

Joanie Willett & Arianna Giovannini

An  
**INTRODUCTION**  
to **UK POLITICS**

Place, Pluralism, and Identities

 Sage



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# Praise for *An Introduction to UK Politics*

This is a very rare kind of book. It provides an introduction to British politics while at the same time challenging a number of dominant assumptions and exploring the emergence of new pressures. At its core is an emphasis on pluralism and power. The interwoven nature of modern British governance – in relation to ideas, processes and institutions – is laid bare in an account of a changing polity which is as sophisticated as it is subtle, and as engaging as it is accessible.

**Matthew Flinders, Professor of Politics, University of Sheffield and Vice President of the Political Studies Association of the United Kingdom**

A comprehensive and fascinating look at key topics in British politics today. Weaving together theory, empirical analysis and expert contributions, this is both clearly written and thought-provoking. A must read for all British politics students.

**Laura Richards-Gray, Lecturer in British Politics, Birkbeck University of London**

This book goes beyond the study of political institutions, portraying a 'diverse array of voices' and how these perspectives shape the UK's political system. This inclusive approach to the study of politics helps us understand the UK as a multinational state (how it got here and where it might be going) and it provides a hard-hitting account of the challenges facing citizens and decision-makers today. This is a different kind of textbook which comes highly recommended.

**Lynn Bennie, Lecturer in Politics, University of Aberdeen**

This book offers a stimulating and accessible introduction to the ideas, identities, and institutions that shape our politics today. It will be an invaluable resource to students seeking to navigate the complex and rapidly changing politics of the United Kingdom.

**Richard Hayton, Associate Professor of Politics, University of Leeds**

*An Introduction to UK Politics* provides a solid introduction to the institutions of UK governance, whilst also being rooted in 'everyday' political lives. Up to date, and with attention to theoretical concepts, it will be of real benefit to students who want to know how UK politics really works.

**Daniel Gover, Senior Lecturer in British Politics, Queen Mary University of London**

This book brings a fresh and original perspective to the changing panorama of British politics. Unlike the more traditional institution-focused textbooks, this new Introduction engages with the fragmentary and sometimes contradictory elements of British politics in a sharp and stimulating fashion.

**Cillian McGrattan, Lecturer in Politics, Ulster University**

This is a fascinating and highly original introduction to the study of contemporary British politics. By focusing on the concept of pluralism, the authors succeed in drawing together both traditional and novel perspectives on what British politics is all about. Students who read this book will learn not only to understand contemporary political institutions, actors and issues, but to situate them in a broader story of what it means to do politics in a multinational, multicultural, multidimensional modern state.

**James Strong, Senior Lecturer in British Politics, Queen Mary University of London**

This innovative and intellectually stimulating textbook provides a highly relevant approach to the study of British politics. It enhances our understanding of the UK's political system by reference to important contemporary themes, such as pluralism, historical legacy, identity and inequality.

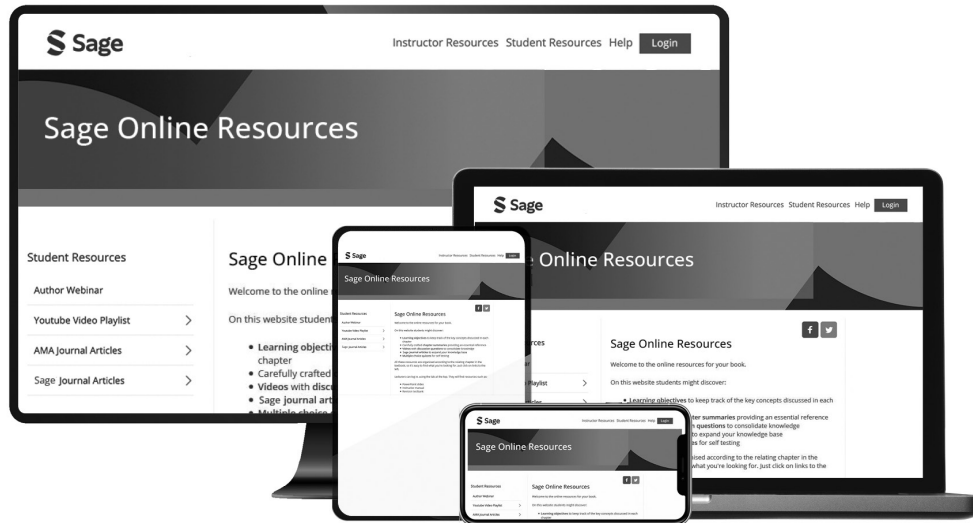
**Geoff Horn, Lecturer in Politics, Newcastle University**

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# Online resources



*An Introduction to UK Politics* is supported by a wealth of online resources for lecturers to use with students to support teaching, which are available at:

**<https://study.sagepub.com/Willett1e>**.

## For lecturers

**Teaching guides** outline the key coverage in each chapter and provide suggested activities/examples to use in class or for assignments.

**PowerPoint decks** designed for use in lectures can be downloaded and customised for use in your own presentations. They feature figures and tables from the book, and the key themes and theories from the chapters.

# About the editors and contributors

## Editors

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# Preface

We have designed this volume to be an essential textbook for first, second and third year university courses that focus on politics in the UK. Our chapters have been carefully curated to form the basis of required readings and seminar discussion and our innovative approach will help to frame modules in a way that is interesting and engaging and draws on our experiences of student needs when examining politics in the UK.

## Why this book?

When presented with the question of ‘What does UK politics mean to you?’ students routinely tend to frame their answers in terms of national politics played out in Westminster. This perspective is reflected in most undergraduate teaching resources, which emphasise the national level institutions of government. Having taught UK politics for many years, we felt that different approaches can help to better understand the complexities of the subject and we trialled some of our thoughts in the classroom. The idea of this book stems from these reflections. We seek to adopt a pluralistic approach, arguing that ‘what happens in Westminster’ is only a part of the complex and intersecting processes, relations, (hi)stories and practices that underpin UK politics.

Thus, we present a critical assessment of the UK political system that looks at whether, how and why power is or should be dispersed throughout different levels of governance as well as civil society, rather than simply accept that political authority is concentrated in the working of the central state. Our experience in the classroom and more broadly in academia tells us that there is a need for a textbook which reflects the whole breadth of politics in the UK and emphasises the ways that contribution to political life happens – and *should* happen – not just in London, but in our communities, towns, villages and cities in our everyday lives.

Taking a networked approach based on Deleuzian assemblages, we show that individuals, governmental and non-governmental institutions, organisations, businesses and pressure groups are all key political actors. They devise formal and informal campaigns situated, operating with and interacting at different levels across the country. Our aim is for students to feel that the body politic is something that we *all* have the capacity to shape and that we are all a part of, rather than something that is remote and inaccessible. We want students to see politics as something that is ‘done by us all’, and not ‘on us’. That is why we use the concept of ‘the politics of the everyday’ as a driving principle that shapes the authors’ analysis across the book. Ultimately, this allows us to introduce UK politics in an accessible way to students, and as a subject that they can actively engage in, rather than simply focusing on distant and far away processes and practices that only elites can access and influence.

To achieve this, we have organised our textbook around the central question of ‘*How plural is politics in the UK?*’ As well as reflecting our pressing concerns about the diversity and accessibility of different forms of political engagement in the UK today, this question operates as a way to analyse and explore the many different aspects of political engagement that thread across the UK and weave UK politics together.

Overall, this textbook approaches UK politics as an analytical lens rather than a descriptive introduction. We show the way that the past folds into and informs the present to create the identities and cultures in which our politics and government happen, and which exposes some of the tensions and fracture lines that may lead to further changes in the future. This enables us to consider the central role that identities and inequalities play in contemporary UK politics, which is not yet reflected in the current range of undergraduate textbooks. It also means that our textbook provides a dynamic analysis, offering an action-focused, problem-based and engaging introduction to the topic.

We take equality, inclusion and diversity as a guiding principle, not just in terms of the subject matter of this book, but also for what concerns the crafting of its contents. Our editorial team and chapter contributors bring many different perspectives to this publication, which informs our analyses and the aspects of politics that we consider to be important. We are from a range of different class, career, national and cultural backgrounds, and are based in universities reflective of the different types of institutions which exist in the UK today.

## What’s in this book

Our textbook is the first designed to represent UK society today – shifting the focus from static institutions to how UK politics is changing across different sectors of society. We argue that society in the UK has evolved rapidly over the past years and these changes have created a fluid and dynamic political landscape. This is illustrated by events like the 2016 vote to leave the European Union or the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, as well as by broad and long-lasting dynamics such as political re-alignment, and movements like Black Lives Matter and Extinction Rebellion. The importance of identity politics and the UK’s changing relationship with the world as well as with its constituent nations underscore the need for teaching resources that can explore and reflect the shifting interplay between culture, society and government in the UK. To cover all this, the textbook is organised in three sections.

Part I lays the foundation for a pluralist interpretation of UK politics and provides a set of framing chapters that offer an account of what it means to study UK politics from a pluralist perspective, and some of the inequalities which thread the UK.

In Part II we cover key structures, concepts and institutions that form the heart of UK politics such as power, community politics, territorial politics and devolution, the legislature, executive, political parties and the media.

In Part III we examine some of the big questions in the contemporary UK: socioeconomic inequalities, the green agenda and the UK’s relationship with the rest of the world.

Our chapter structure follows the themes traditionally taught on UK politics courses, but the content is very different, reflecting our central question of how plural UK politics is,

considering how society in the UK is ‘assembled’ and the relationship that this has with formal and informal politics.

The Introductory chapter provides an overview of how to approach the study of politics in the UK, giving readers a sense of (some of) the different kinds of identities and analyses which underpin politics in the UK.

Chapter 1 argues that UK politics needs to be understood as being made up of a diverse array of political actors, from everyday people through to those working in the machinery of central government. The chapter asks *why* pluralism matters for a liberal democratic government and considers pluralism as a descriptive and normative tool which has utility for well-functioning liberal democracies. We also cover the ways that histories impact on the degree to which ideas and knowledge resonate and gain traction, and how this affects the flows of information, people and ideas between assembled parts of the UK political system.

Chapter 2 takes a critical look at how the UK as we know it today has come together over time as a multi-national state and the impact these processes of ‘assemblage’ have on the territorial and constitutional settlement of the country. The chapter first considers what a nation-state is, and what makes a state ‘multi-national’. Second, and drawing on this, the chapter offers an overview of the specific dynamics of territorial distinctiveness across the nations of the UK, and it concludes by evaluating the constitutional settlement that has emerged from the long path of incremental unification that characterises our country.

