

## Educate to Liberate! Multiculturalism and the Struggle for Ethnic Studies

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*This essay was written on the thirtieth anniversary of the Third World Strikes at San Francisco State University and the University of California at Berkeley which gave birth to Ethnic Studies. Its purpose was to assess the history of the struggle for Ethnic Studies, including the new round of student actions that broke out in the 1990s. Just after the publication of this essay I had the privilege of joining the renewed third world liberation front that successfully launched a student strike to defend the embattled Ethnic Studies Department at Berkeley.*

Thirty years ago, students of color at San Francisco State University called a strike demanding a Third World College. The authorities deployed up to ten thousand armed men almost every day for more than two months to crush the Third World strike, but the students prevailed--and Ethnic Studies was born. Similar battles erupted at Berkeley, Columbia, Cornell, and other white universities throughout the country.

Despite almost constant attacks by hostile politicians, administrators, and academics over the last three decades, Ethnic Studies has endured. As one of the few spoils of student wars that have been institutionalized, Ethnic Studies today probably occupies a more prominent place in U.S. academic and intellectual life than at any time in history.

But the years of struggle have also taken their toll. Lodged within white universities and bereft of powerful social movements, Ethnic Studies has increasingly submitted to academia's elitist rules, rewards, and punishments.

How has Ethnic Studies survived? What remains of its original mission? What struggles shape Ethnic Studies today?

### **EDUCATE TO LIBERATE!**

I was a wide-eyed seventeen-year-old freshman when I joined the Third World strike at U.C. Berkeley in January of 1969. There were few students of color on campus then, and whites exercised a virtual monopoly on the truth. W.E.B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, and James Baldwin had no place in the university pantheon. The theory that slavery had turned all Blacks into Sambos was wildly popular in the history department.

I was drawn to the activists of color, many fresh from civil rights and anti-Vietnam War battlegrounds. Inspired by groups like the Black Panthers, the American Indian Movement, the Brown Berets and the Young Lords, students of color took the lead in critiquing universities as elitist institutions complicit with the system of white supremacy at home and abroad.

The Ethnic Studies movement had several goals. Activists of color saw Ethnic Studies as part of an attempt to transform the racist educational system from the ground up. Standing for unity

among peoples of color, they demanded an education relevant to struggles for racial justice at home and abroad and for programs that would serve as powerful bases for launching and supporting student and community organizing. They wanted programs that would engage in pioneering, interdisciplinary scholarship for and by people of color. And they fought for autonomy to set their own educational standards, hire and fire faculty, and to admit students. They envisioned that students and community, along with the faculty, would control the programs.

It was this radical agenda that authorities across the country feared, to the point of massive armed intervention.

But by 1971, they had won Black Studies programs at over 500 schools and got nearly 1,300 schools to offer at least one Ethnic Studies course. For many, it was the first time education seemed relevant and empowering. Ethnic Studies saved Charles Jackson, who first discovered it at San Mateo Junior College in the early seventies. "Ethnic Studies made sense out of my life and motivated me to graduate," says Jackson, now a successful optometrist.

However, by 1972, the ongoing resistance of administrators, politicians, and conservative intellectuals were joining together into a powerful counterattack. They castigated Ethnic Studies as balkanized bastions of self-imposed isolation for students of color, shoddy scholarship, and unqualified professors. They succeeded in purging radicals and shutting down infant programs. By the time I started working in Ethnic Studies in 1974, only 200 such programs remained.

## **HERE COMES MULTICULTURALISM!**

Ethnic Studies suffered further attacks in the Reagan years, but the tide began to turn at the end of the 1980s. The demographic growth of peoples of color far outpaced whites. By 1980, the number of Blacks in college reached 1.1 million, up from 75,000 in 1953. Between 1976 and 1993, the number of Asian American college students grew from 198,000 to 724,000. By 1993, one million Latinos attended college.

These students used their increased numbers to revive the Ethnic Studies movement. "The 'diversity movement' built off the momentum of the Rainbow Coalition and the anti-apartheid movements of the mid-1980s," says former student leader Sumi Cho, now a law professor at DePaul University. "Students demanded the establishment of new Ethnic Studies programs and organized to make Ethnic Studies courses a requirement for college graduation."

