

The New York Times's 1619 Project: A racist falsification of American and world history

Niles Niemuth, Tom Mackaman, David North
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"The 1619 Project," published by the *New York Times* as a special 100-page edition of its Sunday magazine on August 19, presents and interprets American history entirely through the prism of race and racial conflict. The occasion for this publication is the 400th anniversary of the initial arrival of 20 African slaves at Point Comfort in Virginia, a British colony in North America. On the very next day, the slaves were traded for food.

The Project, according to the *Times*, intends to "reframe the country's history, understanding 1619 as our true founding, and placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are."

Despite the pretense of establishing the United States' "true" foundation, the 1619 Project is a politically motivated falsification of history. Its aim is to create a historical narrative that legitimizes the effort of the Democratic Party to construct an electoral coalition based on the prioritizing of personal "identities"—i.e., gender, sexual preference, ethnicity, and, above all, race.

The *Times* is promoting the Project with an unprecedented and lavishly financed publicity blitz. It is working with the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, which has developed a proposed teaching curriculum that will be sent to schools for teachers to use in their classes. Hundreds of thousands of extra copies of the magazine and a special supplement have been printed for free distribution at schools, libraries and museums across the country. Nikole Hannah-Jones, the staff writer and New America Foundation fellow who first pitched the idea for the Project, oversaw its production and authored the introduction, will be sent on a national lecture tour of schools.

The essays featured in the magazine are organized around the central premise that all of American history is rooted in race hatred—specifically, the uncontrollable hatred of "black people" by "white people." Hannah-Jones writes in the series' introduction: "Anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country."

This is a false and dangerous conception. DNA is a chemical molecule that contains the genetic code of living organisms and determines their physical characteristics and development. The transfer of this critical biological term to the study of a country—even if meant only in a metaphorical sense—leads to bad history and reactionary politics. Countries do not have DNA, they have historically formed economic structures, antagonistic classes and complex political relationships. These do not exist apart from a certain level of technological development, nor independently of a more or less developed network of global economic interconnections.

The methodology that underlies the 1619 Project is idealist (i.e., it derives social being from thought, rather than the other way around) and, in the most fundamental sense of the word, irrationalist. All of history is to

be explained from the existence of a supra-historical emotional impulse. Slavery is viewed and analyzed not as a specific economically rooted form of the exploitation of labor, but, rather, as the manifestation of white racism. But where does this racism come from? It is embedded, claims Hannah-Jones, in the historical DNA of American "white people." Thus, it must persist independently of any change in political or economic conditions.

Hannah-Jones's reference to DNA is part of a growing tendency to derive racial antagonisms from innate biological processes. Democratic Party politician Stacey Abrams, in an essay published recently in *Foreign Affairs*, claims that whites and African Americans are separated by an "intrinsic difference."

This irrational and scientifically absurd claim serves to legitimize the reactionary view—entirely compatible with the political perspective of fascism—that blacks and whites are hostile and incompatible species.

In yet another article, published in the current edition of *Foreign Affairs*, the neurologist Robert Sapolsky argues that the antagonism between human groups is rooted in biology. Extrapolating from bloody territorial conflicts between chimpanzees, with whom humans "share more than 98 percent of their DNA," Sapolsky asserts that understanding "the dynamics of human group identity, including the resurgence of nationalism—that potentially most destructive form of in-group bias—requires grasping the biological and cognitive underpinnings that shape them."

Sapolsky's simplistic dissolution of history into biology recalls not only the reactionary invocation of "Social Darwinism" to legitimize imperialist conquest by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century imperialists, but also the efforts of German geneticists to provide a pseudo-scientific justification for Nazi anti-Semitism and racism.

Dangerous and reactionary ideas are wafting about in bourgeois academic and political circles. No doubt, the authors of the Project 1619 essays would deny that they are predicting race war, let alone justifying fascism. But ideas have a logic; and authors bear responsibility for the political conclusions and consequences of their false and misguided arguments.

