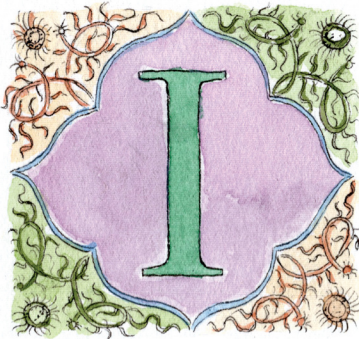


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Beating, Not Joining, Ethnic Studies



IN 2019, the California State Board of Education released a draft of an ethnic-studies model curriculum. Reaction was swift and furious. More than 100,000 Californians submitted public-comment letters, many expressing disgust. Even the reliably liberal *Los Angeles Times* editorial board called it “an impenetrable melange of academic jargon and politically correct pronouncements,” adding that it was “hard to wade through all the references to hxrstory and womxn and misogynoir and cisheteropatriarchy.” A coalition of civic organizations representing a variety of ethnic groups released a joint statement denouncing the draft curriculum for being “replete with mischaracterizations and omissions.”

California’s Jewish population, more than a million strong, felt especially singled out. The draft curriculum endorsed the Boycott,

Divestment, and Sanctions movement. It cited the words of a Palestinian rapper accusing Israelis of “[using] the press so they can manufacture.” The scant reference to antisemitism was especially stark given that the synagogue shooting in Poway, Calif., occurred during the preparation of the curriculum. The Jewish caucus in the state legislature took note, writing in a letter to the Department of Education that “the draft curriculum denigrates Jews” and goes out of its way to attack the Jewish state. “In stark contrast to brief and dispassionate references to other global conflicts,” reads the letter, the model curriculum “singles out Israel... for special critique and condemnation that is both out of context and factually inaccurate.”

Within a month, Governor Gavin Newsom vowed that the draft curriculum would “never see the light of day.” Two years later, with the participation of a coalition of Jewish groups, a new curriculum was released that crossed out the overt antisemitism and included new Jewish-focused lesson plans, fulfilling the bill’s stated objective of “preparing pupils to be global citizens with an appreciation for the contributions of multiple cultures.” By the end of this decade, a semester-long course in ethnic studies will be a high-school graduation requirement for every student in California public schools.

Whether that represents a triumph for California’s students — or for Jews — is another question.



To understand how an ostensible attempt to sensitize California’s students to their state’s ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity rapidly devolved into a forthright exercise in antisemitism, among other things, it helps to know something about what ethnic studies is and where it comes from. The first ethnic studies department in the United States was established in 1968 at what is now San Fran-

cisco State University, as a result of a student strike led by a group called the Third World Liberation Front. As that name suggests, ethnic studies was never about disinterested scholarship. A mission statement by the Critical Ethnic Studies Association (CESA) makes clear the ideological commitments of most university ethnic studies departments:

Ethnic studies scholarship has laid the foundation for analyzing how racism, settler colonialism, immigration, imperialism, and slavery interact in the creation and maintenance of systems of domination, dispossession, criminalization, expropriation, exploitation, and violence that are predicated upon hierarchies of racialized, gendered, sexualized, economized, and nationalized social existence in the United States and beyond.

Not surprisingly, then, the main purpose of ethnic studies isn't to celebrate America's multicultural society. It's to denounce every form of American perfidy, real or not, not the least of which is U.S. support for the Jewish state. A 2021 paper by the AMCHA Initiative notes that "one-third of all U.S. faculty who support an academic boycott of Israel have a primary or secondary affiliation in a university Ethnic Studies program." CESA's inaugural conference in 2011 included discussions on "Turtle Island and Palestine: Forging Alliances Against Settler Colonialism" and "Suppression of Palestine Solidarity by the Academic Industrial Complex and the Nation State." (Turtle Island is a Native-American name for North America.)

