

# ONE DECADE AND THE POLITICS OF ETHNIC STUDIES: FOCUS FOR THE FUTURE

---

CHARLES C. IRBY  
CAL STATE POLY, POMONA

---

The first decade of coloured ethnic studies has passed *quietly*. This uncelebrated passing is probably more related to what *did not* occur in conceptual, methodological, and theoretical developments during the ten-year period than what *did*, in fact, happen. The decade can be characterized as one in which the ethnic studies movement suffered from intellectual dropsy. The politics of ethnic studies are all of those activities which have served to restrict its development.

One purpose of this paper is to examine the ramifications of ethnic politics, showing how the politics are responsible for the current status of ethnic studies. And this assessment is designed to look at how we arrived *here*, after a full decade, much more resigned than confused and further away from our goal of multicultural education in 1980 than we were in 1970. With reference to ethnic studies, too much politics and not enough intellectual creativity were the basic heritages of that decade.

This presentation, however, would be remiss and irrelevant if only the problems are focused for discussion. It is, however, necessary for us to look at where we have been as a method of spotlighting our paths for the future. Consequently, the primary purpose of this paper is to focus on "whither ethnic studies?" for dealing with the overriding issue of multicultural education as a reality.

## *Three Problems Which Developed from the Politics of Ethnic Studies*

THE FIRST PROBLEM: Many coloured professors gained entry into traditionally white college and university teaching staffs as a result of the ethnic studies movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. (Some have said that we pimped our way into "their closed shops.") We found ourselves in traditional academic departments according to the disciplines in which our academic training had occurred. Unfortunately, many of us were saddled with the responsibility of being experts in all matters pertaining to "our" ethnic group--a responsibility (and duty) we gladly accepted, even though we had neither training nor experience for these tasks. Too many of us were so happy at the academy's final recognition of us that we failed to recognize, or refused to acknowledge, that we had become *schlocks*.

We existed, as it were, in the nether regions of the academy. We were responsible for developing an area without prior models for direction. And it was this situation that established the basis for most problems in ethnic studies.

THE SECOND PROBLEM: Once we gained access to the academy, we attempted to do academic research with unacceptable variations on Euroamerican scholastic techniques. This contentious situation set the stage for a host of problems such as the lack of respect from the more "traditional" faculty colleagues, resulting in nonretention in many instances. Nonretention of "ethnic" faculty, in turn, diverted our energies to the discussion of racism and other issues confronting "those" individuals rather than to the development of ethnic studies as an area of academic enquiry. Too frequently, we followed the trail of "the racist nature of..." when we should have been about an agenda which moved us toward our ideal of a liberating education for persons in a multicultural society.

Perhaps the most significant issue in the retarded development of ethnic studies during the decade had to do with our being side-tracked by "institutional" money. A Ford Foundation Report on Ethnic Studies, *Widening the Mainstream of American Culture*, provides the best example at hand: Between 1970 and 1973, the Ford Foundation sponsored "three hundred and thirty-eight fellowships in ethnic studies for Ph.D. candidates from universities throughout the country."<sup>1</sup> In addition, it provided grants for "ethnic studies" totaling eleven million, two hundred fifty-four thousand, five hundred and eighty-three dollars (\$11,254,583.00) between 1969 and 1976.<sup>2</sup>

It is clear from *Widening the Mainstream of American Culture* that somewhere along the way persons who might have been committed to the goal of multicultural education were "bought" before they had an opportunity to make a contribution to the development of ethnic studies. The result is that corporate institutions of higher education and in general developed *coloured Euroamericanists* to stand as spokespersons for ethnic studies.

The 1970s began with a generalized goal of multicultural education, which has yet to be accepted as a prerequisite for liberation. Neither multicultural education nor liberation were truly overriding issues during the first decade of ethnic studies. By the end of the decade we were going in multiple directions without cross-fertilizations. If we had been what we said we were, then we would not have entered the 1980s with the notion of pluralism dripping from the tips of our monocultural tongues.

