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The History, Development, and Future of Ethnic Studies

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# The History, Development, and Future of Ethnic Studies

*Since their inception, ethnic studies programs have had to fight for academic legitimacy. Now that they are winning it, Ms. Hu-DeHart wonders whether they will become oblivious to the real-world problems of people of color.*

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BY EVELYN HU-DEHART

**I**NSPIRED by the civil rights movement and buoyed by the energy of the antiwar movement, a generation of American college students invaded administrative offices 25 years ago, demanding fundamental changes in higher education. The occupation of administrative offices by students of color and their white supporters startled and terrified presidents, deans, and professors. The faculty and administration were almost exclusively white and predominantly male – and the student body was predominantly white and primarily male. The curriculum had been fairly static since the first decades of the century, and multiculturalism had not evolved.

Beginning in 1968 at San Francisco State University and at the Berkeley and Santa Barbara campuses of the University of California, the movement spread to many other schools throughout the nation. Students of color demanded better

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access to higher education, changes in the curriculum, the recruitment of more professors of color, and the creation of ethnic studies programs. These programs were the beginning of multicultural curriculum reform in higher education.

From their origins in California, ethnic studies programs and departments have survived and proliferated throughout the United States.<sup>1</sup> After serious cutbacks during the budgetary crises of the 1970s and 1980s, they are back bigger and stronger than ever. Ethnic studies programs have been revitalized, reorganized, and reconceptualized. Indeed, they are increasingly becoming institutionalized. The field of ethnic studies has produced a prodigious amount of new scholarship, much of which is good and innovative. However, as is true in all disciplines, some of the work is weak. The perspectives of ethnic studies are intended not only to increase our knowledge base but eventually to transform the disciplines. Their influence is being widely felt and hotly debated.

Today there are more than 700 ethnic studies programs and departments in the United States.<sup>2</sup> They are represented by five established professional associations: the National Council of Black Studies, the National Association of Chicano Studies, the Asian American Studies Association, the American Indian Studies Association, and the National Association of Ethnic Studies. The Association of Puerto Rican Studies was formed in 1992.

A disproportionate number of ethnic studies programs are located in public colleges and universities because these institutions are more susceptible to public pressure than are private schools. There are more ethnic studies programs in the West because of that region's fast-growing and ethnically diverse population. The biggest and most powerful programs are found in four public research universities in the West:

1. The Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, has programs in Asian American, Chicano, and Native American studies and offers the nation's only Ph.D. in ethnic studies.

2. The Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, San Diego, was created in 1990. It takes a comparative approach and has no ethnic-spe-

cific programs.

3. The Department of American Ethnic Studies at the University of Washington, Seattle, was created in 1985 by bringing together programs in African American, Asian American, and Chicano studies.

4. The Center for Studies of Ethnicity and Race in America at the University of Colorado, Boulder, was created in 1987 by consolidating existing programs in black studies and Chicano studies and adding new programs in Asian American and American Indian studies.

Aside from the West, Bowling Green State University in Ohio has one of the oldest ethnic studies departments, which was founded in 1979.

During the decades in which ethnic studies programs were established and grew strong, American society underwent dramatic changes that continue to this day. The civil rights movement might have removed the last vestiges of legal apartheid in the United States. However, other ways have been invented to deny equal opportunity to the historically marginalized communities of color. In the 25 years since the issuance of the Kerner Commission Report, which spoke of two Americas — one rich, one poor; one white, one black — the gulf that divides the nation has grown wider than ever. Today 1% of the population of the U.S. has "gained control" of more of the nation's wealth than the bottom 90%. This situation parallels the stark and painful inequality in much of the Third World.<sup>3</sup>

