

The Progressive Case For Cultural Appropriation

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“I am human. I think nothing human is alien to me.”

— African writer, Publius Terentius of Carthage (a.k.a. “Terence”)

Over the course of the past decade, a potpourri of buzz-terms has emerged in contemporary political vernacular. Some of these terms help us better understand the world in which we find ourselves. Others, however, reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of the subject-matter to which they have been applied. The latter is the case with the shibboleth, “cultural appropriation” (Cul-Ap). Typically used pejoratively, the contentious term has become fashionable amongst aficionados of political correct-ness. Extracted from the sudsy depths of academic lingo by the most obstreperous p.c. aficionados, it is now commonplace in the argot of those smitten with “propriety”. The feckless leveling of this accusation has sewn needless discord, and has served to undermine the integrity of public discourse.

As we shall see, using Cul-Ap as a gauntlet rather than as an invitation serves to exacerbate the very problem its enthusiasts purport to solve. Instead of effecting inter-cultural comity, scorn for Cul-Ap only stirs up acrimony. How so? The vilification of Cul-Ap (tacitly) prescribes a regimen of cultural segregation, thereby setting the stage for contrived pique directed across confabulated borderlines against an imagined OTHER. In other words: The anti-Cul-Ap crusade is diametrically opposed to the most vaunted ideals of cosmopolitanism. (For more on this point, see Kwame Anthony Appiah’s “Cosmopolitanism: Ethics In A World Of Strangers”; chapters 7 and 8.)

So how did this term become a pejorative? As a neutral term, it simply points to the use of memes associated with cultures other than one’s own. The implication, though, is that such an act is impolitic. Appropriation is, after all, typically a bad thing, isn’t it? {26}

I will argue that the act of “appropriating” an element of culture, while deemed ethically-questionable by Cul-Ap-phobes, has generally salutary repercussions. {1} Embracing Cul-Ap involves an endorsement of what historian Iriye Akira referred to as “cultural internationalism”, which—I hope to show—is integral to cosmopolitan ideals.

First, a note on memes. Memetics is a way of thinking about epidemiology, whereby pieces of information are seen as the analogues of genomes, and thus subject to natural selection. Put another way: As replicators of information (that is: patterns of thought / behavior), memes are analogous to genes (that is: biological replicators). A meme can be anything from a belief in the flying spaghetti monster to grandma’s recipe for chicken pot pie. Memes might be names, catch-phrases, tunes, dance routines, superstitions, sacred rituals, or countless other things that humans think and do. The successful memes tend to be the ones that are both sticky (memorable) and catchy (contagious). For the present purposes, we are concerned with memes insofar as they are widely-recognized elements of a particular culture—especially when they are recognized to be UNIQUE to and INTEGRAL to that culture. While the laws of biology and ecology dictate which anatomical mutations succeed; social psychology is the primary determining factor in meme-proliferation. {17}

But what else is at play when it comes to an aversion to “Cul-Ap”? As a term of opprobrium, this

shibboleth tends to be invoked by those who subscribe to a divisive form of “identity politics”, a topic I explore at length elsewhere. For in order to be cast as an ethical transgression, Cul-Ap must be conceptualized in terms of people’s membership in a demographic category. In its pejorative incarnation, it pertains to how said designation relates to a (dubious) regime of cultural demarcation. That the ham-fisted use of this term (to wit: “cultural appropriation” as a pejorative) has wormed its way into the catechism of “identity politics” is testament to how misguided otherwise well-meaning expositors have become.

The supposition that we should all come together without engaging in any cross-cultural memetic exchange—while spurning trans-cultural fertilization—is untenable. For it assumes distinct cultural boundaries where no such boundaries exist. It should be uncontroversial to note that one does not have to be Mexican to eat fajitas any more than one has to be Swiss to eat Emmentaler cheese. (Non-Belgians who enjoy eating Belgian waffles are on notice!) When people of different cultures interact with one another, one culture invariably blends into another culture; and this is usually a felicitous development. Indeed, the phenomenon is ubiquitous. Cul-Ap is happening all around us every day; and occurs without notice in the most anodyne ways. Little are anti-Cul-Ap crusaders aware: They are THEMSELVES engaging in Cul-Ap countless times a day with virtually everything they do and say.

Each of us lives within a memetic microcosm that has no clearly-defined boundaries. Our locus of memes is perpetually shifting, changing. This metamorphosis is based—in part—on external memes that happen to be impinging upon us at any given time. Understanding this, it is plain to see that the compartmentalization of cultures is not only inimical to pluralism, it is antithetical to the most fundamental principles of cosmopolitanism. What proponents of “identity politics” cannot seem to understand is that, though it is perhaps a quick fix for some, such an approach does nobody any good in the long run.

Granted, discursive segregation can be done along demographic lines—per the regime of “identity politics”. Yet an elementary fact seems to be lost on Cul-Ap-phobes: A melting-pot is not merely about the co-existence of disparate cultures; it is about the (discretionary) MELDING of cultures. This is even the case when it comes to the most insular cultures. For even as parochial enclaves are themselves not melting pots (insofar as they have impermeable boundaries), they are effectively petrified melding pots (haven been frozen in time by Reactionary forces that treat the CURRENT version as some pre-ordained final destination). Put another way: While a pluralistic society is comparable to a salad, its culture is an ALLOY. Even as people may maintain their distinct ethnic identities, the cultural milieu in which they live is a fluid amalgamation of ethnic components.

Thus: Even when cultures are segregated, they can’t help but be the products of Cul-Ap. A society that has been systematically partitioned into discretely-defined collective identities cannot truly be said to be pluralistic. For it is a society that has not come to terms with the Cul-Ap that brought it to where it currently is.

Cultural boundaries blur into each other because cultures INEVITABLY meld whenever they interact. This process is more a matter of fusion than it is of superposition. Such intermixture can happen any number of ways for any number of reasons. One way: A culturally exogenous population that has recently arrived in a new land assimilates (wittingly or un-) elements of the indigenous culture. Another way: The native culture adopts elements of other cultures; though the latter is sometimes coerced into doing so due to the power asymmetry typically involved in colonialist scenarios. Cul-Ap is bi-directional.

Bottom line: ANY culture is—invariably—an alloy of other cultures, which themselves are alloys of other cultures, and so on, going back to time immemorial. This is a good thing; as the alternative is insularity and stagnation.

In spite of all this, anti-Cul-Ap crusaders insist that trans-cultural fertilization is somehow deleterious to civil society. The only solution to this (purported) injustice, we are led to believe, is a regimen of meme-sequestration carried out along cultural lines. In other words, the prescription for respecting other cultures is cultural segregation: separate but equal. (This should sound eerily familiar.)

In their eagerness to doll out memetic injunctions, these self-appointed arbiters of cultural exchange fail to realize that cultures cannot be “purified” any more than communities of people can be purified. We might recall that part of cultural purification is exclusivity: Believers in a pristinely-maintained culture want to prevent things from leaking out as much as from leaking in. That is: They insist on some kind of memetic quarantine so as to preserve the (purported) integrity of each culture. But what, exactly, are we seeking to preserve with our memetic quarantines?

Calls for cultural segregation are a reminder that parochialism typically accompanies Reactionary thinking. This is where things get confusing. Cul-Ap-phobes are conservatives masquerading as “liberals”. As it turns out, they are not advocates of pluralism; they are cultural segregationists who see any transference of memes across cultural lines as a ploy—by the adopters—to exploit those of the source-culture. Any incidence of domination / exploitation that DOES exist is thus attributed—at least in part—to whatever Cul-Ap can be identified.

But here’s the thing: Cultural integration (what the sociologist, Max Weber dubbed “sinnzusammenhang”) involves some sort of memetic co-optation; which is simply to say that the formation of a given culture is the result of incorporating elements from other cultures. Such memetic transference constitutes the warp and woof of ALL cultural life. This is not some insidious program of annexation; it is cultural integration taking its natural course. In other words: It is part of the natural course of cultural evolution (and, hopefully, cultural progress).

Therein lies the snafu: In order to depict Cul-Ap as invidious, we must suppose that one can somehow annex the elements of another culture. The suspicion is that, by SEIZING this or that meme from its rightful owners, those (purported) owners are being short-changed. Consequently, the argument goes, Cul-Ap occurs to the detriment of the source-culture. It’s as if, by making use of an exogenous cultural element, one were perpetrating some sort of memetic heist.

This supposition is, of course, entirely specious; as memes are non-rivalrous—which is to say: barring instances of intellectual property (copyrights, trademarks, and patents), the use thereof is non-exclusionary. Memetic transference is NOT a zero-sum game. When the element in question is conducive to the commonweal, everybody wins.

And so it goes: To characterize Cul-Ap as a transgressive act, one is forced to contend that temporarily adopting—or blithely participating in—an element of another’s culture is somehow trespassing on that culture’s sovereignty over itself; and thereby committing a kind of desecration. Hence Cul-Ap—by its very nature—is deemed derogatory toward and/or exploitative of those who identify with the meme-in-question. The indictment is made especially when the meme plays an integral role in their cultural heritage. The unavoidable conclusion is that any act of unsanctioned adoption / participation must be forbidden...even if it is done in good faith.

It is an irony that those most engaged in cosmopolitan life are especially prone to breaching this municipal ordinance. After all, the modus operandi of cosmopolitanism entails engaging in Cul-Ap AS A MATTER OF COURSE. In fact, it is impossible to be a genuine cosmopolitan WITHOUT enthusiastically engaging in rampant Cul-Ap at almost every turn.

Prohibition of Cul-Ap effectively mandates what is best described as cultural Apartheid: “I shall keep my culture to myself; and you are expected to keep your culture to yourself.” This is especially ironic, as such onerous strictures are (ostensibly) meant to enforce a “respectful-ness” for all cultures. In the end, Cul-Ap-phobes are hyper-parochialists who refuse to admit that they are being, well, hyper-parochial. To reiterate: The demonization of Cul-Ap betrays a fundamental ignorance of the principles of cosmopolitanism.

So there we have it: In the Cul-Ap-phobes’ eagerness to condemn what they see as an infelicitous use of exogenous cultural elements, they lose track of the implications of such their own captious thinking. (After all, part of obtuse thinking is not recognizing such thinking as obtuse.) By rebuking a gringo for snacking on tortillas, one may as well castigate anyone who isn’t Japanese for making a “pinky swear” (the “yubikiri”, coined by the Yakuza).

The indictment of illicit Cul-Ap is shown to be frivolous the moment we attempt to universalize the maxims on which it is purportedly based. As I will show in the present essay, taking the stricture to its logical conclusion, and applying it everywhere—especially where its proponents did not intend—exposes an UNAVOIDABLE inconsistency in its actual application. An anti-Cul-Ap crusade cannot help but be riddled with double-standards. For the standards it purports to uphold are INVARIABLY selectively applied...lest proponents of Cul-Ap strictures run headlong into a wall of their own absurdities.

In the final analysis, we come back to the (unavoidable) fact that Cul-Ap has always existed; and has usually been welcomed by all parties involved. Indeed, only the most conservative societies on Earth have sought to curb adoption of memes from other cultures; or claimed ownership of certain memes as though it were written in the stars. Time after time, history has shown that a robust, vibrant culture is one that readily incorporates new elements—even if from external sources—whenever such elements are encountered. That is, after all, what an open society entails.

As will be shown here, societies the world over have been appropriating cultural elements from external sources since time immemorial. “The Persians are greatly inclined to adopt foreign customs” wrote the Greek historian, Herodotus about the Achaemenid Empire. In fact, Herodotus attributed the Persians’ astounding success to this modus operandi; which was inextricably linked to their embrace of pluralism. In the Book of Ecclesiastes, written in Babylon in the 5th century B.C., there is a reason the authors noted that “there is nothing new under the sun.” The book was composed with many Persian and Aramaic loan-words; and, as we shall see, Judaic tradition is comprised largely of culturally-appropriated elements—cribbed from older traditions during the Exilic Period. The passage may as well have read, “We’re just revamping what already exists.”

In Classical Antiquity, the Romans engaged in rampant Cul-Ap from the Greeks. In the Dark Ages, the Arabs engaged in rampant Cul-Ap from the Nabataeans and Persians. And we might note that the Mongols were so incredibly successful because they engaged in Cul-Ap from the Uyghurs...and the Chinese...and the Persians...and pretty much EVERYONE ELSE they conquered.

The reason the charge of illicit Cul-Ap is spurious is that all cultures are based—to some not insignificant degree—on the co-optation of antecedent and/or exogenous cultural elements. Indeed, any given culture is—essentially—crystalized cultural hybridization. We speak of memetic “fusion” as if it is something exotic; when it is probably the LEAST exotic thing that humans do. (For a historical perspective on this point, ref. “Ancient Worlds” by Michael Scott.) There has never existed a culture that was not a pastiche of memetic precursors—with elements extracted from the various contemporaneous cultures with which it interacted. To wit: Every culture is derivative.

Cul-Ap-phobes fail to realize that appropriation—whether calculated or unwitting—is the only way that any culture came to be in the first place. Over the course of human history, Cul-Ap has never—to repeat: NEVER—been seen as problematic. Only recently has cross-cultural memetic transference taken on a contentious penumbra. This ersatz crime is now a touchstone of those preoccupied political correctness, for reasons that I will also explore in the present essay.

Cul-Ap-phobes fail to see that the inter-mixture of cultures is socially beneficial; and that an integral part of that intermixture is meme-exchange. So they demand a memetic embargo at the imagined boundaries of each cultural enclave. The concern seems to be the preservation of cultural integrity, upholding a purist version of this or that culture against the dreaded scourge of meme-poachers. But what of cultural integrity? When harmonious, a culture is imagined to be a mellifluous memetic fugue. Yet even the most ordered cultures are a salmagundi of elements culled from different places at different times for different reasons—usually by sheer happenstance. Cultures are rather messy things; and that is what makes them so fascinating. Any given culture, insofar as it can be discretely defined, is what Levi-Strauss called a “bricolage” of elements from antecedent sources—which is simply to say that any given culture is an accident of history. A designated culture is not some timeless blueprint inscribed into the fabric of the cosmos. For it could easily have been other than it now is; and it STILL CAN be something other than what it currently happens to be. Cul-Ap-phobes seem unable to grasp this.

Another problem, as we’ll see, is that the anti-Cul-Ap crusade is gratuitously tendentious. Being officious about (purported) meme-allocation rights is no strategy to foster amity across cultures. Rather than engendering respect for foreign cultures, the vilification of Cul-Ap only succeeds in amplifying tribalism. Once participation in others’ cultures is forbidden, we start going down a dangerous road—a road that leads to a raft of unintended consequences. As it turns out, making Cul-Ap taboo is a surefire way to keep the other (however demarcated) other-ized; which is simply to say that cultural segregation—like any form of segregation—reinforces alterity.

To sum up: There are two elementary things that those who demonize Cul-Ap seem not to understand:

- No culture exists in a vacuum
- No culture—as it has come to exist, however it has come to exist—emerges ex nihilo

Both of these things remind us that cultures are BASED UPON Cul-Ap. Cultures interact, and are perpetually in flux. Culture is a process; not a destination. Yet the way Cul-Ap-phobes cast the issue, one would think that any given culture has been magically conjured from stardust, then frozen in time “as is” for the rest of eternity. For them, this means that “preserving” a culture means protecting it from memetic leakage / penetration. According to this thinking, a culture must be quarantined so as to preclude memetic transference TO or FROM other cultures.

There are countless ways to illustrate the present thesis. Let’s start with something simple. Shall we suppose that all Americans are denigrating pagan culture with their festivities around the “Christmas tree”? The practice was originally a Germanic celebration of the winter solstice. It focused on the Norse god, Odin; and even made use of the colors red and green. The Christmas tree itself was based on the “koliada” from ancient Slavic (pre-Christian) winter festivals. Yet today we rarely hear those from Eastern Europe accusing the rest of the western world for “appropriating” a sacrosanct part of their culture.

Meanwhile, the Georgians could accuse everyone else of ripping off their yule-tide “chichilaki”. Or were THEY ripping off the Roman Empire’s custom of Saturnalia: a winter solstice celebration of the god, Saturn; and—believe it or not—his representative on earth? (That’s right: The Romans used the occasion to

commemorate a deity's worldly incarnation.) During Saturnalia, homes were bedecked with wreaths of evergreen. And the date that Romans—through Constantine, Rome's first Christian emperor—celebrated the birthday of the godhead, Sol Invictus? December 25. All this should sound oddly familiar. {28}

And why, exactly, the 25th of December? As it happens, that was the day of the Mithraic winter solstice festival, in which the annual birthday of the sun was commemorated. Mithra-ism was still rampant throughout the Roman Empire during Late Antiquity (spec. when the Christian version was being formulated by the Vatican's magisterium in the 4th century).

But that's not all. Christmas revelers today are all—unwittingly—riffing off the cult surrounding the canonized Greek bishop, Nicolaus of Myra (rendered “Sinterklaas” in Dutch), on whom “Santa [Saint] Claus” is based. Why Nicolaus? Well, there was a cult surrounding him at the time, which had itself been modeled on a cult around the Pythagorean philosopher, Apollonius of Tyana—a man who lived in Cappadocia during the 1st century. Even the holiday's exalted mascot was purloined from antecedent pagan figures. {2}

So what's with the repudiation of Cul-Ap NOW? With all the contrived pique, one would think the grievance at hand was with some sort of cultural ASSAULT. Nothing could be further from the truth. As will be discussed, anti-Cul-Ap crusaders treat appropriation as a kind of EX-propriation. They react as though the source-culture were being picked dry by a horde of dastardly meme-scavengers. Thus Cul-Ap is taken to be deleterious to the culture of those who anoint themselves stewards of those memes. What we find, though, is that the ensuing imbroglio is nothing but an exercise in self-indulgent titivation—replete with maudlin theatrics about the ills of being “disrespectful” / “offensive” / “insensitive”.

Let's explore whether or not there is any credence to such grievances.

Case-Studies:

My aim here is to show why that entire project of of proscribing Cul-Ap is wrong-headed. Later, I will explore the crucial distinction between appropriation (which I take to be non-rivalrous / inclusionary) and expropriation (which I take to be rivalrous / exclusionary). {26} But first, let's survey some examples to see whether or not hysteria over Cul-Ap might possibly be stemming from a pointless moral panic. This means evaluating Cul-Ap as it actually is rather than how it is caricatured by Cul-Ap-phobes.

We might begin by noting that the cooptation of cultural elements is generally celebrated in liberal democracies around the world. As will be explicated, we see this in literature, in architecture, in musical styles, in dance, in language, in iconography, as well as in culinary and sartorial practices; from the most formal rituals to the most quotidian social norms encountered in everyday life.

Language is one of the best examples. With idiosyncrasies in vernacular (like street-lingo, idiomatic expressions, and buzz-terms), ANY catchy turn-of-phrase that becomes fashionable can't help but be appropriated by those outside of the culture that originated it. Indeed, that's how any snappy locutions propagate across the meme-sphere...even across cultures. ANYTHING that becomes sufficiently popular can migrate between cultures that interact with one another.

By looking at some well-known instances of Cul-Ap, we can begin posing pertinent questions. As will become immediately apparent, characterizing Cul-Ap as an illicit act leads to absurdity.

Let's start with a song. “Amazing Grace” was sung by African slaves in the antebellum South as a way to keep hope alive during an epoch of tribulation. So, today, can non-black people sing this heartfelt song?

According to the logic of Cul-Ap, the answer is a resounding “no”. It’s as if allowing non-black people to sing that particular hymn would somehow deprive African Americans of their legacy of empowerment through song. Even more preposterously, the contention is that PREVENTING non-black people from singing this song would somehow HELP them forge solidarity with black people. Hence the Kafka-esque prescription: Universal inclusion via targeted exclusion.

But wait: It gets more complicated. For the song was composed in 1725 by a white (Anglican) clergyman...who was, it turns out, a former slaver. John Newton wrote the song as a way of expressing contrition (pursuant to his change of heart regarding the enslavement of Africans). So it is, in a sense, MORE appropriate for white people—remorseful of a past injustice—to sing this song.

We might continue along this line of inquiry. If Europeans play jazz, are they guilty of cribbing African-American culture...or are they simply paying tribute to great music? Should Buddhist musicians be allowed to perform Handel’s “Messiah”? Can Taoists sing “Jingle Bells”? Can Caucasians sing the Blues? The legendary Egyptian pop-singer, Umm Kulthum (a.k.a. “Kawkab al-Sharq”) incorporated an Occidental musical idiom. Was she guilty of Cul-Ap as well? And what about other Arabic pop-singers (like Samira Said and Elissar Zakaria Khoury)?

When Bing Crosby sang “Silent Night” (which would become a secular American classic), was he ripping off Austrian culture? After all, Franz Xaver Gruber composed the song (“Stille Nacht”) for his church in Oberndorf bei Salzburg in 1818. Shall non-Bavarians be prohibited from singing this song? Should it be off-limits to non-Catholics? (If so, we should be thankful that Crosby was Catholic!)

According to the specious rational undergirding the charge of illicit Cul-Ap, sharing customs across cultural lines, however demarcated, without express permission to do so, is a morally dubious act, and so should be forbidden. For engaging in such an act, we are told, is indicative of (tacit) condescension; and even of derogation—especially if it is done in too flip a manner. But does anyone REALLY believe this? If so, it becomes a quandary that many of the most cherished Christmas songs were composed by Jewish men: Jay Livingston, Sammy Cahn, Irving Berlin, Jule Styne, etc. In such cases, who was appropriating who?

As I hope to show forthwith, the entire case for the vilification of those engaged in Cul-Ap unravels as we recognize that Cul-Ap is everywhere—even in places we might not suspect. If we were to apply the standards for Cul-Ap-prohibition consistently—and universally—we would end up implicating everyone’s culture, everywhere, since the beginning of recorded history.

In order to bring to light the issue at hand, we might pose some other questions: Can Arabians perform Shakespearean plays...in Arabic...donning Bedouin attire? What about when Arabian dancers perform “Liwa”, which was adopted from African folk dance? Do I need to be Irish to direct a production of River Dance? Can Irish who do not have a full appreciation of their Gaelic heritage do so? If yes to BOTH, and fidelity to the culture is not the ultimate standard, then are we to predicate eligibility on bloodlines? Birthright? Shall qualification be based on some minimum time of having been immersed in the culture? The further we inquire, the more convoluted the criteria we use for allotting license to participate in another culture becomes.

We are forced to use the same standards to answer analogous questions: Can anyone other than the Cantonese take Kung-fu lessons? Can non-Venetian film-makers use Vivaldi in their scores? Can non-Indian women wear saris? The more examples we assay, the more it becomes apparent that when Cul-Ap occurs—especially when done in good faith—the world is all the better for it.

We might note that meme-adoption between cultures regularly occurs even when we don't realize it—with technical innovations, scientific insights, superstitions, folklore, catch-phrases, games, attire, and countless other things. This is salubrious in most instances; and it is salubrious for reasons that may not be immediately apparent to the parties involved.

Regardless of who one might be, succumbing to Cul-Ap-phobia is tantamount to cultural masochism. For insofar as one identifies with a given culture—one is invariably forced to indict ONESELF for the illusory crime. The fact is: Nobody is NOT currently enjoying a product of serial Cul-Ap. Cul-Ap is as endemic to culture as is breathing oxygen. It is safe to say, then, that grievances involving Cul-Ap demonstrate a fundamental mis-understanding of how cultures interact.

If I attend a luau and wear a lei around my neck, am I in some way desecrating Polynesian culture? In such a scenario, there are two different perspectives at play: For the Hawaiian, donning the flowered necklace is customary; yet to me, the accoutrement is simply nifty—even mildly exotic.

Exotic? Wait. What's THAT all about? Exoticism, we should bear in mind, is simply the result of differing vantages of familiarity, not the result of some invidious double standard. Yet, proclaims the Cul-Ap-phobe: "If you find it exotic, then you shouldn't be allowed to do it!" This is a harebrained declaration. Shall one also refrain from dating people one finds exotically attractive? Shall we deem exotic locals off-limits for holiday travel? Shall gourmands avoid any cuisine they happen to find exotic? Must we curb ALL curiosity in things that we find unfamiliar in a beguiling way? We may as well criminalize fascination.

Well, then, how shall problematic instances of exotic-ization be addressed? What is typically identifying as a problem is the FETISHIZATION of exotic-ness. Here, it is not the (perfectly natural) fascination with the exotic that is problematic; it is the fetishization of such things. But then again, fetishizing ANYTHING is indicative of dysfunction. Ironically, Cul-Ap-phobia is ITSELF based on fetishization: treating cultural elements as sacrosanct totems—that is: as if they were the sole basis of existential ballast.

But that's not the worst of it. When it comes to "trying on for size" exogenous cultural elements, a censorious attitude ends up being just another form of parochialism. Indeed, a key facet of Cul-Ap-phobia is a nagging penchant for meme-sequestration (whereby one is obliged to hold in abeyance anything seen as FOREIGN). The notion that one should not be permitted to (intermittently) participate in—or temporarily adopt—some cultural element (esp. when one happens to find it exotic) is ludicrous.

Take, for instance, a non-Hindu attending a Navratri celebration, and opting to don a "bindi" (third eye) as part of his participation in the festivities. Fancying the practice, the person opts to do it again later on—of his own accord—in other contexts. In doing so, is he being patronizing toward Hindu culture? Hardly. Supposing that doing so is somehow uncouth would be to conflate homage with mockery. Looking at the spirit behind the gesture is key. Alas. As we shall see, so far as Cul-Ap-phobes are concerned, intentions are entirely beside the point; as the act itself is ipso facto perfidious.

The vilification of those engaged in Cul-Ap misses what makes humans social creatures: curiosity of novel memes from other lands. Indeed, to hear those who carp most about this ersatz crime, one would think the sky was falling every time a group of Asians formed rock-n-roll band. (Based on this standard, K-pop would be a moral outrage!)

Ironies abound. For every one of the gormless enthusiasts who demonize Cul-Ap benefits from the fruits of Cul-Ap as much as anyone else; they just don't realize how much of what they do is the result of the

very thing against which they inveigh. Most Cul-Ap is unwitting; yet it suffuses our lives. In adopting one or another meme, people are simply being pragmatic. As Steven Lukes put it in his “Liberals & Cannibals”: “People often follow customs [prevailing social norms] blindly, even compulsively and without reasoning about what they do. But the fact that they don’t reason does not mean that they don’t have reasons.” This goes for art, music, dance, cuisine, clothing styles, literary styles, religious dogmas, and virtually everything else that constitutes culture. Indeed, meme-exchange is a spur for cultural FRUCTIFICATION; but the benefits are not always recognized until we have the benefit of hindsight.

So what happens if a Kurd puts a Persian rug in his home while a Persian puts a Kurdish rug in his home? Is that a fair trade? Can either hang a Native American tapestry in his foyer? If all of this is illicit, then what’s really going on here? It would seem that even interior design must be subject to cultural sanction. (And unless you’re a Parisian of Italian descent, don’t even think of putting Venetian blinds on French doors.) Once we proscribe Cul-Ap in ONE context, where does it stop?

Mehendi (a.k.a. “henna tattoos”) is used ritually in Turkey, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh amongst Muslimahs; yet it was originally a Vedic practice that predated Islam by many centuries. Does this make Dar al-Islam culpable in an elaborate memetic caper?

It might be noted that the two most popular sports in Japan are baseball and soccer. While soccer is international through and through, baseball is a hallmark of Americana. Shall Americans—even as they watch Dragonball Z and snack on a bento box—begrudge the Japanese for adopting this hallowed pass-time (and, it might be noted, infusing it with their own cultural flavor)?

And so it goes with other instances of cross-pollination. Some Russians practice ju-do (rebranded as “sambo”) even as some Japanese fancy Asian-style matryoshka dolls (rebranded as “Russian nesting dolls”, though with a Japanese aesthetic). As a result of this mutual “appropriation”, no one is the worse for wear. In fact, such reciprocal meme-transference is oftentimes a means of trans-cultural solidarity (a refreshing change from the war of 1904-05). Now Russians watch anime and read manga; and not a single Japanese person is up in arms about it.

The point cannot be emphasized enough: The charge of Cul-Ap as some transgressive deed demonstrates a grave misunderstanding of how culture qua culture WORKS; and how it has ALWAYS worked. Making Cul-Ap taboo is—paradoxically—a gambit to celebrate our shared humanity via cultural segregation.

The Relevance Of Intentions:

When the Japanese play baseball, are they being “insensitive” to American sports-fans? Simply posing the question demonstrates the inanity of this line of inquiry. Clearly, Cul-Ap is not inherently disrespectful. Otherwise, we would be forced to insist that rap be off-limits to Eminem; that country music be off-limits to Lil Nas X; that curry be off-limits to anyone who isn’t Indian; and that Brazilians can no longer practice jiu-jitsu.

So what, then, of ill will? Do intentions really matter to those for whom Cul-Ap is a moral outrage? Is their bone to pick not really with Cul-Ap per se, but with the attendant sentiment? Perhaps it is dubious motives that they are after.

Alas no. The more petulant Cul-Ap-phobes are apt to feign indignation even if it is clear that no disrespect was intended. After all, their (cockamamie) presupposition is: For people of one culture to adopt—or even to casually partake in—an element from another culture is to AUTOMATICALLY be derogatory toward the

latter culture.

Nobody actually believes this; yet Cul-Ap-phobes pretend to think that it is true. So it goes with the puritanical mindset endemic to a fixation on political correctness. Imputing sinister motives to those engaged in utterly innocuous activities has become somewhat of a cottage industry in p.c. circles. Participants are incentivized to take offense at virtually any breach of etiquette, no matter how frivolous. The agora is quickly flooded with dyspeptic interlocutors afflicted with a severe case of what the Danes refer to as “krænkellesparat” (a predisposition to quickly take offense at trivialities).

Consequently, the vilification of those engaged in Cul-Ap seems to attain regardless of intention. That is to say: The alleged transgression exists whether or not there is ill will involved. For, the thinking goes, the gesture ITSELF is an act of desecration. Hence: Cul-Ap should be seen as an affront irrespective of the sentiment attending the act of the accused “appropriator”. Good will is a moot point.

So far as Cul-Ap-phobes are concerned, the use of an exogenous cultural element is iniquitous no matter how innocuous—or innocently intentioned—the gesture might be. If anyone FEELS patronized, then the accused is IPSO FACTO guilty of being patronizing / disrespectful. Those who prosecute this ersatz crime fail to see that there is a difference between naively being hokey (trying something on for size, just for the fun of it) and derisively engaging in mockery (demeaning others simply because they are different).

We find that, in the vast majority of cases in which invidiousness is attributed to the unscrupulous use of an exogenous cultural element, the ACTUAL crime is bigotry; and so can be explained AS SUCH. No need, then, to blame such things on Cul-Ap.

The issue here, then, is not Cul-Ap per se, but Cul-Ap done in bad faith. Consequently, the primary concern should be cultural obloquy, or—for that matter—ANYTHING that is not done in good faith. The fact is that not all participation in—or adoption of—an exogenous cultural element is derogatory. In fact, as we shall see, the vast majority of it is benign.

But how, then, are we do deal with those who are not being sufficiently deferential to others’ cultures—especially when the element in question is considered sacred? The question answers itself. The issue at hand, we find, is (alleged) INSENSITIVITY, a disposition can exist with or without exigent Cul-Ap.

When Thais deck their urban shopping malls with copious amounts of tacky Christmas decorations, and play American Christmas carols throughout the concourse, is it a case of Buddhists being “insensitive” to Christians? (Make no mistake: The vast majority of Thai shoppers know almost nothing about Christian theology; and even less about the Nativity legend.) This blithe use of kitsch is for entirely commercial purposes. But, then again, the same could be said for Americans’ use Christmas themes. (After all, Christmas is hardly a RELIGIOUS occasion for the majority of Westerners.) Even the Japanese have gotten in on the action, celebrating “Kurisumasu” in laughably hokey ways.

But wait. Christ-mas is ITSELF the result of rampant Cul-Ap. Indeed, it is one of the most flagrant examples of Cul-Ap, based as it is on pagan precursors. It is no more OWNED by Christendom than it is owned by Thailand. The yule-tide holiday, celebrated on the winter solstice, has about as much to do with Jesus of Nazareth as the Easter Bunny has to do with Nicene soteriology. (A bunny-rabbit laying colored eggs in the springtime is, at best, a cartoonish metaphor for a resurrected savior-god.) And it was in the Middle Ages that Epiphany-tide was appended to Christ-mas-tide, so as to incorporate the legend of the Nativity (confabulated in the Middle Ages) into the holiday.

Of course, the commemoration of the winter solstice as an auspicious occasion is as universal as just about anything—from the Hindu “Makara Sankranti” to the Persian “Yalda Night” to the Incan “Inti Raymi[-rata]” (observed by the Quechua to the present day). Heck, it’s why Stone Henge was five thousand years ago. (!)

The concern about “insensitivity” seems straight-forward enough. Yet when someone is DELIBERATELY being derogatory in doing something, the point of concern is the ill will. Being derogatory is a problem irrespective of HOW one is being derogatory. If it happens to be in the process of Cul-Ap, the problem is not the Cul-Ap per se. For Cul-Ap can always be done in good faith. How any given person might happen to feel about it is another matter entirely. As will be discussed forthwith: We cannot establish moral standards based on this or that party’s sentiment.

When those engaging in Cul-Ap are vilified, the implication is that they are AUTOMATICALLY being “disrespectful” (or, at best, insufficiently sensitive). Cul-Ap is thus taken a form of condescension BY ITS VERY NATURE. Yet framing the act-in-question as an illicit form of “appropriation” does nothing to address concerns about discourtesy (alt. being “disrespectful” or “offensive” or “insensitive”) which animate many Cul-Ap-related grievances.

Here, the bone to pick is an illusory one. The contention is as follows: By being cavalier—or even just insouciant—in the use of an exogenous cultural element, the culprit is demeaning the source culture. That is: He is not taking the cultural element—and by implication, the culture-in-general—seriously enough. The attitude ascribed to the culprit is: “I’m doing this simply because I find it amusing. Consequently, I am neglecting the fact that this meme is meaningful to certain people.” The tacit message is that members of the source-culture don’t matter.

Hence anything short of a subscription to the culture WHOLESALE disqualifies one from participating in any element of it. If this is true, questions arise that Cul-Ap-phobes are unprepared to answer. When world-renown (Chinese) cellist, Yo-Yo Ma plays one of Brahms’ sonatas (German), bluegrass (American Southern), or a tango (Latino), is he paying tribute to different cultures or is he exploiting them? If the former, how can we know for sure? By what terms is he exempt from the proposed strictures on Cul-Ap? If the latter, how so? Might we suspect that his ostensive tribute really a veiled desecration? Is this acclaimed musician cribbing the material, or is he celebrating it? Such questions answer themselves. Indeed, the mere posing of them reveals the inanity of vilifying Cul-Ap.

The gripe, we find, is often with participation that is conducted with an inadequate degree of solemnity (that is: when done cavalierly; and so—arguably—patronizingly). For when Yo Yo Ma plays a piece from a German composer, he is taking it very seriously; and inarguably doing the material justice. Here the idea seems to be that participation on the part of the casual “appropriator” is supercilious; and, in being supercilious, is somewhat dismissive of the cultural element’s import to members of the (purported) source-culture. But this is clearly an untenable assumption. How are we to determine when someone is being too cavalier in their use of an exogenous cultural element? Yo Yo Ma is a clear-cut case; but what of the untalented Asian cellist who is simply dabbling in Mozart for his own idle amusement? Is he also exempt from charges of Cul-Ap? If so, what absolves him?

It would seem, then, that for those suspicious of Cul-Ap, it is CAPRICE that is the bone of contention. The accusation follows: “You are engaging in the act with an inadequate show of solemnity. Ergo you are being patronizing.” Simply being care-free when participating in another’s culture is seen as care-LESS. This seems to make sense...until we realize that we humans do this sort of thing all the time. In fact, it is almost unavoidable. WASPs impetuously get henna tattoos. Mexicans don stetsons. Counter-culture punk-rockers shave their heads in the Native American “Mohawk” style. Japanese music-stars simulate

American-style punk...and goth...and boy-bands...and, yes, even cowboys. Are these exuberant adopters being insufficiently appreciative of the culture that first popularized the meme?

Shall we suppose that such acts somehow undermine human solidarity? When finding affinities is done flippantly, is the gesture morally suspect? Are we to suppose that the lackadaisical nature of quotidian behavior disqualifies it from civility? Does care-free really equate with care-LESS?

Harboring contempt for Cul-Ap disregards the fact that daily life is INHERENTLY mercurial. With respect to quotidian behavior in a setting where cultures routinely intermingle, people can't help but casually imitate memes they find amenable. It is inevitable that bystanders will blithely emulate certain exogenous cultural elements—from locutions to attire—in extemporaneous ways. In most cases, such mimicry is a tacit form of flattery. Construing such behavior as *IPSO FACTO* patronizing—or even derogatory—is disingenuous. It may be clumsy. It may even be flippant. But it is rarely invidious.