Chapter 3 addresses the racial contract, examining the way in which the obligations between the state and individuals are bound by conceptions of race. We look at what is meant by colonialism and the ideas (or myths) that were employed to justify and legitimise it. We also examine postcolonial migration to Britain, and the ways in which it brought many formerly colonised people to the UK. Next, we consider multiculturalism and the ways in which diverse communities live in Britain, how this shapes British politics. This includes how racialised postcolonial migrants to Britain engage with and are represented in the British political arena.

Chapter 4 examines structural inequalities as they relate to the relationship with work in the present-day UK, through the prism of class and gender as intersecting forms of identification relevant to UK politics. We use ‘social reproduction’ to illuminate the struggles over the value of ‘key’ or ‘essential’ work, and assess the proposals put forward by UK political parties and other actors to ameliorate these inequalities. We consider different distributive and ‘predistributive’ policies to address relevant structural inequalities, and the meaning of ‘pluralism’ in the context of industrial relations as the ‘politics of work’.

In Chapter 5 you will learn that policy change is complex, involving many different individuals, pressure groups, organisations and political actors, even if these are different in size and in their ability to produce change. By examining everyday politics and cultural norms we see that political change often grows out of cultural change. The micropolitics of everyday activities and living one’s authentic self create new structures and norms to which policy has to respond. We use the concepts of social capital and pluralism to see how strong, pluralist democracies rely on an active and vibrant civil society, participating in formal and informal community place-shaping.

Chapter 6 looks at the process of devolution in the UK and at the state of sub-national governance across the country, linking these debates to issues concerning regional inequalities. First, the chapter considers what is (and what is not) devolution and how this policy agenda fits within the UK constitutional setting. Second, it draws on this to assess the asymmetric character of the process of devolution and how it is evolving in each of the four component nations of the UK. It concludes with a critical reflection on the democratic and socioeconomic inequalities that stem from these dynamics.

Chapter 7 shows that political parties are neither the exclusive domain of the elite nor entirely democratised bodies. Political parties are an accumulation of parts, which sometimes fit together seamlessly and sometimes rub one another up the wrong way. The chapter will help students to identify political parties' internal sub-groups, including the role played by party members, party staff and elected representatives. We explore how political parties can reflect dimensions of difference in the UK, including territorial and ideological diversity, and learn how political parties organise political competition in the UK. Finally, the chapter considers whether political parties remain essential to British democracy.

Chapter 8 focuses on elections and referendums. These are infrequent opportunities for citizens to express our preferences and hold our elected representatives to account. In this chapter we consider theories of elite and mass opinion formation to understand how the political representation of our interests, beliefs and values works, or doesn't work, in practice. We explore the relationships between values and party choice and how these have changed over time. Finally, we examine the Scottish and EU referendums, considering how they have altered the relationships we have with the political parties and the way we understand public opinion in the UK.

Chapter 9 looks at how the news media have a critical public service role in a democratic society. We show that ideally journalism will offer a platform for a wide range of ideas to be debated, which will help inform the public on political affairs. We examine whether the news media enhances or restricts pluralism in the UK political system, and we see that news coverage of political affairs in the UK is limited and hampered by systemic problems, but it is an essential part of the democratic system, and the democratic system would be worse off without the news industry.

Chapter 10 will help students to reflect upon the extent to which the UK Parliament meets our modern pluralistic values, understand the ways in which citizens can access and influence the institution, and identify areas where the UK Parliament can be reformed to resolve some of its limitations. The chapter shows that the UK Parliament has developed over the centuries and historical institutionalism acts as a drag on reform. Enhancements have been made in the quality of petitioning and the engagement activities of select committees but progress is slow. Government dominance remains a challenge and parliamentary sovereignty means government sovereignty through parliamentary majorities.

Chapter 11 focuses empirically on the premierships of recent UK prime ministers, notably David Cameron, Theresa May, Boris Johnson and Liz Truss. The chapter addresses how far the experience of governing from 10 Downing Street can be understood from the perspective of the core executive literature, conceiving of the prime minister as reliant on other actors and institutions in central government. It is also necessary to consider how the UK executive

manages relationships with civil society and citizens considering recent events. The chapter considers the limitations of academic perspectives such as the core executive approach given recent developments in UK politics and policymaking.

Chapter 12 looks at the policy models that have shaped the UK's economy into what it is today. It considers the balance of interests in the UK economy, how economic and political resources are distributed, and the extent to which the United Kingdom can claim to have an economy for all. It provides an overview of some key trends in the UK economy and a sense of the different economic policy models that have been applied by successive UK governments. We consider whether politics can change economic outcomes, and why there may be constraints on it doing so.

Chapter 13 explores the ways in which UK environment and climate politics is a dynamic assemblage through the case study of veganism and the related animal movement. We see why a range of differentiated environmental organisations exist and how political and lifestyle activism interact. You will examine the pathways through which environmental knowledge is constructed, assembled, contested and sometimes used to inform UK environmental policy. You will also learn about the range of related political views held between and among vegans and environmentalists and explore how these energy flows shape environmental knowledge.

Chapter 14 takes us through the significance of the Brexit referendum and the contested foreign policy narrative of 'Global Britain.' We look at the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy, and the extent to which these have or have not been shaped by pluralistic influences. The chapter demonstrates that, from the history of the British Empire to Brexit and beyond, issues of foreign policy – how the British state acts beyond its territorially defined borders – have always been messily and inextricably intertwined with social issues within those borders.

## How to use the book

Our textbook has a series of features to support student learning and ensure that students can engage with the topics covered in an interactive manner. These include:

- **Need to know:** This boxed section signposts students to some of the foundational knowledges around each topic, and where they should go to look into this topic in more depth (e.g. government websites).
- **Case studies:** Our case studies showcase differing perspectives on the same event, supporting and encouraging students to interpret the familiar through different positionalities.
- **Theory:** In our theory boxes, we feature different concepts in action, exploring how to employ these concepts, and how they help us to interpret particular worlds.
- **Spotlight on research boxes** across chapters are intended to spark debate and critical thinking by showcasing the latest seminal or controversial publications.
- **Annotated reading lists** provide students with a way in to some of the key wider literature.

# Acknowledgements

Editing and putting together this book has been an exciting journey. We are hugely indebted to Andrew Malvern at Sage who, from day one, with his constant enthusiasm, support and professional advice has been just the best commissioning editor any author could hope to work with. Daniel Price at Sage has also been a constant source of support and professional help. Daniel has fantastic interpersonal skills and was able to keep us to schedule (ish) in a beautifully gentle but firm way. We are extremely grateful to both. We would also like to thank the reviewers for their extremely useful comments on the initial book proposal and draft chapters, and who helped us improve its content and final shape. Of course, thanks are also due to the fantastic contributors to the book who, with their diverse, original and timely analyses have brought to life the ideas and aims we proposed as editors. We hope students and instructors will find this book valuable and use it as a springboard to promote the study of UK politics from a new angle.

Joanie Willett, St Austell, Cornwall

Arianna Giovannini, Sheffield

August 2023

# An introduction to politics in the UK

Joanie Willett and Arianna Giovannini

## Learning objectives

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Have an overview of how to approach the study of politics in the UK
- Understand (some of) the different kinds of identities which underpin politics in the UK
- Identify a range of analytical lenses through which to construct your own knowledge about politics in the UK
- Understand how the different political institutions in the UK fit together

## Introduction

The aim of this introductory chapter is to set the framework that guides this book and present some of the key concepts, ideologies and issues that underpin the analysis developed in its chapters. This will allow you to make the most of the book's contents and understand how to use it as a learning resource that will help you to build your own knowledge of UK politics.

Before you begin working through this chapter, we want you to ask yourself a question. Is there anything on which all people in the United Kingdom can agree? Have you got an example of something that is often considered to be a universally held value, which on reflection very much is not?

Joanie's example is about university education. From one standpoint, we imagine this to be something to which everybody aspires, and which all parents encourage and support their children to do. Joanie's experience is very different and she remembers the note of panic in her mother's voice when she told her, aged 24, that she planned to go to university. Her mother was apparently more horrified than when Joanie had told her that she was having a baby nearly nine years previously. Her mother's objections were on religious grounds, but there are many other reasons why some people throughout the UK feel that something as apparently universally good as a higher education is not for people like them.

Why are we telling you this? To make the point that there are many different *UKs* and that we cannot make the assumption that the one that we inhabit is anything like the same as the one that other people experience. Instead, and as we will discuss in more depth in the



chapters to follow, the UK is assembled from *many* different experiences, assumptions and expectations. This is why this book is tied together by the question *How plural is politics in the UK?* This is another way of asking the extent to which the many different experiences, cultures, beliefs and meanings held by people in the UK are represented, listened to and heard in the various machineries which makes up UK politics and government.

We talk about what we mean by ‘assembled’ and the relationship between this perspective and pluralism in the next chapter. This offers us a way of approaching UK politics which looks at power as something which is dispersed throughout the political system. In this book, we want to get away from the idea that politics and power in the UK are clustered around the Parliament in Westminster, London. Instead, we want to focus on how people everywhere, across the country, are important in understanding and shaping UK politics. This is why we open the book with a discussion about the different identities which make up the UK, before talking about institutions only later. In our view, political institutions rely on people to give them meaning and purpose.

In other words, rather than being the most important part of UK politics, we look at our political institutions as an expression of how we are currently choosing to organise ourselves in the UK. For us in this book, looking at how the UK is assembled helps us to retain this focus on people. Furthermore, we also argue that we cannot understand politics in the UK – its structures, infrastructures, debating points and issues – unless we also get to grips with the diversity that characterises the UK, understanding the many different ‘UKs’ that people inhabit and perceive through their lived experiences. Over the next few pages we will introduce you to some of the foundational principles of the UK that are necessary to hit the ground running, before we start with in-depth analyses of specific issues, processes and institutions in the following chapters. These principles include: i) a view of the UK as a multi-national state and that this is still reflected in its regional diversity and inequalities today; ii) an understanding of the UK as a nation-state with a history of colonising large parts of the world – a contested ‘heritage’ that still has a huge impact on our polity today; iii) an acknowledgment that, despite being a developed country, the UK still has many structural inequalities which affect the life-chances and ability of people to participate in political processes and procedures. After we have unpacked these points, we will provide an overview of some of the institutions which make up the UK political system, looking at how they connect together. We will close by explaining some theoretical approaches through which you might like to make your own analyses of UK politics. In this way, we hope that the book will become a useful resource for you, enabling all students to develop a critical and interactive understanding of politics in the UK.

