

# An Introduction to Race and Culture

Fifth Estate Collective

2003

Over the years, our special features addressing identity politics—from the 1971 women’s issue to the queer edition of 1993—have both appealed to and tested our readers for the challenging exchanges these topics inevitably generate. This issue on Race and Culture has inspired both an unprecedented quantity of contributions and stimulating controversy within the Fifth Estate (FE) collective.

We have had months of debate within our editorial collective on the topics raised in this issue. At times, the discussions were intensely personal and even divisive. Trouble started as soon as the theme was announced. The first call for submissions, printed in the Fall FE, read: “When radicals adopt, appropriate, or adapt the cultures and rituals of marginalized minority groups, they...” followed by a list of choices. This was immediately challenged because it assumes that no “radicals” are members of those “marginalized minority groups.”

Despite our disagreements, the FE staff is unanimous about the importance of the larger radical community discussing anti-authoritarian identity politics. The powerful continue to exploit existing divisions and exacerbate historical problems. The tactic of divide-and-conquer is ancient, with current cynical manifestations all around us. We all need to work towards formulations for new modes of solidarity in order to combat our mutual foes.

It is important not to forget that the US is a country where white supremacy still reigns. People of color face a criminal “justice” system that targets them through racial profiling, convicts them at higher rates than whites and sentences them more harshly. Politicians campaign by race-baiting and attack affirmative action. Polluting industries place hazardous factories and waste plants in communities of color. Hate crimes against people of color continue. “English only” ordinances proliferate. The list goes on and on.

We are aware that this issue may prompt some of the emotional reactions we have already shared with each other in the collective; we welcome these as an important part of the learning process. In examining race, we realize that we may have to face uncomfortable realities but hope to avoid the semantic squabbling that all too often characterizes discussion of race in radical communities. However, it is important to think about some basic definitions of the concepts that have fueled so much contention—race and cultural appropriation. Race is a construct, but one that acquires reality both when we use it and when it is used against us. Race can be a tool of economic hegemony. Race can be a basis for solidarity. Race is a way of thinking learned at an early age by most Americans.

In a globalizing world, practices, forms and styles that might have once been the basis of cultural identity are now available to nearly everyone. Since the market logic of capitalism dominates the globalization process, these cultural forms are treated primarily as commodities, sucked dry and tossed onto the compost heap of history. This is the context for cultural appropriation.

How can anti-authoritarians seeking egress from empty consumerism practice borrowed cultural forms or play borrowed musics without unwittingly hastening the demise of these very practices? And where do we draw the line? Is it acceptable for white musicians to play hip-hop or sing the blues? For a non-native to conduct a sweat lodge? Clearly, activists from the dominant culture need to develop ethics of cultural appropriation based on more sustainable economic models than that of capitalism.

Simply declaring ourselves free of racism is no longer enough. We can forge bonds within and between communities, struggling together against the blatant racism of capitalism and the state. But we must go deeper than that. In combating racism, we have to start with ourselves. We must recognize that backgrounds and privileges influence people's outlooks on life.

It may be foolhardy to think that we can destroy racism (or race) with mere words. But to continually discuss and debate the subject through critique and reappraisal can move the project closer towards realization. This is only the beginning of a long conversation, so we have more questions than answers. We hope this issue will open up a discussion that fosters greater understanding and ultimately expands the outlooks of anti-authoritarians. We look forward to your feedback.

# fifth Estate

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Fifth Estate #363, Winter, 2003/2004

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