

Closed Classrooms?
An Analysis of College Syllabi on Contentious Issues

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One of the central justifications for universities is that they are needed to form citizens. Citizens need not just a fluency with the ideas that are contending for dominance in our democracy, but also an ability to assess them critically.¹ This is especially true for the next generation of elites who will go on to exercise an outsized influence over national and international affairs.

We should ask, then, how well are colleges and universities preparing the young to assume such powers? How well are they introducing students to the moral and political controversies that roil modern democratic life? Are students being exposed to a broad range of intellectual perspectives that give shape to these controversies and illuminate the complexity of the issues at stake?

Such questions have been hard to answer in any systematic fashion because we know so little about what is taught in college classrooms. What we professors do in our capacity as teachers has been largely shielded from public view. As the education

¹ On the latter virtue, Andrew Deblanco argued that college should furnish citizens with a “well-functioning bullshit meter.” See Andrew Deblanco, *College: What it Was, Is, and Should Be*, 2nd ed. (Princeton University Press, 2012), 29.

historian Jonathan Zimmerman has observed, “college teaching is a highly public act that has remained mostly private.”² That privacy has made it hard to assess how well universities and colleges are fulfilling their public purposes.

This essay shines a needed light on college classrooms by drawing on a unique database of college syllabi collected by the “Open Syllabus Project” (OSP). The OSP has amassed millions of syllabi from around the world primarily by scraping them from university websites. They date as far back as 2008, though a majority are from the last ten years. Most of the data comes from universities in the United States, U.K., Canada, and Australia.³ And while the OSP doesn’t provide all of the raw data to scholars, it provides limited access via a searchable website and useful analytic tools to assess the data.

Among other analytic tools, the OSP allows users to see how often texts are assigned, and how frequently they are paired with other publications. It doesn’t, however, allow users to do this latter analysis by country – so, we couldn’t confine our analysis of frequently co-assigned texts to schools in the United States. However, as we’ll see, most of the texts we study are primarily assigned in the United States.

We used the OSP to explore how three contentious issues are being taught: racial bias in the American criminal justice system, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the ethics of abortion. These issues have been important sources of division in our democracy. While the first two issues inspired massive protests from leafy campuses in southern California to the streets of Berlin, the latter issue has been the most enduring

² Jonathan Zimmerman, *The Amateur Hour: A History of College Teaching* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), ix.

³ More than 14 million include the assigned readings. Some are repeat courses. We do not know how many precisely because the database has scrubbed the names of professors. For a fuller description of the database see <https://blog.opensyllabus.org/about-os>.

moral issue in the American culture wars. These issues are also centered in different disciplines that range from sociology and law (race and the criminal justice system) to political science and history (Israel) to philosophy (abortion).

In each case, we explored the extent to which the scholarly debate around each issue is taught to students. Therefore, we are not interested in whether disreputable demagogues and conspiracists are assigned to students. Generally speaking, these figures should be excluded from college syllabi. Rather, we are interested in whether students are exposed to a broad spectrum of the *most reputable and informed* thinkers, which includes professors and, in some cases, well-regarded intellectuals and writers outside of academia.⁴

Guided primarily by citation counts and our own familiarity with the academic literature, we first identified some of the most canonical texts on each issue. More than others, these works shaped the conversation around these issues, attracting praise as well as sharp criticism. Generally speaking, that was an easy exercise. As we'll see, for example, no work has had more influence on the study of race and the criminal justice system than Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*. Because Ta-Nehisi Coates's memoir *Between the World and Me* is also widely cited and assigned, we also selected it for our study. Similarly, *Orientalism* by the literary critic Edward Said, which, though not narrowly about Israel, has had a singular influence on how Jewish Israelis – and their conflicts with Palestinian neighbors – have been understood. Additionally, we selected some of the most cited and discussed historical works on Israeli-Palestinian

⁴ Here we borrow from Jonathan Zimmerman and Emily Robertson's definition of a controversy as one in which the most informed people disagree. See their book, *The Case for Contention: Teaching Controversial Issues in American Schools* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

conflict. And, finally, we examined Judith Jarvis Thomson's "A Defense of Abortion," which has had a uniquely powerful influence on debates over the ethics of abortion.

We then assessed the extent to which these canonical works were assigned with their most important intellectual critics. We asked: Are they taught in conversation with critical texts? Or are they taught with other works which tend to reinforce – rather than complicate – their main arguments?

Additionally, we flipped these analyses to see how often the most important critics of these canonical texts are taught with like-minded thinkers. Here again, we asked whether they are taught along with the canonical texts they are criticizing — or are the critics simply taught with other voices that tend to reinforce their central claims?

To varying degrees, we found a strong asymmetry: While some of the most important voices like Alexander's, Said's and Thomson's are routinely taught, their critics are not generally assigned along with them. And when we flip the analysis to see how often the critics are assigned along with the canonical texts, we find that they generally *are* taught together. In other words, in the comparatively rare cases when these critics are assigned, they are apparently taught to widen the conversation, not cement a different orthodoxy. That suggests a minority of professors do teach these intellectual controversies.

On the whole, though, it seems that professors generally insulate their students from the wider intellectual disagreement that shape these important controversies. *That is the academic norm*, at least in the cases we studied. This is a problem we must collectively remedy.

Racism and the American Criminal Justice System

Few issues have vexed American politics more than the question of whether – and to what extent – the criminal justice system is biased against black Americans. More than any other book, Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness*, inspired a moral and political reckoning over race and our criminal justice system. Published in 2010, the book sat on the *New York Times* bestseller list for nearly five years. Ibram X. Kendi said it was “the spark that would eventually light the fire of Black Lives Matter.”⁵ Similarly, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* described *The New Jim Crow* as “one of the most influential books of the last 20 years.”⁶ *Slate* said it “transformed forever the way thinkers and activists view the phenomenon of mass incarceration,” ranking it among the best of the past quarter century.⁷

The academic influence of Alexander’s book was no less significant. As of this writing, it has been cited nearly nineteen thousand times. *The New Jim Crow* also became popular in university courses, as it should have given its scholarly and political influence. In the OSP database, it has been assigned 5,389 times, the vast majority in courses taught at American universities and colleges.⁸ Overall, that makes Alexander’s book the 232nd most assigned text, more popular than John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, and, even, the *Federalist Papers*.

⁵ Ibram X. Kendi, “A History of Race and Racism in America, in 24 Chapters,” *New York Times*, February 22, 2017.

⁶ “The New Canon: What’s the Most Influential Books of the Past 20 Years?” *Chronicle Review*, October 20, 2018.

⁷ Dan Kois and Laura Miller, “The 50 Best Nonfiction Books of the Past 25 Years,” *Slate*, November 18, 2019.

⁸ Of 5,389 appearances in the database, 4,153 are from universities and colleges in the United States – about 77% of all cases. Alexander’s book also appeared in 732 syllabi in the U.K., nearly 14% of all cases.

Alexander's book claimed that American history should be understood as a cyclical struggle between white supremacists and advocates for racial justice. While advocates for racial justice eventually succeed in overthrowing systems of racial oppression (as they did in the case of slavery and Jim Crow), white supremacists are resilient. Thus, after the successful passage of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act, Alexander says, they waged a new drug war that stirred up racialized fears of urban crime and social breakdown. In this way, Jim Crow—a system of racial oppression and social control—was reborn, just in a more sinister form. After all, the new system seemed fair and race neutral on the surface, when in fact, it was designed to subjugate black Americans. As Alexander concludes: "We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it."⁹

Alexander's provocative thesis was challenged almost immediately by other scholars. Yale Law Professor James Forman, Jr. penned a rebuttal, first published as a Yale Law School working Paper in 2011 and then in the pages of the *New York University Law Review* in 2012. Though Forman is no fan of the war on drugs, he thought Alexander's most significant empirical claims were demonstratively wrong. Alexander's thesis, Forman wrote:

Presents an incomplete account of mass incarceration's historical origins, fails to consider black attitudes toward crime and punishment, ignores violent crimes while focusing almost exclusively on drug crimes, obscures class distinctions within the African American community, and overlooks the effects of mass incarceration on other racial groups.

Finally, Forman added, "the Jim Crow analogy diminishes our collective memory of the Old Jim Crow's particular harms."¹⁰

⁹ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness* (The New Press, 2012), 2.

¹⁰ See James Forman, Jr., "Racial Critiques of Mass Incarceration: Beyond the New Jim Crow," *New York University Law Review* 87(1) 2012: 21-69.

Forman’s article did attract scholarly attention. As of this writing, his rebuttal has been cited more than 500 times. And some of the arguments in Forman’s article were picked up by other authors, who developed them in a more sustained way. Forman himself did so in *Locking Up Our Own*, published in 2017.

How often has Alexander’s book been taught with Forman’s essay? Before answering that question, we should first note that we didn’t want to include courses that taught Alexander’s book *before* Forman’s essay was published. So, since Forman’s article was published in 2011, we don’t want to fault professors for not assigning it in 2010 or even in 2011. Therefore, when we calculated the percentage of syllabi that included Forman’s article along with *The New Jim Crow*, we only looked at the total number of courses that assigned Alexander’s book since 2012. We apply this method through the following analysis.

Table 1: Frequency with which Prominent Critics are Assigned with Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*

	Total	Alexander Total	Percent
Forman (2011)	149	4,309 (since 2012)	3.46%
Pfaff (2014)	3	3,758 (since 2015)	0.08%
Fortner (2015)	53	3,405 (since 2016)	1.56%
Pfaff (2017)	49	2,438 (since 2018)	2.01%
Forman (2017)	84	2,438 (since 2018)	3.45%
Sharkey (2018)	9	1,951 (since 2019)	0.46%

Forman’s essay has been assigned with *The New Jim Crow* more than any subsequent academic work that challenged her thesis. That said, it has only been taught 149 times with Alexander. That means that nearly 97 percent of the course syllabi that

assign Alexander's book don't include Forman's essay in the OSP database (see Table 1).¹¹ So, while Forman's work helped stir academic contention over Alexander's thesis, it didn't find its way into many courses.

As Table 1 shows, the growing chorus of voices that followed Forman has been largely ignored as well. One is John Pfaff, a law professor at Fordham University. In 2014, he authored "Escaping from the Standard Story: Why the Conventional Wisdom on Prison Growth is Wrong, and Where We Can Go From Here" in the *Federal Sentencing Reporter*. Like Forman's 2011 article, Pfaff was sharply critical of *The New Jim Crow*. He especially stressed that prison growth was not primarily caused by the war on drugs, as Alexander contended. Instead, Pfaff argued that the rise in violent and property crime played a more important role in prison growth. From these empirical observations, Pfaff concluded: "When someone like Michelle Alexander argues in *The New Jim Crow* that drug incarcerations are the primary source of prison growth she is simply, categorically wrong."¹²

Pfaff's article has been almost entirely ignored by those who teach *The New Jim Crow*. It has been assigned with Alexander's book in *only three* courses in the OSP database. Perhaps this oversight is understandable, though, since Pfaff's article attracted less scholarly attention than Forman's piece in the *New York University Law Review*. As of this writing, it has been cited just 67 times.

The same cannot be said, though, of Michael Fortner's seminal book, *The Black Silent Majority*, published by Harvard University Press in 2015. While Fortner shares

¹¹ Ideally, we could have ascertained how often *The New Jim Crow* is assigned with *any* of her critics. However, the analytic tools on the OPS database don't permit that analysis.

¹² John F. Pfaff, "Escaping from the Standard Story: Why the Conventional Wisdom on Prison Growth is Wrong, and Where We Can Go From Here," *Federal Sentencing Reporter* 26(4) 2014: 265-270.

