

What Critics of 'Cultural Appropriation' Are Missing

Just type the word “cultural” into a search engine and you’re likely to find the phrase “cultural appropriation” at or near the top. Whether it’s a social justice warrior engaging in [a hostile confrontation with a kid over his dreadlocks](#), or it’s a rant about [how Justin Timberlake](#) has “appropriated” black culture with his music, we need some context.

The recent attack on “appropriation” is complicated and even the people that use the term are often unable to differentiate between cultural “exchange” vs. “appropriation.” The people who use the term “appropriation” use it as a way to denote a hostile annexation of culture rather than a harmonious “exchange.” Presumably, the harmonious exchange is what they argue has occurred with other technological and cultural blending through history.

According to the theory, “appropriation” occurs when a dominant (usually white) population snatches pieces of a minority culture without understanding all of the implications of this action. They argue that it’s an exploitation of culture because there is no way the dominant culture can use a minority’s emblems and customs without somehow tainting it or abusing it. This is a bizarre and myopic view of culture and of human history. In short, it does not stand up to scrutiny.

History is all about the exchange of culture. Humans are social animals (hat tip Aristotle) and that means that culture is also a social concept. Those that argue whites are “appropriating” claim it’s not a mutual exchange and therefore wrong. What they are missing is that history shows such “exchanges” are almost never mutual.

Does anyone believe that gunpowder was part of a harmonious

“exchange?” Of course not. It was harnessed by the Chinese, initially for entertainment (fireworks) but eventually for warfare. The technology quickly spread throughout Asia by warring factions on that continent.

By the time Europeans began using gunpowder it had been in use for centuries in Asia. Europeans were generally considered an “inferior” race by the Far East when this exchange happened. I guess it would be possible to call this an “appropriation” but let’s just call it what it really is: cultural progress.

A similar case can be made with, say, coffee. Early records indicate that this drink originated somewhere in Ethiopia and spread throughout the Middle East. It eventually was “appropriated” by the Dutch and other European nations who thrived on trade. Was this mutual? Was this fair? I know I don’t have any inkling of hostility towards the Horn of Africa while sipping coffee and certainly none when I sip the South American versions. Yet, according to the theory of “appropriation,” my dominant culture should be shamed into not drinking this delightful beverage.

We need to embrace the times when multiple cultures adopt styles and customs.

These are bonding actions and reinforce the socializing behaviors of different cultures. Would I like everyone to have further context behind every item that was ever exchanged in the long pageant of the humanities?

Sure. Should we hold it against a white kid wearing dreadlocks because he does not grasp every cultural subtlety that developed that hairstyle? No.

Isolationist thinking only leads to one thing – isolation.

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[Image Credit: KYLIE JENNER/WEBSTAGRAM]