

Empowering an Alternative to Far-Left Ethnic Studies

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Key Points

- In California and other states, neo-Marxist ideologues are using “ethnic studies” as a Trojan horse to indoctrinate students in a divisive ideology.
- State and district policymakers must not permit this enterprise to take root. But merely saying no is not enough; the best defense is a good offense.
- The Coalition for Empowered Education is developing an alternative to far-left ethnic studies that emphasizes respect and pluralism, which ought to be embraced and facilitated by scholars and policymakers alike.

For more than half a century, ideologues in higher education fused various strands of neo-Marxism and racialist revanchism into a field they called “ethnic studies.” Then, after the death of George Floyd, they saw and took the opportunity to export their doctrine into K–12 schools. In 2021, California adopted legislation mandating the teaching of ethnic studies in every public school in the state.¹

From the get-go, ethnic studies was not what its name suggests: the study of diverse ethnic groups. It has been and is based on, according to the Ethnic Studies Department at the University of California, Berkeley, a theory of power and oppression, in which “race and racism have been, and continue to be, powerful social, cultural, and political forces and their connections to other axes of stratification, including gender, class, sexuality, and legal status.”² In other words, the ethnic studies field promotes a specific set of opinions rooted in both Marxist and postmodern thought about how the world works.

One of the primary forces pushing mandatory ethnic studies in California was Unión del Barrio, which

“promote[s] and defend[s] the human rights and class interests” of Latin American and Chicano citizens living in the US. The organization seeks the liberation of “la Raza”—indigenous and Latino inhabitants of the Americas—from the “international capitalist elite that is currently led by the United States.”³ Another force was the Association of Raza Educators, which brings together public school educators, university professors, and students committed to the “democratization of public education.” The two organizations embrace a radical neo-Marxist ideology that rejects America’s political and educational systems, which it states are

designed to exploit our labor, keep a disproportionate number of our people in prisons, stereotype us through the media, falsify our history, deny us a relevant/productive education, and militarize the border in order to keep out the very same people from which Aztlán/México Ocupado was stolen.⁴

This ideology is not merely about inculcating an understanding and respect for ethnic minorities.

Today, this movement is represented by the Coalition for Liberated Ethnic Studies (CLES), which includes a powerful hodgepodge of political activists, consultancies, professors, and academic departments.⁵ In the immediate aftermath of October 7, CLES published a series of posts on social media praising the Hamas “resistance” and calling for the liberation of Palestine.⁶ One affiliated group, the Educational eXcellence and Inclusion Training Opportunities program at the University of California, Santa Barbara, received a \$3 million grant from the US Department of Education to build curricula for California schools.⁷

With a nearly 50-year head start, and armed with a state mandate and federal funds, the radical activists can now leverage their entire body of literature and network of college professors and academic departments to instill their pet theories into public schools and the impressionable minds of young people. Their success in establishing their ideology in public schools has forced concerned parents and educators who oppose indoctrination to play catch-up. Indeed, those who value critical thinking, oppose extremist ideology and antisemitism, and support Western values now need to counter extreme curricula district by district, head off other states from adopting similar mandates, and produce alternative pedagogy that meets California’s requirements without indoctrinating children. They have a lot of ground to make up in a short period.

The first draft of the “model curriculum” in early 2021 was truly outrageous.⁸ It put the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement on a “civil rights” pedestal. It listed 154 influential people of color but made no mention of moderates such as Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, or Thurgood Marshall. It deemed capitalism a form of “power and oppression.” In listing various forms of bigotry, such as “classism, homophobia, Islamophobia, and transphobia,” the draft left out antisemitism.

Jewish organizations sprang into action. They managed to remove many of the most egregious claims in the curriculum and succeeded in getting legislators to erect guardrails that advised local school districts not to adopt radical, hate-filled versions of the curriculum.⁹ The California Board of Education unanimously adopted a revised model curriculum in March 2021.

