Why Respect Culture?

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Why respect culture? The demand for respect that I have in mind is not satisfied when we simply recognize or acknowledge cultural differences. It instead requires that we accord the particularistic claims of cultural communities special normative weight in our political judgments and deliberation. And it requires that we pursue policies and design institutions that actively protect and promote particularistic cultural commitments. Many political philosophers urge us to respect culture in just this sense. I argue that while they *presume* that we should do so, they do not offer compelling reasons why. What is more, on a quite plausible account of how culture works, these political philosophers probably *cannot* provide persuasive reasons. Simply put, we do not have moral reasons to respect culture in any direct sense.

The tensions that surround culture and the normative claims made for it in political debate pervade western press coverage. In 1994, for instance, *The New York Times* opened the year with an ominous warning about the need to protect indigenous peoples from impending "cultural extinction" that threatens them in the face of relentless political and economic development (Wilford 1994). This basically was a plea to protect and preserve particular cultures. Yet the *Times* also has roundly criticized well established, indigenous cultural practices. For example, it recently focused on the ritualized female slavery practiced illegally in several West African states (French 1997a, 1997b). Here the families of young girls surrender them to traditional priests whom the girls serve sexually and otherwise in atonement for crimes committed by relatives. In their coverage, then, our press often displays deep ambivalence about whether and on what terms we might, by turns, protect and criticize other cultures.

This same ambivalence characterizes the recent writings of many political philosophers who also are preoccupied with the normative status of culture. Consider a prominent example. Charles Taylor defends a "politics of cultural recognition" that, while committed to traditional rights, is wedded neither to uncompromising insistence on "uniform application of the rules defining these rights without exception" nor to individualist skepticism regarding "collective goals." He presents this communitarian political vision as an alternative to the "liberalism of rights." He claims in the first place that while his view allows for uncompromising application of such universalist rights as *habeas corpus*, it nevertheless allows him "to weigh the importance of certain forms of uniform treatment against the importance of cultural survival, and opt sometimes in favor of the latter" (Taylor 1994, 60–61). Taylor then endorses a still stronger position. He defends the "presumption"—which he embraces in "something like an act of faith"—that "we owe equal respect to all cultures." According to Taylor this presumption requires that we respect "the equal value of different cultures; that we not only let them survive, but acknowledge their *worth*" (Taylor 1994, 64–69).

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Liberal theorists too are especially anxious regarding the claims of culture. They argue among themselves about whether and, if so how, liberalism might accommodate such claims. The problem as liberals see it is that individuals "are owed respect as citizens and as members of cultural communities" even though the imperatives that issue from these two bases of respect often stand at least in considerable tension and sometimes in outright conflict with one another (Kymlicka 1989, 150). Liberals thus endorse as legitimate state interference with objectionable "internal restrictions" that groups impose on their members, even as they argue that those same groups legitimately may demand "external protections" from outside groups, including the larger society within which they exist (Kymlicka 1995, 35 and following; Green 1994; Raz 1994, 185–187). Yet it should be clear that protections of the latter sort have clear priority in this liberal agenda because it is only once we grant them that interference in the internal affairs of the group seems problematic. Liberals nonetheless disagree about how best to implement the "external protections" that embody respect for culture. Some insist that cultures must be protected as a matter of collective or group right (Raz 1994; Margalit and Halbertal 1994; Waldron 1993). Others insist that cultures can be defended as a matter of individual right (Tamir 1993, 45, 53) to, for instance, association (Kukathas 1992) or education (Rorty 1995). Still others seek to defuse what they take to be unhelpful disputes concerning rights and who can bear them. They focus instead on mechanisms of "group differentiated citizenship" to defend the claims of cultural minorities (Kymlicka 1995, 45 and following).

I have little to say about such disagreements. This is because very nearly all the political philosophers I have thus far mentioned *presume* that we should respect culture in the sense that I mentioned at the outset. They thus neglect what I take to be an analytically prior and therefore more fundamental set of questions. Why is culture important? More specifically, what normative claim, if any, might culture have on us? These questions, in turn, raise others. How does culture enter into social and political interaction? How do cultural practices invite strategic interpretation and reinterpretation? How, if at all, are culture and power implicated with one another? Political philosophers, whether communitarian or liberal, who presuppose that culture has normative value largely disregard such questions. They focus almost exclusively on the functional value of meaning and significance, at the expense of the necessarily contested, discriminatory character of cultural symbols and practices (Rorty 1994, 152, 158). My argument, then, focuses on the political and particularly on the deep and inevitable strategic dimensions of culture. In particular I explore issues of social and political theory that philosophers typically treat as unproblematic.

The remainder of the article consists of five sections. In the next section I address two broad accounts of why we should accord normative weight to culture. I first examine and set aside the view that culture is somehow intrinsically valuable or good. I then examine the broadly consequentialist view advanced by several liberal political philosophers that culture is valuable because it contributes in an important way to the well-being of some individual or group. I conclude that, as it presently is formulated, this view is untenable insofar as it lacks a plausible account of how culture works. In the next section I sketch a theoretical account of how culture works that focuses on the symbolic forms that are the constituent element of any culture. I argue that the "force" of symbolic forms and the practices in which they are deployed operates in quite specific ways to define the range of possibilities for relevant actors. In the following section I illustrate the ways that symbolic force enters into social and political processes by considering the practice of slavery. I then address the politics of culture and specifically identify the unavoidable opportunities and incentives that symbolic force provides for strategic behavior. I conclude by suggesting how the strategic dimension of culture subverts the claims of those who urge us to respect it for normative reasons. In particular I explain why neither of two extant approaches to grounding the value of cultural membership can coherently accommodate the politics of culture.

Why Respect Culture?

Many political philosophers, whether they deem themselves liberal, communitarian, or otherwise, simply presume that we should respect culture. They thus focus on the various means by which we might do so. Joseph Raz succinctly traces the broad contours of public policy toward cultural minorities from classic stances of toleration, through the assertion of nondiscrimination rights to the active affirmation of multiculturalism (Raz 1994, 172–173; Taylor 1994, 53 and following). Toleration, on his account, allows minorities to practice their culture so long as it does not affect the majority. It thus allows the majority to restrict the access of the minority to public media and public spaces. Nondiscrimination rights disallow such restrictions, but hold instead that members of minority cultures cannot be excluded from schools, neighborhoods, employment, and so on simply on the basis of cultural membership. Multicultural policies de-

mand equal respect for all viable minority cultures and so can require distribution of political and economic resources in such a way as to sustain and insure the future of minority cultural communities.

But why does culture warrant respect in the sense that this policy shift presupposes? Why do our judgments regarding the justice, equality, fairness, or otherwise of social and political practices and arrangements require that we actively should assign special normative consideration to culture? Answers to these questions require that we identify what has been called "the value of cultural membership" (Kymlicka 1989, 1995). Here there are two broad accounts. On the one hand, we might respect culture because it is intrinsically valuable. On the other hand, we might respect culture on consequentialist grounds in the specific sense that it contributes in an important way to the well-being of a relevant individual or group.

