

No One Owns a Culture

To own something is to have the rights (1) to determine exclusively how it is used, (2) to appropriate exclusively any income or other benefits it yields, and (3) to transfer the foregoing rights to others by sale, gift, or bequest. In this light, it is clear that no one owns a culture, and hence no one may legitimately seek state violence for the defense of such asserted property rights.

One may have preferences about culture. One may have affections for or aversions to a culture or particular elements of a culture. But such preferences do not entail any rights of ownership. Moreover, all cultures are constantly changing to a greater or lesser degree by spontaneous, decentralized processes, including interaction with other cultures. Such interaction has always been the case except for the cultures of people completely isolated from the rest of the world.

To treat the arrival of new members of society who live to some degree in accordance with different cultures as if these persons were “invaders” who threaten to destroy one’s culture is simultaneously to evince little faith in the attractiveness and strength of one’s culture and to seek its defense as the enforcement of property rights where no such rights exist.