

## Why should liberals care about collective agents as such?

*Xavier Boileau, McGill University*

### Introduction

Why should liberals care about collective agents? Liberals often offer ambiguous answers. As Margaret Moore points out, liberals find it difficult to recognize the importance of collective agents as a source of justice in their own right (Moore 2016). The fundamental commitments of liberals directly conflict either with the idea that there is such thing as “real groups” or, if such entities exist, that they could be prioritized over individuals in certain situations. The reason for this reaction is quite simple: the normative core of liberalism is that individuals should be protected from the potential coercion of state, religion, or any other threatening social institutions (Audard 2009). By its very nature, liberals are skeptical of all calls for the greater good, whether this greater good is economic, social, or cultural, that could impose constraints on individuals. Despite this initial reluctance, liberal theorists are still conscious that collective identities and groups play a crucial role in most social settings and generally accept that individuals are not free-floating beings without communal attaches. In recent decades, examples such as cultural injustices, settler-colonialism settings, or demands from sub-national groups have all confronted the liberals to the limit of a purely individualistic understanding of injustice.

Trying to respond to this challenge, liberals have proposed over the years different strategies to explain the relevance of group for liberalism. One such strategy is to derive group value from their instrumental value to individuals. This is, for example, the strategy employed by Will Kymlicka (Kymlicka, 1995) or Alan Patten (Patten, 2014) to defend their respective theories of cultural rights. Philipp Pettit and Christian List also endorse a similar approach in their book on collective agency (List et Pettit 2011). Despite the interest of this strategy, I would try to argue that understanding groups mainly through individuals can lead us to miss some critical dimensions of the tensions between different communities. This is especially true in a context where multiple peoples cohabit with each other, such as in multinational or postcolonial spaces. By focusing too much on individuals, we can miss the call for justice they are formulating.

To do so, my intervention will be divided into three parts. First, I will rapidly review the traditional liberal strategy developed to defend collective rights. Second, I will propose that such a strategy faces at least three problems: external interventions, a thin understanding of self-determination, and the reproduction of the state gaze. Particular attention will be given to the third one. Finally, I will suggest that a modest retooling of the conventional liberal argument allow us to address each of these problems.

### **1. Classic liberal solution: collectivity as autonomy enhancing**

As said in the introduction, group rights are not a new topic for liberalism. At least since the liberalism-communitarian debates of the 80s, and then with the debates about cultural rights, liberals have been trying to show how their theories could include the question of collective rights (Boucher, Guérard De Latour, et Baycan-Herzog, 2023). Without going through all the answers provided, the typical liberal strategy highlights the normative importance of communities for individuals. The argument generally adopts the following reasoning:

1. Individuals are the only entities' well-being we should care about;
2. Autonomy is a core element of an individual's well-being;
3. Such autonomy is not naturally given but is construed through cultural and social institutions (history, language, education, social settings, etc.);
4. Individuals deprived of such institutions will lack the necessary tools to develop their autonomy;
5. Since liberals want to favor autonomy formation in each individual, they should seek to preserve the pertinent social and cultural institutions for autonomy formation;
6. Groups are the primary providers of such institutions;
7. Ergo, liberals should care about groups since they are instrumentals in the formation of autonomous individuals.

This argument was famously proposed by Will Kymlicka in his foundational work on multiculturalism (Kymlicka 2001; Preda 2013). Yet, he is not the only one adopting this line of reasoning. In her book on liberal pluralism, Avigail Eisenberg also shows that early liberals pluralists, such as Dewey, used a similar argument in their work (A. I. Eisenberg 1995). We also find similar arguments in the work of Allan Paten (Patten 2014), and in that of List and Pettit (List et Pettit 2011). Granted, autonomy is not the only value that a group could have for individuals. One could also consider that groups and the institutions representing them are essential because they provide other goods, such as stability, security, rights, etc. (Spinner-Halev 2022, 381). Nevertheless, in all these cases, liberals only care about groups as long as they are perceived to be linked to individuals' well-being (Seymour 2017).

