

Cultural Appropriation

by [Walter E. Block](#) (February 2024)



Queue, Keith Harrop

It is cultural appropriation if a black person listens to Mozart; this dead white male composer is simply not part of that person's culture. It is cultural appropriation whenever an Oriental person tunes in to rap music; those songs are simply not part of that person's culture. It is cultural appropriation every time a Jew eats pork; not only is this food simply not part of that person's culture, it is proscribed by his culture, not to say religion, which, indeed, is part of culture. It is cultural appropriation when a Catholic drinks Manischewitz wine. It is cultural appropriation when a Bulgarian wears a Mexican sombrero. It is cultural appropriation when a non-Indian plays chess, since this game originated in that country. It is cultural appropriation if a non-Jew eats gefilte fish or takes advantage of the Salk polio vaccine. It is cultural appropriation if a Jew reads the New Testament. It is

cultural appropriation when a Hindu benefits from the Pythagorean Theorem. It is cultural appropriation when a non-Arab utilizes and benefits from the concept of the number zero, since that insight sprang from that culture.

I could stop here. I have already made my point. But I cannot do so. This is so much fun. So, I'll press on.

It is cultural appropriation if a non-Greek partakes of democratic processes. It is cultural appropriation when a non-Briton even mentions the Magna Carta let alone wishes to be bound by it. It is cultural appropriation whenever non-Italians eat pizza or spaghetti. It is cultural appropriation if a city person eats vegetables grown on a farm. The favor is returned whenever a farmer uses a plow built in the city. It is cultural appropriation when a non-American flies in an airplane. It is cultural appropriation if a non-German drinks beer or rides in a BMW. It is cultural appropriation whenever anyone uses a second language, one with which he did not grow up; language is part of culture, after all. So let us stop all study of foreign languages. It is cultural appropriation if heterosexuals use computers, or anything else such as the web that eventuated from this invention since Alan Turing, a gay man, was the creator of the first computer. When whites do or listen to rap music or jazz, that is, you'll never guess, yes, cultural appropriation. When blacks play basketball (a game [invented](#) by James Naismith a white man) they are engaging in you know what. Ditto for women. As a result, we will have to disband the WNBA.

At one time, blacks emulated whites; the former wanted to look more like that latter. Then, along came Malcolm X, who insisted that "Black Was Beautiful" and demanded that his community "throw away those hair straighteners!" Nowadays, white people are trying to look more like their black cousins. Some have adopted the corn-row or dreadlock hair

style. Both are guilty of cultural appropriation.

Ok, ok, alright, I'll stop with the examples. But, I assure you, I could have gone on and on, pretty much indefinitely.

So what is the point of mentioning so many *reductios ad absurdum*? It is this. If you are not an intellectual, a member of especially an elite university, one could be excused for thinking that cultural appropriation is totally and completely unobjectionable. After all, it consists of nothing more and nothing less than people being introduced to cultures, mores, experiences, practices, accomplishments of others. We all learn from each other in this way. What could be wrong even in the slightest with that, pray tell, they might ask.

How then to account for the great animosity, the vicious rejection, of cultural appropriation on campus? Various explanations present themselves.

One possibility is sheer madness. The Chinese had their cultural revolution where, unfortunately, millions of people were murdered. We are now having our own version of the sheer insanity of a cultural revolution. Happily, it has not yet killed even a single person, at least to my knowledge. But it is more than just slightly annoying. Wokeism has caused job loss for numerous academics who deserved no such fate. It has put a gigantic crimp into the search for knowledge. Perhaps, without it, medical technology would have advanced to a greater degree than affirmative action would allow it to, and in which case precious lives would indeed have been lost to this pernicious doctrine.

Another possible explanation for the ascendancy of cultural appropriation is affirmative action itself. When students whose intellectual apparatus do not qualify for admission to college are allowed in anyway; when professors are hired not

on the basis of merit but rather due to irrelevant considerations such as pigment or plumbing; when it is academic death to fail students who clearly do not “belong” and therefore should not be “included” in an institution dedicated to learning and to the intellect; well, then, what can you expect? Something has got to give. That something, it would appear, is opposition to cultural appropriation.