These were the attitudes that also informed the original model curriculum. Students were asked to "challenge racist, bigoted, discriminatory, imperialist/colonialist beliefs," to "critique empire-building in history," and to "connect ourselves to past and contemporary movements that struggle for social justice." The language remains

even in the current 696-page model curriculum that was ultimately adopted by the state. It also lives on in what is now called the Liberated Curriculum, which splintered out of the remains of the initial draft curriculum disavowed by Governor Newsom. Last year, the Hayward Unified School District, an East Bay body that operates 30 schools serving over 20,000 students, signed a contract with the Liberated Ethnic Model Curriculum Consortium to implement its version of ethnic studies. Among its other educational offerings, the Consortium offered a “toolkit” for “Preparing to Teach Palestine,” which warned that opponents of their curriculum “want to prevent teachers and students from making connections between the U.S. and Israel as white settler states, or apartheid-era South Africa and the current apartheid in Israel.”

But what about the new, quasi-official curriculum?

Some argue that the revised curriculum is a triumph for the Jewish community. Not only are the antisemitic dog whistles and anti-Israel slurs gone, there are now two separate and extensive sample lessons on Jewish issues: one on “Antisemitism and Jewish Middle Eastern Americans,” the other titled “Jewish Americans: Identity, Intersectionality, and Complicating Ideas of Race.” Eleven Jewish figures, including Norman Lear, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Julius Lester, and Rabbi Eric Yoffie offer testimonials about the meaning of their Jewishness. A fact sheet on Jewish Americans emphasizes the many forms of discrimination Jews have experienced in the United States, from university quotas to employment discrimination to murderous antisemitic attacks in Poway and Pittsburgh. It quotes two definitions of antisemitism, the first from the Anti-Defamation League, the second from the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. There is an emphasis on the cultural, ethnic and racial diversity within the broad Jewish family, as well as the persecutions they have endured. Significantly, the sample lesson notes

that “the Jewish people originated about 3,000 years ago in Southwest Asia, in the land of Israel.”

As many Jewish groups and leaders argued at the time, the revised curriculum gave Jews a seat at the table, which was surely better than being *on* the table, as they were the first time around. But should Jews really want to be at this table at all?

For all the changes made to the new curriculum, it remains rooted in the foundational ideological themes of ethnic studies. To adapt a line from *Animal Farm*, while all minorities may be equal in the curriculum, some are more equal than others. In its preface, the curriculum stresses that its focus will be on “African American, Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x, Native American, and Asian American and Pacific Islander studies.” Other minorities, including Jews, remain strictly secondary, and some prominent American ethnic groups rate almost no discussion at all (the word “Italian” gets five mentions; the word “Irish,” one). This is largely in keeping with ethnic studies’ “intersectional” approach (the word is mentioned 59 times) to the study of identity, which in theory is a way of taking note of multiple overlapping identities but in practice amounts to little more than a points system that reduces genuine diversity to a continuum that runs from “oppression” to “privilege.”

These frames of reference pervade the curriculum’s discussions of Jewish identity. “Assimilation allowed the children of Jewish immigrants to change their position on the racial hierarchy....” “Light-skinned Jews may experience the benefits of conditional whiteness on the basis of their appearance....” “Jews of color, like all communities of color, face systemic racism....”

This kind of language is an attempt to make the Jewish-American experience fit within the rigid boxes created by the ethnic studies worldview — one that views the United States as a cisheteropatriarchy, brought forth upon a settler-colonized continent, conceived in slavery,

and dedicated to the proposition that power should remain in the hands of exploitative white capitalists.

Is this actually how Jews think of America, or of our personal or family histories in it? Surely not.

Yes, many Jewish families have stories that involve an encounter with antisemitism: a country club where Jews knew not to apply; a white-shoe law firm with an unstated policy of not hiring Jews; a grandfather who had the grades to go to Harvard but wound up at City College instead, a victim of admissions quotas; a nasty remark about being “Jewed down” in a business transaction.

But, for the most part, Jews have overwhelmingly seen the United States as the *goldene medina*, a place where such bigotries as we encountered were trivial next to the bigotries we had escaped — and trivial, too, compared with the opportunities available to us. Jews experienced religious and cultural freedom in the United States as we never had elsewhere in our long history of exile. Our achievements in dozens of fields — academia, business, finance, law, literature, medicine, music, science, and technology, to name only the obvious ones — tended to be admired, not envied. When doors to certain institutions remained closed to us, we were free to build competing institutions, from which we opened the doors to all. Whenever we wished to assimilate, we could; when we wished to preserve our differences, we could do that, too. And what was true for Jews from European backgrounds quickly proved to be true for Jews from Middle Eastern backgrounds, too, as anyone who has spent time in Beverly Hills can attest.

