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Culturalism: Culture as political ideology

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The controversy on multiculturalism has changed the political fronts. The Left defends respect for minority cultures while the Right stands guard over the national culture. But these two fronts merely constitute two variants of a culturalist ideology, argue Jens-Martin Eriksen and Frederik Stjernfelt.

Culturalism is the idea that individuals are determined by their culture, that these cultures form closed, organic wholes, and that the individual is unable to leave his or her own culture but rather can only realise him or herself within it. Culturalism also maintains that cultures have a claim to special rights and protections – even if at the same time they violate individual rights.

The culturalism of today, in which culture becomes a political ideology, thrives on both the Left and the Right. Most well known is leftwing multiculturalism, which has a radical, anti-democratic variant as well as one that suggests that it is possible to harmonize multiculturalism and (social-) liberal views. However, multiculturalism can also exist in forms that belong to the far Right, such as the French concepts of ethnopluralism, the idea that all cultures have the right to autonomy as long as each remains in its own territory. This approach results in political conclusions to the effect that immigrants must either allow themselves to be assimilated lock, stock and barrel, including everything from their religion down to their cuisine, or else return to their original native countries (assuming that such countries exist).

Culturalism has an entire range of categories in common with nationalism; indeed, nationalism in reality constitutes a subvariant of culturalism, in which a single culture provides the basis for the state. Therefore it does not



come as a surprise that the present nationalist renaissance in European politics makes use of culturalist ideas to a great extent. On the domestic stage, the Danish People's Party is the obvious example in its re-adoption of Danish nationalist ideas from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including its radical anti-Enlightenment stance. Since the Mohammed cartoon controversy, the party has felt a strategic need to join the defenders of freedom of speech against Islamist machinations. And irrespective of what one can surmise to be the motives for this about turn, it has to be noted that it was possible only as a result of the party claiming freedom of speech a "Danish value", as though it were a homegrown invention. This is naturally a culturalist falsification of history: freedom of speech is not a Danish invention. Its roots are of course found in international enlightenment movements; freedom of speech is a high-quality import. It is something that liberal and democratically-minded forces, by dint of great effort and at great cost to themselves, managed to force through in the face of Danish absolutism and the Danish State Church until the right was formalised in the June Constitution of 1849.

An immediate problem in Denmark – and also international politics – is therefore that there is culturalism on both sides of the political spectrum. On the Left we hear culturalist battle cries calling for the recognition of the most anti-modern and unappetising cultural practices; on the right we hear the battle cry of Danishness and the reawakening of a most anti-modern and unpalatable Danish nationalism. These two versions of culturalism are natural enemies, even though they base themselves on the same spurious system of ideas. For a hundred years, French and German nationalisms were each other's main opponents, yet frequently drew on exactly the same intellectual heritage. One culturalism is the automatic enemy of the other precisely because culturalisms are naturally particularisms, which is to say, they each select their chosen people – and not all people can be equally chosen. But this strident antiphon of particularisms, in which the reinforcement of the culturalism of the Left frightens more voters to move towards the culturalism of the Right and vice versa, ought not to persuade anyone into believing that culturalisms of the Left and the Right constitute the main antithesis in modern politics. On the contrary, the conflict is between Enlightenment and culturalism – between democracy, political liberalism, the rights of the individual, universalism and the Enlightenment on the one hand, and on the other hand the unenlightened maintenance of culture, tradition and authenticity, and the conservative opinion that the individual is linked by fate to a specific culture.



There are consequently two kinds of criticism of Islam that often sound as though they were related, but which must not be confused. One of them criticises Islam as such because it is a foreign religion that is irreconcilable with Danish values and Danish traditions. This is the criticism of one culturalism expressed by another; it is Jesus Christ against Mohammed. It is one mythological figure in fateful conflict with another. The other criticism, meanwhile, attacks Islamism, not because it is un-Danish, but because it is a totalitarian ideology related to the various forms of totalitarianism during the inter-war period in Europe. This criticism is an informed criticism of a political movement that is opposed to the open society and fundamental democratic principles. This criticism is not directed at Islam as such, but rather focuses on ideological, political and social barriers that cut off individuals from his or her rights. Whether these barriers have their background in cultural, political, religious or other dogmas is ultimately irrelevant.

There is scarcely a more important task in contemporary politics and political philosophy than giving full consideration to developing universal enlightenment and with the greatest possible force turning against both the prevailing right and leftwing forms of culturalism and their enslavement of the individual in his or her own "culture".

A glance at the criticisms directed by the Left at the culturalism of the Right provides a point of reference of how far the Left has strayed from its starting point in the Enlightenment. It also reveals how little the Left actually knows about its political opponents in the battle that has developed over the last few decades, during which the question of culture has appeared on the agenda and gradually replaced prior debate on divergent political utopias.