Alexander's condemnation of the modern drug war, he disputes Professor Alexander's account of its origins. Our draconian drug laws, Fortner found, grew out of the concerns of working- and middle-class blacks, who were seeking to protect their values and interests in the face of rising crime in the 1970s. And unlike whites, Fortner contends, these blacks found it far more difficult to move due to housing discrimination and their own financial insecurity. It's also why whites did not push for tough-on-crime policies in the early, formative years of the drug war. Since they were never in any real danger, Fortner argued, whites generally had other things on their minds.

Unlike Alexander, then, Fortner didn't find a racist conspiracy at the heart of the American drug war. Instead, he argued that its origins were more complex and tragic. And he rejected Alexander's sense that blacks were merely the subjects, never the agents, of modern American history. Fortner explained, pointedly: "I wrote this book to redeem the agency of black people who are portrayed, at best, as backbenchers to history, treated either as hostages to white supremacy or as the collateral damage of neoliberalism."¹³

Fortner's book attracted widespread praise as well as criticism. And it couldn't be easily ignored by scholars. It won the 2016 Herbert H. Lehman Prize for Distinguished Scholarship in New York History, awarded by The New York Academy of History. The *New York Times Book Review* selected *The Black Silent Majority* as an Editors' Choice in 2015, while Harvard University Press nominated it for the Pulitzer Prize as well. As of this writing, Fortner's book has been cited 280 times since its publication in 2015, a sign that it has hardly gone unnoticed by scholars. Even so, since 2016 *The Black Silent Majority* was assigned *only 53 times* with Alexander's book. That means that it was

¹³ Michael Javen Fortner, *The Black Silent Majority: The Rockefeller Drug Laws and the Politics of Punishment* (Harvard University Press, 2015), xii.

taught with *The New Jim Crow* in less than two percent of the courses in the database (see Table 1).

In 2017, both James Forman Jr. and John Pfaff published books that developed the claims they made in their earlier essays. Pfaff authored *Locked In: The True Causes of Mass Incarceration-and How to Achieve Real Reform Hardcover*, a careful analysis on the causes of prison growth. *Locked In* was widely reviewed and attracted praise from across the ideological spectrum. Forman's book, *Locking Up Our Own*, confirmed much of what Fortner claimed in *The Black Silent Majority*. He argued that black mayors and police chiefs first rose to power at the moment crime was surging in American cities. Faced with that pressing challenge, they embraced tough-on-crime policies. Forman's book was a sensational success, winning the Pulitzer and listed by the *New York Times* as one of the ten best books of the year. These books were too noteworthy to be ignored by scholars. As of this writing each book has been cited more than six hundred times.

Yet neither book is assigned to college students very often with Alexander's groundbreaking work. *Locked In* and *Locking Up Our Own* have been taught 49 and 84 times, respectively, with *The New Jim Crow* since their release – a book that has been assigned in 2,438 courses since 2018 (see Table 1). Like other important critics of Alexander's book, the norm is to shield students from the wider academic debate, even if that isn't always the motive.

In 2018, the Princeton sociologist Patrick Sharkey published *The Uneasy Peace: The Great Crime Decline, the Renewal of City Life, and the Next War on Violence*. Unlike many of the prior criticisms of Alexander's book, Sharkey argued that some of the consequences of America's anti-crime crusades were positive, particularly for black

Americans. Sharkey observed, for example, that violence reduction had been most stark in black neighborhoods. This change, Sharkey found, even improved educational outcomes for black children. After all, he observed, it's hard to focus on schoolwork when local murder rates are high. Sharkey stressed that while the great crime decline improved the lives of the most vulnerable, it was also purchased at a great social cost. Flooding neighborhoods with cops and mass incarceration reduces violence, but it is also punitive, even to those who commit no violence.

Sharkey's book was well received and attracted scholarly attention. As of this writing, it has been cited 341 times. But like Alexander's other critics, *Uneasy Peace* didn't find its way into classrooms very often. It has been paired with Alexander's book in only 9 courses.¹⁴

It's possible, of course, that other professors teach Alexander's critics by themselves, and thus stack the deck against her thesis. Yet in every case, *The New Jim Crow* is the *most commonly* assigned text with its most prominent critics (see Table 2). In other words, when professors decide to actually teach these critics, they generally include Alexander.

It's true that Alexander is not always taught with these critics. But even when that's true, they are paired with *other* books that take a more critical view of the criminal justice system. Consider Patrick Sharkey's book, *The Uneasy Peace*, a work that is paired with Alexander's only 26 percent of the time. Yet Sharkey is frequently assigned with more radical voices, such as Forrest Stuart's *Down, Out, and Under Arrest* and

¹⁴ We also examined Harvard economist Roland Fryer's important 2017 study of racial bias in the use of force by police. It found that police are not more likely to shoot blacks than whites, though the former are subjected to non-lethal forms of aggression at higher rates, after controlling for relevant factors. It is paired with Alexander's book in *only 5 cases*. See Roland G. Fryer, "An Empirical Analysis of Racial Differences in Police Use of Force," working paper, July 2017. Meanwhile, Heather Mac Donald's *The War on Cops* appears only once in the OSP database.

Victor Rios’s *Punished*. The general picture that emerges, then, is one in which a small minority of professors teach the scholarly debate over race and the criminal justice system.

Table 2: Frequency with which Alexander is Taught in Courses that Assign her Critics

	Alexander, <i>New Jim Crow</i>	
Forman (2011)	#1*	82%
Pfaff (2014)	#1	75%
Fortner (2015)	#1	72%
Pfaff (2017)	#1	72%
Forman (2017)	#1	56%
Sharkey (2018)	#1	26%

* Indicates most assigned text

What is generally taught with Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*, if not her most important critics? Voices who say that the West generally is far more irredeemably evil than Alexander contends. The top three titles assigned with Alexander are Angela Davis’s *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me*, and Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (see Table 3). Others in the top ten include Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s *Golden Gulag*. Broadly speaking, then, it seems that most of the authors assigned with Alexander are those that reinforce rather than complicate her critical perspective.

Table 3: Top Titles Assigned with Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*

	Total Count	Percent
<i>Are Prisons Obsolete?</i> Angela Davis	351	6.5%

<i>Between the World and Me</i> Ta-Nehisi Coates	313	5.8%
<i>Discipline and Punish</i> Michel Foucault	312	5.8%

What explains the one-sidedness of course syllabi? Why don't professors generally teach the scholarly controversy around Michelle Alexander's important book? A very partial answer might be because too many professors teach the book despite not having any real expertise in the scholarship on crime and punishment. This conclusion is suggested by the fact that Alexander's book is not infrequently assigned in fields outside of history, sociology, political science, and law (see Table 4). Roughly 27 percent of the time her book is taught by professors with expertise in English, theology, social work, education, and philosophy. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that Alexander's critics are least likely to be assigned by professors in these fields. There are no syllabi, for example, where an English professor assigned Michael Fortner's *The Black Silent Majority* or John Pfaff's *Locked In*.

Table 4: Assignments of Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* by Discipline

<i>Discipline</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percent</i>
History	1,052	22.4%
Sociology	1,032	21.9%
English Literature	636	13.5%
Criminal Justice	606	12.9%
Political Science	523	11.1%
Social Work	296	6.3%
Law	205	4.4%
Philosophy	134	2.8%
Education	126	2.7%
Theology	96	2.0%

Even so, most professors who teach *The New Jim Crow* are from fields we would expect: sociology, history, political science, and law. They may do better on average than their colleagues in English and Education. But the norm, even for them, seems to be to protect their students from learning about the broader scholarly controversy that Alexander's book sparked.

The only work to even come close to rivaling the influence of Alexander's book was *Between the World and Me*, the 2015 memoir of the journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates. His memoir was not narrowly about the criminal justice system. But more than any other work, it shaped and reflected the emerging sense that white supremacy infected all American institutions, thus lending legitimacy to the defund movement that was emerging. And Coates certainly singled out police and prisons for special rebuke, claiming that their injustices are products not of corruption, but of democracy itself: "The abuses that have followed from these [criminal justice] policies – the sprawling carceral state, the random detention of black people, the torture of suspects – are the product of democratic will."¹⁵

Though broadly aligned with Alexander's rebuke of our criminal justice system, Coates's memoir was also far more despairing than *The New Jim Crow*. Even before its publication, Coates gained notoriety for rejecting any faith in the possibility of national redemption. In 2014, he wrote: "I view white supremacy as one of the central organizing forces in American life, whose vestiges and practices afflicted black people in the past, continue to afflict black people today, and will likely afflict black people until this country passes into the dust."¹⁶ For Coates, America is a world that is permanently

¹⁵ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (Spiegel and Grau, 2015), 79.

¹⁶ Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Black Pathology and the Closing of the Progressive Mind," *Atlantic*, March 21, 2014.

scarred and disfigured by racism. And in *Between the World and Me*, Coates argued that nothing could really change that fact.

Coates's memoir was a smash success. A *New York Times* bestseller, *Between the World and Me* won the National Book Award and was a finalist for the Pulitzer. The *New York Times* also named it one of the best 100 books of the 21st Century. Its scholarly impact was significant as well. As of this writing, it has been cited over three thousand times and has been assigned in more than 2,500 courses in the OSP database.¹⁷

When we examine the most commonly assigned titles with Coates's memoir, we're struck by two observations. First, it is often assigned with some important books, especially works by James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (see Table 5).

Table 5: Top Titles Assigned with *Between the World and Me*

	<i>Total Count</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<i>The New Jim Crow</i> Michelle Alexander	313	12.5%
<i>The Fire Next Time</i> James Baldwin	233	9.3%
<i>Citizen: An American Lyric</i> Claudia Rankine	231	9.2%
<i>The Souls of Black Folk</i> W E B Du Bois	183	7.3%
<i>White Fragility</i> Robin DiAngelo	157	6.3%
<i>Beloved: A Novel</i> Toni Morrison	126	5.0%

¹⁷ Roughly two-thirds of these cases are from colleges and universities in the United States.

<i>The Wretched of the Earth</i> Frantz Fanon	120	4.8%
<i>Sister Outsider</i> Audre Lorde	117	4.7%

Undergraduates should read these classics. Second, no voices are assigned that fundamentally challenge Coates's account of racial inequality in 21st-century America. Even if we expand our list to include the top-100 most commonly assigned books and articles with Coates's memoir, we don't find a single reading that does so.

Students are thus left with the impression that there is no deep intellectual contention over racial inequality in modern America. Coates's work generated considerable intellectual controversy, and not just because of objections from movement conservatives. Other journalists and intellectuals, including John McWhorter, Glenn Loury, and Thomas Chatterton Williams, objected to Coates's racial pessimism.

Williams, in particular, emerged as a sharp critic of Coates's thesis, penning assessments in the pages of the *London Review of Books* and the *New York Times*.¹⁸ He also authored a well-received memoir, *Losing My Cool*, in 2010 that was nearly a photo negative of Coates's. Rejecting Coates's hard structuralism, Williams leans into existentialism, arguing for the radical agency of black Americans in a world stained by racism. Yet, after reviewing the syllabi in our database, it doesn't seem to have occurred to professors to assign Williams—or a thinker like him—along with Coates.

¹⁸ See Thomas Chatterton Williams, "Loaded Dice" *London Review of Books*, December 3, 2015; Thomas Chatterton Williams, "How Ta-Nehisi Coates Gives Whiteness Power," *New York Times*, October 6, 2017.

