

**From:** Lee Ohanian  
**Sent:** Wednesday, January 20, 2021 12:20 PM  
**To:** Ethnic Studies; [email redacted]; SBE  
**Cc:** [emails redacted]  
**Subject:** [EXTERNAL] Comments on Ethnic Studies Curriculum

Dear Colleagues,

I am writing to you through the channel for public commentary on California's ethnic studies curriculum. I remain concerned that the curriculum continues to be divisive and omits important positive aspects of America's ethnic experiences.

In terms of my commentary, I am providing you with a column I wrote about this issue below for the Hoover Institution. The URL is:

<https://www.hoover.org/research/ethnic-studies-curriculum-promotes-divisiveness-and-indoctrination>.

The text of my column is pasted in below as commentary. I hope we can create a more positive, inclusive, and forward-looking curriculum in which our children learn to celebrate each other's heritages, and that they learn that anyone growing up in our wonderful country can make remarkable contributions.

My discussion below about the economic advances made by the Hmong immigrants in just 20 years shows that the "American Dream" is indeed alive and well.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Lee E. Ohanian

Professor of Economics, UCLA and Senior Fellow, Hoover Institution,  
Stanford University

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## [Ethnic Studies Curriculum Promotes Divisiveness and Indoctrination | Hoover Institution](#)

A third draft of California's ethnic studies curriculum was released last month. Despite a third try, the latest version remains far from its legislated purpose of "highlighting the contributions of minorities in the development of California and the United States" and helping students become "global citizens with an appreciation for the contributions of multiple cultures." [www.hoover.org](http://www.hoover.org)

A third draft of California's ethnic studies curriculum was released last month. Despite a third try, [the latest version remains far from its legislated purpose](#) of "highlighting the contributions of minorities in the development of California and the United States" and helping students become "global citizens with an appreciation for the contributions of multiple cultures."

The first draft, issued in 2019, was identified by many as divisive political indoctrination of students and was rejected following enormous criticism, including harsh critiques from the *Los Angeles Times* and *Washington Post*.

[The second draft was also rejected.](#) A letter signed by 80 groups, ranging from Black Americans for Inclusive Ethnic Studies to the California Association of Scholars, stated as follows:

"We are deeply concerned that classes taught using this curriculum will become vehicles for highly controversial, one-sided political advocacy and activism that will both subvert the educational mission of our schools and incite bigotry and harm against many students."

How about the third draft? Better than the first two, but it is far from providing guidance on what students should learn about the wonderfully diverse world

we share and how we can build a meritocratic society where everyone has an opportunity to succeed.

The reason it fails to do this is because this positive agenda is not the focus of the curriculum. And this is the reason why neither the first draft, nor the first do-over, nor the second do-over is acceptable. One is tempted to conclude that the strategy is to implement the minimum changes needed to get buy-in, while preserving the agenda of “critical ethnic studies.”

Critical ethnic studies, which is related to critical race theory, is a branch of ethnic studies that focuses on White supremacy, slavery, racism, colonialism, and victimization, with the belief that that these issues are the primary drivers of many of our social problems, and this theme permeates the current draft of the curriculum.

The focus of the curriculum on critical ethnic studies has prevented the creation of what could be a rich and rewarding curriculum celebrating the heritages and histories of all, and which could have facilitated the academic journeys of underrepresented minorities within the state’s school system.

Perhaps the most important justification for requiring ethnic studies is that minority students benefit enormously by learning about role models from their ethnic backgrounds. While the third iteration of the curriculum offers such lessons, there are glaring omissions of those who could inspire new generations of Californians, irrespective of their color.

Martin Luther King is a notable omission from the list of African Americans. A person displacing King from the list is Mumia Abu-Jamal, a former member of the Black Panthers who is serving a life sentence for first-degree murder of a police officer who had stopped Abu-Jamal’s brother. His incarceration has become a cause célèbre in liberal political circles, despite testimony from three eyewitnesses and ballistics evidence supporting his guilty sentence.

What about Black women role models? Katherine Johnson is omitted. Johnson was a brilliant NASA mathematician who was included in an otherwise all-male research team that calculated the orbit of 1969’s *Apollo 11* flight. The motion picture *Hidden Figures* was inspired by her. Just imagine

how her story could motivate girls to embrace the fields of mathematics and science.

Assata Shakur, an African American activist from the 1960s who was convicted of murder during a shootout with police, and who escaped from prison and fled to Cuba where she was granted political asylum, is included.

A similar pattern of omissions and inclusions emerges for Native Americans. There is no mention of the “code talkers,” a group from the Navajo tribe who created an unbreakable code that helped the United States win World War II. Including the code talkers would celebrate the important contributions of Native Americans and highlight the uniqueness of the Navajo language.

