

Slavery and the American Revolution: A Response to the New York Times 1619 Project

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This is the text of a lecture delivered by Tom Mackaman at a meeting of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at the University of Michigan on October 22, 2019. The meeting is part of a series organized by the SEP and the IYSSE throughout the US.

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Thank you to the University of Michigan Chapter of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality for inviting me. The IYSSE, together with the *World Socialist Web Site*, is organizing similar lectures at colleges across the country.

These are important meetings. Their purpose is to answer the *New York Times* 1619 Project, which seeks to impose a new narrative of American history in which all is to be explained by white racism. In its own words, the Project, “aims to reframe the country’s history, understanding 1619 [the year the first slaves were brought to colonial Virginia] as our true founding.” The lavishly funded campaign includes a glossy magazine that is being distributed by the hundreds of thousands, free of charge, to museums, libraries and schools, including, so far, every high school in Buffalo, Washington DC, Winston-Salem and Chicago, where the public school workers went out on strike last week.

In a more fundamental sense, these meetings are motivated by the need to build an international movement of the working class and youth against war, the destruction of living standards, police state repression and the threat of dictatorship, and ecological catastrophe. The Socialist Equality Party, together with the IYSSE, insists that the basic division of society is class, not race. Class is defined by an individual’s relationship to the means of production. Working class people, regardless of their skin color, gender, or whether they live in the United States, Mexico, China or anywhere else, sell their labor power in order to survive. This unifies them against capitalist owners and their governments. The task of socialists is to make this objective reality, and the tasks arising from it, consciously understood.

This is not just wishful thinking. In the past year, mass opposition and working class movements have erupted in France, Puerto Rico, Hong Kong, Egypt, Iraq, Ecuador and now Chile, among other places. The global nature of the auto industry has been revealed by strikes in Mexico, South Korea, Romania, India and now among American auto workers at General Motors and Mack Volvo, struggles that the United Auto Workers bureaucracy is attempting to sabotage. Some 2,000 miners in Arizona and Texas and more than 20,000 teachers in Chicago are also currently on strike.

Every attempt will be made to divert and divide this movement of the working class. Donald Trump appeals openly to xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism and anti-communism, and threatens political violence on opponents, the deployment of the military to crush domestic opposition, and the suspension of all constitutional norms. The emergence of an openly authoritarian government and the development of a fascist

movement whipped up from the White House pose the gravest of threats.

However, Trump is not the creator, but rather the product of a diseased ruling class. The pursuit of American imperialism’s aims abroad and at home through war has proceeded for decades under Democratic and Republican administrations alike, through massive military and police spending, attacks on democratic rights, the rollback of workers’ wages and benefits, tax cuts for the rich, and the evisceration of all forms of social spending.

There is also agreement between Trump and his ruling class opponents that the working class should be divided. For the Democratic Party, this entails the promotion of various forms of identity, including gender, sexuality, and, above all, race, as the decisive social category.

This is the political essence of the 1619 Project. *Times* reporter Nikole Hannah-Jones sets the tone in the project’s lead essay. She insists that “anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country,” that slavery is its “original sin” and “the root of the endemic racism that we still cannot purge from this nation to this day,” and that “the inhumanity visited on black people by every generation of white America justified the inhumanity of the past.” Against all of this, “black Americans fought back alone.” [Emphases added]

What are the political implications of this approach to history? If we grant as true that “white America” can never overcome its racism, it follows that there exists no possibility for political cooperation and genuine solidarity among working class people and youth in America, let alone the world, to confront the crises that threaten all of humanity. Black workers and youth should subordinate themselves to the African American wealthy and upper-middle class, people like Ms. Hannah-Jones, and organize as an identity group inside the Democratic Party—for which, of course, the *New York Times* is a primary mouthpiece.

There is nothing progressive about this in the slightest. Indeed, in its insistence that *race*—which has no basis in science—is the determinative category of both the present and past, the 1619 Project shares the most basic premise of the white supremacists and fascists that are being set into motion by the Trump administration.

This is dangerous politics, and very bad history. Hannah-Jones mixes anti-historical metaphors pertaining to biological determinism (that racism is printed in a “national DNA”) and to religious obscurantism (that slavery is the uniquely American “original sin”). But whether ordained by God or genetic code, racism by whites against blacks serves, for the 1619 Project, as history’s *deus ex machina*. There is no need to consider questions long placed at the center of historical inquiry: cause and effect, contingency and conflict, human agency and change over time. History is simply a morality tale written backwards from 2019.