Israel and Palestine

No intellectual has been a more influential critic of Israel than Edward Said. His 1978 book, *Orientalism*, popularized a framework through which today's advocates on behalf of Palestinians understand their struggle against the state of Israel and the West generally. Said casts the Western world as the villains of history and peoples of the East as its noble victims. In his account, westerners dominate the East partly by denigrating it to make it seem worthy of subjugation through a worldview he called "Orientalism." "The essence of Orientalism," Said concluded, is the "ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority." It falsely affirms "an absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior."

Arabs are particularly stigmatized by western Orientalists, according to Said: "For no other ethnic or religious group, is it true that virtually anything can be written or said about it, without challenge or demurral." "Lurking behind" these dehumanizing prejudices, Said concluded, is "the menace of *jihad*," the "fear that the Muslims (or the Arabs) will take over the world."¹⁹

In Said's account, then, it was impossible to take Zionism seriously as one among the myriad nationalist movements that emerged in the nineteenth century, much less to see Israel itself as a land of refugees or the ancestral homeland of Jews. And, indeed, Said's *Orientalism* singles out Israel for special rebuke, suggesting that the state could be justified only if one accepted the xenophobic ideology at the core of Western civilization. Israel's defenders – particularly those who lament the lack of democracy in the Middle East and fault Arabs for their militancy – represent the "culmination of

¹⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 287, 300.

Orientalism.” Said faulted the West for failing to recognize the “Zionist invasion and colonization of Palestine,” a fact, he alleged, that “no Israeli would deny.”²⁰ *Orientalism*, thus, sought to turn the tables on the prevailing American understanding of Israel: It is not, in fact, an outpost of liberal democracy or refuge from antisemitism, it is an instrument of white supremacy.

Said wrote *Orientalism*, not simply out of some abstract intellectual interest, but rather as “an Arab Palestinian in the West.” He claimed that while Zionism enjoyed many academic defenders, there wasn’t any scholar – at least not one with expertise on the Arab world – who had by the late 1970s “culturally and politically identified himself wholeheartedly with the Arabs.”²¹

Even before the publication of *Orientalism* (1978), Said’s academic work was interwoven with his activism against Israel. Soon after publishing his dissertation on Joseph Conrad, Said joined the Arab-American University Graduates, a group founded in 1967 to “challenge Zionist constructions of the conflict in the middle east.”²² In 1970, he met Yasir Arafat and began a long-term collaboration with him and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).²³ Said translated Arafat’s famous 1974 address to the UN General Assembly in which the PLO leader—with a holster bulging visibly under his jacket—claimed to be holding both a gun and an olive branch.²⁴ For these contributions, Said was elected to the Palestine National Council in 1977 (where he sat until his leukemia diagnosis in 1991).²⁵ During the Carter years, the professor operated as a

²⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 318-19.

²¹ Said, *Orientalism*, 27.

²² Elaine Hagopian, “Ibrahim and Edward,” *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 26(4) 2004, 5.

²³ Pankaj Mishra, “[The Reorientations of Edward Said](#),” *The New Yorker*, April 19, 2021.

²⁴ Paul Hoffman, “Dramatic Session,” *The New York Times*, [November 14, 1974](#).

²⁵ Richard Bernstein, “Edward Said, Leading Advocate of Palestinians, Dies at 67,” *The New York Times*, [September 25, 2003](#).

liaison between the Administration and the PLO. And in 1988, Said traveled to Algiers to help the PLO issue a declaration of independence and draft a constitution.²⁶

But Said's greatest contribution to the Palestinian cause was most likely his role as a public intellectual and leftist celebrity, to which the runaway success of *Orientalism* elevated him. In America, he was a regular commentator in the media.²⁷ He became an icon of sorts: Said's handsome face graced t-shirts and posters around the world.²⁸

In academia, Said is widely acknowledged as the godfather of the emerging field of postcolonial studies, and his views have profoundly shaped the study of the Middle East. Said also inspired – and in some cases directly mentored – a generation of anti-Zionist U.S. scholars whose dominance in the academic study of the area is unquestionable today, including Rashid Khalidi, the Edward Said Professor of Modern Arab Studies at Columbia University (recently emeritus).

It's hard to overstate the academic influence of *Orientalism*. As of this writing, it has been cited *nearly 90 thousand times*. *Orientalism* is also the 16th most assigned text in the OSP database, appearing in *nearly 16 thousand courses*. The handful of works that are more commonly assigned include textbooks and writing guides like *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk and E.B. White as well as *English Grammar in Use* by Raymond Murphy. And it's more popular than any work in the old Western canon. John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, for example, is assigned in 7,208 courses, making *Orientalism* more than twice as widely assigned.

²⁶ Patrick E. Tyler and Nora Boustany, "PLO Proclaims Palestinian State," [Washington Post](#), November 14, 1986; Richard Bernstein, "Edward Said, Leading Advocate of Palestinians, Dies at 67," [The New York Times](#), September 25, 2003.

²⁷ "[Professor Edward Said \(1935-2003\): Scholar, Activist, Palestinian](#)," [obituary] *Democracy Now!* (26 Sept. 2003)

²⁸ Pankaj Mishra, "[The Reorientations of Edward Said](#)," *The New Yorker*, April 19, 2021.

The book is especially commonly assigned in universities abroad. In the U.K. alone, for example, *Orientalism* appears in an astonishing 7,673 courses in the OSP database. It is also big in the United States. When we confine our search to American colleges and universities, *Orientalism* appears in 3,825 courses in the OSP database, just a bit less than Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* and far more than Thomson's "A Defense of Abortion." And when we consider his work collectively, Said's scholarship appears in more American syllabi than either Alexander or Thomson.²⁹

But if *Orientalism* enjoyed great academic success, it was also challenged by prominent critics who perceived deep and consequential cultural differences between the West and the Arab world. Of the scholarship in this tradition, perhaps none was more influential than *The Clash of Civilizations* by the Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington. It has been cited nearly 50 thousand times and taught in nearly nine thousand courses in the OSP database.

Published in 1996, Huntington agreed with Said that the Arab world is sometimes caricatured by westerners. And he acknowledged that the "East" is, of course, a diverse world. Nonetheless, Huntington thought that cultural differences would increasingly drive world conflict – and that Islam, in particular, represented a threat to Western values and the world order. Huntington put the clash starkly: "The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power." As for Islam, Huntington said the problem is a West that is convinced of the "universality of their culture" and their obligation to extend it abroad.

²⁹ Said's work appears in 6,732 courses in U.S. colleges and universities, compared to 4,201 and 2,559 for Alexander and Thomson, respectively.

“These are the basic ingredients,” Huntington concluded, “that fuel conflict between Islam and the West.”³⁰

More controversially, Huntington further claimed that Islamic countries were particularly prone to violence, arguing that the evidence for this claim was “overwhelming.” “Wherever one looks along the perimeter of Islam,” Huntington observed, “Muslims have problems living peaceably with their neighbors.” “Islam’s borders *are* bloody,” he concluded.³¹

Predictably, perhaps, Huntington’s book was both praised and condemned. To some it seemed especially prescient, especially after the terrorist attacks on September 11th. To others, it seemed the work of an Islamophobe, cloaked in a thin scholarly veneer. Said, in particular, argued that Huntington’s book was among the worst exemplars of Orientalist thinking. In “The Clash of Ignorance,” penned for *The Nation*, Said observed that Huntington’s book is a “belligerent” work that “recklessly” pits Islam against the West. Huntington’s “thesis is a gimmick,” Said concluded, “better for reinforcing defensive self-pride than for critical understanding.”³²

If another book rivaled Huntington’s challenge to Said, it is Ian Buruma and Ivischai Margalit’s *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies*, which turned the thesis of *Orientalism* on its head. First published in 2004, *Occidentalism* argued that it is the West that is portrayed in grotesque ways, and not just by its Islamist enemies in the East, but also by intellectuals in the West. Indeed, Buruma and Margalit argue that Occidentalism first originated in western criticisms of the Enlightenment, and have been adopted by various anti-modernists ever since, including by everyone from

³⁰ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations: Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1997), 33, 217-18.

³¹ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 254-58.

³² Edward Said, “The Clash of Ignorance,” *The Nation*, October 4, 2001.

communists in the West to Islamicists in the East. *Occidentalism*, they assert, is a “dehumanizing picture” of western modernity, one that says it is essentially “soulless, money-grubbing, rootless, [and] faithless.”³³

Occidentalism enjoyed great academic success. As of this writing, it has been cited nearly 1,400 times – not nearly as impactful as Huntington’s classic, but impressive nonetheless. Because *Occidentalism* was published just after Edward Said’s death, he didn’t have an opportunity to challenge it. Still, a review of *Occidentalism* in the *New York Times* noted that “it is easy to imagine what the relentlessly ideological Mr. Said would have seen in their work: yet another supposed instance of Western scholarship whose picture of the hostile, backward Oriental ‘Other’ invites the exercise of Western power.”³⁴ In the OSP database *Occidentalism* appears just 475 times, far less than Huntington’s classic, but hardly a negligible amount either.

Within the world of Middle East scholarship more narrowly, though, Said’s most prominent intellectual foe was undeniably Bernard Lewis, then the most distinguished scholar of the Islamic world and a chaired professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University. Lewis exemplified precisely the kind of scholar Said said couldn’t possibly understand the East; he was a white Westerner who grew up in colonial England. In *Orientalism*, Said gives Lewis special attention, denouncing him for being little more than an anti-Muslim propagandist.³⁵ In 1982, Lewis hit back, penning “The Question of Orientalism” in the pages of *The New York Review of Books*. Lewis’s disparaging review charged Said with ignoring the actual scholarship on the Middle

³³ Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 5, 10.

³⁴ Gary Rosen, “Is Terrorists’ Hatred of the West The West’s Own Bastard Child?” *New York Times*, March 27, 2004.

³⁵ See Said, *Orientalism*, 314-21.

East, including the work of Arab authors. In later work, notably in *Islam and West* (1993), Lewis accused Said of creating and living in an “alternate universe” disconnected from reality.³⁶

Their feud culminated in a much larger rift among scholars of the Middle East. Troubled by what he regarded as the politicization of the entire field by Said and his fellow critical theorists, Lewis teamed up with the Lebanese-American scholar Fouad Ajami to found the Association for Scholars of the Middle East and Africa (ASMEA) in 2007. Intended as a rival to the Middle East Studies Association (MESA), the new academic association aimed to nurture an intellectual community beyond a Saidian framework.

Apparently, though, students won’t learn much about the intense controversy that has attended Said’s *Orientalism* since his book is very rarely assigned with any of its critics. Instead, it is taught with titles that reinforce and extend its message (see Table 6). The authors include luminaries of critical theory, including Benedict Anderson, Michel Foucault, Frantz Fanon, and Judith Butler.

While all of these thinkers are certainly worth reading, they don’t introduce much intellectual friction when assigned together. Their shared central goal is to delegitimize Western ideas that the authors fear justify oppression, with many perceiving the destruction of colonialism and its vestiges as the great moral battle of our era. It is thus no surprise that they draw on and seek inspiration in one another’s work to mount an interlocking and comprehensive attack on Western intellectual and political traditions.³⁷

³⁶ Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West*, reissue edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). 109.

³⁷ For example: Said was an early promoter of Foucault’s ideas, which are cited on page 3 of *Orientalism*; Homi K. Bhabha wrote the introduction to the 60th edition of *The Wretched of the Earth*; *Gender Trouble* draws extensively on Foucault as well as on Fanon and Spivak.

