

The “Irrepressible Conflict:” Slavery, the Civil War and America’s Second Revolution

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The following lecture was delivered on Tuesday, November 5 at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. It was the second in a series of three lectures at the U of M in response to the New York Times’ “1619 Project,” which presents a falsified, racist interpretation of American history. Lectures on this topic are being held across the country under the title “Race, Class and the Fight for Socialism: Perspectives for the Coming Revolution in America.” The first lecture, titled “Slavery and the American Revolution: A Response to the New York Times’ 1619 Project,” was held November 1.

The purpose of this lecture series, hosted by the Socialist Equality Party, is to address the falsifications of the *New York Times’* “1619 Project” and undertake a historical materialist analysis of American history, and in this lecture, the Civil War. Our purpose is not academic. Our aim to elaborate the strategy for socialist revolution.

The “1619 Project” is a politically motivated attack on historical truth. Through this initiative, the Democratic Party seeks to present race, and not class, as the essential dividing line in American and world society.

This historical falsification has a clear political value for the American financial aristocracy. In the US, the wealthiest 1 percent of households now owns 40 percent of the wealth. The next 9 percent owns another 30 percent, meaning the top 10 percent owns 70 percent of all wealth. The bottom 50 percent—160 million people—owns less than 2 percent. That’s less than the 3 percent owned by the richest 400 Americans.

Only an oligarchic society such as this one could produce a figure like Trump, who epitomizes in his reactionary politics and personal depravity all the characteristics of the degenerate financial aristocracy.

In a country of 320 million people, roughly 285 million—the bottom 90 percent—constitute the working class. Of those, roughly 40 million are identified as black, 170 million are identified as white, 50 million are Hispanic, 17 million are Asian, and 4 million are Native American. Of all categories, roughly 40 million are foreign born, while another 35 million are second-generation immigrants. And, of course, within each category there are younger and older workers and women and men. Within this diverse working class, there exist various levels of stratification—from highly skilled workers with higher incomes to those living below or at the very fringes of solvency.

These are just the figures for the working class in America. Across the world the working class comes from all different national and cultural backgrounds. The workers’ position in society, however, is determined not by the color of their skin, their religion, their language or their gender, but by their class—by the fact that they sell their labor power in order to survive. The task of socialists is to break down the racial myths, clarify the historical record and bring workers of all the backgrounds together in a common, united struggle for social equality.

Historical falsification and identity politics are strategic weapons in the hands of the ruling class, which deliberately employs these tools to weaken the objective position of the working class by pitting workers against each other and thereby suppressing the class struggle. Trump opts

for the openly fascistic method, scape-goating immigrants, excoriating socialism and appealing to the most openly racist elements of American society.

But this lecture will address the Democratic Party and its history, its use of racial politics—today and in the decades leading up to the Civil War. Today, this brand of racialism is in no way a progressive alternative to the fascism of Trump. In fact, as an ideology, the Democratic Party’s identity politics shares much in common with the party’s racist roots and with fascist racial and irrationalist theories of the early 20th century. It is an extremely dangerous and right-wing ideology and it must be opposed.

This critique will focus on two articles in the 1619 Project, the first by journalist and *Times* staff writer Nikole Hannah-Jones, the originator of the project, titled “Our democracy’s founding ideals were false when they were written. Black Americans have fought to make them true,” and the second, by Princeton sociologist Matthew Desmond, titled “In order to understand the brutality of American capitalism, you have to start on the plantation.”

Both Hannah-Jones and Desmond argue that slavery was the fault of all white people, who are fundamentally predisposed to be racist. Key to the argument of Hannah-Jones is the claim that even Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation had no relation to any progressive political struggle for equality. In her words, Lincoln “blamed them [black people] for the [civil] war.” The decision to free the slaves was merely a question of winning the war. She writes, “Anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country, as does the belief, so well articulated by Lincoln, that black people are the obstacle to national unity.” We will return to Mr. Lincoln momentarily.

