

From: Victor Lieberman

Sent: Thursday, August 8, 2019 4:10 PM

To: Ethnic Studies

Subject: a university professor comments on ethnic studies proposal

Dear California Department of Education,

I am the Raoul Wallenberg Distinguished University Professor of History at the University of Michigan, where I teach a large course -- probably the largest such course in the United States -- on the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict. My course, and the accompanying textbook I wrote, are hugely popular with Muslims, Jews, Christians, and secularists because I present diverse, often conflicting narratives, encouraging students to reach independent judgments. Precisely because I believe in inclusive pedagogy rather than indoctrination, I am deeply disturbed by the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC) for California public school students, now being considered under bill AB-331 as a mandatory requirement for graduation, and I write to express my concerns.

My concerns are two-fold. First, the proposed curriculum discusses prejudice faced by Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, African Americans, and Muslim Americans, and those groups' success in overcoming intolerance and contributing to California's progress -- all of which is commendable and necessary narrative. But the ESMC erases the Jewish experience. It does not discuss Jews' disproportionate contribution to the California economy over several generations. It does not mention Jews' enormous overrepresentation in organizations opposing foreign wars and supporting African-American and Hispanic civil rights, nor does it note that after African-Americans, Jews are the country's most liberal voting bloc. And while it devotes considerable attention to Islamophobia, the ESMC omits all reference to anti-Semitism -- which is indefensible insofar as the latest FBI statistics show that anti-Semitic incidents are well over three times more common than Islamophobic incidents.

Second, the ESMC's references to the BDS movement and the Arab-Israeli conflict -- my specialty -- fundamentally distort those issues. The ESMC Glossary (the same Glossary that omits all reference to Anti-Semitism) claims that BDS is a "global social movement that currently aims to establish freedom for Palestinians living under apartheid conditions." In fact, Palestinians living in Israel already enjoy precisely the same civic and voting rights as Jews, and far greater political freedom than the residents of any Arab country, according to the London-based Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, the most respected survey of its sort.

Palestinians living outside Israel, whether under Hamas, the PA, or various Arab governments, do not enjoy those rights because they are not citizens of Israel. The situation is not analogous to apartheid because whereas the world recognized South Africa as a single state, no country regards Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank as a single state. On the contrary, the international community has consistently advocated creating two states, Israel and Palestine.

Who bears responsibility for the failure of that vision is a subject of legitimate debate, which I consider in my class in all its complexity. What is clear, however is that Israel (or its predecessor, the Yishuv) offered to recognize Arab sovereignty over the West Bank, Gaza, and other parts of the former British Mandate on at least six occasions (1937, 1947, 1968, 2000, 2008, 2014) and that all such offers were rejected, and rejected with systematic violence. Why? Because majority opinion among Palestinians, consistently expressed in opinion polls, programmatic statements, and political action, has been unwilling to accept a permanent Jewish state and sets as its long-term goal Israel's destruction. The BDS movement says unequivocally and openly that it shares that same objective. One can perhaps sympathize with Palestinian feelings of historic displacement, but one cannot ignore that fact that Palestinian rejectionism has been a central factor, possibly the central factor, in perpetuating the conflict, in encouraging extremism on both sides -- and in keeping Palestinians outside Israel in a condition of political limbo for the last 52 years.

In reducing this situation to a black-white drama of gratuitous oppression of innocent people yearning for freedom, when in fact Palestinians have sought not independence from Israel, but Israel's destruction, the ESMC distorts the historic record. This curriculum risks isolating and stigmatizing Jews, or any students, advocating for Israel, among their high school peers -- a bizarre outcome for a curriculum whose state purpose is to promote tolerance and inclusion. This curriculum is worthy of schools in Stalin's Soviet Union in 1952 -- but not California in 2020. It should either be rejected entirely or substantially rewritten by scholars without strong preliminary bias and with a scrupulous regard for historic accuracy .

Sincerely,

Prof. Victor Lieberman

University of Michigan