For liberals, the value of this approach is twofold. First, it allows them to explain why some collective rights could be justified in a liberal framework without abandoning their core commitment. More precisely, this line of arguments is coherent with both methodological individualism and value individualism (Jones 2018). Second, it immediately identifies a clear limit to these rights: they are only valid if they serve individuals' autonomy or the specific good seen as essential for their well-being. No collective rights could be used to coerce group members to adopt some particular practice. Again, if one returns to Kymlicka, this is at the core of his distinction between external protection and internal restriction (Kymlicka 2001; Preda 2013). This reading introduces no strong conflicts between collective and individual rights. The latter still maintain their priority over the former. Liberals only recognize that some individuals' rights have to be asserted collectively (or as "group differentiated rights," as Kymlicka labels them), either as participatory rights or because they are a collective interest. Such a solution avoids the possibility of more substantial conflicts between individuals and the collective since the latter is always the manifestation of the former.

To illustrate this point, linguistic struggles give us a good example. Usually, such problems are presented as if all members of the group desire the same social goods, in this case, their language. Still, no group members desire to be the only ones to pay the cost of maintaining the minority

language. In such cases, coercion on group members is allowed since it's the only way to secure a good that all community members want (or should desire)<sup>1</sup>. Again, framed this way, conflicts between groups and individuals are reduced to a minimum. Coercion is only acceptable because it's the only option to obtain the social good wanted by *all* community members (Weinstock 2020; Robichaud 2020). It is easy to see why this argumentative strategy would appeal to a liberal. That being said, we would like to show in the following section why the following approach could be problematic in certain circumstances.

## 2. Some problems with the solution

Although not always problematic, we wish to show that this ethical individualism defended by liberals opens the door to different problems in contexts where several autonomous political communities cohabit, whether in plurinational or postcolonial societies. To support this assertion, we suggest that it is possible to identify three problems associated with this limitation: 1) external oversight, 2) reducing the scope of collective autonomy, and 3) reproducing the state gaze.

The first problem we would like to highlight is that focusing on individuals can open the door to unwanted supervision by external authorities over minority groups. Limiting collective rights to external protection creates a burden on the group members to show that the rules they put in place do not constrain their members in any "illiberal ways." In cases where such illiberal constraints are found, the door for an external authority to step in and block the group policy is opened. On most occasions, such intervention would seem warranted. One only has to think about the abuses of some religious associations to see the problem of unlimited group power over their members. However, the situation is less clear when we think about national minorities or indigenous people. As other commentators have pointed out (Holder 2012; Coulthard 2018; Chevrier 2019; A. Eisenberg 2019), the idea that an external agent belonging to the majority group would be more competent than the group member to decide what is an infringement of liberal's

---

<sup>1</sup> However, as Jacob T. Levy noted in his earlier work, it is not always clear that such outcomes is really the one wanted by all community members. On the opposite, there seems to be evidence that, given the choice, some members would prefer to defect to other language than paying the cost of keeping their own language alive (Levy 2000).

rights is dubious. More problematic, such a requirement seems to put in place a double standard since majority policies are not constrained similarly by the evaluation of an external agent. Such conditions place the minority group in a position where it has to legitimize its policy not only to its members but also to the majority group members. However, such a prerequisite seems strange when considering most conflicts about liberal norms between groups. If such restrictions were to be regarded as liberal in the eyes of the majority, it would be hard to see why the minority would need to protect his policy in the first place. On the opposite, one would think that such protection would be needed in a situation where the minority group thinks of his policy as being liberal, but the majority sees it as illiberal. In other words, external protection against majority review will generally be needed precisely in situations where the majority sees such protection as illegitimate. In practice, the need to respect liberal rights and protect individuals' rights could be seen only as a way to justify external control over the group. Even without enforcing this control, this line of thinking could be seen as highly patronizing for the members of those groups.

