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Goleta, CA, USA

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Culture Wars and the Political Unconscious

**Abstract** This introduction outlines the main argument of the book and summarizes the focus of each chapter. In analyzing the works of politicians, professors, and pundits, I show how the interpreters of culture wars often produce and replicate the irrational social dynamics they are seeking to critique. Thus, the centrist critics bemoaning the polarizing of our political and social lives utilize a polarizing rhetoric just as the Right-wing politicians attacking the Left's political correctness deny and project their own form of cancel culture. Moreover, as others have remarked, culture wars are often themselves a mode of displacement and substitution bent on replacing concerns for class conflict and economic exploitation with a focus on competing cultural norms and identities. However, instead of simply dismissing the importance of class or culture, I seek to show how it is necessary to think both at the same time without giving priority to one force. Thus, concerns over racism, sexism, and homophobia need to be attached to the way prejudices and stereotypes serve to enable and maintain economic forms of exploitation and privilege.

**Keywords** Culture wars · Right-wing · Class conflict · Identity politics · Polarization · Rhetoric · Displacement · Primary processes · Stereotypes · Prejudices



Whenever we are talking about cancel culture, identity politics, political correctness, or the alt-Right, we are dealing with a culture war, which often pits two sides against each other in a split world of good and evil.<sup>1</sup> These political representations rely on a set of unconscious processes best understood through psychoanalysis. As we shall see, if you want to understand the rhetoric of the Right, the Left, conservatives, and centrists, it is necessary to comprehend how these ideologies rely on unacknowledged defense mechanisms, fantasies, fears, and desires.<sup>2</sup> In fact, I will argue that if we do not employ psychoanalytic concepts to examine our political investments, we will be unable to get to the root causes driving these social productions.

In analyzing the works of politicians, professors, and pundits, I will show how the interpreters of culture wars often produce and replicate the irrational social dynamics they are seeking to critique. Thus, the centrist critics bemoaning the polarizing of our political and social lives utilize a polarizing rhetoric just as the Right-wing politicians attacking the Left's political correctness deny and project their own form of cancel culture.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as others have remarked, culture wars are often themselves a mode of displacement and substitution bent on replacing concerns for class conflict and economic exploitation with a focus on competing cultural norms and identities.<sup>4</sup> However, instead of simply dismissing the importance of class or culture, I seek to show how it is necessary to think both at the same time without giving priority to one force. Thus, concerns over racism, sexism, and homophobia need to be attached to the way prejudices and stereotypes serve to enable and maintain economic forms of exploitation and privilege.

## A BRIEF POLITICAL HISTORY OF THE CURRENT CULTURE WAR

In tracing the foundations and processes of current culture wars in the United States and beyond, I emphasize several different political strategies, which often reinforce each other but do not form a coordinated conspiracy. On one level, this social conflict is driven by the effort of the wealthiest people in the world to justify the cutting of their taxes.<sup>5</sup> The first step in this process is to claim that we do not need high taxes on the rich because we do not need to fund expensive social welfare programs supporting undeserving people of color. This underlying argument of the Neo-liberal Right uses unconscious primary processes to equate the

government with welfare and welfare with people of color.<sup>6</sup> The next step is to deny that people of color face discrimination anymore, and this move is made by denying real evidence of prejudice and discrimination.<sup>7</sup> Finally, this ideology claims that the only reason why we still think racism is prevalent is that Leftists keep on making it up.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the Right denies racism and projects it onto its split-off other.

This use and denial of racism is coupled with another Right-wing political discourse often called Nixon's Southern Strategy.<sup>9</sup> According to this theory, after Civil Rights bill of 1964, conservative and Right-wing politicians realized that they might alienate some people if they appealed directly to racism, and so instead, they started to use crime as a stand-in for black people.<sup>10</sup> Once again, the key to this rhetoric is to both deny and use racism simultaneously: Therefore, the very moment you are catering to racist beliefs, you are also hiding this appeal by replacing it with something else that causes an unconscious association through the process of symbolic displacement. It is vital to stress here that without a psychoanalytic understanding of the ways rhetoric works, we cannot fully comprehend how political discourse relies on unacknowledged contradictions and symbolic primary processes.<sup>11</sup>

