



# *The Crisis of the University in the Context of Neoapartheid*

## **A View from Ethnic Studies**

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**Abstract:** This paper is a decolonial intervention in the crisis of the Humanities today. It shows the colonial limits of its scope and the challenges posed by subaltern subjects and knowledges to its future. The essay is rich in examples of how the Westernized University works to reduce or neutralize the impact of Ethnic Studies and other forms of subaltern knowledge production that represent a challenge to the eurocentric/westerncentric Humanities as they exist today.

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

An often neglected consideration in reflections about the crisis of the university and the humanities today is that some of the most intractable challenges and perverse consequences that the university and the humanities face are not only due to the influence of global capitalism or neoliberalism *simpliciter*, but more specifically to racial neoliberalism, global coloniality, and neoapartheid.<sup>1</sup> Spelling out the current crisis of public education and the challenge that the humanities face today in terms of neoliberalism alone is a repetition of the

same mistake that others have committed when they have aimed to articulate every problem as simply an emanation of capitalism, without seeing how capitalist exploitation is inextricably connected with multiple forms of dehumanization, many of them based on the colonial enterprises of European civilization (slavery, the modern gender system, racism, and Orientalism, among others).

This reductive understanding of the current crisis is partly rooted in theoretical perspectives that consider racialization and coloniality secondary to the power of commodification and to the expansion of the market logic and value system, and partly due to the definition of the humanities as the heart and soul of liberal university education and to their perception as

<sup>1</sup> For explorations of racial neoliberalism and global coloniality see Goldberg (2008) and Grosfoguel (2002) respectively.

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useless when observed through the lenses of neoliberalism. When one departs from those premises, the disinvestment on the humanities and their consideration as useless, cosmetic, or merely optional appears as the most devastating dimension of the current crisis at the university. Lost from view is that, while the humanities and the interpretive social sciences are often devalued as fields that do not produce profit, areas such as Ethnic Studies are straightforwardly rendered illegal and perceived as dangerous (see Rodríguez 2010). Likewise, the critiques of the modern Western university and its liberal form of education that have emanated from fields such as Ethnic Studies are also ignored or left aside as unimportant or as too temporary to have any substantial value. And so, the great crisis of the age at the level of the university is presented in terms of an encounter between the liberal humanities and neoliberalism, a duality that preserves the presuppositions that keep interdisciplinary and emancipatory fields like Ethnic Studies as a temporary complement of the humanities, or as a threat. This is without a doubt one of the most disconcerting and unfortunate aspects of analyses of the crisis of the university today, and one that must be corrected not only for the sake of social and cognitive justice (Santos 2010), but also for the preservation of what is best in the humanities and other areas in the university.

Based on the previous considerations, I submit that in order to respond to the current crisis the humanities have to insist not only on how important they are for a robust democracy and for the formation of an educated citizenry, but also to:

- a) take stock of how they have been complicit with neoliberalism (in terms of over-professionalization, etc.) as well as with different forms of dehumanization, segregation, and apartheid;
- b) enter in a closer relationship with interdisciplinary formations that focus on the critical examination of race, gender and other markers of dehumanization and consider the possibility that a formation like “ethnic studies” could actually become a matrix for the transformation of the humanities through engagement with questions and issues that have typically remained excluded from it, as Johnella Butler (2001) aptly describes. I conceive of “ethnic studies” as a name for a particular expression of a project that precedes the formation of “ethnic studies” in the academy and that has gone with different names in different places and spaces. These different projects can be seen as part of an unfinished project of decolonization after the end of formal desegregation in the academy. What we find today, though, are multiple attempts to intensify the colonization of knowledge and the segregation of peoples in society. One only has to compare census projections on the one hand, which anticipate that people of color, and possibly Latina/os alone, will become majority in the country sometime in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the dismal reports of, for instance, Latina/os having “the lowest rate of high-school completion and the lowest level of educational attainment of any minority group” or Black students having “the lowest college-persistence rate of any racial group” (see Schmidt 2010). In face of this, one could argue that neither the humanities nor the social sciences should aim to remain “neutral.” But this only means that they have to take sides with the emancipatory and decolonial forms of

knowledge production today, and being willing to change in the process;

- c) consider entering into a different relation with social movements, and develop methods that simultaneously legitimize those movements and provide new lenses for work in the humanities, the social sciences, and the university at large (e.g., Boaventura de Sousa Santos' theorization of the World Social Forum and his proposal for changes in existing research universities and the creation of a Popular University for Social Movements—Santos 2003 and 2010);
- d) seek to empower the population that is expected to become the majority in the US by engaging the problems that they face and that are common to other long-standing populations in the country who have always been considered to be outside the norm.

