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Writing Against Essentialization

Cultural Appropriation as a Problem*

Abstract:

In recent years, certain cultural forms of expression as well as certain practices, artefacts or phenomena have been problematized and scandalized as cultural appropriation. This contribution argues that the accusation of cultural appropriation is based on essentializing and therefore problematic concepts of culture. Claiming a phenomenon or a thing to have been subjected to cultural appropriation assumes that such elements belong exclusively to certain groups of actors, while others use them in an illegitimate manner. This article focuses on the question of how new forms of (re)essentialization of culture are mobilized, and how categorical boundaries are drawn in processes of othering between a homogenized “we” and clearly separated and equally homogenized “others”, based on the assumption of a supposed cultural difference. Cultural appropriation is identified as a powerful slogan-concept. The article analyzes the social discourses on cultural appropriation, and the academic discourse that sometimes confirms or legitimizes the accusation of cultural appropriation. Culture, today, is shown to be instrumentalized as a category of difference and how sovereignty of interpretation is articulated in relation to the mechanisms of cultural (re)production and transmission.

Keywords: cultural appropriation, cultural property, authorization, slogan-concept

“A hairstyle is causing a stir in Sweden”: this was the headline in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* on January 30, 2019. The hairstyle in question adorned the head of the newly appointed Swedish Minister of Culture, Amanda Lind, who had previously been the central secretary of the Swedish Green Party. “No sooner had she been appointed”, the *NZZ* characterized the process, “than she faced fierce criticism, from the very corner of urban intellectuals from where many Green voters originate. A white [!] European woman wearing dreadlocks – should this not be classified as inappropriate ‘cultural appropriation’?” (Hermann 2019).

* Translation by Stefanie Everke Buchanan. The editorial responsibility for this translation lies solely with the author of the text. In the interest of readability, direct quotations from media sources have been translated from German.

The same hairstyle also became the subject of controversy in Germany: in March 2022, musician Ronja Maltzahn was uninvited from a Fridays for Future demonstration in Hanover: “If a white person wears dreadlocks, then it’s a case of cultural appropriation, because we as white people do not have to deal with the history of collective trauma of oppression because of our privilege.” (N.A. 2022a) Thus reads the the climate activists’ statement quoted in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. In her reaction, however, the musician herself emphasized that she wanted to set a sign against discrimination.

“A wonderful tankard. Have you seen it?”, AfD¹ chairwoman Alice Weidel toasted the audience at the Gillamoos festival in early September 2023. The event is used by many representatives of political parties as an arena for mobilization. “Tankards, dirndls, traditional costumes. And anyway: According to Green logic, that would all be cultural appropriation, as they call it. Cultural appropriation, isn’t it? And that is always the argument of our politically overcorrect ones when they want to forbid our children to play Indians and dress up as chief or squaw. Because this is what the twisted world of the Greens and the Left look like. They want to dictate what we can dress up as and what we can still eat.”² While Weidel scandalizes and politically instrumentalizes the debate about cultural appropriation here by linking it to the right-wing discourse fragment that ‘those up there’ would now ban everything for the people (Dümling 2023), she had explained just a few minutes prior that she herself would deliberately not wear a dirndl because she comes from Westphalia.

The reference to “Indians” and “squaws” in Weidel’s speech refers to 2019, when a Hamburg daycare center sent a letter to parents asking them to forego stereotyping costumes at carnival so that potential harm could be avoided. The letter made headlines across Germany; in response, a CDU³ MP spoke of paternalism, while an FDP⁴ politician considered it a ban (N.A. 2019). From a conservative perspective, there seemed to be a consensus that carnival was all about fun and creativity. The online magazine *Hallo:Eltern* took a more nuanced view: “It’s not about forbidding children to do something. Rather, this is an opportunity to break with outdated patterns of thought. At its core, it’s about the question: Where does discrimination begin?” (Diedenhoven 2023). At stake was not a culture of prohibition, but an opportunity to sensitize children to injustices.

These examples demonstrate that the discourse on cultural appropriation is complex, ambivalent, in parts also paradoxical and, following cultural anthropol-

1 The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) is a German far-right populist party.

2 Speech by Alice Weidel, Gillamoos public festival, September 4, 2023: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07iK64UsBUc>. Accessed February 12, 2024.