Just think how many kids might be inspired to study the process of language and learning if they learned about the code talkers. Or consider former US senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell, the most recent of just four Native Americans who ever served in the US Senate. He is also missing from the list.

Who displaces them? One is Dennis Banks, a Native American activist who was convicted of incitement of riot and assault, and who received a court martial from the Air Force.

The agenda is clear. Highlight the possibly wrongful incarcerations of political activists by a White-dominated justice system and omit heroes whose politics do not check off the boxes required by critical ethnic studies, even individuals as remarkable as Martin Luther King.

Another problematic issue in the curriculum is the failure to use facts and instead rely on stories that may or may not have a factual basis. Processing facts and data in an organized way is central to a child’s education, particularly today when understanding technical information and mathematics is so highly valued. This necessary training in logical thought and critical thinking is missing.

Take the issue of wrongful incarceration. There have been [375 DNA-based exonerations within the United States](#), and 60 percent of those have been of African Americans.

This single statistic establishes that African Americans have been disproportionately impacted by wrongful incarceration. But a statistic does not win over the hearts and minds of young people. So instead of using facts, critical ethnic studies seduces students with intriguing stories about *potentially* wrongful convictions that may have no factual basis.

Telling Mumia Abu-Jamal's story (which has been made into a movie) is more compelling than a statistic, even though the statistic is infinitely more informative about wrongful convictions of African Americans. And because of its media coverage, Abu-Jamal's story, despite no evidence of anyone else committing the crime, apparently is more compelling than that of Curtis Flowers, a Black man whose murder conviction was overturned by the Supreme Court but whose case did not attract nearly the same level of notoriety.

A hallmark of US immigration is that most immigrants achieve economic success at a much greater level than they could have achieved in their country of origin. But this fundamental aspect of ethnicity in the United States is largely missing from the curriculum. Consider the Hmong people of Southeast Asia who came to the United States as refugees in the 1970s and 1980s from a way of life that had changed little over hundreds of years, and who spoke an ancient language consisting primarily of one-syllable words.

The proposed curriculum discusses the Hmong with a focus on patriarchy and gender roles within Hmong society, and the de rigeur discussion of racial injustice:

"The criminalization of men and boys of color goes hand in hand with the decriminalization of white males. As a result, white criminality is less controlled, surveilled, and punished while black, Latino, and Southeast Asian criminality is treated as threatening and in need of punishment."

What is curiously omitted is the miraculous improvement in the Hmong's standard of living. In 1990, only 24 percent of the Hmong were employed, compared to 56 percent by 2010. Over this same period, the median household income of the Hmong grew from just 47 percent of the national average to 92 percent, and the percentage of the Hmong receiving public assistance fell from 67 percent to 12 percent. All of this in just 20 years and

accomplished by an ethnic group that, prior to coming to America, had largely been living like they had two hundred years ago.

This transformation could only occur in the free and capitalistic United States. Yet students will read about the Hmong as represented in this curriculum and have no idea how they achieved the American dream, and so quickly. What a shame. But this is what can happen when facts don't fit the desired narrative.

But not all is lost. Enter the [Alliance for Constructive Ethnic Studies](#), a group of thousands of Californians, including educators, African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, Armenians, and refugees from Communist countries who are working to help create an inclusive, positive ethnic studies curriculum, free from political agendas, that will help kids learn and think independently.

On their website, you will hear from Clarence Jones, one of Martin Luther King's legal advisors, who describes how the third draft of the curriculum is a "perversion of history that will inflict great harm on the students in our state." You will hear from Mark Yudof, University of California president emeritus, who worries that the curriculum does not invite diverse viewpoints, nor does it promote engagement through the democratic process.

Most important, you will see how the alliance has made enormous progress in advancing how the curriculum can be changed based on the ethnic studies curriculum of the Los Angeles Unified School District, which does not focus on critical ethnic studies or critical race theory. The alliance provides a blueprint for what to do in designing a positive and constructive ethnic studies curriculum.

The period for commentary on the state's third draft remains open for two more days. I urge you to write and let your voice be heard. You can provide feedback on the proposed curriculum by writing to the California Department of Education at [ethnicstudies@cde.ca.gov](mailto:ethnicstudies@cde.ca.gov), or you can sign the Alliance's statement [here](#).

The primary goal of any society is to organize itself to promote liberty, peace, and equal treatment. The Alliance for Constructive Ethnic Studies is doing just that. And California students will be much better off if Governor Newsom, state legislators, and the Department of Education listen to the Alliance.