This first problem leads to a second problem more linked explicitly to sub-national minorities and indigenous peoples' political claims. Usually, such groups vindicate some form of self-determination rights. However, by prioritizing the instrumental role that collective identities play for individuals, liberals diminish the meaning and scope of the concept of collective autonomy itself. The way the liberal arguments work, culture is mainly considered a background context for the individual. As we saw, culture is where individuals are socialized and acquire autonomy. In this sense, self-determination can be understood as a tool granted to protect this cultural or socialization space. Armed with self-determination, the group members can then implement a policy protecting their cultural background (Kymlicka 2001; Patten 2014). This understanding dramatically reduces the scope and potential utility of collective self-determination for sub-national minorities and indigenous peoples to the protection of age-old institutions and past practices. However, collective autonomy can be understood as a more radical idea. Collective autonomy implies that community members are the authors of their institutional arrangements (Stilz 2015; Nootens 2022). In this second sense, collective autonomy is a forward-looking activity in which something new is created. This is a place where group members can choose with others

to adopt new norms, projects, identities, and values. In other words, the institutional space is a place of actions in which a collective will manifest itself. This collective will is not a passive voice but a willing actor in the world who can challenge other collective and individual actors in the social space. As both Seymour and Preda point out, collective self-determination implies a right to act against its members (Seymour 2017; Preda 2013). Preda writes:

But it is clear that, in such cases, protecting the group's interest would require 'internal restrictions,' and this is precisely what a right to collective self-determination amounts to: the right of a group to make its own rules by imposing certain restrictions on its members. (Preda 2013, 263)

In other words, power over members by a collective is at the heart of what counts as collective self-determination. A collective is self-determining when it can put constraints on its members. This way of understanding collective autonomy is not strange for liberal thought. Even under the guidance of liberalism, any society will make choices that will constrain individuals' choices in one way or another (Seymour 2017, 31-35). This is generally the power one finds at the center of most self-determination claims. However, this way of thinking about collective autonomy complexifies the scope of autonomy and the relationship between groups and individuals. In terms of scope, the principal change is that we are facing an institutional space that can decide to change the social space around him and not just protect a specific cultural space. In terms of relations, there are more potential conflicts between individuals and groups since both have distinct wills that can clash with each other (Seymour 2017, 31-35). In other words, institutions are not just background features that provide social goods to individuals. They are also institutional actors that try to act in the social world and transform the context in which individuals act. Even if present in the liberal literature, this latter feature is often downplayed in the instrumentalist justification for group value.

Finally, the third problem is the one that concerns us the most in the context of this paper. This problem relates to liberals' limited understanding of the concept of collective identity, which reintroduces the risk of reproducing the "state gaze" on cohabitation issues between people. Here, we understand the notion of "state gaze" in the following sense: the tendency of the state to frame

a specific social problem in both a readable and non-threatening way for himself. Its intention is not so much to produce an accurate understanding of the situation as it would be understood by the group demanding it but to frame the situation to be compatible with its interests. In what way does it relate to groups? Generally, liberal states see the social space as composed of multiple citizens, i.e., various individual bearers of rights and interest groups representing the interests of these individuals. It is toward these citizens that the state feels responsible. Sure, states can consider the collective needs of these citizens when necessary. But, when doing so, it still mainly measures its success through the well-being of the individual members of the group. These collective needs are understood as an aggregate of individual demands and not as distinct collective (Patten 2020). In other words, if the states put in place a policy designed to improve the living conditions of women, the policy's success will be evaluated through the actual improvement of the individual condition of the members of this specific collective. Did it improve the living conditions of the population targeted by the policy, here women? In other words, individuals are used as a proxy to measure the well-being of this specific collective.

If such an approach is sensible in some instances, it can hide problems in other situations. We think problems linked to indigenous peoples and sub-national minorities can be such instances. For such a group, it is not always clear that individuals are necessary a good proxy to measure the well-being of the collective. Don't get me wrong, there are multiple instances in which using individuals as a proxy is perfectly justified. Education, material well-being, health, rights, and service access are good examples. However, focusing on these parameters can hide other problems and other claims made by these groups. As underlined, these groups generally see themselves as possessing a distinct institutional setting from the state majority (Iverson 2017; Gagnon 2021; A. Eisenberg 2022). These understandings push them to care not only about the individual well-being of their members but also about the relative standing of their institutional setting compared to other institutional settings. A fact that an emphasis on individual rights can come to hide. A real improvement in the living conditions of a minority group can hide a deterioration in the sustainability of their specific institutional settings. Individuals' rights can't grasp the whole story.

