



How Today's Left Is Promoting White Supremacy

By forcing Americans into racial and cultural boxes, the American left is stunting the growth of healthier and more equitable future.

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A staple of ancient Greek tragedy is a plot twist in which a protagonist attempting to avoid a negative result inadvertently brings that result into being. Over the last decade, the American left has been engaged in just such a tragedy. Critical race theory, with its arsenal of white privilege and cultural appropriation, was intended to decenter whiteness in our society and create more equitable and multicultural social norms. But in practice, the exact opposite is occurring.

Let's take the example of cultural appropriation. Generally speaking, the concept is meant to give ownership of cultural phenomena to members of the racial group that created it. Through this, the goal is to resist assimilation of minority cultures into the broader American culture and to assure that cultural symbols stay, in a sense, "pure."

But one vital exception to this rule undermines the broader project of decentering whiteness. That is, of course, that cultural appropriation does not apply to white culture.

This creates an essential imbalance that does two very harmful things. First, it defines whiteness as a cultural default. Indeed, perhaps the only way to define "white culture" is that which no other culture can claim. Second, in so doing it makes white culture the only culture that is universal. That is to say, white culture is anything that everyone, regardless of race, may partake of freely and without paying some tribute to the racial group that created it.

The musical "Hamilton" is a perfect example of this. There is no, or at least almost no, objection to black and brown actors playing the white Founding Fathers. However, were a play to be cast with a white actor as Frederick Douglass or Harriet Tubman, there clearly would be objections to this. While this is meant to protect the cultural legacy of black Americans, it does so by putting it in a cage and stunting its growth and cultural impact.

The concept of cultural appropriation is rooted in what was historically a very real problem. We can take an example from American music in the mid-20th century. Elvis Presley can be credibly accused of appropriating the song "Hound Dog" from Big Mamma Thornton.

But the problem with that was not that Presley created a new version of the song, but that the music industry of the time privileged his version with more air time, opportunity, and pay than it did hers. The answer to this problem is to level the playing field, not to segregate artistic output.

What makes this problem even worse is that white culture, or again, cultural output that no non-white group can claim, becomes the only one that everyone can engage in. This makes absolutely no sense especially given that year-by-year America becomes less white and more ethnically varied.

Minority cultural output is protected only in the sense that Victorian-era women were protected. They were put on a pedestal and praised for their purity, but also denied freedom in an effort to maintain that purity.

We saw the negative results of this way of thinking at work in a recent poster created by the Smithsonian Institution, which purported to explain elements of whiteness. Among the signs of whiteness it listed were individualism, hard work, objectivity, and delayed gratification. Critics were quick to point that this is pretty much exactly how a white supremacist would go about describing whiteness. But how did it happen? Why did the museum think these were traits of whiteness to begin with?

It goes back to the definition of whiteness being what everyone can partake in. The museum was certainly not suggesting that non-whites cannot or should not value or exhibit these qualities, but that because these qualities are not “owned” by any specific non-white group they are universal and therefore white.

The fundamental fallacy at work here is the belief that cultural output is the result of some innate racial difference, either biological or environmental, that locks what is created by non-whites into a proprietary box. But as the country becomes more diverse and as more mixed-race people are born, this effort to maintain the purity of cultural output becomes impossible without instituting segregation, something that the left now often embraces in ways that 25 years ago would have been anathema to it.

The American left has traditionally prided itself on being on the right side of history, but today their efforts to make sure that everyone stays in one racial or cultural lane puts them in the position of standing athwart history shouting “Stop!” Their opposition to an America in which cultures blend to create a national identity runs counter not only to our nation’s traditions but also to the cold reality of cultural and racial mixing.

In the long run, this is a fight they can’t win, but that doesn’t mean they can’t cause a good deal of harm and discord in the short term. The sooner they desist with these futile efforts, the healthier and more equal our society will be.

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