### Need to know: What is the UK?

One of the things which both unites and divides us relates to what we actually call this polity that most of us are living in right now. Do we call ourselves the United Kingdom? Great Britain? Great Britain and Northern Ireland? England? This is what we often called the UK before 1997,

when we began to understand that we had been naming the entire polity by one of its constituency nations. You might still have the experience of going overseas and having people refer to you as coming from England, even if you actually are from one of the other UK nations. Some of the university modules that you are encountering will make some sort of reference to politics in the UK, but there will still be others which are entitled something like 'British Politics'. However, just like knowing the British Isles as 'England' was clearly wrong, carrying all kinds of colonial linguistic legacies as it overlooked Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Cornwall; so too 'Britain' leaves out Northern Ireland. Therefore, if we are to use a way of naming which accurately reflects the land mass governed by the Parliament in Westminster, London (with support of the Parliaments in Scotland and Wales, and the Northern Ireland Assembly), we need to use the term 'United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland' and 'UK' as a shorthand for it. Yes, this is complicated and perhaps a bit confusing, but it also reflects the complexities that underpin the UK as a multi-national state (for a full discussion, see Chapter 2).

## The UK as a multi-national state

Understanding the nature of the UK as a multi-national state is essential to capture how its constitution and territorial settlement have evolved over time, and the extent to which power is dispersed across and within the official constituent nations (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) of the country. In Chapter 2 we discuss this in detail, providing a full explanation of key concepts as well as the historical path through which the UK has come together.

For now, it is important to note that the process that led to the creation of the UK as we know it today was underpinned by a series of conquests, annexations, unions and separations of constituent nations over several hundred years. The UK has been united into one sovereign nation-state, but the histories, cultures, values and identities of Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England (and also Cornwall and English regions with a stronger sense of distinctiveness) have not been eradicated. As a result, throughout this process, feelings, demands and struggles for more autonomy and even self-determination have kept bubbling under the surface, and have at times emerged in different forms, including armed and violent episodes. For example, while for a time Ireland was part of the UK, the 1916 Easter Rising saw the beginning of the end of UK rule over most of the island of Ireland. For Scotland and Wales, key moments that expressed a desire for more autonomy were the 1997 devolution referendums which introduced a Parliament in Scotland and an Assembly in Wales (now a Parliament). We should also remember that in 2014, despite strong opposition from the government in London, Scotland held an independence referendum. While the pro-independence camp lost its battle in the end, almost 85 per cent of the Scottish population went to the polls, thus showing that they cared about the future of their nation. And a year later, the Scottish National Party (SNP) banked an astounding victory at the general election, taking 56 of an available 59 seats – abruptly transforming it from a 'minority party' on the UK stage to one with a major impact on the country's politics (Rose and Shepard, 2016).

Why do people in the UK's constituent nations campaign for autonomy or even independence? In his seminal book *The Break-Up of Britain* (1977), Tom Nairn argues that this is because after the end of the Empire, civic nationalism has replaced class as people seek to have their interests heard and needs met. Furthermore, highlighting the relationships of conquest (and domination) between England and the other nations of the UK, Michael Hechter (1975) used the term 'internal colonialism' to characterise socioeconomic and political dynamics across the union. At the bottom line is a sense that the UK is not very good at ensuring that the benefits of the country's wealth are fairly distributed throughout all its nations – signalling an issue with the allocation of power within and away from the central state and the government in London.

Indeed, this issue is not limited to the so-called Celtic nations. The centrifugal effects of late capitalism, pooling resources towards the major cities (Martin et al., 2016) combined with a continual tendency in the UK towards centralising decision-making in London, contributed to the development of a 'geography of discontent' (McCann, 2018) in the so-called 'red wall' areas in the North of England and the Midlands. Despite being traditionally Labour, voters switched to the Conservatives in the 2019 general election, allowing Boris Johnson and his party to win. Indeed, the 'levelling up' agenda heralded during the election campaign and initiated by Johnson once in government was aimed precisely at trying to even out some of these regional inequalities (Giovannini, 2021a; Tomaney and Pike, 2020).

The UK is not alone in being a multi-national state cut across by cultural, historical, economic and political differences. Many nation-states globally are more or less (un)easy alliances of different nations, brought together by conquest or pragmatism. For example, if we look at mainland Europe, just as the UK has a secessionist movement in Scotland, the Catalans and Basques have parties that campaign for them to become independent from Spain, and demands for Corsican independence from France have led to many political struggles. Many nations within multi-national states also have their own distinctive language. In the Netherlands (never Holland, for the same reason that the UK is not England) the Frisians speak a very different language from the Dutch. Slovenia is comprised of three different cultural and linguistic-facing communities, leaning towards each of Italy, Austria and Croatia. In Italy, there are parts of the country like South-Tyrol where, in some areas, most of the population speak German as their first language and barely know Italian as they were annexed to the country from Austria after the Second World War. The importance of language as a cultural marker is so intense that linguistic justice is a central plank of the European Free Alliance, the European political party which represents regional and national autonomy and independence movements in the EU Parliament. In the UK, speakers of minority languages (including in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland) have had to endure discrimination for keeping their native tongue.

The point that we want to make here is that there is nothing 'natural' about the nation. Nations, their myths, memories and symbols are (re)interpretations of older or sometimes even invented traditions, in order to achieve particular ends and outcomes (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2014; Smith, 1991). Indeed, Linda Colley, in her seminal book *Britons: Forging the Nation* (2009), provides us with a wonderful overview of how Britain was invented. What this

also shows us is that nations and nation-states (including the UK) are in a constant state of adaptation and flux, rather than being fixed entities.

## Regional (in)equalities

Looking at territorial diversity also introduces questions of (un)equal opportunities, life chances and societal and economic outcomes of people in different parts of the UK. The UK is one of the most regionally unequal nations in the developed world, containing both some of the poorest parts of Europe (such as Northern Ireland, Cornwall, West Wales and the Valleys), as well as some of the richest parts of Europe (Raikes et al., 2019). The so-called North/South divide within England also provides a language which connotes the different kinds of lives experienced by people in the North, and those in the South (Giovannini and Rose, 2020). However, regional inequalities go much further than the economic questions which we have introduced here, and we will explore this in greater depth in Chapter 6. They also extend to how politics in the UK is imagined.

An exercise that you might like to try is to make an internet search of images for politics in the UK. Then ask yourself how many of these images (beyond flags) depict something beyond London, the Parliament in Westminster, and the various political actors that participate in Westminster politics. These kinds of imaginaries construct a story which says that politics in the UK is all about what happens in one small part of the country (i.e. in and around its capital). If we were to stick only to these depictions, we would hardly know that other parts of the UK exist, or what they are. And yet, regional inequalities, a sense of being 'left behind', needing 'levelling up', or greater political decentralisation have all, in various guises, been a mainstay of UK politics since at least the late 1990s (Giovannini, 2021a; Willett et al., 2019). Regions might be less visible than nations – but they keep occupying a hefty part of the UK policy agenda. In this book, when we ask how plural the UK is, we are also asking about the extent to which different regions of the UK are represented in political debates, regional inequalities are visible, and people from the regions are active participants in a pluralist politics in the UK.

## Politics and identities in the UK

Sometimes it can be tempting to imagine identity as a monolithic entity – identity just *is*: it's the essence of a thing, that people hold and that ties a group of people together (Parekh, 2008). To unpick this, it is useful to start with Benedict Anderson's (1991) assertion that national identities are *imagined*. In other words, the political community of the nation is so large that we cannot possibly know everyone within it. So the actual community is constructed in our minds around various myths and memories and symbolism, which creates a sense of belonging around shared stories, values and vernacular that work as invisible ties that bind specific groups of people together. We will come back to stories a little bit later but for politics, a sense of 'we-ness' is really important. People need to feel that the nation-state caters for and provides fair representation to their political community if the concept of the

‘nation’ is to inspire their loyalty and therefore their consent to government (Bryant, 2010). But what exactly is the identity that we collect around in the UK? This is difficult to pinpoint, precisely because, for example, a person can feel at the same time British and Scottish, or English and British, Cornish and British, or even Yorkshire, English and British. This is the point. Identities are fluid, multiple, overlapping and ever changing.

The identities underpinning politics in the UK have territorial connotations, but also other key dimensions. For hundreds of years the inhabitants of this collection of nations have been engaging in conversations and geopolitical positioning amongst themselves and in their interactions and imaginaries of other nations beyond what would come to be known as Britain and the United Kingdom. UK identities have often been framed in terms of being part of western civilisation. Before we talk about colonialism and its impact, it is important to note the very idea of western civilisation is an ideologically created construct which in itself generates an artificial separation between European knowledge, politics, ideas, and cultures, and those of the rest of the world (MacSweeney, 2023), or more specifically, the ‘East’ or the Orient (see also Said, 2003).

Debates about contemporary UK identities have been framed as ‘culture wars’ since at least the early 2000s. In their book *Culture Wars, the Media and the British Left*, James Curran et al. (2005) traced the shifts in identities within the UK that have led to the profound political changes which happened over the decades since the 1970s. Part of the argument here is that the relationship between evolving identities in the UK and politics is tangled and co-evolutionary. We could ask ourselves questions about the extent to which the political consensus in the UK has altered because our politicians have taken a leadership role in setting out a policy agenda and convincing people to follow them. Or perhaps our political leaders have had to follow a continually evolving thread of identities, experiences, beliefs, attitudes and aspirations amongst people in many different parts of the UK. Regardless of the influences on popular culture, what we have seen over the decades since the 1970s is a set of identities built on a greater sense of individualism rather than the collectivism which underpinned the previous post-Second World War consensus.

Note here the term ‘consensus’. By this we are making the explicit point that identities in the UK are multiple rather than singular. There is no single, collective UK under which the public assembles. Instead, we are made up of a multiplicity (or plurality) of experiences that shape our individual sense of self – and therefore the identities in the polity which we are part of and help to create. The point about consensus is that it provides a kind of thread or an ‘ish’ which resonates enough with our experiences to be able to follow even if it does not fully reflect our identities. This is where the politics of pluralism is important and we will look at this in more depth in Chapter 1.