If we take this uncharitable construal of mimesis to its logical conclusion, we wind up in a maelstrom of absurdities. For we are forced to conclude that we all desecrate the memory of the Tang Chinese by celebrating with fireworks. And we demean the Mexican “vaquero” with our exaltation of gun-toting, Anglo-Saxon cowboys. Never mind the insult to WASPs when men around the planet opt to don polo shirts. We find ourselves enveloped in a tourbillion of Cul-Ap galore, and so wind up indicting every aspect of our daily lives.

Of course, there are not always noble intentions afoot. So WHAT OF dubious motives? Here, we must contend with the question of where mere portrayal—cartoonish or not—ends and the alleged impropriety begins. We might ask: At what point does portrayal become exploitative? Alas, this is impossible to discern; for what may be merely a flubbed attempt at homage to one person is an intolerable—even if unwitting—affront to another.

Yet take heart. This disparity of sentiment needn't leave us in some interminable quandary. We do not need protocols to tell us that Disney's film, “Song of the South” was exploitative AND derogatory. We need only bring our moral intuitions to bear on the facts of the case. But there is a difference between “Song of the South” vis a vis African Americans and, say, “Ratatouille” vis a vis Parisians. Indeed, there is something amiss if someone does NOT find the former problematic; yet only the tetchiest Parisian would find the latter offensive. The explanation for this key difference, then, cannot be explained by couching things in terms of Cul-Ap.

So we might pose the question: At what point does conduct that is meant to be “all in good fun” become something that exhibits an insufficient amount of “due respect”? According to whom? To what extent are we all obliged to cater to every passer-by's sensibilities? The moment subjectivity is employed as the standard for ethical guidelines, we find ourselves unwitting bystanders in a whirlwind of extemporaneous prohibitions...subject to be updated as any moment...without notice...based on any random bystander's whim.

Admittedly, the “I'm just doing it for the fun of it” excuse only goes so far. How shall we verify that something is REALLY being done in good faith? Where does affinity end and perfidy begin? Sincerity is a notoriously difficult thing to gauge; so nobody can know for sure. Anyone who deigns to adjudicate such matters is forced to claim to have psychic abilities.

Let's pose the question another way: At what point does anodyne playfulness involving exogenous cultural elements become insufficiently heartfelt to be deemed acceptable? No universal standard is possible. Short of mind-reading, no adjudication can be conducted. For even something done without any bad

intentions can still be done too flippantly—that is: in a ham-fisted manner. After all, most imitation is more pantomime than genuine immersion.

The mimesis of something that is the hallmark of others' identity can easily be construed as patronizing. But one person's impression can not be the ultimate standard for evaluating another person's conduct. In any case, heedlessness is not tantamount to treachery. And being inconsiderate is not the same as being unethical. To equate matters of propriety with matters of probity is fundamental mis-step when it comes to moral principle.

Alas. Anti-Cul-Ap crusaders anoint themselves the adjudicators of good form; and even fashion themselves as standard-bearers of good will. In their ardor to appoint themselves the guardians of cultural integrity, they fail to see that to vilify those engaged in even the most benign instances of Cul-Ap requires them to be complicit in the very activity against which they inveigh. For their prosecutorial zeal involves a sense of entitlement (exercised under the aegis of "respect"); and a hefty dose of self-righteousness (which they construe as philanthropic fervor).

It requires more sense of entitlement to tell people that they are not allowed to engage in a bit of exogenous cultural activity than it does to—well—simply engage in it. The former requires one party to tell another party what they cannot do; the latter is simply an exercise of volition regarding one's own affairs.

And when people ARE being condescending, what are we to do? In the event that Cul-Ap is being done with a scornful sneer, how are we to respond? When contending with superciliousness, the proper focus is not the Cul-Ap that happens to accompany it. The focus, rather, should be on the superciliousness. (Put another way: The diagnosis of an act done with ill will is not the act itself, it is the ill will.)

To review: The demonization of Cul-Ap generally pertains to any act that is seen as disrespectful—typically, because it is construed as condescending. The prohibition aims to mitigate anything that is (purportedly) done "in poor taste". The problem is that proponents of this approach allege bad intentions to be around every corner. Once in this neurotic frame of mind, suspicion of Cul-Ap almost seems to make sense. But in order for this to work, one must refrain from ever looking into ACTUAL intentions.

When, say, an Anglo-Saxon dons a Pocahontas costume, we must ask: What is BEHIND the act? Is it an attempt to demean or is it simply all in good fun? The charge of illicit Cul-Ap makes no such distinction. Alas, for Cul-Ap-phobes, the act itself is seen as PRIMA FACIE pernicious. To recapitulate: Those who insist on treating the use of an exogenous cultural element as an illicit act are forced to pretend that all of it is derogatory BY ITS VERY NATURE.

The Cul-Ap-phobe's credo, though, amounts to the following precept: To casually partake in another's culture is to AUTOMATICALLY be patronizing—irrespective of motives. It makes sense to be wary of those who assume to know for certain what it is like to be someone other than themselves; but it does not follow from this that every act of cultural participation is done in bad faith (spec. when done cavalierly). This is a rather presumptuous position to take, especially when the focus should be on the ultimate of all common denominators: our shared humanity.

What those who denounce Cul-Ap as inherently iniquitous fail to realize is that intentions matter. When something is done in a mean-spirited manner, the problem is not necessarily with the deed per se; it is with the mean-spirited-ness. If one is being a jerk while baking chocolate chip cookies, that's not an indictment of chocolate chip cookie-baking.

Where Ethnic Fidelity Is Relevant; And Where It Isn't:

If a Westerner dresses up as a samurai just for fun, is he guilty of pilfering something from ancient Japanese culture? Is he demeaning the ancient “sho-gun” culture with a whimsical gesture—succumbing to an impetuous “try it on for size” moment? By blithely countenancing a simulacrum of the medieval warrior, might he be patronizing the “bushido” creed? Is “just for the fun of it” too cavalier for the consideration such an outfit warrants? After all, short of donning an authentic “hatomune do”, he is in danger of caricaturing something that used to be taken very seriously.

These are all fair questions. Yet denigration would seem to be an overly harsh indictment. (Generally-speaking, being inconsiderate is not tantamount to being unethical.) Yet the way Cul-Ap-phobes ramble on about such incidents, one would think a grave moral transgression has occurred...whereby members of the source-culture have actually incurred harm.

Such accusations, assuming they are sincere (which is not always the case), stem more from neurosis than they do from a bold show of rectitude. It could even be said that it is the ACCUSATION ITSELF that is doing the real damage. For it encourages trepidation in those who are curious about other cultures...yet are reticent to do anything that might be construed as untoward. We are expected, it seems, to forget how commonplace cultural exchange has been since the beginning of time.

Upon even cursory scrutiny, we find that those who cry “politically incorrect” typically have laughably petty grievances. So far as they are concerned, there is a bone to pick around every corner. Take, for instance, grievances about the portrayal of colored people in the HBO series, “Game of Thrones”—a mythical land based on medieval European tropes. (The show was itself adapted from the novel series, “A Song Of Ice And Fire”, which did not pretend to be doing anything other than trafficking in stereotypes in a gratuitously titillating fashion.) Those griping about said television show neglected to note that the beautiful, noble Dornish warrior sisters—like the “unsullied” and Dothraki of Essos—did, indeed, have darker skin. But were they REALLY concerned about a fantasy-world denigrating entire races?

It seems not. After all, similar complainants pretend not to understand why elves and mermaids (mythical creatures) can be white or East Asian, but not black. {4} Presumably, these are the same people who claim to be “offended” that there were no dark-skinned elves in “The Lord of the Rings”. Shall we also be dismayed by the fact that so few Punjabis are cast as Vikings? (!)

Whether or not the figure in question is fictional is beside the point. The Greek gods were—in fact—NOT East Asian; so it would be peculiar to portray, say, Aphrodite as Japanese in a production that deigns to depict Greek myth. Even so, there is no problem with Asians dressing up as Aphrodite “just for fun”. How shall we account for this discrepant assessment? There are two different criteria at play here. As it turns out, costumes can be used either for portrayal (where fidelity to the folklore IS important) or for recreational caricature (where there is no pretense of fidelity to the folklore invoked).

Here is where we encounter the shaky basis for Cul-Ap-phobia. It is fair to say that, when it comes to the PORTRAYAL OF certain things, it is important to maintain ethnic fidelity. For instance, a black vampire makes about as much sense as a Nordic Ninja or a Siamese Santa Claus. This should NOT prevent Scandinavians from dressing up as Ninjas or people in Thailand from wearing Santa Claus costumes “just for the fun of it”. But is SHOULD prevent those deigning to proffer a serious portrayal of medieval Japanese culture or of “Western” Christmas traditions from engaging in cultural mis-representation.

When playing dress-up (“cos-play” in the current lingo) that involves personages from other cultures, there is no pretense to ethnic fidelity. People are, as it were, just playing around. That is to say: They are doing so just for the fun of it. This is why it is fine for a non-Native American to dress up as Pocahontas for a festive occasion (where there is no pretense of ethnic fidelity)...even as it is wrong to cast a non-Chinese actress as Mulan in a film (where there IS a responsibility to maintain ethnic fidelity). The former is a matter of festivity, the latter is a matter of dishonesty.

So, yes, Disney can make a live-action version of Mulan for an audience dominated by WASPs; but only if they make an honest effort to do the tale’s legacy justice (and give credit where credit is due). This means not betraying the spirit of the story; and not pretending that Mulan was anything but Chinese. Casting anyone but a genuinely Chinese actress to play the role would, indeed, be an outrage.

This principle can be illustrated by making further queries. Shall we pretend that Alexander the Great was Swahili or that Jesus of Nazareth was Slavic? To do so would be factually inaccurate. But this should not prevent Africans from donning Macedonian warrior costumes or the Irish from dressing up as the Messiah.

In the event that there is any pretense of ethnic fidelity, an accurate characterization is warranted. This is not rocket science. If one is going to do a biopic on Martin Luther King Jr., casting Jackie Chan in the lead role is probably not the most prudent choice. Why not? Because the famous American civil rights activist wasn’t Cantonese. Simply noticing this is not a slight against everyone from Hong Kong. {15}

Ethnic fidelity is important; yet it does not preclude the prerogative to engage in play-acting (“cos-play” for idle amusement). Hence we have two different scenarios:

1. Upholding fidelity to ethnic exigencies when purporting to portray what are cultural realities.
2. Casually participating in exogenous cultural elements—be it sartorial, musical, culinary, literary, or anything else.

The imperative of (A) is not mutually exclusive with the prerogative to engage in (B). The former involves responsibilities; the latter involves liberties.

There is nothing inherently profane about playful experimentation—even if done puckishly, with a wink and a nudge. Almost none of those who are playing dress-up are seeking to MOCK the thing they are ostensibly EMBRACING. In the event “cos-play” is done a waggish manner, we mustn’t ascribe ill-intent to what is—more often than not—little more than irreverent playfulness. For what is “all in good fun” for one party may be an intolerable mischief to another. Therefore any given party’s sensibilities cannot be the ultimate standard by which any given behavior is proscribed.

The inconsistent standards of an anti-Cul-Ap crusade become painfully evident the moment we start applying them universally. So far as Halloween costumes go, culture-segregationists seem not to consider donning lederhosen a mockery of Bavarians...or wearing a kilt a mockery of the Scots...or dressing up as “Swiss Miss” a mockery of the Schweizer...to say nothing of pirates and ninjas and gypsies. But why not? Because, like all other indictments leveled by those obsessed with political correctness, the charge of illicit Cul-Ap is based on ineluctably inconsistent logic.

Case in point: When white women wear hoop earrings, it is an affront to Hispanic or African culture; yet if they embroider ‘Hello Kitty’ on their purses, well, then the Japanese have nothing to complain about. {3}

It soon becomes plain to see that the protocols of political correctness ONLY work by being highly selective. The modus operandi is invariably: “It’s fine if THIS group does it; but opprobrious if THAT

group does it.” Rarely do Scandinavians become incensed when Indians or Africans dress up as Vikings. Rarely do the Irish become incensed when Arabs or Asians dress up as leprechauns. And the Japanese have no scruples whatsoever with Western women dressing up as geishas. (Many Japanese even APPRECIATE the gesture.) Such widespread equanimity goes precisely to the crux of the matter: Grievances about Cul-Ap are revealed to be bogus when those doing the hemming and hawing claim to be offended ON BEHALF OF the (imagined) victims of the (imagined) crime...even when the real-world counterparts are not at all offended. (It requires a pathological conceit to indulge in vicarious offense-taking.) Such confectionary indignation is more a matter of self-ingratiation than it is about the sincere expression of moral opprobrium.

We rightfully take exception to those who deign to fleetingly experience the plight an oppressed / marginalized group by engaging in a superficial emulation of some element of that group’s culture...and who then pat themselves on the back for being empathetic. The problem with such poseurs is that they trivialize the tribulation of others by role-playing—as if temporarily adopting the outward accoutrements of a people was tantamount to feeling their pain. Such empty gestures are, indeed, problematic; as they are more pantomime than a genuine effort to empathize.

The best that might be said of posing is that it is very tacky. In some cases, the cavalier participation is a puerile attempt at exoticism—which invariably ends up as FAUX exoticism. The act is typically a gambit to assert a novel identity within one’s own community via superficial (that is: cosmetic) means. In doing this, one invariably plays into stereotypes. Even so, superficiality is not a crime, it is a character flaw. The issue at hand is obtuse thinking, not Cul-Ap.

The problem with trafficking in crude caricatures is that it is disingenuous. Even so, the protocols of political correctness are not a requirement for being honest. So the question remains: Shall we EVER consider it objectionable to flippantly “try on for size” a meme from a culture other than one’s own? Yes; if it is done IN ORDER TO demean. What is opprobrious about such instances, though, is the mean-spirited-ness; not the “appropriation” per se.

It IS possible to temporarily—even flippantly—“try on for size” a cultural element without being mean-spirited. Even blithe gestures can be done in good faith.

When it comes to the vilification of those engaged in Cul-Ap, it is INEVITABLE that standards will be applied ad hoc. And it is not merely that double standards are permitted; they are—effectively—MANDATED.

We can inquire further. Can Asians dress up as cowboys? Can Latinos dress up as Flappers? Can ANYONE dress up as slutty nuns? If not, then who shall be the official adjudicator when it comes to such matters? A subset of a group cannot claim to be offended on behalf the entire group. So do some people’s offense matter more than the fact that most others are NOT offended? How does the calculus of offense-taking work?

For those of us who genuinely care about culture, the primary point of concern is vulgarization—which can take the form of feckless misrepresentation or outright debasement. This pertains to portrayals (where there IS a pretense of ethnic fidelity), not to dressing up just for fun (where there is NOT any such pretense). Deliberately misrepresenting folklore is not so much pernicious as it is DAFT. There is nothing wrong with “cos-play” involving Bantu Vikings...or Dutch geishas...or Celtic sheiks; but we should not pretend that such cultural chimeras have any legitimacy beyond tongue-in-cheek “dress up” (that is: play-acting that is, as it were, all in good fun).

This is simply a matter of common sense: If one is directing a play about Zulu warriors, don't cast a Korean actor. A Nubian Queen? Don't cast a Russian actress. A documentary on Ashkinazim? Don't cast Bengalis. Whether or not the character is fictional or not is entirely beside the point.

It seems not to occur to those afflicted with Cul-Ap-phobia that the sharing of culture might be impelled by good will (or even just good cheer). King Arthur was Anglo-Saxon; it would be nutty to suppose otherwise. But why can't, say, Indonesian revelers dress up as English knights—if, that is, it's all in good fun?

The hysterics over Halloween costumes attests to the neurosis underlying Cul-Ap-phobia. The willingness to blithely mis-represent aspects of a culture's heritage attests to the hypocrisy of those same people. {15}

Those who are most irked by Cul-Ap exhibit a state of moral panic that is entirely disproportionate to the alleged transgression—as if Korean girls wearing sexy genie costumes on Halloween might be a worse problem for the world than, say, systemic socio-economic injustices. The “djinn” are from the Middle East, but no Persian or Arab has ever incurred harm from people dressing up as genies...any more than Jews would be harmed by people dressing up as “shedim” or Buddhists would be harmed by people dressing up as “asuras”. The only difference is that many Muslims STILL BELIEVE in “djinn”. That shouldn't be anyone else's problem.

Instances Of Commercialization:

What of the dysfunctions that are endemic to commercialization? At what point the commercialization of culture done is bad faith? This leads to another question: At what point do we qualify appropriation a commercial venture?

Making queries about concretes may help discern which principles are involved here. When those in “the West” take yoga classes, are they hijacking a key element of Hinduism...or are they simply adopting a practice they find advantageous? In a sense, American-style yoga IS a mere caricature of Indian culture: hokey, superficial, and—yes—commercialized. Yet it does not follow that there is something iniquitous afoot when someone opts to participate in a Vinyasa seminar.

Here's the thing: ALL culture is cheapened by being commercialized—regardless of who might be doing it. One need only experience a tourist-trap in ANY country to note that most countries often commercialize—and so cheapen—THEIR OWN cultures when it is economically advantageous.

Should the French be offended by the fact that the best cinematic production of “Les Liaisons Dangereuses” was made by Chinese director, Jin-ho Hur (“Wi-heom-han Gyan-gye”)? The Chinese rendition (2012) re-conceived Pierre Choderlos de Laclos' 18th-century tale to have transpired in Shanghai's high society of the 1930's. Hollywood had recently adapted it to New York City during the 1990's (“Cruel Intentions”). Yet Parisians were not up incensed.

Should the British be up in arms over the fact that the Americans ripped off “Romeo And Juliet” with the Broadway musical, “West Side Story”? The American classic (by Arthur Laurents) re-conceived Shakespeare's tale to have taken place in 1950's New York City (with Tony & Maria) instead of in medieval Verona, Italy. (The Montagues and the Capulets were replaced by the Jets and the Sharks.) The next year, the famed Japanese author, Yamada Futaro (a.k.a. “Yamada Seiya”) wrote “Koga Ninpocho” (a.k.a. “The Kouga Ninja Scrolls”), in which the ill-fated lovers (re-named Gennosuke and Oboro) were members of warring clans in feudal Japan c. 1600.

Meanwhile, the Broadway musical, “Hello Dolly” was lifted from a musical by the Viennese playwright, Johann Nestroy (via Thornton Wilder). No Austrian was exercised over this instance of theatrical appropriation. There was then an American version of the classic French novel “Phantom of the Opera” by Gaston Leroux. This did not elicit any acrimony from Parisians. In Russia, Nikolai Leskov appropriated Shakespeare for his “Lady Macbeth of the Mtensk District”. There was no outrage. Why not? Upon surveying the resplendent tapestry of the world’s artistic achievements, we can only conclude that the admixture of cultures should be encouraged.

Admittedly, Cul-Ap is not always an estimable affair. Richard Strauss may have approved of Stanley Kubrick using “Also Sprach Zarathustra” as the theme song for the film “2001: A Space Odyssey”. However, Nietzsche probably would NOT have approved of the musical theme to his magnum opus (which, sadly, he never had the chance to hear himself) being used for nationalistic or religious purposes, as it—unfortunately—often is. And while Tchaikovsky may have been fine with Disney using his material in “Fantasia”, Shakespeare may have balked at the plot of “Hamlet” being recruited for animated, singing animals in the Serengeti—as Disney opted to do with “The Lion King” (thus turning tragedy into triumph: an inspiring story for the kids).

It might also be noted that “The Lion King” amounted to a Westernized version of the Japanese film, “Kimba” from 1950 (replete with hallmark set-pieces), though Disney did not admit as much at the time. It could be argued that this makes the American film more a matter of plagiarism than it was of cultural appropriation. The irony here is that the creator of “Kimba”, Osamu Tezuka, had made Japanese versions of Bambi and Pinocchio in 1951. The difference is that Tezuka did so with permissions, and without any pretense of novelty. (In other words: He ADMITTED that he was engaging in Cul-Ap; reminding us that, at the end of the day, it is honesty that counts.)

Appropriation is sometimes more a matter of the CHEAPENING of culture-in-general (as with commercialization) than it is the judicious use of cultural elements. Thought-provoking commentaries on the “culture industry” (read: the commodification of culture) can be found in the writings of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (under the aegis of the Frankfurt School of critical theory); and provide worthwhile insights into this matter.

Hollywood has been festooned with Cul-Ap since its earliest days. In American cinema, some of the all-time classic Westerns were “Spaghetti Westerns”, so named because they were produced and/or directed by Italians. The acclaim of such films was in no way dampened by the fact that Europeans were “appropriating” the characters of the fabled “wild west” (i.e. overwrought folklore about the American frontier). Meanwhile, spaghetti is a staple of American cuisine which was “appropriated” from the Italians. This was not some premeditated exchange. Shall we wonder whether or not cowboys for pasta is a fair trade? (To be fair, Americans STARRED IN the Spaghetti Westerns, even as Italian food earned an exalted reputation worldwide.)

When it comes to “Westerns”, there was trans-cultural fertilization afoot in several other ways. The American classic “The Magnificent Seven” was an adaptation of Akira Kurosawa’s “Seven Samurai”. (Maclean’s “The Guns Of Navarone” was also an adaptation of “Seven Samurai”.) The Japanese had no problem with this. (Yes: the Japanese are to thank for one of America’s most beloved cowboy films.) Kurosawa’s films also served as the basis for the classic Western, “Fistful of Dollars” (“Yojin-bo”)...and even as inspiration for “Star Wars” (“The Hidden Fortress”). Is such cross-pollination a slight against either culture?

Meanwhile, when Kurosawa made his critically-acclaimed movie, “Ran”, nobody begrudged him for

having regurgitated Shakespeare's "King Lear"...which was itself adapted from Raphael Holinshed's hagiography of the Briton King known as "Leir". Kurosawa's "Ikiru" was a revamping of Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilyich". (Thank you, Russians.) And when he made "Throne Of Blood", nobody begrudged him for having riffed off of "Macbeth". (Human nature as it is, it could have been a Danish king or a Japanese Emperor.)

Thank heavens for thematic cross-pollination! Cultural elements, it turns out, are not commodities to be traded and bartered; they are PUBLIC GOODS...from which we all benefit. Meme-harvesting, it turns out, is the engine of cultural flourishing.

Granted, trans-cultural fertilization is not always reciprocal. Humans operate in a global meme-sphere, and find themselves incorporating various things from various places at various times for various reasons. And so uni-directional memetic transference does not necessarily indicate that some sort of domination is afoot. Much of cultural exchange is INVARIABLY unilateral, as it occurs extemporaneously.

In proscribing ALL Cul-Ap, we would be forced to concede that Disney was guilty of illicit Cul-Ap by making "Aladdin". But a problem arises: Appropriated from WHOM? In fact, "Aladdin" was not even authentically Arabian. The tale was a medieval European invention involving a fantastical caricature of Arabian culture (ref. "One Thousand and One Nights")...which was itself based on PERSIAN literature (namely: the medieval Pahlavi work, "Hazar Afsanah"). So who's the victim in such a case?

We can pose further queries about the commercialization of culture simply by surveying animated feature films. Was Disney guilty of Cul-Ap when it made...

- "Pinocchio" (*Italian*)
- "Pocahontas" (*Algonquian*)
- "Aladin" (*Arabian*)
- "The Emperor's New Groove" (*meso-American*)
- "The Princess and the Frog" (*African American*)
- "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" (*Romani*)
- "Beauty and the Beast" (*French*) {22}
- "Hercules" (*Greek*)
- "Mulan" (*Chinese*)
- "Tangled" (*German / Dutch*)
- "The Little Mermaid" (*Danish*) {4}
- "Brave" (*Celtic*)
- "Frozen" (*Swedish / Norwegian*)
- "Moana" (*Polynesian*)
- "Coco" (*Mexican*)

...or "Saludos Amigos" starring Donald Duck (*Latin American*) ?

How about when Dreamworks made "Prince of Egypt" (*Hebrew*) ? How about when 20th Century Fox made "Anastasia" (*Russian*) ? How about when Sony made "Hotel Transylvania" (*Romanian*) ? How about when American film-makers made "Kubo and the Two Strings" (*Japanese*) ? How about when Irish film-makers made "The Breadwinner" (*Afghan*) ? What's going on here?

Granted, the use of cultural leitmotifs in such films was more a matter of unsanctioned culture-INVOCATION than it was a matter of appropriation. The fact remains, though, that most were rather puerile caricatures of the cultures they deigned to represent. Shall we suppose that the above companies

were pillaging the world's cultures to make animated films? {5}

While these were all commercial productions done primarily for their entertainment value (and, perhaps, with an ancillary concern for other cultures), it is no secret that they were created for financial gain. One might say such products were done “all in good fun”, as the saying goes; yet the question persists: Were these movies exploitative? Did any of them demean or trivialize the source-culture? Puerile—and inaccurate—as they may have been, we might consider that they served other purposes (e.g. spurring curiosity about alternate cultures amongst a youthful audience). In the grand scheme of things, all these animated films were relatively anodyne.

By contrast, Disney served only as the distributor (and English language over-dubber) for Japanese films like “Ponyo”, “Princess Mononoke”, and “Spirited Away”. In such cases, the most significant thing that was being appropriated was Hollywood's muscle...BY the Japanese. So who was exploiting who?

In 2004, renown director Hayao Miyazaki made the blockbuster hit, “Howl's Moving Castle”...which was “appropriated” (with consent) from British author, Diana Wynne Jones. Shall this be given a pass simply because Jones was compensated handsomely? (Consent is much easier when something is treated as intellectual property.) Is Cul-Ap, then, just about MONEY—an act that is reduce-able to a financial transaction?

We've already mentioned the Chinese adaptation of “Dangerous Liaisons”, which was originally French...before it was Americanized. As I write this, the stewards of the Japanese blockbuster, “Kimi no Na-wa” [Your Name] INSISTED that Hollywood producers render the film in a (live-action) Western idiom. Meanwhile, Hollywood has recently adapted the acclaimed French film “Intouchables” (as “The Upside”) without eliciting any accusations of illicit Cul-Ap from the French.

These are not isolated incidents. The same went for adaptations of:

- The French “La Cage aux Folles” (as “The Birdcage”)
- The German “Wings Of Desire” (as “City Of Angels”)
- The Italian “Profumo di donna” (as “The Scent Of A Woman”)
- The Spanish “Abre los Ojos” (as “Vanilla Sky”)
- The Swedish “Let The Right One In” (as “Let Me In”)
- The Norwegian “Kraftidioten” (as “Cold Pursuit”)
- The Indian “Parinda” (as “Broken Horses”)
- The Cantonese “Internal Affairs” (as “The Departed”)
- The Japanese “Ju-on” (as “The Grudge”)
- The Korean “Oldu-boi” (as “Oldboy”)

Hollywood is not the only participant in cinematic Cul-Ap. Bollywood recently did an Indian rendering of Thomas Hardy's “Tess of the d'Urbervilles” (“Trishna”) without any recriminations from the Brits. And we might ask: When the French re-did the Japanese film, “Himitsu” as “Si J'étais Toi”, were the Japanese being taken advantage of by heedless Francophiles?

To the objection that film adaptations don't count as (illicit) “cultural appropriation”, the only response is: Given the logic undergirding Cul-Ap-phobia, how could they possibly NOT be? Granted, films are intellectual property; so rights to them can be bought and sold. But are we to suppose that CLASSIC films (all of these were critically-acclaimed in their original forms) are not an integral part of the source-culture? It is an ineluctable fact that Hollywood was appropriating something in each of these cases. That it was done purely for financial gain arguably makes it WORSE. To treat commercialization as a means of

exculpation from the charge seems odd. In any case, all these cases of Cul-Ap were innocuous...which reminds us that Cul-Ap is more ubiquitous than we often realize.

So where does this leave us? “Cultural appropriation, you say? Well, by all means!” is the most reasonable retort to charges of Cul-Ap. And so, it turns out, there was nothing iniquitous about Disney making an animated version of “Cinderella”...even without permission from the world’s Italians (who first offered the world the tale of the “Cinder” maiden). Were Americans aware that the vaunted movie studio was using material from German authors (“Aschenputtel” by the Brothers Grimm c.1812)? And that the Brothers Grimm had taken it from a French author (Charles Perrault’s “Cendrillon” from his 1697 “Contes du Temps Passé”)? And that Perrault had taken it from a Neapolitan author (Giambattista Basile’s “Cenerentola”, included in his 1634 anthology, the Pentamerone)? Yet no Italian was offended. In any case, Basile was likely inspired by a recounting of the tales of “Cupid and Psyche” by the Roman writer, Apuleius of Numidia. And Apuleius was likely doing a rendering of an even older GREEK legend (that of the slave-girl, Rhodopis, who won the love of the Egyptian king in the 7th century B.C.) It’s Cul-Ap all the way back!

Nor were many fans of this cherished fairytale aware that many other cultures had ALREADY “appropriated” the character of the “Cinder” maiden:

- **Norwegians** (“Katie Woodencloak”)
- **Irish** (“Ashy Pel”)
- **Jewish Poles** (“Raisel”)
- **Georgians** (“Conkijajgharuna”)
- **Serbians** (“Pepelyouga”)
- **Filipinos** (“Maria and the Golden Slipper”)

Even the Russians incorporated the character into legends of “Baba Yaga”. YET...according to Cul-Ap-phobes, the Greeks should have sequestered the leitmotif during its initial run in Classical Antiquity—staking their claim on the folktale so that none of these other pesky cultures could have gotten their grubby hands on it (and refashioned it to suit their own respective cultures). Heaven forbid. {19}

When Woody Allen used Rhapsody in Blue for the score of his film, “Manhattan”, he was paying tribute to a fellow Jewish New Yorker, Jacob Gershowitz (a.k.a. “George Gershwin”); but Woody Allen needn’t have been EITHER a New Yorker OR Jewish to have done this. According to the contorted logic of Cul-Ap-phobia, though, had the producer / director of the film been a WASP, something iniquitous may have been afoot. All that is beside the point anyway, as Gershwin HIMSELF engaged in Cul-Ap, employing musical idioms from the rhythm and blues pioneered by African Americans.

The re-purposing of cultural elements has recently been given the name “remix culture”. This has generally been considered a kind of innovation; and thus a salutary development—be it in music, architecture, the culinary arts, the visual arts, or clothing design.

Games are another illustration of how Cul-Ap is typically benign. The Russians play chess even though the game was originally Indian.

The game’s origin was in India in the early 6th century (during the Gupta epoch); and was known as “c[h]atu-[r]anga” (“four arms” in Sanskrit); and was possibly Babylonian (Assyrian) prior to that. Chaturanga led to various other games: “xiang-qi” (Chinese), “jang-gi” (Korean), “sho-gi” (Japanese), “sittuyin” (Burmese), and “mak-ruk” (Siamese). It was adapted by the Sassanians, and eventually popularized in Persia as “chatrang” (later rendered “shatranj” in Arabic). The term “rook” derives from the

Middle Persian “rukḥ”, meaning chariot. The “bishop” was originally an elephant (“fil”); the “knight” was originally a horse (“asp”); and the king was originally a “shah”.

Shall Persians NOW be offended that the Occident switched their elephants to clerics? (One might say that taking a sacred animal and turning it into an ecclesiastical figure was a form of cultural vandalism.) As it turns out, nobody cares. Why not? Because cultural adaptation is what happens with EVERYTHING.

As we all know, the game was eventually brought to Europe via Andalusia by the Muslims. (How the meme migrated from the Moors to the Russians is anyone’s guess.)

The number of Indians up in arms over this? Zero.

Rummy is another case in point. The Israeli game, “rummikub” was inspired by the well-known card-game, “gin rummy”...which was, in turn, based on the French game “conquian”...which was itself an adaptation of the (Qing) Chinese game, “mahjong”. The number of Chinese up in arms over this? Zero.

And that’s not the end of it. We find that this lineage of cultural appropriation continued elsewhere. For the Indian game, “Paplu” is a spin-off of “gin rummy” as well. Like any other meme, whom the meme has been appropriated FROM is based on where we draw the line in history. No French are incensed at Indians by this...just as nobody in China is incensed at anybody in France.

Playing cards derived from the medieval Chinese game, “Tien Gow” [Heaven Nine], which dates back to the 12th century. It eventually came to Europe via the Mamluks. So whether you happen to be playing “Go Fish” or “Canasta”, you are engaging in Cul-Ap...though now with Occident-style kings, queens, jokers, and knaves (rendered “jacks”).

That Cul-Ap was allowed to occur in all these places should be seen—according to the logic of Cul-Ap-phobes—as a travesty. But it wasn’t. Should someone in the future opt to “appropriate” the Indian game “Paplu”, then so be it.

A Case of Narcissism (Multi-Culturalism vs. Cultural Relativism):

Even hallowed folklore is invariably the product of Cul-Ap. So to eschew Cul-Ap actually denies the very basis for the culture one deigns to protect. Cul-Ap, it turns out, is generally benign; and oftentimes beneficial...even when it involves sacred traditions. For EVEN THEN, Cul-Ap was likely how those traditions came to be in the first place. So why all the fuss?

Much of the grievance expressed regarding this hobgoblin seems to be based not on unilateral memetic transference, but on the fact that certain instances of Cul-Ap happen to bother some people sometimes. Offense-taking, then, is the issue; not Cul-Ap per se. My theory is that the majority of anti-Cul-Ap hysteria is insincere; and results from the puritanical sensibilities—and chronic peevishness—endemic to political correctness.

Cul-Ap has—regrettably—become one of the more handy munitions in the arsenal of p.c. vigilantes. Certain expression is considered odious simply because it OFFENDS someone. Inter-cultural mimesis is deemed tantamount to traducement...even INJURY. Those who perceive themselves as having been mocked ascribe dubious intentions to whomever is seen as “crossing the line”. The idea, then, is to prevent anyone from ever being disconcerted.

With the mere wave of a magic wand, those hell-bent on being churlish can turn even the most innocuous

piece of expression into a devastating infraction. A professed sense of discomfiture can be wielded as a rhetorical cudgel...which can then be used to bludgeon anyone with whom one opts to take exception. The moment “offense” is used in this manner, we discover that it is invariably invoked in place of sound argumentation.

But we must ask: Shall censorship be exacted according to some designated party’s sensibilities? Who shall be the official arbiters of meme-allocation? Shall everyone else on Earth be at the mercy of THEIR sensibilities? To countenance regulation on Cul-Ap requires there to be gate-keepers of cultural transference...which requires that the rest of us cede sovereignty over our own lives to those who claim to know better.

A logistical problem arises, as one party’s subjective state is used to impose restrictions / obligations on everyone else. Any bystander is invited to allege injury due to a bout of discomfiture. But the scene of the crime ends up being solely in one’s own mind.

According to this modus operandi, one can whimsically designate anything a sacred cow...and thereby render certain acts off-limits to everyone else. This attests to the narcissism underlying Cul-Ap-phobia: “It bothers me. Therefore nobody should ever be allowed to do it.” (The collective version of this is no better: “The gesture offends certain people, therefore it must be considered odious by everyone on the planet.”)

Here, narcissism does not necessarily involve VANITY (which was Narcissus’ problem); it is more a way of viewing the world: “It’s all about ME; and how I happen to feel.” (The etymology of “narcissism” notwithstanding, the use of the term in psychology has little to do with vanity.) Here, everyone is expected to cater to a given party’s subjective state. But to suppose that one party’s sentiment is translatable to a universal ethical mandate is untenable—as it cannot help but lead to an anarchy of incompatible moral standards, each claiming precedence.

Such subjectivism-gone-haywire privileges whimsy—nay, caprice—over deliberation; which leads to formidable problems. How shall we proceed? Should tacky-ness be forbidden? Unseemliness? Even if the aim is to make the agora more agreeable to EVERYONE’S taste, we must still ask: Is it possible to eradicate poor taste by forbidding it? Can we vanquish those who are uncouth by tsk-tsk-tsk-ing them into oblivion?

It is de rigueur amongst aficionados of p.c. to pass self-serving endeavors off as a public service. (Virtue signaling is, after all, a kind of preening.) Here, propriety is (mis)construed as probity. Like persnickety schoolmarms with an ax to grind, the self-styled Inquisitors of Cul-Ap take it upon themselves to police the agora, seeking to cleanse it of (perceived) improprieties. In a fit of self-righteous indignation, they carry out this mission by leveling a litany of denunciations in a frenzy of finger-wagging; as if scolding had magical didactic properties.

Anti-Cul-Ap crusaders imagine themselves to be de-contaminating the public discourse in a flourish of virtue-signaling, construing their pettifogging as some kind of moral intrepidity. (Virtue-signaling is about the signaling, not about the virtue.) They seek out an excuse to be offended; then feel empowered by having taken offense at any triviality they can find. They then indulge in a paroxysm of pearl-clutching...before embarking on their next ax-grinding expedition.