3 The Christlich Demokratische Union (CDU) is a German conservative party.

4 The Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP) is a liberal German party.

ogist Julian Warner, highly ideological⁵. This article argues that this at times also applies to the academic debate on cultural appropriation in which highly diverse processes and phenomena are negotiated (Arya 2021; Young/Brunk 2012). The discourse is about terms (“Indians”) and things (dreadlocks) that have become problematic, about practices of cultural production (e.g. in the field of popular music), about questions of restitution (e.g. the Benin bronzes)⁶ or the use of queer symbols (Brammer 2018). The academic debate is anything but uniform. It does not always make a clear distinction between the accusation of cultural appropriation and the objects and phenomena being problematized; it is sometimes itself highly normative, ahistorical and decontextualizing when authors attempt to distinguish between supposedly good and supposedly bad forms of cultural appropriation; and some work explicitly legitimizes the criticism of what is scandalized in public discourse as cultural appropriation – at the high price that it does not deconstruct culture as a category of difference that can be instrumentalized, but rather confirms it.⁷

The academic and social debates on cultural appropriation and the associated problematic (because they are essentialist) conceptions of culture need not only be categorized in terms of cultural anthropology, but their political dimensions (particularly in terms of identity politics) must also be critically commented on. This is important because the concept of cultural appropriation, which cultural studies used in the 1970s and 1980s in order to uncover power asymmetries, is now being used to generate new asymmetries in social and, in some cases, academic discourse. The term supplies ammunition to ideological struggles over cultural (re)production in the present and is part of what Anne Dippel refers to as new and medially intensified

5 “Von Dreadlocks bis Moonwalk – Julian Warner über kulturelle Aneignung,” Deutschlandfunk, October 2, 2022: <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/audiothek?drsearch%3AsearchText=Julian%20Warner&drsearch%3Astations=4f8db02a-35ae-4b78-9cd0-86b17726ec0>. Accessed November 20, 2023.

6 Cf. the articles in the forum of the Zeitschrift für Volkskunde 2019, which deal with the topic of re-stitution: https://www.waxmann.com/index.php?eID=download&id_artikel=ART104108&uid=frei. Accessed December 14, 2023.

7 This also applies to Lars Distelhorst’s work, which does explicitly address the problem of essentialism but can ultimately be read as a legitimization of the concept of cultural appropriation. Distelhorst’s definitional proposal on cultural appropriation shows this as well. He states that cultural appropriation intervenes in conflicts over hegemony because members or groups of a dominant culture appropriate the symbols of discriminated groups struggling for emancipation in order to recode them for their own purposes or transform them into articles of consumption, which causes a shift in their meaning and renders them unusable for representation (Distelhorst 2021: 128). This argument, however, can also be applied to cultural anthropology: It is through the very accusation of cultural appropriation that the things or terms being problematized are made usable for representation – for example as a political statement against structures of thought and power, which can be seen, among other things, in the high level of media attention regarding the topic.

discourses of self-assurance (2022: 217). Questions of interpretive sovereignty and authorization fuel both accusation and defense. At the same time, however, according to Julian Warner's thesis, the actual problems that are supposed to be solved with the concept of cultural appropriation are obscured. To put it bluntly, as he writes, it is worth reflecting on the fact that the discourses on cultural appropriation are substitutes for the fact that we are not talking about the actual distribution struggles.⁸ Against this backdrop, the sometimes sharp and polemic criticism from the left-wing political spectrum that is articulated in debates about cultural appropriation thwarts the actual goal: Although it is guided by postcolonial argumentation, it (re)essentializes culture. Erich H. Matthes, among others, has pointed this out from a philosophical perspective: "[...] persons who make claims objecting to cultural appropriation predicated on essentialist distinctions between insiders and outsiders risk causing harms of a similar kind to the appropriations to which they are objecting" (Matthes 2016: 346). The discursive production of supposedly distinct, separable cultures problematized by Matthes can then also be linked to right-wing extremist or right-wing populist discourses which also assume supposedly homogeneous cultural spaces – albeit with different goals – but argue with racist and nationalist patterns of thought.