To answer all that the 1619 Project falsifies and all that it leaves out would require far more than the time we have this evening. Another lecture here at the University of Michigan, by *World Socialist Web Site* reporter Eric London, will deal with the sectional conflict between North and South and the Civil War. A final lecture, by Socialist Equality Party

National Secretary Joseph Kishore, will address the development of the African American population as a critical component of the working class and the impact of the Russian Revolution on American class and race relations. Collectively, these lectures will show that race and racism are not immutable, but emerge out of material and political interests. They will demonstrate the crucial role of revolution—the American, the Civil War, and the Russian, and finally, the fight for socialism today, in advancing human equality.

My task this evening is to address the 1619 Project's attack on the American Revolution and its principles, which Hannah-Jones contemptuously refers to as a "founding mythology" and "lies." If one knew nothing more than what the 1619 Project teaches about American history, he or she would be left to assume that slavery was a uniquely American affair, and that the American Revolution was waged by greedy slaveowners trying to stop the benevolent King George III from freeing the slaves!

Thus, Hannah-Jones tells us, "One of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery," and that, at the time of the American Revolution, "one-fifth of the population within the 13 colonies struggled under a brutal system of slavery unlike anything that had existed in the world before."

But this is the "founding mythology" of the 1619 Project, not the American Revolution. In answering, I will address the origins of the chattel slave system and its vast development in the Atlantic world from the 15th through the 18th centuries, and then the origins of the American Revolution and its impact on slavery.

Slavery

As a system of forced labor and subordinate social status, slavery was not at all unique to the 13 colonies. It reached back to antiquity—including Babylonia, Egypt, China, Greece and Rome—and rose also in the New World before Columbus in the Aztec, Mayan and other empires. Slavery was a source of surplus value in ancient agricultural societies, and, as a form of legal property, was closely associated with domesticated animals. It is noteworthy that the word *chattel* has a common origin with *cattle* and *capital* in the old Latin *capitale*.

In Europe, the Middle East, North Africa and East Africa, the slave networks developed in ancient times survived the fall of Rome. Long before the Atlantic slave trade, people were deported into slavery from among the many peoples and cultural groups of Central and Western Africa across the Sahara, and for a thousand years the African rim of the Indian Ocean bustled with slave ships. The captors of slaves in Africa were other Africans. They maintained slavery in their own societies, and sold their slaves to Arabs and Persians, and later to Europeans.

Nor was slavery confined to Africans. The term "slave" is itself derived from the Latin word for "Slav," *sclavus*. The word took on its modern meaning as the pagan Slavic populations of eastern Europe were subjected to servile labor after military defeat; the word's "transferred sense is clearly evidenced in documents of the 9th century," comments the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

What Americans would today call "white people" continued to be subjected to slavery right on up until the 1800s. Between about 1500 and 1700 some 2.5 million slaves from the Black Sea, overwhelmingly eastern Europeans, passed through Istanbul. Further west in the Mediterranean world, according to Ohio State University historian Robert Davis, as many as 1.25 million Europeans were captured by Arab corsairs and taken into slavery in North Africa between 1500 and 1800—precisely the same centuries as the rise of the Transatlantic African slave trade. Entire villages in locations as far away as Iceland were depopulated. Europeans themselves also enslaved people who today would be called "white." Until 1453, the Italian city-states dominated the Black Sea slave trade, sending Bulgarians and others to labor on the sugar plantations of the

Mediterranean.

Thus, when the first European merchants made their way to Africa's west coast and began purchasing slaves in significant numbers in the late 15th century, they tapped into longstanding networks of slavery that existed in both Africa and Europe. Gradually over the ensuing three centuries, the ancient system of slavery, transplanted to the New World, became bound up with the vast development of key agricultural commodities: tobacco, sugar, rice, indigo, and finally cotton.

In *Capital* Marx described this period as that of primitive capitalist accumulation:

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, signaled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation. On their heels treads the commercial war of the European nations, with the globe for a theatre.... If money according to Augier, 'comes into the world with a congenital blood-stain on one cheek', capital comes dripping from head to foot from every pore with blood and dirt.