Semiotic prudery is every bit as retrograde sexual prudery. Alas, one is obliged to undertake this campaign of discursive de-contamination as if, by deploying a raft of sanctimonious asseverations, one could somehow make the world a better place. As it turns out, though, what is seen as contamination is often just the messy—often clumsy—intercourse endemic to pandemic free expression.

But there are perks to participating in this charade. An excuse to grouse about imaginary crimes is an occasion for Cul-Ap-phobes to congratulate themselves for standing up for some illusory ideal (an ideal that, in their own minds, ONLY THEY are qualified to fully comprehend). Once one has adopted this attitude, a cloudy day can be seen as a sign of a sinister plot to sully another culture. Even on the sunniest day, they see ominous storm-clouds of oppression forebodingly gathering on the memetic horizon, threatening the fabric of civil society.

The Cul-Ap-phobe's exhibition of moral panic, then, is just moral preening. They recognize that, in the current climate, a display of virtue-signaling affords one an opportunity to pat oneself on the back for upholding some fatuous notion of social justice. It is little more than theatrics. The most churlish practitioners of this craft are, it seems, DETERMINED to be offended. By what? Well, by SOMETHING. ANYTHING. The most vociferous p.c.-mongers could look at a potted plant and see a devious scheme of exploitation.

Political correctness, we should bear in mind, is entirely performative in nature; as it is more about keeping up appearances (that is: sticking to the assigned script) than it is about underlying moral principles. Feigning outrage is a way to earn approval from those participating in the same charade. Not only do the protocols of p.c. incentivize people to be tetchy, such protocols exhort people to put on airs. Morality becomes a matter of keeping up appearances, following whatever choreography has been prescribed by the self-appointed impresarios of propriety. The result of this charade is a queer combination of peevish-ness and sanctimony.

What animates such a counter-productive enterprise? Anti-Cul-Ap crusaders find themselves operating in an incentive structure that has been designed to promote—and reward—a priggish disposition. When it comes to virtue-signaling, the intent is to arrogate social capital to oneself—from like-minded compatriots—simply by shaming others. Shaming them for what? Well, for what amounts to blasphemy—as defined by like-minded compatriots. Such posturing requires no ACTUAL rectitude. For an obsession with etiquette does nothing to engender probity; it simply obliges everyone to—well—keep up appearances.

By participating in this pageant of virtue-signaling, one can't help but enter into any interaction with a chip on one's shoulder. Taboos can be conjured out of thin air; and one can then pat oneself on the back for enforcing them ad hoc. The more ornery commissioners of these confabulated strictures are prepared to conduct an auto-de-fé whenever even a minor infraction is encountered. An anti-Cul-Ap crusade ends up being more a hustle than a sincere effort to foster civility.

So for the p.c. aficionado, propriety is king. But here's the thing: Obsessing over propriety does nothing to promote the commonweal; it only obliges everyone to PERFORM in the prescribed manner. (To reiterate: p.c. is entirely performative in nature, and has nothing to do with rectitude.) People participate in the charade not to be better people, but simply to earn approval—that is: to feel VALIDATED by compatriots. To thrive in such environs, everyone is obliged to put on airs (while disregarding moral principle).

In this scenario, participants are adjured to exalt the latest rules of propriety; yet nobody is actually moved to ground their deeds in moral principles, which are timeless and not at the mercy of social pressures. In other words, participants are moved to SIGNAL that they are “with the program”. Doing so requires feigning contempt for anyone who breeches whatever the etiquette du jour happens to be. Those who refuse to play along are summarily scorned—even ostracized. (Shame is the primary weapon of the p.c.-monger.)

Characterized as it is by a mindset that is both authoritarian and puritanical, political correctness—replete

with its step-child, identity politics—is a patently right-wing phenomenon. It is, in effect, illiberalism pretending to be liberal. One might consider p.c. a kind of inverted liberalism with pseudo-latitude window-dressing. In sum: Those who countenance p.c. are not genuine Progressives; they are imposters—nay: petty, pusillanimous imposters.

What makes p.c.—especially identity politics—so insidious is that it often masquerades as a quasi-Progressive enterprise. If one ever deigned to sabotage Progressivism from within, instituting a strict regime of p.c. would be the optimal way of doing so.

It quickly becomes plain to see that these Potemkin “Progressives” are, in fact, RE-gressives. They care nothing for cosmopolitan ideals; they simply re-define the terms of tribalism.

The exaltation of manufactured vexation has made offense-taking an avocation for p.c. aficionados. For for the vituperative anti-Cul-Ap crusader, taking offense is seen as taking a moral stand. But rather than their grievance being a mark of an intrepid disposition, it is nothing more than a craven emotive ejaculation. Such contrived indignation not only misses its mark, it ends up having the opposite of the intended effect: sowing division instead of solidarity. This irony seems to be lost on those swept up in anti-Cul-Ap hysteria.

No matter. The demonization of Cul-Ap is a chance for the haughty proprietors of cultural demarcation to engage in boorish rants about how some people are not staying in their own lane (a lane to which they have been assigned by accident of birth). Pearl-clutching is passed off as a sign of injury; hand-waving is passed off as sound argumentation. Having indulged in this hammy display of histrionics, the anti-Cul-Ap crusader can then congratulate himself for—in his own eyes—having boldly expunged a raft of chimerical social injustices from the agora.

All the while, Cul-Ap-phobes are blissfully unaware of the self-contradictions in their condemnations. (Ideological zeal, it seems, is like Novocain for cognitive dissonance.) The grievances of the self-appointed guardians of (unsullied) culture have little to do with respecting culture; yet they are thoroughly convinced that their mission is ALL ABOUT respect for culture. What is lost on them is that having (actual) respect for culture involves respecting how cultures emerge in the first place. To respect culture QUA CULTURE, one must respect the process that creates it.

Most of those bewitched by p.c.-mania are determined to be offended. It is no wonder, then, that a veritable cottage industry of offense-taking has emerged in p.c. circles. People wear their contrived “offense” like a badge of honor. And so it goes. Cul-Ap-phobia is often more about scoring points in some kind of virtue-signaling tournament than it is about promoting civility. Such posturing is the hallmark of political correctness. After all, p.c. is entirely performative in nature; and stems from a need to be recognized as one of the good guys (which is to say: it stems from narcissism). At the end of the day, p.c. amounts to little more than a schmaltzy exhibition: a self-ingratiating display that has nothing to do with rectitude. (Probity, we should bear in mind, has nothing to do with earning approval from peers.)

An anti-Cul-Ap crusade is more about theatrics than it is about ethics. Participants in this charade are eager to find an excuse—ANY excuse, no matter how fatuous—to claim “offense” in a gambit to telegraph their “woke-ness”. Alas. Such cloying pretense becomes de rigueur when p.c. governs public discourse. One has done nothing to bolster the commonweal, but at least one has gotten some attention.

Offense-taking also comes in handy as a discursive redoubt. Whenever “I feel offended” is wielded by an interlocutor as an offensive maneuver, it is done in a last-ditch effort to stand one’s ground when no argument is available to support one’s position. For lack of anything intelligent to say, one can simply

claim “offense”; then avoid conceding that one has no solid grounds for taking the stance that one has taken. This is a very enticing proposition for those who have nothing erudite to contribute to the public discourse (yet nevertheless yearn to be noticed).

How can we be so sure that anti-Cul-Ap hysteria is much ado about nothing? The experiment has been run countless times, so it is not difficult to simply observe. When a non-Chinese female dons a “cheong-sam” (a.k.a. “chi-pao”), what actually happens? Even as p.c.-mongers rant about the horrors of Cul-Ap, the vast majority of Chinese (the alleged victims) see the gesture for what it really is: a sign of cultural appreciation—even TRIBUTE. Such vicarious offense-taking reveals not only the neurotic disposition of those who are enamored with political correctness; it exposes the fatuity of using “cultural appropriation” as an indictment.

But wait. As it turns out, the Han Chinese THEMSELVES appropriated the “cheong-sam”. They adopted it from the Manchu peoples of the northeast, who were ethnic Jurchen. And even then, the sartorial style originated during the Liao dynasty...which was Khitan (a nomadic Mongolic people related to the Xianbei). Shall modern-day Chinese be apologizing to the Manchurians? The irony is that subsequent designs of the dress were influenced in large part by the fashions of the OCCIDENT...which, ironically enough, is one of the reasons it was banned in Maoist China. That’s right. The Chinese DELIBERATELY sought to Westernize the design.

The “cheong-sam” is a beautiful dress for all women; and we should only celebrate the fact that more women around the world are incorporating it into their fashion repertoire.

The problem with Cul-Ap, the story goes, is that by simply engaging in the act, one is according insufficient respect to the source-culture. The idea is that to engage in Cul-Ap is to evince an intolerably cavalier attitude toward others’ cultural identities. Yet not all Cul-Ap is done heedless of the source-culture; and—in any case—most ACTUAL instances of derogation do not involve Cul-Ap. Cultural transference is about affinities; and exploitation rarely involves an effort to forge affinity. So Cul-Ap-phobes are left to explain how, exactly, Cul-Ap is tantamount to exploitation.

There is another explanation for the penchant to hold Cul-Ap in contempt; and to summarily vilify anyone who engages in it. There seems to exist a fear of comparing cultural elements across cultures. Such comparisons are sacrilege for cultural relativists (who demand that EVERYTHING be shown deference). For them, indiscriminate “respect” for ALL CULTURAL ELEMENTS EVERYWHERE, no matter how dysfunctional, is mandated. Never mind that promiscuously allotted respect renders the exhibition of respect an empty gesture. (Only when judiciously granted does respect mean anything. For respect that is worthwhile is borne of discernment.)

Relativism lies at the root of this peccadillo. For to make comparisons of analogous elements between cultures is to risk assessing the relative MERITS OF those cultural elements; and so must be seen as a form of chauvinism. The supposition—entirely groundless—is that people derive their humanity EXPLICITLY FROM the designated element; and so are INHERENTLY tied to it as if by some cosmic force. Everyone on the planet is therefore obligated to show “respect” for the element so as to avoid hurting the people who identify themselves with it. (Make fun of tacos, and one is impugning all Mexicans.)

In the most outrageous instances of anti-Cul-Ap hysteria, comparative critiques of analogous cultural elements is portrayed as an oblique form of “bigotry” (against those who espouse the element deemed inferior). It’s as if one could be bigoted against a custom; or even racist against a MEME. And so making judgements about the relative merits of this or that custom is seen as a kind of hubris. Those engaged in such heretical critiques are even at risk of being assailed for pointing out incontrovertible cultural

tendencies (viz. statistical realities that stem directly from prevailing social norms; i.e. those which are embedded in the ambient culture). For such critiques involve JUDGEMENT; and judgement—especially when it involves brute candor—is off-limits in some circles.

So we find ourselves dealing with a charge that only makes sense if one denies the existence of universal standards. The cultural relativist must realize, though, that treating everything as sacrosanct does not help ANYBODY. Pretending that everything has comparable moral valence—and so must be treated with moral parity—is untenable. Some cultural elements ARE objectively better / worse than others; and the standard by which we determine this cannot itself be derived from how much stock any given party happens to place on them. The notion that there can be no universal standards is not only inimical to cosmopolitanism; it is at odds with Reality.

Stating that something is part of someone’s culture is not to exempt it from judgement. Civic responsibility demands that we assay which memes most conduce to the kind of society to which we all—as fellow humans—aspire. This attains irrespective of whether the meme is from our own or another’s culture. What we want to avoid is cultural CHAUVINISM: the idea that certain memes are better simply by dint of the fact that they happen to come from a certain (i.e. our own) culture.

We cannot pick the culture we were born into; but we CAN choose what we do with that culture. There has never existed a culture that was pre-ordained; or a person that is tied by some ethereal cosmic decree to this or that culture. The idea, then, is not to compare cultures wholesale (as if any given culture was destined to be as it eventually came to be). Rather, it is to compare analogous memes—on a case-by-case basis—on their own merits (rather than according to the culture with which they happen to be affiliated, which is—after all—merely an accident of history). In doing so, it helps to bear in mind that there is nothing inevitable—or ineluctable—about a given culture.

The trappings of ethno-centricity can be found within every ethnic group. Each culture deals with its own dysfunction in its own way...to varying degrees of success. Suffice to say: There are pitfalls everywhere. Those affiliated with any given culture can’t help but contend with the temptation to become self-absorbed; and thereby become smitten with maintaining both a sense of purity and of exclusivity (only WE are entitled to such and such). It should be borne in mind that racial purity blurs into ethnic purity, which—in turn—blurs into cultural purity. The prohibition of Cul-Ap entails championing a chronic parochialism...all in the name of “staying in our own lanes”. {23} Think of all the scenarios in which we have heard some group decree: “Nobody else should be allowed to do this.” Has such decree ever been issued for noble reasons? Has it ever led to good things? In the final analysis, much of the hubbub over Cul-Ap stems from a veiled sense of entitlement.

Indulging in a tribalistic mindset is the most expedient way out of the responsibility to think for oneself. Meanwhile, whenever there is a preoccupation with the exalted status of the in-group’s rightful claims, the vile penchant for ethno-centricity is always lurking beneath the surface. This is especially so when a high degree of parochialism prevails. In the event that others fail to honor the exaltation of one’s own tribe, one can bask in a warm bath of one’s own crocodile tears...and thereby elicit sympathy for one’s veiled cupidity. (Hubris is tolerated so long as it can be disguised as humility.)

There’s another problem with a program of memetic sequestration. We short-change the people affiliated with a culture—ANY culture—by supposing they are incapable of overcoming their own cultural deficiencies; and embracing things that might not be indigenous. As it turns out, we are all human, and so all possess the same capacities to recognize universals. For, as human beings, we—every last one of us—have access to immutable principles. Immutable principles, by definition, transcend any and all cultures. (Immutable principles are NOT social constructs; whereas the elements of any given culture are

ONLY social constructs...much as some might like to believe their own sacralized customs are somehow hardwired into the cosmic order.) One only demeans an ethnic group by supposing its members are uniquely incapable of grasping what are categorically universal principles. The denial of universals is sheer folly—the hallmark of that untenable epistemological blunder: relativism.

Cultural relativism, it should be noted, is not the same as multi-culturalism. Multi-culturalism refers to an embrace of ethnic diversity—an embrace, mind you, that involves a sincere interest in learning about other cultures. Cultural relativism, though, does not require one to know ANYTHING about—nor genuinely CARE about—ANY cultures. Cultural relativism—like ALL relativism—is characterized only by a dereliction of intellectual integrity.

Happily, multi-culturalism—an integral part of cosmopolitanism, it should be noted—neither requires nor entails one to indulge in cultural relativism. While discrimination between people is a bad thing (when predicated on anything other than merit), discrimination between memes is an integral part of deliberative democracy; and routine in a free (read: open) society. Estimable cases of discrimination are invariably based on standards that are categorically universal. Recognizing when one cultural element is more conducive to the commonweal than another is not a conceit; it is the mark of a discerning mind.

Cultural relativism is a gross failure of intellectual curiosity—not to mention a complete abdication of rectitude. (The same might be said of epistemic relativism and its demented cousin, moral relativism.) It is also a mark of mental laziness. After all, cognitive exertion is required to critically evaluate any given culture—especially one’s own; and then make judgements about any given cultural element according to universal standards. (A modicum of perspicacity also helps.) Note that doing so is NEVER about judging a culture wholesale; as each element must be assessed individually, on its own merits. Being multifaceted, ANY culture is—invariably—a mixture of better and worse facets. (A culture is not rendered null simply by modifying one of its constituent elements...or by introducing a NEW element.)

Here, as anywhere, relativism is a cop-out. After all, mental discipline can be extremely difficult; especially when it requires one to contend with deeply entrenched biases, and overcome conflicts of interest. For we ALL—every last one of us—have vested interests that sabotage even the most sincere attempts at objectivity.

But the key here is intellectual curiosity (that is: giving a shit about other cultures). As we find upon even cursory scrutiny, those who level charges of illicit Cul-Ap have no sincere desire to effect inter-cultural comity. (They don’t even have a genuine interest in learning about other cultures.) Mutual understanding is not their goal. Their primary objective is to cavil; and thereby earn brownie points from like-minded compatriots for “fighting the good fight” against those dastardly cultural appropriators. But the fact of the matter remains: Engaging in an anti-Cul-Ap crusade has NOTHING to do with giving a shit about other cultures.

It is crucial to recognize the ideological distinction between multi-culturalism and cultural relativism if one is to understand Cul-Ap-phobia. Multi-culturalism is the hallmark of cosmopolitanism. Cultural relativism is inimical to cosmopolitanism. This is a difference worth recognizing. These two oft-discussed-yet-little-understood ideals, then, are unrelated both logistically and morally. Alas, it is a common mistake on the part of both overt Reactionaries and those on the regressive “Left” (that is: covert Reactionaries) to conflate multi-culturalism and cultural relativism—an irony that is lost on both contingents.

One does not support a culture by refusing to be critical of it. When assaying any given culture, we invariably find that both human wisdom and human folly are endemic to CULTURE PER SE.

Generally speaking, one should bring a critical eye to that which one most cares about. (High standards show respect.) “I think highly of you, so I expect more from you” is the spirit behind the adage: “Dissent is the highest form of patriotism.” This is why we are hardest on those we love / esteem. Here, though, we are not referring merely to kin, or even to fellow denizens of a nation-State; we are referring to all humans...as FELLOW HUMANS. We may not all share a family or nationality, but we all share our humanity. And that fact must inform all interaction.

Thoughtfully critiquing X is indicative of—as it were—giving a shit about X. Identifying the salubrious aspects *as well as the dysfunctions* of a given culture is something that ANYONE is capable of doing; as humanist standards are transcendentally prior to social constructs...which are, after all, just historical accidents. We are all human, so we are all—pace those with mental handicaps and/or psychopathy—equipped with the requisite cognitive faculties AND moral intuitions to engage in such a critique. Accident of birth does not confer upon anyone a unique Providential appanage. For each one of us, all memes present themselves for audit. (I explore this point at length in my essay: “Contra Identity Politics”.)

In sum: We want cultures to be HEALTHY, not just THERE. One does a culture no favors by pretending every aspect of it is beyond reproach. No culture is flawless; as every culture is a reflection of some combination of human creativity and human depravity. The same West African can wear a beautiful kente cloth while celebrating female genital mutilation. The same Pashtun can make a delicious pulao while forcing his wife to wear a burka. The full range of human feats and human foibles are on display in virtually any culture that has ever existed. It should not be considered “rude” to point this out.

In the final analysis, there exists no culture that needs to be either embraced or eschewed wholesale. As humans, we are all entitled to assess whatever our fellow humans do. So long as this is done on a case-by-case basis, we do not risk being unfair. Coming to trans-cultural encounters from what is ultimately a HUMAN perspective entails that—in the midst of our appreciation for the resplendent variegation of mankind’s social norms—we are all in a position to judge. Universal standards demand nothing less. In doing so, it is up to us to employ sound reasoning; and to bring to bear the (universal) moral principles to which we all have access (that is: if we care to look). Astute discernment requires perspicacity.

In the event that we find an ethical lapse in what we see, those who have a sense of civic duty openly denounce it. When we really like what we see, we are apt to adopt it. This process is called “being human”.

When we consider people of other cultures, we should come to the encounter with our shared humanity at the fore. In other words: While appreciating our differences, it is important to be mindful of what we all have in common.

Cul-Ap-phobia only seems to make sense insofar as cultural relativism is seen as a prerequisite for (or corollary of) multi-culturalism. That is: It is—like most neuroses—based on illusion. The fact of the matter is that pluralism does not require relativism. In fact, pluralism is enabled by the recognition of universal moral principles (that is: a shared vision of what constitutes a civil society). After all, common purpose is the lifeblood of pluralism.

To conclude: A combination of narcissism and relativism underlies much of the hysteria surrounding Cul-Ap. To be a Cul-Ap-phobe requires one to be both self-absorbed and oblivious to universal moral principles. To cure this phobia, one must first address the myopia that underlies it.

The Contorted Logic Underlying Cul-Ap-Phobia:

As mentioned, ignorance—and a smug embrace OF that ignorance—is at the root of Cul-Ap-phobia. Upon hearing Cul-Ap-phobes rail against the “appropriation” of this or that cultural element, one can be quite certain that they do not have a keen grasp of what they are talking about. One can also be quite certain that they have no genuine interest in learning the history of the culture-in-question, let alone in fostering pluralism. As I hope to show presently, the rationalization for their grievance is utterly specious; and their attitude is antithetical to cosmopolitan ideals. Their gripe only advertises an ignorance of what culture PER SE is; as well as a glib disregard for how any given culture forms (their own or anyone else’s).

Meanwhile, those of us who DO understand how culture works should not put up with such nonsense...let alone accede to unreasonable demands to never participate in exogenous cultures. For unless one is a nudist, one is almost certainly engaging in Cul-Ap every time one puts on an article of clothing. Lest one refrain from exhibiting ANY art, and playing ANY music, and eating ANY food, and dancing in ANY way, it is inevitable that Cul-Ap is involved in one’s everyday life. We can say the same thing about the culinary arts or architectural / interior design or religious rituals or holiday celebrations or literature or film or countless other things that have become part of this or that culture...anywhere...at any time. Indeed, a concatenation of cultural appropriation is what any given culture IS.

In a milieu roiling with Cul-Ap-phobia, avoiding charges of Cul-Ap requires cultural segregation—something that is antithetical to cosmopolitan ideals (and that is diametrically opposed to multi-culturalism). For in order to prevent that which is deigns to prevent, we are forced to erect barriers between memetic enclaves. Rather than involving the (intentional) segregation of PEOPLE, this involves the (de facto) segregation of behavioral norms.

Commissioners of this dubious municipal ordinance are not seeking to prevent people of different cultures from intermingling; they are simply positing a kind of (strictly circumscribed) collective meme-ownership. What they prescribe is not DEMOGRAPHIC Apartheid; it is, instead, a kind of SEMIOTIC Apartheid. It’s hard to know which is worse. <<

So what does cultural segregation entail? It is, effectively, a regulation of deportment based on memetic inheritance. The ordinance is: Indigenous memes only! It’s as if by adopting—or temporarily partaking in—a cultural hallmark from outside one’s own culture, one is somehow engaging in some sort of meme-embezzlement. Are those engaging in Cul-Ap somehow “taking advantage of” denizens of the (purported) source-culture?

So what of instances of Cul-Ap that ARE—arguably—exploitative? Even then, the problem is the exploitation, not the Cul-Ap itself. The fact is that virtually anything can be done with sneering condescension. The key, then, is: What is BEHIND the act? (Indeed, ANYTHING can be done in bad faith. If I do X in bad faith, the solution is not to forbid X; the solution is to entreat people to do X in good faith.) When creative exploration of other cultures transmogrifies into creative exploitation, we have a problem. But the problem is the EXPLOITATION.

Should Germans feel exploited every time Yo-Yo Ma performs one of Bach’s cello suites? Why not? Because there is not exploitation going on; only Cul-Ap.

Cul-Ap-phobes call for a scenario in which each culture stakes its claim on a constellation of consecrated memes. These are—by dint of this tacit claim—designated as memes that anyone else is prohibited from

adopting, or even participating in. They might be reminded that a cordoned-off culture is an insular culture. Moreover, a hermetically-sealed culture is a culture held in stasis. It seems that those who vilify anyone engaged in Cul-Ap would be content if all the world's cultures were to languish in a state of enforced parochialism. We should bear in mind that the entire point of pluralism is to eschew notions of cultural purity.

In reality, forbidding cross-pollination between the world's cultures would bring all cultural flourishing to a halt. The fact is that, when it comes to cultural globalization, trans-cultural diffusion is ubiquitous. After all, that's what happens when global human solidarity prevails.

Is the license to partake in a designated cultural element—insofar as the element can be discretely defined—transferable? On who's terms? What would the conditions be for transferring such a license? In positing this ersatz crime, one is forced to posit collective ownership of a meme (alt. monopoly power over a meme); which is nonsensical.

The constables of meme-sequestration aim to protect the declared inventory of memes like skittish security guards posted at a warehouse that has been put under quarantine. They obdurately insist that each culture—insofar as it can be discretely demarcated—be cordoned off. Such memetic cordons are necessary, we are notified, lest those of the dominant culture persist in their domination with impunity.

This a really, really bad idea. Not only does it fetter the lifeblood of culture (memetic cross-pollination); it exacerbates cleavages—nay, FISSURES—along cultural lines, thereby engendering tribalistic mindsets. This can't help but lead to the fragmentation of a polis based on ENTIRELY ARTIFICIAL (read: un-necessary) boundaries. Put plainly: Segregation of cultures leads to segregation of PEOPLE along cultural lines.

Some who clearly do not understand what culture IS or how culture WORKS have offered half-baked definitions of the dastardly Cul-Ap—typically having to do with TAKING something called “traditional knowledge” (a nonsensical term if there ever was one) or “cultural expression” without permission. Permission from WHOM, exactly, cannot possibly be specified. Such unauthorized-use-of-meme, we are notified, may include the illegitimate use of an exogenous culture's music, dance, dress, cuisine, folklore, and LANGUAGE.

Wait. Language?

What on Earth could this possibly mean? We should bear in mind that language is part of culture. So we engage in Cul-Ap whenever we make use of a term or phrase from any language that is not the lingua franca of our homeland. (Call it lexical cooptation, something that every vernacular has done since the beginning of speech.) English, for example, is an amalgamation of Norman (i.e. French) and Germanic vernaculars—with an infusion of Vulgar Latin, Koine Greek, and Old English. Lexical cooptation has occurred with virtually every language that has ever existed. So unless one speaks Classical Chinese, Sanskrit, Old Turkic, Avestan, Sumerian, Aramaic, Coptic, Koine Greek, Vulgar Latin, Old Norse, or Old Gaelic, one is engaging in Cul-Ap every time one opens one's mouth.

Some Cul-Ap-phobes warn against taking someone else's “cultural knowledge”. But how can one “take” knowledge? And what in heaven's name is “CULTURAL knowledge”? Does it mean knowledge ABOUT a particular culture? It cannot possibly mean such a thing, as knowledge of other cultures is a GOOD thing. In any case, as with any other knowledge, when one acquires it, one has not TAKEN it. (Supposing knowledge can be “taken” requires one to traffic in epistemological nonsense.)

What, then, could this queer locution possibly mean? Are we to suppose it is possible for a designated

“culture” to OWN certain knowledge? If knowledge can be said to BELONG TO a culture, then we are ascribing agency to an abstraction. Shall we suppose that social constructs can have agency?

Progress is effected—in part—by allowing new (i.e. foreign) memes to penetrate one’s own memetic orbit. An open society asks that people be willing to adopt an exogenous cultural element whenever doing so might—in some way—enhance their own culture. {6} We might note that in an open society, such an eventuality is seen as unproblematic—even serendipitous. After all, cosmopolitanism is predicated on the recognition that one’s own culture does not have a monopoly on all the good ideas; and that we are all better off when we embrace each-other’s attainments.

Naturally, riffing off of something that others take seriously will sometimes be taken as a kind of blithe devaluation. In such cases, the designated culprit’s cavalier gesture—BECAUSE it is done cavalierly—is seen as an affront; or even as indolent. Understandably, perfunctory emulation (the mercurial “just for the fun of it” mimicry that is an entirely self-involved exercise) can be seen as patronizing by those who have consecrated it (i.e. those who see it as uniquely THEIRS). “We define ourselves by X; whereas you are simply trying X on for size.” Hence the participant in appropriation is perceived as condescending. (“It’s a triviality for you; but it is very important to THEM.”)

“You’re participating in—or temporarily adopting—X just for the heck of it; but X matters a great deal to us!” Shall such disparity in valuation preclude all Cul-Ap? No—for two reasons. First: One party’s ability to enjoy the full sanctity of X is not undermined by another party’s cavalier treatment of X. (The religious fundamentalist is not stymied in his doctrinal fealty by the casual observer of the same Faith.) Second: In a ham-fisted effort to STYMIE stereotypes, one is forced to base one’s grievance on them. To reiterate the point: All members of a society do not define themselves according to the same cultural elements.

Unintended Ramifications **(The Misplaced Concern About Stereotypes):**

The concern about being condescending toward a certain culture is understandable; but only insofar as one is playing fast and free with stereotypes. By crying “cultural appropriation”, one commits the very crime that one deigns to prevent. For one assumes a homogeneity amongst the people over which a designated culture supervenes—homogeneity that does not really exist. Not every member of a given culture is equally wed to this or that cultural element; nor does every member identify with a particular cultural element in the same way (or even AT ALL). The problem then is with stereotypes, not with a cavalier adoption of—or participation in—exogenous cultural elements.

Any given culture is not demographically homologous. More to the point: How are we supposed to determine who the gatekeepers of each culture are supposed to be? This conundrum becomes even more confounding given the fact that even those WITHIN any given culture cannot necessarily agree on what its signature traits might be. A culture is rarely a homogenous block, as it contains a diverse assortment of constituents, each of whom emphasizes some of its aspects over others. (Not all Americans identify with baseball and apple pie.)

Every frivolous charge of Cul-Ap is invariably predicated on a regime of “identity politics” It is never a good idea to divide the world into insiders and outsiders—allotting entitlements and restrictions according to the demographic category in which someone happens to—ostensibly—belong.

The iron-clad demarcation of distinct cultural elements invariably runs into problems of definition. Those who hem and haw about non-Japanese people eating sushi typically do not even understand what the term

MEANS. As it happens, the moniker is short for “sushi-meshi”, which simply means soured rice. But wait. The raw fish content with which “sushi” is primarily associated is actually “shashimi”; while the accoutrements (such as the seaweed wrap) are generally referred to as “neta”. So is it the RICE with which these kvetchers are concerned? Or is it the use of seaweed wrap? Or is it the use of raw fish? And does this vague prohibition include the dish’s predecessor, “funa-zushi”, which simply involves fermented fish (“nare-zushi”), which—as it turns out—can be found everywhere on the planet? Would a prohibition against non-Japanese serving sushi include variants like “ura-maki”, “maki-zushi”, and “maki-mono”...none of which, it turns out, are exclusively Japanese? So what are we REALLY talking about here? Who draws the lines? Can NOBODY eat uncooked seafood outside of Japan? If so, does it need to be consumed separately from seaweed? Or is the rule that it just can’t be WRAPPED IN the seaweed?

When non-Japanese diners do eat such things, can they do it while watching Gundam?

And by the way, “tempura” was taken from the Portuguese. So shall the Japanese ALSO be prosecuted for illicit Cul-Ap? By the same token, we might ask: When Scandinavians eat hummus, is there a reason for Levantine peoples to be thrown into a moral panic? The repercussions of enacting strictures against Cul-Ap are rarely considered—especially if those strictures were to be applied to everyone (that is: applied consistently).

ALL of this assumes that there exist bright, flashing neon lines between cultures, each of which is a monolith of sacralized customs, belonging exclusively to itself...for all eternity This is nonsense. Cultures are AMORPHOUS. They do not have rigid boundaries; they have hazy penumbras. They don’t ABUT one another, they BLEED INTO one another. They merge and diverge. Lines are fluid and always blurry...which means that there really are no lines. Recognizing a definitive element of a culture is not the same as indulging in cheap caricature.

Moreover, cultures are not monoliths. The virtue of any given culture is that it is NOT monochromatic; it is a melange of memes, incorporated into its repertoire at different times from different places. This semiotic kaleidoscope belies the notion that cultures are homogenous blocs with clear-cut edges. The exact position of the boarder between THIS culture and THAT culture is oftentimes illusory. As Steven Lukes put it: “Cultures are never coherent, never closed to the outside, never merely local, and never uncontested from within and from without” (ibid.)

Haphazard cultural hybridization is what culture IS—indeed: what it has ALWAYS BEEN. Culture could not possibly be anything else. Lukes put it well: “The idea that cultures are wholes, rather than clusters or assemblages of heterogeneous elements with varying origins, is a systematic exercise in the reduction of complexity based on mythical thinking” (ibid.)

Cultures are effectively man-made (memetic) ecosystems, each with its own climate and landscape; each with a unique—and fluctuating—set of environmental conditions. That is to say: Cultures are concatenations of elements originating from different places and times under different circumstances...for a variety of reasons that not immediately obvious to the adopters. They are amorphous: more like a swirling kaleidoscope than a static mosaic.

The problem with demonizing Cul-Ap, then, is how one is to precisely demarcate the source-culture for any given meme. For memes percolate up from the roiling stew that is the meme-o-sphere, crystalizing here and there (due to one historical accident or another). Memes then shift from one cultural context to another in response to subsequent accidents of history. It’s contingency ALL THE WAY DOWN.

A memetically-quarantined culture is a stagnant culture. Worse: Demanding that everyone “stay in line” is

tantamount to a mandate for cultural segregation. We might note that such an attitude is nothing new: Progressives have always had to contend with Reactionaries who've insisted everyone "know their place".

This is an unreasonable request in a globalized world—wherein people are eagerly interacting with one another, seeking to embrace anything that is new and appealing. This should remind us that culture is amorphous—with blurry edges. It mixes with other cultures and undergoes a metamorphosis—sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse, but usually in utterly innocuous ways. The result is that what many perceive as an emblematic element of a particular culture is really not what they fancy it to be.

Due to the fact that cultures have fuzzy boundaries, proscribing Cul-Ap becomes an quixotic task. Where cultures begin and end is not only indeterminate, but perpetually in flux. Each culture is comprised of a fluid amalgam of myriad elements, any one of which might be shared with various other cultures. As the numerous examples provided here attest, any given meme probably has a history that does not immediately announce itself.

Myriad things that are now found in the Muslim world were appropriated from non-Islamic cultures. The "shura" council (a term used as the title of Surah 42 of the Koran) is an adaptation of the Turkic "khurultay"...which was itself taken from the Mongolian "Khooraldai"...which was Tengri-ist before it was Islamic. This reminds us that cultures often blend into one another—nay: SEEP into one another. And so navigating the interlaced border between MY culture and YOUR culture is a byzantine task.

Tying culture to a demographic is not just untenable due to the indeterminate nature of CULTURES; it is untenable due to the indeterminate nature of DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS. For who's to say where any given group begins or ends? In a world where one demographic blends into another, one is obliged to pretend demographics can be discretely defined.

In reality, the boundaries of a given group—however defined—are vague and in perpetually in flux. One therefore encounters the same issues as when one tries to define phenotypic populations in terms of RACE. That is: One is forced to concoct social constructs ad hoc, based on superficial criteria—criteria that have no discrete boundaries. If red people are allowed to tap-dance but not blue people, then what about purple people?

So the notion of collective ownership of a meme—especially along demographic lines—is LOGISTICALLY untenable, as the designation of WHO, exactly, the (purportedly) rightful owners might be is impossible to pin down. Stewardship is ephemeral, and forever elusive.

When one impugns those engaged in Cul-Ap by recourse to "cultural ownership", one is in danger of not merely cultural essential-ization (insisting that cultural elements are INHERENT TO a certain population), but of ETERNALIZED cultural essential-ization (insisting that those cultural element must remain proprietary for all time). This only seems to make sense if we forget that the constituent parts of any given culture are what they are by sheer accident of history; and that OUR culture is OURS by sheer accident of birth. In the end, we're all human; and so are all equally entitled to try the memes of the world on for size.

In any case, countenancing signature features of a culture is not stereotyping; it is simply acknowledging statistical reality (paying heed to a prominent element of a culture, or even paying tribute by amplifying one of its hallmark features). If one wants to call this a stereotype, then so be it. The point is that one does not CHEAPEN the portrayal of culture by blithely caricaturing it in a way that MIS-represents it.

To suppose Cul-Ap is morally dubious, one must also pretend that cultures are static, and discretely-defined. In a clumsy attempt to deter stereotypes, the Cul-Ap-phobe ends up propounding them. Insofar as

the culprit may ACTUALLY be countenancing a stereotype, the complainant ends up VALIDATING the stereotype...even as he haughtily denounces the act of countenancing it. (One is reminded of those who deal with a hang-over by imbibing.)

In many cases, the indictment of Cul-Ap focuses on any expression that SEEMS to countenance stereotypes. This is an eristic complaint. For the use of stereotypes is unproblematic so long as one is forthcoming about the fact that stereotyping is, indeed, what one is doing. The “catch” is that it needs to be done without ill will. Cheeky humor is not taboo in a free society; and we must be permitted to be impertinent when it is all in good fun.

It should be noted that the perpetuation of negative stereotypes works within the domain of satire—where snark is the point. The only proviso is that, in order to be respectable, it must be done in good faith. While tongue-in-cheek, it mustn't be mean-spirited. As with parody, the point is to be open about the fact that the tropes that one is employing are, indeed, tropes; and are being used with a “wink and a nudge”, not with a scornful sneer; for didactic purposes, not to demean. After all, even the most biting of satire seeks to rouse, not to quash.

Stereotype or no stereotype, one's ethnic identity has no bearing on what one can and cannot do in a free society. We should bear in mind that negative stereotypes are oftentimes perpetuated by some of the very people who are the subjects of those stereotypes. That is to say: In some cases, many of the culprits are members of the group being (negatively) stereotyped; as they are unabashedly EMBODYING the stereotype rather than rebuking it. Indeed, THEY are the ones who should MOST know better; and it is THEY for whom fellow members of the relevant group should reserve contempt.