For some analysts, it is the *lack* of pluralism in the UK, combined with some fundamental changes about so called ‘British values’, which underpinned the vote to leave the European Union in the 2016 referendum (Ashcroft and Bevir, 2016; Goodwin, 2023). We look at this in greater depth in Chapter 5, but the idea that there is a tangled interrelationship between people’s sense of identity and the political choices (see also Dorling and Tomlinson, 2020) that we make is an interesting one, and one to which analysts and

students of politics in the UK need to be much more alert. This is why the first part of the book focuses on the structural and identity-related issues which underpin politics and pluralism in the contemporary UK.

## The UK and the legacy of colonialism

One of the recurrent themes in UK politics is immigration. In public debates, the language around this issue shifts from refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants, ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ immigrants, people smugglers and, more recently, people trying to cross the Channel in small, overcrowded, unseaworthy boats (Blinder and Allen, 2016). In each instance the language about migrants shifts, with words designed to raise different emotional responses (e.g. see Ahmed, 2004). However, we cannot understand attitudes towards immigration in the UK without also understanding the UK’s history of colonialism.

Although the sun may have set on the British Empire in the aftermath of the Second World War (Ferguson, 2004), its impact on society and politics in the UK has been enormous. In fact, Sathnam Sanghera makes the argument in his book *Empireland* that it is impossible to understand the UK right now without also understanding the long impact of colonialism. We will look at this in more depth in Chapter 3. However, the empire provided the British people with both a sense of pride and national superiority, and also a racialised doctrine which allowed for the brutal treatment and even genocide of ‘native’ peoples (Elkins, 2022; Lawson, 2014).

To understand this more fully, we need to think of the long effects of culture and memory. People who were educated in the UK in the 1950s are likely to have encountered experiences similar to those related by Richard Evans in an article in the *New Statesman* in July 2020. With the trigger warning that some of his education taught extremely offensive and dehumanising language around people of colour, he wrote:

... when I was a child in the early 1950s, much of the world map displayed on the classroom wall was still painted pink, depicting the ‘British Empire, on which the sun never sets’. I learned to read from a primer called ‘Little Black Sambo’ about a Tamil boy and his parents Black Mumbo and Black Jumbo.

He went on to share some of the many ways in which extremely offensive racist attitudes and symbolism were learned and shared as part of the fabric of everyday life in the UK. We are not making the claim here that all older people are racist. Society and people evolve. What we want to highlight is how attitudes and values are embedded into cultural norms, as in the offensive education example above, and how such attitudes and values can have an extremely long reach through the generations.

For individuals and their families from formerly colonised lands, this had an enormous impact on the kinds of lives which they lived. The ‘no blacks, no dogs, no Irish’ signs showcased in some venues made it extremely difficult for people from colonised lands, invited to take part in the post-Second World War reconstruction of the UK, to get housing, work, or access to basic services. Andrea Levy’s award-winning book *Small Island* (Levy, 2014),

drawing on the experiences of her mother when she moved to the UK from Jamaica, really brings this to life. But the violence and racism experienced by people of colour was utterly appalling and completely dehumanising. This is well documented by scholars such as Paul Gilroy (2002) in his book *Ain't no Black in the Union Jack* and Robbie Shilliam's (2018) *Race and the Undeserving Poor*.

Whilst we might like to imagine that there have been improvements in societal attitudes in the intervening decades, and certainly legal instruments such as the 2010 *Equality Act* and those which went before it, have gone a long way towards making overt discrimination illegal. However, there is still significant structural racism and underlying racist attitudes. If anything, it is now manifest in more 'sophisticated' and subtle ways (Showunmi and Tomlin, 2022). The Windrush scandal is a clear example of this. The Empire Windrush was a ship carrying migrants from the Caribbean, invited to the UK to help to fill a labour shortage in the late 1940s. As Levy (2014) documents, many of these immigrants already thought of themselves as British, but there was also the understanding that they and their descendants would of course be formally British citizens, able to live and work in the UK indefinitely. However, under the 'hostile environment' to immigration from 2012, many Windrush generation migrants and their descendants found themselves deported – sometimes to countries in which they had never lived or visited and had no networks at all (Gentleman, 2019). The point that we are trying to make here is that the legacy of colonialism still affects the UK, particularly with regard to race and racism.

## Structural inequalities

We should not imagine that structural inequalities in the UK founded on dehumanisation are limited to people of colour and immigration. For example, when in 1869 J.S. Mill published his book *The Subjection of Women* calling for women in the UK to have the vote, one of the charges that he had to make was that women were not (as was commonly believed) an inferior species of human to men. Mary Wollstonecraft (2009 [1792]) made some similar arguments in the 1790s. She was writing at a time when married women were literally, legally considered to be the property of their husbands. This was not something that would change in law for many decades. In living memory of when Wollstonecraft had been writing, between 1541 and 1743 thousands of (mostly) women were legally killed on accusations of being witches. As Marianne Hester wrote in 1996, this was part of a deepening patriarchal move towards the control of women. Although women often played a role in shaping politics, from social campaigners such as Emily Hobhouse to the vigorous activism for votes for women by the Pankhursts and their supporters, this was played out over a time when the options available to women were severely limited. In her book *Testament to Youth*, first published in 1933, social activist and journalist Vera Britain recalled how before the First World War, even for a woman of her class and privilege, going to university or even travelling unaccompanied was extremely difficult. The social disruption of the war meant that she was able to do what would have been unthinkable before – earn her own money and make her own choices. Although options for women have improved enormously over the intervening

decades (Gottlieb and Toye, 2013), the structural exclusions which women experience are still very much present although they have shifted and morphed (Evans, 2015).

The Equality Act 2010 covers discrimination on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, race and ethnicity. The fact that so many groups in society require legislation in order to be protected against discrimination is telling and links tightly to the thread at the heart of this book. The fact that people with so many different experiences are structurally excluded from enjoying life to the fullest in the UK raises important issues around pluralism in UK politics and the degree to which different people are able to participate in setting or influencing the political agenda. In the following chapters, we seek to weave many different experiences throughout our examples and case studies. In Chapter 4, we link structural inequalities to work, which also helps to make visible class – one aspect of discrimination *not* covered by the Equality Act, which nevertheless has had an enormous impact on life chances and opportunity. It also affects the kind of voice that people have in the political landscape (McGarvey, 2018). The changing nature of work helped to create and perpetuate economic and societal inequalities which are very much part of the fabric of the contemporary UK (e.g. see Hobsbawm, 1999). One of the interesting things for us to do as political analysts is to explore just how our politics is (or is not) evolving over time in response to the structural inequalities which we see, and further, what the machinery of government needs to do in order to keep up with and better reflect these changes.

### Theory box: Political analysis

In the next chapter we will introduce you to the concept of the assemblage, which will be the main lens through which we examine politics in the UK. However, we strongly encourage you to always ask yourselves the question ‘What angle is this claim about UK politics coming from?’ The claim that we are making right now is coming from a post-structural perspective which holds that all ‘truth’ is subjective and, therefore, dependent on one’s viewpoint.

Space does not permit us to go much beyond the key positions, but books such as Freedom and Stears’ (2013) *The Oxford Handbook for Political Ideologies* and Barbara Goodwin’s (2016) *Using Political Ideas* are excellent starting points for you to get a deeper understanding about what different analytical frameworks look at and show. It can also be really valuable to examine the same set of ideas through a number of different ideological lenses to help to get a more well-rounded understanding of a topic. There are many different intersections between the ideologies which we list below.

Some key ideological positions include:

- *Conservatism*: Not necessarily to be conflated with the Conservative Party (both Margaret Thatcher and Liz Truss were very radical prime ministers), conservative beliefs emphasise the importance of incremental change. It is a pragmatic doctrine focusing

(Continued)



on 'what works now', and 'how can this be adapted to work better' rather than following normative ideas about abstract notions of the 'good' society.

- *Liberalism*: Liberalism is concerned about core notions of the good society. Considered to be extremely radical at the time of its inception from the late 1600s onwards (alongside the rise of modernity and enlightenment thought), varieties of liberalism privilege the universal ideas of liberty, natural rights, individualism, progress and welfare. At times liberals can favour welfare systems which more libertarian versions feel is at odds with individual freedom, so like many analytical perspectives, it is a very broad church.
- *Social democracy*: In general, social democracy is a kind of fusion between liberal ideas of freedom and rights, and more socialist perspectives about the value of collective action in order to overcome the inequalities and exploitation inherent in free-market capitalism and more economically libertarian ideas.
- *Anarchism*: Often imagined predominantly as being about the abolition of hierarchical forms of government such as states, this can be considered problematic by anarchists who identify with more left-leaning, collective action types of anarchism who do not want to be associated with the extreme liberal individualism of, for example, free-market varieties. At its core, anarchism is about self-organised and adaptive types of societies.
- *Economic libertarianism*: Economic libertarianism has been a theme of the global economy of the latter part of the 20th century, following the belief that a free market is the best form of distributive mechanism, and that economic rationales should be applied to political questions.
- *Nationalism*: Nationalism foregrounds an emphasis on the needs of the nation. Often it is associated with the far right and a sense of ethnic exclusivity around who 'belongs' within the nation. However, it is also often used as a means of making visible a group of people bounded by territory and a common sense of belonging (e.g. through shared culture, beliefs, religion or language), who are experiencing or perceiving various types of experiences (such as the impact of colonialism).
- *Populism*: Populism centres a discourse on the divide between 'out of touch' elites who hold positions of power and 'ordinary people', and seeks to reverse this. In some regards it is an extreme form of liberalism in its emphasis on popular sovereignty. However, it also risks becoming a 'tyranny of the majority' which has serious issues regarding the inclusion of minorities.
- *Feminism*: Feminism exposes the spaces in which patriarchal structures and knowledge dominate the private and political sphere. As with all ideologies, there are many different forms of feminism, which argue that gender is still an extremely important societal cleavage through which women are disadvantaged and, as such, it should be mobilised and politicised to establish full equality.
- *Green theories*: Green theories cover a very wide range of different ideological positions which all foreground the relationship between people and the natural environment and the political solutions which could improve this relationship. They range from deep green perspectives which place ecologies as paramount and call for radical lifestyle changes, to ecological modernisation perspectives which ask what kinds of technological solutions can enable climate adaptation without significant lifestyle changes.

- *Decolonisation*: Decolonisation explores and exposes the impact that colonialism and decolonisation has had, and continues to have on people of colour, inclusion, discrimination and life chances. It seeks ideas and policies which can ameliorate historic and contemporary injustice and seeks to ensure that people of colour are equally visible throughout the public sphere.