Such arguments challenge a genuinely cultural-scientific concept of culture (May 2020). Following Stuart Hall, such a concept takes into account multiple identities or multiple affiliations (Scheer 2014), deconstructs the powerful and interest-driven differentiation between insiders and outsiders and, since the debate on the concept of culture itself initiated by Lila Abu-Lughod (1991; Hann 2007), rightly warns against conceptualizing culture as a container. It sees cultural and social anthropological research tasked with precisely the subversion of problematic concepts such as homogeneity, coherence and timelessness (Abu-Lughod 1991: 476). But it is precisely these concepts that are uncritically called upon in social discourse when the accusation of cultural appropriation is levied. In the process, forms of culturalization become manifest: Sections of culture that are problematized and scandalized are given a single interpretation without taking their temporal and spatial contexts into account. A discipline such as cultural anthropology/European ethnology, with its social constructivist and power-sensitive perspectives, is in particular demand here. At the same time, it should be emphasized that the experiences of racism, powerlessness, violation, and hegemony that are often invoked as part of the critique of cultural appropriation should not be relativized or even questioned. Just as their

8 "Von Dreadlocks bis Moonwalk – Julian Warner über kulturelle Aneignung", Deutschlandfunk, October 2, 2022: <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/audiothek?drsearch%3AsearchText=Julian%20Warner&drsearch%3Astations=4f8db02a-35ae-4b78-9cd0-86b177726ec0>. Accessed November 20, 2023.

impact on global coexistence must be documented and analyzed, ideologically and morally undergirded understandings of culture must be critically scrutinized.

The following contribution understands cultural appropriation solely as a field or source concept. The discourse on cultural appropriation is an object and topic of research, and its analysis provides information on processes and ideologies regarding the authorization of culture in the present. The central question is how new forms of the (re)essentialization of culture are mobilized and how categorical boundaries between a homogenized 'we' and the equally homogenized 'others' are drawn in processes of othering based on the argument of a supposed cultural difference (Pe-ball/Schönberger 2022: 26). Ultimately, the discourse on cultural appropriation is about (identity) political claims to culture that must not leave cultural anthropology untouched. The accusation of cultural appropriation is socially and politically explosive. It is based on problematic notions of purity, authenticity, and the homogeneity of social collectives. In empirical cultural analysis, these dimensions have often been deconstructed as interest-driven fictions that can be politicized and ideologically deployed.

The argument will unfold in two steps: First, I outline the areas labelled as problematic by calling them cases of cultural appropriation. Second, I review the sometimes contradictory academic debates in which the phenomena claimed to be cultural appropriation are addressed in order to show how the phenomena under discussion are clearly and normatively judged, thus actually making the cultural appropriation claim plausible. Finally, I will outline elements for a cultural anthropological critique of the concept of cultural appropriation.⁹

Areas Problematised as Cultural Appropriation

The examples with which the article opens demonstrate the resemiotization of segments of culture in complex, ideologically charged processes operating in a metacultural discourse. A hair style is no longer an individual aesthetic or a fashion choice.¹⁰ Instead it is interpreted as disregard for cultural specificity, oppression, white hegemony or an expression of racist structures of thought. The hair style turns into a primarily political symbol, even if the criticized actors position themselves against any form of discrimination. Doing so negates the embeddedness of each specific case

9 I would like to thank Regina Bendix, Ina Henning, Sarah May, Laura Marie Steinhaus and Thomas Thiemeyer for their valuable comments on a first draft of this contribution.

10 Of course, it must be emphasized at this point that in social practice, individual aesthetic decisions can certainly be simultaneously political. The cultural scientist cited above, Julian Warner, pointedly describes in a Deutschlandfunk (German public radio) podcast that his Jamaican grandmother was stunned when he turned up with dreadlocks because she had negative associations of the hairstyle with class differences.

into an equally specific lifeworld. The emphasis rests instead on an assumed collective, context-independent 'cultural characteristic'. Thus, the private sphere becomes political, and the abuse that is entailed in the accusation of cultural appropriation is not presented as individual misconduct, but as a structural problem that does not simply concern the individual but society as a whole.

Levying an accusation of cultural appropriation always entails a positioning as speaker. But who is actually speaking in whose name, or for whom? This question is anything but trivial (Noyes 2006): depending on the baseline, speaking for others is a hegemonic colonial act – as in the case of the musician who was disinvited from the Fridays for Future demonstration. We can assume that the activists voicing the criticism do not predominantly belong to the group of actors for whom they are raising their voices.¹¹ This also applies to the debates at the Hamburg daycare center and the question of which carnival costumes are considered (in)appropriate. In each case, speakers voice their claims for other discursively produced collectives or for an equally discursively produced 'own' collective without problematizing the reference figure.

