

# The Disfiguring Prism of Oppressor and Oppressed

RCP [realclearpolitics.com/articles/2023/10/29/the\\_disfiguring\\_prism\\_of\\_oppressor\\_and\\_oppressed\\_149977.html](https://realclearpolitics.com/articles/2023/10/29/the_disfiguring_prism_of_oppressor_and_oppressed_149977.html)

Peter Berkowitz



## COMMENTARY

On Oct. 13, New York Times columnist Pamela Paul reported that a Stanford University student told her that on Oct. 10, “[a] lecturer in one class that day asked Jewish students to raise their hands, then took one of the Jewish student’s belongings and told him to stand apart from everyone else, saying that was what the Israelis did to the Palestinians.” Later the same day in another section of College 101, according to another student to whom Paul spoke, the non-faculty teacher “asked all of the students to say where they were from and depending on the answer, he told them whether they were colonized or colonizer. When a student said, ‘Israeli,’ he called the student a colonizer.”

Five days after the New York Times column appeared, the Stanford Daily presented a less chilling account of events based on other students’ recollections. The alternative version, however, was bad enough. In the first class, the instructor still singled out a Jewish student and asked him to stand to illustrate power imbalances. And in the second class, the instructor still asked students where they were from and pronounced the different countries colonized or colonizers, labeling Israel a colonizer.

These abuses of classroom power took place three days after Hamas' 10/7 attacks. In the early morning hours, more than 2,000 Hamas jihadists burst through Israel's security barrier on the Gaza border, massacring some 1,400 Israeli civilians as well as more than 20 Americans and other countries' citizens, committing rape, mutilating bodies, wounding more than 3,000, and abducting more than 200 mostly civilians, including Americans and other nations' citizens. Hamas' war aim – indeed, its very reason for existence – is to destroy the Jewish state.

On Oct. 11, Stanford President Richard Saller and Provost Jenny Martinez issued a firm statement. The president and the provost deplored the “intolerable atrocities including murder of civilians and kidnapping” perpetrated by Hamas. They stressed that **“Stanford stands unequivocally against hatred on the basis of religion, race, ethnicity, national origin, and other categories”** (emphasis in original). They reaffirmed the university's “commitment to academic freedom,” emphasizing that “latitude for expression of controversial and even offensive views is necessary to avoid chilling freedom of thought and ideas.” And they underscored that “harassment and abuse have no place here.”

Saller and Martinez also announced that a specific allegation of harassment and abuse had come to their attention: “We have received a report of a class in which a non-faculty instructor is reported to have addressed the Middle East conflict in a manner that called out individual students in class based on their backgrounds and identities.” Since “[a]cademic freedom does not permit the identity-based targeting of students,” the president and provost wrote, “The instructor in this course is not currently teaching while the university works to ascertain the facts of the situation.”

Inquiring minds will want to know how in the first place Stanford hired an instructor capable of identity-based targeting of students. After all, it takes a particularly acute ideological blindness to urge students, just days after Hamas' cross-border rampage and bloodcurdling crimes against humanity, to divide the world into colonizers and colonized; classify students, and assign guilt or pronounce innocence, based on ethnicity, religion, and nationality; and suggest in class Israeli culpability to a student from Israel while the Jewish state was burying civilians killed, burned, and butchered in cold blood.

The suspended Stanford instructor's proselytizing reflects a powerful pedagogical creed within the American educational system. Throughout the nation, teachers indoctrinate students to believe that the crucial categories for understanding America in particular and Western civilization in general are variations on the theme of oppressor and oppressed: colonizer and colonized, subjugator and subjugated, villain and victim.

These vulgar binaries force students to place themselves – and cram the rest of humanity – into one of two mutually antagonistic camps. They obviate the need to study the evidence of science, the intricacies of history, the subtleties of literature, and the arguments of philosophy

because they render the good guys and the bad guys fixed and unalterable. And they foster ignorance, self-righteousness, and intolerance.

As it happens, in an early September guest essay in *The New York Times*, Deborah Satz, dean of Stanford's School of Humanities and Sciences, and Dan Edelstein, professor of French and by courtesy of history and political science as well as the faculty director of the university's Civic, Liberal, and Global Education program, recognized that the "intolerance of ideas on campus is not just a consequence of an increasingly polarized society." Satz and Edelstein argued in "By Abandoning Civics, Colleges Helped Create the Culture Wars" that campus intolerance "also results from the failure of higher education to provide students with the kind of shared intellectual framework that we call civic education." The dean and the professor rejected a return to Western civilization courses on the spurious grounds that such classes inherently slight other cultures. And they understated the importance to civics education of a solid foundation in America's founding principles and constitutional traditions. But they rightly insisted that to foster free speech and tolerance on campus, the curriculum must provide an education in the essentials of citizenship, as the university has undertaken to do with the Stanford Civics Initiative (in which I teach).

