THE CHRONICLE
of Higher Education

The Chronicle Review

July 4, 2010

The Future of Ethnic Studies

The field is under assault from without and within

By Gary Y. Okihiro

On May 11, 2010, less than a month after signing SB 1070, which many people hold legalizes racial profiling, Arizona's Gov. Jan Brewer signed HB 2281 into law. That law bans schools from teaching classes that are designed for students of a particular ethnic group or that promote resentment, ethnic solidarity, or overthrow of the U.S. government. "Public school pupils should be taught to treat and value each other as individuals and not be taught to resent or hate other races or classes of people," it reads.

According to Tom Horne, the state's superintendent of public instruction and one of the bill's principal sponsors, the law was aimed at Chicano studies as taught in the Tucson school system. He called the program "harmful and dysfunctional." Judy Burns, president of the Tucson Unified School District's governing board, disagreed, declaring that Chicano studies benefits students by promoting critical thinking.

The caricatures and falsehoods implied in the language of HB 2281 and in the arguments in its favor are as old as the field of ethnic studies, of which Chicano studies is a part. And while the Arizona law deals with primary and secondary schools, the issue is very much alive in higher education as well. There, too, ethnic studies, now almost half a century old, is facing threats: from budget cuts that often hit the smallest and newest programs first, from scholars who have transformed ethnic studies into multiculturalism and the study of difference, from critics who say ethnic studies is divisive—and from ethnic studies itself.

In light of the "culture wars" of the 1980s and 90s, the arguments of Arizona's political leaders appear positively old-fashioned. They say that ethnic studies has been created only by and for particular racial groups, and that it promotes hatred of whites and minority-group solidarity. Thus the "harmful" and "dysfunctional" nature of ethnic studies is allegedly that it creates social cleavages where, presumably, none existed before. Those battles were waged and resolved years ago—in favor of multiculturalists. Even former advocates of a single national culture now agree that the United

States is and has always been a diverse nation, and that its study, accordingly, must reflect that fact.

Moreover, many sectors of American society, including prominently the military, businesses, and members of the cultural sphere, know that diversity is important. That's why a record number of institutions filed friend-of-the-court briefs, arguing that diversity is a compelling interest, in the affirmative-action case decided in 2003 by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Grutter v. Bollinger*.

Still, Arizona's anxieties over border controls, both within the state and along its fences with Mexico, reflect a national concern over solidifying consensus at home while imposing imperial order abroad. History shows that wars, especially divisive conflicts, promote homogeneity rather than diversity, and that intolerance of difference patrols the perimeters of patriotism. The contentious U.S. imperial wars of the late 19th century in the Caribbean and Pacific were accompanied and followed by immigration restrictions justified by eugenics and fears of "swamping" the white race. In our time, we witness wars abroad and a securing of the homeland against immigrants, as well as curtailments of our civil liberties.

The problem of the 20th century, W.E.B. Du Bois famously declared, was the problem of the color line. Race, or, more accurately, the way race is socially constructed and contested, constituted the pivot for social relations as imperialism closed the 19th century and the decolonization struggles of Africa and Asia dominated (from the perspective of the colonies) the 20th century. The contest between the ideology that propped up colonialism, on the one hand, and the commitment to self-determination and the eradication of racism, on the other, survived the white-against-white aspect of World Wars I and II.

In the words of the philosopher-revolutionary Frantz Fanon, the third world, conceived in the mid-20th century as Africa, Asia, and Latin America, was a project by the periphery to solve the core's problems of imperialism, wars, and systems of bondage. Those goals of self-determination and anti-racism, which defined the third-world project, were what the students of the Third World Liberation Front, at San Francisco State College, had in mind in 1968, when they stated as their purpose in proposing ethnic studies: "to aid in further developing politically, economically, and culturally the revolutionary third-world consciousness of oppressed peoples both on and off campus."

The transnational color line at the 20th century's start narrowed into nationalist struggles in Africa and Asia by the century's

midpoint. Perhaps as a result, ethnic studies, which began amid postcolonial nation-building, lost its bearings in the thicket of identity politics and nationalism. Black power and its permutations, an effective antidote to the poison of a colonized mentality and a radical declaration for self-determination, also bore the stain of white identity politics and programs of national and manly reconstitution. Patterned on nationalisms abroad and identity politics at home that promoted homogeneity and punished difference for the sake of solidarity, U.S. cultural nationalism among peoples of color pursued that same policing of the borders it struggled against, along with the nation-state's patriarchy and heterosexuality. As feminists of color have pointed out, cultural nationalism was saturated with patriarchy and homophobia, and in that way mimicked and formed alliances with the dominant order.