We mean that it's possible to think of a situation in which individual well-being is improved but not the group's well-being. Here, one can think of the following example. Imagine a policy designed to improve the linguistic situation and material situation of a sub-national minority. To achieve this aim, the policy established a solid and extensive package of linguistic rights that allows group members to use their language to access different services (education, health, government, etc.) and guarantee their rights and ability to work in their language. Once put in place, one could imagine that such a policy would improve the individual situation of most minority language speakers (as, in fact, multiple cases showed us). However, this policy could leave the power imbalance between these minority people and the majority unchallenged. In the same way, it could leave the long-term viability of its institutional framework untouched. The problem we are trying to highlight is that it seems possible for a state to help individuals without helping the group they belong to. To clarify our example, we can use the situation proposed by Daniel Weinstock in his article "Liberalism and Policy in 'Mere Number Cases.'" In this article, Weinstock proposed to think of a situation where a minority group sees its language threatened without being the subject of any apparent injustice. The language erosion is simply the result of a number game. One group is more numerous than the other, which creates an insensitivity for minority group members to abandon their group and integrate into the most numerous group (Weinstock 2020). A case corresponding to what is known in the literature as the Laponce law. This is a situation in which no individuals are harmed but where the institutional foundation of the group would be threatened. As Weinstock shows, bar other injustice, there is no obvious argument at the disposition of a liberal theorist to act in this situation. What creates the problem is not any individual injustice but institutional power imbalances.

While Weinstock aims to analyze what liberalism allows in this situation, I use this example to highlight the possible independence of the group's well-being from its members' well-being. This situation clearly illustrates that an institutional setting can be threatened without any blatant injustice directly toward its members. There is no discrimination between individual members of the linguistic minority or misrecognition from either side. The minority is slowly losing its members because the relationship between the different communities is going relatively well and is mainly



pacific. Following Laponce law, the more the relationship between the groups members is going well, the more the minority language will be threatened. The institutional basis for a specific collective, here a linguistic community, is threatened without directly targeting any individual or discriminating against any particular group members. However, as shown by Weinstock, liberals don't have much to respond to such a situation. The main reason is that the source of the threat is at the level of institutional competition and not at the individual level.

Despite the challenge such a situation represents for liberals, there should be nothing shocking for most social scientists. As we saw in the previous section, liberals multiculturalists were justly concerned by this liberal inability to capture the relevance of groups for political justice. So far, we argue that liberals have succeeded in considering groups only through individuals. They are not so much concerned with the conflict between groups as they are with disputes between individuals created by collective affiliation and the cost that collectivity identity can represent for individuals (Kymlicka 2022). For this reason, institutional competition, especially in a multinational space, is not always easily considered despite its potential implications for the survival of some communities. That is explained by the fact that the pertinent relationships that one should care about for a meaningful exercise of self-determination are not between collectivity and individuals but between different communities. However, framing the problems this way contradicts how liberal states do it. The question is no longer how the state can serve its citizens' collective needs but how the institutional space should be reframed so that its competitors obtain more power. It is not only that sub-national groups and indigenous peoples are demanding collective rights, but also that they are questioning the scale of the majority collective rights (Lecours et Nootens 2009; Kymlicka 2022).

If we have used the example of language so far to think about a situation that harms a group without harming its members as individuals, it is not the only example at our disposal. I believe that self-determination is another case of such a situation. Even barring obvious violations, the self-determination of a minority group could be threatened without harming any individual. Such a situation could happen for multiple reasons: institutional transformation, transformation in the

political culture, new understanding of the political arrangement, shift in the balance of power, institutional (in)capacity to contest all-encompassing norms, etc. It is even reasonable to say that one could use the improvement of individual well-being and rights as a threat to the viability of some collective self-determination by increasing the pressure on the minority group.