American slavery is a monumental subject with vast and enduring historical and political significance. The events of 1619 are part of that history. But what occurred at Port Comfort is one episode in the global history of slavery, which extends back into the ancient world, and of the origins and development of the world capitalist system. There is a vast body of literature dealing with the widespread practice of slavery outside the Americas. As Professor G. Ogo Nwokeji of the Department of African American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, has explained, slavery was practiced by African societies. It existed in West Africa "well before the fifteenth century, when the Europeans arrived there via the Atlantic Ocean." [1]

Historian Rudolph T. Ware III of the University of Michigan writes, “Between the beginning of the fifteenth century and the end of the eighteenth, millions lived and died as slaves in African Muslim societies.”[2] Among the most important of contemporary scholarly works on the subject is *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, originally published in 1983, by the Canadian historian Paul E. Lovejoy. He explained:

Slavery has been an important phenomenon throughout history. It has been found in many places, from classical antiquity to very recent times. Africa has been intimately connected with this history, both as a major source of slaves for ancient civilizations, the Islamic world, India, and the Americas, and as one of the principal areas where slavery was common. Indeed, in Africa slavery lasted well into the twentieth century—notably longer than in the Americas. Such antiquity and persistence requires explanation, both to understand the historical development of slavery in Africa and to evaluate the relative importance of the slave trade to this development. Broadly speaking, slavery expanded in at least three stages—1350 to 1600, 1600 to 1800, and 1800 to 1900—by which time slavery had become a fundamental feature of the African political economy.[3]

Professor Lovejoy remarked in the preface to the Third Edition of his now-classic study that one of his aims in undertaking his research “was to confront the reality that there was slavery in the history of Africa, at a time when some romantic visionaries and hopeful nationalists wanted to deny the clear facts.” [4]

In relation to the New World, the phenomenon of slavery in modern history cannot be understood apart from its role in the economic development of capitalism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As Karl Marx explained in the chapter titled “The Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist” in Volume One of *Das Kapital*:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation. On their heels treads the commercial war of the European nations, with the globe for a theatre. It begins with the revolt of the Netherlands from Spain, assumes giant dimensions in England’s Anti-Jacobin War, and is still going on in the opium wars against China, &c.

Marx’s analysis inspired the critical insight of the brilliant West Indian historian Eric Williams, who wrote in his pioneering study *Capitalism and Slavery*, published in 1944 :

Slavery in the Caribbean has been too narrowly identified with the Negro. A racial twist has thereby been given to what is basically an economic phenomenon. Slavery was not born of racism: rather, racism was the consequence of slavery. Unfree labor in the New World was brown, white, black, and yellow; Catholic, Protestant and pagan.

The formation and development of the United States cannot be understood apart from the international economic and political processes that gave rise to capitalism and the New World. Slavery was an international economic institution that stretched from the heart of Africa to the shipyards of Britain, the banking houses of Amsterdam, and the plantations of South Carolina, Brazil and the Caribbean. Every colonial power was involved, from the Dutch who operated slave trading posts in West Africa, to the Portuguese who imported millions of slaves to Brazil. An estimated 15 to 20 million Africans were forcibly sent to the Americas throughout the entire period of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Of these, 400,000 ended up in the 13 British colonies/United States.

Slavery was the inescapable and politically tragic legacy of the global foundation of the United States. It is not difficult to recognize the contradiction between the ideals proclaimed by the leaders of the American Revolution—which were expressed with extraordinary force by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence—and the existence of slavery in the newly formed United States.

But history is not a morality tale. The efforts to discredit the Revolution by focusing on the alleged hypocrisy of Jefferson and other founders contribute nothing to an understanding of history. The American Revolution cannot be understood as the sum of the subjective intentions and moral limitations of those who led it. The world-historical significance of the Revolution is best understood through an examination of its objective causes and consequences.

The analysis provided by Williams refutes the scurrilous attempt by the 1619 Project to portray the Revolution as a sinister attempt to uphold the slave system. Apart from the massive political impact of Jefferson’s Declaration and the subsequent overthrow of British rule, Williams stressed the objective impact of the Revolution on the economic viability of slavery. He wrote:

“When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another...” Jefferson wrote only part of the truth. It was economic, not political, bands that were being dissolved. A new age had begun. The year 1776 marked the Declaration of Independence and the publication of the *Wealth of Nations*. Far from accentuating the value of the sugar islands [in the Caribbean], American independence marked the beginning of their uninterrupted decline, and it was a current saying at the time that the British ministry had lost not only thirteen colonies but eight islands as well.