These symbolic-discursive claims are presented as the (cultural) property of a supposedly distinct group.¹² In the concept of appropriation, the reference to ideas of ownership is already semantically inherent (Scafidi 2005). In his monograph on the ethics of appropriation, Jens Balzer points to this aspect by stating that appropriation always includes expropriation, theft, and an illegitimate act (Balzer 2022: 13). But is it really that clear-cut? The premise on which the statement is based – especially in its claim to universal validity – must rather be called into question, not least because it operates with legally defined concepts without critically assessing them. All the cases outlined above revolve around the question of who owns certain forms of cultural expression – initially not in a legal sense (Shand 2002; Brown 2003) but in an

11 I can only hint at the complexity of the debate here: In her article "More than a Feeling," Alice Hasters refers to racist structures without criticizing white people who wear dreadlocks on an individual level: "This is why, if I'm being honest, most of the time I don't really care if a white person wears dreads. I can even have a nice conversation with a white person with dreadlocks without thinking about their hair. However, the fact that this is the case doesn't change the fact that I think their hairstyle is a form of cultural appropriation that is problematic. White people should be able to recognize racist acts and power structures without me bursting into tears." <https://www.zeit.de/kultur/2019-12/rassismus-wut-trauer-gefuehle-diskurs-10nach8>. Accessed December 12, 2023. One comment on the article argues even more pointedly: "If you really want to work towards a post-racist society, you have to be *for* cultural appropriation. Everyone should be able and allowed to cultivate as many traditions as possible. If white people know and wear dreadlocks and maybe learn something about their history in the process, that's a *good* thing. I'm writing this as an Afro-German."

12 On the problematization of the term group in cultural anthropology and the heterogeneity of social collectives, see Brubaker 2004 as well as Noyes 2003.

identity-political and certainly also ethnicized understanding. This makes the debate much more complex than it is presented in the media discourse. After all, neither dreadlocks nor dirndls nor “Indian costumes” are legally protected. They have no authors and are part of a cultural repertoire that has become globally available and can be understood as part of a globalized popular culture.

The idea of authorship is culturally specific and by no means universal, even though it now applies worldwide. Moreover, it cannot be applied across the board in view of the diverse fields and phenomena where accusations of cultural appropriation are made – from repatriation to pop culture. With the concept of the author or with terms such as theft and expropriation, the debate in the aforementioned academic texts is clearly framed in legal terms. In this way, they themselves contribute to the processes of commodification and juridification of culture which Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) deconstructed following the question how ethnicity becomes a global commodity, drawing on numerous examples.

The debate about cultural appropriation must be contextualized within a much broader process in which sections of culture are legally framed and turn into a commodity. The Göttingen interdisciplinary Research Group 772 on the constitution of cultural property has problematized this accordingly (cf. Groth et al. 2015; Brown 2003; Skrydstrup 2012), and presented a multitude of instructive empirical case studies. Cultural anthropologist Regina Bendix assumes – and this thesis could be applied to the topic of cultural appropriation – “that more people are participating in the negotiation of ideal value attribution and thus appreciation. In her words, societies have become more democratic and heterogeneous, and actors increasingly possess an anthropologically informed, cultural self-awareness on the one hand and participate in the production or at least consumption of – also increasingly – globally circulating excerpts of cultural aesthetics on the other. Ideal attributions of value are intermingled with economic interests. This then adds the question of ownership a more or less virulently s one of to the negotiation components” (Bendix 2005: 178).

The global constitution of the debate on cultural appropriation can thus only be understood by looking at various global developments in which sections of culture are incorporated into new legal and political frameworks: the certification of food that is understood as traditional (e.g. May 2016; Welz 2015), the negotiations of the World Intellectual Property Organization on traditional culture (Groth 2012) or the UNESCO conventions on the preservation of intangible cultural heritage (Hafstein 2018; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004; Tauschek 2013) or on the protection of the diversity of forms of cultural expression: All these politically induced interventions form, to speak with Rolf Lindner (2003), a specific constellation in which new understandings of culture also circulate and in which culture is transformed into a resource (Coombe 2009; Yúdice 2003) for which claims can then be articulated. In all

these (cultural) political interventions, concepts such as authorship or legal claims to (traditional) culture are globalized and made globally available as an argument.

