it enables us to explore the ways in which culture-war narratives and approaches are used to produce the political dividing lines and antagonisms that are central to generating forms of rightist populism. As the racialised spatial imaginaries of the Sewell report indicate, such antagonisms are frequently mobilised through divisive geographical framings. Recognising these strategies can help us to understand some of the work that culture-war framings and logics are doing, and it can also help signal ways of shaping and facilitating alternatives.

This article attempts to make sense of these logics through foregrounding the ways in which particular spatial imaginaries and spatial divisions are being mobilised by the political right. Spatial imaginaries combine intersecting elements of the cultural, political and economic, and this means that exploring culture wars from this perspective helps avoid the idea that it is possible to separate a critique of culture wars from social and economic analysis - a problem Janet Newman describes in her conversation with John Clarke in this issue. One way of doing this is tracing the different ways in which forms of whiteness as victimhood become spatialised and envisioned through particular antagonisms through discourses of Levelling Up. Tracing the ways in which antagonisms are articulated can also be important in ensuring such divisive narratives are challenged and contested. This is of particular importance given that a timid Labour Party under Keir Starmer has largely shied away from any attempt to shape or reshape the political terrain.

Care clearly needs to be taken to avoid falling into logics of response that bolster the kind of antagonisms the Tories are seeking to entrench - not least because in the main it is only 'culture warriors' who are invested in fighting battles over issues in

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this way. There are, however, as Malik suggests, significant risks in not responding from the left, and leaving the right to shape and dominate key aspects of this political terrain. This means that, rather than straightforwardly engaging with the spatial divisions being fomented/ articulated by the Conservatives, it may be more useful to unsettle some of the simplistic and divisive spatial and social logics being used. Hall's focus on engaging with the formation of consent as a process is useful here, for it can emphasise some of the effective polarising work which culture-war framings are doing; but it can also help draw attention to their lack of a broader political resonance, and hence enable a resistance to any sense of the Tories' culture-war positions as hegemonic. All this makes Labour's position all the more frustrating, for there is a concerted failure here to see the way these issues are defined as being up for grabs, as part of a political terrain to be actively shaped and contested.

Thus, for example, the Sewell report's concerted attack on ideas of 'institutional' or 'structural' racism could arguably be seen as a sign of defensiveness, and of the jolting impact on the right of bringing ideas - such as 'white privilege' - which have been taken for granted into contestation. The dramatic terms through which the links between racism and colonialism were highlighted through the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 are indicative of this. The failure of the Tories' attempts to generate statues as a political issue with broad divisive political resonance to anyone beyond broad far-right groupings who are ready to come out and 'defend statues', is a good example here - as is the acquittal by a jury of the Colston Four, much to the disgust of Tory culture warriors such as the Attorney General Suella Braverman.

The failure of the jurors to conform to the antagonisms posed by figures like Braverman shows that the dividing lines envisioned by the culture wars can be refused, may lack resonance, or may have paradoxical effects - witness the increase in support and respect for the Royal National Lifeboat Institute after it was attacked by figures such as Nigel Farage for rescuing people crossing the channel.[26] And, as Adom Philogene Heron emphasises in his fine essay on the end of the Colston statue and Bristol's spectral geographies, although there may have been some opposition to Colston's fitting demise in Bristol's docks, there was also a broad-based opposition to the slaver's statue; Heron positions this event as part of ongoing 'work of repair'.[27] Such opposition shows that, far from neatly conforming to the divisive distinctions of Conservative culture warriors, the politics of many places in the UK are being shaped in significant ways by progressive articulations of multiculture.

Ben Rogaly, for example, has drawn attention to forms of working-class culture in Peterborough 'that is both multi-ethnic and non-metropolitan'.[28] Rogaly's insights offer important ways of unsettling and refusing the divisions that are mobilised - in both aggressive and more unthinking ways - between constructions of 'white indigenous' 'locals' and migrants, and of creating more open and inclusive ways of narrating the histories and geographies of place.[29] This approach can aid in the unsettling of some of the powerful spatial divisions which are constructed/mobilised through different aspects of the culture wars. And such a focus on non-metropolitan multiculture also challenges the pervasive whitening of the working class which - as this article's discussion of Levelling Up has emphasised - is a key underpinning for divisive narratives.