It was not an accident that the victorious conclusion of the revolutionary war in 1783 was followed just four years later by the famous call of English abolitionist William Wilberforce for the ending of Britain’s slave trade.

In examining the emergence of British opposition to the slave trade, Williams made a fundamental point about the study of history that serves as an indictment of the subjective and anti-historical method employed by the 1619 Project. He wrote:

The decisive forces in the period of history we have discussed are the developing economic forces. These economic changes are gradual, imperceptible, but they have an irresistible cumulative effect. Men, pursuing their interests, are rarely aware of the ultimate results of their activity. The commercial capitalism of the eighteenth century developed the wealth of Europe by means of slavery and monopoly. But in so doing it helped to create the

industrial capitalism of the nineteenth century, which turned round and destroyed the power of commercial capitalism, slavery, and all its works. Without a grasp of these economic changes the history of the period is meaningless.

The victory of the American Revolution and the establishment of the United States did not solve the problem of slavery. The economic and political conditions for its abolition had not sufficiently matured. But the economic development of the United States—the simultaneous development of industry in the North and the noxious growth of the cotton-based plantation system in the South (as a consequence of the invention of the cotton gin in 1793)—intensified the contradictions between two increasingly incompatible economic systems—one based on wage labor and the other on slavery.

The United States heaved from crisis to crisis in the seven decades that separated the adoption of the Constitution and the election of President George Washington in 1789 from Abraham Lincoln's inauguration and the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. None of the repeated compromises which sought to balance the country between slave and free states, from the Missouri Compromise of 1820 to the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, were ever able to finally settle the issue.

It is worth bearing in mind that the 87 years of history invoked by Lincoln when he spoke at Gettysburg in 1863 is the same span of time that separates our present day from the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932. The explosive socio-economic tendencies which would do away with the entire economic system of slavery developed and erupted in this relatively concentrated period of time.

The founding of the United States set into motion a crisis which resulted in the Civil War, the second American Revolution, in which hundreds of thousands of whites gave their lives to finally put an end to slavery. It must be stressed that this was not an accidental, let alone unconscious, outcome of the Civil War. In the end, the war resulted in the greatest expropriation of private property in world history, not equaled until the Russian Revolution in 1917, when the working class, led by the Bolshevik Party, took state power for the first and so far, only time in world history.

Hannah-Jones does not view Lincoln as “the Great Emancipator,” as the freed slaves called him in the 1860s, but as a garden-variety racist who held “black people [as] the obstacle to national unity.” The author simply disregards Lincoln's own words—for example, the Gettysburg Address and the magisterial Second Inaugural Address—as well as the books written by historians such as Eric Foner, James McPherson, Allen Guelzo, David Donald, Ronald C. White, Stephen Oates, Richard Carwardine and many others that demonstrate Lincoln's emergence as a revolutionary leader fully committed to the destruction of slavery.

But an honest portrayal of Lincoln would contradict Hannah-Jones' claims that “black Americans fought back alone” to “make America a democracy.” So too would a single solitary mention, anywhere in the magazine, of the 2.2 million Union soldiers who fought and the 365,000 who died to end slavery.

Likewise, the interracial character of the abolitionist movement is blotted out. The names William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Elijah Lovejoy, John Brown, Thaddeus Stevens, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, among others, do not appear in her essay. A couple of abolitionists are selectively quoted for their criticism of the Constitution, but Hannah-Jones dares not mention that for the antislavery movement Jefferson's Declaration of Independence was, in the words of the late historian David Brion Davis, their “touchstone, the sacred scripture.”