After all the modifications, however, the curriculum’s ideological core remains intact. The “foundational

values” of the state-backed Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum are to “critique empire building in history and its relationship to white supremacy, racism, and other forms of power and oppression”; “connect ourselves to past and contemporary social movements that struggle for social justice”; and “build new possibilities for a post-racist, post-systemic-racism society that promotes collective narratives of transformative resistance, critical hope, and radical healing.”¹⁰ No matter how much some in the mainstream Jewish community want to declare victory, the amended model curriculum still explicitly upholds the original dogma and insists that every California public school do the same.¹¹

So here we are, three years later and one year before schools are required to have their ethnic studies classes in place, and California is a free-for-all. Some school districts are working with the most radical actors, sometimes out of public sight, to adopt the most extreme forms of ethnic studies that portray the US and Israel, among others, as illegitimate “settler-colonialist” states.¹² They’re all in on the decolonization narrative.¹³ Some are embracing the less extreme form of the same pedagogy, avoiding the most explicit “liberatory” rhetoric but nevertheless indoctrinating their kids in the larger oppressed-oppressor framework, leaving it to teachers to invoke their favored “collective narrative of transformative resistance” and social justice cause.¹⁴ And some school systems are genuinely open to alternative and more constructive approaches that don’t tell their students precisely what to think about the world.

Gov. Gavin Newsom has on several occasions exhorted schools not to adopt the most radical versions, but the version his administration ultimately endorsed conditions students to think in this oppressed-oppressor binary and, left unopposed, will inexorably drive many students to the more extreme worldview.¹⁵ It should shock no one when students in California schools storm the hallways chanting “from the river to the sea” or teachers take it upon themselves to “teach Palestine” and encourage student walkouts.¹⁶ The state created the permission structure.

Fearful of further spread, new initiatives such as the Coalition for Empowered Education¹⁷ have come online to develop an alternative curriculum and teacher training.¹⁸ The coalition comprises Jewish, Asian, black, and Latino members who don’t want

neo-Marxist ideology inculcated in their kids, oppose the abolition of gifted and talented programs and of the very concept of “merit,” abhor the neo-segregationist racial affinity groups their children have been placed in, support critical thinking, and deplore antisemitism and other extremist rhetoric.¹⁹

The “empowered” curriculum and teacher training that the coalition is developing stands in stark contrast to the “liberated” framework. Whereas the liberated framework teaches that America is irretrievably rooted in white supremacy and that systemic racism is baked into American society and is the cause of all disparity, the empowered curriculum teaches that America is rooted in the aspirational goals of fairness and equality for all and that racism is not the cause of every disparity. Whereas the liberated framework teaches theories and practices informed by anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, and anti-racism, the empowered framework emphasizes liberal democratic values, inquiry-based learning, and pluralism. Whereas liberated ethnic studies preaches “critical consciousness,” the empowered model teaches critical thinking.

One group’s work will not be enough to bring an effective alternative to the educational marketplace, much less counter the well-connected groups promoting liberated ethnic studies in other states. Moderate state policymakers on the center right and the center left, in the legislature and the state superintendent’s office, have too long shied away from substantive curricular concerns. The radical actors took more than 50 years to “march through the institutions”²⁰ and build the leverage to impose a radical minority position on entire states. Moderate actors must get their acts together and collaborate with sympathetic university professors and state and district leaders to promote an empowered alternative to ethnic studies before the liberated version swamps the field. We don’t have 50 years. We have, maybe, five.

The Coalition for Empowered Education must work fast to fully develop its curriculum, bring it to schools willing to consider alternative models, provide training for teachers at scale, and counter radical curriculum and teacher training. It needs all the help it can get.

About the Author

David Bernstein is the founder and CEO of the Jewish Institute for Liberal Values and author of *Woke Antisemitism: How a Progressive Ideology Harms Jews* (2022).

Notes

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