## Institutions in UK politics

In this last part of our introductory chapter, we want to give you a brief overview of the institutions that you will encounter later on in this book, so you can see roughly how they all fit together and support each other. We claim that in order to understand the institutions of politics in the UK, we first need to understand the people and our histories through which these institutions came in to being. In short, political institutions, including the buildings, practices and knowledge of the Parliaments in Westminster, the long-standing practice of voting and emerging institutions around social media use are created, constructed, and maintained by us, the people. As the 2016 referendum vote to leave the European Union and the UK's subsequent departure at the end of 2019 show us, we only join and maintain our institutions if 'we' choose to.

### The people

Without the experiences, attitudes, values and beliefs of 'ordinary' people living across the United Kingdom, we would not have a UK politics! As voting and non-voting members of the public, some of us choose to organise into clubs, associations, membership organisations, or even political groups. As we will see in Chapter 5, these all have the role of shaping our communities in some way or alerting us to things we care about and that affect our lives which need to be changed. This might be something that we get involved in at a local level, or it might be something that takes us to a national or a UK-wide platform. Qualifying citizens, over the age of 18, also choose our governments at all levels.

### Local government

Local government acts as a really important bridge between localities, communities and different levels of government. They are run by councillors who are chosen at regular elections and include county and unitary authorities, non-metropolitan district councils, metropolitan district councils, and town and parish councils. Not every area is served by every type of council, and London is different again with the Greater London Authority as the first tier, and 33 boroughs plus the London Corporation below it. We will explore this complex landscape more fully in Chapter 6.

Local government follows strategies and funding set by central government and is responsible for implementing government policy and delivering a wide range of services (Barnett

et al., 2021). However, local government sometimes struggles to do this, especially since the introduction of austerity measures that have led to increasing and severe budget cuts over more than a decade (Barnett et al., 2021). In recent years, the growing constraints under which local government operates have led some to argue that councils should take a lot more control over local decision-making (e.g. see APSE, 2021). In England, these calls are connected with the ongoing ‘devolution agenda’, which involves the creation of ‘combined authorities’ (i.e. groups of two or more councils that collaborate and take collective decisions across council boundaries) led by a directly elected Metro Mayor. Where they exist (and they are by no means universal) town and parish councils are the level of government which should be the easiest for people to interact with because they are literally the closest to where people live their lives (Willett and Cruxon, 2019).

## Parliaments

We use parliaments as a plural here to include the devolved institutions in Scotland, Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly alongside the Parliament in Westminster. Devolved institutions are (at least in principle) still subordinated to the UK Parliament but have direct power over so-called ‘devolved matters’ (i.e. the specific policy areas for which Westminster has transferred power to them). In theory, Westminster should not get involved in these areas (Syed et al., 2023) but, due to the principle of parliamentary sovereignty which guides the UK constitution, it still retains the authority to take back any competence it has transferred to the devolved parliaments. Parliamentary decisions are made by representatives (members), chosen by the people during election cycles. We hope that by the time that you encounter Chapters 11 and 12 you will see that parliaments in general, and the Westminster Parliament in particular, are just some (very important) parts of a *much* bigger system of UK politics. We would of course, encourage you to reflect on the different feedback loops between parliaments and the public, and the degree to which it reflects the different kinds of lives of people in the UK.

## Political parties

Political parties are organised groups of people which actively seek to bring about changes in their communities by competing in elections and seeking to win power and get into public office. Party members operate at all levels of government, including town and parish councils; district, county and unitary councils; and all parliaments and the Northern Ireland Assembly. Some members of the Scottish, Welsh and UK Parliaments were previously councillors, as they learned their craft in the practice of politics. Political parties play an important role in linking together public opinion and different levels of government (Pattie and Johnston, 2016). We will look at the feedback-loops between party policy, public opinion and government in Chapter 7. However, political parties will consult a range of different individuals and organisations when setting out their agendas for government.

## Elections and referendums

Elections play a vital role in UK representative democracy. This means that every few years qualifying citizens aged 18 and over, are invited to vote in an election to decide who they would like to represent them. Occasionally, on contentious or big topics, the public is invited to decide what should happen through a referendum, or a vote on a single issue (such as the Brexit referendum in 2016, or the Scottish Independence referendum in 2014). Elections and referendums are one way in which people can feed their opinions, attitudes and beliefs into government policy. In elections, voters can choose which political party they would like to run government at whichever level is being targeted – national or local. We will look at this in more depth in Chapter 8.

## The media

For democracy to work well, it is important that people are able to be informed about what is happening locally and nationally. Ideally, following a balance of the evidence, the public can then make up their minds about what they think about key topics. The media are important in sharing this kind of information and include TV, radio, print, online and social media reporting. There is a debate about the level to which the media shape or are shaped by public opinion. However, the different types of media in the UK play a vital role in sharing information around people, organisations and government. They can expose us to people who experience very different versions of the UK to ourselves, discuss policy solutions... and demonise or ‘other’ particular groups of people. We look at the role of the media in Chapter 9.

## Conclusion

So what do we take from this chapter. The first thing is that the UK is built on many different inequalities. Many of these have foundations in the colonial histories of England – one of the constituent nations of the UK. Many of the United Kingdom’s nations experience social, economic, and historically, political inequalities compared to England. Even within England, where you live has a huge impact on your life chances and how well you are able to participate in UK politics. Culturally too, there are many groups in UK society who historically have been excluded from political participation on the basis of class, gender, sexual orientation, disability and, of course, ethnic background. This latter relates to Britain’s colonial histories, the exploitations that this entailed, and the cultural meanings which enabled colonial abuses to be maintained. History matters. ‘Living memory’ puts those of us who are younger in touch with the cultures in which those of us who are older were raised. But to analyse the question of how plural UK politics is, you will need to consider your own analytical tools, and in this chapter we have outlined some of these and the key institutions that you will want to think about. However, as you work your way through this book, we want you to feel that UK politics is something that we *all* have the capacity to shape, from our communities,

towns, villages, cities, nations and everyday lives. We hope that you will feel better equipped to navigate the various different spaces through which individuals, institutions and organisations help to make and shape politics.

## Key take-home points

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- The UK is a multinational state.
- There are many different inequalities within the UK. Some are cultural and some are regional (territorial).
- Culture has deep roots and long-term impact – which is why things which happened a long time ago still matter today.
- There are many different analytical perspectives through which to examine politics in the UK. We provide a basic outline above.
- We also identify some key institutions in UK politics.

# Part I

## Foundations

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# 1

## Power, pluralism and politics in the UK

Joanie Willett

**Image 1.1** A well-functioning, pluralist, liberal democracy should allow space for all voices to be heard and listened to © Photo by Daniel Samray on Shutterstock

## Learning objectives

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Understand how to read and interpret this book
- Discuss the importance of pluralism for a well-functioning liberal democracy
- Explore what we mean by the argument that British politics needs to be understood as being an assemblage of political actors
- Appreciate how this book will help you to consider how plural British politics actually is

## Introduction

In the early summer of 2020 it still felt like the world had shut down. We hadn't yet come to terms with the 'new normal' of Covid lockdowns, and suddenly some of us, furloughed or having to lead much quieter lives because of the pandemic, had much more time on our hands to listen and think. We were also realising that people of colour in the UK were being disproportionately impacted by Covid, both as those who caught the disease, but also as those more likely to die by it. Against this backdrop and following the trigger of the killing of George Floyd as he was arrested by US police in Minneola, Minnesota, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement erupted back onto the political landscape with major protests in cities such as London, Birmingham, Bristol, Liverpool and Hull. The movement began in 2013, also in America, following the trial in Florida for the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and a chapter was opened in the UK in 2015, in Nottingham. Patricia Francis (2021) argues that there was something about the 'quiet' of the pandemic which allowed George Floyd's death to resonate, reverberate and catch hold to produce the shifts that it has in UK politics and popular culture, in a way that, for instance, the 2016 protests marking the anniversary of London's Mark Duggan's killing did not. Online slogans spread into the offline world, onto placards and t-shirts, facilitated by a range of offline community groups and organisations (Ruiz, 2022). Iconic moments such as the toppling of the statue of slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol (Hayes et al., 2022; Nasar, 2020) helped to cement BLM in the popular imaginary, focusing attention on the structural injustices and systemic violence experienced by people of colour (in the UK and globally). Instead, BLM made visible the ideologies, histories and power dynamics of colonialism that underpin the categories, analyses and knowledge through which we come to learn about the world (Archer et al., 2022; Parsons., 2022; Yusoff., 2018), and which sit subtly beneath the surface, underpinning racialised inequalities.

In calling for mainstream attention to Black subjectivities (Davies, 2022), the Black Lives Matter movement in the UK responded to a situation whereby the marginalisation of Black voices and the systemic racism that facilitated this marginalisation, were (and are) deeply embedded in recent and distant UK histories. Authors such as Paul Gilroy in *Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (2002) and Robbie Shilliam in *Race and the Undeserving Poor* (2018) document the overt and subtle, physical and emotional abuses that people of colour experienced. Many of us know that migrants to a postwar UK struggled to find accommodation due to the



infamous signs ‘no dogs, no blacks, no Irish’, and in part this is built on a historical, colonial legacy whereby people from colonised lands were able to be treated by colonisers as sub-human, inhuman and therefore as targets of abuse.

Ray Moxham (2003) in his book *Tea* documents the way that these attitudes and the appalling treatment that they facilitated, are folded in to iconic symbols of Britishness, such as the hot beverage, tea. Rashmi Paun (2022), in a blog with inclusivity think tank *British Future*, discussed his experiences of being both a student, and a refugee in 1960s Britain. His experiences highlight the ways that structural racism damages the ability of people of colour to contribute to UK politics in the ways that they might want to and are skilled to do. Sadly, this shouldn’t have been surprising given that we also know how in the postwar years, overt racism was a political platform which literally won elections. For example, MP Enoch Powell’s 1968 ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech arguably helped the Conservative Party to win the 1970 general election, forcing an unwilling and liberal party leadership into a manifesto which promised tighter controls on immigration (Peele, 2018). Although Powell was exiled to the back benches by the parliamentary party, his vehement criticism of mass immigration touched a grass-roots nerve and has become symbolic of the way that racism sought to push people of colour out of the public sphere. At some times this has been overt, by literally banning such groups from the public space; but it can also be covert and subtle, such as maintaining norms and values that make it harder for marginalised groups to participate fully, or even to exist and flourish.