Let us take a look at the task facing left wing culturalism and at the way in which the two culturalisms are blind to the similarities between them. In Denmark, it is remarkable that since the defeat of the Left in the parliamentary elections in 2001, leftwing culturalism has not yet been able to produce an analysis of its ostensible opponent, the Danish People's Party. It seems that many years after its defeat, the Left has not been able to move on. It continues to base its ideas on what it sees as the only thing applicable to the Right: that it is "racist" and that the voters the Right has succeeded in mobilising are either "racist" or suffer from other psychological defects such as "Islamophobia". Political analysis seems in some way to have been taken over by a rather slipshod social-psychological diagnostic.



Naturally, this finds expression in repeated accusations of racism aimed at rightwing culturalism.

In his book *Islams and Modernities*, the Syrian philosopher Aziz Al-Azmeh points out that differentialism, which is a more generalised concept for racism, has undergone what he calls a “de-racialisation”. “Race” is no longer used as a valid form of identification, and all that is left is the culturalist argument. In Denmark, the Danish People’s Party should be understood as being a culturalist party whose attitudes are an expression of a modern differentialism. No major political movement in Denmark or anywhere else in Europe bases its platform on racism. Such a position is no longer held by an elite and is not represented by any but radical losers without political significance.

But why is the Left unable to diagnose culturalism in its political opponent and to launch an offensive against the opinions that the party really represents? Logically enough, this is due to the fact that they allow themselves to be blinded by the same cultural views as their homologous opponents: they are themselves culturalist. And this naturally establishes limits to the extent to which they are able to analyse their opponents’ position.

Both culturalisms express respect for cultural differences and espouse their belief in the protection of these identities. Right and leftwing culturalists merely maintain these protective measures under various guises. Leftwing culturalists claim that various distinct cultures should be able to co-exist on the same territory or in the same state, where, formally or informally, different jurisdictions for individuals are applied, according to the cultural group into which they were born. Rightwing culturalists maintain the same attitude towards preserving cultural identity, but each culture in its own territory, each culture in its own country.

An important and frequently overlooked effect of the growing importance of the two forms of culturalism on contemporary politics is that social groups that had previously organised themselves on the basis of “interests” are now increasingly organising themselves on the basis of “culture”. This naturally divides these groups politically.

British philosopher Brian Barry writes that:



The proliferation of special interests fostered by multiculturalism is [...] conducive to a politics of 'divide and rule' that can only benefit those who benefit most from the status quo. There is no better way of heading off the nightmare of unified political action by the economically disadvantaged that might issue in common demands than to set different groups of the disadvantaged against one another. Diverting attention away from shared disadvantages such as unemployment, poverty, low-quality housing and inadequate public services is an obvious long-term anti-egalitarian objective. Anything that emphasizes the particularity of each group's problems at the expense of a focus on the problems they share with others is thus to be welcomed. [1]

If underprivileged groups can be persuaded to become more concerned with religion, culture and identity, they will be split, and the focus will be moved away from concrete political problems. The current configuration in Danish politics, in which many disadvantaged Danes support the culturalist Right, while immigrants and multiculturalists support the Left, is a striking example of this phenomenon. It probably constitutes one of the main structural reasons for the profound crisis in the Social Democratic Party, whose core voters are now distributed according to cultural affiliation rather than their own interests.

The question poses itself as to how long the Social Democratic Party and the rest of the Left intends to allow itself to be guided by the delusion of culturalism.

The Left's progressive involvement with the hardline concept of culture both in Denmark and internationally is one of the most important and least recognised political developments of the last thirty years. Culturalism, in its political and leftwing forms, is by no means a recent phenomenon. Its first appearance on the world stage came in 1947 when American anthropologists attempted to derail the UN Human Right's Charter. They refused to accept that it was possible to presume universal human rights, since this would suppress individual cultures. However, the western Left - whether in its Communist, Social Democratic or social liberal variants - was at that time so international in its views that culturalism remained below the surface. Meanwhile, in the 80s and 90s a vacuum was created by the demise



of Marxism and its role as a reference point for leftwing parties in the West. The profoundly conservative cultural ideas of culturalism subsequently and surreptitiously moved into this arena. The surprising thing is that this transformation took place largely without a blow being struck – although culturalism is in many respects diametrically opposed to Marxism. Whereas Marxism maintains that culture is a superstructure on social economic regularities, in contrast culturalism will say that the economy of a society depends on its culture and the value systems of that culture, or at least that the economy is indistinguishable from all other cultural features in the society in question.