Charles Taylor is perhaps the most forceful exponent of the view that we should respect culture because it is intrinsically valuable.[1] He first identifies a class of goods that he deems "irreducibly social" because "the nature of the good requires that it be sought in common" (Taylor 1994, 58). Taylor then concludes that because "culture can be the locus of goods" of that sort, it is intrinsically valuable. He reasons as follows.

> If these things are goods, then *other things being equal* so is the culture that makes them possible. If I want to maximize these goods, then I must want to preserve and strengthen this culture. But the culture as a good, or more cautiously, as the locus of some goods (*for there might be much that is reprehensible as well*), is not an individual good. . . . The idea that the culture is only valuable instrumentally in this kind of case rests on a confusion. . . . It is not a mere instrument of the individual goods. It can't be distinguished from them as their merely contingent condition, something they could in principle exist without. That makes no sense. It is essentially linked to what we have identified as good. Consequently, it is hard to see how we could deny it the title of good, not just in some weakened, instrumental sense . . . but as intrinsically good. (Taylor 1995, 137; my emphasis)

Several things are important about this line of reasoning. Taylor advances it as part of his ongoing protest against the "atomism" of contemporary political thought. Here he is attacking "welfarism" by insisting that some goods—those that he deems "irreducibly social"—cannot be defended on the assumption that "the good is only a good because it benefits individuals" (Taylor 1995, 129). Taylor wants to dissuade us from viewing culture as a public good in the technical sense. He first claims that culture is the sort of good whose value is "undecomposable" into the value that individuals, one at a time, attribute to it. He then concludes that if we view culture as valuable to some group, we also must concede that its value is intrinsic rather than instrumental.[2] Taylor, however, never actually presents an *argument* either for his claim that culture is intrinsically valuable or that this is so because it is the locus of "irreducibly social goods." In the passage cited earlier the highlighted phrases perform all of the work. All things are not equal and no culture is free of "reprehensible" or even of morally ambiguous practices.

One clear example, already mentioned, of such an objectionable practice is the ritualized enslavement of young girls that is practiced—widely, if illegally—in several West African states. It is just this sort of ongoing, institutionalized practice that Taylor might rightly condemn as "reprehensible." Yet it is unclear that he offers any leverage with which to criticize even so egregious a practice as slavery. For in his defense of the presumption that we owe all cultures equal respect, Taylor quite explicitly directs our attention away from particular practices and toward the broad contours of whole cultures "that have animated whole societies over some considerable stretch of time" (Taylor 1994, 66). In this way Taylor disables our ability to criticize particular cultural practices including our own.

[1] Taylor never states precisely what it means for something to be "intrinsically valuable." For a brief discussion of this topic see Raz (1986, 198–201). It appears that for Taylor culture falls into the category of what Raz calls "constituent goods" in the sense that it is among the "elements of what is good in itself which contribute to its value, i.e., elements but for which a situation which is good in itself would be less valuable" (Raz 1986, 200). That said, for Raz goods that are intrinsically valuable are a species of public good in the technical sense. They thus can be valuable for individuals in just the sense that Taylor is concerned to deny. Note also that in subsequent work Raz rejects the view that culture is intrinsically valuable.

[2] Taylor presents his view as self-evident and finds it difficult to make sense of alternative positions, of views that, say, characterize culture as a good that is intrinsically valuable for individuals or that is instrumentally valuable for some group. Here the burden plainly falls on him to explain why such positions are nonsensical. Others clearly do not share his view. Several theorists defend the sort of position that Taylor pronounces nonsensical. Buchanan claims culture is intrinsically valuable for individuals (Buchanan 1991, 53–54). Waldron insists that culture is instrumentally valuable for groups (Waldron 1993, 346, 358–359). For completeness sake note that the liberals discussed later view culture as instrumentally valuable for individuals. The point here is that Taylor needs but never provides an argument for the relation he asserts between the nondecomposable value of culture and its allegedly intrinsic value. On the evidence, not only are both of these characterizations contestable, but the relation between them seems to be very much a contingent one.

Like others, I am here simply suggesting that at any given time any complex culture will sustain practices that range from reprehensible to admirable (e.g., Kymlicka 1995, 171). The sole plausible criterion by which to assess the value of a culture is in terms of how the practices it sustains enhance or diminish the well-being of the variously situated individuals or groups affected by them. How else might we judge such practices as ritualized female slavery to be "reprehensible"? This, in turn, requires that we focus attention less on the value of culture writ large than on the origins and workings of particular norms, practices, and institutions. There are, in other words, no obvious, general criteria for suggesting that any culture, even if we grant that it is "irreducibly social," is for that reason "intrinsically good." Taylor offers no argument to persuade us otherwise. I will not consider the possibility any further.

Consider now the view that culture is valuable because of the consequences it sustains. This view, typically espoused by liberal theorists, holds that cultures are not intrinsically valuable, that they lack "moral status of their own" (Kymlicka 1989, 165; 1995, 83). Rather, cultures are valuable and in need of protection solely because they contribute to some more basic human interest. There are at least two ways of conceiving this interest. Some insist that the "value of cultural membership" derives from the fact that it provides an essential "context of choice" that determines "the range of options" from which individual members of particular cultural communities choose (Kymlicka 1989, 164–168; 1995, 84–93). On this account we "should be concerned with the fate of cultural structures . . . because it's only through having a rich and secure cultural structure that people can become aware, in a vivid way, of the options available to them, and intelligently examine their value" (Kymlicka 1989, 165; Buchanan 1991, 53–54). Others claim that culture is valuable because it is functional to the interest of its individual members in being able "not only . . . to identify with a group" but also, and more importantly, to establish and sustain their "personal identity" (Margalit and Halbertal 1994, 501–502, 505–506).

Several points emerge from these liberal briefs for the value of cultural membership. First, they are not obviously incompatible. Indeed, even those who emphasize one or the other interest regularly recognize that culture is important both in grounding identity and in defining options.[3] Second, although cultural membership must be exercised in groups in order to be effective, it nevertheless is grounded in the interests of *individuals* in securing their personal identity or in exercising capacities for autonomous choice.[4] Finally, on this view the value of cultural membership implies that individuals are entitled not just to *some* cultural context but to *their own* cultural context (Kymlicka 1989, 177; Margalit and Halbertal 1994, 502–506).

With perhaps the exception of the last point this is a rather modest agenda. In subsequent sections, however, I argue that, on a plausible view of how culture defines options or identities, even so modest an agenda is suspect. The source of my suspicion lies in the particular way in which liberals conceptualize culture. Here too there is substantial agreement. Liberals insist that the proper focus of theoretical attention is "the concept of culture as a comprehensive way of life." Such a culture typically "affects everything people do: cooking, architectural style, common language, literary and artistic traditions, music, customs, dress, festivals, ceremonies" (Margalit and Halbertal 1994, 497–498). It thus is "institutionally complete" (Kymlicka 1995, 18, 76, 78).

