



How Jewish Organizations Should Respond to the Spread of “Liberated” Ethnic Studies

By David L. Bernstein

I. Upholding American Pluralism and Democratic Values

Mainstream American Jewish organizations have long been at the forefront of advocating for a more pluralistic, just, compassionate, free and civil America. Unfortunately, over the past three decades, centrifugal forces set into motion by a range of factors—from social media to gerrymandered congressional districts to growing economic insecurity—have given rise to a fierce culture war, characterized by two distinct forms of illiberalism. On one side are right wingers intent on using state power to ban ideas they don’t like and to “restore” conservative cultural values. On the other are left wingers intent on portraying America as a fundamentally oppressive society and, by maximizing their leverage in institutions, reshuffling the deck and shifting the narrative. This has been made even more challenging by a much needed racial reckoning that has too often stifled alternative voices and approaches.

Both sides of the culture wars violate liberal, democratic principles. Left to their own devices, they weaken, not strengthen American democracy. Both fuel antisemitic conspiracy theories that endanger Jewish life and wellbeing. What’s worse, these two forms of illiberalism feed off each other in a vicious cycle that further polarizes our politics. Mainstream Jewish organizations should double down on an American pluralism narrative that resists both forms of illiberalism and upholds democratic values and respect for diversity.

In this brief, I argue that **American Jewish organizations should not, in an effort to maintain progressive partners and “get the best deal we can,” accept radical ideological pedagogies that portray America as a pervasively oppressive settler-colonialist state.** Indeed, the dominant response from mainstream advocacy organizations has been to “pay the price of admission” and support

ideological curricula so that Jewish organizations have a better chance of improving the depiction of Jews. I argue that’s a mistake. **At the very least, Jewish organizations should tee up a second option for local communities contemplating a course of action that opposes rather than amends the ideological curricula.**

Mainstream American organizations should be guided by three strategic principles: (1) They should oppose illiberalism on the right and left (this need not suggest that the two forms are equally dangerous in the here and now) (2) They should stand up for true American pluralism and respect for a range of cultural expression and viewpoints (3) They should seek ethnic and religious partners who share a vision of America that is democratic, liberal and pluralistic and who oppose the extremes on both ends.

II. Triangulating on Ethnic Studies

Ethnic Studies has been brewing in college humanities for more than 50 years. Ethnic Studies is the interdisciplinary study of difference—chiefly race, ethnicity, and nation—and its relation to power.

Unfortunately, this pedagogy is not merely dedicated to educating about and celebrating cultural diversity or telling long-ignored stories of ethnic minorities on the American scene. Rather, it is a distinct dogma that imparts very specific understandings of power, oppression, and even global affairs. It does not just “teach history” of American misdeeds—although it imparts such misdeeds with a very specific historical interpretation. It also

insists that contemporary America is still plagued with oppression. Much of it is editorial masquerading as news. American Jewish organizations can and should stand up for racial justice without supporting radical approaches.

While there are non-ideological multicultural curricula that are taught in a number of schools and school districts, which Jewish organizations and others should seek to elevate, Ethnic Studies is a specific discipline that inculcates students in “critical consciousness,” instructing them to



Slide used in numerous Liberated Ethnic Studies curricula.



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recognize and resist systems of oppression. Even after California’s Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum was stripped of its blatant antisemitic and anti-Zionist attributes, it continued to prescribe teaching “values...rooted in critical consciousness” and challenging “imperialist/colonial beliefs and practices at multiple levels.” The simplistic, binary ideology is almost guaranteed to foment hostility toward Jews even if not explicitly mentioned, as ideologues deem Jews as part of the dominant class.

The more radical version of the curriculum, known as Liberated Ethnic Studies, differs in providing an international, post-colonial frame to the discipline, insisting not only on a calumnious view of America, but on a similar, Manichean understanding of global power and disparity. The “Liberated” version focuses heavily on “settler-colonialism,” describing how modern, Western nations were built and continue to oppress their own and other populations. Through this lens both the US and Israel are deemed “settler-colonialist” states.

Unfortunately, this radical form of Ethnic Studies is rapidly proliferating in California and across the country. The Liberated Ethnic Studies movement is highly organized and financially incentivized to sign contracts with local school districts. **The potential long-term damage on perceptions of Jews and Israel cannot be overstated.**

Training Teachers in anti-Israel perspectives

Just as troubling as the curriculum are teacher trainings that inculcate teachers in radical forms of Ethnic Studies, including those that specifically portray Israel as a settler-colonialist state. Teach Palestine and the Middle East Children’s Alliance have been holding such trainings across the country. Teachers have not been trained in any alternative, non-ideological approach to Ethnic Studies, and none is presently on offer. As it now stands, these radical nonprofits and consultancies are the only game in town.