At the end of the day, every human is morally obligated to assess every other human AS a fellow human being—based on standards that are universal.

To recapitulate: In order to get an indictment of Cul-Ap to hold water, the complainant is forced to countenance stereotypes. Thus: Anyone engaged in behavior / speech that happens to superficially correlate with the countenancing of certain stereotypes is summarily accused of promulgating those stereotypes...with (perfidious) ulterior motives ascribed. The thinking is as follows: “It is something that someone who actually is bigoted might do / say; so you doing / saying it makes you bigoted by association.” The irony is that such an indictment is ITSELF born of perfidy. It has the added effect of perpetuating the very stereotypes it (ostensibly) seeks to stymie.

Most of what is derided as Cul-Ap is simply an instance of nescient people propounding puerile caricatures of (certain parts of) a culture based on jejune stereotypes, typically in a sophomoric fashion—with a dismissive scoff—where the aim is to be derogatory. There is much to be said about what is wrong with such instances, but NONE of it has anything to do with “appropriation”. Let's spell it out: The problem with the above is, well, propounding puerile caricatures of (certain parts of) a culture based on jejune stereotypes. Doing so is callow; it is patronizing; and it is usually based on ignorance.

But suggesting Cul-Ap is the explanation for such problematic conduct only makes things worse. It confuses the manifestation of the mean-spirited-ness for the cause of the mean-spirited-ness. (The ill will itself cannot be reduced to the means by which it is conveyed.) Vilifying those engaged in Cul-Ap because they are being jerks is not an indictment of Cul-Ap. To ascribe the ill will to the Cul-Ap ITSELF is to miss the point.

Cul-Ap-phobes are not the stalwart defenders of good will they fashion themselves to be; for they are only stoking acrimony—by exacerbating tribalistic tendencies—with their censorious attitude. It's as if human

solidarity could somehow be engendered via a program of inviolable cultural demarcation.

The frivolous charge exacerbates the very dysfunction it deigns to ameliorate, as it tethers cherished cultural elements to specific groups (which, as we've seen, are often racially defined by the complainants). The repercussion of this is cultural segregation and—even worse—a reinforcement of STEREOTYPES: hardly a recipe for pluralism.

Even worse, in some cases, there seems to be an inadvertent racism undergirding indictments of Cul-Ap as unacceptable—another manifestation of the inconsistent standards already discussed. Let's look at some examples where racist thinking seems to be operative.

According to the commissars of Cul-Ap, even attire must be allotted according to some ethereal license—rendering even wardrobes proprietary. Sartorial restrictions seem to entail the most obvious *reductio ad absurdum*. If a European man dons a turban, from whom is he appropriating: Berbers of the Maghreb, Bedouins of Arabia, Pashtuns of the Hindu Kush, Sikhs of the Punjab, Hindus of India, or ALL of them? Isn't it strange that we talk about "Arabs" when the Hashemites, Alawites, and Saudis so often despise one another? Which one has the most credible grievance, then, when non-Arabs appropriate something that is considered "Arab"?

One might be tempted to respond: All of them. But this is not the issue. The point is: What would THEY think? And, as it turns out, THEY will often tend to disagree amongst themselves. For each constituency fashions itself as the truest and greatest representative of "Arab" culture. They are all equally right; and so are all equally wrong. Hence the *reductio ad absurdum* of the logic employed by Cul-Ap-phobes.

If a Palestinian man decided to wear tartan fabric whilst a Scottish man decided to wear a keffiyah, is this MUTUAL theft? Can either of them claim to have been somehow "ripped off"? Exploited? In the meantime, can either of them wear a Mexican poncho? According to Cul-Ap logic, even Latino culture must be divvied into cordoned enclaves; as anyone other than meso-Americans mustn't don a huipil. If we are to take charges of illicit Cul-Ap seriously, we must suppose that these parties are smuggling memetic contraband. Cultural sequestration, then, would be the only answer: an ersatz solution to an ersatz problem.

The way Cul-Ap-phobes would have it, the cultures of the world would be rendered a network of memetic cordons, separated by impermeable membranes. But wait. Is the charge of illicit Cul-Ap really about CULTURE? Let's pose a few other queries to see. Can any woman who isn't Japanese wear a kimono? As it turns out, yes: any ASIAN women can without receiving much guff. Can any woman who is not Ashanti wear kente cloth? As it turns out, yes: any BLACK woman can without receiving much guff. Can any woman who isn't Navajo wear a manta? As it turns out, yes: any NATIVE AMERICAN woman can without receiving any guff.

Suddenly, the true logic of anti-Cul-Ap fervor is revealed. Cul-Ap-phobia, it seems, is NOT about culture after all; it is about phenotypic features. For Chinese culture is very AT ODDS with Japanese culture, to put it mildly. Africans, you say? The Nubians, Oromo, Swahili, and Zulu are quite far from the Ashanti. Native Americans, you say? The Iroquois, Shoshone, Pawnee, and Sioux had little to do with the Navajo. In many cases, these phenotypically proximal groups spent much of their history fighting and killing each other. (!) So what's going on here? Rather than being based on genuine concerns about protecting the integrity of anyone's culture, Cul-Ap-phobia seems to be based more on vaguely racist criteria and categories specious generalizations...all of it concocted ad hoc to suit the purposes of the anti-Cul-Ap crusade du jour.

What of nationality, then? Even that poses problems. The Ashanti are Ghanan. However even fellow

Ghanans (e.g. Yoruba, Hausa, Mande, Akan, Fulbe, etc.) are culturally distinct. YET...virtually no one who complains about Cul-Ap would give people a free pass simply because they have a shared nationality. The free pass is ONLY given if there is RACIAL similarity. We should find this standard very disturbing. For the conditions are now no longer about culture, but about RACE.

Pointing out that a particular custom (be it a social norm or a tenet) is dysfunctional / immoral is not an act of bigotry. This is true even if that custom happens to be a hallmark trait of a particular ethnicity. Elements of a culture / creed can be—nay, MUST be—assessed in a way that has nothing to do with harboring contempt for any ethnic group with which that culture / creed may be affiliated. The indictment of a particular custom (for being either morally-dubious or counter to the commonweal) is not a devious scheme to denigrate an entire community, however that community may be defined. Being against gulags doesn't make one anti-Russian.

Criticizing iniquitous practices / dogmas which happen to be rooted in this or that culture does not constitute a crime against humanity. For one cannot be racist against a meme. Why? Because social norms are not humans. Indeed, what makes us human is not the particular memes we happen to adopt; it's that we have a choice.

Alas, p.c. aficionados would have us believe that simply noticing social norms within a society (i.e. the signature features of a culture) is somehow a matter of “stereotyping”. This is erroneous. Statistical realities are not generalizations; nor are they caricatures. We might be reminded what makes stereotyping objectionable. A stereotype requires one to engage in gross generalization, which behooves one to lend credence to a disingenuous portrayal of anyone who might be included in that generalization. And THAT leads one to pre-judge (read: mis-judge) individuals, according to a fraudulent charge of collective culpability; which can then be used as an excuse for collective punishment.

Hence stereotypes are the lifeblood of prejudice.

But that isn't what we're doing when we apply a critical eye to MEMES. Prevailing trends—insofar as they are recognized AS TRENDS—are not iron-clad laws of the universe; so there is no need to treat them as such. Whenever an ethnic group happens to espouse this or that custom, it is an accident of history; not an indelible feature of that group. It is not written in the stars that subscription to certain memes—whether rituals or doctrines—be the basis for any given community's humanity.

It is worth acknowledging trends qua trends; and investigating how / why they came to be. During the course of this investigation, moral evaluations are warranted. Such evaluations are possible because they are conducted according to objective standards—that is: standards that TRANSCEND culture. After all, moral principles are universal.

So what of gringos dancing the tango? It's not deemed Cul-Ap if LATINOS do the tango; yet the Tango is Argentinian. So if Brasilians do the Tango, it is still technically Cul-Ap. So shall the Tango be off-limits to all non-Argentinian Latinos? Likewise, the Samba would be off-limits to all non-Brasilian Latinos? This is, of course, preposterous. Each Latin American country has notably different cultures. (And, in this case, they don't even speak the same language!) Yet, according to the logic of Cul-Ap phobia, all Latinos must be considered a monolithic demographic bloc; so it's fine for ALL Latinos to dance the Tango and the Samba; but maybe not gringos. Again, we find the issue is more about some vaguely-defined notion of RACE, not about culture per se. The reductio ad absurdum here should be obvious, as many Argentinians and southern Brasilians are white (mostly Germanic). The logic implodes in upon itself.

The logic gets even more convoluted the more we inquire. Can Japanese Brasilians dance the Tango? Are

they “properly” Latino? Is it because of their Brazilian nationality that Japanese who also happen to be Paulistas get a free pass? But wait. Wasn’t the Tango originally Argentinian? Or was it Uruguayan? When it comes to who decides to practice this fine art, does it really matter?

Can non-Japanese artists create their own version of anime (geared to a non-Japanese fanbase)? The use of Japanese-style animation in Kansas is no more meme-theft than is bukkake in Arabia or origami in Iceland. How about manga for Latinos? (Shall that be permitted only insofar as Japanese are “allowed” to dance the tango? Is that a fair trade?) Should sub-Saharan Africans be allowed to belly-dance? Can non-Austrians do the Viennese waltz? Can non-Andalusians learn Flamenco?

Are we to suppose that because a meme started in ONE place, nobody in any other place should be permitted to adopt it? Or are we to suppose that ethnicity dictates which memes are off-limits to whom? If Kiwi rugby players perform the Maori / Samoan “haka” prior to a match, are they desecrating Maori-tanga; or are they simply celebrating their country’s heritage? Such queries can only lead to one conclusion: Anti-Cul-Ap hysteria invariably backfires, undermining the very cause its proponents claim to be helping.

Inconsistent Standards:

The anti-Cul-Ap crusade is enabled by the deliberate conflation of exploitation with exploration. This is made apparent by the fact that complaints of Cul-Ap have only recently become fashionable; and have been lent credence only insofar as we stopped acknowledging the distinction between condescension and acclamation. In 1999, Natalie Portman donned maiko-style (Japanese) make-up and a Mongolian-style head-dress for her role as Padmé Amidala of Naboo. This occurred without any scandal; as doing so was clearly not seen as problematic at the time. Despite the fact that it is now one of the most decimated cultures in history, no Mongols complained. The Japanese press actually CELEBRATED the use of their culture in an American sci-fi extravaganza.

In the next Star Wars film, Portman donned a Russian “kokoshnik”. No Russians were incensed. As it turns out, such stylization did not constitute a debacle of unsanctioned mimesis; the motley alien wardrobe was—like most science fiction—a creative pastiche. Yet a decade later, George Lucas would surely have been excoriated by legions of Cul-Ap-phobes for this eclectic sartorial stylization.

The problem with those crying “cultural appropriation” is that decriers are forced to be highly selective in their indictments. Yo-Yo Ma is no more begrudged for his choice of non-Chinese cello material than someone of non-Latino ancestry is begrudged for taking up salsa dancing. Yet woe to a non-Chinese woman who dons a cheongsam! How can this double standard be justified?

Let’s look at some other (inexplicable) exceptions. Americans don’t pay tribute to Caribbean islanders every time they have barbecue chicken. {7} Why not? It’s the same reason women around the world don’t feel the need to commemorate Catherine de Medici every time they wear high heels. {8}

The Japanese tend to CELEBRATE other countries’ use of anime—each invariably adapted to its own culture. Anime (and manga) have morphed into a resplendent array of offerings around the world. It seems asinine to accuse Westerners of something uncouth when partaking in this gem of Japanese culture...even if the participants are not as sophisticated as one might prefer them to be. (Anime is, after all, as much about entertainment as it is about artistic prowess.) Shall Japan establish memetic embargoes so as to ensure nobody bootlegs its cultural bounty? This would be odd, as much of Japanese pop-culture is comprised of bootlegged Western culture—from baseball to “B-Style”. {9}

In cases where there is an asymmetry along one metric or another (geo-politically, economically, or in terms of pop culture), is it bad when Cul-Ap turns out to be a unilateral affair? If so, then samba in Tokyo is fine, but there shall be no Manga in Brasil. And what of the Brazilian wax? Lo and behold, now gringos do it too! Is this particular style of anatomical landscaping unethical when anyone but Brazilians do it? Might such waxing be open exclusively to Latinos? How about to those who are HALF-Latino? What about Latinos who do not identify all-that-much with Latino culture? What's going on here?

The simple answer: CULTURE is what is going on. Cul-Ap can have—and, indeed, often does have—pro-social effects. Just ask those who now practice capoeira (established by African slaves in Bahia); which is now ALSO considered Brazilian. (What does “Brazilian” even mean? Legal citizenship? A specific ethnicity? A certain degree of dedication to upholding cultural heritage?) Ballet was originally an Italian dance form from the Renaissance; and it was promptly rendered into its quintessential form by the Russians...after, that is, it has already been appropriated by the French.

Modes of attire also illustrates the selectivity of Cul-Ap-phobia. In the modern era, the propagation of sartorial practices is demonstrated by the necktie—itsself based on a European ascot...which was based on the French cravat...which was appropriated from the Croats. {16} When Indians and Arabs and Africans wear polo shirts, it is not some ploy of memetic embezzlement (from unsuspecting, preppy American WASPS)...any more than it is when, say, the Chinese drink root-beer.

It seems non-Westerners are granted exemption from the charge of Cul-Ap in such instances—ostensibly due to European colonialism. Fair enough. Having been subjected to systemic subjugation, victims of imperialism might be granted exemption from certain things that are off-limits to Europeans who still enjoy the residual advantages conferred by their forebears. But how, then, shall we treat the (Ottoman) Turkic “kaftan”, a robe which yielded variations in Persia (the “xalat” / “chapaan”) and even Hasidic Jewish culture (the “bekishe”)? The article of clothing also made its way east through Kurdish, Russian, Tatar, and Mughal cultures. It even transformed into FEMALE attire in Morocco (as the Berber “kafta”). So who is guilty of Cul-Ap in THOSE instances? Everyone? No one? Where are the lines to be drawn? Based on what criteria?

We might also note that headscarves are not the sole province of Muslimahs; as they have been a sartorial practice for THOUSANDS of years (primarily for women)—from the Armenians and Russians to the French and Dutch. Recently, such garb is often taken to be emblematic of Muslim-ness. So, we might ask, what constitutes a MUSLIM headscarf? That is: What, exactly, is it that distinguishes a hijab from, say, a dupatta or an apostolnik or a tichel? Would a sanction on headscarves for non-Muslimahs include BONNETS? What about plain ol' kerchiefs, which were popular amongst female WASPs in America throughout the 20th century? Individual memes, it turns out, are as amorphous as entire cultures. What constitutes one type of head-scarf from another? There is no way to answer such a question. So how are we to establish the boundary conditions for proper meme usage?

In virtually all cases of Cul-Ap, we find that the spirit behind incorporating “foreign” memes into one's cultural repertoire is a cosmopolitan one. In the best cases, it stems from the recognition that the way WE currently do things might not be THE BEST way. We needn't shy away from the realization that it is sometimes prudent to adopt elements from other cultures. So the hang-up seems to be based on something more nebulous than the transference of memes PER SE.

The universal rights to expression are best captured by art. One might say that much of the point of making art—and, by the same token, the basis for APPRECIATING art—is putting oneself in another's shoes...especially those from other walks of life. Such a pan-cultural perspective is what makes artistic

expression such an effective vehicle for human solidarity. It is also what makes art arguably the greatest pedagogical medium for inter-cultural understanding.

Indeed, Cul-Ap is one of the key components in the art one encounters in ANY country. Such co-optation is not a matter of indiscriminately ransacking others' cultures; it's a matter of celebrating the best of what the world has to offer. When Matisse and Picasso incorporated African themes into some of their paintings, are we to suppose that they were trafficking in (African) memetic contraband? Of course not. They were simply doing what artists do. Their works were a pastiche: more a matter of adapting than of cribbing. Picasso conveyed this point with his cheeky comment: "Good artists copy; great artists steal." (T.S. Eliot echoed the sentiment. William Shakespeare's entire career was BASED ON IT.) In the art-world, to "appropriate X" simply means to "make us of X"—as when Andy Warhol "appropriated" the Campbell's soup can. If we indict this kind of appropriation, then Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso and in deep trouble. So what is at issue when it comes to "appropriation" as it pertains to memes?

We might recall that artistic expression—from paintings to literature—is largely about putting oneself in another's shoes, seeing the world from the perspective of someone from a different walk of life. Art honors the importance of putting oneself in someone else's shoes—thereby even if one is not afforded the opportunity to walk a mile in them. Appreciating art affords one the chance to empathize with those who are different from oneself. Indeed, that is one of its greatest virtues.

Alas, the upshot of demonizing Cul-Ap is that we mustn't ever try to put ourselves in another's shoes—at least, not in this way. The upshot of this is inimical to the pluralistic spirit. The obdurate demand, "know your place!" should be a red flag. Such a regressive attitude misses a crucial fact: Global human solidarity is about TRANSCENDING cultural divisions; not reinforcing them. Taking measures to put oneself in another's shoes is a laudable act; and should be applauded, not derided. Even when the participation is fleeting, there is no harm in temporarily wearing the hat of another—even if it's just being done "for the fun of it". So long as it is done in good faith, Cul-Ap is the lifeblood of cosmopolitanism. Indeed, even in cases where it is done with a dismissive attitude, or in too flip a manner, it remains the touchstone for all inter-cultural appreciation.

We often forget that even the best art is based in part on a non-trivial degree of mimesis (that is: creative imitation of what came before). As the adage goes: Imitation is a form of flattery. Art is rarely limited to sources from the autochthonous cultural milieu. This is not to say that all art is "derivative" in the cheap sense; it simply reminds us that even the greatest artistic achievement is never done in a cultural vacuum. Indeed, it is often the INTERACTION BETWEEN cultures that enables the best artistic inspiration.

Regarding meme-allocation protocols: Who's to say what constitutes a distinct element of a particular culture? Which culture shall stake its claim on which meme? Based on what? Inevitably, it becomes a convoluted matter as to what, exactly, is being "appropriated"...and from whom? We are expected to keep track of who supposedly "owns" which element, which requires the members of a culture can be demarcated. This becomes an intractable task once we go back far enough in history. For any given culture, almost every element was appropriated from somewhere, at some point.

Music illustrates the fact that ALL culture is invariably derivative. Even the greatest compositions remind us that this is an approbative exigency, not something to lament. Pop music borrowed from rock-and-roll, which borrowed from jazz. But jazz was itself a cultural appropriation from indigenous African peoples. At which juncture in this memetic lineage shall we say someone is "guilty" of Cul-Ap? We are asked to suppose that there is a clearly-demarcated, definitive boundary that exists in the aether between "black" music and "white" music (both highly dubious categorizations in themselves). Moreover, we are asked to suppose that this threshold is memetically impermeable, entailing some mandate for ETHNIC separateness,

enduring for all eternity.

The genealogy of music genres demonstrates that some who complain about Cul-Ap are themselves racist. For according to certain precincts in the African-American community, nobody other than black musicians should be allowed to perform jazz, rhythm and blues, reggae, funk, scat, ska, doo-wop, hip-hop, Mo-town, or southern Gospel. This would be a ridiculous stricture, to put it mildly. Every Hispanic on Earth would even be on shaky ground when enjoying salsa, merengue, samba, mambo, and tango—as such genres are also derivative of African idioms.

But according to the same logic, nobody who is not white should be allowed to perform classical music. Imagine proposing such a prohibition; and imposing it on all the world's non-white musicians. Considering rock'n-roll's antecedents in African idioms, barring Cul-Ap would preclude half the world's contemporary music. For boy-bands adopted elements of hip-hop...which, in turn, led to K-pop. Are Koreans to be prosecuted for taking culture from African Americans? If the proposed standards were to be applied consistently, we would wind up instituting all sorts of nutty restrictions.

Gladly, we needn't consider such wide-ranging memetic embargoes. For all artists are influenced by other artists. And oftentimes, it is artists from different cultures. Cul-Ap is the animus of even the most novel artistic expression. As innovative artists resist pressure to conform to an artificially-contrived orthodoxy—nay: an orthodoxy defined by ETHNIC NORMS. In such cases, cross-cultural embrace is a virtue, not a sin. We should not be surprised to find that most art is NOTHING BUT Cul-Ap. It's been that way for thousands of years.

Appropriation Or Annexation? (Cul-Ap vs Cul-Ex):

The demonization of Cul-Ap only makes sense insofar as it is construed as a kind of annexation (i.e. exercising control over) the objects of concern. But that which Cul-Ap-phobes rebuke is almost never a matter of exercising control. Does Yo Yo Ma in any way try to exercise control over German music when he plays Brahms' sonatas? Does he deprive Germans of their heritage each time he performs? We could ask the same of American culture when he plays bluegrass; or of Hispanic culture when he plays a tango.

Expropriation—cultural or otherwise—involves some sort of exploitation and/or marginalization. It is, after all, a kind of annexation: taking control over something that is rightfully in the province of others; and doing so to their detriment. Cultural interpenetration, on the other hand, does not necessarily involve exploitation / marginalization; nor is it a kind of annexation. Rather, it is a kind of memetic imbrication—as with creolization (linguistic), syncretism (religious), or fusion (whether culinary or musical). It is no secret that cultural hybridization can occur with language, creeds, cuisine, and music—as well as attire, architecture, folklore, and virtually anything else. This is not a bad thing.

When considering creole languages, syncretic religions, dishes that borrow from disparate ethnic recipes, and other forms of cultural hybridization, we are reminded that the cordoning of cultures countermands the metamorphosis of which EVERY culture is a manifestation. Cultures are inherently dynamic, not static. They interact with one another in an on-going process of societal intermingling—affecting each other along the way. Depending on a variety of factors, influences may be unilateral or they may be reciprocal. In any case, too attempt to freeze any given culture at a certain time and place is to betray the very process that made it what it currently is.

Cul-Ap, it turns out, is a sign of comity; as well as an invitation thereto. By contrast, cultural imposition is a sign of hegemony (whether a matter of control or exploitation / marginalization). Cul-Ap-phobia

conflates the two. It is one thing for a group (in a position of socio-economic privilege) to IMPOSE UPON a marginalized group its own customs. It is quite another thing for one group to simply make use of the customs of another group. The former is a matter of trying to control others; the latter is a matter of pursuing affinities. The issue, then, is subjugation.

The censorious attitude of the anti-Cul-Ap crusader is based, in large part, on another kind of conflation: appropriation with expropriation. Here, (benign) instances of Cul-Ap are construed as (malign) instances of Cul-Ex. The former is what the present essay endorses, as there are no “losers” in the transference. By contrast, the latter describes something that is done to the detriment of the source-culture. It is difficult to say how, exactly, one culture could profit off of exogenous cultural elements “at the expense of” the source culture; as cultural elements are non-rivalrous. (Memetic transference is rarely a zero-sum game; and so is typically not exclusionary.) The point of contention, then, is commercialization (see the discussion above) or derogation (whereby the source-culture is diminished—or its members dehumanized—in some way).

The question arises: Are we to suppose that trans-cultural fertilization constitutes some kind of “expropriation”? And if it is uni-directional, is it automatically to be considered exploitative? Interestingly, transference is often not a reciprocal affair. Bavaria may celebrate having the new options of, say, Kabuli palaw and Afghan carpets for bystanders to enjoy at their leisure; yet we are not inclined to suppose that the culture of the Hindu Kush may be enhanced by sauerbraten on each kitchen table, Schubert in the air, and Schopenhauer on the bookshelves. While Deutschland welcomes the perahan tunban, it might be unreasonable to expect female Pashtun villagers to don a dirndl whenever the mood strikes them.

But why the uni-lateral flow?

One possibility is to think of this in terms of power asymmetries. After all, communities unaffiliated with incumbent power structures are more susceptible to being exploited. It is, indeed, those belonging to underprivileged communities who incur socio-economic injustices. While such asymmetries often end up being relevant factors when groups of people interact, and while there are valid concerns about structural inequalities, such matters are beside the point when it comes to trans-cultural fertilization. After all, who is more marginalized: a Deutscher donning a dirndl in Waziristan or a Pashtun donning a perahan tunban in the Rhineland?

Let’s evaluate that (admittedly hyperbolic) hypothetical. In both countries, the dominant demographic would be adopting a meme from the minority demographic. The explanation for this uni-laterality, then, must be accounted for in another way. As it turns out, far from being explained by Cul-Ap, the key differences IN PRACTICE boil down to a fundamental socio-political disparity: a cosmopolitan society vis a vis a provincial society. This is why we find halal kebab carts in Paris yet no ham ‘n cheese crepe stands in Kabul. To wit: There IS an asymmetry; but the asymmetry lay in the societies’ respective open-ness.

The lesson here is obvious; but let’s spell it out. It is CLOSED (viz. illiberal) societies that disdain Cul-Ap; as they seek to maintain ethnic purity. Hyper-traditionalism is—after all—predicated on systematically-enforced parochialism. There is a term for refusing any influence / input from the outside world: nativism. THAT, it would seem, is the real problem.

The allegedly problematic instances of Cul-Ap occur only in one direction: toward the culture of those who enjoy higher socio-economic status. But this is the antithesis of cultural IMPOSITION. Discretionary adoption mustn’t be confused with IMPOSED assimilation—whereby a minority group is pressured into adopting the ways of the dominant group in order to be accepted. Indeed, cultural imposition (Cul-Imp) is a problem with which we should be concerned, as it involved hegemony; and is the hallmark of imperialism (You need to do things the way WE want you to).

Though coerced adoption occurs in some circumstances, it is not operative in any of the examples of salutary Cul-Ap enumerated in the present piece. In each case I mention, those within the “appropriating” culture were not obliged to assimilate into the source-culture. When Yo Yo Ma plays Bach, he is not trying to be more German. When gringos eat burritos, they are not (necessarily) trying to be more Mexican. And when Muslimahs shed their hijabs, they are not (necessarily) trying to be more “Western”.

In certain circumstances, it is obvious that meme-adoption is not the result of some calculated program of co-optation—as when an indigenous population has been assimilated by an impinging (dominant / exploitative) power. The fact that most former British colonies—from Uganda to Bengal to Hong Kong—now drive on the left side of the road (and, bewilderingly, are smitten with cricket) is a vestige of their colonial past. Obviously, having adopted some of the cultural elements of their occupiers, the unwilling subjects of European geo-political dominion cannot be considered guilty of an infelicity. After all, they were the VICTIMS. The problem in such circumstances was not memetic transference PER SE; the problem was COLONIALISM (that is: systematic domination / exploitation). Leveling charges of Cul-Ap does nothing to diagnose the underlying problem; for it misses the point entirely.

This is why Antonio Gramsci spoke about “cultural hegemony” rather than about “cultural appropriation”. To cavil about Cul-Ap is to invert his diagnosis of social injustice. The obloquy toward Cul-Ap is something he would have found bewildering; as one does not exploit someone by simply participating in what they are doing.

Colonialism is objectionable because it involves domination and exploitation. Of course, Cul-Ap is sometimes a byproduct of colonialism; but is that a bad thing? When the Dutch eat Bami Goreng, we are reminded that some Indonesian cuisine made its way into the Dutch cuisine; and it is no secret that that occurred as a result of the Dutch colonizing Indonesia. But in such cases, what was wrong with the colonialism was the COLONIALISM, not the transference of culinary memes. All the harm wrought upon the Indonesians had nothing to do with the fact that a few Dutch adopted some of their tasty dishes back in the Netherlands. (As it happens, the Indonesians ended up adopting some tasty Dutch dishes, like hagelslag and poffertjes).

Meanwhile, the Brits adopted Vindaloo from India...which the Indians had actually adopted from the Portuguese (“vinha d’alhos”). This was in addition to de-spiced versions of korma, tikka masala, and various curries. Of all the horrible things the British did to the Indians (and there was a lot), this culinary transference does not make the list. Meanwhile, Indians adopted “chai” (tea) from their colonizers, the British...who themselves (like virtually everyone else) adopted it from the Chinese. (Ancient Indians did not drink tea.) Denouncing colonialism does not require one to vilify Cul-Ap.

Thus Cul-Ap (which is generally benign) is often concomitant with colonialism (which is invariably malign). While the French did not adopt Vietnamese cuisine during their time in Indo-China, the colonized adopted some things from their colonizers. Baguettes (known as “banh mi”) and croissants became a big hit in Vietnam as a result of France’s ill-considered colonial enterprise. Even the hallmark of Vietnamese cuisine, Pho, was an adaptation of the French “pot au-feu” (with noodles and lots of broth added to the mix).

But compunctions about Cul-Ap do not necessarily involve colonialism. Sometimes, it simply involves the migration of memes between ethnic groups. When that occurs, should we suspect iniquity? No. By donning corn-rows, white hippies aren’t embezzling a meme; they are—as it were—trying something (an edgy coif) on for size. Even if this is done heedless of the ethnic origins of the hair-style, we needn’t assume that something odious is afoot. For corn-rows do not belong to either African or Caribbean culture. Indeed,

they could be found throughout the Greco-Roman world during Ancient Antiquity. Yet that historical fact has no bearing on the legitimacy of, well, ANYONE doing such things with their hair today.

Alas, everyone with a parochial mindset—irrespective of their culture—likes to believe that world history started with the beginning of THEIR OWN culture. In this sense, there is a pathological conceit underlying Cul-Ap-phobia: “It is integral to our culture; therefore we shall assume it originated with US.”

The fact of the matter, though, is that EVERYONE is deriving cultural elements from bygone eras; and often from other lands. When a caucasian opts to don corn-rows, she is no more being exploitative than when a black woman straightens her hair and dyes it blond.~ This equivalence is in no way affected by asymmetries in unrelated areas (spec. socio-economic asymmetries). Hint: Pace the issues related to overt tribal signifiers, political oppression never had anything to do with who wore which hair-style. Structural inequalities are a serious problem, but establishing an embargo on MEMES will do nothing to ameliorate them. If anything, such an embargo would REINFORCE disparities along tribal lines.

Those who worry about Cul-Ap are often focused on some sort of power asymmetry: cases in which those from a dominant culture heedlessly appropriate cultural elements from those who are being marginalized. And it IS, more often than not, heedless. Trans-cultural fertilization usually occurs organically—which is to say: unwittingly.

Even so, such transference is sometimes done by design. In other words, sometimes Cul-Ap results from a deliberate integration of exogenous memes into the native cultural repertoire. When it IS done by design, the pollination is invariably unilateral. However, such uni-laterality does not—in and of itself—entail exploitation. Oftentimes, it is a mark of AFFINITY, and serves as a gesture of solidarity. Sharing memes is, after all, a way for people from different walks of life to relate to one another.

One does not rectify socio-economic inequities or help marginalized / exploited communities by adjusting (or circumscribing) semiotic conventions. Social (e.g. semantic) norms are symptoms, not underlying causes.

In any social interaction, there are—of course—legitimate worries about the repercussions of power asymmetries; as there is the possibility that those in a more powerful position will abuse their privileged status (i.e. to lord it over everyone else). But insofar as this (very real) problem is cast in terms of Cul-Ap, we needlessly create conceptual vexations that undermine our ability to solve it.

Let’s leave aside the obvious fact that one cannot pilfer memes. One can only exploit PEOPLE, not culture. Moreover, it is a mistake to treat cultural elements like commodities. Ironically, it is the commodification of culture that those afflicted with Cul-Ap-phobia claim they want to PREVENT. They thus find themselves obliged to countenance the very thing they purport to be against.

Cul-Ap-phobes prattle on about non-existent dispossession as if a grave injustice were being done whenever trans-cultural fertilization occurs; but the injustice is illusory. The demonization of Cul-Ap rarely—if ever—solves the problems it purports to solve. Of all the potentially effective ways to ameliorate power asymmetries across demographic lines, this is not one of them. Even as structural inequalities may sometimes be concomitant with Cul-Ap, they do not exist BECAUSE OF Cul-Ap.

First, a word on the terms “appropriation” and “expropriation”. In common parlance today, the two terms are used interchangeably, as they are treated as synonyms. In other words, they BOTH mean: to make use of—or even exercise control over—something without permission. Presently, it is useful to make a distinction between the two terms. I take the former as meaning: To make use of for a (new) specific

purpose (for which it has been newly designated). Hence “appropriation” is to be held in contradistinction with the illicit act to which it has lately often been applied (an act for which the term “expropriation” can be duly reserved). This semiotic conflation has led to the hermeneutic conflation on which Cul-Ap-phobia is based. {26}

When it comes to elements of culture (i.e. memes), Cul-Ap-phobes insist that appropriation be construed as EX-propiation (as though a memeplex could be looted). Yet this misapprehension only attains if memes are treated as commodities. According to such blinkered thinking, Cul-Ap is seen as a kind of resource-extraction...even as the resource is un-deplete-able. In order to get their indictments to hold water, anti-Cul-Ap crusaders are forced to (effectively) commodify cultural elements; thereby reifying the very terms of exploitation they deign to expurgate!

Let A be the culture of those who happen to dominate a society (socio-economically) and B be the culture of those who happen to be subjugated / marginalized. Even as A might incorporate elements from B into its memetic repertoire, the problem lies with the mechanism of subjugation / marginalization, not with the transference of memes. Consequently, to focus on Cul-Ap per se is to completely ignore the source of the problem.

Cul-Ap-phobes focus their ire on the allocation of meme-usage...as if trying to rectify an unhealthy diet by restricting the manner in which one sets the table. Shall we suppose that one can make the food one eats more nutritious by only using one’s own dinnerware? Herein lays the irony: One of the ways in which a subaltern population is marginalized is through the marginalization of their CULTURE. While a PEOPLE can remain marginalized, a CULTURE cannot be said to be marginalized if its elements are being adopted by those in a more privileged position—thereby being INCORPORATED INTO the dominant culture. (One cannot at the same time elevate something and suppress it.) Admittedly, problems arise when those cultural elements are adopted even as the people remain marginalized. However, such an eventuality cannot be attributed to the Cul-Ap. The solution to the marginalization of people is not the sequestration of their culture.

Cultural segregation is never a good idea. For it paves the way for—and subsequently reinforces—other modes of segregation. Indeed, it is a slippery slope from cultural segregation to ETHNIC segregation. Memetic embargoes (based on purported meme-ownership) do nothing to ameliorate power asymmetries. If anything, they create yet another obstacle to effecting social justice.

We mustn’t lose sight of the fact that trans-cultural fertilization is a key feature of multiculturalism. Indeed, it is the hallmark of a pluralistic society. Would those who deride Cul-Ap urge us to embrace other cultures yet simultaneously keep our distance? It is not a good sign when people are inclined to say: “WE can don this attire / hairstyle, but YOU cannot; because you aren’t one of us.” This “respect it but stay away” approach can only be described as a kind of cultural schizophrenia.

In virtually every case discussed in the present piece, we find that the embrace of Cul-ap is a sign of amity. The prohibition of Cul-Ap, then, is an (inadvertent) invitation to alterity. In this respect, Cul-Ap-phobia encourages the very thing it deigns to mitigate.

So why the skittishness when it comes to embracing exogenous cultural elements? Cul-Ap-phobia stems—in large part—from a Reactionary mindset, whereby people are exhorted to be skittish about novelty; and who are suspicious of anything deemed foreign. “It’s not ours, so we should keep our distance!” (Ironically, they typically remain sanguine—as well they should—when others opt to adopt THEIR cultural elements.) It all comes back to an US and THEM mentality; where everyone is exhorted to stay on their own side of the fence. This imperative to “stay on your own turf” is simply about memetics instead of

geography.

The appropriation against which Cul-Ap-phobes inveigh is deemed a form of oppression—as if those engaged in Cul-Ap were participating in a meme-procurement racket. To equate meme-adoption with oppression is to censure what—in turns out—is the basis for human bonding (whether it be within or across cultures). This holds true even in the case of power-asymmetries.

Those who argue that only enfranchised demographic groups can be guilty of Cul-Ap (as, indeed, only the more-privileged are in a position to dominate the less-privileged) miss what makes oppression oppressive. The contention is that when someone from a marginalized group (esp. when a minority demographic) does it, it doesn't count as “cultural appropriation”. But does this make any sense?

We should note, though, that this same double standard is employed in the argument that certain demographic groups (spec. those that are marginalized) are exempt from being bigoted—as if racial minorities are incapable of being racist and women are incapable of being sexist. This changes the definition of racism from something that is race-neutral (prejudice based on race qua race) to something more tailored to one's own interests (anything a certain racial group does that I don't like)...which is, ironically, ITSELF racist. Such an ad hoc application of this criterion prescribes a regimen of (de)merit along racial lines.