The humanities have more chance of saving what is most important about them by showing their relevance in critical analysis and by pursuing the most constructive lines of inquiry that I have indicated above, than by rehearsing the typical arguments about its constructive role in educating the citizen-subject, etc.—lines of argument that do not take sufficiently into consideration the extent to which the problem that we face is neopartheid, and not just economic neoliberalism.

## II. “HUMANITIES METHODS IN ETHNIC STUDIES”: A VIEW FROM UC BERKELEY

Now I would like to give a more concrete account of some of the main points that I have made. I will primarily take a local perspective and focus on the present,

without ignoring history or global dynamics. I will highlight the value of the humanities, but do so via a circuitous route that does not necessarily end in the humanities as we have known them. As to a focus on the present and the local context, I will begin with a reflection on a course that I taught for seven years at UC Berkeley, where I first offered these reflections.

The course in question was entitled “Humanities Methods in Ethnic Studies.” The approach that the course presupposes poses the humanities as the source of tools for the study of “ethnic” populations, which in the field of Ethnic Studies does not mean people who have an ethnicity in general, but those who by virtue of their language, culture, or place of origin are not conceived as part of the norm and are rather perceived as dispensable populations. As worthy as this kind of study is, my approach was different. What I decided to do with the course was to focus on the questions and methods explored by a number of intellectuals, the majority of whom are of color, and who are attentive to multiple forms of dehumanization, oppression, and exploitation. It was this work, for the most part inter- and trans-disciplinary, that served as a foundation to raise the question of method and simultaneously think about the meaning and significance of the humanities. That is, the course focused not so much on already existing humanities tools or methods, but on how Ethnic Studies both demands and provides tools for a renewed and reconceptualized form of humanities.

I taught this course several times at UC Berkeley, and it became perhaps the most successful course that I taught there, as measured by the number of study groups that were formed and by student organizing (organizing film series, doing free tutorials for other students, etc.) that continued well after the course had finished. The course begins with a discussion of Cathy Davidson and David Theo Goldberg “A

Manifesto for the Humanities in a Technological Age,” which appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2004 (Davidson and Goldberg, 2004). In that essay, Davidson and Goldberg identify certain elements in the crisis of the humanities and argue for a renewed conception of humanities work that more fully embraces the challenges brought up by digital technologies, interdisciplinarity, and questions about value, meaning and significance in the design and implementation of research in all areas and policy issues.

Davidson is John Hope Franklin Institute Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies and the first Vice Provost for Interdisciplinary Studies in the nation, if not ever. John Hope Franklin was an eminent African American historian with a long record of research in African American and US American History, as well as a leader in the struggle for civil rights and social justice in the US. So, Davidson and, as I will show, Goldberg as well are not only humanities scholars, but also intellectuals whose vision is shaped by foundational literature and figures in Ethnic Studies. I dedicated the first week of the course to discussing Davidson’s and Goldberg’s “Manifesto,” reading it with the lenses of the traditional humanities and assessing it from the angle of Ethnic Studies scholarship. I’ll try to give you a taste of this now, but be mindful that it takes several hundred pages and long hours of lecturing to take students to a level in which they are able to understand the different layers of the arguments just quickly outlined here.

