Cultural studies, over the past couple of decades, has become happily ensconced as the discipline *du jour* in many European and North American universities. In the United States, a few prominent ‘cultstuds’, as Thomas Frank has labelled them, have achieved celebrity status, with salaries to match.\(^1\) As a discipline, despite its avowed distaste for ‘grand narratives’, cultural studies has been oddly totalising, subsuming virtually all human practices under the sign of ‘culture’. Everything from sex to serial homicides, from contagions to quantum physics, is said to be ‘socially constructed’ and, therefore, *ipso facto* cultural. Needless to say, politics and economics have not fared very well against such imperial ambitions. In the dominant postmodern version of cultural studies, politics becomes redefined as culture. Cultural politics, the bane of the Right in the American ‘culture wars’, is all about (and nearly always *only* about) individual and group identities. Economic analysis, in any recognisably radical or Marxist form, simply disappears from sight. Although routinely included in the trinity ‘race, class, gender’, class is hardly ever given serious consideration. As the American cultural theorist Lauren Berlant observes, ‘discussions of the politics of sex and bodily identity have become so fascinating and politically absorbing, a concern with the outrages of American class relations has been made to seem trite and unsexy’.\(^2\)

Even for those sympathetic to its broader aims, it becomes difficult to ignore the theoretical flabbiness of culturalism’s more ambitious claims. To inflate ‘culture,’ as Terry Eagleton has argued, to include war, famine, debt, environmental pollution and a host of other pressing concerns, is to so expand the term to the point of meaninglessness.\(^3\) Two recent books, with varying degrees of sympathy, have attempted

---

\(^1\) Frank 2000, pp. 276–306.
\(^3\) Eagleton 2000, p. 131.
to claw back some of the ground lost to culturalism by reasserting the independence of politics and economics.

In her introduction to Cultural Studies and Political Theory, Jodi Dean sets out an alternative theoretical programme which, she believes, avoids the reductive strategy of both traditional political theory, which focuses primarily on the state, and cultural studies, which ‘risks non-intervention by presuming its political purchase in advance’. According to Dean, ‘decentering the state’ has opened space for the analysis of ‘the political everything’ inscribed in everyday social practices. Dean offers four methodological frames to guide inquiries into ‘the political everything’: (i) a Foucauldian inspired ‘problematisation of the political,’ i.e., questioning what is political and what is not; (ii) pluralisation: not assuming that politics is centred in the state but is dispersed across a wide range of activities and social spaces; (iii) contextualisation: appreciating the ways in which activities and spaces are actively depoliticised; (iv) specification: drawing out the connections between specific experiences of oppression, harm and need and larger structures, relations and processes of power.

Dean contends that this heterodox framework opens up greater opportunities for political engagement and action. This may be, but it also holds the danger of inflating politics in the same way that cultural studies has inflated culture. ‘Decentering the state’ might open up areas of social life once considered beyond the ken of political analysis, but it may also drain politics of any coherent focus. Instead of the politicisation of culture, we may well end up with the culturalisation of politics – in which things cultural become a substitute for and diversion from the ‘trite and unsexy’ business of class politics.

The various contributions to the volume in fact pull in both these directions. Several authors suggest that politics can only be redeemed by moving more decisively toward the cultural. In an otherwise interesting essay on capital punishment as a form of mass forgetting, William Connolly rarely ever departs from the philosophical and cultural terrain. Little reference is made to the class and racial dimensions of capital punishment and then only in the context of a dubious reference to an ‘African-American underclass in the inner cities where most visible acts of violence occur’. A similar bent toward the cultural is evident in several other contributions. In a critique of right-wing communitarianism, one author plumps for a politics of ‘subversive disruption and parodic deconstruction’. Another attempts to turn the tables on the political Right through a ‘rereading of the canon (Tocqueville and Machiavelli, in particular) against neoconservative warriors . . .’ Cultural politics, it is argued, has become a necessity

---

4 Dean (ed.) 2000, p. 11.  
5 Dean (ed.) 2000, p. 9.  
6 Connolly 2000, p. 35.  
7 Reinhardt 2000, p. 102.  
8 Cruikshank 2000, p. 64.