As we will see later in this chapter, this kind of structural exclusion matters to liberal democracy, and therefore to the study of UK politics. They impact on the extent to which excluded groups are able to participate in assembled civil society and political debate, contributing to discussions about how the UK should evolve and adapt to contemporary challenges. In this book, politics in the UK is not only a study of institutions, it is also a study of civil society, history and culture, and the way that various groups of people seek to shape our institutions and polity.

The point that we are making in this chapter is that a well-functioning liberal democracy should provide space for all the different groupings within society to operate, be heard and listened to. Put another way, this chapter will argue that good politics and good policy need to come from a plurality of voices – or many voices. For us in this book, pluralism is not just an abstract and difficult concept to grasp. Instead, it reflects the way that policy is developed with, and by, people with a diverse range of experience and experiences. We see pluralism as essential for a flourishing and equitable politics. This is because there is no one, singular UK culture, or one, singular UK experience. Instead, politics in the UK is assembled out of many, many different groupings and experiences, values and histories. In our example above, we discussed assembled differences in terms of race and ethnicity. In this book, you will also encounter (some of) the many different experiences in the UK, formulated in terms of gender, class, sexuality, nation or region.

What we hope to show through the example (above) of Black Lives Matter, and also considering feminism and the LGBTQ+ movement, is that a pluralist democratic politics does not have to be about state power alone. Instead, it includes the everyday politics and multiple stories out of which UK society is assembled and UK politics emerges. Our examination

into pluralism considers it as both a descriptive tool and a normative goal. Pluralism is both a moral imperative and a device which has utility for well-functioning, flourishing, liberal democracies which are able to adapt to the physical and natural environments and challenges put before them. This brings us to the question of power. The version of pluralism that we use in this book borrows from a conceptualisation of power that views it as ‘rhizomatic’, or radically dispersed throughout society, culture and economy, as opposed to one-directional and hierarchical. We begin by asking what pluralism is and why it matters. This takes us to William Connolly’s (2005) version of pluralism, and for us in this book, the language around how the UK is assembled. From here we ask the question about what an assemblage *is* and how it works for us in our analysis of and understanding about UK politics. Finally, we address the language that we attach to contemporary analyses of pluralism.

## Assemblage, power and UK politics

This section discusses what we mean when we talk about how the UK is assembled. Analyses about how ‘things’ are assembled are used in academic disciplines far beyond the social and political sciences, wherever scholars have needed to describe highly complex systems involving many different actors, institutions, practices, objects, meanings, organisms, patterns and places. It also helps analysts to see the ways in which the assembled fabric of our communities does (or doesn’t) connect with other things, structures, infrastructures, economies, politics, meanings and experiences (e.g. see Bajpai et al., 2020; Willett, 2021).

The assembled parts that make up human communities are complex and entangled. Drawing on the seminal philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari (2004), Delanda (2016) describes in his work the ways in which our environments, institutions, practices, beliefs, symbols and histories are often symbiotic, needing each other in order to be able to function. If we were to apply this to the study of politics, we can see how the idea of a parliament – whether in Westminster, Stormont, Cardiff, or Holyrood – does not make sense without a public, or a people. Equally, a political party presupposes that there is both a people to vote for it, and an organising body in which once returned elected persons can participate. But there is no ideal type of ‘organising body’. It just so happens that in the UK we have a parliament, which appears in the way that it does because of complex histories over an extended period of time (about which, more in the chapters to follow).

Over recent centuries UK political institutions have evolved around general principles of liberal democracy, but even other liberal democratic governments globally have different structures and systems to those that we have in the UK. The point is that there is no one, perfect kind of political institution. Our institutions evolve over time in an entangled interaction between the many different actors, actions, relationships, meanings and flows of information over a period of centuries. Jane Bennett in her book *Vibrant Matter* (2010) adds an additional layer to this. She incorporates the natural environment and the non-human into our anthropocentric political assemblages, reminding us about the symbiotic relationships that we have between ourselves and the natural environments in which we live (see also Lemke, 2021). We shape it, and it shapes us, but we couldn’t exist without it (although the natural and physical environment clearly could exist without us!).

We need to understand which groups of our assembled UK are structurally advantaged in making their voices heard, which are disadvantaged, and how we can improve this balance. One of the things that an assemblage does for the study of politics in general – and UK politics in particular – is that it reminds us that there is no singular ‘essence’ of a thing (see Connolly, 2005). For example, there is no single ideal type of government structure. Instead, the ideas and meanings that are assembled around the institutions of local and national governance, their interrelationships with civil society, businesses, campaign and lobby groups, voluntary associations and environments are all in a constant process of evolution. Even institutions which appear to be relatively stable, are changing in many different ways, sometimes large and sometimes microscopic.

Each of these organisations or institutions which are connected with government in some way are also an assemblage, formed from and connected to many other assemblages. Some of these connections and flows of energy will be affected by deep historical legacies and differences in the meanings and attitudes that they attach to the same objects and things. Sometimes interpersonal/organisational relationships can have an enabling effect which builds energy, and at other times these relationships can be draining, which dissipates enthusiasm, willingness and capacity. For the study of politics in the UK, this means that we will be able to understand it a lot better, if we consider the interactions of a rich constellation of political actors – including local and national campaign groups, industry champions, unions, social movements, businesses, various levels of government and organisations.

It is important to note that this is a theory of *change* rather than stasis. No assemblage will remain long in its current shape but will evolve, connecting with different assemblages and abandoning others. We mentioned earlier about race and racism in the UK, and how racist attitudes were used at times to win elections. From this, we come to understand that at one point these kinds of beliefs were pretty central to UK assemblages. What the Black Lives Matter movement and others like and before it have done is to try to push these attitudes outside of UK assemblages and make them no part of it. Although there is still a long way to go in the UK (Parsons, 2022), the overt ‘no blacks, no dogs, no Irish’ type of discrimination described by Gilroy is a thing of the past.

However, racism is so far from pushed outside that the Vote Leave campaign for Brexit was able to use it to mobilise the right-wing populist vote (Durrheim et al., 2018). Vote Leave had to be more subtle about it than Enoch Powell. This highlights the fact that shifting attitudes mean that racism has no overt and open place in our public sphere, even if some people still hold these views privately. We know that the institutions, relationships, values and knowledge which make up UK politics are also changing – sometimes very rapidly. Drawing on social scientist Bruno Latour (2005), this means that rather than study the *object* of UK politics, we need to understand better the processes, mechanisms and flows of information through which these changes occur. Exploring UK politics through a theory of change helps us to better comprehend, and even predict, some of these changes.

Finally, analysing UK politics in this way provides us with a different way of looking at power which helps us to understand how political power does not have to be focused on parliamentary processes, but is also dispersed throughout civil society. Traditionally, power

in politics is imagined along the lines of Robert Dahl's (1957) ability to get someone to do something that they would not otherwise do. It is a mechanical, one-directional flow from the power-full, to the power-less. It has what Stephen Lukes (2021) calls 'the three faces of power' – decision-making, non-decision-making (agenda setting), and ideological power which influences peoples' desires, thoughts, and beliefs. One of the contributions of post-structuralism, seeking to expose, explore and dismantle social, political and cultural structures and the workings of power is to re-cast power as something that is shared throughout the political system. For example, Michel Foucault (1998) tells us that even the people that we imagine as 'power-less' are able to find spaces to access power. For example, there is a power in resistance. To illustrate, Foucault tells us that in forming a resistance, counter-cultural and marginalised ideas become more deeply dispersed (and therefore known about) throughout society. Consequently, whilst we might *imagine* that power is 'held' and exercised by some, another way to think about it is that there are many possible sites of power. Part of the skill of doing politics is about being able to observe, harness and utilise these sites of dispersed, systemic power.

Deleuze and Guattari (2004) use the biological metaphors of the tree root versus the rhizome to help to visualise systemic power. They observe how although big, heavy, and strong, tree roots are relatively easy to dismantle if you have the correct tools and enough force. This is because all of the power and life force comes from one central node. Rhizomes, on the other hand, papery thin and tangled though their roots may be, have the benefit of having *no* central node. Instead, power is dispersed throughout the system. Consequently even though the root can be broken apart using only my fingertips, and I can dig the bulk of the rhizome root out of the ground with relative ease, if I leave any part of the root in the ground, it will have the power and capacity to regenerate and grow, and the plant will start again. To imagine UK politics as only being about the parliamentary system is to liken the parliamentary machinery to Deleuze and Guattari's metaphorical tree root with its single site of power. Instead, we might prefer to imagine UK politics as rhizomatic, dispersed throughout society and into the everyday lives of the inhabitants of these isles – all of whom contribute in some way to how our political system and its cultural underpinnings develop. Power in UK politics can be observed and harnessed at a local, individual and everyday level as well as through our formal political institutions.

## Political representation in the UK

Because it is so central to liberal democracy, the concept of political representation is really important. The starting point for us is the normative claim that politics in the UK *should* contain a fair representation of the diverse population of the UK, but empirically, in practice, it often doesn't. Durose et al. (2013) describe it as a polity dominated by middle-aged white men. This is an issue which is shared with the devolved parliaments, and referring to Northern Ireland, Galligan (2013) reminds us that a lack of representative voices in government is a problem for democratic accountability. In short, if governments are not making policy which reflects the needs of all citizens, this affects the legitimacy of government.

Moreover, political representatives with intersecting identities are able to show greater empathy with persons from a wider cross-section of the community, following a much broader policy agenda (Tatari and Mencutek, 2015).

As we began to see in our example of Black Lives Matter above, there undeniably *are* (many) spaces in which diverse voices have been and are, ignored at best, or pushed out and derided at worst. For just a moment, we are going to take representation in the parliament at Westminster (through Members of Parliament) as a proxy measure for diversity amongst some of the most visible political actors in the UK. We would want to note that in the 40 years following the end of the Second World War, when many persons from lands that Britain had colonised answered the invitation to help in postwar reconstruction, there were no Members of Parliament of colour in Westminster at all. Postwar migrants and their descendants were for decades entirely unrepresented amongst people who were supposed to represent the interests and experiences of people in the UK. Unbelievably, this means that there were more non-white MPs in the 40 years between 1892 and 1932 than there were in the next 55 years. In 1987, Diane Abbott, Paul Boateng, Bernie Grant and Keith Vaz were the first (Labour) MPs of colour since Shapurji Saklatvala, the Member of Parliament for Battersea North, standing for the Communist Party of Great Britain and of Indian Parsi heritage, was elected in 1922.