It is quite significant that Duke, a southern university, decided to link its agenda for interdisciplinary studies in the academy with the work of an African American scholar. This agenda became solidified with the creation of the John Hope Franklin Center for Interdisciplinary Studies and the John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute at Duke, both of which were co-founded by Cathy David-

son and African Americanist Karla Holloway. In my view, the John Hope Franklin Center for Interdisciplinary and International Studies and the Humanities Institute are places originally conceived to do interdisciplinary, international, and humanities work “in color,” by which I mean, not just for African Americans and people of color, but oriented by imperatives of social justice, fully aware of the significance of dehumanization and race for the very constitution of modern society and scholarship, and inspired by horizons of possibility that envision the emergence of a decolonized humanity. Isn’t something like this what also inspires the Kantian-Humboldtian liberal arts and the sciences that are at the core of the modern Western university? Well, not exactly. The John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute takes its point of departure from elsewhere (the U.S. south and the underside of modernity rather than just the European Enlightenment and its characteristic ideas of nature, society, and reason), even as it is also inscribed in the modern Western research university. But let me turn now to the co-author of the “Manifesto,” David Theo Goldberg.

David Theo Goldberg is Director of the System-wide University of California Humanities Research Institute at UC Irvine. Davidson and Goldberg are, indeed, conscious of the relevance of their positions as directors of humanities institutes, and they wrote their “Manifesto,” “as scholars with experience as directors of two interdisciplinary humanities institutes—one on the West Coast and one on the East Coast, one at a public university system and one at a private university” (2004, B7). But they share more than they willingly admit in the essay, as Goldberg, just like Davidson, has a record of commitment with a scholarly vision grounded on attending to social justice issues and anti-racist work. To be sure, we all know that Goldberg is one of the foremost theoreticians of race and

racism, and one strongly committed to an anti-racist vision, to showing the conceptual viability of the concept of race, and to the rejection of color-blind racism, which is the dominant form of racism today. Less known is that before being the Director of the UC Humanities Research Institute, he directed the School for Social Justice, known today as the School for Social Transformation at Arizona State University. I am going to take a moment to at least mention some features of that School because, just like Duke University's John Hope Franklin Institute, it represents a place where the humanities and the social sciences are being reconfigured, rather than simply revalued, in a direction that can ultimately make what we call "the humanities" more productive and relevant.

The School for Social Transformation is driven by the tasks of revealing "intersecting forms of injustice based on race, gender, class, sexual orientation and legal status, among other factors," engaging "multiple visions of justice," and transformation, by which they mean using "multidisciplinary social inquiry" to allow scholars and community leaders to translate lessons learned during one historical moment or location to solutions appropriate for emerging social justice concerns" (see <http://justice.clas.asu.edu/about>, accessed Jan. 22, 2011). The goals and principles of the School for Social Transformation seem to be in line with other contemporary efforts such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos's proposal for a Popular University of Social Movements (Santos 2003). Santos is arguably the foremost theoretician of the World Social Forum, and a strongly respected intellectual and scholar-activist in parts of Africa and Asia, and in Latin America. He has written amply about the crisis of the university since at least the 1990s, if not before. And in addition to developing a proposal for a Popular University of Social Movements, he argues that research universities can become sources of

"counter-hegemonic globalization-as-public-good," but this entails for him a radical transformation from fixation on northern epistemologies to openness to southern epistemologies, from university to pluriversity knowledge, and, from speaking about the liberal arts and their value to focusing one's reflection on global social and cognitive justice (Santos 2010).

At stake in Santos's reflections is a critical intervention in the conceptualization of the university, and a shift away from the monopoly that the liberal arts have had at the time of articulating the relevance and principles of education, even as they are being challenged by corporate criteria. The shift in question complicates debates on the dominant principles and oppositions between fact and meaning, prediction and interpretation, and explanation and understanding. Here we see, rather, an emphasis on emancipation and social transformation that invites us to formally introduce concepts such as emancipation and decolonization in our discussion about education, well beyond the limits imposed by the traditional sciences and the humanities with their typical insistence on explanation and understanding. This is part of what I want to put on the table for discussion here, and part also of the fundamental claims of the "Decolonizing the University" conference, which took place in the spring of 2010 at UC Berkeley and celebrated the 40 years of Ethnic Studies on that campus (see <http://vimeo.com/15729523>).