Related to these two Right-wing discourses, we find the historical shift of the Democratic Party from representing mostly the interests of the working class, the poor, and people of color to a focus on catering to upper-middle-class professionals.<sup>12</sup> One of the main reasons for this change has to do with the loss of unionized jobs due to globalization and automation.<sup>13</sup> Since labor unions were once major funders of the Democratic Party, the loss of union members and their contributions pushed this party to look for other, wealthier sources of support.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, the Right took advantage of this situation by passing laws and policies to further undermine unions, and at the same time, the Right also sought to recruit former Democrats by using racism, sexism, and homophobia to replace concerns with class with worries and resentments regarding social status.<sup>15</sup> Although the Right has delivered very few benefits for the white working class, it has been able to appeal to a certain segment of low-income individuals by emphasizing how the Democrats are now the party of elites that look down on average people.<sup>16</sup> The power of appealing to unconscious resentments can be shown in the fact that many of the people who benefit most from social welfare programs are the same ones who vote for politicians who demonize these benefits.<sup>17</sup>

The Right-wing attack on the government in general and welfare policies in particular has been coupled with the formation of a powerful coalition with conservative Christians.<sup>18</sup> Driving this contradictory combination of religious hyper-moralists and amoralist libertarian capitalists is a shared hatred for what they see as a Left-liberal ideology.<sup>19</sup> As Freud remarks in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, what often unites a group together is not shared beliefs but shared hatreds.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, Freud also indicates that another political bonding strategy involves the hysterical identification with suffering.<sup>21</sup> Thus, conservatives and Right-wingers can unite together over a sense that they are the victims of liberal culture bent on taking away their freedom and enjoyment.<sup>22</sup> In fact, Freud also highlights how underlying our envy and jealousy of others is often an imaginary fantasy of total, unrestrained enjoyment.<sup>23</sup>

On this level of unconscious politics, we find two related imaginary constructions: On one level, we find the libertarian fantasy of the individual who is able to access pleasure without any social restraint, and on another level, we discover that any limitation to the enjoying subject is seen as a form of oppressive castration.<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, this Oedipal conflict between the individual and society is usually presented in gendered terms. As Freud himself insists, the libido is coded as male as the castrating moral order can be associated with the maternal super-ego.<sup>25</sup> Thus, in contemporary culture wars, it is the feminized “nanny” state that is represented as trying to censor and castrate the victimized male subject.<sup>26</sup>

As many on the Left have pointed out, these gendered symbolic associations come from a conservative social hierarchy dedicated to using stereotypes and prejudices to maintain order and enable the exploitation of devalued social groups.<sup>27</sup> However, most Left-wing minority-based social movements seeking to reverse these social hierarchies have not examined the underlying psychological forces shaping this system in the first place. In other terms, the connection between hierarchy and splitting is not exposed and rejected, and so the minority-based social movements may reverse the values of the conservative social order but not the underlying structure.

Another key aspect of contemporary culture wars is the shift of the Left from prioritizing freedom and liberation to emphasizing moral and political righteousness.<sup>28</sup> As many critics have claimed, aspects of the Left look like a new form of religion censoring people for their illiberal words and actions.<sup>29</sup> This focus on canceling and boycotting people who are

not politically correct feeds the Right-wing backlash against these movements. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the Left takes on the role of the maternal super-ego seeking to control the libertarian, masculine id.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, in an effort to gain support and solidarity, the Left employs a hysterical use of suffering and empathy, which relies on the production of a victim complex based on a founding trauma.<sup>31</sup> Since the victim is always good and the perpetrator is always evil, the victim's aggression is justified, and all criticism is seen as an attack on a helpless person.<sup>32</sup>

The Right has also used this victim complex by positing that the people who have the most power and privilege are the ones who are the biggest victims of discrimination and exploitation.<sup>33</sup> In this mode of reversed racism, white male Christian heterosexuals represent themselves as the true victims of political correctness, welfare state policies, taxation, and immigration.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, as a reactionary movement, the Right is able to bond with conservatives over a shared sense of victimization and abandonment. While much of this demonization of the Left is driven by an underlying tax revolt from above, the key to this backlash movement is the ability of privileged wealthy whites to gain the support of the economically and socially threatened white working class.<sup>35</sup> Often racism, sexism, homophobia, and nationalism are utilized in order to shift the focus of the threatened working poor from the economic system to cultural resentments.