Table 6: Top Ten Titles Assigned with Edward Said's *Orientalism*

	Total Count	Percent
<i>Culture and Imperialism</i> Edward Said	1,926	12.1%
<i>Imagined Communities</i> Benedict Anderson	1,819	11.4%
<i>The Wretched of the Earth</i> Frantz Fanon	1,711	10.7%
<i>The Location of Culture</i> Homi K Bhabha	1,670	10.5%
<i>Black Skin, White Masks</i> Frantz Fanon	1,479	9.3%
<i>Gender Trouble</i> Judith Butler	1,050	6.6%
<i>Can the Subaltern Speak?</i> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak	1,001	6.3%
<i>Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction</i> Robert Young	936	5.9%
<i>Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison</i> Michel Foucault	910	5.7%
<i>The History of Sexuality</i> Michel Foucault	878	5.5%

In this intellectual project, Israel is often cast as an exemplar of white supremacy and colonialism, even in books that don't focus on the country. For example, Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* treats Israel as self-evidently malign. Bhabha—whose book is steeped in the works of Fanon, Said, Foucault, and Anderson—imagines a scene in his conclusion where someone is invoking oppressive discourse: “Whenever these words are said in anger or in hate, whether of the Jew in that estaminet in Antwerp, or of the Palestinian on the West Bank.” Thus, Bhabha, without ever once using the name

of the nation, conjures up an image of an Israeli oppressor hatefully and gratuitously spewing slurs.³⁸

Other authors that are most commonly paired with *Orientalism* have avidly used their stature in the academy to champion the Palestinian cause by portraying Israel as fundamentally illegitimate.³⁹ Butler, for example, is an advisory board member of the anti-Zionist organization Jewish Voice for Peace,⁴⁰ and appeared in a 2013 documentary aimed at convincing American Jews to reject Zionism.⁴¹ Spivak, meanwhile, was a leader in promoting boycott, divestments, and sanctions (BDS) over the past couple decades. For example, she signed a 2007 letter that charged Israel with a “worse system of apartheid than anything that ever existed in South Africa” and “ethnic cleansing.”⁴²

Even those authors who did not address Israel specifically either in their activism or scholarship are understood by anti-Zionists as friendly to their cause. For example, Benedict Anderson notes that his work’s Hebrew translation was introduced by a Palestinian Israeli politician, motivated by a desire to undermine Jewish nationalism.⁴³ Fanon, who (in)famously asserted the “cleansing value” of violence for the colonized, is frequently appealed to as a guide and oracle on Palestinian liberation.⁴⁴

³⁸ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), online Taylor & Francis All E-Books.

³⁹ Foucault himself--although he inspired most of the others and although he was himself a fan of the Iranian Revolution--did not share their antipathy for Israel. See Karlis Racevskis, “Edward Said and Michel Foucault: Affinities and Dissonances,” [Research in African Literatures](#) 36(3) 2005, 85; Benjamin Weinthal, “[French Philosopher](#): ‘Left-wing Islamism and antisemitism have a future,’” *The Jerusalem Post*, 31 Dec. 2019.

⁴⁰ “[Judith Butler](#),” Office of the President, University of California, Systemwide Academic Freedom Congress [accessed 10 July 2025]; “[Our Approach to Zionism](#),” Jewish Voice for Peace [accessed 10 July 2025].

⁴¹ “[Some of My Best Friends Are Zionists](#),” [documentary] Directed by Bruce Robbins (2013), IMDb.com.

⁴² “[Boycott Israel – Don’t Play another 'Sun City'!](#)” [BDSMovement.net](#), 20 May 2007. Spivak dates her activism to her first meeting with Edward Said in 1974, when he conditioned their friendship on her agreement to working “for Palestine.” Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, “[The Colonizer’s Violence Only Generates Violence](#),” FORSEA Forces of Renewal Southeast Asia, February 8, 2024, [YouTube.com](#).

⁴³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, second edition (New York: Verso, 2006), 222, 228.

⁴⁴ A Google search yields innumerable linkages of Fanon to Palestine, see for example: Ken Chen, “In the Zone of Nonbeing: [Frantz Fanon in his time](#)—and in ours,” *The Nation*, June 3, 2024; Ismail Patel, “War

If we expand our review from these top-10 ten titles to the top-100 titles assigned with *Orientalism*, it doesn't reveal many critics. One is the aforementioned *Clash of Civilizations*. It is assigned in 758 courses along with Said's book, a bit less than five percent of the time (see Table 7).⁴⁵

Huntington is an outlier, though. Buruma and Margalit's *Occidentalism* appears with *Orientalism* in just 138 courses, less than one percent of the time. Bernard Lewis is also almost never assigned with Said, despite their years of sparring. Lewis's "The Question of Orientalism" is assigned in 179 courses with *Orientalism*, approximately one percent of time. Meanwhile, Lewis's *Islam and the West*—a book that has been cited some 1,671 times—is assigned with *Orientalism* even more rarely.

Table 7: Frequency with which Prominent Critics are Assigned with Said's *Orientalism*

	Total	Percent
<i>Clash of Civilizations</i> Sam Huntington	758	4.76%
"The Question of Orientalism" Bernard Lewis	179	1.12%
<i>Occidentalism</i> Buruma and Margalit	138	0.86%
<i>Islam and the West</i> Bernard Lewis	114	0.72%

on Gaza: [Why Frantz Fanon's Words Are More Relevant Today](#) than Ever," MiddleEastEye.org, June 11, 2025.

⁴⁵ Since all of these titles were published well before the OSP began scrapping syllabi from the web, we didn't need to control for the year of publication, as we did in the analysis of Alexander's critics.

When we reverse the analysis and begin with Said's critics, however, we find that *Orientalism* frequently accompanies them (see Table 8). For example, in courses that assign Lewis's "The Question of Orientalism," Said's classic is taught 73 percent of the time. *Orientalism* is paired with *Islam and the West* about half the time. And, in courses that teach Lewis's book, Said's *Culture and Imperialism* is the second most assigned title, taught about 28 percent of the time. So, here again, we see the same pattern: While Lewis is almost never assigned with Said, Said is usually assigned with Lewis. Meanwhile, a significant minority (29%) of professors who assign Margalit's *Occidentalism* also pair it with *Orientalism*.

Table 8: Frequency with which Said is Taught in Courses that Assign his Critics

	Said, <i>Orientalism</i>	
"The Question of Orientalism" Bernard Lewis	#1	73.2%
<i>Islam and the West</i> Bernard Lewis	#1	49.1%
<i>Occidentalism</i> Buruma and Margalit	#1	29.1%
<i>Clash of Civilizations</i> Sam Huntington	#2	8.5%

While *Orientalism* is the second most commonly assigned title with Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* (see Table 8), the overall trend is to *not* assign *Orientalism* with Huntington. Huntington's book is paired with Said's classic less than ten percent of the time. Said's "The Clash of Ignorance," though, is also the sixth most commonly assigned

title with Huntington, appearing in more than six percent of the courses that assign *The Clash of Civilizations*.

But unlike Said, Huntington isn't treated reverently, since he is often paired with *other* books that press against his thesis, particularly Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, among others. Huntington's book is taught, it seems, as a contestable perspective, not as a unique oracle of wisdom.

Orientalism is taught in a wide range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences (see Table 9). It is popular in history and political science – two fields we would expect. However, it is also taught in more than three thousand literature courses and hundreds of classes in the fine arts, media studies, and film. Overall, about a third of courses that assign *Orientalism* are outside of the social sciences and history. Presumably, scholars in these fields consider Said's work of relevance because they believe orientalism infects western literature and art.

In these humanities courses, though, that skeptical lens seems to go unchallenged. The syllabus database shows that the major works that challenge Said's theory are only occasionally taught in English or the humanities. *Occidentalism*, for example, is rarely taught in literature courses.⁴⁶ Students are thus especially not exposed to the deep intellectual controversy that surrounds Said's social theory in their humanities courses. These professors are also presenting as a *scholarly* consensus the broad *social* consensus against Israel on campus.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Three percent of professors who teach the book are in literature. It's mostly taught in political science and history.

⁴⁷ For college opinion: see Eitan Hersh and Dahlia Lyss, "Conflict and Growth: An Over-Time Study of the Impact of the Israel-Hamas War on U.S. College Students," Report to the Jim Jordan Foundation, September 2024.

Table 9: Assignments of Said's *Orientalism* by Discipline

<i>Discipline</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percent</i>
History	3,538	26.7%
English Literature	3,009	22.7%
Political Science	2,371	17.9%
Sociology	1,034	7.8%
Anthropology	877	6.6%
Fine Arts	642	4.8%
Religion	590	4.4%
Media / Communications	472	3.6%
Film and Photography	393	3.0%
Geography	340	2.6%

While Israel is a character in lots of courses that are *not* devoted to the history and politics of the Middle East, a far smaller subset of students encounter it in courses focused on the country and its conflicts. What are they being taught? When we turn our attention from *Orientalism* to historical and social scientific works, we don't find one main or even a few regnant books. Instead, we encounter a constellation of roughly eight frequently assigned works. Thus, for the purposes of this study, we examined books on the Arab-Israeli conflicts and the Palestinian struggle that have been assigned at least 500 times in the OSP database (see Table 10).

Because the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a popular one to teach abroad, especially at universities in the U.K., Table 10 also displays the appearances of these texts in courses taught at American colleges and universities. The same slate of titles, though, seem to be popular both here and abroad, with only modest differences across nations.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ The analytic tools on the OSP database don't allow us to see what the most frequently co-assigned texts are by country. So, the analysis of co-assigned texts that follows looks at the frequency of co-assigned texts both here and abroad. Most cases are from the U.S. and U.K.

Table 10: Top Titles Assigned on Israel-Palestine (over 500 Appearances)

<i>Title</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>U.S. Only</i>
<i>Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict</i> Charles D. Smith	897	427
<i>The Iron Wall</i> Avi Shlaim	813	134
<i>Palestinian Identity</i> Rashid Khalidi	729	268
<i>Righteous Victims</i> Benny Morris	644	201
<i>The Israel-Palestine Conflict</i> James Gelvin	595	176
<i>The Iron Cage</i> Rashid Khalidi	527	182
<i>The Question of Palestine</i> Edward Said	522	111
<i>The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited</i> Benny Morris	388	88
<i>The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem</i> Benny Morris	245	43

These books are written by some of Israel's strongest academic critics. The most assigned textbook is Charles D. Smith's *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History With Documents* appears more than any other work (897 times). Its popularity propelled it through ten editions. The very first edition of Smith's textbook was recommended, with some reservations, in 1989 by activist-scholar Hisham Ahmed in *al-Fajr*, the only English-language newspaper published in the occupied territories.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Ahmed did have caveats, e.g., he criticized Smith for treating the Israeli occupation as "benign"--and the activities of the PLO and Fatah as "terrorism"--as "unsatisfactory" and "cliche[d]" (15). Hisham Ahmed, "A Textbook for Undergraduates in the US," *al-Fajr*, September 25, 1989, 8-9, 15, [online](#); Suzi Weissman, "[In Memorium: Hisham H. Ahmed](#)," *Against the Current: A Socialist Journal*, Nov-Dec 2019.

