

Ben Pitcher

### **Consuming Race**

Routledge, New York, 2014, (ISBN 978-0-4155-1969-4), 176 pp.

What does it mean when somebody wears a Bob Marley t-shirt? In his book *Consuming Race*, Ben Pitcher shows that wearing a shirt with a depiction of the reggae musician/counterculture hero can mean many things, but most of those things have to do with race, in one way or the other. This is exactly the process that Pitcher deals with in his book: how racial meanings are produced and reproduced through everyday consumption. According to his eloquent argument, race is to be treated as a cultural resource that shapes contemporary culture, rather than being merely a battleground for discrimination and inequality. This vision on the subject is comparable to West & Zimmerman's (1987) argument: rather than a pre-existing fact of life, social categories such as gender as race are shaped and reshaped by 'doing' them (see also Brubaker et al., 2004). Race, we are warned by Pitcher, needn't necessarily come down to racism. It is an inevitable way of dealing with the world around us, instead of a thing that needs to be overcome. Thus, the "*acknowledgement that we are necessarily involved in race, but that this doesn't necessarily make us racists*" (p. 145) is what truly revitalizes the story about racial consumption.

In his introduction, Pitcher grabs the attention with his variations on a Bob Marley t-shirt (which reminded me of Geertz's "[W]inks upon winks upon winks." (1973, p. 9)), and his first chapter deals with the theoretical foundations of racial consumption. In the six following chapters, example cases are presented in which race is shaped – most of the times unknowingly – by consumers following interior design trends, carefully protecting their garden from unwanted outsiders, or buying post-authentic street food. Not even children's television shows and 'progressive' shows like *The Wire* are safe from Pitcher's critical eyes. In a strangely intriguing passage, even *The Teletubbies* are treated: is it a coincidence that *Dipsy*, the 'black' teletubby, played by an actor of Cuban-Jamaican heritage, is characterized as "'groovy' and 'super cool on the dancefloor'" (p. 106)?, Pitcher wonders. Of course not, he answers: as the fact is that race exists in culture, it is therefore impossible to work *around* it, instead of *with* it. Pitcher calls for an academic acknowledgement of the fact that race exists culturally, whether

we, as progressive intellectuals, want it or not. An anti-racist stance, denying the existence of race in contemporary culture is a blind conviction, or an attempt “to pretend something that deep down we all know is not the case. Race doesn’t disappear.”, Pitcher writes on the first page of the book. Through all the chapters, the author tries to discern racism and race from one another, and it would be faulty to criticize the author as ignorant: Pitcher just wants us to know that there’s more to race than we normally think.

Race is a “messy, mixed-up issue” (p. 24). The terminology is sometimes vague, historically path dependent and some of its use can be deliberately avoided in the name of being correct (see Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Pitcher parries this haziness by writing as clearly and nuanced as possible, but during this process, his nuance makes way for arbitrariness: how can we be sure that Pitcher’s interpretations of the cases are the ‘right’ ones? The author would probably argue, once again in a Geertzian way, that his interpretations aren’t the only *right* ones, but that for a large number of everyday activities, a racial (not a racist!) lens might elucidate what exactly is going on in the act of consumption. Altogether, these chapters underscore the main argument of the book: race is everywhere, and we can’t deny or circumvent it by pretending we’re not seeing it. It is in the theoretical idea that race needs to be seen as a larger framework of understanding the world (and living in it) that Pitcher opens the way for further research.

Altogether, we can (and should) use Pitcher’s ideas to build a better understanding of race in consumption. Even though Pitcher himself hasn’t necessarily solved the puzzle (which he doesn’t claim), he has opened the doors to a more structural way of understanding how racial meanings permeate our daily lives. Not only are the chapters interesting for sociologists invested in racial matters (which they most certainly are!), but also for a larger community of sociologists the book is a valuable addition to their bookshelf, as Pitcher shows how even the most ‘trivial’ acts of everyday life can be scrutinized by larger sociological frameworks. Race still seems to matter, so a broadening of its scope is more than welcome in thinking about contemporary society. If you want to read an innovative and thought-provoking outlook into racial consumption, you can (and should) get your hands onto a copy of

*Consuming Race*, although the author urges you to buy the book through independent bookshops instead of Amazon (as he writes on his website: ([www.benpitcher.com/consuming-race](http://www.benpitcher.com/consuming-race))).

## **References**

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo (2006) *Racism without Racists*, Lenham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers

Brubaker, Rogers, Loveman, Mara and Stamatov, Peter (2004) 'Ethnicity as cognition', *Theory and Society*, Vol. 33, pp. 31-64

Geertz, Clifford (1973) 'Thick description: Toward an interpretative theory of culture' in *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected essays*, New York: Basic Books.

West, Candace and Zimmerman, Don H. (1987) 'Doing Gender', *Gender & Society*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 125-151

**Reviewed by:** Thomas Teekens, *Erasmus University Rotterdam, NL*

**Word count:** 895