A further aspect becomes tangible in the examples given in the introduction: The debate around cultural appropriation is emotionally charged and lends itself to emotionalization, political scandalization and mobilization – across the entire political spectrum. In this process, cultural appropriation is, in Balzer’s words, a contested concept and almost a conceptual hub of our current cultural struggles (Balzer 2022: 75). By referring to the concept of culture, however, the debate often obscures the conditions that are actually at issue (such as everyday racism or social inequality). It must be the task of a critical cultural analysis to make visible the scandalizations and mobilization strategies contained in the discourse on cultural appropriation. This includes naming paradoxes and explaining their origins. The above cited politician Alice Weidel, for example, refers to two forms of cultural appropriation: one – “Indians” and “squaws” – she scandalizes as a culture of prohibition, for her a sign of left-wing ideology. The other – her deliberately not wearing a dirndl because she is from East Westphalia and not from Bavaria – embraces the criticism of cultural appropriation in order to once again defame her political opponents in a populist manner. This contradiction goes unnoticed by the audience; the scandalization works. Weidel uses talk of cultural appropriation to mobilize hatred and disparage a democratic, open, and diverse society. It is compatible with right-wing extremist and right-wing populist concepts of ethnopluralism (Illmer 2021) precisely because it is only effective when built on the idea of distinct cultures or ethnicities.

What the examples outlined in the introduction do not problematize are those processes in which extracts of culture become an economic resource. A prominent term in this is which Activist Sócrates Vasquez and sociologist Avexnim Cojtí relate the concept of cultural extractivism with cultural appropriation in the journal *Cultural Survival*:

“Cultural appropriation includes forms of extractivism in Indigenous territories, where transnational mining, oil, gas, pharmaceutical, seed, and fashion industry companies, to name a few, exploit a natural resource, impacting the lives of the communities they have protected or rely on said resource for their livelihoods. Cultural appropriation is an asymmetric relationship between cultures and societies, where the dominant culture/society deals with and justifies its relations with minorities, in this case the Indigenous Peoples, to use their knowledge, ways of life, art, their relationships with plants and animals, spirituality, worldviews and other aspects of Indigenous identity for capitalist consumption.” (Vasques/Cojtí 2020)

The authors address further aspects from a perspective critical of hegemony and governmentality, writing from a post-colonial angle: they point to the positioning of minorities, and global regimes of exploitation and value creation that transform culture into a globally commodifiable resource, such as in the fashion, creative and

music industries. Only in recent years has this problematization of asymmetries been addressed with the term cultural appropriation, but it has precursors: In April 1973, the Bolivian Foreign Minister approached the then Director-General of UNESCO. The specific reason was Simon and Garfunkel's global hit "El Condor Pasa," released in 1970, which was based on a traditional Andean song and subsequently sparked countless cover versions. The Foreign Minister criticized that both musicians made an enormous profit from a melody that was actually part of the cultural repertoire of a specific group of actors. In his cultural anthropological analysis, Valdimar Hafstein has elaborated on the vocabulary of appropriation: terms in the Foreign Minister's letter such as "appropriation," "depredation" or "usurpation" (cited in Hafstein 2018: 23) refer to patterns of thought and argumentation that are also articulated again in debates about cultural appropriation.

Long before the concept of cultural extractivism was given its terminological contour, this reveals a primarily politically induced criticism of the effects of economic globalization as well as a specific understanding of cultural property that was above all interest-driven: The Foreign Minister was a representative of the dictatorship in Bolivia; he demanded the protection of indigenous folklore to conceal the actual oppression of the indigenous population. Acting as the scholarly narrator in the documentary "El Condor Pasa," Hafstein states: "Safeguarding is here a tool for disenfranchisement,"¹³In the course of its history, the song was also an expression of resistance and protest by Bolivian miners against state violence; then it became itself an instrument of disenfranchisement by this very state.

Conceptualizations and Critique

The concept of cultural appropriation unfolds in a many layered situation: scientific and societal definitions and concepts are either intertwined or diametrically opposed. The academic and societal discourse on cultural appropriation is a discourse with circulating elements. For this reason, it is particularly worth looking at constellations (cultural property, transfer, sampling, reference, tradition, etc.), because individual discourse fragments appear in different contexts (from the debate on restitution to popular culture) in which they develop a life of their own or are enriched with new themes.