### **3. A possible solution?**

To avoid these problems, we believe that liberal theorists can revise the concept of collective identities they use to account for issues concerning relations between communities. Our proposed solution is to adopt a more precise conception of cultural and political institutions that would bring us closer to a corporate understanding of the group. More specifically, we think that it's possible to revisit Kymlicka's concept of the structure of culture in light of the work of Michel Seymour (2017), Vincent Descombes (2013), and Helder De Schutter (2016) to achieve this aim. Brought together, these theorists open the door to a more robust understanding of the structure of culture. Through this revision, our main concern is to show that, to be adequately understood, such basic institutions must be seen as distinct entities from their members.

#### **3.1. Societal culture revisited**

As explained in the first section of this paper, Kymlicka proposed to defend cultural rights based on the instrumental role played by culture in the development of individual autonomy. Through his argument, Kymlicka introduced the concept of societal culture and distinguished between the structure of culture and the character of culture (Kymlicka 2001; 1991). This crude distinction essentially allows him to separate on one side the institutional core (history, language, and basic institutions) used to develop an individual autonomy from, on the other side, the more or less transient manifestations of a culture at a specific time. Our goal is not to criticize this distinction but to build on it to show that the notion of the structure of culture can do more work to help us understand how a collective can be seen as a distinct entity from its members. Besides Kymlicka's work, I build my argument on the work of three other theorists: Michel Seymour, Helder De Schutter, and Vincent Descombes. The two formers each expand on Kymlicka's initial argument. Not directly linked to Kymlicka's work, Descombes develops a distinction between the nominal and

collective identity that helps us explain how we can conceive a group as having a distinct interest from that of its members.

In his work, De Schutter tries to answer one of the common criticisms levels at Kymlicka's argument. The criticism goes as follows: if Kymlicka's argument shows that a cultural context is necessary for individual development since it offers us a context of choice, it doesn't show that every individual must have access to their own culture (Patten 2014; Seymour 2017). In response to this specific challenge, De Schutter suggests that such critics depend on a thin reading of the context of choice. The relevance of this context is not limited to the initial developmental stage of our autonomy but also to the exercise of our autonomy throughout our lives. For De Schutter, the context of choice is not only an initial situation but also the space in which we will make our choices throughout our lives. This conception is anchored in a contextual understanding of autonomy, each context allowing a finite amount of possible autonomous lives. More than just useful for giving me an initial realm of meanings, I am interested in preserving my cultural context because I made my choice while considering this context for the future. In other words, my cultural context is not only relevant for my development stage but also for securing the relevance of my choice in the future (De Schutter 2016). De Schutter's argument is the first helpful step in reasserting why we should care about the existence of multiple institutional contexts. If we come back to the question of language, my interest in being able to speak my mother tongue is not only because it helps me in the initial development of my autonomy. My interest also lies in the fact that I want to know that committing to my mother tongue will still be relevant in the future in the specific institutional framework in which I am right now. In other words, not only do I want to speak French, but I also want to secure the context in which that choice is made. I aim to secure in the future the specific context of choice in which I am right now.

The interest of this argument is twofold. First, it explains why we should care about a specific cultural context and not just any context. Second, it also solidifies the notion of the structure of culture proposed by Kymlicka. It points toward a more robust understanding of the "basic institutions" it implies. This is where we turn toward Vincent Descombes and his work on social

identity. In his work, Descombes tries to show how one can conceive of a collective that is not reducible to individuals (Descombes 2017). To do so, Descombes distinguishes between nominal identity, as defined by Appiah, and collective identity, which corresponds to a corporate identity. Whereas nominal identity implies an aggregative conception of collective identity, collective implies a corporate one. He highlights four characteristics necessary to define a collective identity:

1. You can use a proper noun to speak about them;
2. They have a historic criterion of identity;
3. This identity is an institutional representation built by the community;
4. They have their interest;