THE THIRD PROBLEM: We neglected ethnic studies as an area of academic enquiry--an area of scholarship that could become "legitimate only through constant debates, explorations, and discoveries. With our intellectual canons, we fixed on Asianamericans (Chinese and Japanese, usually) overthrowing the stereotype of the "myth of the model minority"; blacks in history and their contributions to nation building; Chicanos in history and literature; and the *nishnawbek*, who, because they are indigenous peoples, were primarily viewed through filters which focused on all the wrongs that have been perpetrated against them by whites. In other words, we developed

ourselves as stereotypes rather than being creative in our endeavors. And "we" were much more effective in the *stereotypical developments of ourselves* than "they" were. J. Lawrence McConville's haunting words capture the essence and spirit of the "popular" pursuits in the 1970s. He notes that

Ethnic studies may. . . be criticized for tending to construct new and more sophisticated stereotypes than those circulated by the conventional wisdom, yet we have little reason to expect these more exalted notions will be any more humane. There is a surprising tendency to gloss over the amount of variability of personal or regional culture within an ethnic group and to oversimplify the nature of inter-ethnic contacts as well. Undocumented assertions of psychic unity and careless remarks about the "needs" of collectives have left many otherwise sympathetic colleagues understandably disillusioned.<sup>3</sup>

We were less than seriously involved in worthy pursuits.

Some of us decided that the Marxian approach provided us with the proper analytical tool for ethnic studies. Others decided that our literary geniuses provided us with the proper ethnic orientations. Some of us thought that creating heroes "who looked like us" and did the same kinds of things "them" whites did would give glory to our movement. Still others thought that political science or sociology would provide us with the expertise for gaining "our piece of the pie." There is every likelihood that these positions were supported by "institutional" money as fitting and proper orientations for academic scholarship, and some of us became established members of traditional departments. We entered these departments as "ethnic" specialists, and this situation essentially brought closure to the activist ethnic studies movement.

We became political factions. Each coloured person became expert in matters pertaining to her or his own group. This kind of politics left us stagnating in prairie-like sloughs--sloughs, as isolates, which have not altered the consciousness of the "Anglo-conformist" mainstream, regardless of our ethnicity. Indeed, we find, in what appears to be a contradiction, that there are many more ethnic concerns in the academic literature in 1980 than there were in 1970. But this circumstance is counterproductive, because, as Brom Weber suggests, the "...so-called ethnic texts (continue to) reflect the dominant Anglo-conformist culture preeminent in English departments and American society as a whole."<sup>4</sup> As such, these "ethnic texts" support the notion that "white is right" even in a coloured face.

There was little debate on the issue of retooling--a necessary retooling to capture the complexity of the issues involved in developing an ethnic studies to truly further our aims for multicultural education. And while there is some evidence which demonstrates that retooling was occurring, there is none which suggests that this circumstance was supported by "institutional" monies.

### Summary and Conclusions to the Problems

The first decade of ethnic studies can be characterized as one in which our attention was scattered rather than concentrated. Our attention was focused on "them" looking at "us." To put it simply: Ethnic studies, as an area of academic enquiry, was retarded because those of us who accepted the mantle of responsibility were unwilling to fulfill our charge or were incapable of fulfilling it. There were some strides made in "fresh-water" but disconnected "puddles." These are important as we connect the past with the future. These "puddles" are viewed as critical springboards for our collective present and future directions.

### Whither Ethnic Studies?: Toward Solutions

The purpose of ethnic studies is to develop multicultural education as a liberating experience for people. We begin with the assumption that "monocultural (educational) preparation for life in a multicultural society is inherently deficient."<sup>5</sup> We understand that "education is not neutral, it is for the liberation or for the domestication of people, for their humanization or their dehumanization, no matter whether the educators are conscious of this or not."<sup>6</sup> We further propose that

Quality education is a process which...provides maximum opportunity for each (person) to locate and utilize culturally enhancing knowledge and skills alignments which (are congruent with their) needs and abilities. (It) must stand above popular assumptions and provide the flexibility which recognizes individuality as an important attribute...in a free society.<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, our focal area must be viewed as dynamic processes where multiculturalisms, liberation, and education are in most instances synonymous. This is the legacy left by the freshwater "puddles" of the 1970s.