Significant demographic changes have also taken place in the United States in the last 25 years. Since 1965, when U.S. immigration laws eliminated the "national origins" quotas that favored Europeans, immigrants from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean have for the first time outnumbered white European immigrants to the U.S. The country's political and military interventions since World War II have also boosted immigration from Asia, Central America, and the Caribbean. From 1965 to the 1990s, non-Europeans have composed over 80% of all immigrants — almost nine million in a surge during the 1980s. This new wave of immigration accounts for the doubling of Asian Americans in the U.S. population and the increase of Latinos by 60%.<sup>4</sup>

As a result of these immigration pat-

terns, the U.S. population is rapidly becoming "colored" and increasingly more diverse — in race, ethnicity, religion, language, music, art, literature, and other cultural expressions. In fact, with more than half of its population already highly diversified, California provides a glimpse of the nation's future. It will be an oxymoronic "majority minority" state by 2050. The relatively high birthrate of minority Americans, as well as their lower age distribution, will mean that ever increasing numbers of people of color will fill our classrooms and enter our work force.

In order to bring about a truly pluralistic democracy, our education system at all levels not only must reflect the nation's diversity in its student body, faculty, and curriculum, but also must seek to achieve comparable educational outcomes for all groups in society. The education reforms known collectively as "multiculturalism" — one example of which is the integration of ethnic studies into the college curriculum — have as major goals the establishment of democratic pluralism and the achievement of educational equity.

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#### THE NATURE OF ETHNIC STUDIES

What is ethnic studies? First, the field is distinct from global or international studies, particularly those programs known generally as "area studies," with which ethnic studies is often compared and confused. Area studies programs arose out of American imperialism in the Third World and bear names such as African studies, Asian studies, and Latin American studies. These programs were designed to focus on U.S./Third World relations and to train specialists to uphold U.S. hegemony in regions in which the U.S. had heavy economic and political investments. Area studies scholars have become far more critical of U.S./Third World relations since the antiwar movement of the 1960s, and many have adopted Third World perspectives. However, they are still predominantly white male scholars entrenched in established departments, subscribing to and benefiting from traditional patterns of distributing power and rewards in the academy.<sup>5</sup>

Ethnic studies programs, which grew out of student and community grassroots movements, challenge the prevailing aca-

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democratic power structure and the Eurocentric curricula of our colleges and universities. These insurgent programs had a subversive agenda from the outset; hence they were suspect and regarded as illegitimate even as they were grudgingly allowed into the academy. Definitions of ethnic studies vary from campus to campus and change over time. What the programs have in common is a specific or comparative focus on groups viewed as "minorities" in American society. European immigrants have dominated America and defined the national identity as white and Western. Groups of color have a shared history of having been viewed as distinct from the European immigrants and their descendants. They are the "unmeltable ethnics," or ethnics without options regarding whether to invoke their ethnicity.<sup>6</sup>

A culturally nationalistic vantage point characterized almost all of the early ethnic studies programs. This perspective still has enormous resonance in the Afrocentrism of some black studies programs. Most ethnic studies scholars today adopt a relational and comparative approach, looking at questions of power through the prisms of race, class, and gender. One definition of the academic purpose of ethnic studies can be found in the 1990 proposal to create a Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, San Diego:

Focusing on immigration, slavery, and confinement, those three processes that combined to create in the United States a nation of nations, Ethnic Studies intensively examines the histories, languages and cultures of America's racial and ethnic groups in and of themselves, their relationships to each other, and particularly, in structural contexts of power.<sup>7</sup>

To most scholars in the field, it is the role of ethnic studies to pose a fundamental challenge to the dominant paradigms of academic disciplines. While he was specifically addressing the goals of Puerto Rican Studies, Frank Bonilla, founder and director of Hunter College's Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, expressed guiding principles applicable to all ethnic studies:

We have set out to contest effectively those visions of the world that as-

sume or take for granted the inevitability and indefinite duration of the class and colonial oppression that has marked Puerto Rico's history. All the disciplines that we are most directly drawing upon — history, economics, sociology, anthropology, literature, psychology, pedagogy — as they are practiced in the United States are deeply implicated in the construction of that vision of Puerto Ricans as an inferior, submissive people, trapped on the underside of relations from which there is no foreseeable exit.<sup>8</sup>