The selective application of indictments should clue us into the double standard afoot. We don't begrudge non-French girls who—on a lark—put their hair in French braids. Why not? If, say, a Desi girl opts to put her hair in a French braid just for fun, it is technically an act of Cul-Ap; yet not in the way that p.c. aficionados find objectionable. For such practices are not especially cherished in—nor integral to—French heritage. Yet woe to any girl who isn't Native American who decides to dress up as Pocahontas for Halloween. {10}

Power asymmetries are relevant when it comes to populations interacting—especially when there is any kind of systematic domination / exploitation afoot. But such a problem cannot be diagnosed in terms of Cul-Ap; nor can it be resolved by appeals to mitigate Cul-Ap. Of course, domination / exploitation is ALWAYS bad. Being socio-economic in nature, it can even when occur WITHIN a culture. Clearly, Cul-Ap is not the clinching factor.

Generally speaking, what does it mean to “appropriate” something? In the event that X is non-rivalrous, “appropriating” X can not be a matter of exercising control over X; nor can the use of X be in any way mutually-exclusive with another's use of X). Think of using someone else's recipe for a delicious meal. In spite of all this, Cul-Ap-phobes speak of such an act as if it were tantamount to EX-propriation—as if it would entail depriving its rightful stewards of their exclusive province. Are we to suppose that an annexation of Caribbean culture is taking place any time white Brooklyn hipsters put their hair in dreadlocks? {11} How about when Southerners eat “jerk” chicken while listening to Reggae music? Are we to inventory cultural elements—some of which are tacitly marked “proprietary”—according to the decree of some arbiter of cultural exchange?

The non-rivalrous (that is: non-exclusionary) nature of memes means that—pace intellectual property—they can only be invoked, not seized; celebrated, not confiscated. This is why incorporating—into one's personal fashion repertoire—a clothing style normally associated with another culture does not constitute some kind of sartorial larceny. Elements of a culture are—after all—non-rivalrous BY NATURE.

Thomas Jefferson put it well when he said: “He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me.” In the

event that a gringo dons a sombrero while throwing a taco party, the world's Mexicans have lost nothing; no more than when gringos eat popcorn or Caesar salad (which were—incidentally—also invented by Mexicans). {20}

Should someone contend that he likes this part of another's culture, and that he might like to incorporate it into his life, the response is: "Keep your grubby hands off THEIR memes!" But one cannot copyright an element of culture. Elements of culture are not a kind of property; so they are not subject to the kinds of strictures germane to intellectual property rights.

Those who treat Cul-Ap as if it were an ethical transgression are implicitly calling for meme-ownership along cultural lines. They are effectively prescribing a regime whereby each meme is consigned to (what they surmise to be) the source-culture (which is almost certainly not the ORIGINAL source-culture). Meanwhile, they are calling for the prohibition of un-sanctioned usage, which amounts to an embargo on cross-cultural memetic transference. According to this thinking, the only solution to illicit meme-usage is some sort of meme-requisition program along (imagined) cultural lines—lines that, it turns out, don't exist. One must wonder: Is it even possible to requisition memes? No. But this does not prevent culture-misers from calling for the repatriation of cultural elements. Nor does it deter them from promoting an ad hoc program of cultural segregation so as to maintain the sanctity of chimerical cultural demarcations.

And so it goes: The self-appointed proprietors of the source-culture are concerned with the taking of memes AS IF it were the taking of property. This only makes sense insofar as one treats memes AS property (spec. as intellectual property collectively held by all those affiliated with the designated culture).

Reality tells a different story. Cultural elements are, in a sense, a public goods—like the air we breath. Sometimes we happen to share the air with those who are not in our own group. Culture belongs to humanity itself; which is to say it is a GLOBAL public good. There is an open invitation for every person—qua member of mankind—to participate in the gloriously diverse panorama of cultures of which the global community is comprised.

The Cul-Ap-phobe's dubious enterprise seems viable only insofar as cultural elements are treated as something other than public goods. Recall that, in broaching the topic of participation in cultural life, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads: "Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary, or artistic production of which he is the author" (Article 27). This pertains to intellectual property. But the thing with cultural elements is that no particular person is the author. Elements of culture, then, are NOT like intellectual property. Hence cultural tort makes no sense.

Pace this legal construct (i.e. private property), memes cannot be indemnified as if they were articles of property. Ideas belong to all mankind. An attempt to proscribe unsanctioned meme-usage—or to prohibit memetic cooptation across cultural lines—is thus based on a category error.

Whenever taking a stand, we must ask what principles we are ultimately championing. Proscribing Cul-Ap is antithetical to cosmopolitan ideals. For to limit ourselves to using only autochthonous cultural elements is to preclude the possibility of both quotidian and activist cosmopolitanism. If we are willing to eschew cosmopolitan ideals, then what shall be the guiding principle for our decisions? Are we prepared to put forth some ethnically-oriented puritanism? If not, then we should take pause before rushing to judgement about inappropriate meme-usage.

Were we to mandate a hermetically-sealed culture for everyone on Earth, what would the repercussions be? (This is not hyperbole; it is merely taking the logic of Cul-Ap-phobia to its logical conclusion.) There

is no doubt that commodifying what is a cherished cultural element “cheapens” it; but in such cases, it is **COMMODIFICATION**, not appropriation, that is at issue.

But when this is done on an **INDIVIDUAL** level, commodification is clearly not salient. One person adopting a meme (for personal purposes) is hardly tantamount to commodifying the meme.

Barring the legalistic construct, intellectual property (alt. “proprietary information”), genuine knowledge cannot be “owned” by **ANYONE**. Barring the legal construct of “intellectual property”, knowledge belongs to all mankind; and so cannot be stolen. How, then, can one possibly **STEAL** knowledge? More to the point: How can one steal **ANYTHING** simply via expression? Any given instance of expression is a **HUMAN** act; ergo no one party can claim sovereignty over it. (Imagine claiming: We own the exclusive rights to handshakes; so they’re off-limits to everyone else.) Where do we draw the line? Does it make sense to claim ownership of, say, high heels? Henna tattoos? Peace signs? Pony-tails?

The self-appointed arbiters of Cul-Ap seek to impose a strict regimen of meme-allocation...yet they can never provide a consistent logic to how the lines shall be drawn. In this dialectical shakedown, each adjudicator fashions himself a sibyl—arrogating to himself the magical power to divine what does and does not qualify as Cul-Ap. The rest of us are expected to await judgement; and abjure on demand whenever we are called out for illicit meme-usage.

Cul-Ap-phobia involves certain a kind of derangement that any level-headed person would find confounding. Cul-Ap-phobes think that one must show respect for any given culture-taken-as-a-whole...rather than for **PEOPLE** (who may happen to be affiliated with that culture). Never mind that it makes no sense to evaluate a culture wholesale (as if it were some monolith with clear-cut edges); one is obligated to demure whenever given the chance to investigate any other culture.

Even more absurd: Cul-Ap-phobes believe that the only way to do this is to refrain from ever showing curiosity about any culture other than one’s own (e.g. acknowledging that a foreign culture may seem, well, **FOREIGN**). This is especially the case if one happens to be **WHITE**—whereby being curious about other cultures is, we are notified, tantamount to **COLONIALISM**.

Sound too zany to be true? Note the bullying of knitting enthusiast, Karen Templer on Ravelry.com in early 2019. (You read that correctly: **KNITTING**.) Templer was excoriated for the sin of wanting to incorporate Indian aesthetics into her repertoire; and—to make things worse—for noting **OUT LOUD** that Indian culture was foreign to her. (Meanwhile, when Oprah Winfrey chastised Indians for using their hands when they eat—a wonderful idea—, she was called out neither for her arrogance nor for her ignorance.)

This is where “identity politics” becomes so perfidious as to be Kafka-esque. To **SIMPLY NOTICE** differences between one’s own culture and another, and subsequently express a genuine interest in acquainting oneself with the other culture, is seen as beyond the pale. Some denizens of this knitting forum felt the need to decry the menacing scourge of interwoven cultures (pun intended)...when it came to the stylization of **TEXTILES**.

Let’s be clear: Templer was castigated for being **COSMOPOLITAN**. Her crime was being fascinated by other cultures. (All the more terrifying: She was looking forward to actually visiting India—a land as alien to her as another planet; thereby learning more about how **THEIR** craft may have related to **HER** craft.) No doubt that the world would be a more beautiful place if **MORE** people were so inclined! There is no other way to characterize Templer’s (bizarrely churlish) persecutors than as hyper-puritanical, hyper-provincial cultural segregationists—each of them demonstrating that it is possible to simultaneously engage in pearl-clutching and finger-wagging.

Templer's on-line assailants were pernicious actors who—clearly—had nothing but contempt for internationalism. In their eyes, to strive to be worldly was to somehow be IMPERIALISTIC. But what, in heaven's name, was the real problem supposed to be? (Before attempting to answer this question, note that Templer was invited by an Indian family, and was planning on staying with them—in their home—to better familiarize herself with their time-honored sartorial practices.)

Alas. So far as bad-faith interlocutors are concerned, to find something “exotic” is to engage in some devious scheme of alterity. If Templer—as a white woman—had the gall to celebrate the Indian aesthetic when it came to woven fabrics, and incorporate any element thereof into her own practice of this handicraft, she must be guilty of that imaginary crime: Cul-Ap!

What can we learn from this disturbing episode? Anti-Cul-Ap crusaders often engage in Reaction Formation—projecting their own bigotry onto those who are, in fact, the OPPOSITE OF bigoted. (It only more Americans were as interested in Indian culture as Templer was!)

Here's the contention: If you fail to countenance the strict parochialism that these self-appointed arbiters of cultural exchange have mandated, something downright invidious must be afoot.

You will therefore be summarily harangued for the bigotry that Cul-Ap-phobes refuse to see in themselves.

What is most ironic—and risible—about such bullying is that p.c.-mongers do absolutely nothing to mitigate the iniquities that they claim to be so deeply concerned about. How many of Templer's persecutors actually knew ANYTHING about the depredations of British colonialism in India, and WHY it was so awful? Well, you see, there's no time to actually learn anything about the world when one is busy patting oneself on the back for chimerical activism.

We are once again reminded that virtue-signaling requires no ACTUAL virtue. And, once again, the purported victims can't decide whether they are supposed to be on their high horse or on a cross. Sanctimony loves a good persecution complex...even if the alleged persecution involves woven fabrics that combine motifs from two different cultures (the horror!)

It is plain to see that NONE of those officious cultural adjudicators are serious about effecting cosmopolitanism. Rather, they are simply scavenging the public square for an opportunity to cavil. And we are reminded that there is no (legitimate) problem that political correctness purports to solve that cannot be solved without it. Weaponizing propriety is a way of vilifying those whom one would prefer remain muted. As is the case with other recriminations in the p.c. ambit, the cynical accusation of ransacking another's culture is a matter of guilting people into silence; so that one need not engage them in serious discussion.

In his book on “rethinking identity”, Kwame Anthony Appiah made the point very well. When noting that the Ghanaians of west Africa had developed the distinct art of “bodom” (glass beads) after having adopted the craft from the Venetians, he asked: “What sorts of progress would have been advanced by insisting that the Venetians owned the idea of glass beads, and policing their claim?” The mistake, he noted, was treating elements of culture as (intellectual) property. “Unfortunately, the vigorous lobbying of huge corporations has made the idea of intellectual property go imperial. [The idea] seems to have conquered the world. To accept the notion of cultural appropriation is to buy into the regime they favor—where corporate entities, acting as cultural guardians, ‘own’ a treasury of IP, [thereby] extracting a toll when they allow others to make use of it.” He concluded that those who make indictments based on Cul-Ap “in terms of ownership have accepted a commercial system that is alien to the traditions they aim to protect. They

have allowed one modern regime of property to appropriate THEM.”

Unlike Cul-Ap, Cul-Ex is exclusionary. An example would be Disney’s attempt to copyright the Swahili saying, “hakuna matata” [“no problem”] due to the fact that the phrase had become somewhat of a trademark of the cinematic blockbuster, “The Lion King” (an animated film released in 1994, itself a rip-off of the Japanese “Kimba, The White Lion”). All reasonable people would agree that trying to monetize a cultural element is highly objectionable. The attempt by a large media conglomerate to take legal ownership of a LOCUTION for its already-bloated corporate profits is downright obscene. The culprit here, though, was greed; not Cul-Ap per se. What Disney was attempting to do was annex a phrase, thereby claiming exclusive rights to it (effectively taking ownership of a phrase in order to use it as a marketing gimmick).

Such an odious act had nothing to do with what is commonly described as “cultural appropriation” simply because the phrase had ALREADY BEEN appropriated (in the making of the film itself); and without issue.

Gladly, Cul-Ap is rarely about using a meme for strictly commercial purposes. Any given cultural element X is non-rivalrous; which is simply to say: Appropriating X is not an act of seizure, as it does not entail depriving anyone else of X (nor of their ability to avail themselves of X of their own accord). The same would be the case with, say, the “appropriation” of an IDEAL.

EX-propriation of X, on the other hand, involves seizure of—or the exercise of control over—X. The latter act DOES entail depriving someone else of X (that is: of their right to make use of it). Therefore it is a mistake to conflate the appropriation of X with the EX-propriation of X. The former is not exclusionary (as X is non-rivalrous). The latter IS exclusionary (when X is treated as property, as when Disney attempted to copyright a Swahili phrase).

This crucial distinction can be captured explicitly: When those enjoying more power say to those who are less powerful, “Hey, that’s a nifty thing you do; we’d like to give it a try,” it is consummate with the cosmopolitan spirit. Doing so is the OPPOSITE of declaring: “Hey, you are no longer allowed to do that; you now need to do things OUR way.” The former is born of open-mindedness; the latter is born of hubris (read: an authoritarian, puritanical mindset). Cul-Ap is germane to the former; Cul-Ap-phobia is germane to the latter. Cultures are actually STRENGTHENED by dissemination; not diluted by it. (Diffusion does not entail dilution.) In any case, one can no more pilfer a meme than one can embezzle an ethos...or abscond with a zeitgeist...or steal a moral principle.

The way Cul-Ap-phobes talk about cultural elements, Cul-Ap entails a deprivation of another’s ability to partake in his own culture. Yet cultural elements are non-rivalrous. So the indictment is based on flawed logic. One party’s participation in culture in no way compromises another party’s prerogative to do the same. In reality, Cul-Ap is not resource-extraction. Rather it is the inevitable consequence of cultural efflorescence. It is not a matter of picking at dead flesh; it is a matter of harvesting the ripe fruits of human activity; and SHARING. Adopting an exogenous cultural element is not a matter of predation; it is a matter of culling. When anti-Cul-Ap crusaders accuse anyone engaged in inter-cultural exchange of “taking” something to which they are not entitled, they are treating cultures as (deplete-able) commodities instead of public goods.

We might explore the flawed logic here even further. Take the harebrained suspicion that some sort of meme-poaching operation is afoot whenever those of one culture adopt—or partake in—elements from another culture (especially when they do so without “permission”). This misses an elementary point: participation is not appropriation. When one TAKES something, the source no longer has it. That is not the case when it comes to the adoption of cultural elements—whether temporarily or permanently.

In this respect, Cul-Ap phobia is based on zero-sum thinking (the supposition that one party's gain is another party's loss). But cultural elements are non-rivalrous (that is: communal); and so cannot be thought of in the same way we think of intellectual property. So any attempt to commodify cultural elements proceeds from a fundamental misunderstanding memetics.

Such Reactionary thinking is a hallmark of the right wing. As usual, the problem with parochialism is that groups of people anchor their self-esteem in the esteem accorded to certain cultural elements. Consecrated memes are taken as proxies for DIGNITY. So to critically evaluate those memes, the thinking goes, is to derogate the people who covet them. According to this gestalt, sanctified cultural elements are rendered the basis for the humanity of those who do the sacralizing. This is based on a "post hoc ergo propter hoc" mis-step: mistaking what we now happen to associate with WHO WE ARE for something we own. We thereby set ourselves up to be offended.

This is a reminder that with political correctness, EVERYTHING is taken personally; and, as a consequence, objectivity goes completely out the window. Most p.c.-mongers deign to vanquish the inequities of society with a strict regimen of enforced propriety—as if all the ills of the world were attributable to breaches of etiquette. In doing so, they confuse propriety with probity.

It is one thing to become obsessed with etiquette; it is quite another thing to WEAPONIZE etiquette—using propriety as a weapon against those who refuse to color within the lines. The upshot of all this is that good form masquerades as moral principle—as if being polite were somehow a surrogate for rectitude.

Consequently, political correctness amounts to a program of weaponized etiquette, which operates at the nexus of puritanism and authoritarianism. The strictures of political correctness are simply blasphemy laws by another name. In fact, the program has all the trappings of cult activity—replete with Inquisition.

Trans-cultural fertilization on a global scale is sometimes referred to as "cultural globalization". The globalization of certain cultural elements strengthens social relations across cultures; as it sets the stage for an inter-connectedness amongst the world's populations. That sounds fine. However, for those concerned about systems of domination / exploitation, the worry is less about cultural globalization than it is about (what has mistakenly been called) "cultural imperialism".

When enculturation is the handmaiden of imperialism, the culprits are the stewards of the SOURCE-culture, not the adopter culture. To recapitulate: Cosmopolitanism is not imperialism; it is its antithesis. In the event that one party encounters another party's culture and—of its own volition—simply "tries it on for size", nothing odious is afoot. It is when this is done so as to denigrate that dubious motives may be afoot. Yet even then, it is not the adoption PER SE that is the problem, it is the hubris underlying the gesture.

So what, then, of the (perfectly valid) concern about imperialism? Imperialistic agents engage in both imposition (ON others) and expropriation (FROM others). This entails domination / exploitation (OF others). But Cul-Ap does not involve either of these; as it is either a matter of engagement (WITH others)...or of simply leaving others to themselves.

The other form of appropriation IS of concern—namely: that by which one seizes CONTROL OF the object (rather than simply SEIZING it). Yet this has nothing to do with what is often referred to as "cultural appropriation"; as Cul-Ap is no more about taking control than it is about taking. For it is merely a matter of participating. That is: Cul-Ap is a matter of participation. It certainly has nothing to do with controlling anything. In other words: Cul-Ap is about SHARING, not about usurping SOVEREIGNTY. Alas. Cul-Ap alarmists construe "participating in" as some kind of "control over".

To resolve this quandary, we are forced to define Cul-Ap as the taking of “cultural expression” (alt. “cultural knowledge”) without permission. Yet here, the litigation falls apart. For it is unclear what “taking” and “permission” here could possibly mean. (Can one pilfer a meme?) Permission from WHOM? From an appropriations panel? From some supreme arbitration authority? Indeed, it is not specified how, exactly, one is supposed to secure “permission” from a “culture”. What would it mean to be the anointed spokesperson of an entire culture?

Once we posit that a particular cultural element “belongs” to THIS set of people, but not to THAT set, insoluble problems arise. Who, pray tell, would be the ultimate adjudicator in such matters? Emotional investment is an amorphous psychical state. So who shall be appointed for ascertaining what is and what isn't a permissible instance of cultural invocation? Can ANY one person (that is: any ONE person) speak on behalf of everyone in the world who is affiliated with a given culture? Such an arrangement would prove itself to be intractable within the hour. So what, then? Are we to undertake a worldwide referendum every time someone wants don ethnic garb or try a signature hairstyle or perform some traditional music?

Shall allotted entitlement (i.e. exclusive access to memes) be determined by plebiscite? Shall usage rights be accorded per the decrees of self-designated stewards of the meme-in-question?

A sign of the neurosis endemic to Cul-Ap-phobia is the recent emergence of the inane pejorative, “culture culture”. The pejorative makes it seem as though cultural EX-propriation were somehow possible. The term is bandied about as though there were bad actors scavenging the social landscape for cultural elements to seize for their own selfish purposes. (Is meme-dispossession a sensical concept?) Cultural elements are not commodities; they are part of the social milieu in which we live.

Memetic hegemony is a problem only insofar as it is a symptom of INSTITUTIONAL (governmental and/or corporate) domination. Problems arise when the propagation of culture is a matter of IMPOSITION (i.e. one group wielding power over another group). This is not the scenario described by “cultural appropriation”. Cul-Ap could never possibly be the explanation for oppression / exploitation. So to blame Cul-Ap for structural inequality (or for systemic socio-economic injustices) is to miss what makes oppression oppressive and exploitation exploitative. Gringos cannot possibly oppress Mexicans by eating a tacos.

Insofar as the promulgation of memes is NOT a function of hegemonic designs, it is not problematic in this way. In other words, the problem with “cultural imperialism” would be the IMPERIALISM. When unconnected to imperialism, then, cultural globalization is not necessarily a matter of domination / exploitation. When group A adopts a cultural element from group B, A is not dominating / exploiting B. However, Cul-Ap-phobes suppose that the propagation of memes is INHERENTLY imperialistic—as if epidemiology somehow translated to hegemony. This is an utterly spurious proposition.

Antonio Gramsci conceived “hegemony” as the control that those in power wield with impunity over a subdued (marginalized) population. He held that this was largely a matter of controlling the culture. This should be contrasted with Cul-Ap, which has nothing to do with imposing anything on anyone. It's about making use of memes, not wielding control over people. Ironically, it is the Cul-Ap-phobes who deign to control culture by fiat—issuing permissions from on high.

Concerns about power asymmetries are entirely valid. Yet none of the problems arising from structural inequalities along ethnic lines are addressed by demonizing Cul-Ap. Prohibiting those in a more privileged position from making use of memes that originated in a marginalized community does nothing to attenuate the marginalization.

When memes propagate, so long as they are adopted organically, moral problems generally do not arise. It is when memes are imposed from above that charges of imperialism hold credence. Even then, insofar as it is a descriptor, Cul-Ap pertains to the opposite of this. That is to say: Cul-Ap does not involve imposition; it involves adoption. In the normal course of cultural globalization, imposition is typically not what's going on; it is SHARING that is the aim.

Arbitrary Timelines:

As already discussed (spec. with regards to hair-styles), the demonization of Cul-Ap involves a conceit regarding the origins of the cultural element at issue. The charge that someone has smuggled memetic contraband across cultural lines requires one to engage in a quixotic attempt to identify the ULTIMATE source-culture of the designated meme. That identification is invariably based primarily on present exigencies, not on historical realities. As it turns out, exactly which culture is anointed as the TRUE OWNER depends on how far back in history one opts to terminate one's inquiry. Such a temporal threshold is inevitably arbitrary.

As I will try to show, in order to assert that a designated meme "belongs" to a certain culture, one is forced to ignore all of the history that preceded the purported source-culture's adoption of it. Such conceit is no better illustrated than with iconography and holidays (especially when they are sacred). Yet it is even illustrated by quotidian memes like catch-phrases or clothing fads. We must ask: Where did it begin? And who started the trend? Oftentimes, a discrete origin does not exist. Any given culture is not a fait accompli; it is a work in progress—the result of having incorporated memes from extant cultures during its own development. That process is STILL HAPPENING.

Cultural elements generally have a history that predates the culture that now claims the element as its own. Beer is originally from Egypt. Mocha is originally from Qatar. Coffee is originally from Ethiopia. Yet we never associate the consumption of such things with their source-cultures. Why not? We choose to start the history of beer, mocha, and coffee at some point LATER ON. This is only natural. Each culture is inclined to take credit for a meme that it fancies to be a signature trait of itself. So we are apt to associate wine primarily with French and Italian culture...even though it was originally PERSIAN. (Thanks, Shiraz.) If we were to enforce the strictures suggested by Cul-Ap-phobes, tea would be off-limits in England (since the Brits appropriated it from India after colonizing the sub-continent).

Contrary to the popular adage, apple pie is originally British, not "American". (Apples originally came from Kazakhstan, by the way. And pie goes back to ancient Greece.) "Just as American as apple pie," it turns out, means NOT (originally) American after all.

As mentioned, the iconic (white) cowboy of the "wild west" in American folklore is a derivative of the Mexican "vaquero". Peanut butter was first used by the Incas and Aztecs. And don't get Italians started on the origins of REAL pizza. Why aren't the Nahua people incensed by Skippy? Well, probably for the same reason Neapolitans aren't incensed by Pizza Hut. One people's cultural heritage is not threatened by another's adoption of this or that cultural element; as their pride need not be anchored to any particular meme.

Alas. If we were to take the logic of Cul-Ap-phobia to its logical conclusion, only Qataris could eat mocha, only Ethiopians could drink coffee.

We all incorporate elements from various cultures into our own repertoire...then, eventually, fancy it to be

our own. Paying tribute to antecedent adopters undermines cultural pride; so we tend to elide any heritage that countermands our own. This goes for technology as much as it does for cuisine. Gunpowder, the concept of vaccination, paper, and moveable type are originally from China; yet rarely do those in the Occident commemorate these vital Oriental contributions.

Though certain memes might CURRENTLY be integral parts of a given culture (by sheer accident of history), those memes do not eternally “belong” to ANY given culture. To illustrate this point, we might harken back to the pantheon of Roman gods: Jupiter, Venus, Neptune, Minerva, Hercules, Vesta, Mars, Mercury, Pluto, Juno, Diana, Nike, Bacchus, Vulcan, Ceres, Harmony, and Saturn. Who are these deities? Lo and behold, they are the Italic version of Hellenic gods: Zeus, Aphrodite, Poseidon, Athena, Heracles, Hestia, Ares, Hermes, Hades, Hera, Artemis, Victoria, Dionysus, Hephaestus, Demeter, Concordia, and Kronos (respectively). Heavens to Mergatroid; the Romans poached the entirety of Mount Olympus!

As it turns out, this is USUALLY how deities are established. Even the Hebrew “Yahweh” seems to have been appropriated from the antecedent godhead of the “Shasu” (an Amorite clan that hailed from Ephraim). Shall we begrudge the world’s Jews for filching the Abrahamic deity from their Canaanite forebears? Perhaps not, as there are no Shasu left to file charges. But that’s neither here nor there; for virtually ALL deities are derivative.

Whoever one might be, most of the elements of one’s own culture are the (tentative) culmination of a very, very long sequence of Cul-Ap. This makes contempt for Cul-Ap a form of (inadvertent) masochism. Want to find someone guilty of Cul-Ap? Look no further than a mirror. Regardless of who you might be, you are likely (unwittingly) engaged in myriad instances of Cul-Ap every day.

We are more prone to a bout of Cul-Ap neurasthenia when we fail to come to terms with the fact that a cultural inheritance is, indeed, an INHERITANCE (or, more accurately, a concatenation of various inheritances...most of which are probably not even recognized as such). Are we to deny everyone else the right to do with OUR cultural elements what we have already done ourselves with others before us? Virtually ANYTHING we now fancy to be “ours” was, at some point, someone else’s.

As we’ve seen, the point can be illustrated by something as trivial as what people opt to do with their hair—be it corn-rows or dread-locks. We might even explore this matter further. Let’s look at French braids and Bantu knots. French braids were not originally French, they were Numidian. And they were used by the Chinese before that...and by the Greeks even before THAT. Bantu knots were Zulu knots before they were Bantu. And they Nubian before that...and Egyptian even before THAT. It is plain to see, then, that nobody OWNS the hair-style.

This is how we can account for the fact that few are in a snit about the “Dutch braid”, an adaptation of the “French braid”...which was an adaptation of the (Algerian) Berber braid...which, as mentioned, was an adaptation of an ancient Numidian stylization. This is why the French don’t even call French braids “French braids”; they—more accurately—call them “African braids”. (For similar reasons, they don’t call french toast “french toast” because it actually isn’t French.) To repeat: EVEN THAT is not accurate—as the African braiding style was ALSO used by the medieval Chinese and by the ancient Greeks. In any case, the Ancient Egyptians were braiding their hair long before anyone else. (Women braiding their hair was evidently an issue in Palestine during the 1st century, as Paul’s first letter to Timothy admonishes them against it.)

So are we to then suppose that the Dutch are guilty of Cul-Ap? From where? How far back shall we go? Should the Greeks be in an uproar about hairstyles in the Netherlands? How about the Chinese? Where, exactly, are the lines to be drawn? In virtually every case, the very people Cul-Ap-phobes proclaim are the

victims were guilty of the indiscretion themselves. With all the serious problems in the world today, who is and isn't donning this or that hair-style should be the least of our concerns.

We all exist as a locus of memes from different places. As individuals, we customize our memetic repertoire as an expression of PERSONAL identity. The result is a motley assortment of cultural elements, some of which are from cultures other than our own. Manifesting the elements of different cultures in one's own behavior is the hallmark of multi-culturalism. It is also how any given culture formed in the first place. The genealogy of cultural elements is testament to on-going co-optation; a process that shall hopefully continue indefinitely.

By suggesting that someone is "stealing" something from another culture, one sets oneself up to explain how the designated source-culture conjured the idea out of thin air. Unless one is referring to the Sumerians (or the Indus Valley or the Yellow River Valley civilizations), whatever one is fixated on likely came from somewhere else...which, according to Cul-Ap, makes all mankind a swarming throng of memetic thieves.

The ubiquity of meme-appropriation is also illustrated by the ramification of iconography around the world. The cooptation of icons has occurred throughout human history. Let's look at a few well-known examples of Cul-Ap as it pertains to semiotic transmigration (that is: memetic transference with respect to symbols).

Christianity fancies itself to be a movement rooted in unstinting forbearance. In an odd twist of irony, though, after being adopted by the Roman imperium, its iconography underwent a queer inversion. The transmogrified (Nicene) religion took as its emblem a Roman torture device. Preceding the use of a crucifix to symbolize the Faith, the movement had already espoused a series of appropriated symbols:

The initial following of Jesus of Nazareth (known as "the Way") was based on universal compassion; and used a FISH as its insignia. In Koine Greek, the symbol came to be called the I-Chi-Th-Y-S, an acronym for "Iesous Kristus Theou [h]Yios Soter" [Jesus, anointed son of god, savior] (a.k.a. the "ichthys"). In place of a fish, the movement eventually adopted the pagan "Vesica-Pisces". Most of the earliest followers of Jesus of Nazareth were fishermen. Consequently, he characterized his ministry as fishing for followers—as attested in the first chapter of the original Gospel: Mark. The fish seems to have been appropriated from antecedent iconography, much of which had to do with the Roman worship of Venus...who was, in turn, based on the Greek goddess, Aphrodite. The leitmotif was also likely influenced by the pagan goddess, Atargatis (often associated with fish)...whose origins were in the Middle East. It is yet another irony that—after all this—Christianity would become an obdurately patriarchal institution.

Pursuant to Emperor Constantine's purported conversion, the Chi-Rho (the first two letters of the Greek term, "Kristos") was used as an emblem of the newly-minted Roman religion. Only when Nicene "Christianity" (based largely on the tenets diametrically opposed to the original movement) became the prevailing version of the creed—during the reign of Emperor Theodoseus—did the cult adopt the crucifix as its insignia. And it is quite likely that THAT was inspired by the Egyptian Ankh. {12} Christian iconography was a veritable orgy of appropriation.

Examples of appropriated iconography are seemingly endless. The staff of Hermes (a dagger enwrapped by a helix of one or two snakes, sometimes topped by a pair of wings) originated in Mesopotamia during the 4th millennium B.C. It eventually served as the icon of the Sumerian demi-god, Nin-gish-zida: messenger of the Earth-mother. It was then "appropriated" by the ancient Egyptians (ref. the Djed pillar at the Dendera temple).

During Classical Antiquity, it was used by the ancient Greeks as the “kerukeion”—an icon for the deity associated with healing, Asklepios (which incorporated the serpent known as “Python”). It was thus often known as the “Rod of Aesclepius” in Greco-Roman lore. Meanwhile, the shaft was used in India as the “mudra” for Mauryan king “Ashoka the Great”.

The staff eventually made an appearance in the Torah as well; in the form of a protective brass pole for the Israelites—thus serving as a talisman meant to ward off the lethal bites from serpents that Yahweh had sent to punish them (Numbers 21:4-9).

In the Book of Exodus, Moses presents the Israelites with a depiction of a snake coiled around a staff. He does this in order to protect them from, well, snakes; as serpents generally symbolized evil in Abrahamic lore. This icon (the “caduceus”) was meant to serve as a prophylactic against poison—both actual and theological. It was none other than the herald used by Hera’s messenger, Iris in Greek mythology; and associated with the aforementioned god of medicine, Asklepios.

It is telling that a Judaic prophet opted for pagan iconography when seeking an antidote to (literal and spiritual) venom. But as it turns out, such appropriation was not uncommon in Abrahamic lore; as much that was eventually considered Hebraic had been appropriated from Hellenic sources. {31}

In another twist of irony, the icon was scornfully referenced later in the Hebrew Bible—by the reformist king, Hezekiah—as the “Nehushtan” (that is: as something to be rebuked).

The staff then came to be dubbed the “caduceus” by the Romans; and would subsequently be associated with Mercury in medieval astronomy. It is now used to symbolize medicine—presumably with Hermes in mind. Shall we inform most of the medical associations around the world that they are guilty of appropriating culture from the Sumerians? Well, it’s not a problem, as the Sumerians don’t exist anymore. So who cares, right? Neither do the ancient Egyptians. But wait. What about the Greeks and Indians? Do they have a case to make? If so, the American Cancer Society better rethink its logo.

The ways in which we, as a community, characterize things (that is: how we happen to think of things CULTURALLY) is a function of a concatenation of salient semiotic factors—factors that are perpetually in flux, and determined by a variety of social forces. Semiotics plays a significant role in collective (read: tribal) identities.

The relationship between a collective identity and semiotic exigencies is highly complex; as each is—ultimately—a historical accident. The “catch” is that everyone likes to think that their iconography is unique to them. We all want to take ownership of our own signature semiotic repertoire. So we see novelty even when things are derivative. We do so...lest we be forced to concede that what we hallow is merely an accident of history; and could have easily been otherwise had circumstances been different.

Once something has been sanctified, such a concession becomes untenable.

So when assaying how a given group identifies with a certain set of memes at any given time, it is necessary to take into account the social psychology underlying nascent memetic resonance. {29} Amidst all this, we are faced with a choice. We can quibble over who “owns” which cultural gem; or we can all feast at a communal table.

What of the phoenix? The “feng-huang” in medieval Chinese art inspired its use in medieval Persian art (as the “simurgh”). This posed no problem—a fact that becomes especially apparent once we consider versions of the icon predated BOTH cultures (as the “gandaberunda” in Hindu art). We in the Occident

now know this leitmotif from its Greco-Roman incarnation: a bird rising from the smoldering ashes.

And what of the double-headed eagle? It has been used as an insignia for regimes in Austro-Hungary, Albania, Serbia, and Russia, as well as for the Holy Roman Empire; yet it originated with the Hittites of Anatolia...and was later “appropriated” by the Byzantines (as the “Palaiologos”), then by the Seljuk Turks. Shall it now be deemed off-limits to anyone but eastern Europeans and Turks? Shall we now suppose that those who use the insignia are guilty of ripping off the Hittites? The Germans adopted it as the “reichsadler” in the 19th century. In doing so, was there something iniquitous afoot in Saxony?

The so-called “Star of David” [Hebrew: “megan David”] offers another case-study in appropriated symbols. The symbol seems to have originated in ancient Canaanite iconography. It was eventually adopted by Kabbalists for use on “segulot” (talismanic protective amulets) during the Dark Ages. Kabbalists originally referred to it as the Seal of Solomon—which appeared in two versions (as either a pentagram or a hexagram).

It is oft-forgotten, though, that the original emblem of Judaism was the Aryeh Yehuda [lion of Judah]. During Classical Antiquity, and into the Middle Ages, the predominant symbol of the Mosaic Faith was actually the **menorah**—as attested by the Babylonian Talmud, which never mentions a star. When Roman Emperor Domitian erected the triumphal “Arch of Titus” to commemorate the Roman victory over the Jews in 70 A.D., the latter were associated not with a star, but with the menorah. The menorah was still the go-to symbol in the 5th and 6th centuries A.D.—as demonstrated by the Jewish Catacombs of Rome and Venosa. (For more on this, see my essay on “The Land Of Purple”.)

Assuming King David even existed, were he to have seen this star, he surely would not have associated it with either himself, with his people, or with the Abrahamic deity. Consequently, it stands to reason that this was NOT what Solomon would have used for his royal seal. A lion symbolized his creed, not the Canaanite hexagram. And for the next two thousand years, its emblem would be a menorah.

Only around the 11th or 12th century A.D. did those involved in the Mosaic tradition start incorporating the fabled hexagram into their iconography—a convention that was mostly limited to the Kabbalist tradition. The star was thereafter used as an insignia for Masoretic texts (as attested by the Leningrad codex). Through the Renaissance, the familiar symbol was alternately known by Jews as the “Shield of David” or “Seal of Solomon”. Yet it was hardly exclusive to Judaism. During the Crusades, the same star was used by the (vehemently anti-Semitic) Knights Templar! (Cul-App, it turns out, is not without ironies.)

It was not until the 19th century that Jewish communities within the Pale of Settlement (i.e. the Ashkenazim of Eastern Europe) adopted the star as an insignia for Judaic identity. And only in the advent of the modern Zionist movement (in the late 19th century) did it come to be associated primarily with Judaism.