In fact, if political representation in Westminster is our proxy for diversity, the UK Parliament as an institution has a long history of being extremely unequal. The first ever female MP to take her seat was Nancy (Viscountess) Astor in 1919, standing for Plymouth Sutton (Constance Markievicz, elected in 1918 for Sinn Féin did not take her seat). However, in the 101 years since Markievicz's election and the 2019 general election, there have only been a grand total of 552 female MPs. To put this into perspective, the total number of female MPs over this 101-year period would not fill the 650 seats in the House of Commons. In fact, 220 of this total figure of 552 were elected to Westminster in 2019 where, in making up only 34 per cent of the total number of MPs, they are considerably fewer than the proportion of women in the general population.

We can see similar issues in the UK in terms of class. Parliamentary data uses attendance at a fee-paying school as a proxy for class. Ninety-three per cent of the population did *not* attend a fee-paying school but went to either a comprehensive or state-funded grammar school. According to the 2019 *Elitist Britain* report by the Sutton Trust and the Social Mobility Commission (2019), the 7 per cent of Britons who went to a fee-paying school occupy 39 per cent of the top positions in public life. This is a severe under-representation of persons who attended state schools. Actually, 65 per cent of judges, 59 per cent of Civil Service permanent secretaries, 57 per cent of the House of Lords and 52 per cent of diplomats were privately educated, as were 43 per cent of the most influential news editors and broadcasters. In this context, the 2019 Parliament doesn't look *quite* so bad. Only (only!) 29 per cent of parliamentarians were educated privately (Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Commission, 2019). This is over four times higher than the electorate that they represent and means that few MPs will have had any personal experience of the desperation of destitution and decisions about whether to 'heat or eat'.



**Image 1.2** The UK is assembled out of a rich diversity of different groups of people, who bring a wide range of different experiences and perspectives

Photo by David Fowler on Shutterstock

The examples above are an illustration of the difficulties experienced by the wider population in accessing and being represented by parliamentary assemblages. This lack of representation means that a wide variety (or plurality) of voices struggle to be heard in UK national politics. In other words, this translates to a physical lack of pluralism across a range of different measures, at the heart of our parliamentary democracy. But why does this matter? In the next section we are going to explore what pluralism is, and why it is desirable.

## What is pluralism?

Pluralism literally means a diversity of lifestyles and norms (cultural), values and ethics (moral) and political choices (political) (Heywood, 2015). When we talked about Black Lives Matter earlier in this chapter, largely we discussed cultural pluralism. In the previous section, we talked more about political pluralism, and the ability of different groups to alter political processes. Moral pluralism is a little more complex. Here, we ask about whether our polity and civil society can accommodate different values and ethics. Whilst we are comfortable, for example, with the idea that persons with different ethical values derived from religious or spiritual beliefs can co-exist within UK society and politics, we are less certain about pluralism that threatens a core value of liberal democracy.

### Theory box: John Locke, liberal democracy, and the importance of pluralism

Liberal, democratic governments are based on the concepts of popular consent and legitimacy. This Theory box explains what we mean by them, how they came to be considered important, and in brief how they impact on UK politics.

Liberal democracy as a form of government is a product of the modern era. By this we mean that there is a tangled (inter-) relationship between enlightenment thinking; the rise of science as a means of understanding our world; capitalism as an overarching economic

framework; the industrialisation of the labour market; and an interest in individual rights, freedoms, and the ability to hold decision-makers to account.

One of the early important figures of enlightenment who thought about how government should be run was John Locke (1632–1704). Locke's views on government were impacted by his experience of political instability during the English Civil War (1642–1651) and the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. In 1689 Locke published his *Two Treatises on Government* in which he provided a moral basis for, and outline of, a type of government in which sovereignty resided in citizens rather than in the monarch. By this we mean that the purpose of government is to protect the natural rights of citizens, and government only governs through the popular consent of the *people*. Locke talks about the importance of being able to 'cashier one's governors', or to be able to hold those with authority to account for their actions. Unlike in systems where sovereignty resides in a monarch, or king (such as that advocated by Locke's contemporary Thomas Hobbes), Locke introduces a form of government whereby the legitimacy of government rests on the consent of citizens, for whom their life, liberty and property is protected.

Locke also introduced other principles to government that we will find familiar – such as the 'separation of powers' between the principal arms of government of the Legislature, the Executive and the Judiciary, ensuring that no part of government would get too strong. It is important to note that whilst these ideas seem normal to those accustomed to Western politics now, they were considered as radical in UK politics right up to the early 1800s. Other key theorists included Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft, and Enlightenment thinking underpinned the American War of Independence (1775–1783) and the revolution in France (1789–1799). Both nations initiated governments expressly founded on these principles. The UK had a more incremental journey towards adopting Enlightenment principles in government, and we can still see echoes of this – for example, in the way that we do not have a complete separation of powers.

As we see in the chapter, contemporary pluralism is still founded on the premise that government needs to protect the rights and freedoms of the public if it is to retain its legitimacy and popular consent. Key differences relate to who the public is imagined to be, and how they are incorporated into assembled processes of governance.

Pluralism can also be normative or descriptive. When making a normative claim, we are saying that something *should* be more plural, representing a more diverse cross-section of society. If we are making a descriptive claim, we are asking how diverse something that we observe actually *is*. As a concept, it can be traced back to the early foundations of liberal democracy, as put forward by John Locke (1632–1704) (see Theory box above). Whilst liberal democracies are generally agreed that political pluralism is good and important, cultural and moral pluralism are more contentious because some conservatives argue that government relies on a unity of values to bind people together and through which to steer a policy middle ground. From this position, too broad a range of cultural and moral diversity threatens

good governance. Echoing Modood (2000), the problem with this argument is that there is no one, singular, unifying, essential UK identity. Instead, we are assembled from a range of positions and experiences which complicate a unified identity. Sometimes, groups feel that their particular interests and needs are unheard, which can lead to them taking drastic forms of resistance in an attempt to make themselves more visible. For some analysts, this was at the core of the Leave vote in the Brexit referendum (Ashcroft and Bevir, 2021). To deal with similar situations better, we need to embrace pluralism, the multiple identities out of which Britain is assembled, and its rich diversity of voices at a local, cultural and political level (Ashcroft and Bevir, 2016).

Above, we have a number of different claims arguing for cultural and moral pluralism within UK politics. Modood's and Ashcroft and Bevir's claims rest on the descriptive argument that culture and society just don't function any other way. Norman and Kymlica's (2000) argument is more normative – that minorities should have a right to be heard. Another normative argument for pluralism can be found in the utilitarianism of philosopher J.S. Mill. For Mill in *On Liberty* (2008 [1859]), cultural, political and moral diversity encourages us to question, adapt and update the things that we think that we know, which means that we challenge our beliefs. In turn, this means that the things that we 'know' are founded on reason rather than belief, meaning that we make better decisions. Consequently, there is a utility in following the principles of pluralism.

The key differences between a pluralism based on rights and one based on utility is that rights-based perspectives represent a moral rule which should be followed at all times. It is a 'first principle', which means that it should determine all future actions. 'Utility' refers to a moral rule which is right because of the *consequences* of following that rule. A popular way of showcasing these differences is by asking the question 'Is it OK to tell a lie?' If our moral choices are based on first principles, and a first principle is that lying is bad, then it is never OK to lie. But if by telling a lie, I am able to stop a worse thing happening, then under the principle of utility, telling a lie is OK because the *consequences* of the action are beneficial.

To bring this back to pluralism, a question that we have to ask ourselves as political analysts is about whether pluralism is good because it conforms to certain liberal ethical values, or whether pluralism is good because it helps us to make better and more informed choices. For example, if my decisions are made with full regard for the diversity of experiences of citizens in the assembled UK, then I am making decisions based on a more accurate interpretation of the assembled political landscape. Therefore, my decisions will be better able to help the UK evolve and adapt to our changing world (Montpetit, 2016).

As a concept, pluralism has a rich and highly developed history, rooted in disagreement over the precise meaning and applicability of the term (Lassman, 2011). Tocqueville's (1835) *Democracy in America* is often cited for its insights into the varied ways in which different perspectives were able to be aired and heard in the America that he witnessed on his travels. Adcock and Vail (2012) provide us with an in-depth history of its journey from 1950/1960s liberal interest group pluralism, where scholars such as Robert Dahl argued that not all people choose to actively engage in politics, but that organisations and political groupings have the legitimacy to speak for those that choose not to engage (see also Chambers and Carver, 2008). The 1970s and 1980s saw a neo-corporatist analysis of the structural barriers in



unequal access to power. Following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, 1989 to the 1990s saw the concept return to liberal pluralism, with the key difference that this time the emphasis was on voluntary associations rather than on interest groups, including on the value of the autonomy of collective non-state actors.

Robert Putnam's (2000) *Bowling Alone* is a good example of this perspective, and his work is explored in more depth in Chapter 5. Whilst Putnam provides us with an empirical analysis, the conceptual architecture offered by William Connolly's (2005) *Pluralism* reworks its ontological underpinnings (see Spotlight on research below). Pluralism goes from a conservative theory of order and the status quo to a radical discussion of the nature of political activity (Chambers and Carver, 2008) and how politics is assembled. In creating a rhizomatic pluralism to which everyone can contribute, Connolly provides a rich, dense conceptual architecture through which to examine pluralism in contemporary politics.

### Spotlight on research: William Connolly's pluralism

William Connolly's contribution to our understanding of pluralism has been rich and varied. In the 1990s his work addressed questions around identity, difference and the problem of the 'other'. For example, in his works *Identity/Difference* (1991) and *The Ethos of Pluralization* (1995), he explores the tensions between the need to draw boundaries around identities, and the risk that this takes. For example, identities are important for movements in order to help them to become visible and increase their ability to create political change, but this also creates divisions, which sustains cruelty and violence.

Connolly's solution was to explore the complex adaptive assemblages of Deleuze and Guattari. The assemblage has no fixed and rigid boundaries. Things, ideas, structures and institutions are merely collected around other ideas, concepts, structures or institutions. These collections are fluid and constantly evolving. This means that ideas, concepts, structures, things and institutions that are connected (either within assemblages or outside of them) have the capacity to *affect* (see Chapter 5), impact or shape other things, ideas, concepts, etc. This kind of pluralism is a radical democracy because the scope for political change lies right the way across assembled political actors and civil society, incorporating memory (Connolly, 2002) and also, the environment (Connolly, 2017). In fact, one of the interesting questions posed by Connolly is 'What is the limit of political actors?' So, in *Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming* (Connolly, 2017), through the concept of affective assemblages, Connolly asks about the degree to which our politics is a more-than-human entanglement with our environments.