This conception of what they variously call an "encompassing," "pervasive," or "societal" culture is decisive to the substantive policy prescriptions that liberal theorists advance (Margalit and Halbertal 1994, 497–498; Raz 1994, 129; and Kymlicka 1995, 76, 78). It provides the criterion by which they identify those groups that justifiably can demand special recognition by the state.[5] Yet this preoccupation with whole cultures also is problematic in ways that liberal theorists do not recognize. In particular, like the position that Taylor adopts, it systematically diverts attention from the politics of culture.

How Does Culture Work?

Liberal political philosophers no doubt suppose that they have answered this question. Culture, on their account, works to sustain the identities of relevant actors, to de-

[3] See, for instance, Margalit and Halbertal (1994, 497–498), Kymlicka (1989, 175–177; 1995, 105), Raz (1994, 134, 176–178), and Tamir (1993, 35–36).

[4] See, for example, Margalit and Halbertal (1994, 499–501, 508), Kymlicka (1989, 162–168), Raz (1994, 178, 189), and Tamir (1993, 42–48).

[5] The concept of a "societal culture" allows Kymlicka to differentiate between "multinational" and "polyethnic" patterns of cultural diversity and, from there, to recommend different sorts of policy response to the claims of groups within each category (Kymlicka 1995, 10–18, 26–33). Likewise, Raz (1994, 129) differentiates "peoples and other groups that are serious candidates for the right to self-determination" from those who are not, precisely in terms of the "pervasive cultures" that mark the identity of members belonging to groups of the former sort. Margalit and Halbertal (1994, 497–498) simply identify groups with "encompassing" cultures as the relevant bearers of a right to culture. And for Tamir (1993, 67–77) a common culture grounds the right to national self-determination.

fine the options available to them, or both. I think that they correctly identify the effects of culture. Yet, having claimed that culture has these effects, they neglect the causal mechanisms that bring them about. The problem here is that options and identities are artifacts of the unavoidable relations that obtain between symbol and strategy in social and political interaction (Johnson 1997a,b). The process by which options and identities are generated and defined thus significantly undermines any confidence liberals might have in their ability to attribute normative status to culture. In order to substantiate this line of argument it is necessary to explore the concept of culture more carefully.[6]

For anthropologists, the first step toward developing a well-founded conception of culture involved "cutting . . . the culture concept down to size, therefore actually insuring its continued importance rather than undermining it." The hope was that this analytic approach would generate "a narrow, specialized, and . . . theoretically more powerful concept of culture" to replace the vague, general conceptions typically deployed by social scientists (Geertz 1973, 4). Rather than attend, as liberal theorists would have it, to culture understood as an "encompassing," "pervasive," or "societal" structure, this approach encourages us to focus on symbolic forms and the various practices (e.g., rituals, traditions, myths, and so on) in which social and political actors deploy them.[7] This, in turn, has the advantage of directing attention to the crucial theoretical issue of how we conceptualize the force of symbolic forms and the way in which that force informs social and political interaction.

Cultures consist of intersubjectively shared symbols that actors invest with meaning and deploy in ritual, tradition, and other modes of symbolic action. A symbol, in turn, is "any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception—the conception being the symbol's 'meaning' " (Geertz 1973, 91). Symbols, by definition, are "multivocal," and hence ambiguous, not simply in the sense that they can and do embody multiple meanings, but in the further sense that different actors can invest the same symbol with divergent, indeed conflicting, meanings (Geertz, 1973, 113; Kertzer 1988). On this view symbolic forms, not the imperfectly shared, occasionally idiosyncratic, frequently contested meanings that differentially situated actors attribute to them, constitute the shared, public dimension of culture.

Cultural practices, then, afford social and political actors a sort of "symbolic strategy for encompassing situations," for imposing some conceptual order on otherwise indeterminate processes of interaction (Geertz 1973, 250, 230, 89; Ortner 1984, 129). I return to the view of strategic dimensions of symbolic action in a later section. Here I address the question of how symbols work. This, in turn, requires that we distinguish for analytical purposes the "scope" of symbolic forms from their "force."

The *scope* of a symbol or a cultural practice consists in "the range of social contexts" to which relevant actors consider it to have "more or less direct relevance." Its *force* refers to its "centrality or marginality" in the lives of relevant actors, to the "psychological grip" it exercises over them (Geertz 1968, 111–113). The efficacy of a set of symbolic forms clearly depends on the scope that actors attribute to it. In this sense the attention that liberal political philosophers accord "encompassing," "pervasive," or "societal" cultures is warranted. Yet we must accord analytical priority to force over scope. Claims about the scope of particular symbols or practices presuppose that they have force. If symbols lack such force they cannot be relevant to *any* social context. Curiously, however, liberal political philosophers remain preoccupied with the scope of cultures, with their purported "encompassing" or "societal" character, to the virtual exclusion of any understanding of symbolic force and its implications.

The force of symbolic forms is at bottom cognitive or conceptual (Lukes 1977, 68 and following). Symbolic forms, deployed in cultural practices of various sorts, "structure the way people *think* about social life" (Moore and Myerhoff 1977, 4). They provide actors with "extrinsic sources of information" (Geertz 1973, 92) not in the sense that they convey detailed messages, but in a broader sense of imparting a view of how the world actually is, how it operates—the sorts of entities it contains, how those entities can be expected to behave, and so on. Symbolic forms establish the focal categories of social and political interaction and, thereby, establish parameters on belief formation.[8] They do not directly instill be-

[6] Here I am especially indebted to Geertz (1968, 1973, 1983). I also draw upon the anthropological writings by Barth (1993), Cohen (1985), Kertzer (1988), Mach (1993), Mintz (1982), Moore and Myerhoff (1977), Ortner (1984, 1990), and Rosen (1991).

Two points are important here. First, Geertz arguably has had greater impact on the ways that we conceptualize culture than any other modern anthropologist or social theorist. In that sense my reliance on his work has presumptive warrant. Second, critics regularly complain that Geertz's conception of culture systematically and necessarily diminishes the role of strategy, power, and conflict in social life. In that sense, because I draw heavily on his work precisely to show the unavoidably strategic dimensions of culture, I take on a particularly heavy burden of argument.

[7] Thus Geertz explicitly differentiates his own redefinition of culture in terms of shared symbols and meanings from other views on which culture consists in "the total way of life of a people" (1973, 4–5).

[8] Thus, symbolic forms do not so much represent or express preexisting values and beliefs as define the range of things over which individuals hold beliefs or values. They help structure belief (Kertzer 1988, 68; Cohen 1985, 10–21). And in this way they enter, indirectly but importantly, into a standard account of how reasons

liefs or values. Instead, symbolic forms help delineate—in at least two analytically separable if empirically related ways—the realm of social and political possibility for relevant actors.