### III. CONSERVATIVE AND LIBERAL RESPONSES

It is not difficult to imagine how conservative and liberal quarters react when faced with these possibilities, concepts, and frameworks. From the conservative side, in 2006 David Horowitz wrote a series on "Indoctrination," the third installation of which targeted the

School of Justice and Social Inquiry at Arizona State University. He wrote that the School “is not a department whose course of study is devoted to legal concepts of justice or discussions of the same. Quite the contrary. The department’s self-description makes it clear that the agenda is specifically designed to introduce students to the concepts of ‘economic justice’ and ‘social justice,’ which are ideological terms associated with the political left. The department’s self-description specifically (and deceptively) claims that its approach is empirical and objective...” (Horowitz 2006a).

It is instructive that the first piece in Horowitz’s “Indoctrination” series is dedicated to the University of Colorado at Boulder and that it begins by making reference to its Ethnic Studies Department’s former chairperson Ward Churchill (Horowitz 2006b). Ethnic Studies, to be sure, is typically first in line when it comes to conservative attacks, even as it has sometimes been forced to survive only in the form of primarily social scientific studies about race and ethnicity, or as a companion to area studies, which are arguably reductionist conceptions of the field. I would argue, instead, that what we have come to call Ethnic Studies is one of the most important interventions in academic settings and that it challenges the division of knowledge based on the primacy of explanation and understanding and the European and U.S. American oriented humanities and sciences. That is, Ethnic Studies is yet another example of an intellectual and scholarly space that challenges the humanities and aims to make humanities’ work simultaneously more rigorous and relevant. To be sure, those committed with the liberal arts curriculum and division of knowledge tend to see Ethnic Studies as: either an undesirable field whose relation to social movements make it suspect; as an unsophisticated scholarly space that is haunted and fundamentally limited by feelings of

nostalgia, cultural nationalism, or ethnic essentialism; or, at best, as a temporary space to be either maintained at a minimum, phased out, or folded into discipline-based departments and the standard divisions between the humanities, the social sciences, and other areas.

The difference between the two realities is to some extent captured in a piece by Stanley Fish entitled “The Crisis of the Humanities Officially Arrives” (2010), when compared with Roberto Rodríguez’s column “Arizona: This is What Apartheid Looks Like” (2010). The first article addresses the proposed elimination of French, Italian, Classics, Russian, and theatre programs from the State University of New York at Albany and calls for political action in defense of the liberal arts. The second focuses on laws SB 1070 and HB 2281, and calls attention to a social reality of apartheid that affects bodies as well as knowledges and cultures. The issues are quite different: the crisis of the liberal arts vis-à-vis the near-criminalization of certain forms of knowledge with HB 2281. And, yet, one must reflect on how these two realities relate to each other. While Ethnic Studies disturb and challenge the existing division of knowledge and conceptions of the humanities in the university, they appear even more as a threat to other forms of hegemony out of the university. There is no better evidence of this today than the passing of state law HB 2281 in Arizona, which bans Raza Studies from Arizona’s public schools classrooms. This law is a companion to another piece of legislation, SB 1070, which allows police to interrogate suspects about their citizen status on the basis of “reasonable suspicion.” While humanists complain about the lack of recognition of the value of their fields, and their evaluation according to metrics that belong to the corporate sector and that seek efficiency rather than understanding, Raza and Ethnic Studies scholars face not only the menace of neoliberalism, but also perse-

cution and illegality. That is, while the humanities are facing the pressure of neo-liberalism, Ethnic Studies is facing the pressure of both neo-liberalism and neoapartheid in a context where the people and their memories, knowledges, questions, and perspectives are rendered illegal.

From the perspective of a number of humanists, the relation is clear and prioritizes the crisis of the humanities even as it shows concerns for apartheid: one must demonstrate how the humanities are important for the education of ethno-racialized populations, particularly those that are growing demographically. The argument claims that these populations deserve the humanities, and that the humanities deserve support from the state in compensation for their function of enlightening the population. The implicit view here is that it is better for the state and for ethno-racialized populations to value and support the humanities, since they can pay a role in better prepare people for life in the nation and, doing this, they help reduce the apparent need for apartheid. This argument, though, is not much different from liberal views that propose unidirectional assimilation in response to the more conservative ones that tend to justify apartheid. But unidirectional assimilation and its demoralizing and marginalizing effects are precisely what Raza Studies classes in Arizona high schools are combating.

