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United States

In California, "ethnic studies" are trying to gain a foothold in schools

By Claire Levenson

Published on 02/24/2021 at 6:49 PM



The debate over a radical course of "ethnic studies" in high school reveals the growing influence of "critical race theory" in California and elsewhere. Several American schools are already encouraging students to analyze everything through an identity prism and to divide the world between oppressors and victims. What raises protests ... Including in the progressive camp.

In August 2020, in the wake of anti-racism protests that followed George Floyd's death, California Governor Gavin Newsom passed a law that requires students at 23 state universities to take a "ethnic studies" for graduation. The law defines ethnic studies as the "interdisciplinary and

comparative study of race and ethnicity", with the emphasis placed on four "historically racialized" groups : "Native Americans, African Americans, Asians. -Americans and Latin Americans ". The management of Cal State - the name of this network of universities - was opposed to this measure, judging that it was a problematic interference in the affairs of the college.

Shortly thereafter, another bill was submitted to the governor of California, with the goal of making ethnic studies compulsory in all public high schools in the state. Since 2016, a model course on the subject was already in development for schools, but its content was so ideologically oriented that the governor vetoed it in September 2020.

The over 500-page text, largely influenced by "critical race theory , " described the mission of the high school curriculum as follows: "to criticize the empire and its relationship to white supremacy, racism, patriarchy , to capitalism [...], to challenge imperialist and hegemonic colonial beliefs ". This is a far cry from the official goal enshrined in the law, which is to "prepare students to be global citizens with an appreciation for the contributions of multiple cultures. " " The tone was so radical that even a liberal daily as the *Los Angeles Times* had lamented in an editorial that "This course attempts to impose predigested political views rather than helping students broaden their horizons . "



International Living

GROWING INFLUENCE OF AN IDENTITY IDEOLOGY WITHIN UNIVERSITIES

In 2020, a parents' organization emerged to defend a less ideological approach to these teachings: "We realized that the curriculum was inspired by critical ethnic studies," explains Elina Kaplan, co-founder of the Alliance for constructive ethnic studies. *It is a very politicized view of the world, with a narrow ideological point of view that focuses on an oppressor / victim paradigm. Parents mobilized because they did not want their child to learn that they are either oppressors or victims. "*

The revisions of the curriculum (which is in its third version and will be put to a vote in March) illustrate the tensions linked to the growing influence of a certain ideology of identity, popular in American universities. In the first version of the text, all possible oppressions were listed, except anti-Semitism, which has since been added. Jargon words like hxstory (instead of "history", where the x is used to challenge the rigid gender binary approach to history) have been erased, and some courses, like the one that proposed "decolonize your food" (on Native American and Latin culinary traditions), have disappeared.

Disappointed, the authors of the first version declared that the current text was not "liberating" enough .

Whether the future text is adopted or not, ethnic studies are anyway already taught in high schools in California and in other states, with more or less ideological approaches. In Los Angeles, the program analyzes the social struggles of various communities but without obsession with the dynamics of oppression: the curriculum specifies that it is about *"giving students a deep understanding of ethnic and social issues rather than promoting activism. particular policy. "*

CHILDREN INITIATED INTO THE CONCEPTS OF "WHITE PRIVILEGE"

Conversely, other schools already practice very oriented approaches. In Cupertino, for example, parents complained after a 3rd grade teacher asked his students to identify aspects of their identities that contained "power and privilege" (for example, being white), in order to make maps of their identities. Elina Kaplan says she regularly receives emails from parents whose children are introduced to the concepts of white privilege, with sometimes confusing results, such as the case of a ten-year-old Métis girl who wondered if her (white) father was oppressing her mother (Afro-American)...

In Seattle, Washington, an ethnic studies-inspired math lesson (available on the district's website) offers reflections on *"oppressive mathematical practices"* and asks *"who has the authority to say what?" 'one answer is correct'*. In an interview, the district's head of ethnic studies spoke of *"deconstructing the colonization of math as a Western concept"*.

Elina Kaplan explains that criticizing these courses can be complicated because *"you can easily be accused of being racist ,"* she explains. *This question is sometimes presented as an opposition between left and right. But in fact, the vast majority of the members of our association are Democrats. So it's not a right-versus-left issue, we just oppose all forms of indoctrination. »*

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