In the first place, symbolic forms operate indicatively to focus the attention of actors, directing it toward certain ranges of alternatives and away from others. They allow actors to establish order, relation, and predictability in the face of indeterminacy (Moore and Myerhoff, 1977, 18). They *foreclose* possibilities. This process is not naive. Symbolic force discriminates. By calling attention to certain identities and options, thereby defining them as viable or feasible, it forecloses others. It constitutes social and political interactions on particular, partial terms (Lukes 1977, 68–69; Kertzer 1988, 87).

If symbolic forms operated only indicatively they would have an unvaryingly constraining, conservative impact on social and political interaction. But symbols also operate subjunctively to *disclose* possibilities often not immediately discernable in mundane existence. They thus can help reveal options and identities that might go otherwise unconsidered. Orchestrated in more or less complex cultural practices such as ritual, for example, symbolic forms give palpable existence to as yet unrealized possibility (Geertz, 1973, 112). They nourish the imagination of social and political actors (Nozick 1993, 172–173). Thus, this process is not naive either. By imaginatively disclosing and exploring possibilities actors can, within limits, redefine their options and identities (Rorty 1983; Johnson 1999a).

Symbolic forms, then, exert force over social and political actors by commanding their attention and capturing their imagination. They govern the mental capacities with which actors delimit the possibilities embodied in their extant situation and envision those that lie beyond it. Symbolic force thus provides the sort of "comprehensible mechanism" that we need if we are to understand how symbols and cultural practices influence ongoing human interaction. Moreover it does so in a way that recognizes that any plausible conception of how culture works must allow for "a kind of elastic distance" between symbols and those constituencies for whom they have force. In short, this view of the force of symbolic forms allows us to see how they affect social and political interaction without programming it. This "distance" is important for explanatory purposes (Ortner 1990, 84, 89–90). It also is crucial to the normative project of liberal political philosophers precisely insofar as they rightly recognize that agents can, in fact, reassess and revise their cultural attachments and that agents are morally warranted in so doing (e.g., Tamir 1993, 33, 49; Kymlicka 1995, 92–93, 104–105; Raz 1994 178–183). It nevertheless remains to be seen how symbolic force enters more concretely into social and political practices.

Symbolic Force—An Illustration

From the sketch I have just offered it is, I hope, clear that my views about the role cultural symbols and practices play in social and political interaction and the ways they might enter normative argument are far from dismissive. I disagree with those who contend that, as compared to culturally defined options and identities, those deriving from, for example, gender or social-economic factors somehow "grow out of something more real" (Kateb 1994, 512).[9] On my account symbolic force necessarily and intimately intersects with the "hard surfaces of life" (Geertz 1973, 30).

Recall the contemporary practice of slavery that I mentioned at the outset.[10] In contemporary West Africa young girls—known in Ghana as "trocosi . . . or 'slaves of the gods' "—frequently are delivered into slavery in atonement for crimes committed by family members. They are given to local priests "to work as slaves in religious shrines as a way of appeasing the gods for crimes committed by their relatives." The trocosi slave is separated from her family and serves until the priest decides that the family must replace her with yet another young girl. This cycle of ritual expiation, which can go on for generations, is deeply embedded in local traditions. It embodies indigenous views of communal guilt and traditions of priestly power (French 1997b, A5). It also exemplifies a more general historical pattern.

Relations between masters and slaves are marked by three features: (1) an extreme asymmetry of power, (2) the abrupt, involuntary, and irreversible isolation of the slave from his family and community of origin, and (3) the pervasive dishonor visited on the slave (Patterson

(e.g., beliefs and desires) cause action. "On a causal-instrumental account of rationality, our standards of rationality must depend upon our view of the character of the world and upon our view of what we are like, with our capacities, powers, disabilities and weaknesses. . . . Our view of the world and of ourselves, and our notion of what counts as rational, are in continual interplay" (Nozick 1993, 134–5). See Johnson (1997 a,b).

[9]Compare Barry (1998) who argues that the preoccupation with cultural difference is misleading insofar as it diverts attention from pressing issues concerning the distribution of material goods.

[10]This example is not trivial. The Ghanian government estimates that as many as 10,000 girls might be so enslaved (French 1997a, 1). Nor is it an aberration. Slavery continues to be a "flourishing business" in many parts of the world (*The Economist* 1996).

1982). The slave's distinctive, extreme powerlessness with respect to the master emerges from the fact that paradigmatically slavery constitutes a reprieve from death, usually of captives in war, but also in instances of those either convicted of capital crimes or rendered vulnerable by extreme physical or economic hardship. The reprieve, however, is conditional upon the slave continuously and manifestly yielding to the power of the master.

On this account, "the slave, however recruited" is "a socially dead person" with "no socially recognized existence" independent of the master. In particular, the slave is denied ties to present or future communities or to any cultural heritage and so is "truly a genealogical isolate" (Patterson 1982, 5). The crucial point here is that the slave's isolation is a symbolic construction.[11] The same symbolic practices that mark slaves as "socially dead" also thereby situate them "outside the game of honor." Hence, "social death" initiates, and the outward symbolic markings of that status complete, the explanation for why slaves submit to, and uninvolved third parties accept without protest, what in other circumstances would be immediately recognized as institutionalized evil, cruel, unjust, or inhumane treatment. In slave societies, commonsense defines slaves as the sort of being to whom categories of cruelty, injustice, and so on, simply do not apply.[12] And they do not apply precisely because slaves are symbolically marked in ways that so indicate (Patterson 1982, 11, 8).[13]

Two comments are in order here. First, this example is especially germane to the present discussion. The predicament of slaves, as Patterson presents it, parallels quite closely the threat to members of beleaguered cultural minorities about which political philosophers worry and, on the basis of which, they urge us to accord culture weight in our normative judgments.[14] Thus Joseph Carens, for instance, argues that the protection of threatened cultures is, if not morally required, surely "morally permissible" just insofar as failure to do so has "disastrous consequences" for indigenous populations who, absent traditional identities, are especially vulnerable to disease, social anomie, economic exploitation, and political oppression (Carens 1992, 574–77; Kymlicka 1989, 170).

Second, this discussion is meant to suggest how symbolic force defines options and sustains identities in ways that are as important politically and socially as the influence of purportedly more "real" factors. The politics involved in all of this, however, are not yet entirely clear. In order to remedy this it is necessary to return to the question of how culture works.

The Politics of Culture

Political philosophers who presume that we should accord culture normative weight in our political judgments and deliberations largely neglect the politics of culture. They are preoccupied instead with the functional value of meaning and significance. Thus, we are told, "*meaningful* individual choice" presupposes, in a noncontingent way, "access to a societal culture" (Kymlicka 1995, 84, 83). Such a culture, in turn, is extensive in the sense that it very likely (but not necessarily) includes, for example, "national cuisines, distinctive architectural styles, a common language, distinctive literary and artistic traditions, national music, customs, dress, ceremonies and holidays, etc." (Raz 1994,

[11] "The master's authority was derived from his control over symbolic instruments, which effectively persuaded both slave and others that the master was the only mediator between the living community to which he belonged and the living death that his slave experienced.