In the ancient world, the hexagram served as a sacred symbol in Phoenician, Assyrian, Roman, Armenian, Ethiopian, Bactrian, Indian, and Tibetan iconography. Each version used what was a catchy and straightforward design: two triangles (one inverted) super-imposed upon one another.

The Semitic origins of the hexagram star will likely forever remain unclear. Why did some of the early Semitic peoples adopt it? One possibility is that it was the pagan symbol for “Kewan” / “Kaiwan”, the Canaanite star-god rebuked in the Book of Amos (5:26). This moniker was—mistakenly—rendered “Re[m]phan” / “Raiphon” in Koine Greek when the Septuagint was composed in the 2nd century B.C. (“Kewan” was probably a Semitic adaptation of the Assyrian “Kayawanu”; as in the reference found in Acts 7:43.)

Considering how iconography usually works, we should not be surprised to find that this particular star is not unique to Judaism—as Albanians and Palestinians (that is: Muslims in the Balkans and in the Levant) have been using it as an emblem for centuries. In fact, prior to the 20th century, it was just as much an Islamic symbol as it was a Jewish one. The hexagram was on the Moroccan flag until 1915, when it was altered to a pentagram. The star also has mathematical significance: the fractal hexagram (a pair of superimposed triangles, one inverted) is referred to as the Koch snowflake.

But wait. There's more. The symbol was also used in the Far East! Practitioners of Shinto in Japan have been using the hexagram star (as the “Kagome” crest) since the 5th century B.C. And it was often used on Hindu mandalas EVEN BEFORE THAT. Indeed, the “Shatkona” antedates ALL THE OTHER versions of the hexagram. The two triangles—one pointing up, the other down—represent “Om” and “Hreem” in Vedic lore; or, alternately, Shakti (representing Vedic “prakriti”) and Shiv[a] (representing Vedic “purusha”) in Hindu lore. So, gee-wiz. Who's symbol is it?

As it turns out, Jews of the modern age are the LAST people on Earth to have adopted this familiar symbol...which is now associated with the modern nation-State of “Israel”. Shall we cry “cultural appropriation” against the world's Jewish people each time we see them using this “star of David”? According to the logic of Cul-Ap: YES. But we don't. Why not? Because doing so would be ridiculous. Like anyone else, Jews have a right to adopt things from other cultures. The symbol was not ORIGINALLY theirs; yet they now use it as their own nevertheless. And that's perfectly fine. {25}

The iconography that is familiar to us NOW is often the result of a long line of Cul-Ap. Granted, many instances of the hexagram around the world (Indian, Persian, Illyrian, Armenian, Byzantine, Moroccan, Malay, Balinese, Japanese, etc.) emerged independently, not from Cul-Ap; but the point remains: It is the height of conceit for anyone who adopted the meme later in the timeline to claim exclusive ownership. It is important to recognize that what we now call the “Star of David” originally had a very different semiotic existence—be it the Shatkona yantra in Hinduism; or the Kagome crest in the Shinto tradition; or any of the other occurrences of the symbol over the millennia. And when we see the hexagram's use in Judaism (since its appearance in the 11th century), we should note that that was a later development; and that the Anahata mandala existed long before.

In an ironic confluence of iconography, ancient manuscripts of the “Bardo Thodol” (a.k.a. the “Tibetan Book of the Dead”) feature a mandala with a hexagram circumscribing a swastika—something that was often done in the Vajra-yana tradition. (Navajo art also sometimes used this combination.) Such a seemingly discordant concurrence is an illustration that those two symbols have a history that is vastly different from the connotations with which people in the Occident have come to be familiar. It is a reminder that to expect cultures to exist in silos is a quixotic venture. And it is further confirmation that pan-cultural integration is nothing new; and nothing to fear.

Another Abrahamic example drives the point home. Dar al-Islam implicitly pays heed to its pagan roots by retaining the crescent moon as its icon-of-choice—a hold-over from pre-Islamic Arabia, where it symbolized the moon-god, Hubal. Naturally, Mohammedan lore was designed to elide this fact. For it is de rigeur for virtually ALL iconography to obfuscate its own genealogy. Indeed, failing to do so risks revealing the fact that—whatever it might be—the meme is merely a social construct (which is to say: it is an accident of history).

As it happened, the crescent moon and star combination was ALSO used in Sassanian iconography, and continued to be used by the first Mohammedans. It's no surprise, then, that such iconography was eventually adopted as a key element in Islamic iconography. Muslims may wish to elide this fact; but ALL

memes have genealogies that don't necessarily accord with the stories we like to tell ourselves (especially when it comes to memes that we fancy to be OUR OWN). Consequently, each iteration in the genealogy of an icon deems itself to be sui generis (i.e. NOT derivative). When it comes to sacred symbols, this is done to claim authenticity, and thereby assert legitimacy.

So it goes with Christianity vis a vis the crucifix; so it goes with Judaism vis a vis the Star of David; and so it goes with Islam vis a vis the crescent moon.

In sum: A cultural element is not always what we fancy it to be. Rushing to judgement about who can and cannot partake in it, then, invariably proceeds from a host of spurious assumptions. It's like the Scot who insists that tartan (a.k.a. plaid) is exclusively Gaelic, failing to realize the patterned fabric was used on continental Europe—and even in ancient China—long before it made it to Alba. (It did not appear in Scotland until the 16th century...hundreds of years after William Wallace fought for independence.)

When it comes to symbols, the tendency for things to not be as they now seem is most blatantly demonstrated by the Hindu / Jain—and then Buddhist—**swastika**. This is a tragic tale of mal-appropriated iconography. The sacred symbol has been sullied by its appropriation by the Nazi party after it had already been in use for THOUSANDS of years. {13} But how in heaven's name did THAT happen? Lo and behold: By a series of memetic appropriation.

The symbol-in-question was actually used in Greek iconography since c. 900 B.C. as the tetra-gamma dion [four-gamma shape]. And it was used on Scythian coins going back to Classical Antiquity.

In Vedic Sanskrit, "swasthi" means good fortune, blessed-ness, peace, prosperity, and/or well-being (roughly comparable to "eudaimonia" in Greek). Meanwhile, "laksh[a]" means progression toward a goal; which seems to have served as the etymological basis for the suffix, "-ka" (as well as for the goddess, "Lakshmi"). Ergo "swastika".

The symbol's history in Europe is columnious. Germanic occultists like Guido von List and Adolf Josef Lanz von Liebenfels sometimes made use of the Teutonic "hakenkreuz" [hooked cross]; the latter for his virulently anti-Semitic, hyper-nationalistic "New Templars Order". The Thule Society also made use of the symbol for its own nefarious purposes. The basis of this iconography was—ostensibly—ancient Nordic mythology. (The symbol, signifying some kind of preternatural power, seems to have been associated with Thor's hammer.) In the advent of the first World War, the German Freikorps got the idea to use the swastika from Teutonic shrines that made use of the symbol (as some medieval Germanic churches tended to do). They were also likely aware of the Templars' use of it as an emblem of the Teutonic legacy. They most likely did NOT have Hinduism, Jainism, or Buddhism in mind. Considering symbol's association with militant "völkisch" Supremacy, it was only natural that the brown-shirts opted to adopt the symbol soon thereafter. Lo and behold: Nazi leadership had connections to the Thule Society.

It is worth bearing in mind that, so far as the Nazis were concerned, the symbol was the "haken-kreuz" [hooked cross]; not the "swastika".

It might be noted that some Native American tribes ALSO made use of the swastika (e.g. the Navajo; with the whirling log); though they likely did not appropriate it from anyone else. The symbol was even used as the insignia for the U.S. Army's 45th Infantry Division until 1939 (as a homage to Native Americans). Once the symbol became inextricably associated with Nazism, the U.S. military felt obliged to refrain from using it anymore.

Tragically, the association with Nazism has stuck; and along with it the odious stigmatization. Regardless,

the swastika STILL IS what it has been for THOUSANDS of years. The world's Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists needn't let the fact that an Austrian psychopath appropriated their symbol in the 1920's deter them from continuing to make use of it.

Most would agree that the Nazis' hijacking of the swastika was the most vulgar case of Cul-Ap in modern history. Nevertheless, if we were to enumerate a hundred of the most execrable things the Third Reich did, hijacking a Hindu / Jain symbol would probably not make the list. In other words, even when it comes to the most egregious case of Cul-Ap, it is STILL not an issue that needs to be addressed in terms of "cultural appropriation". What the Nazis did with the swastika is more accurately characterized as a vulgar semiotic swindle. (Note that even the NAME of the symbol is Vedic.) It is due to a failure to understand how meme-appropriation works that many still primarily associate this hallowed symbol with Nazism.

Alas. As with embellishments to folklore (be it the urban legends or ancient myths), stigmatization has a ratcheting effect: Once a stigma is sufficiently ingrained in the collective consciousness, it is difficult to revert back to the original semiotic instantiation. This is why it's still okay to name a girl "Swastika" in India, but such a choice would be uncouth in the West. An athletic company has permanently stigmatized the female name "Nike"; and an automobile company has permanently stigmatized the female name "Portia" (based on the homophonic Bohemian family-name, "Porsche"). Mass-inculcation is rarely reversible, especially when the stigmatization is poignant. But if we are to hew to the strained logic of Cul-Ap-phobia, should we not demand that "Nike" (Greek) and "Portia" (Roman) be returned to their rightful homeland?

It makes sense to take measures to curb such memetic hijinks. But this does not require one to demonize Cul-Ap per se. Even the most opprobrious cases of Cul-Ap do not warrant the kind of anti-Cul-Ap hysteria found in some p.c. circles.

Sacred symbols sometimes even come to be treated as casual accessories—as anyone knows who has donned a fleur-de-lis (originally the French symbol for the divine right of kings). So, yes: The Boy Scouts of America are guilty of ripping off the Holy Roman Empire. Shall we be incensed by this?

What of the Apple command symbol? Appropriated from the Swedes. The dollar sign? Appropriated from the Portuguese. The glyph for female? The Alchemical symbol for antimony. And on and on. Cul-Ap is all over the place. It ALWAYS HAS BEEN. The swastika is perhaps the most poignant—if tragic—example; the (Judaic) Star of David, the (Christian) cross, and (Islamic) crescent moon being the most un-acknowledged. Even so, this is how iconography usually works. The Maori of New Zealand understand this—which is probably why they don't complain that one of their tribal marks is now used as the symbol for "biohazard".

And what about architecture? During the Renaissance, certain elements of Europe's gothic architecture—specifically, the signature pointed arch—was heavily influenced by Islamic structural design. Shall we consider this an instance of the Occident appropriating a meme from the Orient? Is Alhambra in Grenada a tribute or a desecration? But wait. As it turns out, the pointed arch that is so often associated with Islamic architecture was itself appropriated from antecedent Sassanian (Persian) architecture... which had actually been pioneered by the ancient Assyrians in THEIR architecture during the Bronze Age. Meanwhile, the Byzantines made use of this distinct structural feature long before Mohammed of Mecca's fabled ministry—as attested by the Karamagara bridge in Cappadocia c. 500. Shall we consider this a case of serial memetic theft?

That's not all. The signature "horseshoe arch" typically associated with Islamic Andalusia was, in fact, an appropriation of a Visigothic design. Are we to suppose, then, that the Andalusians indebted to the Goths?

And what of the Turks' adoption of Baroque (spec. Rococo) motifs? Memetic transference brought THAT aesthetic from Italy to France to Spain...and even to Russia. It was a spree of Cul-Ap from Anatolia to Iberia...and all the way up to Saint Petersburg.

There are myriad examples of this in architecture. The medieval European structures known as "cloisters" were based on the "peristyles" of ancient Rome: private gardens surrounded by colonnades. The Romans had adapted this structural feature from ancient Greece...which, in turn, may have had antecedents in ancient Persia. We might note that the word "paradise" derives—via Latin and Greek—from the Old Persian (Avestan) term for a walled-in garden: "paridayda" / "fairi-daeza"...which also yielded the Arabic term, "firdaus". Are Christian monasteries—and the Koran, for that matter—to be prosecuted for illicit Cul-Ap? Is Cambridge University guilty of appropriating an architectural motif from Iran? Merely posing such questions is absurd.

So where is the outcry? As it turns out, Cul-Ap-phobes are only concerned about Cul-Ap when it suits them; glossing over all the other instances that populate their own world. There are countless examples of such selectivity. How often do we hear complaints about Halloween being a tacky re-branding of Halloween (a.k.a. "All Hallows Tide"; "All Hallows Eve")? Never. Yet, as it so happens, the origins of this occasion lay in the Gaelic "Samhain", commemorating the end of the harvest season. Medieval Christians appropriated the (pagan) Celtic idea, and refashioned it as "All Saints / Martyrs Day". The carved pumpkin (now known as the "jack o'lantern") was appropriated from traditions found in the Cornish version of the occasion, Kalan Gwav (a.k.a. "Allan-tide")...which was a variation on the Brythonic (Welsh) "Calan Gaeaf". Yet Cul-Ap-phobes are not up in arms that a Gaelic holiday has been turned into a mawkish commercial enterprise by the rest of the world. Why not?

"But it's okay, as the Irish were not an oppressed minority" is an objection that could only be uttered by those unfamiliar with the earliest era of the American colonies. The Irish were routinely marginalized in America, yet they do not have an aneurism every time non-Irish revelers don a shamrock on Saint Patrick's Day.

Just as with Halloween, St. Patrick's Day has been "appropriated" from hallowed Gaelic folk-traditions by the rest of the Occident. Is the entire Western world denigrating the Irish by celebrating these holidays in such a care-free manner? According to the contorted logic of Cul-Ap-phobia, Americans must be somehow desecrating an entire people's heritage by engaging in daffy activities on such festive occasions. (Is this bigotry via conviviality?) No sane person—least of all the Irish—makes such a contention.

As already mentioned, "Christmas" is the end of a long line of cultural appropriation centered around the winter solstice. Yet its pagan origins are elided by those who now claim the auspicious occasion as uniquely their own. The same goes for Easter. Indeed, celebrations of the vernal equinox go back to the 2nd millennium B.C. with the Babylonian / Assyrian festival, "Akitu[m]". Another of the oldest versions of this was the Persian (Zoroastrian) "Nowruz". "Zag-muk" [beginning of the year] was a Babylonian festival in December that lasted about 12 days. It celebrated the triumph of the godhead, Marduk over the forces of Chaos, symbolized by Tiamat. (Yes: It was originally the twelve days of Zagmuk.) Meanwhile, the most important festival for the Etruscans was the "Ambarvalia" in May; and was dedicated to the mother goddess, Dia. In Christendom, the holiday was based on the Roman festivals of "Floralia" (alternately: "Cerealia", a revamped version of "Ambarvalia").

As mentioned, the ROMAN winter solstice celebration included several leitmotifs that were later adopted by Christ-mas-tide revelers...replete with decking the halls with wreathes of evergreen. Unsurprisingly, Christians also adopted pagan practices for their spring equinox celebration (that of their Messiah's re-birth).

Throughout ancient times, there were various celebrations of re-birth during spring-tide. In the Hindu Kush, Sindhis celebrate “Chetri Chandra” at springtide. In Ireland, the Gaelic “Beltane” was celebrated throughout the Middle Ages. Yet how many times do we hear Hindus or Druids complaining that Christians are using predominantly pagan rituals in their celebration of their savior-god’s revitalization? This is, of course, precisely the point: The fact that bunnies, Easter-egg hunts, and tasty chocolate candies have come to be associated with Pauline soteriology reminds us that memes usually have highly idiosyncratic genealogies.

Never mind Christmas and Easter. Roman Catholicism ITSELF is based almost entirely on pagan traditions. “Ash Wednesday” was a repurposing of the Norse “Day of Odin”, where Vikings placed ash on their foreheads to ward off bad fortune. “Lent” has roots in Assyrian tradition, with the forty-day fast dedicated to Damuzid (a.k.a. “Tammuz”). Even Valentine’s Day (ostensibly a tribute to Valentinus of Terni) has pagan roots. The Roman Catholics—under the direction of Pope Gelasius—appropriated that auspicious occasion from the Roman feast of Lupercalia—a celebration of fecundity (read: female fertility). As it turns out, EVEN THAT had been appropriated from another culture: the ancient Arcadian festival of Lykaia.

As is often the case, there is appropriation going as far back as our timeline can take us. When it comes to memes, what is now autochthonous was at one point exogenous. Cul-Ap-phobes fail to recognize this. So what they aim to do is terminate the very process that brought the culture-in-question to where it now is. It’s like trying to protect butterflies by prohibiting the formation of cocoons. To spurn those who CONTINUE the very process that brought one’s own culture to where it is today, then, is the height of hypocrisy. For it is to undermine that which one is aiming to protect.

Judaic traditions illustrate the point as well. Would we be right assail the world’s Jewish people for appropriating the Persian (Mithraic) festivals of “Jashn-i Mehr” (a.k.a. “Mehr-i Gan”) and/or “Fravashi” (a.k.a. “Fravard-i Gan”) in their observance of Purim? The Judaic occasion was ostensibly based on the commemoration of the apocryphal Persian queen, Esther; but its origins lay elsewhere.

And shall we take umbrage with Beth Israel for having based “Yom Teruah” (a.k.a. “Rosh Ha-Shanah”; meaning head of the year) on the Assyrian festival of “Akitu[m]” (a.k.a. “Resh Shattim”, also meaning head of the year)?

The Day of Ashura was rendered the Tenth [Day] of [the month of] Tishri (alt. “Yom Ashura”), which came to be known as “Yom Kippur” in Judaic tradition. (“Ashura” means “tenth” in Aramaic.) Incidentally, the Day of Ashura was also the inspiration of the Muslim “Laylat al-Qadr” [Night of Power], as well as for the Shiite mourning of Hussein ibn Ali at Karbala during the month of Muharram. The earliest Mohammedans fasted during the Day of Ashura, an Arabian tradition that predated Islam. { 14 } Shall we begrudge Jews and Muslims for cribbing this holiday from pagan antecedents?

The answers to these questions are, of course all “no”. It makes perfect sense that such adaptations happened within Judaism. After all, Judaic lore was codified in Babylon during the Exilic Period. Consequently, it is no surprise that those forming the new creed opted to simply adapt the existing traditions to their own Faith.

But wait. There’s more. Shall we begrudge Jews for riffing off of the Egyptian harvest festival dedicated to Min when establishing the holiday of “Chag ha-Asif” (a.k.a. “Sukkot”)? The occasion was ostensibly based on the Mishnah (as well as passages from the Books of Nehemiah and Zechariah); yet it was really just another case of appropriated lore. Even one of the most sacred Judaic practices, circumcision, was

adopted from the Egyptians (which Canaanites started practicing during the Amarna period).

“But that was a really long time ago,” comes the objection. Granted. But how, then, shall we proceed? Does memetic provenance have a sunset clause? Is it the case that if the appropriation occurred a while ago, then we are permitted to let it slide? To qualify for exemption, where shall the cut-off be? The problem is: Whatever threshold one might propose, it will invariably be arbitrary. The ad hoc rationale for the indictment reveals the highly-selective nature of Cul-Ap demonization.

Shall we suppose, then, that illicit Cul-Ap has a statute of limitations? How far back do we need to go before Cul-Ap is deemed to have been copacetic? Is it to be sanctioned retroactively...or was it okay all along? If Cul-Ap was wrong last weekend, how was it not wrong a few millennia ago?

What of Islam? The myriad traditions involved in the “Hajj” (Muslim pilgrimage) were ALL appropriated from antecedent pagan rituals—including ablutions, animal sacrifice, and the circumambulation of the Meccan cube (“kaaba”). Throwing stones at an edifice that represents evil forces (for the expiation of sins)? Appropriated. Drinking from the Zamzam well (for spiritual purification)? Appropriated. Kissing a black stone (to garner blessings)? Appropriated. Running between the Safa and Marwah hills? Yep, that was appropriated too. If we were to treat Cul-Ap as a transgression against the source culture, we’d be forced to contend that pre-Islamic Bedouins were the “victims” of rampant Cul-Ap. Even the tradition of fasting for a lunar month (Ramadan) was appropriated from the extant tradition of the Nabataeans, in commemoration of the moon-god, Hubal. In fact, one would be hard-pressed to find an element of Islamic practice that was NOT lifted from antecedent (pagan) practices. {14}

Another example of a religion co-opting elements from antecedent tradition is Theravada Buddhism’s adoption of Hindu lore—replete with Ganesh, Hanuman, and the legend of Rama. {19} As it turns out, virtually every Faith—especially those of the Abrahamic tradition—arrived at its present form as a result of Cul-Ap galore. A creed is invariably a bespoke agglomeration of pre-existent memes. Any given religion is the culmination of a meandering process of ad hoc co-optation—a process that few votaries care to acknowledge. For in consecrating a memplex, one is inclined to fancy it to be sui generis. (It doesn’t make sense to sanctify something that one admits is derivative.)

The lesson here is simple: Leveling charges of illicit Cul-Ap requires absolutely no knowledge of the culture in question. Even worse, doing so typically betrays an ignorance of the cultural element being cited; and a general ignorance of how culture usually develops. The faux sophistication of the Cul-Ap crusader is revealed by the fact that one does not really need to know anything about any of the world’s cultures in order to level the indictment.

In proscribing Cul-Ap, we are not only obliged to specify the purported source-culture (that is; to designate the alleged victim), we are—by the same logic—obliged to specify the ULTIMATE source-culture of the meme-in-question. Doing so would, of course, be a quixotic task; but, more importantly, it is an unnecessary one. For in appropriating an exogenous cultural element, we are merely continuing a process that got that element—insofar as it can be discretely defined—to the current (purported) source-culture in the first place.

What is the optimal time-frame for exclusive rights to a given element of a given culture? When the license for meme-usage has an expiration date, who determines who gets the license, and for how long? In demanding everyone stop making use of the designated source-culture’s memes (because Cul-Ap is inherently bad), we are decrying a process that brought things to where they are now. For, as it turns out, the designated source-culture (whichever one it happens to be, depending where we draw the line in history) was ITSELF guilty of Cul-Ap.

Memes are transferable across both epochs and cultures. As Kwame Anthony Appiah once noted: the “putative owners” of cultural elements may well have been the “previous appropriators” of those elements. He could go so far to say: Their ancestors USUALLY WERE earlier appropriators. After all: That’s how culture works.

To reiterate: Grousing about Cul-Ap is usually a sign that someone does not know much about the history of the culture being cited...or, for that matter, very much about how culture-in-general normally works. In the campaign to paint Cul-Ap as something uncouth, we are admonished to disregard the fact that every culture is a unique conglomeration of material, which was almost entirely culled from other cultures.

At the risk of flogging a steed that is already deceased, it is worth pursuing this line of inquiry in other contexts. Let’s look at literature.

Literature:

In assaying the incidence of Cul-Ap in the literary sphere, we might start by noting that the father of American drama (the Nobel laureate and Irish playwright, Eugene O’Neill) adopted his style from Russian “realism” (esp. the works of Anton Chekov). Was this a problem? If not, then why not? We might then ask: Was American “imagist” poet, Ezra Pound’s gravest sin that, in composing his verse, he employed an idiom appropriated from the Chinese (and Japanese)? Considering that he also happened to harbor fascist sympathies, how shall we prioritize our moral qualms?

With respect to literature, Cul-Ap goes back thousands of years. A prime example of literary cross-pollination is the Hindu “Ramayana”, a Sanskrit epic from Classical Antiquity. Key elements in the work owe a debt to the Mycenaean epics of Homer. Several of the motifs are the same—as with the abduction of a lady, as well as the subsequent conflict based on forbidden love: Sita by Ravana, Helen by Paris. Unsurprisingly, influences flowed in the other direction as well. As it turns out, the Hellenic “Aeneid” exhibits influences from the Vedic “Mahabharata”. {21} Shall Indians be incensed at the Greeks?

Throughout the Middle Ages, the Silk Road—stretching across Eurasia from the Middle East to the Far East—was not just a means of interchanging goods, it was a means of interchanging ideas (including theological tenets, artistic idioms, and fashion). Without rampant Cul-Ap, the Kushan Empire would not have existed. (Gandhara art was the result of Buddhist motifs being infused by Greek motifs. The Bactrian language was the result of Greek letters being used to write an Aryan vernacular.) An illustration of this cultural alloy is the panoply of Buddhist terms that ended up in the Persian vernacular; and the panoply of Syriac / Sogdian terms that ended up in Manichaean liturgy. The propagation of Pahlavi literature across Eurasia attests to the fact that there was an exchange of memes as well as of merchandise...in both directions.

This was a reminder that cultures are not clearly-demarcated domains that can be memetically quarantined. {19}

Even the father of English literature, Geoffrey Chaucer, appropriated many of his motifs from French and Italian sources for his “Canterbury Tales”; yet neither the French nor the Italians were bothered by this. And when Japanese author, Minae Mizumura penned a Japanese rendition of Emily Brontë’s “Wuthering Heights”, the British didn’t seem to mind. Why not?

Regarding contemporary literature, it might also be asked: Can black female authors write novels in which major characters are white men? How about vice versa? If an author cannot compose a heartfelt narrative

involving characters that are anything other than the demographic to which the author himself belongs, then all fiction would be reduced to verging autobiography. Shakespeare was neither a Moorish general nor a Danish prince. Nevertheless, the English playwright was able to create the principle characters of “Othello” and “Hamlet”. The great bard was certainly not a lovesick Venetian teenager; yet we now have “Romeo and Juliet”.

I have mentioned “West Side Story” (1957), an Americanized adaptation of Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet” (1595). But that wasn’t all there was to it. As it turns out, the Elizabethan playwright HIMSELF adapted a tale that had already been widely published...both as an Italian novella by Matteo Bandello AND as a French novella by Pierre Boaistuau (about Reomeo Titensus and Juliet Bibleotet).

And even that was not the beginning. For the Italian and French renditions that inspired Shakespeare had themselves been adaptations of William Painter’s “Palace of Pleasure” (1567)...which had, in turn, been taken from Arthur Brooke’s “The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet” (1562). And that had been taken from Luigi da Porto’s tale of Romeus and Giulietta (1524)...which had been taken from Masuccio Salernitano’s tale of Mariotto and Giannozza, entitled “A Newly Found Story Of Two Noble Lovers” (1476). And Salernitano had taken HIS tale from John Metham’s “Amoryus and Cleopes” (1449)...which had been an adaptation of a tale in Giovanni Boccaccio’s “Decameron” (from the 14th century). And THAT was lifted from Ovid’s tale of Pyramus and Thisbe, published in 8 A.D. Gadzooks! It was Cul-Ap from Broadway all the way back to ancient Rome!

Don’t think this counts as Cul-Ap because everyone was—as it were—IN ON the chain of adaptation? Think again. Everyone in this sequence of appropriation sought to make the tale an integral part of their own culture. In each case, the fact that it had already been a part of someone else’s culture posed no problem; and was even elided. With each iteration, the adaptors sought to make it their own. The asserted ownership by imbuing that which had come from an exogenous culture with a distinct (indigenous) cultural flavor. We can, then, better understand George Bernard Shaw’s cheeky quip that “Shakespeare was a wonderful teller of stories so long as someone else had told them first.”

So the question arises: Is Shakespeare’s vaunted legacy in any way diminished by him having co-opted other cultures’ material? Au contraire. If anything, his work was ENHANCED by him having done so. For the ability to transcend one’s own lot in life—and to imagine what it’s like to be someone else—is what enables great art.

In fact, if the proprietors of Stratford-up-Avon were beholden to proscriptions against Cul-Ap, almost NONE of the great bard’s timeless oeuvre would have been permitted on their stage. Imagine Danes begrudging Shakespeare for Hamlet; or Italians begrudging him for the way he depicted the Montague-Capulet feud. Shall Maghrebi Muslims be incensed over Othello? As it turns out, we rarely hear complaints about such works; as the more sober aficionados of political correctness know better than to grouse about something so patently absurd. It seems they would rather focus on the indiscretion of gringos eating tacos and hitting piñatas at kids’ birthday parties.

This is a reminder that the charge of illicit Cul-Ap can’t help but be highly selective; thereby reflecting the biases of those leveling the charge. Double standards are routine in the demesne of political correctness. Tragically, the doyens of p.c. fail to see that great literature—like all great art—elucidates our shared humanity; and thus transcends culture. Shakespeare has given us some of the great Svengalis in literature—from a conniving Scottish virago (Lady Macbeth) to a conniving Venetian soldier (Iago). We find this character in Germany (as with Mephistopheles) and in France (as with the Marquise Isabelle de Merteuil). The dysfunction of tragic heroes—manipulated by scheming villains—reflects something about humanity. It is a vulnerability that exists irrespective of demographic profiles. Humanity transcends

ethnicity.

Shakespeare reminds us that certain themes are timeless; and that the most profound insights are immune to the artificial boundaries we have so unscrupulously constructed to demarcate one culture from another. Artistic expression cannot be reduced to its creator's ethnic identity. Shakespeare's plays illustrate that certain themes are HUMAN themes, and so not constrained to this or that cultural milieu.

Alas. Not everyone see it this way. In early 2019, the most fanatical of Cul-Ap-phobes opted to pillory Chinese author, Amélie Wen Zhao for penning a novel in which one of the themes was indentured servitude. According to the complainants, as someone who was not black, Zhao had no right to write about anything having to do with one group enslaving another group...as if African-Americans were the only people in the world who had ever experienced slavery. {24} This is nothing short of insanity. It is also a textbook example of racism. And it requires people to know nothing about world history.

Authors are on notice: If you want to pen a story involving minority characters, you risk being accused of exploitation if you do not personally belong to that minority.

Were we to begrudge artists who attempt to put themselves in the shoes of "the other", adopting idioms from outside their own culture, we would be forced to censure much of the world's greatest artistic achievements—musical, sartorial, architectural, culinary, AND literary. In doing so, we would also betray the highest principles of humanism.

Looking around the world, we find that memetic transference is ubiquitous in literature. Take, for instance, the notion of the quintessential seducer: From Don Giovanni (Italian) to Don Juan (Spanish) to Cyrano de Bergerac (French). In Europe, this was nothing new. The famous "Chansons de Roland" from medieval France (c. 1100) were adapted by Italian writers four centuries later (as the tales of "Orlando"; first by Matteo Maria Boiardo, then by Ludovico Ariosto).

If we were forced to censor the literary repertoire in the manner suggested by anti-Cul-Ap crusaders, we must ask: Who would benefit? Shall only Asians write about Asians, Africans about Africans, Scandinavians about Scandinavians, and Latinos about Latinos? Or shall we ALL—as fellow humans—be permitted to recognize that we share in the same humanity?

As we have seen, for the answer, we need only look to Shakespeare. His entire repertoire was a bacchanal of Cul-Ap. Was this in any way detrimental...to ANYONE? As Harold Bloom put it: "The idea that you benefit the insulted and injured by reading someone of their own origins rather than reading Shakespeare is one of the oddest illusions ever promoted."

Sometimes an author seems to be writing from within one ethnic identity, yet turns out to belong to another. When "Danny Santiago" penned a critically-acclaimed novel about Chicano barrios ("Famous All Over Town"), he was revealed to be an upper-class WASP named Daniel Lewis James. This revelation did not detract from either the insightfulness or the literary value of the work. He no more needed to be Hispanic to tell the gripping story than Shakespeare needed to be a Bohemian to craft "The Winter's Tale". Indeed, James was actually knowledgeable about—and genuinely CARED about—the Chicano communities about which he wrote; as he had worked with them intimately in the past.

This should remind us that it is the SPIRIT BEHIND the work that is truly important. Fidelity and good intentions matter more than the demographic profile of the author. When Kathryn Stockett penned "The Help", the fact that a white woman had written a compelling novel about the travails of black maids in the American South during the pre-Civil Rights era did not compromise the story's credibility. She no more

needed to be an African American to craft a poignant narrative about white privilege in Mississippi than, say, Khaled Hosseini needed to be a woman to write his novel about Muslimahs dealing with Afghan patriarchy in “A Thousand Splendid Suns”.

Felicitously, J.R.R. Tolkien engaged in OODLES of cultural appropriation (primarily from ancient Norse culture) in composing “The Hobbit” and “The Lord of the Rings”. Eight decades later, renown British author Neil Gaiman engaged in his own creative appropriation with his “Norse Mythology”. Should Scandinavians be incensed by this? Well, no more than Danes should be up in arms over the fact that Shakespeare ripped off their 12th-century saga, “Vita Amlethi” (itself an adaptation of a tale in the “Gesta Danorum”) when he wrote “Hamlet”. As it turns out, they don’t begrudge ANYONE for appropriating Nordic folklore...any more than they would begrudge somebody for adopting quotidian Nordic customs.

The 1990 animated Japanese series, “Nadia Of The Mysterious Seas” (a.k.a. “Nadia: The Secret Of Blue Water”) was lifted from Jules Verne’s classic, “Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea”—composed 120 years earlier. A decade later, Disney decided to do a take-off on the Japanese rendition—entitled: “Atlantis: The Lost Empire”. So who’s ripping off whom?

Well, nobody. The ideas in the story transcend culture. For instance, the notion of a lost city of “Atlantis” originated in ancient Greece (ref. Plato’s “Timaeus” and “Critias”)...and was then taken up by the Jewish thinker, Philo of Alexandria in the early 1st century A.D...then by the English author, Thomas More in 1516...followed by Francis Bacon in 1626. And on and on. Virtually all literature is appropriation.

And what of, say, the quest for the Holy Grail? Yep. That too was lifted from antecedent lore: the ancient Persian legend of the Grail of Jamshid (believed to be a magical cup of immortality). Versions of the quest would later be done by Goeznovius of Cornwall (the “Legenda Sancti” under the pseudonym, “William”; in the 6th century)...then by Nennius (“Historia Brittonum” in the early 9th century)...then by Geoffrey Monmouth (“De Gestis Britonum” c. 1136)...then by Chrétien de Troyes (“Perceval: The Story Of The Grail” in the 1180’s)...then by Wolfram von Eschenbach (“Parzival” in the 1210’s).

So the tale went from Persian to Cornish to Welsh to English to French to German. The appropriation is endless...and even crosses religious contexts: from Zoroastrian to Christian to patently secular. (For another prime case-study, see the Appendix.)

There was a particular incident that captures the lunacy of the anti-Cul-Ap crusade. In 2017, the popular Canadian writer, Hal Niedzviecki was pilloried for averring that “anyone, anywhere, should be encouraged to imagine other peoples, other cultures, other identities.” In other words: We should all aspire to be cosmopolitan; and—in the spirit of curiosity and empathy—strive to put ourselves in the shoes of others who might be different from us. Art—be it literature or music or anything else—is a great way to do this.

For this position, Niedzviecki was castigated...and ultimately evicted from Canada’s Writer’s Union. Why? For “cultural appropriation”. No kidding. THAT is the sort of lunacy engendered by Cul-Ap-phobia.

To understand literary tradition, and to simply APPRECIATE LITERATURE, is to embrace the vital role that Cul-Ap plays in the life of the mind. From Hermann Hesse’s rendition of “Siddhartha” to James Joyce’s rendition of “Ulysses” to Ursula K. Le Guin’s rendition of the “Tao Te Ching”, there are endless examples of laudatory Cul-Ap in literature. We find that in virtually every case, belletristic appropriation is something to be celebrated, not repudiated.

Guidelines For Fostering Healthy Cul-Ap:

In trying to navigate the labyrinthine logic of Cul-Ap-phobia, I am left with questions about my own conduct. Is wearing the Buddhist necklace my Thai friend gave me unseemly because I am neither Thai nor Buddhist? Am I guilty of Cul-Ap every time I put it around my neck? This seems to be tantamount to asking: Shall I refrain from aspiring to be—in the words of Thomas Paine—a citizen of the world? The important thing, it seems, is that I appreciate what the necklace means in ancient Siamese culture; and—in particular—to my Thai friends. So long as I have an understanding of its significance in Theravada Buddhism, it would seem that—as a fellow human—I am edified by embracing this hallowed talisman.

Felicitously, I am put at ease the moment I realize that the arguments against Cul-Ap are entirely specious. In leveling charges against those of us who make use of memes from beyond their own culture’s purview, Cul-Ap-phobes may as well impugn someone for illicitly annexing the oxygen she breaths when it has wafted from foreign lands. Mankind shares this planet, and remains in awe of the same night sky. There is no reason to balk at the chance to share in the fruits of mankind’s magnificently diverse cultures. The human family is a widely variegated mosaic of cultural spaces, each melding into the other over time. This is a GOOD thing.

As we have seen, much of what is derisively labeled Cul-Ap is, in fact, simply people trying to interact with—and appreciate—other cultures. Sometimes, this means putting on someone else’s hat (that is: trying it on for size). And sometimes doing so leads to the conclusion: “Gee-wiz, that’s a great idea. I think we might start doing that too.”