The first characteristic is the most straightforward. It implies that a collective identity is named to distinguish it from other entities. The University of Victoria allows us to distinguish it from different universities, such as the University of Northern British Columbia. The second characteristic is that collective identities have a historical criterion of identity. That means that, like individual identities, such identities undergo some changes over time. Any definition of such identity should be understood as a signpost or snapshot and never as a definitive statement. This brings us to the third characteristic: collective identities are an institutional representation built by the community. Such collective identities come into existence through discussion and negotiation between the group members. This constant negotiation brings about the multiple transformations that a group passes through and allows the collective identity to be recognized by the different group members. Up to this point, this conception of collective identity points in a similar direction to the one that we find in the work of most liberal theorists (Moore 2019). However, Descombes adds a fourth criterion: that these identities possess their own set of interests distinct from the one of their members. Precisely, these institutions try to persist through time. For example, a university aims not only to educate the next generation of scholars or produce knowledge for the betterment of humankind but a university also tries to ensure its existence in a competitive educational space, compete in a professional market, improve its social standing, respond to its social engagement and responsibility toward government, etc. Moreover, one can easily imagine a situation in which

the institution would be in bad shape or on the decline without affecting the well-being of its members (either because they have other options or because the decline happens in such a way that their members will still be well-off, like incorporation). This fourth criterion brings us closer to a corporate understanding of collectivity than what seems to be implied by the traditional reading of collective rights (Preda 2013).

However, by making explicit these characteristics, it is possible to highlight the idea that the structure of culture should be understood as an institutional space possessing its interest. Like with the university, this institutional space can be threatened without necessarily directly affecting the individuals. For example, this institutional space could be challenged by other institutions, it could be unable to respond to new challenges, or its members could abandon it. Moreover, by acknowledging that such collective identities have their own interests, Descombes more clearly shows how the need of these collective identities can conflict with the needs of its members. For example, one can easily think that it would be logical for a university to increase its fees to survive, even though such an action would run contrary to the interests of its members. Recognizing that such identities are necessarily negotiated highlights the idea that communities imply the implantation of some limit on individuals.

Even though Kymlicka (or Patten, for that matter) always seems reluctant to adopt this strong understanding of the structure of culture, it seems coherent with its general framework. The main difference in our reading of Kymlicka's concept of "structure of culture" is that it should lead us to the conclusion that those institutions have a value for individuals, but protecting the well-being of these institutions can clash with individuals' rights, there exist situations in which we could prioritize these institutional interests over individuals interests.

This way of reframing the notion of societal culture proposed by Kymlicka allows us to rearticulate the conflict between collectives and individuals a little differently. Sometimes, the conditions of existence for a specific institutional setting conflict with individuals' goals and needs. In other words, collectives and individuals have distinct telos. I think the example of language laws in

Canada is an excellent example of the distinction I'm trying to bring about. One could think about the problems of linguistic injustice as a problem of equality between individuals. Each person should have the opportunity to evolve in the language of their choice without undue disadvantage<sup>2</sup>. In this light, the question is mainly about equality between individuals and not about the institutional reality needed to support the existence of different languages (Patten 2014; De Schutter 2021). This type of reading could be linked, up until recently, to the way Canadian linguistic policy was thought about. The logic of equality of service and opportunity places the debate about linguistic rights in a firmly individualistic framework. However, this does not track how the discussion is put forward inside Quebec. Here, the worries about language are not mainly caused by the question of equality between individuals but through institutional persistence and equality between institutional spaces. Language policy is first thought to maintain and solidify the necessary conditions for preserving an institutional setting where French can thrive. This way of framing the argument goes a long way in explaining how Quebec understands language politics and the conflicts it can create with the federal government. The worries are not about inequality between citizens (since such inequalities are way less prevalent than they were decades ago) but the ability of well-functioning institutional patterns to reproduce through time.

Those conflicting ways to frame the different logics of language and cultural rights are nothing new, and one can track back to the disagreement between Patten and Kymlicka about the nature of cultural rights in a liberal framework (Kymlicka 2018; Patten 2014). The initial impetus behind Kymlicka and other liberals' attempt at multiculturalism was partly to import this collective understanding of cultural rights into liberalism. However, Kymlicka stops short of accepting the full implication of such an institutional understanding by framing it so that individual autonomy and group autonomy never really clash against each other.