As we stated in the *World Socialist Web Site* in our reply to the 1619 Project, far from being a phenomenon unique to the colonies that would become the United States,

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.

The mind reels at the horrors of the slave trade—the forced marches from villages in Africa; the dungeons where slaves awaited the "middle passage;" the slave ships in which an appalling number died; the auction block; and then a life of forced labor, degradation and the routine and at times horrific violence that entailed.

However, the 1619 Project's assertion, put forward by both Hannah-Jones and Princeton sociologist Matthew Desmond, that the cruelty of slavery was unique to the 13 colonies does not survive even an elementary examination of the slave trade. The British North American colonies received only 6.5 percent of the 9 to 15 million slaves taken across the Atlantic, whereas the vast subtropical and tropical zone stretching from the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico to Brazil took some 90 percent. Yet by 1830 the American slave states accounted for roughly 30 percent of all people of African descent in the Western Hemisphere. The only way to explain this staggering statistical disparity is that, horrible as slavery in the American colonies (and then states) certainly was, the survival rate was much higher than in the massive plantations of the Caribbean and Brazil, where a great many were literally worked to death, to be replaced by a steady stream of new arrivals.

Because slavery in the New World ultimately became confined overwhelmingly to Africans and their descendants, it is a deceptively easy step to imagine, as the 1619 Project does, that it was a system of racial oppression and deny that it was first, and always foremost, a system of labor exploitation. As the great West Indian historian Eric Williams

pointed out,

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.

In fact, historians have searched in vain for any sort of racial justification for slavery in colonial Virginia. They have found neither that, nor even an original legal justification. To the extent that there was any ideological rationale for slavery it was first religious, not racial. By custom of both Christian and Muslim societies, slavery was reserved for infidels. Muslims enslaved Christians, and Christians enslaved Muslims, and both enslaved those they viewed to be pagans, including the sub-Saharan Africans. In other words, slavery's longstanding existence and its religious sanction appears to have been all that was needed to set it afoot in the Chesapeake.

The 1619 Project would have us believe that John Rolfe's observation of the arrival of "20 odd Negroes" aboard the *White Lion*, an English pirate ship flying under a Dutch flag—whose cargo of Angolans was stolen from a Portuguese slave vessel bound for Veracruz in New Spain!—was a world-altering event. As the first recorded moment when African slaves arrived in the American colonies, it is highly symbolic, *but only symbolic*. In fact, there were already African-descent people in Virginia, and it would take nearly a century before slavery became entrenched in the colonies. And not until the final decades before the Civil War did a fully developed system of racist ideology exist to justify slavery.

The slaves taken ashore in Virginia found an, as yet, sparsely populated colony that was remarkable for its lack of sharp definition regarding slavery *or* race. As Edmund S. Morgan and other historians have shown, slavery shaded imperceptibly into indentured servitude—a system of non-remunerated labor under which people could also be bought, sold, whipped, and separated from family, but which lacked the inheritable status of slavery. For most of the 17th century, indentured servitude was the leading form of labor in colonial Virginia and Maryland, and it continued to be so further to the north in Pennsylvania until after the American Revolution.

When viewed next to indentured servitude, chattel slavery appears to have been, as put by historian Gordon Wood, "the most base and degraded status in a society of several degrees of unfreedom." Another eminent historian, Bernard Bailyn, describes the lot of many indentured servants caught up in a Transatlantic strikingly similar to slavery:

"It was a brutal traffic [that] developed into an organized system with safe houses for confining victims until shipping could be arranged ... Week after week, month after month, children, male and female, were snatched from the streets of London for shipment.

Not only was slavery similar as a form of labor to indentured servitude in Colonial Virginia, it was socially proximate as well. Some African slaves were treated as indentured servants and gained their freedom. Some free Africans became landowners, and perhaps even themselves slaveowners. There were numerous marriages that would later be defined as "interracial" between African men and European women, and vice versa. There is even some evidence of political solidarity, most notably Bacon's Rebellion against the Berkeley faction of the Virginia gentry,

waged in 1676, which included Africans and Englishmen, slaves and indentured servants.