In short, the field of ethnic studies provides a "liberating educational process" that challenges Western imperialism and Eurocentrism, along with their claims to objectivity and universalism. Ethnic studies scholars recognize the importance of perspective, believing that "perspectives . . . are always partial and situated in relationship to power."<sup>10</sup> Putting it concretely, "It is both practically and theoretically incorrect to use the experience of white ethnics as a guide to comprehend those of nonwhite, or so-called 'racial' minorities."<sup>11</sup>

As an approach to knowledge, ethnic studies is interdisciplinary — and it is more than just a grab bag of unrelated applications of separate discipline-based methodologies. Ethnic studies scholarship focuses on the central roles that race and ethnicity play in the construction of American history, culture, and society. Johnella Butler, head of the Department of American Ethnic Studies at the University of Washington, Seattle, writes, "Its interdisciplinary nature and simultaneous attention to race, ethnicity, gender, and class should provide the scholarship and teaching necessary to illuminate it as a specific field of study."<sup>12</sup> Butler is a strong proponent of the comparative approach to ethnic studies, and she urges the examination of connections between groups and experiences. She proposes a "matrix model," described as "looking at the matrix of race, class, ethnicity, and gender . . . within the context of cultural, political, social, and economic expression."<sup>13</sup>

Ethnic studies seeks to recover and reconstruct the histories of those Americans whom history has neglected; to identify and credit their contributions to the making of U.S. society and culture; to chronicle protest and resistance; and to

establish alternative values and visions, institutions and cultures. Ethnic studies scholarship has become a new discipline in and of itself. It is continuously defining and clarifying its own unique methodology and epistemology.

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#### CURRENT DEBATES

Ethnic studies is not totally stabilized, institutionalized, harmonious, or monolithic. It is in a state of transition structurally, intellectually, and ideologically. There is little uniformity among the approximately 700 ethnic-specific programs and departments in the United States. In part, the discussions within ethnic studies are no different from the ongoing debates among biologists, anthropologists, and historians as their fields grow and change. While discussions among ethnic studies practitioners are not usually vituperative or destructive, they are often heated and reflect the state of development of a young discipline. The following comments by no means exhaust the list of issues but should convey some sense of the concerns in the field. This discussion should also suggest the directions that the field of ethnic studies will probably take as it moves into the 21st century.

The key organizational issue seems to be the structure and location of ethnic studies within the academy. Should ethnic studies be an interdisciplinary program that follows the model of area studies, drawing faculty from established disciplines? Or should ethnic studies push for autonomy and full departmental status in view of the fact that the field has developed as a discipline? Should ethnic studies now concentrate on establishing intellectual credentials and credibility, while loosening or severing ties, forged in the early days, with minority student services?

As a program relying on departments for faculty members and courses, ethnic studies has no control over faculty resources and minimal influence on course offerings. Thus it has little power to define itself intellectually and academically. It becomes nearly impossible to build a sound, coherent, and intellectually challenging program through a rather haphazard sampling of whatever courses may be available through a number of different departments.

The unfortunate result of such efforts, well-intentioned though they may be, is that they fuel the argument of skeptics and critics that ethnic studies programs lack rigor and legitimacy. Hence in practice such programs at best function as mere coordinating bodies, organizing a set of loosely related courses around an ethnic-specific or comparative theme. They must rely on the good will, sympathy toward their mission, and positive attitude of traditional departments. Most often, the relationship between ethnic studies programs and departments is tenuous and uneasy, if not outrightly hostile.

The relationship between ethnic studies programs and traditional academic departments becomes unmanageable because it raises issues of turf protection, competition for scarce resources, and racism on the part of traditional scholars. Traditional scholars find it difficult to shake off their preconceptions about the illegitimacy and inferiority of ethnic studies programs and, by extension, ethnic studies scholars. Ethnic studies pro-

grams suffer disproportionately because they are the weaker member of the partnership. During periods of financial constraints, ethnic studies programs can easily be cut back or disbanded. This happened to many of them in the 1970s.