Ethnic Studies scholars simultaneously seized on these demographic shifts to push for ideological shifts. Multiculturalism of varying political hues came in vogue. Progressive versions recognized the historical contributions of peoples of color to U.S. society and culture and emphasized ongoing racism. White liberals and moderates, including many university administrators, utilized the idea of multiculturalism to obscure racism and to promote tokenism in a new guise. Then there is corporate multiculturalism, which uses elements of ethnic culture and images of people of color as marketing devices and replaces anti-racism with management diversity training.

In the last two decades, students and Ethnic Studies scholars have clearly had a substantial impact. Today, 700 colleges in this country have some kind of Ethnic Studies program. Despite a powerful counterattack by academic conservatives against any kind of multiculturalism or "political correctness," no institution of higher learning today can claim elite academic status unless it has an African American Studies program.

But the autonomy and self-determination that Ethnic Studies originally sought have been elusive at best. To fend off attacks from more conservative forces, Ethnic Studyists must often try to ally with white politicians, administrators, and academics who are committed to some kind of multiculturalism. There are opportunities in this alliance, but significant dangers as well, as the experience of U.C. Berkeley and Harvard show.

## **GO HARVARD?**

Columbia's Manning Marable notes that the Ford Foundation joined with Harvard in an effort spanning more than a decade to shape African American Studies at Harvard, and nationally, in their own liberal multiculturalist image. Ford began to underwrite the Harvard program in the early 1980s. Then it funded a comprehensive survey of Black Studies around the country by Harvard's Nathan Huggins and a follow up in the late 1980s.

Among other things, these surveys were used to guide Ford money to African American programs that were dominated, Marable says, by "inclusionists who always assumed that Blacks had to succeed in the context of white institutions and Euro-American standards." Radical feminists, Afrocentrists, Marxists, and others, he argues, were left to fend for themselves.

By 1991, says Marable, Ford, Harvard, and their allies had won. "This is currently represented most dramatically with the national celebrity extended to literary scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and the African-American Studies program at Harvard," writes Marable in *Race & Reason* (1997-98). Gates has parlayed support from Harvard and Ford into prestige and big money by recruiting renowned faculty like Cornel West, William Julius Wilson, and Lani Guinier, and hatching major projects like Encarta Africana with Microsoft Corporation.

The Microsoft/Harvard venture is symptomatic of the tremendous impact corporate multiculturalism is having on people of color and Ethnic Studies. Marable says: "The corporations began to seize upon elements of African-American and Latino popular culture, stripping them of their most militant and creative elements and repackaging them for a mass consumer market." At its worst, Ethnic Studies is the intellectual reflection of corporate multiculturalism in the university setting.

The Harvard experience shows that support from white liberal multiculturalists can sometimes help promote Ethnic Studies. But it also shows that such support often comes with political and ideological costs.

## **THE LIMITS OF MULTICULTURALISM**

Meanwhile, U.C. Berkeley's avowedly pro-affirmative action and pro-multiculturalist

administration is undermining what has been perhaps the most prestigious United Ethnic Studies program in the country. The administration has refused to allow the program to replace four retiring faculty, and a number of other faculty are set to retire soon.

Moreover, Ethnic Studies offers only half as many courses on race as do other departments. And, with the demise of affirmative action, there are fewer students of color to enroll in Ethnic Studies classes. Since its peak of 400 in the early 1990s, the number of Ethnic Studies majors has dropped by half. Chairperson Ling-chi Wang, one of the founders of Ethnic Studies in 1969, is blunt: "I truly believe without a serious change, Ethnic Studies [at Berkeley] will die within the decade."

To stem this erosion, Wang, backed by African American Studies Department chairperson Percy Hintzen, put forward a controversial proposal to merge Ethnic Studies and African American Studies into American Studies, the equivalent of an academic hostile takeover.

Many Ethnic Studies and African American Studies faculty and students oppose the proposal and want to retain departmental autonomy. But before a debate could fully develop, the university administration simply declared that it would entertain no such merger. Apparently, the administration was not about to voluntarily allow the creation of an expanded Ethnic Studies, even under a new name. Despite its multiculturalist pretensions, the university now presides over the death of affirmative action and the strangulation of Ethnic Studies.

The Berkeley experience reinforces what many other programs have learned: white liberal multiculturalists cannot always be depended upon to support Ethnic Studies.

## **LOSING THE MISSION**

However, not all the shortcomings of Ethnic Studies can be attributed to the influence of white administrators or funders. Many argue that Ethnic Studies has moved away from its radical founding premises. As Dylan Rodriguez, an Ethnic Studies graduate student at U.C. Berkeley, observes: "Student activists have struggled for Ethnic Studies, but institutional survival has taken precedence over its original radical mission."