Resistance to European imperialism and a discourse of global white supremacy also prompted the liberating ideas of Négritude (the belief in a singular black or African identity throughout the diaspora) and Pan-Africanism (the unity of all African peoples). But like the "universal" claims to national sovereignty, humanism, and individual rights that arose from European roots, third-world self-determination, along with the claims of American Indians and Hawaiians to sovereignty, floundered in the terrain and language of the first world. The conundrum involved, in a rephrasing of the Caribbean-American writer Audre Lorde's well-known formulation: Can the master's tools dismantle the master's house?

Today ethnic studies looks in a much more disciplined way at power and how it articulates around the axes of race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and nation. That insight was the contribution of the Combahee River Collective, a black feminist-activist group, which, in 1977, saw that "the major systems of oppression are interlocking." For a new generation of ethnic-studies scholars, the focus is not just—or even foremost—on the relations between white and nonwhite people but on relations among peoples of color and the multiple dimensions of race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation.

While postcolonialism's heterogeneity and fluidity can illuminate power and its effects—for example, showing its contingent and malleable nature—it can also, however, deny the realities of social structures and human experience, and absolve global citizens from local responsibility and action. Further, postcolonialism's universalism and disregard of borders resonate with the rise of global capitalism—and the global university—and its paralyzing indeterminacy.

Ethnic-studies practitioners, accordingly, bear some of the

responsibility for the field's infirmities. Despite resurgent student interest and hostile critiques like those in Arizona, we have failed to articulate the compelling intellectual and social necessity of our field for any educated person. Ethnic studies is not identity politics, multiculturalism, or an intellectual form of promoting affirmative action for people of color. Those detours trivialize the political claims of the discipline, reducing the analysis of power relations and their interventions to cultural celebrations and lessons in cultural competence.

But the greatest threat to the field, it appears to me, arises not from willful racists or inarticulate ethnic-studies scholars, but from liberals who have derailed the field's radical challenges into a celebration of cultural diversity and multiculturalism, or into a transnational project that loses specificity and, some might add, responsibility even as it attempts to grapple with the ideas and realities of the present moment. No longer centrally at stake are the nation-state and its particular history and formations of conquest and extermination, land appropriation and labor exploitation, regimes of inclusion and exclusion, and expansion and imperialism. Deliberately blunted is the political edge of ethnic studies, with its focus on power and demands for a more inclusive and just republic (and university) through a dismantling of hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation.

Here at Columbia University, what was once ethnic studies is being transformed, in the name of "globalization" and the study of "difference," into a field of race and ethnicity devoid of a coherent literary tradition, methodology and theory, and even practitioners. Thus the university's Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race is proposing a new major, a generic and global study of ethnicity and race, to replace the present comparative ethnic-studies major. Columbia has also announced a research initiative to combine the work of the Institute for Research on Women and Gender, the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race, the Institute for Research in African-American Studies, and the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society at Columbia, as well as the Barnard Center for Research on Women. It is to be called the Center for the Critical Analysis of Social Difference.

By contrast, I believe that ethnic studies, while necessarily global, should be anchored within the United States. Its capacious subject matter should be "social formation," which Marxist writings posit as the form and stage of society, both its structure and changes over time. For ethnic studies, the social structure is conceived and cultivated by power and the relations among race and ethnicity,

gender, sexuality, class, and nation as discrepant and intersecting constructions.

Social formation attends to the multiplicity of forces at work in the positions and exercises of power. It demands a complexity in our thinking and politics about the overlap and conflict of social categories. Individual subjectivities and social relations are never solitary or fixed; we can see ourselves simultaneously as people of color, women, and members of the working class, and under capitalism our class interests might clash with our privileges of citizenship.

In the past few years, students have been protesting a steady stream of cuts in ethnic-studies departments, centers, and programs. At the same time, it is not inconsequential that we face a present moment of danger, of U.S. imperial wars abroad and denial of civil liberties at home, of an allied war being waged against migrants in the name of sovereign borders and against freedoms of speech and thought and religion. At risk is not merely ethnic studies, but also our democracy.

Gary Y. Okihiro is a professor of international and public affairs at Columbia University, where he was founding director of the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race.

Copyright 2010. All rights reserved.

The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037