The symbolic instruments may be seen as the cultural counterpart to the physical instruments used to control the slave's body. In much the same way that the literal whips were fashioned from different materials, the symbolic whips of slavery were woven from many areas of culture. Masters all over the world used special rituals of enslavement upon first acquiring slaves: the symbolism of naming, of clothing, of hairstyle, of language, and of body marks. And they used, especially in the more advanced slave systems, the sacred symbols of religion" (Patterson 1982, 8–9).

[12] Thus it is important to recognize "dehumanization as central to slavery." Slaves exist literally at the whim of their master. In this sense "radical uncertainty and unpredictability was characteristic of all slave systems," and, from the slave's perspective, such "utter vulnerability may be the essence of dehumanization" (Davis 1996, 51).

[13] See Geertz (1983, 73–93) for an analysis of commonsense as encapsulating a taken-for-granted, symbolically demarcated view of the world and the possibilities it contains. Davis (1996) argues that in slave societies commonsense views are unstable (1) insofar as it is impossible to literally dehumanize slaves and (2) to the extent that the identity of the master trades in Hegelian fashion of recognition by the slave. This point is well taken and supports the claim, which I make in the next section, that because symbolically marked practices are not seamless, they are susceptible to pervasive strategic conflict. Thus during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries slaves in the United States surreptitiously contested such mundane symbolic markers as hairstyle and dress (White and White 1995a, 1995b).

[14] Consider the plight of the slave as described in the following passage. "He had a past to be sure. But a past is not a heritage. Everything has a history, including sticks and stones. Slaves differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed to freely integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory. That they reached out for the past, as they reached out for the related living, there can be no doubt. Unlike other persons, doing so meant struggling with and penetrating the iron curtain of the master, his community, his laws, his policemen or patrollers, and his heritage" (Patterson 1982, 5).

129; Kymlicka 1995, 76). These writers, of course, are aware that membership in such culturally constituted groups depends on "mutual recognition" and that such recognition is marked and sustained symbolically (Raz 1994, 130, 132). And they insist, rightly, that the attachments so marked are especially strong (Kymlicka 1995, 86–91). Because they have little, if any grasp of symbolic force and its vicissitudes, however, they lack a plausible account of why this might be so.

Anthropologists remind us that it is important not to treat culture as "a self-contained 'super-organic' entity with forces and purposes of its own" (Geertz 1973, 11). In the present context this injunction presents us with at least two practical tasks. First, we should not attribute too much "structure" to culture.[15] Any culture consists of an array of symbols and practices. It is not necessarily a neatly ordered, seamless, self-contained entity. The extent of internal interconnection and coherence among the constituent elements of any given culture is an empirical question (Geertz 1973, 407). It is inadvisable to prejudge this question precisely because it will induce us to underestimate the potential "disorder, multiplicity and underdeterminedness" that a given culture encapsulates (Barth 1993, 4–5).[16] This, in turn, will prompt us to overlook not only the ubiquitous opportunities for strategic action at the unavoidable interstices of culture but the ways in which such coherence as does obtain in a given culture itself emerges from the efforts of strategic actors to resolve disorder and indeterminacy in ways that advantage themselves.

Second, the converse, more constructive task is to ground the force of symbols and cultural practices in a systematic understanding of human action. This is a persistent difficulty for anthropological theory (Ortner 1984, 1990). Symbols and cultural practices are not self-animating. Social and political actors engage in "symbolic action" when they deploy symbolic forms in the effort to impose some conceptual order on otherwise indeterminate processes of social and political interaction. This is not a naive process. Because symbolic force discriminates in the ways I suggested earlier it has distributional consequences. It forecloses or discloses social and political possibilities. This makes it an irresistible, potent political resource. Any culture (understood as a complex of symbols and practices) then, not only affords the agents who inhabit it with repeated occasions on which to engage in strategic action. It also offers them strong reasons to do so.

Symbolic action, on this account, has an inescapable strategic dimension. It is the medium for what Geertz calls "the struggle for the real" (Geertz 1973, 316). Actors engaged in this struggle typically seek less to invent new symbols than to creatively contest and recast the meanings invested in existing symbolic forms. They endeavor, with differential facility and success, to exploit symbolic force in order to define or redefine the context of their ongoing interactions. Their objective is to establish as authoritative a particular and partial conception of the world and the social and political possibilities it contains. In the struggle for the real, actors strive to command the attention and capture the imagination of relevant others by controlling the symbolic media with which they think. In this sense the struggle for the real is a struggle for power over others, a strategic contest to control the symbols and cultural practices in terms of which social and political actors envision possibilities and fashion them into viable alternatives (Rorty 1983; Johnson 1999a).

Liberal political philosophers might well object here. They might concede that the foregoing considerations are important for practical purposes of elaborating an explanatory social or political theory, but they still might complain that those considerations are irrelevant to their own more properly normative concerns. This objection is misplaced.

Any philosophical project, liberal or otherwise, which hopes to analyze the role of culture in social and political life, let alone render normative judgments regarding the "value of cultural membership" and the sorts of measures required to protect it, must take as a premise some view of social and political interaction. A "thin" account of action and choice is especially appropriate here because it allows us to isolate the impact of various influences on human agency (Waldron 1992, 759–761). The conception of symbolic force that I sketched earlier trades upon just such a thin account of agency. Here I extend that underlying account in ways that capture the unavoidable relation of symbolic force and strategic action.

I base this portion of my argument on a somewhat unorthodox reading of game theory. Game theorists purport to model social and political interactions in terms that either ignore symbolic considerations or reduce those considerations to the beliefs of strategic agents. Yet the pervasive indeterminacy that plagues the austere, counterfactual world that they construct highlights two especially important, if typically unrecognized, ways that

[15] Kymlicka, for instance, does just this when he systematically privileges the role that "cultural structure" plays in defining the context of human choice and judgment over what he portrays as the more transient "character" of that culture (Kymlicka 1989, 166–167, 172, 178; 1995, 104–105). I return to this point in the conclusion.