When people make use of exogenous cultural elements, the results are usually favorable to everyone involved. Affinities are developed, bonds are formed. Be that as it may, there are—from time to time—instances of impertinence. This can happen in various ways. A lack of appreciation for the virtues of the material’s source; and a lack of proper attribution. These are the two most common problems. A recent example—one of many in dunderheaded Hollywood casting choices—was Dreamworks decision cast a white actress (Scarlett Johansson) to be the protagonist in the Japanese anime classic, “Ghost In The Shell”. (Hollywood then doubled down, and cast a white actor in “Death Note”.) This was somewhat of a travesty, just as when anyone disregards the ethnic origins of a story; or is dishonest about the ethnic nature of its characters—as when Disney opted to cast an African-American actress for the Scandinavian “Ariel”. {4} (Still no word yet on whether anyone is planning on casting a transgender Asian midget as Tevye the milkman in Fiddler on the Roof.) The irony here is that it is primarily Cul-Ap-phobes who endorse such mis-representations. (So much for a sincere interest in respecting cultural traditions.) {15}

If one wants a prime example of Cul-Ap gone awry, look no further than the hokey “New Age” American appropriation of (Indian) yoga—suffused, as it is, with oodles of faux spirituality and an ever-shifting glossary cloying jargon. Notable is the utterly daft use of “namaste” as a kind of profound utterance; as if it were some deeply spiritual incantation (as opposed to what it actually is: the Hindi word for “hello”). {27} Again, we find that Cul-Ap is problematic primarily when it is done out of ignorance.

Make no mistake: odious cases of Cul-Ap do exist. They often involve efforts to erase an ethnic exigency or simply a blatant disregard for the cultural legacy of the material. (There is a difference between the failure to give credit where credit is due and deliberate elision of the origins of an idea. One is careless, the other perfidious.) For example, some Israelis rebranded the Lebanese-Palestinian chickpea-based mezzeh item, “[k]Hummus” as Israeli—a semiotic maneuver that was concomitant with the (attempted) erasure of an entire PEOPLE. (As it happens, cultural cleansing often accompanies ethnic cleansing.) However, the problem in such a case is obfuscation, not appropriation. The sin lay not in eating hummus, but in denying where it came from.

Hummus was not an isolated incident. As it happened, halva, tahini, z’hug, falafel, shawarma, and pepitas were all co-opted from Arab cuisine and dubbed “Jewish” by the Sephardim. All such items now considered staples of “Israeli” cuisine. Here’s the point: Such Cul-Ap is a wonderful thing...so long as the origin of the dishes is not elided.

Another odious form of Cul-Ap is what amounts to cultural VANDALISM—as when the “Hare Krishna” cult mal-appropriated Hindu motifs. This can be a matter of desecrating another tradition’s artistic achievements—as when Hollywood adapted the manga, Dragon Ball into the risible film, “Dragonball Evolution”: a mawkish American rendition of a Japanese classic (done for purely commercial purposes). The film was produced with complete disregard for the material’s cultural legacy, and heedless of its artistic merits. Yet we heard nothing but silence from those who threw tantrums when an Asian dared to pen a parable about the evils of slavery.

A prime case of cultural vandalism was the cynical re-purposing of Beethoven’s 9th symphony (a.k.a. “Ode To Joy”, named after the poem by the German freethinker, Friedrich Schiller), often used by the Roman Catholic Church. In 1907, the American minister, Henry van Dyke changed Schiller’s lyrics, expunging the feminine idiom (re: the daughter of Elysium) from the verse; and re-branded the song, the “Hymn Of Joy”. Beethoven would almost certainly not have approved. Should we consider this memetic adaptation an instance of cultural desecration or simply an anodyne instance of meme-adoption?

There is a difference between appropriating art and perverting it. We can encourage the former while discouraging the latter. It is not the case that every time non-Lutherans perform, say, one of Bach’s devotional pieces, they are misappropriating German culture. For it is honoring the “spirit” of the artistic work that counts. Artistic tribute is not the same as artistic defacement. This is why it is perfectly fine for atheists to sing Gospel music...so long as they do so with a full artistic appreciation for the material. Subscription to Pauline Christology is not a prerequisite for performing music composed with a Christian theme. For one does not need to espouse the dogmatism of the material’s authors to appreciate its artistic value. {18}

It is important, then, to recognize the legacy of the cultural element being invoked. When connoisseurs of political correctness alter the wording of a classic piece of writing to suit their own (puritanical) sensibilities, it is profane. It does not follow from this, however, that those from outside the source-culture should be disallowed from making judicious use of the material. Memetic emulation is not inherently impertinent.

Imprudent occurrences serve as reminders that REAL problems arise not from Cul-Ap per se, but from a lack of appreciation for, and/or a failure to give proper attribution to, the cultural element being invoked. Our tendency to indulge in collective narcissism makes us blind to such things. (Conceit is, after all, a hallmark of a tribalistic mindset.) Denying the origins of a cultural element because we want to make everything ALL ABOUT US is a problem that has nothing to do with Cul-Ap. The problem is self-absorption.

In a twist of irony, the music for the national anthem of the United States is a BRITISH song (“To Anacreon in Heaven”), even as it uses lyrics composed during the War of 1812 AGAINST the British (by a captive on one of the British ships, Francis Scott Key, as he witnessed the attack on Fort McHenry in Baltimore). On the fourth of July, Americans often play Tchaikovsky’s 1812 overture, which was composed to celebrate a RUSSIAN victory (against Napoleon). In the United States, the appropriation of cultural elements is riddled with ironies. Cul-Ap-phobes might ask themselves if we are to become disgruntled about Americans’ use of other nations’ musical scores?

Regarding anti-Cul-Ap crusaders who's motives are not duplicitous, it can be said that their misgivings about Cul-Ap are gravely misplaced. Though concerns about deprecation are valid, censuring alleged mal-appropriation is not an effective way to mitigate such regrettable occurrences. One cannot mitigate ill will simply by proscribing it.

We might remind ourselves that even those from WITHIN the culture-in-question are capable of mal-appropriating an element of that culture. One does not have to hail from a different culture to pervert an artistic masterpiece—a literary or musical work—or to desecrate a sacred artifact. So clearly it is not the Cul-Ap PER SE that is the problem in such cases.

One way to look at the issue is as follows: Appreciation is the opposite of resentment. The former begets comity; the latter begets enmity. Whenever Cul-Ap-phobia is operative, we find people sowing resentment and suspicion. Meanwhile, being “cultured” stems from appreciation. It involves a celebration of the world's resplendent variety of cultural offerings.

Even as we celebrate, we should be prudent. Given that Cul-Ap does not (automatically) entail a kind of derogation of the source-culture, we might wonder: What are the things with which we should be concerned? When it comes to adopting cultural elements that are clearly from outside one's own culture (for the time being), there are two basic conditions of basic decency that should be honored:

1. Give credit where credit is due. It is a matter of common courtesy that the source-culture of the element-in-question not be mis-characterized; and that there be proper attribution in the event that something is being adopted from another culture (at least to the degree that a distinct source-culture can be designated). It is, of course, routine for prideful peoples to be reticent to acknowledge that cherished elements (elements that often buttress their own identity) were lifted from other cultures. But recognition of actual history (i.e. cultural legacies) poses no problem for those who are honest about the origins of their own heritage. { 14 }
2. The adoption should in no way lend credence to—or enjoin—real exploitation. That is to say: It should not be done in a way that adopters are apt to benefit to the detriment of the integrity of the source-culture. It is reasonable to suppose that those who use an exogenous cultural element as a GIMMICK may not be acting in good faith. As we have seen, commodifying cherished cultural elements cheapens them. The only acceptable reason to employ gimmickry is for satire (i.e. for didactic purposes), where the aim is to bring attention to an important issue. By making use of cultural elements for dubious reasons, one is betraying the spirit behind them. THAT is the problem.

In sum: All participation should be done in good faith, with proper attribution. Cul-Ap should never be done to denigrate. In viewing cultural elements that happen to be foreign, we must never lose sight of the fact that humanity transcends culture. Even amidst the world's motley assortment of cultures, mankind is one.

It goes without saying that Cul-Ap is not inherently salutary. Recognizing this fact is simply to say that there can be perfidious forms of Cul-Ap. But the problem in such instances is the perfidy, not the “appropriation”. For Cul-Ap is not inherently defamatory; it is the ill-will of the people engaging in it that make such cases objectionable. In and of itself, meme-adoption is a morally neutral act; which means that “cultural appropriation” is categorically amoral. Every culture has done it. Every culture continues to do it.

Again, we should be reminded of the captious attitude (endemic to p.c. in general) that animates Cul-Ap-phobia. The prospect that someone, somewhere might claim to be “offended” / “insulted” is the eternal, ever-present hobgoblin of p.c.-mongers...who insist that any given person's (purported) discomfiture

entails that certain guidelines (read: formalities) must be mandated for any and all bystanders who could feasibly be blamed for eliciting said discomfiture. Thus one party's subjective state shall impose obligations / restrictions on everyone else.

This is asinine.

In the event that ill will IS involved, we must bear in mind that bad faith is opprobrious regardless of the context. The fact that the same act can be done with good will proves that it is not the act itself that is at issue. The same "cos-play" can be done from a place of admiration or of derision. But even if it is done out of spleen, we must ask: Is acerbic mockery—even the most offensive kind—to be permitted in a free society?

Bottom line: We needn't resort to frivolous indictments of Cul-Ap to denounce perfidy. Instances of Cul-Ap that involve dubious motives are not indictments of Cul-Ap; they are simply reminders that anyone can have dubious motives when doing, well, ANYTHING. The solution, then, is not to proscribe Cul-Ap; it is to ensure that Cul-Ap is done with a modicum of common courtesy. As I hope I have shown, once we design to forbid ALL instances of Cul-Ap, we miss what makes any culture WHAT IT IS; and end up devolving into absurdity.

The issue to address, then, is that of proper attribution / recognition. To illustrate this point, let's look at an example to which many can relate. In the United States, white people have been doing the well-known choreography (sometimes referred to as "the hustle") to the "Electric Slide" since the late 1980's. Most of them haven't the faintest idea that the song and accompanying dance come from African American culture, going back to 1976. This can be attributed more to heedlessness than to perfidy. Here, Cul-Ap PER SE is not the problem. As is often the case, a lack of recognition is at issue. Such dereliction is remedied not by cultural segregation, but by spreading awareness. In other words: The answer is cultural INTERACTION; and—invariably—cultural MIXING.

The little-recognized provenance of the Electric Slide is not an anomalous phenomenon. It is a reminder that Cul-Ap is part of the natural process of memetic transference (also illustrated by the African American basis for jazz, the blues, R&B, rock 'n roll, and—for that matter—most pop music). This is a matter of absorption, not deracination. White people dancing to the Electric Slide in no way infringes on African Americans' ability to do the same. That Britney Spears owes a debt of gratitude to Chuck Berry isn't the problem; that many of her fans are unaware of this debt of gratitude is.

Of course, a dearth of cultural appreciation is not solely due to a failure to acknowledge memetic genealogies. Being "cultured" means being relatively well-versed in the landmark artistic achievements of global society—musical, sartorial, architectural, theatrical, and all the rest. After all, aesthetic value (which is universal) transcends cultural demarcations (which are circumstantial). Memetic transference across cultures is inevitable, as memes are—by their nature—viral. This is the case whether the memes are culinary or literary or anything else. To fail to understand this is to fail to understand how culture works. This even goes for something as basic as language. Heck, it goes for every social norm under the sun...even a silly dance performed during social gatherings.

Shall we begrudge those who want to partake in the bountiful cultural smorgasbord of humankind; or shall we eagerly delve in?

Concluding Remarks:

The present survey has shown that the appropriation of exogenous cultural elements is ubiquitous—and often felicitous. Cul-Ap is not tantamount to the desecration of the (purported) source-culture; nor is it tantamount to the dis-empowerment—nay, denigration—of members of that culture. Even when done cavalierly, there is typically no condescension intended; and—far more often than not—no actual harm done. After all, the propagation of memes across cultures—whether deliberate or unwitting—is simply a matter of memetic diffusion...which, as we have seen, is how any given culture came to be in the first place.

Alas, for those afflicted with Cul-Ap-phobia, this is all a moot point. For according to their tortured logic, Cul-Ap is *prima facie* invidious, and therefore must be decried out of hand. Anti-Cul-Ap crusaders call for memetic quarantine...as if the (imagined) boundaries between this and that culture were iron-clad and forever indissoluble. Pretending that the world is comprised of immutable ethnic demarcations does not foster pluralism; it mandates cultural segregation...which, we are notified, must be enforced in perpetuity (for reasons that they themselves don't even seem to understand).

As we have seen, any culture that has ever existed is a concatenation of cultural elements that antedate it...as well as a merging of contemporaneous cultures that have impinged upon it. Indeed, the proliferation of such acts is how any given culture came to be in the first place. Every meme started somewhere with someone for some reason; and was then promulgated by others elsewhere for other reasons. This has never been considered a moral abomination. In fact, barring those obsessed with some delusive notion of cultural purity, it has always been seen a fairly routine.

If we define Cul-Ap as the adoption of elements of one culture by another, then we soon find that Cul-Ap is something we should celebrate...and, yes, even encourage. For it is one of the best ways to generate awareness about “the other”. Meme-exchange is the substrate of inter-cultural pro-sociality. It always has been; it always will be.

Embracing Cul-Ap is a matter of availing ourselves of what the human race has produced at various times, in various places, under various circumstances. Americans especially should remind themselves that American culture is almost entirely derivative; and has a lot to learn from other cultures (and, in some cases, superior memes to adopt). So to condemn Cul-Ap would be to negate virtually everything that is now considered “American” (including apple pie); and to preclude America's continued cultural evolution. Pluralistic societies don't see the incorporation of exogenous cultural elements as some kind of contamination; they see it as a potential enhancement.

The co-option of exogenous cultural elements is the basis for every culture that has ever existed; and is one of the reasons that cultures flourish. The prohibition of Cul-Ap, then, ends up being just a ill-conceived social ordinance that one violates simply by living life to its fullest. To delimit meme-usage to memes that can be readily tied to one's own heritage (or one's own ethnicity) is to ignore history. Even worse, it flies in the face of the cosmopolitan spirit. Such meme-sequestration is a recipe for hyper-parochialism—an attitude that is sure to lead to the Balkanization mankind into a network of insular cultural redoubts.

The onus is on anti-Cul-Ap crusaders to point to a single case in which the mitigation of Cul-Ap moved the cause for civil rights forward in some way. (Hint: This will be a difficult task considering no such case exists; or, I dare say, possibly could exist.) The demonization of Cul-Ap does nobody any good. If our aim is to forge global human solidarity, that is not the way to go about it.

And so it goes: Cul-Ap-phobia engenders insularity along ethnic lines—which invariably translates to tribal chauvinism. For by supposing Cul-Ap to be iniquitous, one mandates strictures that exacerbate fissures between cultures rather than engendering human solidarity. We mustn't mistake the Cul-Ap-phobe's

veiled parochialism as a clarion call for cosmopolitanism.

In assessing the role of Cul-Ap in a liberal democracy, we should ask ourselves: In the grand scheme of things, what is it we REALLY want people to stop doing?

What is often called “cultural appropriation” is a good thing. Anyone confident in the integrity of their own culture is inclined to say: “Please, by all means, appropriate elements from my culture ‘til your heart’s content! We may all be all the better for it.”

Culture is a dynamic in which to participate, not a commodity to be rationed. It is a process, not a piece of property. To partake in a cultural element is not to loot the source-culture...any more than using a recipe entails looting its originator’s kitchen. Sometimes it is commercialized and branded (Hello Kitty); sometimes it is mal-appropriated (the Nazi’s use of the swastika); and sometimes it is reified and passed off as one’s own (the Christmas tree).

Throughout this essay, I have referred to the salutary effects of trans-cultural fertilization (a cross-pollination of memes). This might also be thought of as a kind of weaving—whereby threads of each culture reticulate in harmonious ways, creating new patterns from old. This is more of a mesh than a clash. The result is a new tapestry; not some infelicitous corruption of “pure” cultures. For no culture is ever purely ANYTHING. There are just threads that find their way from one tapestry to the next.

Any culture that has ever existed is itself an embroidered memetic lattice, resulting from the entwining of antecedent and adjacent cultural exigencies. That’s how memes work. And that’s why it makes no sense to see this—in any given iteration—as an iniquity visited upon the source culture, perpetrated by the adopters.

As I hope to have shown, culture is more like a twirling kaleidoscope than a stained-glass window. Purporting to assert what any given culture “REALLY IS” is like beholding the twinkling spectrum of refracting light in a kaleidoscope and trying to discern the “true color” of the pattern. It is no one thing; and it is certainly not static. Culture is synthesis; which means culture is metamorphosis.

What cultural purists fail to understand is that every culture that has ever existed is a hybridization of previous cultures. What we refer to as this or that culture is just a snap-shot in time of an on-going process, where we often pretend—for heuristic purposes—that we are beholding some calcified arrangement with discrete boundaries, which emerged “as is” from the aether. Those of us who are smitten with a given culture imagine it to be a consecrated monolith that might be maintained ‘til the end of time. This fanciful thinking is anodyne...until we start begrudging others for not playing along.

Alas. We often find ourselves in an imbroglio wherein everyone is inclined to protect their own memetic turf. This is inimical to the cosmopolitan vision. Cultures are not meant to be hoarded; they are meant to be shared.

As we have seen, we can find oodles of cultural appropriation in virtually any culture on the planet. But no matter, Cul-Ap-phobes rebuke ethno-convergence for fear that memes might migrate across cultural lines and intermix—forgetting that an intermixture is how any given culture formed in the first place. If not for memetic transference across cultures, Brazilians wouldn’t play futbol (which originated in England) and Canadians wouldn’t play hockey (which originated in Mongolia amongst the Daurians).

Let’s conclude our survey with martial arts. Already mentioned was the Russian appropriation of Japanese “ju-do” (itself inspired by the “Kito-Ryu” and “Ten-jin Shin-yo-Ryu” schools of ju-jutsu), rebranded “sambo”. After the Second World War, a Jewish Hungarian named Emrich Lichtenfeld created a spin-off of ju-do and the craft of ai-ki-do (itself derived from “Daito-Ryu” school of “ai-ki”-oriented ju-jutsu). This

led to an Israeli martial art known as “Krav Maga” [contact combat]. Meanwhile, in Korea, Hap-ki-do was adapted from the Japanese “Daito-Ryu” (Ai-ki-do) school of ju-jitsu.

The Japanese were not up in arms over any of this appropriation of their craft.

Also after the Second World War, Japanese martial artist, So Doshin (working off the practice of Muneomi Sawa-yama) adapted the Chinese “quan-fa” of Shaolin—rendering it “Ken-po” (meaning “first method” in both languages). The Chinese didn’t seem to mind. (Note: “quan-fa” is a kind of wu-shu [martial craft], the Shaolin version of which is dubbed “kung-fu” in Cantonese.)

“Karate” has an even longer history. It began in the 15th century in the Ryu-kyu archipelago of the South Pacific...which has since been claimed by both the Japanese and Chinese...each of which adapted the exogenous martial art in its own way. After the First World War, its Okinawan incarnation came to be dubbed “Motobu-Ryu”. Then, after the Second World War, in Korea, practitioners melded “karate” with their indigenous “Taekkyeon” to yield “Taekwon-do”.

The appropriation of this craft soon made its way to the United States...without anyone in the Far East taking umbrage.

One of the best arguments in favor of Cul-Ap (and thus against the supposition that it is something to be held in contempt) is modern “jiu-jitsu”. It was originally a method of combat (known at the time as “yawara”, later as “ju-jitsu”) used in Japan by the Samurai during the 16th century (the Sengoku period). The martial art was brought to Brasil in the mid-20th century, APPROPRIATED (most famously, by the Gracie brothers)...and extensively refined. That is to say: It was significantly improved upon. (The craft remained in Japan as the aforementioned Daito-Ryu ju-jitsu via the practitioner, Takeda Sokaku, where—as we’ve seen—it incorporated the principle of “ai-ki”.) Now it is BRASILIAN jiu-jitsu that is the most revered form of the craft. Are we to say, then, that the Brazilians were “guilty” of appropriating Japanese culture? In a sense: Yes! And thank heavens for it. It was appropriated and ENHANCED; and its Latin American incarnation is a far more useful art than its Samurai precursor.

And that wasn’t even the end of it. A hybrid of (Japanese) ju-do, (Siamese) Muay Thai, and (Brazilian) jiu-jitsu was then created: “sanda”. Who did THAT? The Chinese. This is hardly a development to be repudiated. On the contrary, such hybridization is to be CELEBRATED...as all culture is NOTHING BUT hybridization.

Think of it this way: If even one person outside the (purported) group-of-origin is allowed to make use of the meme, then EVERYONE must be allowed to use it. Otherwise, we are obliged to start designating sanctioned groups (that is: specifying additional terms of circumscribed entitlement). Such a tendentious enterprise entails positing demarcations that are invariably ad hoc...thereby compounding the very problem we purport to be solving. In the case of jiu-jitsu, shall we accord exemption from the charge of Cul-Ap exclusively to Brazilians? (Or, more narrowly: Only to the descendants of Helio and Carlos Gracie?)

The charge of Cul-Ap precludes us from being at liberty to appreciate—and subsequently judiciously select—the best elements from other cultures; and incorporate them into our own. To prohibit Cul-Ap is to deprive people of a prerogative that animates the efflorescence of culture in its most estimable forms. After all, nobody can “steal” a custom. Barring intellectual property, memes belong to the world. Those of us who genuinely care about other cultures REVEL in the judicious appropriation of exogenous cultural elements. Indeed, such a gesture is a hallmark of cosmopolitanism.

The lesson here is simple: If cosmopolitan ideals are to prevail, Cul-Ap is to be celebrated. (To reiterate:

What is to be discouraged is any conduct that is mean-spirited.) If only MORE “cultural appropriation” were undertaken, then more people around the world might try “ahimsa” on for size; and maybe even try emulating, say, the pedestrian courtesies of the Japanese. To familiarize oneself with the world’s resplendent variety of cultures is to recognize that memetic cross-pollination is integral to civilizational advance. Always has been. Always will be.

While Cul-Ap does not ALWAYS have positive repercussions, it usually does. Proclaiming the appropriation of memes from other cultures off-limits not only undermines the cosmopolitan enterprise, it consigns each culture to a condition of permanent stasis and insularity (conditions which render cosmopolitanism untenable). Forbidding Cul-Ap is a mark of parochialism, not of respect.

While Cul-Ap-phobes are busy inventorying memes in a ham-fisted attempt to enforce cultural patrimony, those of us who embrace cosmopolitanism are happily engaging in a saturnalia of trans-cultural fertilization. It is only natural for cosmopolitans to encourage Cul-Ap...at least insofar as we see something of ourselves in other cultures, and seek to embrace it. This means recognizing the shared humanity that underlies even some of the most foreign cultural elements. Without trans-cultural fertilization, the Balkanization of mankind would persist indefinitely.

Civilization, it might be said, has been NOTHING BUT one culture appropriating elements of other cultures—ad hoc—in an effort to enhance itself. Decrying Cul-Ap as a social ill would be like decrying foreign ingredients as a culinary sin. When we learn more about other peoples, we learn more about ourselves. For THEY are—after all—other instances of humanity (which is simply to say that they they are other versions of US). Hence human solidarity is best realized via inter-cultural exchange. This is ESPECIALLY so when it is the more-privileged adopting—or participating in—the culture of the less-privileged. For the scope of empathy is broadened by a sharing of ideas.

The problem is that we are all—to one degree or another—unwittingly ethnocentric in our heuristic; as we make sense of the unfamiliar by analogy to the familiar. Alas, we cannot help that the accident of our own environs shapes the lens through which we see the world in which we find ourselves. Much of that lens is formed via an enculturation process we do not fully recognize; as it infuses our daily lives. We no more notice it than the oxygen we inhale.

Mankind is like a library where, as John Donne put it, “all books lie open to one another.” It might be added that nobody OWNS any one of the books. When it comes to the meme-sphere, we are ALL immigrants. And every one of us is entitled to a green card.

While Cul-Ap-phobes are perfectly fine with PEOPLE FROM different cultures intermixing, the intermixture of the CULTURES THEMSELVES is something that they urge us to rebuke. What they fail to realize is that cultural intermixture is salubrious for the same reasons that miscegenation is salubrious. Maintaining purity in EITHER context is a fool’s errand.

Partaking in different cultures enables us to grasp—in the most palpable way—that the one thing we all have in common is our humanity. This is the definition of humanism. Cultural evolution is predicated on the embrace of exogenous cultural elements. Thank heavens for the intermixture of cultures.

In addition to Balkanization, the demonization of Cul-Ap contributes to the dumbing-down of our own culture, and of EVERY OTHER culture; as it discourages people from putting themselves in others’ shoes. Cultural segregation is inimical to humanism, as it rebuffs our shared humanity. The best parts of human civilization, it turns out, are not ALL to be found within one’s own cultural heritage.

Finally, we might note that “unauthorized use of meme” is a crime one would only expect to encounter in a totalitarian society. No pluralistic society has ever been sullied because too many people were at liberty to evaluate—and, if the evaluation turned out to be salutary, to adopt—the fruits of one others’ cultures. If only we engaged in MORE cultural appropriation, provincial Americans might start appreciating things like Buddhism and soccer. We might even discuss the issue over a nice, cold yogurt drink...be it “kafir” (the Russian version), “ayran” (the Turkish version), or “lasi” (the Indian version).

As a point of departure, we should recall the perspective articulated in the 2nd century B.C. by “Publius” Terentius Afer (the African slave better known as “Terence”): “Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto.” [“I am human; and I think nothing human is alien to me.”] Amen.

Endnotes:

{1 A note about my choice of the descriptor, “Cul-Ap-phobia”. I do not use this merely as a pejorative. It is intended to be descriptive, independently of normative claims. In opting for this neologism, I am actually giving complainants the benefit of the doubt—as it presumes that their contempt for cultural appropriation is sincere, stemming more from neurosis than from mendacity (which is to say: they are being irrational, not perfidious). Hence “phobia”. Their aversion might even be categorized as “hamartophobia”, as it pertains to paranoia of imaginary crimes.}

{2 Nicolaus of Myra was a quasi-apocryphal holy-man from Lycia who lived in the 3rd or 4th century. The first major version of the cult surrounding his personage was at Bari, in Puglia (on the Italic peninsula) in the late 11th century. It then spread to Spain in the late 15th century...and was thereafter adopted by the Dutch (whereupon he became known as “Sinter-klaas”). The legend then became Germanic and Slavic...then English. THAT adoption was followed by those in regions colonized by Roman Catholic (European) powers—as with the Americas and the Philippines. So who “owns” this legend? As it happens, Santa Claus is quintessentially European. A depiction of him as anything else—be it African, Arabian, or Asian—is not only erroneous; it shows a lack of respect for the tradition. However, this does not mean that non-Europeans shouldn’t be allowed to dress up as Santa Claus just for the fun of it. For when people engage in so-called “costume play”, there is no pretense to ethnic fidelity. People are just—as it were—playing around; and it is “all in good fun”.}

{3 Hoop earrings go back to the Babylonians / Assyrians. During Classical Antiquity, they were commonplace throughout the Greco-Roman world. Countless African and Amazon tribes have worn hoop earrings over the centuries. So did the Barbary pirates. So did European pirates. In sum: The accessory has been used in countless cultures around the world at different points in history. To suggest that a particular ethnic group somehow “owns” hoop earrings is preposterous. But it is preposterous for the same reason it is preposterous to suppose that ANY culture owns ANY meme. It makes no sense to treat cultural elements as intellectual property.}

{4 The first to posit mermaids were the Assyrians, who associated the magical aquatic females with the goddess, Atargatis. In the Occident, the idea goes back to the ancient Greeks, who posited “sirens” (e.g. Homer’s Calypso of Ogygia). The Greeks also told tales of nereids and oceanids (as with Persa, Amphitrite, and Ianeira); while naiads dwelled in fresh-water lakes. The Romans posited “nymphs”. The Persians posited “maneli”. During the Renaissance, such enchanting creatures were referred to as “undines”; while “limnaeds” dwelled in freshwater lakes. In “One Thousand and One Nights”, there is reference to “Djullanar the sea-girl”. There are also mermaids featured in the tale of Bulukiya. (These were European embellishments of ancient Arabian folktales.) The Scots told tales of “ceasg”. The French

told tales of “Melusine”. The Slavs told tales of “rusalki”. The Yakut / Sakha of Siberia told tales of “alara”. The founding of the Polish capital, War-sawa, was based on the tale of a mermaid named “Sawa”. Amazonian natives (spec. the “Tupi”) had legends of the mysterious lady of the waters: “[u]Iara”. There was the Hellenic “Tyres” (after whom the ancient Phoenician city of Sur was re-named) as well as the Turkic “Alara”. Mermaids were made popular in modern times by Danish author, Hans Christian Andersen (“The Little Mermaid”). And what of the Far East? Hindus and Buddhists tell tales of “apsaras”. (Notably, there is the legend of mermaid princess, “Suvann[a]-Maccha”.) The Chinese tell of the “jiaoren” (ref. the “Classic of the Mountains and Seas”). The Japanese tell of “nin-gyo”. And the Siamese tell of “pongsa wadarn”. Alas, the closest African folklore came to the ideation were (androgenous) ethereal water spirits: “mami wata”. In Africa, there were aquatic beings that were seen as mother-goddesses (as with the Yoruba “Yemoja”); but they were not mermaids. Meanwhile, one of the naiads, “Achiroë”, was affiliated with the Nile River; but she was Greek. There have no more been black mermaids than there have been Latino leprechauns (see Footnote 30). We don’t help marginalized ethnic communities by pretending that they can represent mythical creatures from other ethnicities as if ethnic heritage was somehow irrelevant to folklore. It is important to be true to ALL ethnic traditions. (For more on this, see Footnote 15.)}

{5 “The Princess And The Frog” would have been linguistically Creole; and “Brave” would have been linguistically Gaelic. Meanwhile, Snow White was allegedly of German origin, while Sleeping Beauty was allegedly of French origin; though neither of those tales is necessarily specific to those ethnic traditions. (Each of them might be characterized as “generic white European”.) It might be noted that of the 21 films mentioned here, 15 had a strong female protagonist (while one had a duck). Kudos are in order. Forthcoming are other animated features with female protagonists from around the world. In 2020, there’s “The Sky Princess” (African), “Sitara: Let Girls Dream” (Indian), “Ginger’s Tale” (Russian), “Over The Moon” (Chinese), and “Ainbo: Spirit Of The Amazon” (Native South American). In 2021, there will be “Encanto” (Colombian) as well as a composite of Siamese, Khmer, Vietnamese, and Malay: “Raya And The Last Dragon”.)}

{6 The day that the caterwauling of the “adhan” is no longer heard bellowing in the public square anywhere in the Muslim world (and, instead, one of Chopin’s nocturnes can be heard emanating from an open window as one strolls down the street), we will know that Cul-Ap has helped to move things forward in the Muslim world.}

{7 The origin of barbecue seems to be from the Taino / Arawak people. Today, one of the more popular kinds of barbecue is Korean barbecue...which certainly ignores the origins of the culinary style. Shall this be taken as an unforgivable slight toward Caribbean Islanders on the part of Hanguk-in? If we apply this logic, then we would also need to proscribe “jerk” seasoning (also Caribbean) on all chicken consumed by non-Caribbean Islanders. If we were to do so, then other quandaries arise. What are we to do with Cajun cuisine—a hybridization of Caribbean and Acadian cultures? Was that a matter of French Canadians exploiting Creole culture? Who gets to eat a Po’ Boy sandwich? Those who gripe about Cul-Ap often forget how delicious it can be.}

{8 A major patroness of the arts, the (Florentine) Queen of France pioneered the use of high heels in the 16th century. She was inordinately short; and was envious of her philandering husband’s relatively tall mistresses. We can also thank Catherine de Medici for pioneering the ballet (de cour), as well as various staples of modern cuisine. Peoples from all over the world has since appropriated such elements of European culture; yet neither the Italians nor the French seem to be up in arms about it.}

{9 “B-style” is a cartoonish emulation of American hip-hop (read: urban African American) culture. So where does that leave us? According to the logic of Cul-Ap-phobes, the Japanese are guilty of exploiting

African Americans. In Korea, K-pop is also based on a repurposing American musical idioms—typically, as schtick—to bolster their own pop culture. Artistically-speaking, this can be considered hokey to the point of distraction; but it is certainly not an ethical issue. }

{ 10 I chose this particular example because it turns out to be the opposite of what Cul-Ap-phobes think it is. As is often the case, when caviling about Cul-Ap, prosecutors haven't any clue what the real historical relevance of the characterization might be. The Powhatan princess named Amonute (née "Matoaka") from Tsenacommacah in present-day Virginia (i.e. the girl on whom the folkloric figure, "Pocahontas" is based) actually eschewed her culture in favor of English culture—adopting the name, Rebecca (an English name appropriated from the Hebrew "R-V-Kah"). In one sense, the British appropriated HER PERSONALLY; yet in another sense, she willingly adopted a British identity. Therefore, for non-Native Americans to dress up as her is—in a way—an insult to Native Americans; yet for the exact opposite reason the complainants suppose. (!) For it tacitly pays tribute to a Native American who rebuked her Native American heritage. }

{ 11 Hindus and Jains were donning dread-locks (Sanskrit "jata") OVER A THOUSAND YEARS before it became part of Afro-American culture. Eventually, dreadlocks could be found in ancient Indian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Germanic, and Viking cultures. Hence Caribbean Islanders (spec. Rastafarians) appropriated the hair-style from EUROPEANS. In other words: Jamaicans are the MOST RECENT culture to have adopted the hair-style as a signature stylization. To contend that it is now off-limits to white people is preposterous. It amounts to a historiographical conceit: "Though it has been done for thousands of years, once WE start doing it, everyone else in the world must be barred from doing it ever again." The world is on notice: Henceforth, only Croatians can wear neckties. (The French adopted THAT sartorial practice from the Croats in the 1660's; then the Brits got in on the action.) And while we're at it, no more eye-liner or mascara! Why not? Well, you see, the ancient Egyptians were using kohl for eye-enhancement 6,000 years ago. Unless you seek to bring back the society of the Pharaohs, you are doing that ancient culture a grave disservice by engaging in such cosmetic practices. Anti-Cul-Ap crusaders should be handing out cease-and-desist orders left and right to women shopping at Mac. }

{ 12 Jehovah's Witnesses eschew the conventional iconography; as they consider the crucifix to be a sullied talisman. In a sense, the Watchtower Society is correct: The use of a Roman torture device as a symbol has little to do with the original movement around JoN—a small community known simply as "The Way" (later derisively referred to as the "Ebionites"), which used a fish as its insignia (as most of the apostles were Galilean fishermen). As it turns out, very few who have called themselves "Christians" have actually followed the moral teachings of Yeshua ben Yusuf of Nazareth (helping wayfarers of other tribes, turning the other cheek, loving your enemies, judging not lest you be judged, sharing your possessions with those in need, etc.) Charity and forbearance are now about as "Christian" as separation of church and state (another tenet espoused by Jesus). That is: Not very much at all. }

{ 13 The Sanskrit term for the symbol was "sauvastika". It originally represented permanence—which was construed alternately as prosperity or eternity (ref. Panini's "Ashtadhyayi" from the 4th century B.C.) It also served as the emblem for "surya" (the sun); and was later associated with well-being and good fortune. (This is why—to the present day—the symbol is inscribed at the threshold of many Indian homes.) In Shaivism (esp. Tantric), it is associated with Kali. In Jainism, it is associated with the famed tirthankara, "Suparsh-vanatha". In Theravada Buddhism, it is associated with the footprints / heart of the Buddha. The name of the symbol was later rendered "wan" (Classical Chinese) and "manji" (medieval Japanese), roughly meaning omni-presence. It also emerged in Tibetan "Bön" as the "yung-drung". Note that the Semitic history of the swastika goes back to the Bronze Age. The Phoenicians seem to have used it as a symbol for the sun. There is also evidence in Troas (at the site of the ancient city-State, Troy) that the symbol was used by the Trojans: as the "tetra-skelion" / "tetra-ktys". In ancient Roman ruins, the symbol appears next to the caption "zotiko zotiko" [life of life]. Meanwhile, ancient Celts used a variation of the

symbol—notably the “fylfot” cross of Druidism (which was later adopted by the early Gaelic tribes, as attested in the Book of Kells c. 800 A.D.) It is also used in Slavic “Rodnover” iconography as the “kolovrat”: used to represent the Hands of Svarog. Most notably, there was a swastika-like symbol used in ancient Nordic / Germanic paganism (associated with the hammer of Thor)...which may have inspired its usage by the Teutonic Knights of the High Renaissance...which, as explained, accounts for the Nazi incarnation. In that latest case, Cul-Ap was objectionable not because an exogenous cultural element was appropriated; but because a sacred symbol was grossly perverted, and used as an icon for fascism (hardly in keeping with its Vedic roots). This was more about the hijacking—and thus betrayal—of a semiotic tradition than it was about memetic transference.}