Departments, on the other hand, control budgets, hire their own faculty members, and, most important, determine the course of study. Hence they define the field, setting standards for pedagogy, research, and publication. In short, they have status and, at least structurally, enjoy equality with other disciplines. Departments can also readily create and sponsor graduate programs. Not surprisingly, there is little dispute within ethnic studies about the theoretical desirability of establishing departments rather than programs.

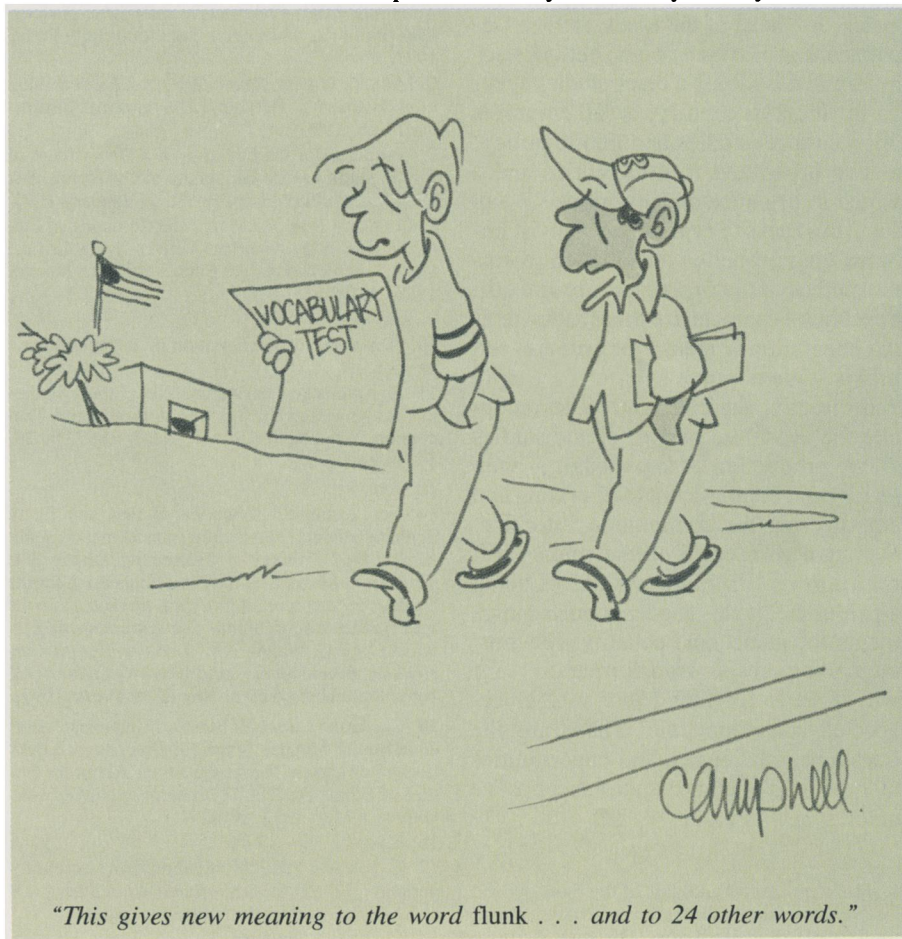
But political expediency and practical financial matters often dictate the less ideal course of action. In public institutions, a program can be created by administrative fiat, whereas the creation of a new department requires extensive review by the faculty and by other over-

sight bodies. This is a long, drawn-out process that can become contentious. A program is still the most common model for ethnic studies because it is the easiest and least costly way to accommodate a new discipline. Tight budgets and program retrenchment are likely to increase in the mid-1990s because of the limited resources that most colleges and universities will have.