In this way, culturalism constitutes a kind of anthropological counter-revolution that turns Marxism on its head. If one reflects on the argumentation of the Left in the 1960s and 1970s – in those days it was above all the economy, the class struggle, means of production, sociology, political systems and resources that were seen as crucial, and it was quite rare and peripheral for the term “culture” to appear. The reverse now applies, and culture attracts far more attention than economics and society – but there has never been any major confrontation in which one model was exchanged for another, as might be expected in ordinary political debate. There have been no furious confrontations between parties concerning the absolute importance of the economy or culture. The transition between opposites has been achieved through a gentle transformation, almost from one day to the next, often without the figures embodying the two attitudes being aware of what was taking place. This is perhaps due to the fact that both Marxism and culturalism have an even simpler and deeper pattern in common: the phenomenon of an oppressed group in relationship to the dominant majority. It is then possible to take the political side of the oppressed following the leftwing slogan of the 1970s: “An oppressed people is always right”. This was understood quite literally, with implications that far surpassed the argument that an oppressed people have the right to be liberated from their oppression. They were now right with respect to all their cultural dogmas, regardless whether what these dogmas maintain is just or true; what was important was that they were derived from the culture of an oppressed people. An argument purely *ad hominem*. It was thus possible to replace the working classes with “the oppressed culture” – even if the implication of this was that emancipation was to be replaced by disciplined culturalism, which maintains antiquated and pre-modern norms – which is to say, an absolute reversal, both in terms of philosophy and values, of what the Left used to stand for.



In her book *La tentation obscurantiste*, the French journalist Caroline Fourest presents an interesting hypothesis regarding the advance of what we call leftwing culturalism. She notes that the two great prototypical points of identification for the European Left during and after World War II were the anti-totalitarian struggle on the one hand and decolonisation and anti-imperialism on the other. For a long time they were able to co-exist without conflict; but, following the important growth of Islamisms in the Islamic countries and among Muslim immigrant groups, the Left found itself divided according to which of the two principal causes was considered most important. If the anti-totalitarian struggle was considered crucial, people tended to turn against Islamism as yet another form of totalitarianism from the inter-war period. But if the anti-imperialist struggle was considered paramount, the tendency was to support Islamism as a legitimate challenge to Western imperialism, at first in the colonialist version and subsequently in the globalised version. This latter choice naturally opened up the Left to culturalism. This turns out to be a twofold problem for the hardline, multi-cultural left wing: culture means at once too little and too much. On the one hand, it is very important, in that it provides an individual with an identity and therefore the right to political care and protection – conservatism built into the culturalist concept of culture. On the other hand, the Left has historically maintained that culture has no meaning, for it is economic and social conditions that are the critical determining factors. Yet at the same time, this Marxist doctrine is behind the multiculturalist idea that all cultures, irrespective of how anti-democratic and anti-liberal they are, can a priori co-exist in the same society. This duality is naturally a constant source of confusion for hardline leftwing multiculturalism. Culture is at once an immutable source of profound identity and at the same time a purely surface phenomenon based on economic determinants. It is naturally impossible for both to be true.

One encounters the concept of “Islamophobia” with increasing frequency; it is used to stigmatise any criticism of Islamism and aspects of Islam that conflict with democracy, human rights and the constitutional state. The hardline, culturalist concept of culture throws a crucial light on the problems raised by the word, first deployed by the Islamic world organisation OIC in its struggle against human rights, and more specifically the freedom of speech. The campaign against the cartoons published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* and the subsequent Mohammed crisis was an example of this struggle. The word “Islamophobia” is increasingly used by Islamic



organisations and hardline multiculturalists in an attempt to limit criticism of Islamic movements. Both valid and unfounded criticisms of various forms of Islam are brushed aside by the argument that they constitute “Islamophobia” – and are thus grouped with racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, etc. In this way, the concept has also been able to infiltrate the Left, where it is seen used alongside “xenophobia” and the other words terms listed above. The word, even semantically, with its clinical suffix “phobia”, expresses a negative quality – it combines a critical analysis with the implication of mental illness. However, the crucial problem with the word “Islamophobia” is in fact that, unlike the other words that are similarly constructed, it applies to a set of opinions. Racism, homophobia and so on are words that speak to a disproportionate reaction to qualities intrinsic to an individual – the colour of their skin, their sexual orientation, etc. But Islam is not a race. Islam is a set of beliefs exactly like other sets of beliefs such as Christianity, communism, liberalism, conservatism, Nazism, Hinduism and many other widely divergent intellectual doctrines of a religious, political or philosophical nature. This is not altered by the fact that certain Muslims, including Islamists, are adamant in their conviction that their set of beliefs is particularly prominent and transcends conventional debate, development and revision. As has been said, democracy is based on the principle of “taking sides according to opinion” and “holding one view until you adopt another” – as two Danish democratic mottoes have it.