Hannah-Jones and the other 1619 Project contributors—claiming that slavery was the unique “original sin” of the United States, and discrediting the American Revolution and the Civil War as elaborate conspiracies to perpetuate white racism—have little to add for the rest of

American history. Nothing ever changed. Slavery was simply replaced by Jim Crow segregation, and this in turn has given way to the permanent condition of racism that is the inescapable fate of being a “white American.” It all goes back to 1619 and “the root of the *endemic* racism that we still *cannot purge* from this nation to this day.” [5] [emphasis added]

This is not simply a “reframing” of history. It is an attack and falsification that ignores more than a half-century of scholarship. There is not the slightest indication that Hannah-Jones (or any of her co-essayists) have even heard of, let alone read, the work on slavery carried out by Williams, Davis, or Peter Kolchin; on the American Revolution by Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood; on the political conceptions that motivated union soldiers by James McPherson; on Reconstruction by Eric Foner; on Jim Crow segregation by C. Vann Woodward; or on the Great Migration by James N. Gregory or Joe William Trotter.

What is left out of the *Times*' racist morality tale is breathtaking, even from the vantage point of African-American scholarship. The invocation of white racism takes the place of any concrete examination of the economic, political and social history of the country.

There is no examination of the historical context, foremost the development of the class struggle, within which the struggle of the African-American population developed in the century that followed the Civil War. And there is no reference to the transformation of the United States into an industrial colossus and the most powerful imperialist country between 1865 and 1917, the year of its entry into World War I.

While the 1619 Project and its stable of well-to-do authors find in the labor exploitation of slavery a talisman to explain all of history, they pass over in deafening silence the exploitation inherent in wage labor.

A reader of the 1619 Project would not know that the struggle against slave labor gave way to a violent struggle against wage slavery, in which countless workers were killed. There is no reference to the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 which spread like wildfire along the railways from Baltimore to St. Louis and was only suppressed by the deployment of federal troops, nor to the emergence of the Knights of Labor, the fight for the eight-hour day and the Haymarket Massacre, the Homestead Steel Strike of 1892, the Pullman strike of 1894, the formation of the AFL, the founding of the Socialist Party, the emergence of the IWW, the Ludlow Massacre, the Great Steel Strike of 1919, the countless other labor struggles that followed World War I, and finally the emergence of the CIO and the massive industrial struggles of the 1930s.

In short, there is no class struggle and, therefore, there is no real history of the African-American population and the events which shaped a population of freed slaves into a critical section of the working class. Replacing real history with a mythic racial narrative, the 1619 Project ignores the actual social development of the African-American population over the last 150 years.

Nowhere do any of the authors discuss the Great Migration between 1916 and 1970 in which millions of blacks, and whites, uprooted from the rural South and flocked to take jobs in urban areas across the US, particularly in the industrialized North. James P. Cannon, the founder of American Trotskyism, captured the revolutionary implications of this process, for both African-American and white workers, in his inimitable prose:

American capitalism took hundreds of thousands of Negroes from the South, and exploiting their ignorance, and their poverty, and their fears, and their individual helplessness, herded them into the steel mills as strikebreakers in the steel strike of 1919. And in the brief space of one generation, by its mistreatment, abuse and exploitation of these innocent and ignorant Negro strikebreakers, this same capitalism succeeded in transforming them and their

sons into one of the most militant and reliable detachments of the great victorious steel strike of 1946.

This same capitalism took tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands of prejudiced hillbillies from the South, many of them members and sympathizers of the Ku Klux Klan; and thinking to use them, with their ignorance and their prejudices, as a barrier against unionism, sucked them into the auto and rubber factories of Detroit, Akron and other industrial centers. There it sweated them, humiliated them and drove and exploited them until it finally changed them and made new men out of them. In that harsh school the imported southerners learned to exchange the insignia of the KKK for the union button of the CIO, and to turn the Klansman's fiery cross into a bonfire to warm pickets at the factory gate. [6]

As late as 1910, nearly 90 percent of African-Americans lived in the former slave states, overwhelmingly in conditions of rural isolation. By the 1970s, they were highly urbanized and proletarianized. Black workers had gone through the experiences of the great industrial strikes, alongside whites, in cities like Detroit, Pittsburgh and Chicago. It is no historical accident that the civil rights movement emerged in the South in Birmingham, Alabama, a center of the steel industry and the locus of the actions of communist workers, black and white.