---

<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of our argument, we take for granted that there is a finite number of official languages in a given political space. We don't discuss here how such official's language should be designated since it would bring us farther than needed. However, one could consult Alan Patten work on this topics (Patten 2014).

### 3.2. Advantages

Restating the distinction between individual and institutional interests allows us to answer most of the problems highlighted in the second section. First, a corporate understanding of groups reminds us that internal contestation is a reality and a constitutive part of such collective identity. The fact that group members challenge internal norms and negotiate new equilibrium between collective goals and individual rights can be seen as the normal functioning of all societal cultures. Recognizing this should prevent us from intervening in this quest from the outside. Doing so would only be seen as imposing the equilibrium of one group over the other.

This brings us to the second problem. In the same way that a corporate understanding creates a genuine space for internal dissent between group members, it recognizes the existence of genuine conflicts between individual interests and collective interests. We say genuine conflicts because it not only accepts their existence but also recognizes that collective rights can trump individuals' rights specifically, in such cases where the structure of the culture of a community is threatened.

However, I would like to highlight the reframing implied by the third problem. By reorienting our attention to the well-being of an institutional space, it becomes easier to make sense of some tensions between the demands put forward by sub-national minorities and indigenous peoples and the majority group. Multiple institutions will pursue distinct projects that clash together. By reframing the claims of those groups as coming from corporate agents and not from individuals, we modify the structure of the problem to be more in line with the demands of these groups. Far from seeing their demands as coming from interest groups, indigenous people and sub-national tend to have a more corporate understanding of their identity. More precisely, one of their core demands is to enact a relationship between different corporate agents and not between individuals. By opening the door to the idea that such collective agents can be harmed, it is possible to emphasize the context in which they could all thrive. By only focusing on individual agents, we risk missing the erosion of the conditions necessary for the persistent cohabitation of different societal cultures. On the other hand, accepting the relevance of corporate identity in this situation helps us locate the suitable agents to tackle these problems.

## Conclusion

Through this intervention, I had a relatively modest goal: show that too much focus on individual rights can hide other relevant issues in a multinational context. The intuition guiding this work is that one can't do justice to these groups' demands without recognizing some independence between groups' interests and those of their members. By highlighting three main problems (external interventions, thin understanding of self-determination, and reproduction of the state gaze), I wanted to show that some situations can't be accounted for if we don't take seriously the idea that collectives possess distinct interests from those of the individuals. Once this argument was presented, I tried to show that a reinterpretation of the concept of the structure of culture proposed by Kymlicka could be used to defend a corporate understanding of a group in line with liberal thoughts.

## Bibliographie

- Audard, Catherine. 2009. *Qu'est-ce que le libéralisme? Éthique, politique et société*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.
- Boucher, François, Sophie Guérard De Latour, et Esmā Baycan-Herzog. 2023. « Rethinking Liberal Multiculturalism: Foundations, Practices and Methodologies ». *Ethnicities* 23 (4): 527-46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687968231151455>.
- Chevrier, Marc. 2019. *L'empire en marche: des peuples sans qualités, de Vienne à Ottawa*. Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval.
- Coulthard, Glen S. 2018. *Peau rouge, masques blancs*. Traduit par Arianne Des Rochers et Alex Gauthier. Montréal: Lux Éditeur.
- De Schutter, Helder. 2016. « The Liberal Linguistic Turn: Kymlicka's Freedom Account ». *Dve Domovini - Two Homelands* 44: 51-64.
- . 2021. « Personality and Territoriality in Theory and in Belgium ». *Language Problems and Language Planning* 45 (2): 218-38.
- Descombes, Vincent. 2017. « L'identité de groupe : identités sociales, identités collectives ». *Raisons politiques* 2 (66): 13-28.
- Eisenberg, Avigail. 2019. « Multiculturalism in a Context of Minority Nationalism and Indigenous Rights: The Canadian Case ». In *Multiculturalism in the British Commonwealth: Comparative Perspectives on Theory and Practice*, édité par Richard T. Ashcroft et Mark Bevir. Oakland: University of California Press.
- . 2022. « Decolonizing Authority: The Conflict on Wet'suwet'en Territory ». *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 55 (1): 40-58. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423921000858>.
- Eisenberg, Avigail I. 1995. *Reconstructing Political Pluralism*. New York: State University of New York.
- Gagnon, Alain-G. 2021. *Le choc des légitimités*. Prisme. Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval.
- Holder, Cindy. 2012. « Devolving Power to Sub-State Groups: Some Worries About the Worries ». *The Monist* 95 (1): 86-102.
- Iverson, Duncan. 2017. « Pluralising Political Legitimacy ». *Postcolonial Studies* 20 (1): 118-30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2017.1334289>.