Material from recent Teach Palestine training.

Alternative Curricula and Teacher Training

Opposing radical ethnic studies need not mean abandoning multicultural education. Several school districts across the country use non-ideological ethnic studies curricula that highlight the contributions of ethnic communities, educate on varied cultural practices, and tell the unvarnished histories of ethnic communities in the US. These curricula empower young people, and do not insist that the system is rigged against all minorities. As mentioned earlier, the Liberated Ethnic Studies activists have been at this work for decades, and boast an array of curricula and training institutes. If we are to make any headway in arresting the proliferation of radical Ethnic Studies, the mainstream Jewish community, working in coalition with other impacted groups, must quickly develop their own curricula and training institutes. Moving in this direction would allow Jewish organizations to stand apart from both the radical left’s indictment of America and the radical right’s indifference and hostility to the country’s diversity and immigrant roots. It would allow Jewish organizations to stand up for a version of America we want to live in.

III. The Jewish Dilemma in Ethnic Studies

Most American Jewish organizations have consciously or unconsciously dodged the culture wars. The spread of Ethnic Studies, however, calls the question by forcing upon us a dilemma: Should Jewish groups oppose the ideologically-infused curriculum altogether, knowing it will have long-term ill-effects on America and American Jews, but in so doing sacrifice leverage to modify the curriculum; or should we accept the curriculum’s underlying ideological framework, and increase our odds at modifying it? To their credit, several American Jewish Committee regional offices (San Francisco, Seattle and Boston) have done the former. In March 2021, AJC national issued a statement opposing California’s modified model curriculum: “American Jewish Committee (AJC) is disappointed by the California State Board of Education’s adoption today of the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC). After a two-year, highly contentious process, this fourth and final version of the curriculum is fundamentally flawed.”

Slide from teacher training sponsored by XITO, an urban education consulting collective that teaches the settler-colonialist paradigm.



The Bay Area “Best Practice”

Nevertheless, as it now stands, the established “best practice” comes from the JCRC Bay Area, which has adopted an accommodationist posture. Writing in the Jewish Journal in January 2021 (“A Jewish Community Playbook on Ethnic Studies”), JCRC CEO Tye Gregory argues that “our fight is not with ethnic studies itself but with those manipulating our state process to drive a wedge between us and other marginalized



communities.” In a letter to the community about a school district, Mountain View-Los Altos (MVLA), which has adopted a form of Liberated Ethnic Studies, JCRC writes that “Objections to MVLA’s curriculum appear to be ideologically-based, with some questioning the inclusion of concepts such as systems of power and oppression... While segments of our community may object to teaching these concepts, these concerns are not related to Jewish identity, antisemitism, or Israel, and should not be conflated with anti-Jewish bias.” This, about a curriculum that states that “Students will grasp how settler colonialism, genocide, and slavery were foundational to the development of the US as an empire within and beyond North America. Students will understand how land theft, genocide, and slavery fueled the rise of US capitalism.”

The now standard-fare response to radical Ethnic Studies comes out of a community with the most at stake, in the most ideologically leftwing part of the country. The JCRC has an extensive array of relationships with progressive groups, which would be jeopardized by opposing the Model Curriculum and local curricula. That’s clearly not the case for many other local Jewish communities with a much more diverse political base. Yet numerous other communities are following in the footsteps of the JCRC Bay Area. As it now stands, it’s the only game in town. By publicly and clearly articulating their own approach, Jewish organizations can tee up an alternative best practice for communities across the country: oppose ideological curricula and develop constructive, non-ideological alternatives.

IV. Recommendations for Mainstream Jewish Organizations

- Articulate a clear worldview, standing up for the free exchange of ideas and pluralism
- Communicate clearly the Jewish community’s opposition to radical Ethnic Studies
- Oppose ideological ethnic studies’ curricula and legislation that would empower such curricula. Do not “pay the price of admission”--supporting the overall radical framework--in order to maximize influence on the portrayal of Jews. **At the very least, tee up this second option--opposing the curricula altogether and supporting alternative, non-ideological curricula--in discussions with local communities contemplating their course of action.**
- Work behind the scenes (when possible) to defeat Ethnic Studies bills at the state level that set in motion the adoption of curricula at the local level
- Support the development of alternative, non-ideological Ethnic Studies curricula and training
- Provide robust support (PR, financial, etc.) to local communities engaged in the battle at the local level
- Build ties to emerging ethnic groups opposed to extremism on the right and the left