[16] Geertz for example is critical of formalism and argues that the task of cultural analysis "is as much a matter of determining independencies as interconnections, gulfs as well as bridges" (Geertz 1973, 11, 18). Compare Rosen (1991).

symbol and strategy are intimately related in social and political interaction.[17]

First, game theorists demonstrate that in any repeated interaction where players sufficiently value the future, any combination of strategies can be sustained as an equilibrium (e.g., Kreps 1990, 75–76). In this sense the agents who populate game theoretic models confront a "bewildering wealth" of equilibria and, in that sense, face range of options so diffuse and indefinite as to be very nearly unintelligible (Aumann 1981, 16). The standard resolution to this endemic problem, even among highly technical game theorists, is to invoke a "focal point," an outcome which, by its very obviousness, mitigates the indeterminacy caused by multiple equilibria. Game theorists suggest that "focal points" are cultural in the sense that they emerge from the "*symbolic* contents of the game" (Schelling 1960, 106; Kreps 1990, 101; Myerson 1991, 114). Yet they leave largely unexplored the question of how focal points indeed coordinate the expectations of relevant players in indeterminate strategic settings. This is an especially pressing problem if, as usually is the case, the interests of those players conflict over the various available equilibria. Any player will have a clear incentive to engage in what Schelling calls "strategic moves" intended to divert the attention of relevant others away from some range of equilibria that contains outcomes that she especially dislikes. Similarly she will have a strong incentive to try to prompt those others to imagine outcomes that may not stand out among the set of possible equilibria, but which she prefers to any of the currently "obvious" alternatives.

Who *are* the relevant parties to a strategic interaction? This is the second point at which symbol and strategy tacitly intersect in purportedly stark game theoretic worlds. The standard procedure for transforming games of incomplete information into equivalent but technically more tractable games of complete but imperfect information inadvertently highlights the crucial role of symbolic force in social and political interaction. Simply put, that procedure reduces, for analytical purposes, all forms of uncertainty among players regarding the nature of their interaction to mutual uncertainty concerning the payoff functions characteristic of other players in the game (Myerson 1991, 74–83). That is, although each player knows her own payoff function, she remains uncertain about the payoff function of other players. Each player addresses this uncertainty by constructing conditional probabilities over the "types" of other players that she might encounter, where the range of possible types is established by an initial objective distribution that game theorists typically portray as a move by "nature." Symbol and strategy intersect here because, as game theorists sometimes recognize, but typically do not fully appreciate, "types" are not *natural* categories. The range of possible "types" in any population is defined and interpreted symbolically (Geertz 1972, 363–364).

Any social and political identity—for example, membership in this or that national or ethnic group—is a symbolic construct (Cohen 1985; Mach 1993). However, the *salience* or otherwise of any such identity—whether members of some population deem it possible to be or to encounter this or that "type"—is itself typically a strategic artifact (Johnson 1997a, 1999a). This is because what it is best for an actor to do in most social and political circumstances depends on reciprocal expectations about those whom she might encounter. Actors therefore seek, within the constraints imposed by the strategic settings in which they find themselves, to define the range of symbolically marked identities, as well as their own location in that range, in ways that will induce expectations among others that lead those others to act in ways advantageous to the actors themselves.[18] Because actors deploy their symbolically marked identities in this manner they will expect, and therefore induce, others to do the same.

Suppose liberal political philosophers object once again? What, they might inquire, follows from the account just sketched? The game theoretic models show that, even in an impossibly sparse environment, symbolic forms are crucially important in delineating possibilities in just the ways that my account of symbolic force would lead us to expect. The liberal political philosophers, however, might well reply that these models, as I depict them, show that "cultural structure" works in very much the way that *they* claim. For symbols enter the models, however tacitly, in ways that render choice intelligible and identities predictable for the agents who inhabit the game theoretic world. This retort is correct as an interpretation of how symbols work, but misleading insofar as it predicates these effects to some overarching "cultural structure." It overlooks the indispensable agency involved as actors, pursuing their own typically incompatible projects, seek to shape the range of possible options and identities available to themselves and to others. In short, it overlooks the politics of culture.

[17] In this sense I take my cue from anthropologist Fredrik Barth who notes that "if we have to construct an initial situation we should not choose the fiction of a perfect structure but rather the fiction of an initial amorphous lack of order, which may then be given a degree of shape through the operation of processes we have modeled" (Barth 1993, 7).

[18] The strategic nature of such contests means, of course, that the range of options and identities that they generate may not be those any particular actor intends.

The claim that culture has an intrinsic strategic dimension in no way entails that we *choose* our culture.[19] Kymlicka correctly asserts that while our options are culturally delineated, "the range of options can't be chosen" (Kymlicka 1989, 164). Yet the fact that we do not choose our options does not mean that they are "given" in the strong sense that they are beyond social and political control. Symbolic forms, on the account I have sketched, govern prevailing conceptions of possibility. This, I take it, captures what it means to say that they are "constitutive" of identities and options (e.g., Kymlicka 1989, 175, 176). Constituting or reconstituting the social and political world does not involve selecting or rejecting discrete, predefined alternatives. It is not, strictly speaking, a matter of choice (Follesdal 1981, 402). Yet possibilities are not defined purely by structural causes.[20] They are constructed, altered, and sustained as social and political actors strategically contest the content and contours of the social world (Johnson 1997a, 1999a).

Any particular culture and the symbols and practices that comprise it are contingent in the historical and continuing sense that "they could well have been different, probably are different in all those places we have not observed, and may now be different in those places we did observe" (Barth 1993, 5). This contingency is inherent, insofar as all cultures are both socially constructed and strategically contested.[21] Because symbolic force discriminates, the process by which cultures are socially and politically constructed unavoidably is a strategic one in the particular sense described earlier. So the point is not simply that any culture will include particular practices that are obviously discriminatory toward one or another subgroup within the culture and so, in Kymlicka's sense, will be candidates for criticism of or interference with the "internal restrictions" that they impose on some members. Nor is the point simply that the content and contours of a particular culture might well be different in the ways just mentioned. The point, rather, is that if the symbolic components of a culture were different or if those components were differently interpreted they would define a considerably different range of options and sustain a considerably different set of identities and this, on the account I offer, unavoidably is an artifact of strategic circumstance. Seen from this perspective cultural practices are morally arbitrary.[22] Those features of culture—the way it defines options and sustains identities—that liberal political philosophers take as primitive stand in need of justification if they are to bear the normative weight liberals place upon them.

Conclusion—Facts, Social and Moral

Kymlicka rightly suggests that the strong cultural attachments that most people develop "seem to be a fact." He adds that "whatever the explanation" for this fact, he sees "no reason to regret it" (Kymlicka 1995, 90). I have sketched an explanation for this social fact in terms of the force of the symbolic forms that constitute our cultural attachments that, because it implicates human reason and agency in an especially powerful way, raises the question of whether the notion of regret is a coherent one here. Regretting the fact that humans develop cultural attachments on the account I give is much like regretting the fact that we have opposable thumbs.

My account of symbolic force and how it informs social and political interaction nevertheless suggests that political philosophers—liberal, communitarian, or otherwise—are mistaken when they advance the claim that in any imaginable human world culture is an unavoidable "social *and* moral fact" (Raz 1994, 125, note 1; my emphasis). They are surely correct that cultural attachments are a social fact. Yet insofar as, in any particular instance, this social fact is generated and sustained by the

[19]Obviously, some people do choose their cultural attachments to a greater or lesser extent. They migrate, they assimilate to the dominant cultural practices of their homeland, or they adopt the sort of cosmopolitan stance that Waldron (1992) describes. And some of those people may, after experiencing one or another alternative, choose to embrace their formative cultural practices. These choices are available, however, only insofar as others construct and sustain competing practices. Tamir (1993, 49–50) offers a contrasting view to which I return below.