More recently, the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies assessed Smith's book as a "useful basic text and reference work on the Arab-Israeli conflict," but also cautioned instructors to augment it with other texts. This is because it found that the book's: "Meta-narrative leans perceptibly toward the Palestinian side. Israel is usually portrayed as the aggressor and Palestinians, including guerrilla groups and terrorist groups, are portrayed as the victims. . . . Smith does a good job of depicting the Palestinians' suffering as a result of the conflict but the element of Israeli suffering is largely missing."⁵⁰

Among the most common guides to the conflict, especially in the United States, is Rashid Khalidi, the Edward W. Said Professor from Columbia (now emeritus). His most assigned book is on the development of Palestinian nationalism, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, which appears 729 times. *The Iron Cage*, his follow-up work, is assigned 527 times, so that altogether, Khalidi appears 1,256 times in the OSP database and 450 times in U.S. universities.⁵¹

Khalidi, a proud Palestinian American, tells the entire story from the perspective of his people, and he doesn't aim at serious engagement with a Jewish-Israeli perspective on the conflict. Besides placing virtually all the blame for the conflict and the failures to resolve it on Israel, he presents the conflict as one between brutal, foreign colonizers backed by enormous empires and indigenous victims. At one point, Khalidi dismisses Jewish claims to the land as wholly based on an "epic myth."⁵²

⁵⁰ Uzi Rabi and Chelsi Mueller, "A Critical Survey of Textbooks on the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," Working Paper No. 1 (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 2017), 65.

⁵¹ Collectively, all of his work appears in 2,770 syllabi.

⁵² Khalidi, *The Iron Cage*, 241.

Like his predecessor Said, Khalidi is not merely a witness to the history he is telling. He was part of the PLO's delegation to the negotiations in the 1990s. And, as he highlights in his recent book *The Hundred Years War on Palestine*, he himself comes from a venerable and storied family of Arab elites in Jerusalem. Thus, the most often assigned historian on the topic is not only offering his readers a Palestinian narrative, he is doing so as an active participant on behalf of the national movement.

Another well-represented group of voices are those of self-described revisionist "new" or "post-Zionist" historians: Israeli writers whose goal was to shatter Zionists' understanding of their own origin story as it was formulated in the decades after Israeli Independence. In 1988, journalist-turned-historian Benny Morris wrote a sort of "manifesto" for the group, suggesting that Israel's birth was "tarnished, besmirched by original sin . . . [and] no more deserving of . . . grace and assistance than were its neighbors."⁵³ Among the three comrades Morris highlighted were Avi Shlaim, whose second book *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*, is the second most commonly assigned work (813 times). The tenor of Shlaim's work is captured in reviewers' reactions as well as his own conclusion. One unstintingly adulatory review praised Shlaim for demolishing the "myth that it is the Arabs who have blocked peace settlements, [since really] it has been Israel that has been responsible for various lost opportunities for peace."⁵⁴ A more critical, though measured, critic seemed slightly taken aback that Shlaim narrates Israeli setbacks in the 1950s with "glee."⁵⁵ Shlaim's goal for his book is spelled out in his conclusion when he writes that while the "moral

⁵³ Benny Morris, "Introduction" and "The New Historiography: Israel Confronts Its Past," in *Making Israel*, ed. Benny Morris (University of Michigan Press, 2007), pp. 7, 14.

⁵⁴ Jerome Slater, "Review of Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*," *Political Science Quarterly* (Spring 2001), 138.

⁵⁵ Anita Shapira, "[The Past Is Not a Foreign Country](#)," *The New Republic*, 29 November 1999.

case for the establishment of an independent Jewish state was strong, especially in the aftermath of the Holocaust,” “the establishment of the State of Israel involved a massive injustice to the Palestinians[,] . . . a debt that must at some point be repaid.”⁵⁶

Morris, author of many books, shows up frequently on syllabi and is the most prominent, nuanced, and hardest to characterize. His public pronouncements by the late 1990s sounded more Zionist than his first book, *Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, implied. For this reason, Edward Said once described Morris as “bordering on schizophrenia” since he refused to “draw the inevitable [anti-Zionist] conclusions from his own evidence.”⁵⁷ Morris’s next book, *Righteous Victims*, was deemed roughly balanced by some scholars sympathetic to Zionism, despite its sharp criticisms of Israel.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the word “colonial” and its variants appears 40 times in Morris’s *Righteous Victims* to describe Jewish settlement in Palestine, while the word “transfer” (referring usually to populations) appears 126 times in *Victims* and 261 times in *Refugee Problem Revisited*. Partly because of these sorts of characterizations, even the left-wing journalist Ari Shavit surmised that Morris’s *Righteous Victims* was “going to strengthen the hands of those who abominate Israel.”⁵⁹

One other author singled out by Benny Morris in the original “new historian” manifesto was Ilan Pappé. His most assigned work *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples*, appears 469 times in the database, just missing the criteria for making the list. Pappé emerged as the least interested in attempting even-handedness in

⁵⁶ Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (Norton, 2000), p. 598.

⁵⁷ Edward W. Said, “New History, Old Ideas,” *Al-Ahram Weekly* (28 May 1998), [archived](#) at Miftah.org.

⁵⁸ Anita Shapira, “[The Past Is Not a Foreign Country](#),” *The New Republic*, November 29, 1999; Uzi Rabi and Chelsi Mueller, “A Critical Survey of Textbooks on the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” Working Paper No. 1 (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 2017), pp. 36-43.

⁵⁹ Ari Shavit interview with Benny Morris, “[Survival of the Fittest](#),” *Haaretz* (8 Jan. 2004).

his books. Enthusiastically rejecting any positivist understanding of the historian's role, he defiantly declared:

The reader of this book will find instances and descriptions that fit many of the claims of one national narrative, the Palestinian one, but fewer of the Israeli one. This is not because the writer is a Palestinian: I am not. My bias is apparent despite the desire of my peers that I stick to facts and the 'truth' when reconstructing past realities. I view any such construction as vain and presumptuous. This book is written by one who admits compassion for the colonized not the colonizer; who sympathizes with the occupied not the occupiers; and sides with the workers not the bosses. He feels for women in distress, and has little admiration for men in command...In short, mine is a subjective approach, often but not always standing for the defeated over the victorious.⁶⁰

While it hardly describes the methodology of all of the authors described here, or even all of the new historians, it does characterize a methodological shift that Said's *Orientalism* has inspired.⁶¹ As we have seen, *Orientalism* essentially applies a Foucauldian, post-modern interpretative approach to the topic of Israel-Palestine, according to which it is the perspective of the storyteller, not the objective correctness of the story, that is key.⁶²

An American academic who appears to have taken inspiration from the post-Zionist project is James Gelvin, a historian at UCLA, whose book *The Israel-Palestine Conflict: One Hundred Years of War*, appears 595 times in the OSP database. Gelvin's textbook presents itself as an even-handed textbook. But it provides no variation from the books we've described above for its interpretation portrays the dispute as a matter of colonizing Zionist outsiders versus indigenous victims.

⁶⁰ Ilan Pappé, *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 11-12.

⁶¹ Morris himself criticizes Pappé on just this point. See his review of Pappé in the *New Republic*, March 22, 2004.

⁶² Of course, we are not suggesting here that postmodern approaches shouldn't be taught. On the contrary, we are arguing that a plurality of perspectives, conclusions, and also methods should be considered when there is some disagreement about them among the experts. The post-modern nature of the dominant literature on this topic makes it all the more pressing to raise critical awareness about the methodology when it is employed, so that no one mistakes one perspective with the one and only view of things.

Gelvin's book stands out as unbalanced to pro-Israel scholars even when compared to others they find harshly critical of Israel. Mordechai Nisan, professor of Middle East Studies at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, for example, says that Gelvin's history "vindictively" places "the blame for the political standoff upon Israel."⁶³ One critical study disparaged it as "conspicuously biased and not suitable as a reference book or as a textbook. It is a group of essays on the victimization of Palestinians by Zionists, cobbled together into a polemical meta-history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, crafted for an American audience."⁶⁴

The politics evident in his work has also shaped his public pronouncements: in 2019, when the University of California Chancellors came out against BDS (the Boycott, Divest, and Sanction movement against Israel), Gelvin demanded: "Where is the chancellors' statement condemning more than 50 years of the Israeli occupation, not to mention Israeli settlement practices, which have been condemned globally?"⁶⁵

Edward W. Said also appears again on this list, with 522 appearances for his 1979 book *The Question of Palestine*. As might be expected, Said's book is a sharply partisan account of the conflict. In an otherwise sympathetic summary of Said's book in *Foreign Affairs*, reviewer John Campbell said that Said "paints Israel and Zionism without redeeming features."⁶⁶ In a study by the Association for Israel Studies found Said was

⁶³ Mordechai Nisan, "The Political Paradigm of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, and Its Flaws," [Review] *Jewish Political Studies Review*, Vol. 21, No. 3/4 (Fall 2009), pp. 186

⁶⁴ Uzi Rabi and Chelsi Mueller, "A Critical Survey of Textbooks on the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," Working Paper No. 1 (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 2017), 64.

⁶⁵ Vito Emanuel, "Boycott of Israel Condemned by UC chancellors Citing Threats to Academic Freedom," *Daily Bruin*, January 10, 2019.

⁶⁶ John C. Campbell, "The Question of Palestine," *Foreign Affairs* (Spring 1980).

the single most commonly assigned author in courses on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict between 2000-2005.⁶⁷

One would hope that these commonly assigned texts on the Israel-Palestinian conflict are often taught alongside their critics. They are not. Generally, the texts discussed above, and those like them, tend to be assigned with each other (see Table 11). So, for example, the authors most often assigned with Khalidi's *Palestinian Identity* include Morris (two of his "new historian" books), Pappe, Gelvin, Shlaim, and Khalidi (his other book discussed above, *Iron Cage*). Though there is diversity in this circle, it doesn't include any that are sympathetic to Jewish Israelis.

Table 11: Top Titles Assigned with Rashid Khalidi's *Palestinian Identity*

	Total Count	Percent
<i>Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History With Documents</i> Charles D. Smith	217	29.8%
<i>Righteous Victims</i> Benny Morris	203	27.8%
<i>A History of Modern Palestine</i> Ilan Pappe	181	24.8%
<i>The Iron Cage</i> Rashid Khalidi	175	24.0%
<i>The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem</i> Benny Morris	173	23.7%
<i>The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World</i> Avi Shlaim	172	23.6%
<i>The Israel-Palestine Conflict</i> James Gelvin	162	22.2%

⁶⁷ Miriam Shenkar, *The Politicization of Israel Studies* (Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2012), 239.

This is not because such scholarly voices don't exist. The fields of middle east and Israel studies are sharply divided, and many scholars and diplomats find much to criticize in the dominant trends.⁶⁸ There are counterparts in the literature that could help expose students to the intellectual controversy surrounding the Israel-Palestinian conflict.⁶⁹ Daniel Gordis's *Israel: a Concise History*, winner of the National Jewish Book Award, is a textbook that covers much the same territory as Gelvin's, but makes only 28 appearances in the OSP database. About Gordis's book, US Ambassador Dennis Ross, a key Oslo peace process negotiator, wrote, "When I am asked 'Is there one book to read about Israel?' I now have an answer."⁷⁰

Like Khalidi, others write as partisans, just on the other side. For example, Dr. Einat Wilf, former Labor Party MK, was part of the diplomatic efforts for the Israeli government. Her book *The War of Return* discusses the various wars and attempted negotiations from an Israeli perspective, but doesn't appear in the database. Similarly, Alexander Yakobson and Ammon Rubinstein take up issues of Jewish nationalism and critically analyze the claim that Israel is a settler colonial state in their *Israel and the Family of Nations*. Their work appears in only 45 syllabi in the OSP database, despite having been cited 148 times in the scholarly literature. And here in the United States, Alan Dershowitz, the famed Harvard University law professor, has been an avid advocate for Israel. His widely read book, *The Case for Israel*, appears in the OSP database in just 95 courses worldwide and in only 34 in the United States.