As Sivamohan Valluvan argues in *The Clamour of Nationalism*, putting forward a simple corrective to whitened versions of the past is never going to be enough to convince right-wing culture warriors of the error of their ways: the 'national myth does not reel in defeat when presented with the corrected historical record.'[30] It does, however, offer the possibility of shaping different narratives, especially on the left - which has often had its own investment in whitened versions of working-class pasts.[31] Some excellent interventions are being developed in relation to these questions, such as the resources being developed through the Race/Class project of the think tank Class, which stresses the centrality of precarity and diversity to contemporary working-class experience.[32]

Such narratives offer potential resources for challenging and unsettling some of the foundations of authoritarian populism. In this respect, Hall's writings on authoritarian populism, which emphasised the importance of race and empire to the UK's politics, especially on the right, continue to have significant resonance.[33] Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever have also drawn attention to the ways in which these long histories have shaped the current post-Brexit political moment. They argue that the 'twin and inter-locking racializing visions of Empire and insular nationalism' which shaped the campaign to leave the EU derived their political power from 'being situated within a broader narrative that postulated the Leave campaigners as the last authentic representatives of the British people'.[34] As I will discuss in the next section, these histories of race and empire are central to understanding contemporary iterations of authoritarianism and their geographies.

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Impunity, authoritarian populism and forging spaces of popular consent

Versions of authoritarian populism on the right in Britain have been underpinned by successive articulations of race and imperial discourses. These have tended to position any criticism of Britain's history as unpatriotic, particularly criticisms of the history of empire, including the violence that sustained it. The monarchy, the armed forces and the empire remain central aspects of British political culture on the right. A key consequence of this is that attempts to hold the armed forces accountable are seen as unpatriotic, and are being met by efforts to bolster and entrench claims to impunity.

This final section explores how current claims to impunity - which should be understood within the context of the culture-war project - are shaped by the longstanding spatial circuits of impunity between Britain and formerly colonised space; and it considers some of the ways in which popular cultures of militarism are being forged to shape consent for authoritarian measures that are dispensing with accountability for the military.

In his introduction to Stuart Hall's *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, Paul Gilroy briefly discusses the colonial and racialised circuits which have constituted policing in Britain, and the ways in which they have shaped cultures of impunity within the police. He notes that the ranks of London's Metropolitan Police in the post-war period were 'swollen with ex-military personnel back home from their cold wars against insurgents, communists and terrorists', but argues that the more deeply rooted problem was the culture of impunity within the force, 'warranted by colonial mentalities that routinely saw blacks as infrahuman and therefore expendable regardless of their formal citizenship status'.[35]

Gilroy's stress on the racialised and colonial dynamics that constituted this 'culture of impunity' within the police is a crucial reference point in relation to the 'front' in the culture wars that relates directly to militarism and the legacies of the role of the armed forces within British colonial history. It offers a perspective that is helpful for understanding the recent reassertion of a popular militarism in Britain, which, as Valluvan notes, marks out the nation through a 'masculinist, martial call to "protective" action.'[36] This popular militarism has shaped, and been shaped by, concerted resistance to attempts to bring British soldiers to account for atrocities

and human rights abuses in a range of contexts such as Afghanistan, Iraq and the North of Ireland. An increasingly authoritarian stance is being taken on these issues by the current Conservative government, including through legislation excluding the possibility of convictions for former British armed service personnel involved in overseas conflict, through the 2021 Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Act - which was passed unopposed by Labour.

The Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill, which is currently proceeding through the UK parliament, has proposed an amnesty in relation to the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland, the central intention of which is to provide impunity for former British soldiers. The amnesty has sweeping terms - and is weighted towards providing cover for armed service personnel. As the legal scholar Louise Mallinder has argued in relation to initial proposals for the amnesty, it compares unfavourably with the legislation on impunity introduced by Pinochet towards the end of the junta's rule in Chile in 1990 - she describes the proposals as 'Pinochet Plus'.[37] This amnesty is a direct result of pressure from Conservative politicians in opposition to so-called 'vexatious claims' against the military.

Such calls for impunity are embedded within cultures of militarism, often formed within particular spaces of 'commemoration' and/or intimidation. These have played an important role in shaping some of the populist articulations and foundations of the authoritarian politics of the right: imperial geographies and imaginaries are central to these constituencies. The populist right have thus been infuriated by demands for justice against British 'armed services personnel' in relation to Bloody Sunday and the Ballymurphy Massacre, the repression of the Mau Mau rebellion, and more recently in relation to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which raise broader challenges to the British state and its ongoing investment in colonial and racist logics.[38] There is a continuity here with New Labour's authoritarian enforcement of cultures of militarism, which, as Vron Ware has noted, involved criminalising aspects of protest against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.[39]