Unfortunately, the fostering of intolerance within the American education system extends well beyond universities. As Parents Defending Education Senior Advisor Michele Exner recently argued, in the name of inclusivity and under the rubric of ethnic studies, K-12 schools teach students to understand life in America primarily in terms of oppression manufactured by America's privileged to maintain their power. For instance, Exner reports, James Logan High School in California offered a course in ethnic studies and social justice that aimed "to teach students to challenge and criticize 'power, oppression, capitalism, white supremacy, imperialism, colonialism.'" The Northshore School District in Washington state designed an ethnic studies program to equip "students to critique, resist, and transform 'systems of oppression.'" A proposed ethnic studies curriculum for Boston public schools explores the "pillars of white supremacy." Examples could be multiplied of courses and programs that urge students to discriminate based on ethnicity – as well as race, class, and gender – as the only available remedy to the supposedly comprehensive injustices of American society and politics.

In "'Ethnic Studies' Is CRT Peddlers' Sneaky New Way To Stoke Racial Division In Schools," Katherine Kersten, a senior policy fellow at the Center of the American Experiment, reports that last spring, Minnesota "enacted what are likely the most radical education measures in the nation." These measures, which Minnesota public schools must phase in over the next decade, reflect "ethnic studies in its 'liberated' form, which not only teaches race-based identities and 'white privilege,' but incites students to take action to 'disrupt and dismantle' America's fundamental social and political institutions."

Advocates, according to Kersten, argued that “liberated ethnic studies” provided “‘An unequaled opportunity to bridge the ethnic and cultural divide’ in Minnesota classrooms by ‘invit[ing] students to more deeply explore’ the state’s ‘many diverse cultures and histories.’” In fact, the ethnic studies steamroller tends to crush the diversity of cultures and histories.

To ensure the imposition of ideological conformity, Minnesota plans to incorporate ethnic studies from kindergarten through high school and not only into history, civics, economics, and geography classes but also into math and science courses. The new academic standards call for kindergartners to “retell a story about an unfair experience that conveys a power imbalance,” writes Kersten. First-graders will, according to the standards, “Identify examples of ethnicity, equality, liberation and systems of power and use those examples to construct meanings for those terms.” Fourth graders will learn that “power structures” define place and region. And high school students will, “examine the construction of racialized hierarchies based on colorism and dominant European beauty standards and values.”

Ethnic studies curricula around the country tend to deliver a uniform, dire, and divisive message. American political ideas and institutions are oppressive and systemically racist. Students who belong to the oppressor class should confess their guilt. And, assenting to the reversal of the hierarchy of oppression, they should, with suitable deference to their moral superiors, join the oppressed in resisting and transforming the American constitutional order.

It is a short step from an educational system that promulgates the neo-Marxist dogma that one is either an oppressor or oppressed based on race, ethnicity, or gender to classrooms in which instructors call out students and determine their moral standing based on race, ethnicity, or gender. One must not underestimate the campus antisemitism energized by the “sick alliance,” in Charles Lipson’s words, between the left and Muslim extremists. But neither should one overlook how the anti-Americanism that suffuses American education fuels anti-Israelism. Israel’s greatest sin, in the eyes of many students and faculty, is not that it is the nation-state of the Jewish people but that it cherishes its friendship with the United States and shares a commitment to the principles of freedom and democracy.

The United States must correct course by rebuilding American education around the principles of freedom and democracy, America’s experiment in ordered liberty, and the wider Western civilization – with its uncommon appreciation of the diversity of civilizations – of which those principles and experiment form a landmark achievement. Since self-criticism is a virtue of a free and democratic nation, the liberal education America needs will examine the nation’s flaws as well as its fine points and will clarify the character of Western civilization by comparing it with other civilizations. Not least, such an education will emancipate students and faculty from the disfiguring prism of oppressor and oppressed.

*Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. From 2019 to 2021, he served as director of the Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. State Department. His writings are posted at [PeterBerkowitz.com](http://PeterBerkowitz.com) and he can be followed on*

*Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.*