13 <https://flightofthecondorfilm.com/#watch>. Accessed December 15, 2023. In its complexity, "El Condor Pasa" is an excellent example for processes of appropriation, of the juridification and economization of culture and ultimately also of its politicization and political instrumentalization. According to Hafstein, while Simon and Garfunkel, even without making this explicit, expressed their solidarity with the poor and oppressed population of the Andean region by performing the indigenous song, this was interpreted less as an appreciation of indigenous music than as economic exploitation from the point of view of the actors it represented.

What problems does the concept of cultural appropriation offer solutions for?¹⁴ Or does the concept rather address symptoms, i.e. does it only touch the surface of much deeper, structural problems such as hegemony, inequality, racism, which thus do not need to be addressed directly? Cultural appropriation can be problematized as a slogan-concept in Dorothy Noyes' sense: "The slogan-concept is an abstraction that seems to validate concrete realities, the name of a purportedly eternal idea used to launch a time-specific project, a tent providing shelter to actors coming from all directions" (Noyes 2016: 412). Slogan-concepts channel attention and mobilize actors in a special way. "*They distract us from intractable structural problems* [italics in the original]. [...] As the symptoms are treated, the disease is ignored or naturalized [...] *They offer a direction that enables movement* [italics in the original]" (Noyes 2016: 413). Finally, slogan-concepts discipline behavior and make clear value judgements: "Concepts that purport to be analytical reveal themselves as normative, providing the principle by which behaviors can be classified as either constructive or destructive. Individuals are urged, perhaps required, to get with the program" (Noyes 2016: 414). Against this backdrop, the definitions of cultural appropriation formulated in societal (and to some extent also in academic) discourse are mobilizing and normative because they are used to derive the supposedly right and wrong ways of dealing with segments of culture, and because in this dichotomization, they fail at differentiation.

This diagnosis can be made for the metacultural considerations on the concept of cultural appropriation: In the course of the debates about carnival costumes for children in Germany and the proposal that stereotyping costumes should be avoided, the online magazine "Hallo:Eltern" has suggested a definition. At first glance, it reads almost like something penned in cultural anthropology and appears to be derived from scholarly definitions: "What is cultural appropriation? We speak of cultural appropriation when a component of a culture, such as traditional clothing or body paint, is removed from its ritual context and adopted by people from another culture for their own entertainment or pleasure" (Diedenhoven 2023).

This proposed definition emphasizes the aspect of decontextualization ("removed from"), recontextualization ("adopted"), and the functionalization ("entertainment," "pleasure"); it is close to a proposed legal definition by Susan Scafidi, who also emphasizes the aspect of profit as a problem (Scafidi 2005). This definition is

14 A good example of how this perspective can also be made fruitful for the academic and not just the societal discourse on cultural appropriation is the music education contribution by Ahlers and Weber. They hope that their discussion will make music teaching more sensitive to, in their words, aspects such as power, racisms, classisms and more diverse cultural concepts in the context of processes of appropriation (Ahlers/Weber 2023: 41; on the discussion in the context of music education cf. also Barth 2022).

also similar to Lars Distelhorst's reflections who states that cultural appropriation is generally understood as a process in which people from a dominant culture appropriate cultural elements from a discriminated or oppressed culture without taking into account the attitude of those affected, thereby shifting or levelling their meaning (Distelhorst 2021: 12). Both proposed definitions are mobilizing and normative: They refer to supposedly true and authentic contexts of culture and delegitimize other forms – also with ethical and moral arguments.

What is striking in these definitional approaches are the echoes of a concept from folklore research in Germany that was already critically scrutinized in the 1960s under the term folklorism (Bausinger 1966; Köstlin 1991). The issue here was the observation that, with growing tourism, culture was being decontextualized for entertainment purposes and based on economic considerations as a kind of second-hand culture as Hans Moser put it at the time (1962: 180). The German folklorism debate of the 1960a already recognized and named the problems inherent to a folklorism diagnosis. For example, critics conceived of cultures as more or less closed; when pointing to supposed decontextualization, they talked of the authenticity of cultural practices, forms of expression or artefacts, and finally – and consequently – of illegitimate and falsifying performance practices. The term folklorism can be termed a scientific slogan-concept. Significantly, the term also contains notions of cultural property. While folklorism was initially an academic concept that was subsequently problematized and no longer figured in cultural theory, the idea it denotes continues to be found in social reality, and still shapes the normative assessment of so-called folk culture today.