THE PATH: The persons in the freshwater but disconnected "puddles" focused their attention on Euroamericanist forces without *linkages* from which to draw nutrients. They survived. But Robert Yoshioka suggests that for ethnic studies to *thrive* and not merely survive, it is important for linkages to be an active ingredie

Some of us learned in the 1970s that an identification of useful learned opinion, from whatever quarter, is necessary to properly construct and link our paths for liberation (see Diagram 1, for example). Our focus on liberation, in the development of our pathways, stems from what Louis Sarabia views as

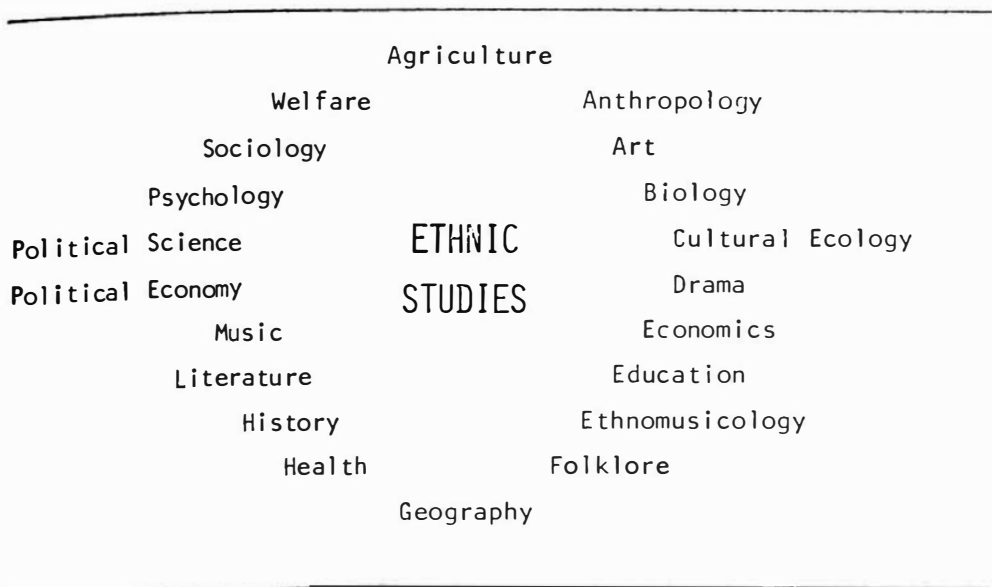
a mission to spread the faith, that faith being reduced to its simplest common denominator in the phrase "human understanding." (Because) we have seen too many communities torn apart and weakened (as) one group failed to understand or even care about another segment of its population. And we (are) compelled to do something about it. We are idealists in an unideal world.<sup>9</sup>

It was in the act of proselytizing that we discovered the bases for our data. We discovered that there is no fixed methodology for the processes of liberation through ethnic studies. Indeed, the essence of our learning revealed that we must view our work as the vehicle by which the principles of democracy are given expression.

It is important for us to agree to aver consistently that ethnic studies is not a discipline. Nor should it be. We must view our focal area as an art form, because our goals are better served by focusing on real issues of liberation which confront us on a daily basis. At our very best we are addressing questions of human values whereby individuals (who sometimes stand as captains of institutions) are capable of understanding "self" and allowing "others" to enhance themselves. Helen MacLam puts it thus:

Ultimately, the purpose of ethnic studies...(is) to invest people with power to act and change; power to assume direction for their own lives and to alter the prevailing societal structure so we may all share in what is justly ours.<sup>10</sup>

Diagram I



Because we are essentially artisans who develop new meaning from existing resources, much of our work necessarily relates to interpreting the pursuits of disciplinarians in the academy. We give a different perspective for *linking* elements from the various disciplines as shown in Diagram I. In the process of our reinterpretations, we must continually influence these disciplines to view existing realities for what they are. Those of us who are, or would be ethnic studies practitioners must understand our tasks as creations in addition to reinterpretations. That is, we must develop a "sacred space" which disciplinarians will not attempt, but tempt those disciplinarians into invading, nonetheless. We must be capable

of forging the creative connections between the nodes of facts to ensure that we are about an agenda which demonstrates that liberation is inextricably linked to all questions of human rights and social justice.