Connolly's evolutionary perspective also adds to pluralism a sense of the deep interrelationship between the past and the politics of what we will become, our future. In this sense, politics is about much more than the present. It includes how we think about our pasts, how these stories reflect the diverse range of experiences of citizens within the assembled UK, and the flow of ideas and knowledge between the different parts of the political system.

We also need to understand the ways that the emotional responses behind our stories are used politically (Ahmed, 2004) to generate further spaces for political change. These histories also play a crucial role in the development of what Connolly (2008) calls ‘resonance machines’, self-sustaining feedback loops between assembled parts of our political system, creating and amplifying stories, flows of information and knowledge, and path dependencies and stasis.

If we were to trace pluralism’s journey using the example of Black Lives Matter, set out in the Introduction, we might have begun with organisations and political groupings associated with (better) representing people of colour within UK politics (neo-corporatist and later, liberal). Putnam’s version of pluralism would have added the day-to-day activities of people of colour within our communities (what we might also call place-shaping), and how this feeds back through from local to national politics. Connolly’s pluralism would include the histories, values and beliefs through which people of colour have navigated their worlds, the formal and informal structures that this has created and which affect the conditions for possibility – or the ability of people of colour to flourish and achieve their human potential. It would draw connectivities and temporal reverberations between the knowledge and emotive responses engendered by colonialism and would showcase how the assembled ‘UK’ incorporates a myriad of different stories and experiences which have been overtly or covertly affectively impacted by the global assemblage of colonialism, to which it is tightly connected.

This version of pluralism might then showcase the many different spaces that people of colour – both in the UK and also by those embedded in other, connected assemblages (e.g. the US or Haiti) – have organised and resisted racial inequalities and injustices. We would see how resistance in the micro-politics of the everyday reverberates into the macro-politics of national and even international processes, affecting and shaping attitudes, values, beliefs and emotional linguistic attachments. In other words, an assembled pluralism allows us to see the entangled messiness of political change, and the ways in which ordinary people are also a part of creating political change.

## Governance, multiculturalism and diversity

Over recent years, scholarly debate and discussion about pluralism as a concept has waned. However, the liberal democratic belief in plural politics, ensuring that many different voices are heard and contribute to political decisions, remains as a strong thread throughout UK politics. We think this makes our central question of ‘How plural is UK politics?’ such a resonant one. Moreover, we have tended to replace the word ‘pluralism’ with other words which discuss concepts that signify aspects of pluralism. We will discuss the three most important ones briefly, here. These are governance, multiculturalism and diversity. This is not to say that they have replaced the importance of pluralism as a concept. On the contrary, they signify three important elements of a well-functioning pluralist society.

‘Governance’ as a concept is designed to better reflect the multiplicity of different actors who contribute to ‘government’ (Bevir, 2012a). ‘Government’ tends to imply a singularity and a central power source and invites mechanical metaphors around things like the ‘levers’

of power. As we have started to allude to above and will see in much greater detail throughout the book, whilst government might be *a* central node, visible as a decision-making, and sometimes as an executive, body implementing these decisions, a multiplicity of non-governmental organisations and individuals feed in to both policy decisions and implementation.

More accurately, drawing on Connolly's (2005) version of pluralism here, policy and government are an assembled network of civil society organisations and Putnam-style associations that describe pluralism within government processes (Husband and Ireland, 2022). For political analysts, part of the challenge is to understand where and how power and decision-making lie in governance networks. For example, is local government moving to a more decentralised, 'devolved' form, or does an analysis of power, networks and decision-making lead us to the conclusion that UK local government is still, essentially, an outreach office of Whitehall? (Hambleton and Sweeting, 2004).

Multiculturalism gained traction as a concept in the 1990s and argued that there was no single, essentialised way of being British (Modood, 2000). Instead, political identities are fluid – adapting, evolving, and growing over time – and reflect broader local and global changes that the individuals living in these isles experience. In this context, ensuring that assembled constellations around what 'Britishness' means reflect the different cultural backgrounds of the peoples of the UK is important. Minority and immigrant cultures have a right to be respected and defended as part of this process. Scholars such as Modood (2000), Gilroy (2002) and Parekh (2008) show how over time persons from minority cultures combine aspects of an individual's cultural heritage with elements of the dominant culture which they choose to adopt, developing 'hybrid' cultures.

More recently, the language around pluralism has adapted again and now clusters around the concept of 'diversity'. This broadens the concept of multiculturalism to include diversity around gender, class, sexuality, disability, as well as ethnicity. An interesting development here relates to the use by scholars of racial diversity of the term 'decolonising' to describe and explore the historical and structural processes, practices and meanings rooted in colonialism and imperialism through which racial inequalities have been maintained and sustained into the contemporary UK (Parsons, 2022; Saini and Begum, 2020). Part of the response to this has come through what has been termed as the 'culture wars' (Curran et al., 2018), whereby some have found it more difficult to keep pace with the ways in which contemporary UK societies and identities have changed over time. In some cases this has resulted in a defensive backlash, which attempts to challenge recent changes and assert a more unified (as opposed to plural) sense of UK identity.

### Need to know: Culture wars

Ashcroft and Bevir (2021) discuss the belief that the result of the Brexit referendum reflected the degree to which some people in UK politics felt left out or unheard by mainstream political debates. Sometimes, this is discussed as part of the 'culture wars' whereby

*(Continued)*

cultural change is happening so rapidly that it is difficult or disorientating for people to keep pace with (e.g. over race, gender and sexuality). In some respects, it is an updating of the former term 'political correctness' and frequently divides society into imagined (and often inaccurate) binary opposites between conservatives and progressives, old and young, and rural and urban. At times, the level of 'debate' is of such toxicity that it actually inhibits the pluralist discussion of the diverse range of positions out of which the UK is assembled.

## Conclusion

The central question of this book asks how plural UK politics is. This chapter sets out to introduce this question, making the argument that a well-functioning liberal democracy should provide the space for all of the different groupings within society to operate, be heard and listened to. Put another way, good politics and good policy need to come from a plurality of voices – or many voices. We have seen that whilst some people fear that too much pluralism will harm the unity of identity that assists government, from other perspectives to deny the rich diversity of experiences, positions, attitudes and beliefs that exist within the nation-state creates more problems than it solves. Moreover, it is also an inaccurate reflection of the UK that we live in, which is a rich tapestry of assembled difference. For politics and policy, there is a utility in embracing this difference and the many views and perspectives available for solving problems. It means that we continually question and update beliefs and knowledge, which in turn helps to enable the UK to evolve and adapt more effectively to global problems.

For us in this book, examining how the contemporary UK is assembled helps to enable us to explore and understand the diversity underpinning society and on which UK politics is based. To adapt Visit Glasgow's slogan, 'People make the UK' and this book aims to explore in detail how people make politics. We show that individuals, governmental and non-governmental institutions, organisations, businesses and pressure groups are all key political actors, devising formal and informal campaigns situated, operating and interacting at different levels across the country. But this also has a temporal element. The politics that we have now has grown out of and in response to the structures, attitudes, values and beliefs out of which 'the UK' was assembled in the past – or in various different pasts. Whilst we are not determined by our assembled histories, an understanding of these histories can help to explain some actions, attitudes, values and beliefs in the present. In this book, we argue that politics is threaded throughout the assembled UK, and that rather than being separate from a distant political centre we are all intricately and intimately a part of and connected to UK politics and the UK's political system. The everyday and our everyday activities, interests and involvement play a really important role in shaping the political system through which our civil society is organised. This means that politics is 'rhizomatic', something that (if we should choose) we can all be actively engaged in rather than distant from.

## Key take-home points

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- The UK is assembled out of people with many different experiences, beliefs and values.
- A well-functioning liberal democracy needs the space for all groups in society to be heard and listened to.
- Exploring many different perspectives helps us to adapt and evolve as a society.
- Individuals, governmental and non-governmental institutions, organisations, businesses and pressure groups are all key political actors, operating and interacting at different levels across the UK.
- Politics in the UK is threaded throughout our communities amongst the formal and informal identities and everyday interests that we are a part of.

## Annotated reading list

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Ashcroft, R. and Bevir, M. (2021) Brexit and the myth of British national identity. *British Politics*, 16, 117–132.

This journal article presents a useful discussion of pluralism in the UK post Brexit. It argues that British national identities have been inherently plural since the post-imperial renegotiation. However, being bound to the binary between universalism and particularism, contemporary UK political parties are ill-suited to be able to address this pluralism. As a consequence, the authors claim that many sections of UK society feel that they are ignored and not listened to, which in turn has led to a widespread feeling of alienation amongst the broader population. The authors argue that the idea of a shared UK national identity is a myth, and adherence to it is destabilising our politics. Instead, we need to better understand and debate the identities and communities out of which the assembled 'UK' is composed. As well as providing their own diagnosis, the authors invite us to reflect on the enmeshed relationships between pluralism, representation, identities, consent and government, and to consider how this changes over time.

Connolly, W. (2005) *Pluralism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

The version of pluralism put forward here fuses identity and politics, arguing for deeply plural political identities, social and personal lives. For Connolly, pluralism goes far beyond the interaction between the government and organised interest groups. Instead, it extends to the private sphere and acceptance of the plurality of people's attitudes, beliefs and values. He talks about how societal 'threats' are used in an attempt to impose singular narratives about 'who we are'. Connolly develops what he calls 'multi-dimensional pluralism' to connote the expansion of diversity (plurality) in multiple dimensions of individual, social and political life. Connolly takes pluralism as far as asking whether it needs to be limited to human actors, but whether there are ways of incorporating the non-human. For persons interested in exploring these ideas further, Jane Bennett's book *Vibrant Matter* (2010, (Durham: Duke University Press) may be of interest.

Putnam, R. (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. London: Simon Schuster.

In this seminal book, Putnam explores the importance of an active civil society for ensuring that we have a vibrant, pluralist liberal democracy. Part of what Putnam encourages us to reflect on is that the relationship between ‘the people’ and governments is much more than merely a two-way dialogue but extends towards ensuring that communities are organised. Putnam provides us with a way of imagining the polity as active vs passive and that it is through activity that we are better able to shape our local, national and global communities. Empirically, Putnam observes that the ways that people live their lives in late capitalism means that we have become atomised, fragmented and detached from our communities. For Putnam, this impacts on the ability of people to be able to shape our worlds – or in other words, impacts on the plurality of our politics.