When the concept of cultural appropriation was coined in cultural anthropology in the 1970s and 1980s, the critical focus was on relations of inequality and power (Ashley/Plesch 2002). Richard A. Rogers also argues in this direction in his 2006 article "From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation." In it, Rogers states that the term cultural appropriation had so far (i.e. until 2006) hardly been defined and remained undertheorized. He proposes that the processes associated with cultural appropriation should rather be understood as "transculturation." To this end, he first defines four different types of cultural appropriation: 1) "cultural exchange," 2) "cultural dominance," 3) "cultural exploitation," and finally 4) "transculturation."¹⁵ Rogers then problematizes the concept of culture by pointing out the dynamics and complex mechanisms of cultural transmission, production and reproduction. Not least for this reason, he favors the concept of "transculturation." In his view, it better reflects forms of appropriation in late capitalism, neo-colonialism and postmodernism:

15 In empirical research, such ideal-type categorizations are unlikely to be as clear-cut. When, in which contexts and by whom is something seen as cultural exchange or as cultural dominance?

“Transculturation involves cultural elements created through appropriations from and by multiple cultures such that identification of a single originating culture is problematic. Transculturation involves ongoing, circular appropriations of elements between multiple cultures, including elements that are themselves transcultural” (Rogers 2006: 491). Nevertheless, he concludes that cultural appropriation is unavoidable: “Cultural appropriation is inescapable, but that is not to say all acts of appropriation are equal” (Rogers 2006: 499).

Ethnologist Susanne Schröter argues in a similar tradition of thought, as quoted in an article in the German weekly newspaper *DIE ZEIT*: Cultural appropriation is “fundamentally something rather positive.” “People have always adopted things from others if they considered them meaningful. To put it in a nutshell, the entire history of mankind is a history of cultural appropriation without which there would have been no development” (N.A. 2022b).¹⁶ From a cultural anthropological perspective, this assessment is highly problematic, not least in its ahistoricity.¹⁷ Cultural appropriation is a comparatively young and initially academic concept that served in the context of cultural anthropology to reveal powerful processes of adoption, cultural change or transfer (a concept that should also be problematized from a cultural anthropological perspective). Of course, the social constructivist concept of culture in cultural anthropology is characterized by the fact that it conceptualizes culture as

16 Hans Peter Hahn argues quite differently but also from an ethnological perspective. For him, appropriation is a concept that, as he writes, describes the struggle for the definition of culture and tradition in various arenas. This struggle, he continues, is based on often questionable claims to ownership and strategies of exclusion whose legitimacy is doubtful (2011: 19).

17 This also applies to Jens Balzer’s proposal to differentiate appropriation in an ethical sense into good and bad appropriation, as if this distinction could be made objectively without taking into account the cultural, political, scientific or even lifeworld frameworks. Balzer argues as follows: A good appropriation is one that is inventive and expands the play of cultural possibilities and also one that shows us that identity does not grow, as he puts it, from a single root but from a network of roots, a rhizome. Identity, he continues, is always hybrid, made, and incessantly in the process of becoming and changing. A practice of appropriation that makes this hybridity and the ambivalent constitution of any cultural identity visible is a good appropriation in the ethical sense. Bad appropriation, on the other hand, is any appropriation that accepts and reinforces seemingly predetermined identities, that aesthetically exploits existing power relations and thus cements them politically. Bad appropriation exploits the aesthetic products of marginalized people from the position of a hegemonic majority and at the same time enshrines these people in their status of marginalization (Balzer 2022: 53–54). The cultural anthropological problem of this universalistic separation of supposedly good or bad appropriation lies, among other things, in the negation of a cultural and historical embedding, which of course also underlies appropriation. If one were to follow Balzer’s assessment, Simon and Garfunkel’s creative takeover in *El Condor Pasa* would be a good appropriation. The comments on the assumed bad appropriation are inconsistent insofar as the accusation of cultural appropriation is based precisely on the assumption of predetermined identities (or cultures or ethnicities). Balzer ignores this paradoxical connection.

a dynamic process; creative takeovers are characteristic of culture in the course of history (Jackson 2021). In social discourse, however, cultural appropriation, as is the case with many cultural anthropological terms, is used differently than in the academic debate.¹⁸ We are dealing here with a translation problem between scholarship and society which is difficult to catch up with because the pair of terms is ideologically instrumentalized in societal discourse, and cultural anthropological voices have a hard time making themselves heard.