As an artistic endeavor, ethnic studies must continue to develop the talent of people from all backgrounds who are interested in multiculturalisms. Merely focusing on academic scholarship, though important, is not enough. Our methodologies must be active. We must continually include community folk, disciplinarians, students, and ethnicians in the processes and procedures of our focal area.

As ethnic studies practitioners, we encompass these directions: questioning "societal priests," including ourselves, restructuring institutions (and disciplines) to reflect multiculturalisms; involving persons in the processes of liberation through dynamic consciousness; and a continuing willingness to accept and project the goals and promises of ethnic studies to hesitant audiences.

THE PROCESS: Because we are continually confronted with an unarticulated monocultural bias in schools and ourselves, we need to avoid being parochial in the pursuit of our goal for liberation through multicultural education. And while we must make use of conventional wisdom, we need to go beyond that in our creations--creations which can result in a truly democratic republic. Indeed, the "thrill of discovery" is an outstanding feature for the ethnic studies process. A necessary dimension for ethnic studies practitioners is change. We need to change ourselves spatially; we need to change our perspectives. These changes provide the kind of linkages we need to develop fully.

Further, we need to change ourselves spatially (geographically) in order for us to better understand differential perceptions. Spatial changes provide us with the opportunity to participate at a level other than that of our usual "safe" base of operation. We need to build into our processes methods by which visiting arrangements are inherent in our movement. Persons and programs need to be continually scrutinized by critical outsiders, and the outsider needs the experience of being a foreigner.

We also need to change our institutionalized perspectives. We can involve ourselves in this process by changing institutions, such as leaving the academy for the world of business/politics, or leaving the university to teach in a secondary school. Some information that we might gain from these forays might well provide us with the insights we need to understand the nature of ethnicity and the means for propagating multiculturalisms. As we learn from our movements and changing perspectives, we are better able to communicate to others how to infuse institutions to the degree that they reflect the multi-cultures we are as a nation. In this process we develop linkages in, and for, ethnic studies.

TO CONCLUDE: Ethnic studies has a mission in the academy and in broader institutional and cultural contexts. That mission is to bring multiculturalism/liberation to fruition for all citizens. We must persist in our pursuits in spite of naysayers. We must be committed to the challenge of democracy. Meanwhile, we must understand that it will not be faculty, students, academic programs, cultural centers, or communities on which ethnic studies will grow and develop its potential for liberation into the next century: *It will be the fusion of them all that will bring fruition to our endeavors.* This dynamic fusion is how *intent* gets translated into *action*.

---

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jack Bass. Widening the Mainstream of American Culture. New York: The Ford Foundation (1978) 34.

It is interesting to take note of this full title and ponder its implications. One such implication is that prior to the Ford Foundation's grant monies to coloured "ethnics," the stream flowed without us. Too many of us have accepted that notion, alas.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-36.

<sup>3</sup> J. Lawrence McConville. "Ethnic Studies Curricula and Related Institutional Entities at Southwestern Colleges and Universities," Bulletin of the Cross-Cultural Southwest Ethnic Study Center. El Paso: University of Texas (1975) 21-22.

<sup>4</sup> Brom Weber. "Our Multi-Ethnic Heritage and American Literary Studies," *MELUS Newsletter*. Vol. 2, No. 1 (1975), 11-12.

<sup>5</sup> Cliff Hooper. "Interaction Education Model," unpublished Mss., Bellevue, WA: Bellevue Community College (1979) 2.

<sup>6</sup> Paulo Freire. "Showing a Man How to Name the World," quoted from *The Ethnic Studies Departmental Working Paper XIX*. Pomona: Cal Poly University (1978) 19.

<sup>7</sup> Hooper, *Op. cit.*, 3-4.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Yoshioka. "Guest Editorial," *Explorations in Ethnic Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1978) 1.

<sup>9</sup> Louis Sarabia. "Guest Editorial," *Explorations in Ethnic Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1979) 1.

<sup>10</sup> Helen MacLam. "Power to the People; Ethnic Studies as an Enabling Force," *NAIES Newsletter*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1979) 26.