[20]This is so even if political possibility obviously is subject to material constraints (Follesdal 1981). The notion of *political* possibility, in particular, presumes that actors intentionally and deliberately endeavor to constitute the world in particular ways (Elster 1978, 48–49).

[21]Again, it is crucial to note that I am not claiming that culture per se is contingent, only that the contours and content of all particular cultures are contingent in both an historical and continuing sense. I in no way dispute the assertion that culture is an ubiquitous, unavoidable feature of human life (e.g., Kymlicka 1999, 176–177). My argument here is about the normative status we should accord to this "social fact."

[22]Kymlicka (1995, 109; 1989, 186–187) too suggests that culture is arbitrary from a moral point of view. He argues that we do not and cannot choose our culture. We instead are born into and, in that sense, inherit cultural structures over which we have no control. Since people do not choose their culture they consequently cannot be held responsible for it and should be protected from any disadvantage that either membership in it or experience of its demise might impose. For doubts about this argument see Carens (1997). By contrast, I argue that cultural practices are generated and continually altered by strategic agents who seek to deploy symbolic force for their own advantage. Consequently, the shape or content of a cultural practice at any given time is a strategic artifact with no special moral status.

sort of strategic processes that I suggest, it is very difficult to see how it can be a *moral* fact.[23] It therefore is difficult, absent an alternative to my account of the politics of culture, to see why we should respect culture in the sense that this requires us to accord the particularistic claims of cultural communities presumptive normative weight in our political judgments and deliberations.[24]

This is not to say that we might or should somehow prevent cultural considerations from entering into our political deliberations. Far from it. Political actors, alone or in groups, typically include among their partial interests, attachments to symbols and symbolic practices. Yet we do not respect others by capitulating to just any interest that they advance. Interests provide one sort of reason in moral and political argument. Like reasons of other sorts they are contestable and, indeed, rebuttable. So we may well respect others if we challenge cultural practices that they endorse but that seem to us objectionable and, conversely, if we stand ready to respond to challenges others might raise against our own practices. Neither sort of challenge need in the first instance consist in condemnation. Both invite a response, an effort to justify, and each implies that those who are challenged may convince critics that their concerns are misplaced.[25] The view I sketch here suggests that there are real, if shifting and contestable, limits to the sort of deference that we owe to any local culture or practice.[26] Indeed, we do not directly respect either whole cultures or particular practices at all. We instead respect the social and political actors who endorse cultural practices. And those actors warrant such respect insofar as, when challenged by either internal dissenters or external critics, they seek in good faith to justify the practices in question. In the end, then, we should not respect culture. We should respect the considered judgments of social and political agents and the processes of public challenge and reasoned argument that sustain those judgments.[27]

I conclude here by addressing an objection to my argument that has been pressed upon me repeatedly. It may seem that the liberal theorists who I have criticized might, with little or no damage to their demand that we respect culture, simply incorporate something like my account of the politics of culture into their own argument. I close by explaining why they cannot do so. For while I think that this objection is seriously mistaken, it nevertheless helps to clarify the nature of my challenge.

Liberal theorists might well complain that, after all, I arrive at a position that very closely resembles the one that they endorse.[28] And they might well claim that they can simply integrate my account of the politics of culture into their own case for the value of cultural membership. This objection is deeply misconceived for at least two reasons. First, my position (and the reasons that I adduce for it) in fact differs considerably and, I hope, obviously from the one that those liberal theorists whom I have criticized endorse. Unlike theorists such as Kymlicka, Raz, Margalit, or Tamir, I simply do not think that cultures, the symbolic practices that constitute cultures, or the identities and options that such practices sustain warrant any presumptive respect. But, perhaps more importantly, I do not see how they might coherently subsume my account of the politics of culture, or anything like it, into their own arguments for the value of cultural membership.

To see why it will help to consider the distinction between choice and circumstance that informs many contemporary liberal theories of justice.[29] On this liberal view, while it is crucial to hold individuals accountable for the consequences of their own choices, it also is important to indemnify them against the possible disadvantages that stem from circumstances not of their own making. With this distinction in mind liberals might think it important to respect culture for either of two reasons. They might

[23]In contrast to the plausible complaints of Kukathas (1992, 110–111) and Waldron (1992) my conclusion does not rest on claims about exogenous factors which subvert the normative weight we can accord to culture. It instead rests on a view of the internal workings of culture—any culture—itself.

[24]Another obvious response would be to deny that the *origins* of a symbolic practice or complex of practices are especially relevant to normative assessment of that practice or complex (Carens 1992). If this objection holds, my argument is very simply beside the point. For arguments against this sort of objection see Johnson (1999b).

[25]This may prompt the reflective self-examination of local practices and attachments that liberals like Kymlicka and communitarians like Taylor endorse. This, in turn, may induce members of a given culture to either revise or embrace more fully their cultural attachments. It may also induce external critics to reconsider and/or revise their views and standards. In this sense, the view I sketch here avoids the danger of self-satisfaction that concerns Carens (1992, 624). For it requires that members of majority cultures must be responsive, in the same way, when critics challenge either the criteria by which we assess others or our own institutions and practices.

[26]Simply put, agents (whether these be others or ourselves) may fail in their efforts to justify their seemingly objectionable cultural practices.

[27]I cannot do more than allude to the sort of political argument I have in mind here. Those interested might consult Parehk (1996) and, especially, James (1999a,b).

[28]Compare Kymlicka (1995, 84–93, 101–105), Raz (1994, 181–182), Tamir (1993, 35, 37) and also Phillips (1997, 58).

[29]Kymlicka (1995, 108–115; 1989, 38,182–203) sketches this distinction and suggests that it is fundamental to understanding the value of cultural membership.

wish to compensate individuals for any disadvantages they would incur if, through no fault of their own, they were deprived of the circumstances of choice and identity that their culture provides. Alternatively, they might wish to protect the cultural choices—that in turn reflect the considered interests—of individuals. I will consider each position in turn and explain why neither can coherently accommodate the politics of culture.

Kymlicka exemplifies the first possibility. The demand that we should respect culture, on his account, focuses exclusively on the "cultural structure" that provides the "context of choice" for a relevant population. Such cultural structures are candidates for the sorts of external protections Kymlicka endorses because they constitute circumstances whose demise would adversely affect individual members of the culture (Kymlicka 1995, 113). By contrast, there is no presumption that we should respect the changing "character" of cultural communities which, at any particular time, might reflect the shifting, potentially conflicting purposes and interpretations of individual members or subgroups. It is the "character" of cultures that embodies the potentially objectionable "internal restrictions" that, according to Kymlicka are candidates for criticism or official interference. Kymlicka thus treats cultural structure as "fundamental" and insists that since it "doesn't involve any necessary connection" to the "momentary" manifestations of its character, it "continues to exist" over and above and irrespective of any of those transitory manifestations (Kymlicka 1989, 166–170, 172, 178; 1995, 104–105).