African slavery eclipsed indentured servitude in the southern colonies for a variety of reasons: the British seizure from the Dutch of the slave trade after the commercial war of 1654-1656 and the Great Fire of London in 1666, which dried up the supply of indentured servants. But it took many decades, until the first years of the 18th century, for a legal code governing slavery to develop. Among the laws that emerged was one that included the elimination of conversion to Christianity as a means of gaining freedom, and the establishment of *partus sequitur ventrem*, that the condition of the mother, slave or free, determined the condition of the child.

The American Revolution

Born into this world of masters and slaves as the sons and inheritors of slaveholding tobacco planters was the generation of Virginians who would lead the American Revolution—George Washington in 1732, Patrick Henry in 1736, Thomas Jefferson in 1743, and James Madison in 1751. In a clear example of bad history (and logical fallacy), the 1619 Project argues that, because the American Revolution did not achieve the destruction of slavery, it must therefore have been waged to preserve it. "We may never have revolted against Britain if the founders had not understood that slavery empowered them to do so; nor if they had not believed that independence was required in order to ensure that slavery would continue," as Ms. Hannah-Jones speculates. "Some might argue that this nation was founded not as a democracy but as a slavocracy."

There is nothing to support this contention. As we explained in our reply, "the world-historical significance of the Revolution is best understood through an examination of its objective causes and consequences." But what was the American Revolution?

Like other great revolutions—including the French Revolution that it helped inspire and later the Russian Revolution—the American Revolution fused the most advanced political thought with economic conditions that had reached sufficient maturity to make the overthrow of an old order both possible, and from an objective standpoint, historically necessary.

The rapid growth of the colonies in the mid-eighteenth century—economic, demographic and cultural—increasingly challenged the bands of aristocratic-feudal control imposed on them by Great Britain. King George and Parliament responded to these changes by attempting to prop up the mercantile-capitalist economic order and the old power structures through a series of taxes and acts, which were once well known to all students of American history. The Colonists, in turn, responded by asserting, increasingly forcefully, their own rights in the language of Enlightenment natural law and reason. The revolutionary implications of this, what historians call the imperial crisis, was well described by John Adams in an 1815 letter to Thomas Jefferson:

As to the history of the revolution, my ideas may be peculiar, perhaps singular. What do we mean by the Revolution? The war? That was no part of the revolution; it was only an effect and consequence of it. The revolution was in the minds of the people, and this was effected from 1760 - 1775, in the course of fifteen years, before a drop of blood was shed at Lexington.

The American Revolution was, in its time, a radical event. Never before had a colonial people, who lived on what was then viewed as the fringe of the civilized world, risen up and thrown off an imperial power. Not only did the Revolution dispose of the King and parliament, it established a new government whose founding document, Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, proclaimed universal human equality and the right to revolution when any government fails in its duty to protect basic rights.

It established a written constitution which asserted that the people are the ultimate repository of power. And it established a Bill of Rights, much under attack these days, that guaranteed basic democratic rights—the freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly; the right to be secure from government searches; the prohibition of torture. A republican revolution, it shattered the aristocratic principle, feudal economic structures such as primogeniture and entail, and drove out of the colonies the courtiers, King’s favorites and Loyalists, and in this way was a revolution “not just over home rule, but who would rule at home,” as one historian put it long ago.

The American Revolution made incarnate the thought of the Enlightenment, the period of intellectual rebirth that undermined the divinely sanctioned feudal order of the Middle Ages, and that grew in tandem with the incipient capitalist economy. Just as scientists—natural philosophers as they were then called—such as Copernicus, Galileo and Newton challenged the feudal-religious conception of the natural world, so Enlightenment political philosophers began to raise questions about the political world—but not the social, which was only dimly understood prior to Marx. Why did kings rule? What was the purpose of government? What were the rights of man? Ultimately, in answer to these questions, the Enlightenment established that there existed natural rights—that is, rights that preceded government, or that exist in a state of nature.

One natural right identified was the right to private property. Another was the right to freedom, or self-ownership. However, the right to property, as James Oakes has pointed out, was increasingly viewed to be the outcome of self-ownership and the right to dispose of one’s own labor. “The property which every man has in his own labour, as it is the original foundation of all other property, so it is the most sacred and inviolable,” Adam Smith wrote in the *Wealth of Nations*.