The struggle of wage labor against capital at the point of production united workers across racial boundaries. And so, in the fevered rhetoric of the Jim Crow politician, the civil rights movement was equated with communism and the fear of "race-mixing"—that is, that the working masses, black and white, might be united around their common interests.

Just as it leaves out the history of the working class, the 1619 Project fails to provide political history. There is no accounting of the role played by the Democratic Party, an alliance of Northern industrialists and machine politicians, on one side, and the Southern slavocracy and then Jim Crow politicians, in consciously pitting white and black workers against each other by stoking up race hatred.

In the numerous articles which make up the 1619 Project, the name of Martin Luther King, Jr. appears just once, and then only in a photo caption. The reason for this is that King's political outlook was opposed to the racist narrative advanced by the *Times*. King did not condemn the American Revolution and the Civil War. He did not believe that racism was a permanent characteristic of "whiteness." He called for the integration of blacks and whites and set as his goal the ultimate dissolution of race itself. Targeted and harassed as a "communist" by the FBI, King was murdered after launching the interracial Poor People's Campaign and announcing his opposition to the Vietnam War.

King encouraged the involvement of white civil rights activists, several of whom lost their lives in the South, including Viola Liuzzo, the wife of a Teamsters union organizer from Detroit. His statement following the murders of the three young civil rights workers in 1964, Michael Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman (two of whom were white) was an impassioned condemnation of racism and segregation. King clearly does not fit into Hannah-Jones' narrative.

But, in its most significant and telling omission, the 1619 Project says nothing about the event that had the greatest impact on the social condition of African-Americans—the Russian Revolution of 1917. Not only did this arouse and inspire broad sections of the African-American population—including countless black intellectuals, writers, and artists, among them W.E.B. Du Bois, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Paul Robeson and Lorraine Hansberry—the Revolution undermined the political foundations of American racial apartheid.

Given the 1619 Project's black nationalist narrative, it may appear surprising that nowhere in the issue do the names Malcolm X or Black

Panthers appear. Unlike the black nationalists of the 1960s, Hannah-Jones does not condemn American imperialism. She boasts that "we [i.e. African-Americans] are the most likely of all racial groups to serve in the United States military," and celebrates the fact that "we" have fought "in every war this nation has waged." Hannah-Jones does not note this fact in a manner that is at all critical. She does not condemn the creation of a "volunteer" army whose recruiters prey on poverty-stricken minority youth. There is no indication that Hannah-Jones opposes the "War on Terror" and the brutal interventions in Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Somalia and Syria—all supported by the *Times*—that have killed and made homeless upwards of 20 million people. On this issue, Hannah-Jones is remarkably "color-blind." She is unaware of, or simply indifferent to, the millions of "people of color" butchered and made refugees by the American war machine in the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa.

The toxic identity politics that underlies this indifference does not serve the interests of the working class in the United States or anywhere else, which is dependent for its very survival on unifying across racial and national boundaries. It does, however, serve the class interests of privileged sections of the American upper-middle class.

In a revealing passage at the end of her essay, Hannah-Jones declares that since the 1960s "black Americans have made astounding progress, not only for ourselves but also for all Americans." She is speaking here not for her "race" but a tiny layer of the African-American elite, beneficiaries of affirmative action policies, who came to political maturity in the years leading up to and through the administration of Barack Obama, the United States' first black president.

A 2017 analysis of economic data found extreme levels of wealth inequality within racial groupings. Among those who identify as African-American the richest 10 percent controlled 75 percent of all wealth; during Obama's tenure the wealthiest 1 percent increased their share of wealth amongst all African-Americans from 19.4 percent to 40.5 percent. Meanwhile, it is estimated that the bottom half of African-American households have zero or negative wealth.

While a very narrow layer of black millionaires and billionaires has been deliberately cultivated in response to the mass unrest of the 1960s and 1970s, the conditions for working class African-Americans are worse than they were 40 years ago. This has been the period of deindustrialization, which saw the systematic shutdown of auto, steel and other factories across the United States, devastating working-class cities such as Detroit, Milwaukee, and Youngstown, Ohio.