This distinction between structure and character sustains the preoccupation with "societal" cultures that informs Kymlicka's policy recommendations. It also quite conveniently allows him to present "culture" as a thoroughly sanitized locus of normative value.[30] It is fairly easy to respect culture on the account Kymlicka gives simply because he so thoroughly de-politicizes it. However, if my account of culture as necessarily generated and sustained at the intersection of symbol and strategy in social and political life is at all plausible, this distinction between the structure and character of a culture is highly suspect. Simply put, his argument that we should respect culture makes it exceedingly difficult, perhaps impossible, to systematically recognize the politics of culture.

Kymlicka is in a bind. He tacitly presupposes some account of how culture works that both explains why cultural attachments "are so strong for most people" and allows agents to be sufficiently reflexive about those (and other) attachments that they can accept or reject, embrace or revise, particular practices (Kymlicka 1995, 81, 86–93, 104–105). Otherwise he cannot coherently attribute option-framing, identity-defining effects to cultural structures. I suspect, however, that any such account also unavoidably entails incorporating symbolic action and its strategic implications as integral to the resulting conception of "culture." And it is just the sorts of cultural politics to which symbolic action gives rise that Kymlicka hopes to relegate to the "character" of cultures. The connection between what Kymlicka terms the "structure" and the "character" of cultures simply cannot be contingent in the way he holds if we take seriously the need for some account of the ways symbolic force enters social and political interaction. Given his own theoretical commitments Kymlicka must take this imperative seriously. Yet, if he hopes to accommodate the politics of culture as anything other than a theoretical afterthought he cannot also retain his view of "culture" as something that exists over and above loosely connected congeries of symbols and practices that inevitably provide agents with ample opportunity and considerable incentive to deploy them for strategic purposes. It is not at all clear that Kymlicka can coherently do so and still ask that we respect culture. This nonetheless is the bind that he and liberals who adopt argumentative strategies like his face.

Yael Tamir exemplifies the second of the positions I identify. She argues that for liberals the proper focus of respect is not cultural structures but "cultural choices" or, more specifically, the right of individuals to choose their cultural identities or communal affiliations (Tamir 1993, 7, 25–34, 35–38, 41, 47). This focus on choice and agency clearly affords Tamir the opportunity to attend to the politics of culture. She in fact both recognizes the "openness, creativity, and diversity within cultures" and allows that the right to culture includes the right of individual members to "re-create" it (Tamir 1993, 53, 49). She also adopts an expansive conception of choice which holds that it need not solely involve "selecting between two well-structured alternatives, but can also involve creating a series of variations combining the old and the new, which may result in a proliferation of alternatives" (Tamir 1993, 49–50). I think that this elides in unhelpful ways the distinction between choice and other forms of intentional action on which choice is parasitic. The point, however, is that while Tamir nowhere systematically considers the politics of culture, she plausibly could extend such remarks in ways that might allow her to do so. The problem is that she can take up this opportunity

[30]In this sense, his liberal view resembles the communitarian stance that Taylor adopts.

only at the expense of her insistence that we respect the cultural choices of individuals.

We should, Tamir claims, respect "cultural preferences . . . because they reflect autonomous choices" and so embody whatever "reflective interest" individuals may have in their cultural attachments (Tamir 1993, 37).[31] Yet in addition to being an object of choice, culture also is, on her account, a precondition for properly reflective and autonomous thought and evaluation (Tamir 1993, 7, 33, 36). There are two features of this argument that bear notice. First, Tamir in the end claims that we should respect two things. We should respect the "autonomous choices" of individuals and the "reflective interest" that such choices express. And we should respect the conditions that make such choice possible. On her account we should respect *culture* only in the indirect sense that it performs the latter task. There is a superficial similarity between Tamir's conclusion and the one I articulated earlier. To see why any similarity indeed is superficial consider the second notable features of her argument.

There is, as she is aware, a curious circularity to Tamir's position. Culture is due respect as the product of autonomous choice while at the same time it is a crucial precondition for such choice in the first place. This circularity appears damning once we reflect on the politics of culture in a systematic way. For the symbolic force around which the politics of culture revolves not only captures the imagination and commands the attention of relevant actors, but necessarily does so in discriminatory ways. This characteristic, in turn, continuously offers social and political actors the incentive and opportunity to try to turn symbolic force to their strategic advantage. Participants in the pervasive strategic contests occasioned by symbolic force seek with differential facility and success to impose particular, partial conceptions of possibility on their social world. And they do so, again with varying proficiency and achievement, in hopes of shaping and constraining the range of options and identities available to others. In this scenario symbolically constituted identities and options are in the first instance more properly understood as ascribed and only then, if at all, as chosen. Individuals frequently encounter such identities and options as inevitable or irresistible.[32] Of course, they also may, on reflection, either accept and embrace identities and options or seek to revise or altogether abandon them. Yet whatever distance they may establish from cultural practices itself trades upon symbolic force and to that extent is itself susceptible to the same strategic pressures.

There consequently is, if my account is at all plausible, scarcely room for the sort of autonomous choice that Tamir and other liberals cherish. Cultural attachments are not due respect because they afford conditions for autonomous choice. They are due respect just to the extent that, like other interests individuals might articulate, they survive challenge by external critics or internal dissenters. This, I claim, is not respect for culture in any direct sense. It instead is respect for the political processes that allow individuals to arrive at considered judgments. Indeed in those processes the particularistic claims of culture have no special normative standing.

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[31]It is difficult to identify just what Tamir claims here. At times she speaks as if we must respect the considered cultural choices of individuals in the sense that they embrace or reject some practice or ritual. But she also insists that for liberals "the *ability* to choose" is "the most essential characteristic of the human agent" (Tamir 1993, 21, my emphasis). So it might be that culture is valuable less because it expresses a reflective interest in a given practice or tradition than because it sustains that capacity to choose more generally. If the latter is a plausible understanding, Tamir's position seemingly converges with Kymlicka's.

[32]For an especially poignant account of what it is like to have one's world constrained in this way see Drakulić (1993, 50–52). She relates how, after 1991, politics and war (themselves animated by symbolic considerations) rapidly transformed ethnically based nationalism—in her case, "being Croat"—from an at best partial ascription that, for herself and many of her fellows, held "no special meaning," into a suffocating new political identity. As Drakulić makes plain the vast majority of Croats (like the Serbs and members of other newly visible ethnic groups) did not choose this identity and the exigencies it entailed. Indeed, her account points up the extent to which the politics of culture revolves around the efforts of strategic actors to construct identities and options and ascribe them to others. This sort of example is especially germane insofar as Tamir is concerned to establish "that the choice of a national identity and its cultural implications are entitled to respect" (Tamir 1993, 38). On the symbolic dimensions of nationalist identity more generally see Johnson (1999a).

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