Smith’s book, the foundation of capitalist political economy and an attack on the mercantilist capitalist system, was published in 1776, the same year as the Declaration of Independence. Their simultaneity was not accidental.

Again, Eric Williams:

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.

Adam Smith’s argument had been anticipated by the *Somerset* ruling of 1772, in which Lord Mansfield, the chief justice of the Court of King’s Bench, ruled that there was no natural right to slavery, or property in man. It could only be established by positive law, which did not exist in England, where, as *Somerset*’s barrister argued, “the air [was] too pure for a slave to breathe in.” The founding fathers were of course aware of the famous *Somerset* case. Yet they established no positive slave law in the Constitution, and in fact carefully excluded the word entirely, referring to it only obliquely in the three-fifths clause on representation.

They were acutely aware of the contradiction between their espousal of equality and the existence of slavery. Patrick Henry called slavery a “Practice totally repugnant to the first Impression of right and wrong.” Washington hoped for a “plan adopted for its abolition.” Madison worried

that “Where slavery exists the republican Theory becomes still more fallacious.” And Jefferson perceived a change

since the origin of the present revolution. The spirit of the master is abating, that of the slave rising from the dust, his condition mollifying, the way, I hope, preparing, under the auspices of heaven, for a total emancipation; and that this is disposed, in the order of events, to be with the consent of the masters, rather than by their extirpation.

Jefferson’s hope was not realized. The masters were extirpated, as a class, in the American Civil War. Yet that later event, the Second American Revolution, is inconceivable without the first.

The generation of 1776 were not mere hypocrites. They took certain measures toward the gradual ending of slavery. Jefferson authored the Northwest Ordinance in 1787, banning slavery in the states that would later become Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin and Minnesota. Under the second Jefferson administration, the United States banned the Transatlantic slave trade in 1808, the earliest year made possible by the Constitution, and one year after the trade was banned by Britain.

The first state to enter the American union after the Revolution, Vermont, became in 1777 the first place in the Western Hemisphere to ban slavery by law. The northern states set into motion plans for gradual abolition that ended slavery there in the antebellum, and, among Virginia and Maryland slaveowners, the Revolution instigated a manumission movement that substantially increased the number of free people of African descent in the United States. As noted, the American Revolution inspired the French Revolution of 1789, and also the Haitian Revolution of 1791, which resulted in the first abolition of slavery in the Caribbean.

In the US, slavery might have withered away peacefully, as the founders hoped, had it not been for the invention of the cotton gin by Eli Whitney in 1793. Cotton production expanded from a minuscule amount in 1790 to 750,000 bales in 1830, to 2.85 million bales in 1850. By 1860 the US South was providing 80 percent of Great Britain’s cotton. By the 1830s, cotton, a single commodity, generated more than half of all US export dollars. With the growth of the Cotton Kingdom, the number of slaves rose from 700,000 in 1790 to around 3.2 million in 1850.

The entrenchment of slavery in the American South is the subject of the next lecture, by Eric London. However, the question remains: in the scale of history, did the American Revolution signify the founding of a slavocracy, as the 1619 Project claims, or did it represent a progressive world-historical event?

The abolitionists had no doubts on this question. For them, the Declaration of Independence, in the words of the late David Brion Davis, was “the touchstone, the sacred scripture.” For Frederick Douglass, who like Martin Luther King Jr. is passed over in silence by the 1619 Project, the Declaration was “the ring-bolt to the chain of destiny.” Indeed, in her condemnation of Jefferson and the founders as so many liars, Hannah-Jones, ironically, finds herself in league with the fire-eating advocates of slavery, including John Calhoun, who called Jefferson’s claim of human equality “the most false and dangerous of all political errors.”

The American Revolution, and the Enlightenment, gave a powerful ideological impulse to the idea of human equality and to the conception of the dignity of labor. First in Great Britain, where the development of industrial capitalism and the working class emerged far earlier, then in the United States, it created the conditions for an anti-slavery movement that placed the institution of chattel slavery on a collision course with destruction. The struggle between the two principles of right—the right of private property up to and including ownership of man, and the right of self-ownership—was ultimately decided in the Civil War, which, as Marx

observed, set the stage for a great advancement in the class struggle. These will be the subjects of the two coming lectures, by Eric London and Joe Kishore.

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