If youth of color and other sectors who have been crucial to the creation of Ethnic Studies and related units in the university thought that investment in the humanities was what would have best responded to their needs, they would have sought direct support for them. Rather, they found a situation where "Arts and Sciences" have been understood for the most part as "White Arts and Sciences," and where the divisions of knowledge within the university, and between knowledge and praxis, are not up to the task of responding to their questions and their concerns. Prioritizing the

defense of the humanities in a context of rising apartheid and the near-criminalization of academic spaces focused on reflecting on people of color's ideas, questions, and concerns is another form of erasure and sub-alternization. A better response to the challenges of the time would be for the humanities to take more seriously the questions and critical insights from decolonial and emancipatory epistemological formations, such as Ethnic Studies, Raza Studies and other projects, and thereby seek to respond to the questions of value and relevance that they face today, even if this means fundamental changes in the humanities themselves. But crises often strengthen the urge for self-preservation, which can lead to ignoring other realities even if those realities are far more dangerous. If responding to the challenge posed by neoliberalism is difficult, it is even more difficult for the humanities to increase their scope and challenge that very limited understanding of the crisis that we face, while seeking to strengthen their ties with the multi- and transdisciplinary epistemological projects that are most closely related to those who are the objects of neoapartheid.

Now, there are other ways to understand the relation between the crisis of the humanities and the emergence of neoapartheid. One interesting consideration that ties these two realities together is that the humanities are facing in the current context the kind of questioning that communities of color have usually faced: they do not produce value and must constantly attempt to prove their right to exist and receive support from the state, and they are ultimately dispensable. Neoliberalism thus seems to be informed by the logic of racism. And as the humanities suffer the brunt of racial logic, people of color and the forms of knowledge most relevant to them become not merely unproductive, but outright dangerous. Through this process the university becomes more and more

“white,” that is, it keeps certain bodies and knowledges away, or in minimum form, while hastening the incorporation of corporate values and racial logic into the very perception and evaluation of the remaining fields.

The temptation for the humanities would be to show that they are the depositories of a better form of whiteness (without ever calling it that, or recognizing it as such) than the one that is now putting the humanities at the level of “unproductive” people of color. The international financial crisis represents, among other things, a crisis of Western hegemony and a limit to the expectations of certain groups of people precisely at moments of increased migratory flows from the South to the North and significant demographic changes in countries such as the United States. It would be a fundamental mistake to critically evaluate the attack on the university today, and the position that the humanities face, only in relation to economics or neoliberalism. Race, racism, and neapartheid are equally important considerations, as well as the legacies of colonialism, slavery, and heteropatriarchy, and all these must be looked at in interconnected ways. Doing so is part of the very analytic framework that Ethnic Studies and related fields often follow. As a result, and contrary to the desire of self-preservation, it seems to me that what the humanities can better do is to expand their analytic vision well beyond the opposition between liberal education as public good and neoliberalism, recognize the racial logic operating in the context of increasing apartheid, and take emancipatory and decolonial epistemological projects more seriously, even to the point of considering a transition from the emphasis on liberal arts training to the cultivation of emancipatory and decolonial acting and thinking.

As I noted previously, it is not only conservatism and neoliberalism that seek to undermine Ethnic Studies and projects such as the School of Social Transformation

at Arizona State. It is also liberalism. Liberals typically defend the humanities and, of course, the liberal arts in face of neoliberalism and conservatism, while at best tolerate areas like Ethnic Studies and seek to keep them at their very minimal level of expression. I’ll give a few succinct examples, drawn in part from the UC Berkeley campus, with which I am most familiar:

- The path from the Third World Strike and the demand of a Third World College to the creation of an Ethnic Studies Department with “ethnic” programs under the Division of the Social Sciences.
- The path from the demand of an Ethnic Studies requirement on campus to the establishment of an American Cultures requirement. Note the path here in designations, which go from “Third World” to “Ethnic” to “American”; and the transition from a demand for a College with departments to the reality of a department with various “ethnic” programs within the School of Social Sciences. A contestatory nomenclature is converted into an ethno-national project within the established division of knowledge in the university.
- The path from projects for empowerment by faculty and students in Ethnic Studies programs, on the one hand, and universities’ interest in “civic engagement” and “university-community partnerships,” on the other, after massive disinvestment from the former and with the expectation that the former would fold into the latter.
- The path from the establishment of an Institute for the Study of Social Change under the leadership of Troy Duster to the creation of the Institute for the Study of Societal Issues and the demotion of the In-



stitute for the Study of Social Change to a Center. Note here the path from a more progressive concept (“social change”) to a more positivistic one (“societal issues”).