When you press down on the water in a bathtub, it is difficult to predict, precisely, where the overflow will occur. When you drive rubber wheels over glass, it is not at all clear where the first tire puncture will occur. When you pile massive numbers of people on campus who clearly do not belong there, it should occasion little surprise that irrationalities of this sort should be the result.

Another [hypothesis](#) is biology. We are hard-wired against free trade, in goods, services, investments and ideas. Cultural appropriation is a type of free trade—by extension of course. Massive numbers of people favor tariffs and quotas and other such interferences with international trade. It should occasion little surprise that they should transfer this opposition to economic free trade to the culture. Opposition to cultural appropriation is all too reminiscent of highly popular Mercantilism: the squelching of free trade.

Why, in turn, should so many people be biologically predisposed against free trade in anything? According to sociobiological studies, eons ago, when our species was living in caves or trees, the typical size of the group was something like 30 people. Anyone from a different group was looked upon with great suspicion, not to say murderous enmity. There would have been no particular genetic advantage to being open to interaction with others, outsiders. If so, you might well have been killed for treason by your own group.

Whatever the source of bitter opposition to cultural appropriation, it is important that its implementation be opposed. The cure for cancer will likely be found by some one, one day, hopefully soon. The discoverer will have a specific race, nationality, ethnicity. In the absence of cultural appropriation all others will be prevented from benefiting from this medical breakthrough of his. That will be a tragedy.

Of course, the “progressives” (they are actually quite regressive) will never take matters so far. Not for them the “hobgoblin” of logical consistency. They would not very much like to apply their philosophy to its logical conclusion. No, for them, forbidding non-Mexicans from wearing sombreros; coming down on whites wearing black face is about as far as they will go (they were strangely silent, though, when comedian Eddie Murphy [adorned himself](#) in white face). Why? Self-preservation. If they were to demand that BIPOCs not avail themselves of bridges, tunnels, skyscrapers, airplanes, numerous medicines or anything else of this sort which were not invented or first created by members of their group, they would not merely be condemned. They would simply be laughed at. This they could never tolerate.

The common man utterly rejects opposition to cultural appropriation. It is pretty much only intellectuals who have been [ensnared](#) in this madness. Why might that be? Here are some possible explanations.

Socialism in general has a record of failure so blatant that only an intellectual could ignore or evade it.
—Thomas Sowell

Some ideas are so stupid that only intellectuals believe

them. –George Orwell

My favorite definition of an intellectual: ‘Someone who has been educated beyond his/her intelligence.’ –Arthur Clarke

An intellectual is a man who takes more words than necessary to tell more than he knows. –Dwight Eisenhower

What is ground zero for opposition to cultural appropriation? Why, it is Yale University, one of the most prestigious institutions of higher learning not only in the U.S., but in the entire world. Yale Professors Nicholas and Erika Christakis were [forced to resign](#) their positions there, due to their opposition to student demands that certain Halloween costumes were off limits due to cultural appropriation. Shame on you, Yale.

Cultural appropriation is part and parcel of civilized behavior. We can all learn from each other. We can all benefit from the experiences of others. To attack cultural appropriation is thus to attack civilization. It is to renounce the possibility that other cultures might have something positive to teach us. It is to stick our heads in the sand, ostrich like. It is to say “my way or the highway.” It is to deny that other cultures have anything to teach us. It is arrogance. It is an intellectual abomination.

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Orleans, and senior fellow at the Mises Institute. He earned his PhD in economics at Columbia University in 1972. He has taught at Rutgers, SUNY Stony Brook, Baruch CUNY, Holy Cross and the University of Central Arkansas. He is the author of more than 600 refereed articles in professional journals, three dozen books, and thousands of op eds (including the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal and numerous others). He lectures widely on college campuses, delivers seminars around the world and appears regularly on television and radio shows. He is the Schlarbaum Laureate, Mises Institute, 2011; and has won the Loyola University Research Award (2005, 2008) and the Mises Institute's Rothbard Medal of Freedom, 2005; and the Dux Academicus award, Loyola University, 2007. Prof. Block counts among his friends Ron Paul and Murray Rothbard. He was converted to libertarianism by Ayn Rand. Block is old enough to have played chess with Friedrich Hayek and once met Ludwig von Mises, and shook his hand. Block has never washed that hand since. So, if you shake his hand (it's pretty dirty, but what the heck) you channel Mises.

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