In other words, the Jewish-American story isn’t part of the ethnic studies worldview at all. It’s a *refutation* of it. Where California’s ethnic studies curriculum sees “interlocking systems of oppression and privilege,” the Jewish experience in America has largely been one of interlocking systems of opportunity and advancement — from, say,

Lowell High School to Harvard Law to the Supreme Court (Stephen Breyer) or Stuyvesant High School to Brandeis University to the presidency of the University of Chicago (Robert Zimmer). Much the same can be said for so many other minority groups — whether they are from Albania, Nigeria, or Vietnam — whose broad experience of America has been one of possibility and prosperity, even if sometimes in the face of xenophobia and racism.



Here, then, lie the deeper problems for Jews with even the new-and-improved ethnic studies curriculum.

First, it's a false narrative — false about the Jewish experience in America and about America itself. Jews should be wary of being included in any narrative that asks us to misconstrue our own history while defaming a country that has, for all its faults, been very good to us — as it has to so many other minorities.

Second, while the new ethnic studies curriculum gives Jews a seat at its table, it's a table for perpetual victims. Shouldn't minority groups who are unembarrassed by their success and who choose *not* to see themselves as victims have their stories told in schools? It is particularly galling to be taught that Jewish success was purchased, in part, through a “conditional whiteness” that suggests complicity with a system of white supremacy.

Third, ethnic studies isn't about *studying* anything. It's about ideological indoctrination of students and teachers alike, relentlessly one-sided in its outlook, simplistic in its understanding of history, and overtly partisan. This would be bad in any educational context, but it is particularly worrying for Jews. The complexities and contradictions of Jewish history make it incompatible with facile dogma — as is true of any ethnic group with a complex his-

tory. Ethnic studies flattens these experiences, rather than bringing out their depths. The problem will only become worse as ethnic studies expands from California to states such as Minnesota and cities including Seattle and Boston.

We can do better. All it takes is a look back at our own tradition.

As people of the Book, Jewish parents, educators, and policymakers outside California should make the effort to *read* the model curriculum. They will discover that it is not a laudable and liberal-minded effort to broaden the American story to include historically marginalized minority groups. It is a tendentious and radical recasting of American history as one long tale of oppression and exclusion, a narrative we have become all too familiar with over the last several decades.

To see just how inimical the curriculum is to pedagogy, Jews can look to their own contribution to the art of teaching. The Talmud offers a model of responsible learning that records all sides of an argument, emphasizing disagreement and the importance of intellectual diversity across its 63 tractates. Jews don't define community by tearful head-nodding and catechisms of dominance and subjugation, but by rigorous, good-faith questioning. In place of the one-to-many dispensation of knowledge from instructor to student, we offer *chevrutot*, partnership study sessions in which students are united by questions prompted by the texts before them. For Jews, intellectual diversity opens up the subjects examined. The ethnic studies model offers an ideological straightjacket that shuts them down.

American Jews also have a moral and civic obligation to ask whether the ethnic studies curriculum advances the ideal of *e pluri-bus unum* or its opposite, *ex uno multi*. Despite its claim to “strive for a future of greater equity and inclusivity,” the curriculum guarantees the latter motto, since it is premised on a sense of profound

grievance and therefore insists on division. As the model curriculum notes in its introduction: “Ethnic studies did not arise in a vacuum. It arose with the intent of giving voice to stories long silenced, including stories of injustice, marginalization, and discrimination, as well as stories of those who became part of our nation in different ways, such as through slavery, conquest, colonization, and immigration.” How about stories of striving and success, of people from impoverished ethnic backgrounds achieving the American Dream, of refugees starting great companies and becoming pillars of the American establishment? That is both a Jewish story and an American story — and one California’s students deserve to know.

Finally, Jews have always been the people who don’t always feel the need to go along. A table you don’t want to be on is not one you ought to be sitting at. Why not build our own? The Jewish story is also an ethnic studies story — one that begins in oppression but does not dwell on it, which has allowed it to culminate in freedom; one that mourns tragedies but celebrates triumphs; one that focuses on the particular but never forgets the universal. Wouldn’t this particular model of ethnic studies serve all young Americans better than the one on offer? *