The major social gains won by workers in the bitter struggles of the 20th century have been rolled back so that an immense amount of wealth could be transferred from the bottom 90 percent of the population to the top. Poverty, declining life expectancy, deaths of despair and other forms of social misery are drawing together workers of all racial and national backgrounds.

It is no coincidence that the promotion of this racial narrative of American history by the *Times*, the mouthpiece of the Democratic Party and the privileged upper-middle-class layers it represents, comes amid the growth of class struggle in the US and around the world.

Earlier this year, auto parts workers in Matamoros, Mexico called on their American counterparts, white and black, to join them in wildcat strikes. Across the South, black, white and Hispanic workers took strike action together against telecommunications giant AT&T. In Tennessee, black and white neighbors defended an immigrant working class family against deportation. Now, the multi-racial and multi-ethnic American auto industry labor force finds itself entering a pitched battle against the global auto giants and the corrupt unions.

At the same time, opinion polls demonstrate growing support in the population for socialism—that is, the conscious political unity of the working class across all boundaries and divisions imposed on it. Under these conditions the American capitalist elite, Democrats and Republican

alike, are terrified of social revolution. They are joining with their ruling class counterparts around the world in deploying sectarian politics, be it based on race, religion, nationality, ethnicity or language to block this development.

The 1619 Project is one component of a deliberate effort to inject racial politics into the heart of the 2020 elections and foment divisions among the working class. The Democrats think it will be beneficial to shift their focus for the time being from the reactionary, militarist anti-Russia campaign to equally reactionary racial politics.

The *Times'* executive editor, Dean Baquet, was explicit in this regard, telling staffers in a taped meeting in August that the narrative upon which the paper was focused would change from "being a story about whether the Trump campaign had colluded with Russia and obstruction of justice to being a more head-on story about the president's character." As a result, reporters will be directed to "write more deeply about the country, race, and other divisions."

Baquet declared:

[R]ace and understanding of race should be a part of how we cover the American story ... one reason we all signed off on the 1619 Project and made it so ambitious and expansive was to teach our readers to think a little bit more like that. Race in the next year—and I think this is, to be frank, what I would hope you come away from this discussion with—race in the next year is going to be a huge part of the American story.

This focus on race is a mirror image of Trump's own racial politics, and it bears a disturbing resemblance to the race-based world view of the Nazis. The central role of race in the politics of fascism was explained concisely in Trotsky's analysis of the ideology of German fascism:

In order to raise it above history, the nation is given the support of the race. History is viewed as the emanation of the race. The qualities of the race are construed without relation to changing social conditions. Rejecting "economic thought" as base, National Socialism descends a stage lower: from economic materialism it appeals to zoologic materialism. [7]

There are many scholars, students and workers who know that the 1619 Project makes a travesty of history. It is their responsibility to take a stand and reject the coordinated attempt, spearheaded by the *Times*, to dredge up and rehabilitate a reactionary race-based falsification of American and world history.

Above all the working class must reject any such effort to divide it, efforts which will become ever more ferocious and pernicious as the class struggle develops. The great issue of this epoch is the fight for the international unity of the working class against all forms of racism, nationalism and related forms of identity politics.

In the weeks and months to come, the *World Socialist Web Site* will publicize and report on lectures that will be organized by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), in which the reactionary anti-working-class politics and historical falsifications promoted by the 1619 Project will be exposed.

Notes:

[1] *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, Volume 3, AD 1420-AD1804, edited by David Eltis and Stanley L. Engerman, [Cambridge: 2011], p. 81

[2] *Ibid*, p. 47

[4] *Ibid*, Location 489

[5] *The New York Times Magazine*, August 18, 2019, p. 19.

[6] James P. Cannon, "The Coming American Revolution," Speech delivered at the Twelfth National Convention of the Socialist Workers Party, 1946.

[7] Leon Trotsky, "What Is National Socialism?" available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1933/330610.htm>



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