On those campuses where administrators have yielded to the department model, ethnic studies departments usually have few faculty members, and most of them are untenured, which reduces them to a marginal status within the academy. Nevertheless, seeing it as an easy way to make a positive statement of their commitment to diversity, administrators are often eager to establish some kind of ethnic studies presence on their campuses. They also know that, if they can go the extra mile and create an ethnic studies department with its own faculty lines, it will be the fastest route to diversifying the faculty. Ethnic studies scholars and supporters, having been stranded on the margins for so long, see any movement toward the inside as acceptable — hence their tendency to settle for less.

Undeniably, the field of ethnic studies is being institutionalized. In addition to the creation of ethnic studies programs or departments, there is a general push toward multiculturalism on the nation's college campuses. Curriculum reform movements are striving to integrate ethnic studies perspectives and scholarship into the mainstream curriculum. This goal entails more than hiring ethnic studies scholars in traditional departments such as history, sociology, psychology, political science, and literature. Ethnic studies scholars must be encouraged to integrate their discipline's scholarship and perspectives into other university courses. A current debate among students and faculty members on many campuses concerns the desirability of requiring an ethnic studies course as part of the core or general undergraduate education program.

About five years ago campuses began offering faculty members voluntary in-service training workshops typically described as "curriculum integration projects." Now that organizations such as the Ford Foundation have added their support to these endeavors, the workshops have become more ambitious and were



recently redesignated as "curriculum transformation" programs.<sup>14</sup> This is good news for ethnic studies. With institutionalization and widespread influence come respect and legitimacy.

In spite of the good news about ethnic studies, these developments have created some uneasiness. Does the push for multiculturalism on campuses threaten to swallow up or co-opt ethnic studies? Will the fading argument be revived that, once the campus is integrated, ethnic studies will no longer be necessary? Even as some applaud the inevitable spillover of ethnic studies into the rest of the curriculum, they also note the tension between that field and traditional fields, "as people try to locate the boundaries between the two."<sup>15</sup>

The dispute over boundaries raises a larger issue that will be even more hotly debated in the future. In 1988 Jesse Vasquez, head of the Puerto Rican Studies Department at Queens College, noted that "even traditional academic departments, formerly resolute in their refusal to include ethnic studies courses in their curriculum, now cross-list, and in many instances generate their own version of ethnic studies courses in direct competition with existing ethnic studies programs." Vasquez also warned that these multicultural curricular reforms may have "effectively managed to co-opt some of the more socially and politically palatable aspects of the ethnic studies movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s." He went on to say that

these latest curricular trends seem to be moving us away from the political and social urgency intended by the founders of ethnic studies and toward the kind of program design [that] conforms to and is consistent with the traditional academic structures. . . . Certainly, the struggle to legitimize these programs academically has taken the edge and toughness out of the heart of some of our ethnic studies curriculum.<sup>16</sup>

The question is, Does the drive for legitimacy and institutionalization entail tradeoffs for ethnic studies that may, ironically, weaken the field in the long run? Should ethnic studies be "seduced and lulled" into believing that institutionalization translates into full acceptance, and does that acceptance signal a change

in traditional faculty attitudes, behavior, and values? Vasquez does not think so. Neither does Epifanio San Juan, Jr. Trained at Harvard in Western literature, San Juan has recently become one of the most incisive and vociferous critics of U.S. racial politics as manifested through issues of multiculturalism and ethnic studies. He is concerned that the "gradual academization" of ethnic studies will force it into the dominant European orthodoxy, which emphasizes ethnicity to the exclusion of race. Such an approach will "systematically [erase] from the historical frame of reference any perception of race and racism as causal factors in the making of the political and economic structure of the United States."<sup>17</sup>