Many contemporary historians have emphasised the centrality of violence and repression to the imperial project, in ways which have been assertively denied by Conservative culture warriors such as Kemi Badenoch. Further, they have stressed the racialised logics that were central to imperialism and its afterlives. Following Gilroy, it is imperative to recognise the importance of these different geographies and circuits, both in shaping the British state, and as a context for current political

claims, struggles and resistance. As Adam Elliott-Cooper argues: 'We cannot understate here the importance of colonial policing to the development of police power and racism on the British mainland. These strategies and techniques have colonial roots, and should be central to the story of police racism.'[40] As he also points out, a key site where such trajectories converged was in relation to the North of Ireland. Thus, for example, the 'Paras' - the 1st Battalion of the Parachute Regiment - who are responsible for a number of the most significant state atrocities in the North, most notably the killing of unarmed civilians in the Ballymurphy Massacre in Belfast in 1971 and 'Bloody Sunday' in Derry in 1972 - 'had a reputation for toughness and aggression, with many of its soldiers being veterans of the British Army's counter-insurgency campaign in the Aden colony'.[41]

The long-running campaigns for justice for those involved in atrocities such as the Ballymurphy Massacre and Bloody Sunday have led to attempts to prosecute individual soldiers, and these efforts have been constructed by militarists and authoritarian populists in ways which articulate militarism and culture-war rhetoric in a particularly virulent manner.[42] As Colin Gannon argued in *Tribune*, the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill performs three functions for the Tories: 'It soaks up political support from noxious English nationalist elements and veterans by at once disproportionately targeting Irish republicans and protecting veterans, sets a precedent of impunity for future human rights abuses arising from imperial occupations or wars, and whitewashes Britain's imperial past.'[43]

This emphasises the importance of locating politics in the North of Ireland in relation to the broader circuits of race and colonialism signalled by Gilroy. Thus Daniel Geary has usefully located the Democratic Unionist Party as part of broader circuits of rightist and racialised politics. He contends that 'ethnonationalism remains a potent force among the ideological descendants of Paisley and his allies, reflected in its hostility to racially undesirable immigrants, Islamophobia, and opposition to liberal internationalist organizations.'[44] Geary links this to the DUP's investment in racialised discourses of support for Brexit, which provides a significant backdrop to the current political context in the North.

The Conservatives' willingness to provide military amnesties reflects a robust commitment to impunity for the institutions of the British state rather than a commitment to the peace process in the North. Its current attitude in this respect appears to combine a lack of interest with a willingness to foment tensions that

might be useful to the Conservative Party more generally, particularly in relation to the border - which, as Cian O'Callaghan and Mary Gilmartin have noted, 'represents the most obvious residual impact of Ireland's status as a post-colony'.[45] This weaponisation of the border by the Conservative right was made most egregiously in Priti Patel's claim that the British government could enforce food scarcity in Ireland to exert pressure on the Irish government to drop its support for the 'backstop'.[46] It is also part, though, of a reassertion of a strong UK state - in line with the pushback against devolution in Wales and Scotland which is part of the broader Conservative agenda post-Brexit. As Daniel Finn has noted, the terms on which Johnson's government was willing to resolve the Brexit crisis were 'a far more eloquent statement of indifference to the unionist cause than the Downing Street Declaration' (over which John Major presided in 1993, and which affirmed that the British government had 'no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland').[47]

A key way in which such tensions in relation to the peace process are being shaped is through popular mobilisation of rightist politics in relation to impunity for soldiers involved in the deaths of civilians in the North of Ireland. A central figure in these mobilisations has been Johnny Mercer, the MP for Plymouth Moor View, who has twice been a Conservative Minister for Veterans Affairs, and is himself a former soldier. Mercer's response to the death of Dennis Hutchings in 2021 should be understood as one of a number of recent attempts to stoke antagonisms in relation to the fracturing UK state, in order to help build popular consent for particular authoritarian populist agendas.

Hutchings was a former sergeant in the Life Guards Regiment, and in 2018 was put on trial for his alleged role in the killing of John Pat Cunningham in 1974.[48] Cunningham, who was a vulnerable adult, was unarmed and running away when he was shot and killed by three bullets fired by a British army patrol, in a field in Carrickaness Road, Benburb, County Tyrone.[49] On hearing of Hutchings's death, Mercer tweeted, 'I'm devastated by the death of my dear friend Dennis Hutchings': 'He was polite, kind, generous and strong. He was determined to prove his innocence against the unrelenting efforts of those who wish to rewrite the history of the conflict in Northern Ireland against his generation of servicemen and women who bled and died to keep the peace'.[50]

This politicisation of the Hutchings' death signals some of the ways in which claims to impunity are shaped through particular links between Conservative

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politics, popular militarism and the North. Mercer's construction of Hutchings in these terms, as part of a 'generation of servicemen and women who bled and died to keep the peace', is part of a concerted opposition to any recognition of the depth of collusion and culpability of the security services in the conflict. This, in turn, is part of a wider reassertion of popular militarism, which is one of the ways in which 'popular consent' and support is shaped for the kind of authoritarian populism that legislates for impunity for military personnel.