⁶⁸ See for example, "Israel Studies at American Universities," [report] Jewish People Policy Institute (2025); "Robert Satloff on Revitalizing Middle East Studies: A new graduate program promises to restore scholarly integrity to a debased field," *The Tikvah Podcast*, 10 July 2025; "The Word Crimes Controversy" [edition], *Fathom Journal*, (May 2019); Martin Kramer, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*, (Washington Institute for Near East Policy Publication, 2001).

⁶⁹ Admittedly some of these are not as often cited as the more fashionable ones, as to be expected from texts that swim against the academic tide.

⁷⁰ Daniel Gordis, *Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn* (HarperCollins, 2016).

And there is today's Benny Morris: The razor-sharp criticism of Israel in his early books has mellowed in his more recent political assessments. As a consequence, it seems, his later work doesn't get as frequently assigned. Morris's *One State, Two States: Resolving the Israel/Palestine Conflict* appears only 93 times in the database since it was published in 2009—and only 15 times in American colleges and universities. *Righteous Victims*, which was published ten years earlier, appears 644 times. Even when we account for the latter work's longer shelf life, it seems that professors have a strong preference for the old Benny Morris. In 2020, for example, *Righteous Victims* was assigned 49 times in the OSP database, while *One State, Two States* appears in just 13 syllabi.

The most important work of scholarship that criticizes the new historians directly is Efraim Karsh's *Fabricating Israeli History: The "New" Historians*, first published in 1997. Karsh is no marginal figure. Formerly at King's College in London and now a professor at Bar-Ilan University, Karsh work has been cited *nearly six thousand times*, a particularly high figure for a historian. One might imagine that *Fabricating Israeli History* by someone of his stature is the ideal book to pair with the most commonly assigned texts on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Yet, Karsh's book appears only 139 times in the OSP database—and only 24 times in American universities and colleges.⁷¹ That means he is rarely assigned with the scholars he is criticizing (see table 12). In fact, Karsh is assigned less than 12 percent of the time with the most commonly assigned books on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

⁷¹ Yoav Gelber's *Nation and History*, mentioned above and which also criticizes the new historians, appears only 3 times.

Table 12: Frequency with which Karsh is Taught with Commonly Assigned Texts on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Title	Count	Karsh
<i>Righteous Victims</i> Benny Morris	76	11.8%
<i>A History of Modern Palestine</i> Ilan Pappé	54	11.5%
<i>The Israel-Palestine Conflict</i> James Gelvin	53	8.9%
<i>The Iron Cage</i> Rashid Khalidi	47	8.9%
<i>The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World</i> Avi Shlaim	65	8.0%
<i>Palestinian Identity</i> Rashid Khalidi	57	7.8%

Might there be some professors who just teach pro-Israeli texts? There may be a handful. But it seems as if the outliers generally like to teach the scholarly controversy. As Table 13 shows, those professors who do assign Karsh, often assign his work with the new historians and those sympathetic to them. The older Benny Morris texts and Shlaim top the list, followed by other voices sympathetic to the Palestinian narrative, including Khalidi, Gelvin, and Pappé.

Table 13: Top 10 Titles Assigned with Karsh's *Fabricating Israeli History*

	Total Count	Percent
<i>Righteous Victims</i> Benny Morris	76	54.7%
<i>The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World</i> Avi Shlaim	65	46.8%
<i>The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited</i> Benny Morris	63	45.3%
<i>Israel's Wars: A History Since 1947</i> Ahron Bregman	58	41.7%
<i>Palestinian Identity</i> Rashid Khalidi	57	41.0%
<i>The Palestinian People: A History</i> Baruch Kimmerling and Joel S. Migdal	57	41.0%
<i>The Israel/Palestine Question: A Reader</i> Ilan Pappé	55	39.6%
<i>A History of Modern Palestine</i> Ilan Pappé	54	38.8%
<i>The Israel-Palestine Conflict</i> James Gelvin	53	38.1%
<i>Six Days of War</i> Michael B Oren	52	37.4%

Thus the same pattern emerges: books critical of the dominant, anti-Israeli narrative tend to be taught as part of a broad spectrum of perspectives, but books that push the dominant narrative tend to be assigned with fellow travelers.⁷²

⁷² The pattern exists even for other books that don't present Israel as the primary villain. Mark Tessler's *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* is a classic and well-regarded textbook that is considered generally even-handed (with 479 appearances in the database). The five books most often assigned with it include the three new historians discussed above and Khalidi (the fifth is Smith). Shlomo Avineri's *The Making of Modern Zionism: Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State* (315 appearances) gives a thorough,

Though slanted against Israel, at least syllabi that do teach histories of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict expose students to important facts about it. Such courses, though, are far fewer than those centered around Edward Said's *Orientalism*. It seems, then, that most students who learn anything about the conflict in the course of their study, do so through the work of Said. For most students, college-level instruction on Israel and Palestine begins and ends with *Orientalism*.

Ethics of Abortion

On the ethics of abortion, there has been no more influential work than Judith Jarvis Thomson's "A Defense of Abortion," published in the inaugural issue of *Philosophy and Public Affairs* in 1971. It has been cited more than 3,600 times and reprinted in numerous anthologies. It's also the most widely assigned text on the ethics of abortion, showing up in some 2,526 courses in the OSP database. Most of these courses – roughly 71 percent – were taught at colleges and universities in the United States, not surprisingly given the issue's greater salience in American politics.

Published prior to *Roe v. Wade*, Thomson rested her classic essay on liberal principles. Whatever the moral status of the fetus, Thomson argued, it does not have a right to be supported by the mother. She arrived at this conclusion by way of a now familiar analogy to generations of college students. Imagine, she says, that you wake up to discover that you have been attached to a famous violinist, who is suffering from a kidney disease. To be cured, he needs the support of your kidneys for nine months. Would it be unjust to detach yourself, Thomson wonders? She concludes that it would not be, writing that except perhaps in some cases, "nobody is morally required to make

classic, and not entirely unfriendly account of the history of Zionism, but is almost never assigned with the anti- (or post-) Zionist books discussed above.

large sacrifices, of health, of all other interests and concerns, of all other duties and commitments, for nine years, or even for nine months, in order to keep another person alive.”⁷³

Thomson’s essay sparked a decades-long debate. It invited criticism by pro-life thinkers and commentary from pro-choice ones, many of whom defended the core of Thomson’s claims against opponents of abortion. Some of the sharpest criticism came from Catholic philosophers, including Patrick Lee, Christopher Kaczor, and Francis Beckwith, among others. They have, in turn, been countered by thoughtful defenders of Thomson, particularly the philosopher David Boonin.

What gets assigned with Thomson’s essay? To the credit of many professors, the most commonly assigned text is “Why Abortion is Immoral” by Don Marquis, a pro-life philosopher (see Table 14). Though not a direct critique of Thomson, Marquis does at least lay out a case against abortion rights. After Marquis, the most commonly assigned texts include one by the pro-choice philosopher Mary Anne Warren as well as broader works in bioethics and philosophy.

Marquis’s essay, aside, two other works with pro-life sympathies appear in the top-100 titles assigned with Thomson’s essay. One is by Rosalind Hursthouse, “Abortion and Virtue Ethics,” which argues that abortion can be a morally troubling choice, regardless of the validity of competing rights claims. It is assigned about seven percent of the time with Thomson. The other is a second essay against abortion by Marquis, assigned less than five percent of the time. Overall, then, it seems that a sizable minority of professors pair Thomson’s famous essay with a pro-life perspective.

⁷³ Judith Jarvis Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1(1) 1971: 47-66.

Table 14: Top Titles Assigned with Thomson’s “A Defense of Abortion”

	Total Count	Percent
“Why Abortion Is Immoral” Don Marquis	897	35.5%
“On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion” Mary Anne Warren	610	24.1%
“Active and Passive Euthanasia” James Rachels	579	22.9%
<i>Utilitarianism</i> John Stuart Mill	465	18.4%
<i>Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals</i> Immanuel Kant	386	15.3%

Courses that introduce students to the ethics of abortion seem better crafted than those that expose students to either racial bias in the criminal justice system or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. First, works which give arguments for the pro-life position are not as uncommon—they are assigned with Thomson more than a third of the time. Second, Thomson is also often assigned with texts that provide students with intellectual tools to critically assess her philosophical assumptions. For example, Mill’s *Utilitarianism*, which is assigned 18.4% of the time with “A Defense of Abortion,” challenges Thomson’s strong emphasis on the primacy of autonomy.

Additionally, commonly co-assigned texts provide alternatives to each other. For example, the Kantian approach is a stark alternative to the utilitarian approach, which suggests that many of these classes are designed around disagreements, rather than presenting a consensus on issues. One can reasonably hope, then, that the spirit in which these varied texts are taught is one of debate and critical engagement. Even so,

there is no substitute for assigning pro-life arguments in their most cogent and powerful form along with Thomson's classic case for abortion rights.

Why are professors better at teaching scholarly disagreement in the case of abortion than in the criminal justice system or Israel? It doesn't seem to be because those who teach issues related to gender, generally speaking, do a better job of exposing students to intellectual disagreement. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, for example, ranks among the most assigned texts in the OSP database, taught in *more than ten thousand* courses. Yet it is almost never assigned with works that challenge her core arguments, such as her notion that all observable differences between the sexes are due to social construction. For example, Camille Paglia, a prominent and vocal critic of Butler's radical constructivism, is hardly ever taught with *Gender Trouble*. Nor is Steven Pinker's work that challenges the notion that human beings are blank slates. Instead, she tends to be taught with other thinkers who share her anthropology, particularly Michel Foucault, Edward Said, and Simone de Beauvoir.

What, then, is a better explanation for the inclusion of a broader range of scholarly voices in courses that teach the ethics of abortion? A likely answer is that the narrow issue of abortion ethics is frequently offered by philosophy departments, which is a discipline whose pedagogical aims explicitly include exposing students to competing arguments and answers to questions, prodding them to form their own reasoned views. As Table 15 shows, nearly 90 percent of professors who teach Thomson are philosophers.

Table 15: Assignments of Thomson’s “A Defense of Abortion” by Discipline

<i>Discipline</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Philosophy	2,214	88.6%
English Literature	63	2.6%
Political Science	55	2.3%
Medicine	44	1.8%
Law	29	1.2%
Women's Studies	23	1.0%
Business	18	0.8%
Biology	17	0.7%
Theology	17	0.7%
Psychology	8	0.3%

That said, even in this case, most professors seem to teach Thomson’s famous article on behalf of abortion rights without pairing it with any scholars who argue on behalf of a right to life.

Perhaps, though, some professors teach pro-life voices without considering pro-choice ones. Given the possibility, we explored the most commonly assigned texts with “Why Abortion is Immoral” by Don Marquis. When Marquis is assigned, we find that it is taught along with Thomson roughly 75 percent of the time (see Table 16). Additionally, the second most assigned work with Marquis’s article is a pro-choice piece by Mary Anne Warren. We should also note that Michael Tooley’s book *Abortion and Infanticide* – an important work of pro-choice scholarship – is assigned with Marquis 13.5 percent of the time. Thus, it seems that Marquis’s essay is almost never taught by itself – that is, without any pro-choice texts.