The Right-wing backlash movements have also used a new form of Cold War McCarthyism to counter what they see as the secret spread of cultural Marxism.<sup>36</sup> The central idea here is that Marxists have realized that they cannot take over society by direct, violent revolution, and so they are playing the long game of infiltrating liberal institutions in order to spread their "woke mind virus."<sup>37</sup> Much of this discourse resembles the classic anti-Semitic conspiracy theory concerning the power of the Jews to take over society in a covert manner, but it often replaces the Jewish influence with a cultural form of Marxism.<sup>38</sup> According to this part of the culture war, while Marx prioritized class conflict, the Left is now fighting over culture and identity. However, even when the Right does not blame this social corruption on "the Jews," it does rely on the same unconscious paranoid processes of splitting, denial, reversal, and projection.<sup>39</sup>

Since the Right wants to counter the power and influence of the Left, it celebrates free speech as the ultimate value so that it can condemn the Leftist censorship and pursue the libertarian fantasy of total freedom and enjoyment.<sup>40</sup> In fact, the Declaration of Independence's promotion of

“life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” fits in well with a Right-wing, libertarian borderline personality.<sup>41</sup> As we shall see, Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex helps us to comprehend how this culture war relies on the conflict between individual pleasure and social regulation.<sup>42</sup> Not only does the Right attract people with borderline personalities who want to be free to act on their drives, but the underlying libertarian ideology itself mimics aspects of a borderline personality through the combination of denial and the pursuit of unrestrained pleasure.<sup>43</sup> In this context, it is vital to remember that for Freud, pleasure is based on an escape from mental and physical tension, and therefore, the individual’s pure pursuit of pleasure relies on a denial of reality and social regulation.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, it is often the mother who is blamed for trying to discipline the impulsive child’s desire through censorship and the threat of punishment. Thus, the gendered aspect of the culture war can be in part traced back to an unconscious Oedipus complex, which places the mother and not the father in the position of social intervention.<sup>45</sup>

## BOOK OUTLINE

In order to analyze all of these aspects of the contemporary culture war, I begin with an analysis of Andrew Hartman’s *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*, which seeks to provide an historical overview of current political dynamics.<sup>46</sup> We will see how Hartman’s centrist perspective laments polarization as it engages in its own mode of splitting in order to create a clear narrative. While Hartman does provide insight into the ideological conflicts starting in the 1980s, his work tends to idealize the 1950s as a period of American stability, and this idealization relies on repressing the role of sexism and racism in shaping the American economy during this Cold War period. Like many of the authors examined in this book, Hartman’s historical narratives tend to separate culture from class.

Chapter 3 reads Allan Bloom’s *Closing of the American Mind* as an early conservative representation of the campus culture wars.<sup>47</sup> This book is important because it unintentionally reveals many of the unconscious processes dominating our current political discourse. As a reactionary text, Bloom attacks diversity and moral relativism in favor of an idealized view of American history. In an effort to promote a secular national religion, he displaces the destructive nature of contemporary capitalism onto minorities and a demonized Left.

Chapter 4 seeks to examine the role of money in funding the Right-wing part of the contemporary culture war. Drawing mainly from John K. Wilson's *The Myth of Political Correctness*, the goal is to show how the hiding of a tax revolt from above behind a battle over cultural identity has been a coordinated effort reliant on the use of large sums of cash.<sup>48</sup> Although the people involved in this conspiracy often were not fully aware of how the different parts of the political scheme fit together, the result has enabled the use of the political unconscious for very specific purposes, especially in the effort to attack universities as centers of Left-wing indoctrination.

In Chapter 5, I examine Greg Lukianoff, the president of the Foundation of Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) and the co-author of *The Cancellation of the American Mind* who proports to be a liberal democrat who is seeking to protect free speech and the diversity of ideas.<sup>49</sup> However, an examination of the source of his founding and his underlying ideology reveals that he is actually a center-Right activist seeking to hide his true intentions behind a false narrative and a set of rhetorical tricks. In fact, one reason why Lukianoff is such an interesting example of our current culture war is that he helps to expose the true goals of the Right's promotion of free speech and criticism of cancel culture. While people like Lukianoff would like us to think that they are just defending the liberal democratic value of free expression, what they are really doing is supporting a well-funded libertarian assault on public universities, the welfare state, progressive politics, and economic regulation. As part of a broad tax revolt from above, Lukianoff receives much of his funding from wealthy, Right-wing donors who are more interested in reducing taxes and shrinking the government than the open exchange of ideas at universities and beyond.