Such popular consent and support for militarism is not being shaped in a vacuum but in relation to diverse antagonisms relating to the fragile peace following the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. Support for impunity is aggressively mobilised through divisive and intimidatory uses of space in different communities in the North, notably through the flying of 'Parachute regiment' flags in Loyalist areas such as the Waterside in Derry. Patrick Pinkerton has written about Parachute Regiment flags being flown in the North of Ireland, 'some bearing the inscription "Londonderry 1972", and the Loyalist slogan "No surrender", in a clear and provocative reference to Bloody Sunday'.[51] Such intimidation is clearly bolstered and given legitimacy by Conservative defence of veteran 'paras'.

Again, rather than mounting a challenge to the Conservative government's increasingly authoritarian stance on impunity, Labour's official position has been mute. It did not oppose the Overseas Operations Bill, for example, though it has opposed the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill, as have all the parties in the North, though for different reasons. But in general, instead of challenging the Conservative Party's cultivation of popular militarism - and the authoritarianism it constitutes - Labour under Starmer has shifted decisively towards the same ground.

This has included echoing critiques of Corbyn as unpatriotic, and positioning Labour's role in the creation of NATO as a central achievement of the party, on a par with the creation of the NHS. Thus, in a critique of the Stop the War movement's position on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Starmer celebrated Clement Attlee and his foreign secretary Ernest Bevin's role in the formation of NATO, arguing that 'Bevinite internationalism will guide Labour's approach to Britain's security every day of my leadership'.[52] That Bevinite 'internationalism', however, was shaped by a staunch defence of what his cabinet colleague Herbert Morrison referred to as 'the jolly old Empire', and this locates these histories as intertwined with what David Russell has

referred to as 'the party's emotional commitment to its imperial legacy'.[53] Starmer's silences on the colonial histories of NATO is part of a broader failure to address Gilroy's concerns about the colonial roots of impunity. Such silences can only serve to provide legitimacy to the forms of impunity that are an integral part of the Conservatives' authoritarian populist project. They have nothing to offer in terms of envisioning more democratic state formations.

Conclusions

This article has argued that culture-war narratives need to be understood as one of the main ways in which forms of authoritarian populism are generated and secured. Drawing on Stuart Hall's discussion of how authoritarian populism seeks to win consent, I have engaged with the ways in which the Conservatives are currently seeking to foster popular support through mobilising geographical imaginaries, as well as through revivifying colonial cultures of impunity. Tracing some of the ways through which these narratives are shaped and constructed not only contributes to a sense of how such consent is forged; it also helps bring culture wars down to earth. Engaging with specific processes and connections can point to ways of challenging and reworking the divisive rhetoric and logics they seek to foment; and it can also aid in a recognition of instances where a significant lack of broader resonance indicates that these positions are far from hegemonic.

The making of authoritarian populism is an unfinished and ongoing process, and its attempted political formations are constantly being challenged and brought into contestation. Recognising this is important politically. Culture-war framings and techniques are clearly an important way in which the right is shaping politics that seek to gain popular consent for authoritarian logics. However, it is nor a foregone conclusion that such antagonisms will gain broader political traction, and they certainly don't chime with the realities of lives and places shaped by forms of multiculture, and this offers political possibilities for contesting and winning this ground. To take advantage of these potential openings it is important to actively intervene on this terrain, rather than to passively leave it to be filled by the malevolent and divisive discourses of rightist culture warriors.

To emphasise this, I have here traced different aspects of such processes through an engagement with the racialised discourses of white victimhood that underpin ideas of 'Levelling Up' and the forms of impunity shaped by recent legislation.

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In different ways these examples show the interplay between divisive spatial imaginaries and authoritarian logics. I've also explored some of the ways in which consent is being articulated in relation to these different political antagonisms, while at the same time arguing for the importance of exploring different forms of politics, based around an assertion of the relations between multiculture and place in challenging these divisive logics, and offering more open ways of thinking about class politics. In the midst of a 'summer of discontent' it is heartening to see that considerable mobilisation is emerging. To challenge the pervasive authoritarian direction of the current government it will be necessary to articulate this with a strong political challenge from the left to the divisions which the right are seeking to foment.

David Featherstone is a Reader in Human Geography at the University of Glasgow. He has core research interests in the relations between space and politics and on geographies of left politics. He is a member of the editorial collectives of *Antipode* and *Soundings*

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Notes

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