In the discourse on cultural appropriation, culture becomes a commodity, a political resource and therefore also ideologically malleable. The concept of culture is used here, as Nassehi puts it, to assert interests, to place asymmetrically cultural claims and, above all, to differentiate (2023: 241). The debates about cultural appropriation are embedded in global transformation processes. They emerge in the context of a globally discernible readjustment and instrumentalization of the concept of culture. They owe their argument to the idea of cultural diversity but then combine this – among other things with forms of a strategic essentialism – with the attempt to fixate it in legal, identity-political or moral terms.

Appropriation – cultural appropriation

The aim of this article was to deconstruct the concept of cultural appropriation from a cultural anthropological perspective. The accusation of cultural appropriation is easy to abuse in populist terms, and has a mobilizing effect as a slogan-concept on both the left and the right of the political spectrum. Yet it is based on a concept of culture that cultural anthropological disciplines have long since left behind: a concept of culture that naturalizes difference, taking difference to be a quasi-objective parameter. The concept of cultural appropriation must itself to be interpreted as the (identity) political appropriation of a cultural anthropological concept of appropriation. This, in turn, has been conceptualized accordingly in cultural and social fields of research. Judith Blume, Caroline Merkel, and Linda Waack have elaborated the strands of the concept of appropriation in the history of science and pointed out the processual character of appropriation and its political dimensions. According to them, the concept of appropriation almost always sets a political accent (Blume et al. 2013: 159), be this a Marxist concept of appropriation, or in Judith Butler's reflections on appropriation as a subversive practice, or in the context of postcolo-

18 Regina Römhild has pointed to the same problem in her work on ethnicity. In her words, in social and cultural practice, ethnological research encounters the persistent power of ethnicization, i.e. the classification and codification of people and their actions according to categories of a collective 'origin' and thus a concept of culture that is effective in the everyday life of society, which it itself has helped to produce but also believes to have long left behind: culture as a statically conceived unity with a space and a group (Römhild 2007: 158).

nial studies. Appropriation emphasizes the processual nature of cultural production, reproduction, transmission, and transformation (Ashley/Plesch 2002). Anyone researching culture inevitably has to confront the complex forms and processes of appropriation (Bausinger 1981), but also the conflict-laden, power-permeated processes of negotiation.

In social discourse, the concept of cultural appropriation owes its rapid rise to the genesis of a pattern of thought and argumentation that essentializes cultural difference. It thus joins a long tradition and draws its argument from developments in which segments of culture are valorized or legalized – as in the case of the corresponding UNESCO convention on the protection of intangible heritage or the preservation of cultural diversity. The accusation of cultural appropriation has attracted a high level of attention and commentary in the media; this proves that the arguments put forward here have long become socially plausible. Even if the high point of the discourse is perhaps already behind us and the level of scandalization has decreased, what remains is the thought pattern that distinguishes between supposedly legitimate and illegitimate uses of culture, that ideologizes culture as a container and as a category of difference. From this perspective, the accusation of cultural appropriation in a normative understanding of culture is part of the problem it wants to solve.

However, it must also be noted that it is only at first glance that the question of where a dirndl may be worn appears less politically explosive than issues of cultural extractivism in post- or neo-colonial contexts destroying tangible livelihoods.¹⁹ In both cases – even if the contexts are different – the mobilizing potential of a concept of culture based on the fiction of cultural purity can be discerned; a concept which uses origin and descent as a justification for who is allowed to have which forms of cultural expression at their disposal. Yet just like the stereotyping and racism pointed to by accusation of cultural appropriation, this is a serious societal problem; it is not solved by a re-essentializing concept of culture but tends to be exacerbated by it.²⁰

19 In any case, it would be worth reflecting more closely on how the academic spaces of discourse differ – for instance in the US or in other post-colonial contexts in which cultural appropriation is discussed differently than in Germany (Ziff/Rao 1997).

20 Of course, cultural and social research also has the task of revealing the inequality and power relations and certainly also the logics of exploitation to which the debates on cultural appropriation refer. It is essential that we use good cultural anthropological arguments to position ourselves against the culturalizing and essentializing effects that come to light in the social debate on cultural appropriation as well as against all forms of racism, culturally based stereotyping and stigmatization.

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