Table 16: Top Titles Assigned with Marquis’s “Why Abortion is Immoral”

	Total Count	Percent
“A Defense of Abortion” Judith Jarvis Thomson	897	74.8%
“On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion” Mary Anne Warren	409	34.1%
“Active and Passive Euthanasia” James Rachels	342	28.5%
“Famine, Affluence, and Morality” Peter Singer	224	18.7%
“All Animals Are Equal” Peter Singer	212	17.7%

That doesn’t mean that pro-life works of scholarship are never taught by themselves. After reviewing the most prominent pro-life scholarship, we managed to find one such work: *Defending Life* by Francis Beckwith, a philosopher at Baylor University. His book, *Defending Life*, has been taught in 48 courses in the OSP database. Unlike Marquis’s article, though, it is assigned exclusively with other works that align with its moral perspective, particularly Christian ones. The most commonly assigned title with Beckwith’s book is *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, a work that condemns gay love. And it is taught, almost entirely in a small number of Christian colleges and universities. The fact that some professors at evangelical colleges are offering a sectarian education isn’t particularly surprising, though. What is troubling is that so many professors at secular institutions, many of which are public, are behaving as if they teach in a seminary.

Furthermore, the works that develop a pro-life case in the most sustained, sophisticated way, are almost never assigned. One is Patrick Lee's *Abortion and Unborn Human Life*, now in its second edition. Lee is well regarded in the field and a chaired professor at Franciscan University. Yet, his book is assigned in *just two* courses in the OSP database. Christopher Kaczor's *The Ethics of Abortion* – now in its third edition – does better, with appearances in 29 syllabi. Like Lee, Kaczor is no marginal figure in these debates. David Boonin, a prominent pro-choice thinker, admires Kaczor's book, claiming it is “one of the very best book-length defenses of the claim that abortion is morally impermissible.” Unlike Marquis, these thinkers also directly challenge the core arguments of Thomson's important essay.

Conclusion

Skeptical readers might advance a number of reasonable arguments against our case. They might say, for example, that our findings shouldn't be trusted since the OSP database doesn't include a random sample of syllabi. It is possible that a more random sample would show that professors do a much better job of teaching a wider spectrum of scholarly perspectives on these contentious issues. But there is little reason to suppose that the syllabi that are publicly available are the ones that are also the least balanced. If anything, we would expect the opposite is more likely since professors might feel compelled to hide politicized syllabi from public scrutiny. Thus, we don't suspect that a random sample would yield substantially different results. And, even if it were otherwise, we have shown that thousands of courses do a poor job of teaching contentious issues.

Others could object that maybe this problem isn't really an American one. After all, we couldn't perform an isolated analysis of syllabi that are offered in just American universities and colleges.⁷⁴ This objection seems weaker in our first and last cases since texts like Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* and Thomson's "A Defense of Abortion" are generally assigned in U.S. universities. But it is undeniably stronger in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Roughly 75 percent of the appearances of *Orientalism* in the OSP database, for example, are from colleges and universities *outside* the United States.

While it's possible that texts like *Orientalism* are taught differently in America, there are also reasons to doubt that conclusion. First, the academic world isn't siloed, especially those across anglophone nations. Academic institutions recruit from international talent pools and many professors who teach abroad received their PhDs at American universities. Second, pro-Zionist voices are so rare in the database that even if they were assigned only in the United States, we would still find a curriculum that often blinds students to the scholarly controversy over Israel and Palestine.

A more serious objection might go as follows: Our findings don't show that professors shield their students from varied scholarly perspectives since that diversity can be found in the very syllabi we criticize. Critics might observe, for example, that Michelle Alexander and Ta-Nehisi Coates certainly don't share the same perspective. In her review of *Between the World and Me* in the *New York Times* Alexander reports feeling exasperated by Coates despairing pessimism. "When in the history of the world," Alexander asks rhetorically, "have the privileged and powerful voluntarily relinquished their status or abandoned the tactics that secured their advantage, without being challenged, fought, confronted or inspired to do so?" "We must not ask," Alexander

⁷⁴ While the OSP database provides useful analytical tools, it doesn't allow users to run analyses of commonly co-assigned texts by country.

continued, “whether it is possible for a human being or society to become just or moral; we must believe it is possible.”⁷⁵

Given such serious differences, can we really accuse our colleagues of being reluctant to teach academic controversies? The objection is a reasonable one, as far as it goes. We agree that we shouldn’t flatten out more radical voices like Alexander’s and Coates’s by collapsing them into a perfectly homogenous camp. And we have no objection to teaching them in the same course (as one of us has done). What we object to is the evident reluctance to teach academic controversies *in full* by systematically scrubbing syllabi of a broader range of perspectives.

Others still might say that our findings tell us nothing about how these texts are taught. They further suspect that these professors teach these texts in a spirit of openness and critical engagement. Maybe. We would simply stress that even if this is the case, it is not a substitute for hearing from critics themselves. Would those who make this objection, for example, find it acceptable if we found the same asymmetry, but in reverse? Would they find it acceptable if Michelle Alexander or Edward Said were both rarely assigned or taught alongside critics who showed up in thousands of syllabi?

And, finally, some might object that not all courses need to include a broad range of perspectives. There is nothing wrong, after all, with teaching courses on critical theory or radical political thought. But it’s one thing to acknowledge that such courses have a place in the university, and another to say that students don’t need to be exposed to the intellectual controversy around the issues that shape our public life. Perhaps that could be achieved if universities offered a wider mix of “one-sided” courses – that is, by

⁷⁵ Michelle Alexander, “Review: ‘Between the World and Me,’ by Ta-Nehisi Coates,” *New York Times*, August 17, 2015.

increasing inter-class diversity rather than intra-class diversity. However we do it, students need exposure to a broader range of ideas.

Why is it important to teach these controversies in full? While there are many compelling reasons to do so, we will emphasize those that touch on our duty to form good citizens.

First, students need to acquire some fluency in the intellectual controversies that shape our nation and world. If all we expose them to are disagreements within cramped intellectual spaces, then we are not preparing them to think seriously about contentious public issues, much less exercise power over them one day.

Second, wrestling with and discussing controversies in full will help students to acquire the civic skills they will need to become citizens in a pluralistic nation. Classrooms are rightly understood as schools of democracy, places where young people practice democratic disagreement and deliberation.

Third, insofar as we're educating tomorrow's leaders, they probably won't lead us anywhere we want to go if they have a distorted sense of social reality. In other words, justice-seeking requires good truth-seekers – and that, in turn, necessitates a broad exposure to the most informed minds. As John Stuart Mill argued in *On Liberty*, this is how we fallible human beings collectively inch toward a better approximation of the truth. The most radical voices don't have a monopoly on wisdom. Like the rest of us, they are prone to error.⁷⁶

Fourth, the pursuit of truth is itself another central value of the university. When we strive to form citizens by exposing them to the controversies that shape public life, we should also cultivate students' intellectual virtues, like curiosity, critical thinking

⁷⁶ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1975), 18-19, 21, 24.

skills, and intellectual humility. The university should be cultivating these intellectual virtues, not a dogmatic adherence to the favored doctrines of the hour. And it should do so, in part, because the cultivation of the mind is a valuable human pursuit, even aside from its instrumental value.

These points also make clear why we do not advocate for the inclusion of wild conspiracy theories or widely discredited hypotheses in our curriculum. The alternative views which are underrepresented in many courses are not only matters of controversy among the most informed people (unlike the question of, say, whether the Holocaust happened), they are also matters of great importance to society today (unlike the theory that the earth is flat). Given that these ideas are both live issues among the most informed and matters of great political importance, they deserve a seat at the classroom table.

Of course, some professors might object to the arguments presented here on any number of grounds. They might, for example, say that in their judgement, particular perspectives see further than others – and it’s their obligation to teach their students what is most illuminating. So, let’s assume for a moment that this is true. Even if the likes of Alexander, Thomson, and Said are infallible, it would still be wise to teach their critics, if only, as Mill reminds us, to offer us a fuller understanding of the truth. As Mill famously stressed in *On Liberty*: “He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side; if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion.”⁷⁷ In other words, if we fail to teach their critics, students may embrace, say, Alexander’s or

⁷⁷ Mill, *On Liberty*, 36.

Thomson's or Said's, perspectives out of prejudice, but not because of real understanding.

Additionally, even if Alexander, Thomson, and Said speak the full truth, many citizens in our nation don't think so. We, the people, are deeply divided over issues like the role of race in our institutions, abortion, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This means that understanding our fellow citizens—and gaining more respect for them by seeing their perspectives in their most cogent forms—requires an engagement with intellectual voices that depart from the received academic wisdom of our day.

Other professors might offer a different objection: They say that we shouldn't distract students with wider scholarly controversies because, if we are to make good citizens, the young must marinate in the depth of the world's many injustices. Only those cold dives will awake them from their complacent torpor and motivate them to do something to make the world a better place. Whereas, if professors do as we suggest, students will walk away from their classes with the sense that the world is messy and complicated, making them less inclined to devote their lives to changing it.

Oddly, though, this counter argument suggests that the best education is a bad one. It presumes that students shouldn't be exposed to broad intellectual disagreements, lest they lose conviction. In this respect it is similar to some religious institutions, whose aim is not liberal education, but rather indoctrination. But if we are in the indoctrination business, we can hardly take the high ground when we protest the accusations coming from the Trump administration. And, if we fail to teach a fulsome spectrum of intellectual views on the issues that most divide us, we shouldn't be surprised when certain factions of our demos decide they don't want to support us anymore.

Professors may resist these kinds of suggestions by appealing to academic freedom. We agree that they should be largely free to teach without outside interference. But professors also have responsibilities to their students. For example, they have a duty to not teach topics that lay well beyond their expertise. And unless they are teaching at explicitly sectarian institutions, they should aim, as much as possible, to teach academic controversies rather than scrub them from the curriculum. These responsibilities stem from an implicit contract between teachers and students in universities devoted to liberal education. Students should be able to expect that their professors are not systematically screening them from intellectual disagreements or presenting contested points of view as if they were orthodoxies.

In the long run, the best way to restore public trust, subvert the anti-intellectual currents on the Right, and prepare our students for citizenship is to embrace liberal education at its best. Above all, universities must recommit themselves to teaching our disagreements. Notice, this is *not* narrowly a call for assigning conservative intellectuals, cloaked in a broader appeal for more viewpoint diversity. On some issues, like abortion, yes, we need to teach more conservative scholars, as we Americans tend to understand the term. But on other issues, like Israel and the criminal justice system, we simply need to hear from those academics—including many from the left and center—who significantly depart from voices like Said's and Alexander's. In other words, how much the spectrum of voices should include genuinely conservative ones depends on the issue. Conservatives are simply more active in some scholarly debates than in others—and, naturally, course syllabi should reflect that fact.

How might curricular change happen? This is a question we'll give more sustained attention to in a future essay. For now, though, we suggest that every

university that cares about liberal education needs to have a better sense of how it's actually teaching contentious issues like the ones we've profiled here. To that end, universities could simply do an internal assessment of their curriculum. Some may discover that they perform better than our paper suggests.

Those universities that don't could assemble a group of the willing, convening faculty who are open to considering making more space for scholarly dissent in their courses. Universities could further encourage such undertakings by offering generous course development grants to faculty who want to widen their students' intellectual horizons. These sorts of curricular evaluations could also become a regular feature of academic assessments. For example, such curricular assessments could become part of the external reviews of university departments as well as evaluations for tenure and promotion. On the basis of these reviews, university presidents and deans might reward departments with more hiring lines and resources, when they show a commitment to teaching a broad range of scholarly perspectives.