In the early days, many Ethnic Studies programs initiated and supported innovative community organizing projects like cooperative garment factories, farmworker organizing, and fights for low-income housing. Early Ethnic Studies was also a dynamic organizing base for the movements against the Vietnam War and for Puerto Rican independence.

But today, as Miriam Jiménez Román of El Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños at Hunter College notes: "Very few faculty have an interest or ability to do community studies, and even fewer are involved in community activism. Of course," adds Jiménez, "the social movements are also weak, so it is more difficult for Ethnic Studies to make community connections than in the 1970s."

Ethnic Studies has also generally reproduced society's gender and sexuality hierarchies. Even today, as Lisa Lowe of the University of California at San Diego observes: "Gays and lesbians

are doing some of the most exciting activist work in people of color communities, but that hasn't been reflected in Ethnic Studies programs."

Abdul Alkalimat, the former president of the National Conference of Black Studies, believes the problem has become entrenched: "The main problem in Ethnic Studies is elitism. The vertical model of higher education creates a hierarchical pecking order between programs, scholars, and between teachers and students."

Glenn Omatsu who teaches at all three levels of California's college system--UCLA, California State University, Northridge, and Pasadena City College--says: "Ethnic Studies is losing its original mission of fighting for the transformation of the entire educational system, empowering students, and connecting with community struggles. Ethnic Studies has increasingly narrowed its agenda to surviving at elite private colleges and flagship state universities."

Ethnic Studies has developed an uncertain relationship to student organizing. For many faculty, Ethnic Studies is now a career, not a crusade. Few programs incorporate students in their governing, planning, or teaching processes, even though student struggles were key in the formation of almost all Ethnic Studies programs and student participation was one of its founding principles. University of Minnesota student Anne Martinez observes, "It has been my experience that very few faculty or staff members can or will go out on a limb for much of anything."

Generally, Manning Marable states: "There is a chasm between the most influential scholarship produced by Ethnic Studies and the social movements and ethnic constituencies which gave rise to such programs."

## **STUDENTS CONTINUE TO FIGHT**

Whatever the shortcomings of Ethnic Studies, the most politically active college students of color still pin their hopes on Ethnic Studies as a focal point of radical educational change.

In recent years, students of color have led mass protests, sit-ins, and hunger strikes at universities in Washington, Maryland, Princeton, Indiana, Northwestern and elsewhere. Some actions have been defensive: protesting unfilled faculty positions, budget cuts, tuition hikes, the end of affirmative action, attempts to end remedial education, and the firing of popular teachers. Other battles have been offensive: fighting for the establishment of new Ethnic Studies programs, for recruitment and retention of students and faculty of color, for gay-lesbian-bisexual support centers.

In 1995, during a month of heated protest, nine students and a professor at UCLA launched a dramatic, life-threatening 14-day hunger strike, galvanizing widespread attention to the underfunding of Chicano Studies. They succeeded in forcing the administration to establish the Cesar Chavez Chicano Studies Center.

In 1996, Columbia students organized the largest protests on that campus since the Vietnam War. They occupied a building and staged a 14-day hunger strike in 1996, demanding that Latino and

Asian American Studies be created to complement the existing African American Studies center. Senior Antonio Garcia said: "Students had no choice but to take their education in their own hands. We have been miseducated and lied to from the very first time we stepped into a classroom." A few faculty were hired, but the struggle there continues.

And student protests at Rutgers in 1995 culminated in the takeover of the basketball court at halftime of a televised game. The demands of the United Student Coalition were reminiscent of the 1960s: resignation of the president, rollback of tuition from \$4,500 to \$1,350 per semester; elimination of SAT scores from admission requirements; restructuring the Board of Governors to a democratically elected board that reflects the student population; and inclusion of minority and women's studies programs as part of the university's core curriculum.

Dylan Rodriguez, who helped organize the thirty-year Ethnic Studies commemoration at Berkeley, is part of the new generation of radicals. "Ethnic Studies is what I do. It can be the best thing at the university," he says. "But it is sometimes incredibly frustrating to try to do 'radical' intellectual work, teaching, or organizing in Ethnic Studies, because it is so tied into the rules of the corporate university. The future of Ethnic Studies will depend on the willingness of community members, students, and teachers to work together to create new forms of resistance to university elitism, and new ways to democratize knowledge."