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Problems in Culturalism – On Tendencies to Over- and Under- estimate Culture as a Political Factor

Currents in multiculturalism take a very hard notion of culture as their point of departure. When culture is seen as the decisive determination of the individual as the indispensable frame for all goals and aspirations of the individual, it often has very problematic political implications. Exaggeration of cultural determination may lead observers to hypostatize cultures into closed bubbles, impenetrable to outside understanding. Preservation of cultures may be taken as an important political end in itself - and, even more problematic, individual rights may lose in importance in favour of group rights going against the rule of law. When cul-

tural features are taken by some to give rise to political problems, however, the argument may tilt in the opposite direction: then culture is taken to be a surface icing only on top of social-economical determinations, as when the special behaviours of certain groups are taken to spring from their social position exclusively. This seesaw shift between a too heavy and too light estimation of the role of culture is a symptom of the precarious position of culture in current policies. Culture does co-influence the behaviour of groups along with other factors, sometimes problematically so - at the same time it may change easier than culturalists believe, especially over generations.

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