Chapter 6 uses a psychoanalytic mode of rhetorical analysis to examine how universities have become the central site for an updated form of Cold War McCarthyism. As I will document, conservative and libertarian ideologues tend to utilize the same unconscious process of splitting, denial, projection, and projective identification, and this mode of the political unconscious reveals many of the inner-workings of the contemporary culture war. In looking at Ben Shapiro's *Brainwashed*, I describe how this popular media personality turns to his own educational experience at UCLA in order to produce a conspiracy theory regarding the way professors indoctrinate students into a Leftist, pro-communist ideology.<sup>50</sup>

Continuing the theme of exposing the unconscious aspects of Republican rhetoric, Chapter 7 analyzes Senator Ted Cruz's *Unwoke: How to Defeat Cultural Marxism in America*.<sup>51</sup> This book elaborates a now-common conspiracy theory circulating on the Right, which is focused on the way our culture has been taken over by a secret Marxist movement. According to this fantasy-narrative, the followers of Karl Marx have realized that they can no longer take over countries through direct political revolutions, and so instead, they are seeking to impose a totalitarian form of Communism by first infiltrating higher education and then spreading out into all sectors of society. According to this story, while the original Marx focused on class conflict and economic exploitation, the new form of Marxism subverts society by engaging in a culture war dedicated to the hatred of white Christian heterosexual males. For Cruz, whose parents came from pre-revolutionary Cuba, Marxism is defined by an emphasis on power relations between the oppressors and the oppressed. Of course, this is a distorted, simplified interpretation of Marx and many of his followers, but the key move that Cruz wants to make is to replace a class war with a culture war through the rebranding of a new mode of anti-Communist McCarthyism.

A major aspect of the contemporary culture war centers on the relations among race, class, and gender at American institution of higher education. As we shall see in Chapter 8 through a close reading of Walter Benn Michaels' *The Trouble with Diversity*, many Leftist scholars follow the classic Marxist position of seeing economic issues as more essential than cultural ones.<sup>52</sup> This conflict between culture and capitalism often results in a splitting off of one from the other, which in turn, undermines our ability to see how these different social forces interact in a complex manner. One reason for this polarization is that people seek to avoid anxiety caused by ambiguity and ambivalence by splitting and simplifying the world according to groups of opposing characteristics. In response, psychoanalysis tells us that we need to find a way to overcome this defense mechanism by increasing our tolerance for fundamental human conflicts, like the conflict between society and the individual.

Chapter 9 argues that although it is clear that many cultural warriors on the Right exaggerate the level of Left-wing indoctrination in higher education, there is often a kernel of truth to their accusations. Just as the Right has become more extreme in its rhetoric and ideology, some factions on the Left have also become more hyperbolic. In order to examine some of the tendencies of the Left, I will focus on how an

emphasis on race and racism can blind people from seeing the truth about our complicated social reality.

While it is now common for people on the Right to criticize people on the Left for censoring speech and trying to cancel people with whom they do not agree, it is evident that many activists on the Right engage in the very same tactics. As I depict in Chapter 10, this effort to shame and condemn the other side is structured by an imaginary, split world where political beliefs are presented in a polarized manner. Moreover, by sharing some of the same unconscious defense mechanisms, people on the Left and Right tend to get locked into a dual relationship of demonization and idealization. To further clarify how the Right has appropriated political, psychological, and rhetorical tactics from the Left, I will examine David Horowitz' *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America* and recent debates over the relation between antisemitism and free speech.<sup>53</sup>

The final chapter examines the different ways that psychoanalysis can help us to move beyond the current polarized culture wars. Part of this process involves exposing the underlying fears, desires, fantasies and defense mechanisms shaping the political unconscious. Instead of focusing on the psychopathology of the Right, I examine the differences among five fundamental ideologies: conservative, liberal, centrist, Right, and Left. This more complex analysis of our current political terrain helps us to move beyond polarization and the splitting of the world into a good us and an evil other. It is also vital to understand the core values and ideals shaping modern liberal democracy and science, and this commitment to the reality principle represents a psychoanalytic mode of critical introspection.

## NOTES

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