If race and racism should remain the analytical core of ethnic studies, when would the total retreat of ethnic studies into the academy not be a contradiction? How could the field separate itself from the ongoing, real-life struggles of people of color in the U.S. today? That is precisely the dilemma that noted ethnic studies scholars such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., head of the Black Studies Department at Harvard, point out. His solution, in describing a black studies agenda for the 21st century, is "an emphasis upon cultural studies and public policy, as two broad and fruitful rubrics under which to organize our discipline."<sup>18</sup> San Juan also seeks to capture the "activist impulse" that propelled the creation of ethnic studies in the first place. He and other scholars characterize this challenge as the integration of theory (or critique) and praxis. Others put it even more simply and directly: the challenge is to reconcile the academic goal of ethnic studies — the production of knowledge — with its original commitment to liberating and empowering the communities of color. San Juan wonders if ethnic studies will return to its "inaugural vision" of being a part of the "wide-ranging popular movements for justice and equality, for thoroughgoing social transformation." Or will it settle for being just another respected academic unit? These are the questions, challenges, and opportunities that the field of ethnic studies faces as we enter a new century.

1. There are several accounts of the founding and histories of various ethnic studies programs. See, for example, Rudolfo Acuna, *Occupied America*,

3rd ed. (Harper & Row, 1988). The *Amerasia Journal* devoted an entire issue (vol. 15, no. 1, 1989) to the struggles connected with the founding of Asian American studies. For a brief history of black studies, see Darlene Clark Hine, "The Black Studies Movement: Afrocentric-Traditionalist-Feminist Paradigms for the Next Stage," *Black Scholar*, Summer 1992, pp. 11-19.

2. Johnella E. Butler, "Ethnic Studies: A Matrix Model for the Major," *Liberal Education*, March/April 1991, p. 30. I am including in my discussion of ethnic studies only those programs that focus on people of color. Thus I will not discuss women's studies, even though that field was born at the same time as ethnic studies and grew out of similar dynamics, generated in this case by the women's movement. The field of women's studies remains dominated by white, middle-class women academicians and students.

3. Salim Mukwakil, "L.A. Lessons Go Unlearned," *In These Times*, 27 May-9 June 1992, p. 3; and Sylvia Nasar, "The 1980s: A Very Good Time for the Very Rich," *New York Times*, 5 March 1992, p. A-1.

4. The national media have been publishing numerous analyses of the 1990s census data as they have become available. A good recent analysis is the cover story by Margaret Usdansky, "'Diverse' Fits Nation Better than 'Normal,'" *USA Today*, 29-31 May 1992, p. 1.

5. For discussions comparing and contrasting area studies and ethnic studies, see the articles by Shirley Hune, Evelyn Hu-DeHart, Gary K. Okhiro, and Sucheta Mazumdar in Shirley Hune et al., eds., *Asian Americans: Comparative and Global Perspectives* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1991).

6. Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

7. "Proposal for the Creation of a Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, San Diego," unpublished document, 25 January 1990.

8. Quoted in Jesse Vasquez, "The Co-opting of Ethnic Studies in the American University: A Critical View," *Explorations in Ethnic Studies*, January 1988, p. 25.

9. *Ibid.*

10. "Proposal for the Creation of a Department," pp. 5-6.

11. E. Antoinette Charfauros, "New Ethnic Studies in Two American Universities: A Preliminary Discussion," unpublished paper, 1 July 1992, p. 20.

12. Butler, p. 28.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

14. For example, Johnella Butler and Betty Schmitz conduct "curriculum transformation seminars" at the University of Washington, Seattle. The seminars are funded by the Ford Foundation for the purpose of "incorporating cultural pluralism into the undergraduate curriculum." See also Johnella Butler and John C. Walter, eds., *Transforming the Curriculum: Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

15. Clayborne Carson of Stanford University, quoted in Denise Magner, "Push for Diversity in Traditional Department Raises Questions About the Future of Ethnic Studies," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1 May 1991, p. A-11.

16. Vasquez, pp. 23-24.

17. E. San Juan, Jr., "Multiculturalism Versus Hegemony: Ethnic Studies, Asian Americans, and U.S. Racial Politics," unpublished paper.

18. Quoted in San Juan. □