Our findings might be interpreted as evidence for the excessive politicization of higher education. We are often told, after all, that universities have become "too political." In another sense, though, our evidence shows the opposite: Universities aren't politicized enough. Courses that evade or deny scholarly controversies sideline political contention – and it's this marginalization of politics that has undermined public confidence in the university. The irony is that we can only temper the current political war over higher education by politicizing our courses; that is, by building more contention into them. We don't see another path toward restoring public confidence in the university.

Appendix

Table 3A: Top Titles Assigned with Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*

	Total Count	Percent
<i>Are Prisons Obsolete?</i> Angela Davis	351	6.5%
<i>Between the World and Me</i> Ta-Nehisi Coates	313	5.8%
<i>Discipline and Punish</i> Michel Foucault	312	5.8%
<i>The Souls of Black Folk</i> W. E. B Du Bois	266	4.9%
<i>Racial Formation in the United States</i> Michael Omi and Howard Linant	190	3.5%
<i>The Case for Reparations</i> Ta-Nehisi Coates	178	3.3%
<i>Pedagogy of the Oppressed</i> Paulo Freire	159	3.0%
<i>Deadly Symbiosis</i> Loïc Wacquant	157	2.9%
<i>Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California</i> Ruth Wilson Gilmore	152	2.8%
<i>The Culture of Control</i> David Garland	150	2.8%
<i>Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity</i> Loïc Wacquant	150	2.8%
<i>American Apartheid: Segregation and The Making of the Underclass</i> Douglas S. Massey	149	2.8%
<i>Racial Critiques of Mass Incarceration: Beyond the New Jim Crow</i> James Forman	149	2.8%

<i>Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment</i> Patricia Hill Collins	148	2.7%
<i>White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism</i> Robin DiAngelo	146	2.7%
<i>White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack</i> Peggy McIntosh	143	2.7%
<i>Slavery by Another Name</i> Douglas A. Blackmon	143	2.7%
<i>Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color</i> Kimberlé W. Crenshaw	140	2.6%
<i>They Say/I Say</i> Cathy Birkenstein	137	2.5%
<i>The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison: Ideology, Class, and Criminal Justice</i> Jeffrey H. Reiman	135	2.5%
<i>The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America</i> Khalil Gibran Muhammad	134	2.5%
<i>The Wretched of the Earth</i> Frantz Fanon	131	2.4%
<i>Prison Writings: My Life Is My Sun Dance</i> Leonard Peltier	125	2.3%
<i>The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics</i> George Lipsitz	124	2.3%
"Letter From Birmingham Jail" Martin Luther King	122	2.3%
<i>Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis</i> Christian Parenti	119	2.2%
<i>Punishment and Inequality in America</i> Bruce Western	115	2.1%
<i>The Autobiography of Malcolm X</i> Alex Haley	114	2.1%

<i>Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches</i> Audre Lorde	113	2.1%
<i>Black Skin, White Masks</i> Frantz Fanon	111	2.1%
<i>Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order</i> Stuart Hall	106	2.0%
<i>On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City</i> Alice Goffman	106	2.0%
<i>Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption</i> Bryan Stevenson	106	2.0%
<i>The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration</i> Isabel Wilkerson	106	2.0%
<i>Soul on Ice</i> Eldridge Cleaver	106	2.0%
<i>From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America</i> Elizabeth Hinton	105	1.9%
<i>Life Without Parole: Living in Prison Today</i> Victor Hassine	104	1.9%
<i>In the Belly of the Beast: Letters From Prison</i> Jack Henry Abbott	104	1.9%
<i>A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present</i> Howard Zinn	103	1.9%
<i>The Penal System: An Introduction</i> Michael Cavadino	102	1.9%
<i>Women, Race and Class</i> Angela Davis	102	1.9%
<i>When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America</i> Ira Katznelson	99	1.8%
<i>The Warehouse Prison: Disposal of the New Dangerous Class</i> John Irwin	99	1.8%

<i>A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America</i> Ronald Takaki	98	1.8%
<i>Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools</i> Jonathan Kozol	98	1.8%
<i>Critical Race Theory</i> Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic	98	1.8%
<i>Prisons in Turmoil</i> John Irwin	98	1.8%
<i>Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics</i> Marie Gottschalk	97	1.8%
<i>The Mark of a Criminal Record</i> Devah Pager	95	1.8%
<i>The Prison and the Gallows: The Politics of Mass Incarceration in America</i> Marie Gottschalk	95	1.8%

Table 6A: Top Titles Assigned with Edward Said's *Orientalism*

	Total Count	Percent
<i>Culture and Imperialism</i> Edward W. Said	1,926	12.1%
<i>Imagined Communities</i> Benedict Anderson	1,819	11.4%
<i>The Wretched of the Earth</i> Frantz Fanon	1,711	10.7%
<i>The Location of Culture</i> Homi K Bhabha	1,670	10.5%
<i>Black Skin, White Masks</i> Frantz Fanon	1,479	9.3%
<i>Gender Trouble</i> Judith Butler	1,050	6.6%
<i>Can the Subaltern Speak?</i> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak	1,001	6.3%
<i>Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction</i> Robert Young	936	5.9%
<i>Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison</i> Michel Foucault	910	5.7%
<i>The History of Sexuality</i> Michel Foucault	878	5.5%
<i>The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness</i> Paul Gilroy	770	4.8%
<i>The Clash of Civilizations?</i> Samuel P. Huntington	758	4.8%
<i>Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference</i> Dipesh Chakrabarty	704	4.4%
<i>The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures</i> Bill Ashcroft	636	4.0%
<i>The Post-Colonial Studies Reader</i> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin	578	3.6%

<i>Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest</i> Anne McClintock	565	3.5%
<i>Colonialism/Postcolonialism</i> Ania Loomba	544	3.4%
<i>Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste</i> Pierre Bourdieu	508	3.2%
<i>Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses</i> Chandra Talpade Mohanty	502	3.2%
<i>Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization</i> Arjun Appadurai	491	3.1%
<i>Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices</i> Stuart Hall	486	3.1%
<i>Beginning Postcolonialism</i> John McLeod	484	3.0%
<i>There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation</i> Paul Gilroy	480	3.0%
<i>Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment</i> Patricia Hill Collins	450	2.8%
<i>Things Fall Apart</i> Chinua Achebe	437	2.7%
<i>Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism</i> Zachary Lockman	430	2.7%
<i>Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex</i> Judith Butler	422	2.7%
<i>Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation</i> Mary Louise Pratt	422	2.7%
<i>Heart of Darkness</i> Joseph Conrad	413	2.6%

<i>Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World</i> Edward W. Said	412	2.6%
<i>Mythologies</i> Roland Barthes	410	2.6%
<i>Manifesto of the Communist Party</i> Karl Marx	400	2.5%
<i>The Second Sex</i> Simone De Beauvoir	386	2.4%
<i>Nations and Nationalism</i> Ernest Gellner	382	2.4%
<i>A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present</i> Gayatri Chakravorty	378	2.4%
<i>Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World</i> Arturo Escobar	372	2.3%
<i>White Mythologies: Writing History and the West</i> Robert J. C. Young	361	2.3%
<i>Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction</i> Leela Gandhi	353	2.2%
<i>A History of the Modern Middle East</i> William L. Cleveland	351	2.2%
<i>Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors</i> Elleke Boehmer	350	2.2%
<i>The Colonizer and the Colonized</i> Albert Memmi	350	2.2%
<i>The Souls of Black Folk</i> W. E. B. Du Bois	345	2.2%
<i>The Invention of Tradition</i> T. O. Ranger	343	2.2%
<i>Ways of Seeing: Based on the BBC Television Series</i> John Berger	337	2.1%
<i>The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays</i> Clifford Geertz	333	2.1%

<i>Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race</i> Robert Young	329	2.1%
<i>The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture</i> Theodor W. Adorno	328	2.1%
<i>Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics</i> Cynthia H. Enloe	322	2.0%
<i>Black Looks: Race and Representation</i> bell hooks	322	2.0%
<i>The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism</i> Max Weber	320	2.0%

Table 14A: Top Titles Assigned with Thomson's "A Defense of Abortion"

	Total Count	Percent
"Why Abortion Is Immoral" Don Marquis	897	35.5%
"On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion" Mary Anne Warren	610	24.1%
"Active and Passive Euthanasia" James Rachels	579	22.9%
<i>Utilitarianism</i> John Stuart Mill	465	18.4%
<i>Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals</i> Immanuel Kant	386	15.3%
<i>Famine, Affluence, and Morality</i> Peter Singer	335	13.3%
"All Animals Are Equal" Peter Singer	321	12.7%
"The Experience Machine" Robert Nozick	302	12.0%
<i>A Theory of Justice</i> John Rawls	237	9.4%
<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> Aristotle	212	8.4%
<i>Abortion and Infanticide</i> Michael Tooley	201	8.0%
<i>The Elements of Moral Philosophy</i> James Rachels	195	7.7%
<i>The Case for Animal Rights</i> Tom Regan	187	7.4%
"Virtue Theory and Abortion" Rosalind Hursthouse	180	7.1%
"Voluntary Active Euthanasia" Dan W. Brock	161	6.4%
"The Challenge of Cultural Relativism" James Rachels	160	6.3%

“The Survival Lottery” John Harris	148	5.9%
“Letter From Birmingham Jail” Martin Luther King	135	5.3%
“Puppies, Pigs, and People: Eating Meat and Marginal Cases” Alastair Norcross	134	5.3%
“Do Animals Have Rights?” Tibor R. Machan	129	5.1%
<i>Leviathan</i> Thomas Hobbes	126	5.0%
“The Singer Solution to World Poverty” Peter Singer	126	5.0%
<i>Euthyphro: With Introduction and Notes and Pseudo-Platonica</i> Plato	125	4.9%
“An Argument That Abortion Is Wrong” Don Marquis	121	4.8%
<i>An Eye for an Eye?</i> Stephen Nathanson	118	4.7%
“A Defense of the Death Penalty” Louis P. Pojman	117	4.6%
<i>On Liberty</i> John Stuart Mill	109	4.3%
“Lifeboat Ethics” Garrett Hardin	105	4.2%
“The Case for the Use of Animals in Biomedical Research” Carl I. Cohen	102	4.0%
“Against the Right to Die” J. David Velleman	97	3.8%
<i>The Right Thing to Do: Basic Readings in Moral Philosophy</i> James Rachels	92	3.6%
“When Self-Determination Runs Amok” Daniel Callahan	91	3.6%

“The Ring of Gyges” Plato	89	3.5%
<i>Practical Ethics</i> Peter Singer	87	3.4%
“An Almost Absolute Value in History” John T. Noonan	87	3.4%
“The Intentional Termination of Life” Bonnie Steinbock	87	3.4%
<i>Justifying Legal Punishment</i> Igor Primoratz	87	3.4%
“Moral Saints” Susan M. Wolf	84	3.3%
“The Subjectivity of Values” J. L. Mackie	84	3.3%
“A Critique of Utilitarianism” Bernard Williams	84	3.3%
“The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect” Philippa Foot	83	3.3%
<i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> René Descartes	82	3.2%
<i>The Case Against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering</i> Michael J Sandel	82	3.2%
<i>Crito: A Socratic Dialogue</i> Plato	81	3.2%
“The Wisdom of Repugnance: Why We Should Ban the Cloning of Humans” Leon R Kass	79	3.1%
<i>Animal Liberation</i> Peter Singer	77	3.0%
“Death” Thomas Nagel	77	3.0%
“Cloning Human Beings: An Assessment of the Ethical Issues Pro and Con” Dan W Brock	77	3.0%

<i>An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation</i> Jeremy Bentham	74	2.9%
“The Tragedy of the Commons” Garrett Hardin	73	2.9%