- Jones, Peter. 2018. « Human Rights and Collective Self-Determination ». In *Human Rights: Moral or Political?*, édité par Adam Etinson, online edition, 441-59. Oxford: Oxford Academic.
- Kymlicka, Will. 1991. *Liberalism, community and culture*. Oxford: Clarendon Press ; <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb373819158>.
- . 2001. *La citoyenneté multiculturelle: une théorie libérale du droit des minorités*. Traduit par Patrick Savidan. Québec: Éditions La Découverte/Éditions du Boréal.
- . 2018. « Liberal Multiculturalism as a Political Theory of State-Minority Relations ». *Political Theory* 46 (1): 81-91.
- . 2022. « Nationhood, Multiculturalism, and the Ethics of Membership ». In *Majorities, Minorities and the Future of Nationhood*, édité par Liav Orgard et Ruud Koopmans, 87-128. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press.
- Lecours, André, et Geneviève Nootens. 2009. *Dominant Nationalism, Dominant Ethnicity: Identity, Federalism and Democracy*. Regionalism & Federalism 15. Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang.
- Levy, Jacob T. 2000. *The Multiculturalism of Fear*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0198297122.001.0001>.
- List, Christian, et Philip Pettit. 2011. *Group Agency: The Possibility, Design, and Status of Corporate Agents*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moore, Margaret. 2016. « Justice and Colonialism ». *Philosophy Compass* 11 (8): 447-61.
- . 2019. « Liberal Nationalism and the Challenge of Essentialism ». In *Liberal Nationalism and Its Critics*, édité par Gina Gustavsson et David Miller, 1<sup>re</sup> éd., 188-202. Oxford University Press/Oxford. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198842545.003.0011>.
- Nootens, Geneviève. 2022. *Constituent Power Beyond the State: Democratic Agency in Polycentric Politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Patten, Alan. 2014. *Equal Recognition: The Moral Foundations of Minority Rights*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691159379.001.0001>.
- . 2020. « Populist multiculturalism: Are there majority cultural rights? » *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 46 (5): 539-52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453720903486>.
- Preda, Adina. 2013. « Group Rights and Shared Interests ». *Political Studies* 61 (2): 250-66. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2012.00975.x>.
- Robichaud, David. 2020. « Language Ethics: Keeping Linguistic Freedom from Becoming Linguistic Free Riding ». In *Language Ethics*, édité par Daniel M. Weinstock et Yael Peled, 90-116. Montreal & Kingston: McGill/Queen's University Press.
- Seymour, Michel. 2017. *A Liberal Theory of Collective Rights*. Montréal/Kingston: McGill/Queen's University Press.
- Spinner-Halev, Jeff. 2022. « Group agency and the challenges of repairing historical injustice ». *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 25 (3): 380-94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2022.2039545>.
- Stilz, Anna. 2015. « Decolonization and Self-determination ». *Social Philosophy & Policy Foundations* 32 (1): 1-24.
- Weinstock, Daniel M. 2020. « Liberalism and Language Policy in "Mere Number Cases" ». In *Language Ethics*, édité par Yael Peled et Daniel M. Weinstock, 178-201. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.