Philosophies are susceptible to open and ongoing criticism and revision – and if you are resolutely convinced of your position, you are naturally welcome to attempt to uphold this true faith in an unaltered form. But you cannot compel others to participate in this by asking them to refrain from criticism. And this is what the word “Islamophobia” attempts to do. In this, the Left has devised a useful attitude towards Islamism through its uncritical adoption of the term, with its intentionally manipulative and disciplinary effect. This approach has also served to paralyse the Left’s own ability to reflect. Any criticism of culturalism is deflected and condemned as Islamophobia. And as such it is politically excluded.

The acceptance of the term Islamophobia is achieved precisely by invoking a hardline concept of culture, as if there were such a thing as *homo islamicus*. This is carried out in alliance with those various practices in Islam that specifically attempt to give the Muslim religion the quality of fate, requiring, in all circumstances, that male spouses in mixed marriages convert to Islam, while information regarding other choices is suppressed, and most



importantly, respecting the prohibition against apostasy. (Apostasy is always punished, either by a fine, “reeducation”, the confiscation of property and compulsory divorce from the husband or wife, by so-called “civil death” or even by real death). For this reason, “Islamophobia” leaves a particularly strange taste in the mouth. The word transforms religion into race.

The reason why intellectual Islamism has succeeded in infiltrating international forums, the political Left and liberal groups, is that it has been able to gain general acceptance of the cultural argument. This has been achieved through the popular anthropological concept of culture, culturalism. It is all the more harmful to the democratic debate, as it tends to de-politicise dogmas that are essentially political and thus leaves them open to criticism – and insult.

Political opinions are one-sided by nature: liberalism, conservatism, social liberalism, social democracy, socialism and so on all compete against each other – although as a rule they are united on a more basic level, each in turn confronting fascism, communism, Islamism and other totalitarian “isms”. But if a set of dogmas, a political movement, is defined as “culture”, there is a tendency for it to be immediately left in peace and for it to no longer be seen as a single partisan and discussible point of view among others. According to this concept, cultures are organic, irreducible totalities in themselves. Hence, cultures not only have a right to existence and a claim to respect – and to have privileges conferred on them – they also have a claim to protection and to the right to continue living in an unchanging way. This was made topical in the case of the caricatures in *Jyllands-Posten*, which were accused of insulting a culture.

In our book *The Politics of Segregation*, [2] we asked Islamists in multicultural Malaysia why they believed it was inappropriate to criticize, mock or hurt people holding different opinions and how one might instead behave when dealing with a subject such as *Jyllands-Posten* wanted to address. A director of studies in an Islamic university explained that it is necessary to first enter into dialogue with the party you wish to criticise, before anything is printed. With the case in question, *Jyllands-Posten* ought to have called, for instance, Islamisk Trossamfund (“The Islamic Religious Community” – a Danish branch of The Muslim Brotherhood) to seek permission. The consequences for democratic discussion that this implies are quite remarkable: if this approach were systematically carried out, any



exchange of viewpoints would be removed from the public sphere and relegated to a closed forum, in order to prioritize mediation between parties. The result of protecting cultures in this way would be to close down open public discussion, and to abandon free debate among citizens.

If one were to follow this logic it would naturally have dramatic consequences on the way in which democracy functions. *Jyllands-Posten* caricatured scurrilous political ideas about using religion in the service of politics, as in Kurt Westergaard's famous cartoon of the prophet with a bomb in his turban. But the Islamists attempted to delegitimise *Jyllands-Posten* by accusing the newspaper of Islamophobia.

In all cases, whether in its reformist, revolutionary or terrorist variant, Islamism is in agreement that society should be organised according to the principles of Sharia. When this is categorised as "culture", it becomes possible to reject any exterior criticism as "Islamophobia" or "racism" because the critics are not "respecting" a "culture". Nazism attempted something similar when it presented itself as the continuation of ancient Germanic culture; however, in those days, the critics were sharper than the Left today, and were able to see through the rhetoric. We are now in the process of witnessing how Islamist movements such as Deobandi, Wahhabism, Salafism and The Muslim Brotherhood (directly influenced by Italian fascism and the French fascist Alexis Carrel) are protected by the "cultural" argument: they are not in fact political programmes, but in reality "cultures" which *eo ipso* cannot be criticised. But as soon as cultures enter the political arena, they must, by definition, be as accountable to discussion and criticism as all other associations, groups, parties and movements that make political demands. In this regard, neither priests, imams nor clerics - of any faith - have an ounce more right to respect than any other individual simply because they make use of divine rhetoric in their political demands.



Footnotes

1. Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality*, 2001, 11-12.
2. Jens-Martin Eriksen, Frederik Stjernfelt, *Adskillelsens politik. Multikulturalisme -- ideologi og virkelighed* [The Politics of Segregation. Multiculturalism -- Ideology and Reality], Lindhardt og Ringhof, Copenhagen: 2008.