{ 14 Note the abiding reluctance of Muslims to acknowledge that virtually every element of the “Hajj” was appropriated from antecedent pagan rituals. Admitting this would bring into question the rituals’ authenticity, and thereby undermine the tradition’s professed Abrahamic pedigree. Most elements of the Hajj were appropriated by the early Mohammedans from pre-Islamic Hijazi culture. We rarely hear protestations from Cul-Ap-phobes about this. Such silence is mostly due to the fact that the pagan Bedouin lobby is non-existent. Meanwhile, most Muslims really, really, really don’t want to concede that many of their sacred rites are a rip-off of the widely-derided “Jahiliyyah” (“ignorant people”; i.e. pre-Islamic Arabians); as such an admission would countermand the standard Islamic narrative. There are few non-Muslim Arabians remaining to mobilize a formidable awareness-generation campaign on that particular matter. This is the problem with anti-Cul-Ap crusades. For, as we have seen, grievances against Cul-Ap are—invariably—highly selective. But then again, such frivolous indictments are ALL based on arbitrary application (it applies HERE, but not THERE) and inconsistent logic (which may be suspended whenever it doesn’t suit the purposes at hand). The implicit message: “It’s okay for US to do it; but we shall excoriate anyone else who does it.” For more on the cultural appropriation undergirding much of Islamic lore, see my essays: “Syriac Source-Material For Islamic Lore” and “The Syriac Origins Of Koranic Verse”. One is hard-pressed to find an element of Islamic lore that ISN’T the result of Cul-Ap. }

{ 15 We do nothing to advance the cause of civil rights by flouting fidelity to the ethnic exigencies of folklore. (Pretending Santa Claus was Siamese does Thai people no favors.) In her usual fashion, Oprah Winfrey was merely being flaky when she opted to cast an African American actress as Cinderella. However, misrepresentation is more often than not a matter of perfidy. It is a weird irony that precedents stemming from “identity politics” have enjoined people to indulge in rather daffy portrayals—all in the name of “inclusion”. Imagine casting an Caucasian women to play Harriet Tubman in a film about African-American history. Why would such a thing be asinine? Shall we also pretend that Sojourner Truth could just as well have been Anglo-Saxon? How about an Asian Phillis Wheatley? Color-blindness only goes so far before one is just being zany. }

{ 16 Tell that to the hundreds of millions of professional men in East Asia who now wear Western-style “business suits” (replete with ties and other impractical accoutrements), none of which makes any rational sense. (The idea is to signal participation in a certain cultural milieu—one that happens to have originated in a foreign land.) This is yet another reminder that political correctness involves double standards. For we are ALL prone to stylize our behavior according to prevailing stigmas—culled from various places, for a variety of reasons. In this case, it is attire seen as as a mark of professionalism; but stigmas are not only sartorial. This needn’t be problematic. Note that, in donning Occidental business suits, denizens of the corporate world in the Orient are not trying to assimilate into—let alone exalt—“Western” culture. They are simply partaking in a regimen of stigmatization based on certain sartorial practices that happened to be initiated in “Western” societies. In this case: A colorful cloth tied around one’s neck (complimenting one’s collar, while veiling the buttons of one’s shirt) is associated with prestige. If we were to hew to the strictures proposed by anti-Cul-Ap crusaders, though, things would have to change. Taking this logic to its

extreme would impose some rather outlandish limitations. From this day forward, only male WASPs are permitted to wear polo shirts.}

{17 The most ironic example of a meme has been the term “meme” ITSELF. The lexeme was originally coined by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book, “The Selfish Gene” when he proposed a new sociological paradigm. In the advent of the social media craze (post-2007), the “meme” meme underwent its own mutation—thereby illustrating how memes can be co-opted, and subsequently reified. Those oblivious to what the scientific term actually means started using it as slang for images with silly captions (especially those posted / disseminated on social media platforms). Of course, the virality of such images was probably what first inspired someone to start referring to them as “memes” (rather than as, well, just photos with a silly captions). The problem is that the most aloof participants in this fad have since become convinced that THAT is all that a “meme” is. The concept of meme is a very important one; and it would be unfortunate if the term continued to be vitiated in this manner. Other than Dawkins’ work on the subject, see Susan Blackmore’s “The Meme Machine”, Steve Stewart-Williams’ “The Ape That Understood The Universe” (Appendix B), as well as commentary by Daniel C. Dennett—especially “Darwin’s Dangerous Idea” (chapt. 12), “Breaking The Spell” (Appendix A), and “From Bacteria To Bach And Back” (chapt. 11).}

{18 So when British poet laureate, Robert Bridges (an Anglican) composed lyrics for one of Bach’s cantatas, thereby rendering the familiar hymn, “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring”, the world was treated to a felicitous case of Cul-Ap; as the gesture did not betray the spirit of the piece.}

{19 Incidentally, the “Rama-yana” was “appropriated” by myriad cultures in the Far East, each of which rendered their own version of the classic Indian work. (I list TWO DOZEN incarnations in part I of my essay on “Mythemes”.) This makes perfect sense, of course, as Buddhism’s roots are in Hindu lore. (It is analogous to Christianity’s relation to Judaic lore.) Yet how often do Indians cavil about the adaptations of their ancient motifs in Thailand?}

{20 The key difference between items like tacos and burritos (on the one hand) and items like caesar salad and popcorn (on the other) is that the former have become an integral part of Mexican culture; whereas the latter have not. But is THAT to be the clinching factor for determining illicit Cul-Ap? If so, then it does not matter who established the meme—or where it originated—after all! Rather, we are to proceed according to what is revealed to be a daffy protocol: In the event that a meme becomes an integral part of a particular culture, nobody else on the planet shall be permitted to use it evermore. The reductio ad absurdum of this maxim should be immediately obvious. For who, then, shall lay claim to wine? And what of things that are the result of cultural hybridization—as with fajitas, quesadillas, and chimichangas? It’s hard to tell where one culture ends and the other culture begins. This is a reminder that no culture has a distinct—or even a static—boundary. So it is unreasonable to plant a flag and demand that nobody cross it.}

{21 There have been myriad incarnations of the Rama-yana; as enumerated in part I of my essay on “Mythemes”. This is a reminder that even the most classic work of the Far East has been appropriated over and over and over again without any fuss.}

{22 “Beauty And The Beast” was actually adapted from a tale by French author, Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve from the 17th century. And HIS rendition was based on an ancient Roman tale—most famously rendered by Lucius Apuleius Madaurensis: “Cupid and Psyche”.}

{23 Demands that we all “know our place” are inimical to cosmopolitanism. The implicit request seems to be: “Celebrate cultural diversity, but do it from safe a distance!” The moment we hear someone insist that we stay in our own lane, hints of fascistic thinking are afoot. This admonition should sound eerily

familiar. It is a dark road to go down.}

{24 Zhao's novel was actually a well-crafted narrative about the horrors of marginalized groups being exploited, and addressed such issues as discrimination against subaltern communities by a socio-economic elite, as well as human trafficking. (Apparently, only African Americans are allowed to pen such novels.) This shameful episode is a stark illustration of how Cul-Ap-phobia can devolve into absurdity. For Cul-Ap-phobes, our shared humanity is something to shun, not to celebrate. The castigation of Zhao reminds us that anti-Cul-Ap crusades are a RIGHT-wing phenomenon. }

{25 For more on this topic, see K. Van der Toorn's "The Iconic Book: Analogies Between the Babylonian Cult Of Images And The Veneration Of The Torah"; as well as Z. Zevit's "The Religions Of Israel".}

{26 The term "appropriation" did not originally mean to seize or confiscate something; it simply meant to use something for a specified purpose (as when the government "appropriates" funds for certain purposes; i.e. allocation of outlays). Hence the distinction that was traditionally made between appropriation and expropriation. (Note Karl Marx's use of the latter when he referred to seizure / confiscation. He referred to the capitalist class as the "expropriators" because they exploited everyone else.) Even as "appropriation" is now used interchangeably with "expropriation", it is only the latter that I take to mean: Using—or taking control of—something for which one did not receive permission from its rightful owner / custodian. Until recently, "appropriation" was a term used in sociology to mean assimilation or adoption (that is: the incorporation of an exogenous meme into an indigenous memetic repertoire). The notion of SEIZING / CONFISCATING a meme is, of course, nonsensical; so it makes no sense to say that a cultural element has been expropriated. (The only way in which a meme can be "expropriated" is in a scenario where it has been legally designated as intellectual property, and the rightful owner of the copyright / trademark / patent opts to redeem it from parties that have used it illicitly.) Consequently, I use "appropriation" in its original sense rather than as a synonym for "expropriation". This distinction is crucial if we are to assay the notion of "cultural appropriation".}

{27 The alternate term for this salutation is "namaskar[a]". Amongst American "New Age" enthusiasts, we also encounter dandy vapidness with the use of the "pranama" (physical gesture of salutation). The over-use of the "anjali mudra" ("wai" in Siamese / Lao) is rather grating for those of us who are familiar with Hindu / Buddhist cultures. The comical irony of all this is that many Cul-Ap-phobes are also "New Age" enthusiasts. Even as they are busy checking whether or not their spirit animal aligns with their moon sign, they are caviling about who gets to wear hoop earrings. }

{28 References to Saturnalia (marking the winter solstice) preceded the establishment of the Roman Empire—as found in the writings of Catullus. The writer, Macrobius was still talking about the tradition c. 500 A.D. It (ostensibly) commemorated a halcyon era, during the fabled reign of Saturn, when there was no slavery and no private property. Nobody was above anyone else; which is to say that nobody was driven by avarice (an idyllic society that involved no exploitation, no material accumulation, and no privation). This was eventually used as an occasion to pay tribute to Sol Invictus—who's birthday was considered December 25th (marking the re-birth of the sun). This "Natalis Invicti" was recognized through the 4th century—as documented on a Roman Chronograph from c. 354. Not until the 12th century did there appear any reference to this auspicious time as, well, Christ-mas. And THAT came from the Syriac writer, Dionysius bar Salibi of Melitene (Cappadocia).}

{29 To assay any given instance of Cul-Ap, we must consider all the historical contingencies that led to it. When exploring this topic, a good place to start is Kwame Anthony Appiah's "The Ethics Of Identity". Also insightful is his "Cosmopolitanism: Ethics In A World Of Strangers". Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Communities" is a classic in this field. }

{30 We can applaud the casting of an African American actress (Halle Bailey) in the leading role of Disney’s live-action rendering of “The Little Mermaid”; while keeping in mind that—even when it comes to fictional characters—there is nothing wrong with acknowledging ethnicity. Santa Clause, for example, is a fictional character based on an Anatolian saint (Nikolas of Myra); meaning the historical figure wasn’t Anglo-Saxon, even as the fictional character was. That said, Kris Kringle was certainly not Native American or Latino. Nor was he African or Arab. Nor was he Persian or Indian. I digress. Black mermaids—like, say, Mongolian or Pashtun mermaids—were never a thing...until, that is, Hollywood in 2023. The only exception seems to be the Yoruba river goddess, Yemoja / Yemanja, who was sometimes thought of in mermaid-like terms; though she was not a mermaid per se. Suffice to say, Hans Christian Andersen did not have Yemoja in mind. Rather, he would have been inspired by the Greek myth of the Sirens made famous by Homer (daughters of Calliope who hailed from the Cretan islands known as “Leukai”). That’s probably where the Poles got the idea for “Syrenka”. These mysterious aquatic maidens were preternatural denizens of the Mediterranean; so probably had olive skin. Andersen, meanwhile, likely had ancient English / Scandinavian folklore in mind, so was influenced by the depiction of alluring maritime creatures found in, say, the Anglo-Latin work, “Liber Monstrorum” from the 8th century. Being in the North Sea, they were likely fair-skinned.}

{31 In Exodus 22:18, when we are told that we mustn’t “suffer a witch to live”, the Semitic term for the person of opprobrium (“me-khashepha”) is best translated as “poisoner”; as “khasheph” referred to potentially harmful herbs. (The pejorative is also used in Deuteronomy 18:9-10. It was rendered “pharmakeia” in Koine Greek; and “maleficus” in Vulgar Latin.) When we say that someone is a “snake”, we mean that they are seeking to do harm in devious ways; and hocking some kind of poison. Recall that in Genesis, Satan (the Semitic term “na[c]hash” actually meant “shining one”) is represented as a serpent, and is associated with temptation / deception. Just as a staff was used by Moses to channel god’s power to part a sea, a staff might be used to employ god’s power to protect people from harm. It is no coincidence that wizards are often depicted with a staff; as the object (alt. a scepter) is typically associated with supernatural powers (e.g. Genesis 49:10). This semiotic is common across most cultures. The ancient Egyptians had the “was”. The Sumerians had the “gidru”. The Assyrians had the “hattum”. The ancient Greeks had the “skeptron”. The Romans had the “sceptrum”. Throughout history, around the world, this idiom has been ubiquitous. The Chinese used it. The Persians used it. The Norse used it.}

POSTSCRIPT 1:

Those who want cultures to be memetic silos are countenancing parochialism in its most flagrant form. It is difficult to embrace our shared humanity across cultural divides if one is pilloried the moment one dares to sample an exogenous meme.

A cosmopolitan outlook is predicated on a recognition of universals; which is simply to say that it is based upon that which transcends all cultural divides. Meanwhile, cultural segregation represents everything that cosmopolitanism is against.

There is nothing written in the stars about this or that culture, let alone about ownership of any one of a culture’s signature elements; as any given social norm is the product of a long sequence of historical accidents. Such things cannot possibly define our humanity; for there is nothing accidental about being human.

Irrespective of circumstance, we all have access to the better angels of our nature because we are all human—irrespective of culture. As such, parochialism—whereby one circumscribes one’s sense of humanity

according to this or that cultural affiliation—is not consummate with a sincere embrace of universals. Such an outlook is inimical to cosmopolitanism.

A genuinely cosmopolitan zeitgeist demands a broader perspective. (Think of it as the cultural analogue of Rawls' socio-economic "original position".) This entails a vantage point that urges us see past our own memetic orbit, to venture beyond the confines of our assigned cultural boundaries, and thereby expand our horizons. After all, those boundaries are nothing more than an accident of history. Human solidarity demands nothing less. Such solidarity is possible only because we are capable of rising above the warp and woof of the social constructs that govern our daily lives.

Memetic transference is an integral part of our shared humanity. And it bears worth noting that Cul-Ap often occurs in places we don't realize. Robin Hood is a prime example. The folk-hero was made famous by ballads from the 15th century like "Robyn Hode & The Munke" and various versions of the "Gest" of Robyn Hode. Later, he was dubbed Roger Godberd (the noble vigilante of Sherwood Forest) by some...Robert of Loxley by others...Fulk Fitz-Warin by still others. All those were English versions of the folklore; and they may or may not have been based on an actual person.

The tale is a timeless one: A noble thief takes from the rich and gives to the poor—a philanthropic mercenary meting out economic justice in an unjust society. Around the world, there also ended up being...

- a **French** version: Louis Mandrin
- a **Scottish** version: Robert Roy MacGregor
- an **Irish** version: Redmond O'Hanlon
- a **Dutch** version: Kobus van der Schlossen
- a **German** version: Johannes Buckler (a.k.a. "Schinderhannes")
- an **Estonian** version: Rummu Jüri
- a **Lithuanian** version: Tadas Blinda
- a **Slovak / Polish** version: Juraj Janosik
- a **Russian / Cossack** version: Stepan Timofeyevich Razin (a.k.a. "Stenka")
- a **Georgian** version: Koba
- an **Abkhazian** version: Abrskil
- a **Ukrainian** version: Ustym Yakymovych Karmalyuk (as well as a Yiddish version: Hershel of Ostropol)
- a **Bulgarian** version: Hitar Petar (the Macedonian version of whom was Itar Pejo of Mariovo)
- a **Romanian** version: Iancu Jianu
- a **Turkic** version: Koroghlu
- an **Ottoman Turkish** version: Hekimoglu Ibrahim
- a **Tamil** version: Koose Muniswami Veerappan
- a **Sinhalese** version: Deekirkevage Saradiel
- a **Chinese** version: Song Jiang
- a **Japanese** version: Ishikawa Goemon (a.k.a. "Gorokizu"; as well as Nezumi Kozo, inspired by Nakamura Jirokichi of Edo)
- a **Korean** version: Hong Gil-dong (loosely based on the historical figure, Im Kkeok of Yangju)
- a **Swahili** version: Fumo Liyonga
- a **Mexican** version: Jesus Malverde; Joaquin Murrieta Carrillo

...to mention examples from 25 other cultures. Some of them were based on real people; some of them were entirely apocryphal.

A few of these tales may have emerged independently of the others; especially if they were inspired by

historical figures. However, in other instances, the tale was likely an adaptation from another culture's version. In any case, over the centuries, the mytheme has clearly resonated across cultural lines. The tale says something about our shared humanity. Indeed, it is a legend that speaks to us...even if we need to couch it in terms of our own cultural heritage.

When we regard what Franz Boas referred to as “cultural diffusion”, we might ask: In the cases of folkloric cribbing, who cribbed from whom? This might be historically interesting, but it is morally irrelevant. Sometimes mythemes emerge in different places / times independently; sometimes they are coopted from exogenous sources. Either way, insofar as any given motif qualifies as a mytheme, there is something about it that resonates with all humans—be it a rags-to-riches story or a holy trinity.

Robin Hood is a reminder that in most cases, the result of Cul-Ap has been salubrious. Moreover, the myriad incarnations of this legendary figure illustrates that there does not exist any meme that is INHERENTLY part of a singular memeplex—that is: inscribed on a particular culture for all eternity. Memes know no such exclusivity.

There are no more cultural essences than there are racial essences. There are only trends within social groups (just as there are only phenotypic tendencies / predispositions within haplo-groups). And there is no necessary correlation between a given cultural element and a certain ethnic group. Such correlations were not written in the stars.

Any given feature of a given culture—as with any given part of a dogmatic system—is not inextricably tied to a particular ethnic group. As with any social norm, a custom emerges when, where, and how it does by historical accident.

That's why criticizing an element of a given culture—or of a given religion—is entirely disconnected from bigotry against whatever group might happen to espouse that element. Memes are not people. One can no more be racist against a social norm than one can be racist against a recipe for casserole (which may or may not happen to be affiliated with a certain community).

In fact, suggesting that such criticism is somehow “racist” is ITSELF born of racism. (The ironies never end.) Criticizing a dubious practice that inheres in a particular culture as actually a civic responsibility. For it is based on the fact that we are all fellow humans; and so are ultimately subject to the same moral standards...whether we acknowledge it or not. Our shared humanity is what give us all access to universal principles: standards by which any practice—regardless of when or where it occurs, or how much it is sacralized—can be evaluated. Objective morality is unconcerned with the myriad idiosyncrasies of communal consecrations. We are all human, so we all have recourse to the same moral compass. (I address this topic in my essay: “The Timelessness Of Morality”.)

More to the point: The humanity of a given person / group is not dependent on any particular social norm. We are far more than an agglomeration of the conventions we countenance—whatever those conventions might happen to be. For our humanity transcends the memes we espouse. What makes us human is not some historical accident—even one that has been sacralized for eons. Meanwhile, the memes we adopt—and opt to retain—are NOTHING BUT a historical accident. Such affinities are, after all, up to us to embrace or discard; and do so according to that which transcends our memetic proclivities.

As Johann Gottfried von Herder pointed out, mankind is not divided into distinct races with any inherent differences that really matter; mankind is divided by CULTURES, all of which are adopted after birth...and, of course, BY ACCIDENT OF birth.

The implication of the present thesis is that Cul-Ap-phobia is the lifeblood of cultural segregation—impelled, as it is, by a fever-dream of cultural puritanism. Like most of those obsessed with political correct-ness, anti-Cul-Ap crusaders are puritanical and authoritarian; which is simply to say that they are the antithesis of the astute cosmopolitans that they fancy themselves to be. Being, as they are, the self-appointed constables of enforced parochialism, we are morally obligated to repudiate their officious decrees.

I could have just as easily entitled this preceding piece, “The Case Against Cultural Segregation”. For anti-Cul-Ap crusaders are effectively cultural segregationists. They fail to realize that any meme-sequestration regime is antithetical to liberal democracy.

As I hope to have shown, a rudimentary knowledge of history is all that is needed to disabuse Cul-Ap-phobes of their peculiar gripe; as the gripe only seems credible to the most obtuse thinkers. I submit that a basic understanding of how culture-in-general works is all that is needed to attenuate this daffy neurosis. Caviling about Cul-Ap, one may as well hem and haw over the fact that all the world’s peoples happen to breath oxygen.

How, then, shall we think about memetic transference?

Consider “cumbia”. Since this dance style eventually migrated to other Latin American cultures from Columbia, do all other Latinos owe a debt to Colombians? Perhaps. But wait. Cumbia is essentially just a Latin take on belly dancing...which was popularized by Arabs, Turks, and Persians during the Middle Ages. Even THEY were not the originators, as the dance style likely originated in Pharaonic Egypt. (In Arabic, the style is referred to as “raqs sharqi”, meaning “Oriental dance”. In typical Latin American fashion, it was rendered a partner dance.) As it happens, belly dancing also led to “flamenco” dancing (also a partner dance) in Andalusia—first amongst the Romani, before eventually catching on with Spaniards. So what are we to make of all this? Is there something sinister afoot?

Let’s answer that (absurd) question by posing another question: Shall the Belgians and Swiss thank the Aztecs for chocolate? (The name derives from the Nahuatl “cacahuatl”.) If so, they presumably owe a massive debt to all Meso-Americans. Bear in mind that when Coenraad Johannes van Houten created Dutch cocoa, he was engaging in Cul-Ap. After all, he co-opted a hallmark of Native American culture from a people. Was Coenraad being iniquitous? Don’t be ridiculous. His adaptation was largely the consequence of him sharing the same planet as Native Americans.

When Morgan Bullock (an African American from Richmond, Virginia) pursued her passion in Irish Dancing, it is disingenuous to contend that she was pilfering from the Celtic legacy. She wasn’t extorting Irish culture; she was paying tribute to it. Indeed, the DANCING may have been Irish, but SHE didn’t have to be.

The question remains: Might it be said that Morgan was “appropriating” something from an exogenous culture? Sure. Should the Irish feel slighted by this? That would be a peculiar reaction to what she was doing. It would be like begrudging Yo-Yo Ma for performing a concerto on his cello that had been composed by Bach for the harpsichord.

Cul-Ap sometimes involves black dancers performing Irish dances; and sometimes it involves Chinese musicians performing German music.

Perhaps Morgan will adapt Irish Dancing to hip-hop, creating a novel (hybridized) style...as occurred with belly dancing (Middle Eastern) to flamenco (Andalusian) to cumbia (Colombian). Appropriation is—after

all—the engine of emerging culture. That’s how older cultures got there themselves. We mustn’t begrudge these cultural mavens for doing what our progenitors did in the first place.

Demanding that Cul-Ap be proscribed is opposed to the cosmopolitan spirit. Indeed, to have a problem with Cul-Ap is to have a problem with CULTURE ITSELF. Memes propagate across cultural lines because no meme is tied to any given culture by some immutable law of the universe. It’s why the British don’t take umbrage when Americans say, “It’s as American as apple pie.” (The pie is originally from England; apples originated in Kazakhstan.) And it’s why Americans don’t take umbrage when culinary maestros from Africa or Asia create their own ethnic variation on the scrumptious dessert. After all, EVERYONE loves apple pie.

The indemnification of memes does not preclude ACTUAL exploitation; it simply diverts our attention from the structural inequalities (power asymmetries) that REALLY account for the more privileged exploiting subalterns. Cul-Ap no more contributes to marginalization than the world’s Muslims were denigrated when Colombians inaugurated “cumbia”.

Cul-Ap-phobia ends up being a huge distraction. It is no secret that there are far more important things to concern ourselves with than who “owns” apple pie...or chocolate...or belly dancing. We live in a world with massive structural inequalities, in which certain communities are marginalized... and oppressed... and exploited. Socio-economic injustices run rampant throughout society. So we might ask: At the end of the day, does it really matter whether this or that teenage girl celebrates a “quinceañera” (meso-American) or a “sweet sixteen” birthday? Answer: No. Heck, she may as well do both. And we may as well throw in a Bat Mitzvah-style candle-lighting ceremony while we’re at it.

In the final analysis, we find that nothing was pre-ordained to be a part of any given culture. There is no cultural destiny. It’s all open-ended. So a culture as it happens to exist NOW is merely a point along the way. Along the way to where? Nobody knows. It’s an on-going process in which each of us partakes, at our own discretion. For, in a civil society, cultural participation is a matter of personal prerogative.

What will become of this long, meandering metamorphosis? Only time will tell. But that’s part of the fun of it. We’re all just trying to evolve; and part of that is adapting our meme-o-sphere to new developments. As fellow humans, we find that certain memes are good for everyone, others are bad for everyone; and ANYONE can point this out. For the only credential required is, well, being human.

So what are we to make of those who deign to assay a specified culture, as if it could EVER be discretely defined? As it turns out, any demarcation between one culture and another is interminably blurry, and perpetually in flux; and—in any case—an accident of history.

Cultures are dynamic agglomerations that are ever-evolving, not static wholes meant to be preserved as-is for all eternity. Moreover, ethnic identities have ALWAYS been amorphous; and don’t depend on any given meme for their continued existence. Such is the nature of memetic exchange: the lifeblood of all human interaction. Consequently, embracing our shared humanity requires us to break out of our parochial mindsets; to not be hung up on what we—or others—happen to have inherited *by accident of birth*. The point, then, is to look beyond the cloistered precincts of our own cultural milieu; and survey—with a sense of awe and wonder—the vast, global meme-o-sphere. Only then can we recognize the world—in all its glorious variegation—as our common home.

What, then, is the key to fostering pluralism? We might note the Spanish term, “convivencia”, which refers to inter-cultural amity. It makes sense that this is a felicitous ideation; as it literally means “living WITH one another”. Imagine.

Postscript 2:

Sharing food is a time-honored way to engender comity between different communities. Indeed, “breaking bread” with one another is one of the oldest ways to forge bonds with wayfarers. Our shared humanity is exemplified by EATING together; and this is especially so when we treat each other to our most hallowed recipes from days of yore. Cordial culinary transmission is yet another reminder that trans-cultural exchange ATTENUATES alterity; and is one of the first steps in eliminating the marginalization of minority communities (who are often seen as “other” by those in a position of privilege).

Today, many cuisines are drawn from what is effectively a global pantry—a process whereby culinary practitioners use ingredients from around the world, and do so at their own discretion. There’s nothing sinister about this. For it is just humans in one place appreciating things traditionally used by humans in another place. In assaying this phenomenon, we may wish to bear in mind that...

- **Chervil** is originally from **France**.
- **Dill** is originally from the **Slavic region**.
- **Dukkah** and **thyme** are originally from **Egypt**.
- **Tahini** is originally from **the Levant**.
- **Cumin** is originally from **the Eurasian Steppes**.
- **Rosemary** is originally from **Mesopotamia**.
- **Saffron** is originally from **Persia**.
- **Turmeric** and **mustard** are originally from **India**.
- **Ginger** and **coriander** (a.k.a. “cilantro”) are originally from **China**.
- **Basil** and **lemon-grass** are originally from **Southeast Asia**.
- **Yuzu-kosho** and **kimchi** are originally from **Japan**.
- **Sambal** is originally from **Java**.

And don’t forget: **vanilla** and **chocolate** are originally from **Meso-America**.

Willful ignorance is required to not realize that, when it comes to the culinary arts, these are just **INGREDIENTS**, not marks of divine ordinance. Such items have been culled from various flora, which—surprise, surprise—tend to grow in some places rather than in others.

To recognize the fatuity of decrying Cul-Ap whenever signature elements of “ethnic” cuisines intermix, one need only concede that every ingredient that has ever existed originally came from **SOMEWHERE**.

When the Japanese adopted “concha” from the Portuguese, rendering it “melonpan”, was this a crime? Probably not any more than when the Portuguese started eating sushi. Meanwhile, curry ended up becoming a big hit in Japan (as with currypan), with a distinct style that barely resembled the Indian version. Do Indians hold this against the Japanese? Nope. Meanwhile, the Japanese are perfectly fine with Indians eating sashimi.

When it comes to assaying how cultural interaction influences the dietary predilections of respective peoples, indigenous botanical exigencies are historically relevant. (Bordeaux comes from the soils of Bordeaux, Champaign comes from the soils of Champaign, Burgundy comes from the soils of Burgundy, and Cognac comes from the soils of Cognac.) Morally, though, such exigencies are entirely beside the point.

Culinary styles that were, at one point, the signature trait of a particular culture end up migrating across

cultural lines. Such memetic dispersion is only natural—which is why fajitas, quesadillas, and chimichangas have become ubiquitous throughout the Occident...in spite of the fact that they happen to be offshoots of Mexican fare. Stylistic choices affect one another, whether it's food or clothing or anything else. (Imagine if Cajun food were limited to New Orleans.)

The salient issue is proper attribution—something Cul-Ap-phobes tend to know—or care—very little about. Trans-cultural adoption is about giving credit where credit is due; and THAT requires one to know something about world history (how cultures have interacted over the course of centuries—nay, over the course of millennia). Such inquiries can be tremendously edifying.

Alas. Cul-Ap-phobes are not interested in edification; as they are too busy with “call out” culture to concern themselves with such frivolous endeavors as, say, generating awareness and forging global human solidarity. They'd much rather segregate cultures than appreciate them.

With this in mind, we see that there is a valid concern about those who are mendacious enough to adopt a meme from elsewhere, then pass it off as their own. In such cases, the problem isn't the adoption per se; it is the dishonesty. Incorporating “exotic” ingredients is not some sort of “cultural theft”. It is, in fact, the way that the culinary arts have worked since time immemorial. Any given item is invariably going to be a novelty to someone somewhere at some point in time; as every place on Earth has social norms from one historical period to the next (of which certain things are NOT a part). It is no crime to find something “foreign” if it is, indeed, unfamiliar. After all, what is and isn't familiar is a matter of historical accident.

The key is how people REACT to such encounters: with conceit and superciliousness...or with an open mind and open heart. A genuine appreciation for the new meme's origins makes Cul-Ap MORE appealing; not less. If we're truly concerned about empowering marginalized communities, unabashed cosmopolitanism is what matters. Decrying “cultural appropriation!” accomplishes nothing...save, perhaps, stirring pointless resentment. In a misguided attempt to uplift marginalized communities by “protecting” their cultural heritage, such interlopers end up amplifying alterity.

Once more, we are reminded that the aim of Cul-Ap-phobes is the segregation—rather than the appreciation—of cultures.

So what of the cockamamie fixation on CUISINE exhibited by “foodies” who've become afflicted with Cul-Ap-phobia? Their first mistake is to suppose that they have identified a phenomenon that is unique to the Occident. Since the Middle Ages, turmeric and cumin have commonly been used in Arab dishes. Are we to suppose, then, that Arabs are somehow guilty of illicit Cul-Ap from Indians? (Arabs adopted Indian numerals as well. Another outrage?) Ever put mustard on your hot dog? Well, then, you're ALSO stealing from the Indians.

What's going on here?

To illustrate the neurosis involved, let's consider a recent case of umbrage. Some of the more fanatical Cul-Ap-phobes have criticized the renown chef, Rick Bayless for his expertise in—and passion for—Mexican cuisine. Why? Well, you see, he is WHITE. The irony here is mind-bending; as anyone who levels such a criticism is racist. This holds whether or not the target of opprobrium (in this case, Bayless) happens to be from a marginalized ethnic group. Bigotry is bigotry, regardless of who's doing it and to whom it is aimed. Bayless is a champion of Mexican culture, not a thief. If only MORE gringos had the appreciation that he exhibits. (!)

No matter. Those who are determined to demonize Cul-Ap persist in their caviling, heedless of how

culture actually works. According to their (laughably obtuse) logic, the entire planet is complicit in some perfidious scheme of culinary cooptation. So far as they're concerned, anyone using fennel, parsley, sage, marjoram, or oregano—who does NOT have ancestors from the Mediterranean basin—is engaged in a memetic heist; and so must be excoriated. The same goes for those using nutmeg, mace, or cloves who don't have ancestors from the Maluku islands of Malaya.

Heaven forbid you happen to prepare a vanilla or chocolate dessert without paying tribute to the Aztecs, sip a coffee without paying tribute to the Abyssinians, or drink some beer without paying tribute to the Egyptians. And be careful not to ever use sambal without first securing permission from the world's Indonesians.

Welcome to the wacky world of Cul-Ap hysteria. Cosmopolitans are forced to contend with a cadre of ornery schoolmarms who, pretending to know anything about international cuisine, are determined to tsk-tsk-tsk their way into paroxysms of indignation. They engage in such acrimony even as they sprinkle some basil onto their dinner...without having thanked those of East Asian descent.

After all, Cul-Ap is only iniquitous when OTHER people do it.

The logic here can become so convoluted that a persnickety commentator once indicted a novel chickpea-based stew in which turmeric was used as an ingredient. Wherefore? Because many curries ALSO use turmeric. Therefore said stew could be considered a kind of curry (even though it did not contain the key element of curry—namely: CURRY LEAVES), and so was IPSO FACTO a case of cultural appropriation from Indian culture.

This is bonkers.

The upshot of this bizarrely censorious attitude is actually quite simple: Limit your diet to only the things that your ancestors likely ate centuries ago.

We regret to inform all mankind: If you aren't English, marmite is forever off-limits to you. Meanwhile, if you ARE English, you're stuck with mutton and haggis for all eternity. (On second thought, haggis is Scottish, so that's off-limits as well!) It seems not to occur to Cul-Ap-phobes that virtually everyone on the planet engages in culinary cooptation on a daily basis, because that's how FOOD works. Broccoli is a Sicilian vegetable; and did not become a part of the American dietary repertoire until the 19th century. (That's right. The Founding Fathers did not know what broccoli was.) Are we now ALL guilty of purloining Sicilian cuisine?

We're all doing it, even when we don't realize it.

The same goes for etymology; because that's how LANGUAGE works. The same goes for religious beliefs; because that's how DOGMATISM works. Etc. Memes that subsist, subsist because they propagate; and they propagate because they resonate with different people at different times and places. We're all human, which means that accident of birth does not make any of us exempt from this all-encompassing dynamic. We're all a part of a global memetic ecosystem, so we're all complicit.

The key, then, is to recognize the malleability of culture. Memetic transference across cultural lines (which THEMSELVES are fuzzy, and perpetually fluctuating) is a function of socio-psychical resonance. Such resonance is, in part, explained by our shared humanity; but it is also dictated by historical contingencies (incumbent power structures, exigent social norms, prevailing sensibilities, etc.) This cultural gradient exists simply due to the fact that certain people, under certain circumstances, have affinities for some memes rather than others. Some people like curry (many of whom are not Indian); others don't. And that's

fine. Begrudging people for their culinary choices (i.e. when those choices happen not to coincide with their ethnic identity) is antithetical to the spirit of cosmopolitanism. Would we do the same with literary choices? Musical choices?

Human interaction entails memetic transference. Whenever in close proximity, cultures do not ABUT; they BLEND. Their boundaries are rarely discrete and static; they are blurred and fluid. Consequently, demarcations become fuzzy...and even illusory. Now that we live in a globalized world, such proximity is not limited to geography. And that's wonderful. Thank heavens for memetic dispersion—be it culinary or sartorial or mythological or anything else.

Tracking the cross-currents of culture is like tracking any other winds. Trying to predict how one culture will interact with another is comparable to predicting the weather. In either case, one is contending with highly-complex, open systems—which, when they meet, are bound to inter-penetrate in idiosyncratic ways. Memetic zephyrs impinge upon a given locality, and do so SPORADICALLY. This is the case whether we are talking about cuisine, architecture, literature, folklore, attire, music, dance, sport, or anything else. It is asinine to begrudge anyone who opts to participate in this on-going dynamic.

Cosmopolitanism requires that one eschews Exceptionalism; and recognizes that one's own culture is—in the grand scheme of things—nothing ontologically special. All cultures are a concatenation of social constructs; and all social constructs are accidents of history. No singular culture was determined by divine Providence; and no memetic ownership was written in the stars. So it is important that we come to any evaluation NOT as members of any particular tribe, but simply as fellow HUMANS.

In the early 1930's, the renown social anthropologist, Ruth Benedict noted that “there has never been a time when civilization stood more in need of individuals who are genuinely culture-conscious, who can see objectively the socially conditioned behavior of other peoples without fear and recrimination” (“Patterns Of Culture”, p. 10-11).

Benedict's approach was to assay the world's widely-variegated cultures NOT through the lens of one's own culture, but from an impartial perspective. As Edward Said would four decades later, she rejected the Occident-centric way of seeing the world (see my essay, “The Universality Of Morality”). Surely, Benedict AND Said would have recoiled at the thought that people would one day vilify those engaged in Cul-Ap; and do so in the name of social justice.