

The CEA Forum

Winter 2003
Volume 33.1

Book Review

Review of *Racism and Cultural Studies: Critiques of Multiculturalist Ideology and the Politics of Difference*,

by E. San Juan, Jr.

Durham: Duke University Press, 2002. xii, 428 pp.

Reviewed by Joel Wendland, Dept of Ethnic Studies, Bowling Green State University



Have academically fashionable cultural studies methodologies replaced mass social movements as political activity? This question is raised in E. San Juan, Jr.'s recent study, *Racism and Cultural Studies*. Contemporary postmodern and postcolonial intellectual movements, because they valorize individualized discourses and relativist pluralism, have indeed “displaced the centrality of mass social movements” in the project of group liberation, in San Juan’s judgment.

Overview and Themes:

Racism and Cultural Studies, a study of academic and political developments in the period roughly from the 1992 multiethnic uprising in Los Angeles following the Rodney King verdict to the “Battle of Seattle” in 1999, is a wide-ranging and thorough-going critique of multiculturalism and identity politics. San Juan astutely and rigorously identifies these academic movements as some of the tools used in the university that “has become a conduit if not apparatus for transnational business schemes.” Neo-conservative elitists and neo-liberal bureaucrats strive to transform ethnic studies, using these ideological and institutional practices, from the highly politicized and contestatory field it was at its origins in the 1960s into a device for “a peaceful management of differences” in the current

period. Far too many academics have become complicit in this process, San Juan argues.

To counter this reactionary project, San Juan urges that ethnic and cultural studies practitioners, following the groundwork of leading scholars such as Evelyn Hu-Dehart, Manning Marable, and Angela Davis among others, develop methodologies that will question the legitimacy of the status quo: private property relations, corporate dominance of public institutions, racial essentialism, cultural pluralism that enforces reification of “race,” and the intensification of commodification (or the mystification of social processes) in late global capitalism.

In making this argument, San Juan urges the reassessment of familiar tools used by teachers and scholars in the field. His book provides excellent and accessible historical backgrounds, definitions, and analysis of key concepts such as nationalism, ethnicity, “race,” multiculturalism, hegemony, the linkage of sexuality to racial difference, and postcolonial theory, among others. Additionally, studies of the work of such controversial writers as Frank Chin, familiar theorists and social activists such as Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, and Antonio Gramsci, and national liberationist writers such as Amilcar Cabral and Frantz Fanon lend a sense of urgency and vitality to a counter-hegemonic movement in the field.

Conclusion:

In fact, it is this latter characteristic of the book that is its greatest strength. This drawing together and reassessment of the methodologies of ethnic studies makes this book an excellent candidate for use in upper-division undergraduate and graduate courses. (Historians, literary critics, and cultural studies scholars from a number of fields and disciplines will also find this book useful.) Readers will encounter a refreshing accessibility and clarity difficult to find in the field.

[top](#)

Print or download [pdf file](#) (use the *Acrobat Reader* menus or toolbar to print the file, not the menus or toolbar in your web browser).

 [Back to contents page for Winter 2003 Forum](#)