- The path from desegregation and decolonization of society and knowledge, to initiatives for equity and diversity, as in the Berkeley Diversity Research Initiative, and other such initiatives in the country. Diversity is a concept that can have some usefulness in post-affirmative action California, but it must be properly situated alongside other less ambiguous concepts and within an emancipatory and decolonial rather than a liberal framework. Consider that David Horowitz’s campaign prides itself for trying to bring diversity to university campuses. To be sure, the diversity that concerns him is the presence of conservatives and conservative ideas in the liberal arts. It is also instructive that the academic standards that Horowitz explicitly adopts “to measure what is an appropriate curriculum is provided in a classic statement by the longtime president of the University of California, Berkeley, Robert Gordon Sproul, who defends the freedom of the university and the “right to prevent exploitation of its prestige by unqualified persons or by those who would use it as a platform for propaganda” (Horowitz 2006b). This is, I submit, the way in which Ethnic Studies is usually considered in the academy: at most, they are good for diversity (understood in a liberal form) and good enough for them to be able to exist within the humanities or the social sciences, but not good enough to lead agendas for wider transformation.

Coming back to Davidson and Goldberg, I submit that their eloquent defense of the humanities as well as their commitments and work are testimony to the power of ethnic studies and related fields. Their “Manifesto” can be seen in part as a Trojan horse of sorts, which consists of reconceptualizing the humanities and putting them more in line with areas such as Ethnic Studies while defending them. The defense is clearly necessary, particularly, as their main target is humanities scholars and, particularly, administrators who make decisions about funding and support for the humanities. I often wonder, though, how they would have written their “Manifesto” with another audience in mind. What if they wrote it directly to those who inspired their work—for example, John Hope Franklin and other, numerous anti-racist authors? I wonder whether they would have gone beyond a defense of the humanities and a description of Ethnic Studies as a field within them, and whether they would have sided with Johnella Butler, who proposes that we see Ethnic Studies along with Gender and Women’s Studies and other emancipatory fields as matrixes for changing the humanities and the social sciences (Butler 20010).

I myself take Butler’s path, and join Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who distills important epistemological and socially transformative principles from the World Social Forum and similar projects. But joining these efforts would have sent the message that administrators, and directors of humanities institutes should not just be looking at each other and to how the humanities work in the Ivy League or prestigious research universities. They would have sent the message that sometimes the best keys for transformation come from what has been systematically excluded, and from spaces that remain in the margins or altogether outside the university. Ironically perhaps, if humanities scholar leaders took this turn they might increase their chances

of getting more support by socially conscious foundations, as well as by the growing number of legislators of color in different states.

I would like to conclude by stating that rethinking the university through the careful consideration of neapartheid and “racial neoliberalism” (Goldberg 2008)—instead of solely in reference to neoliberalism *simpliciter*, conservatism, or capitalism—along with serious consideration of the epistemological principles in Ethnic Studies and related projects, has the potential of both addressing the most fundamental problems of the age and gaining the hearts and minds of the neocolonized and segregated populations who make up the majority of people in the world and are expected to become the majority in California (between 2030 and 2040) and in the United States (in the second half of this century). And if the public university in California and the US makes itself relevant to those who become the majorities in the state and the nation, maybe that very public will support it.

I believe that at least some public universities are becoming aware of this, but they are responding to the challenges through the same liberal logic that they have always tended to use, being unable to challenge the roots of the problems that we observe. Perhaps it is time to seriously engage other approaches, particularly those that the segregated populations themselves have often produced and strongly supported, even if that means that we have to dramatically change the university and reconceptualize the organization of the humanities, the social sciences, and the university as a whole. The humanities are welcome to join and support this so far primarily “southern” conversation (counting Ethnic Studies as a southern epistemological space within a northern setting), and maybe, in that way, maintain, and even radicalize, what is best about them in opposition to neapartheid and in favor of a more fully decolonized world.

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