



MORTEN VALBJØRN

‘There are clearly cultural issues at play’ – On Grasping the Conceptual Slipperiness of the Idea(s) of Culture and its Turn(s) within International Relations Theory

After the 1990s arrival of the ‘Ship of Culture’ the notion of culture has shifted from the margins to a much more prominent position within International Relations Theory (IR). At the same time, it has also become clear that those who agree that the study of international relations must be ‘culturalized’ are speaking of quite different things when referring to ‘culture’. This phenomena is by no means reserved to this specific debate; it is a more general trait in discussions involving notions of ‘culture’, which constitutes one of the most elusive and most easily understood concept in the social sciences – a

classic example of what Gallie labeled as ‘essentially contested concepts’. It is against this background Sewell argues that the task of clarifying what we mean by culture is imperative but also almost impossible. The purpose of this paper, which is part of a larger project about making a “‘Baedeker’ to IR’s past and future Cultural Journey”, is to explore ways in which this important but also very difficult task can be addressed. Put differently, it discusses how it in a study of the role of culture in international relations is possible to delineate and delimit the area of concern without ignoring the inherently slippery nature of the key concept in such a project. The paper proceeds in three steps. Based on a charting of the historical evolution of the notion of culture from pig farming to

PlayStations, the first section identifies five distinct ideas of culture embedded within different *univers de discourse*. The second section shows how these ideas can also be identified within IR's sporadic discussions about culture, meaning that the Cultural Journey in IR must be subdivided into more expeditions carrying the same flag but travelling in very different terrain. Based on a discussion about how to approach essentially contested concepts such as culture in which a so-called 'implicit' as well as an 'explicit' approach are rejected, the final section outlines – with inspiration from George Steinmetz – what is labeled as an 'open delimitation'. This is a framework making an explicit delimitation by clarifying how the area of concern is limited to a specific idea of culture and how it differs from other broad understandings of culture. On the other hand, it retains a terminological and theoretical openness as a means of acknowledging the enormous variation in the exact definition and explanation of this idea of culture, hereby seeking to provide a space for comparison across the alternative culturalist approaches