The *Times* asserts that the entire white population, poor and rich alike, supported and benefited from slavery and violently opposed post-war Reconstruction. Desmond claims, “Witnessing the horrors of slavery drilled into poor white workers that things could be worse. So they generally accepted their lot, and American freedom became broadly defined as the opposite of bondage. It was a freedom that understood what it was against but not what it was for; a malnourished and mean kind of freedom that kept you out of chains but did not provide bread or shelter. It was a freedom far too easily pleased.”

Referencing the period following the Civil War, Hannah-Jones similarly states, “The many gains of Reconstruction were met with fierce white resistance throughout the South, including unthinkable violence against the formerly enslaved, wide-scale voter suppression, electoral fraud and even, in some extreme cases, the overthrow of democratically elected biracial governments.”

And further: “White Southerners of all economic classes, on the other hand, thanks in significant part to the progressive policies and laws black people had championed, experienced substantial improvement in their lives even as they forced black people back into a quasi-slavery.”

How convenient for the capitalist class and the multi-millionaire editors of the *New York Times* that the 1619 authors conclude that the historic

levels of inequality and exploitation in America today are not the fault of today's ruling class, but of... the "DNA" of the country in general, and "white people" of "all economic classes" in particular.

In our reply on the *World Socialist Web Site*, we juxtaposed to this racist method the Marxist method of historical materialism. We wrote:

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.

Having introduced the positions of the *Times*, let's address the real historical record, starting with the Great Emancipator, Abraham Lincoln.

Lincoln the attorney would have pointed out that since Hannah-Jones and Desmond have impeached his political character by claiming that he "blamed blacks" for the Civil War and have presented the abolition of slavery as a reluctant act of last resort, we are entitled to introduce evidence to rehabilitate him and in so doing address the *Times'* underlying falsifications of the whole historical period.

As a preliminary issue, one feels the need to remind these people of the small matter that Lincoln did, in fact, carry out one of the most revolutionary acts of the 19th century—freeing the slaves—a task for which he was assassinated. It was a world dominated by kings and tsars, with Europe mired in reaction following the defeats of the revolutions of 1848. Millions of serfs roamed Eastern Europe. The English crown was pumping China with opium and robbing the country blind. France invaded Mexico and established an emperor to collect its debts. Millions more risked their lives traveling on disease-ridden ships to throw off the weight of feudal reaction and make it in America. Fifteen years after Cavaignac suppressed the Paris workers in blood and eight years before Thiers would do the same to the Commune, Abraham Lincoln sat at his desk and wrote that four million human beings—with a market price of billions of dollars in today's money—were "Thenceforth and forever free."

Lincoln is an absolutely unique figure in American history. His own life is insolubly connected to the American Revolution, which Tom Mackaman addressed in the first of this lecture series. Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809, with three weeks remaining in the second term of President Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence.

In his biography of Lincoln, Sidney Blumenthal summarizes Lincoln's young career in relation to the question of slavery:

Lincoln's deepening understanding of slavery in its full complexity as a moral, political, and constitutional dilemma began in his childhood among the Primitive Baptist antislavery dissidents in backwoods Kentucky and Indiana, whose churches his parents attended. As a boy he rode down the Mississippi River to New Orleans, where the open-air emporium of slaves on gaudy display shocked him. His development was hardly a straight line, but he was caught up in the currents of the time. His self-education, which started with his immersion in the Bible, Shakespeare, and the freethinking works of Thomas Paine and French philosophes, was the intellectual foundation for his profoundly felt condemnation of Southern Christian pro-slavery theology.

Lincoln's hatred for slavery was in part personal. Blumenthal explains that at a campaign event, Lincoln, "the man who had been extraordinarily reluctant about discussing his past, sensitive about his social inferiority, blurted out a startling confession:"

"I used to be a slave," said Lincoln. He did not explain what prompted him to make this incredible statement, why he branded himself as belonging to the most oppressed, stigmatized, and untouchable caste, far worse than being accused of being an abolitionist. Illinois, while a free state, had a draconian Black Code. Why would Lincoln announce that he was a former "slave?" The bare facts he did not disclose to his audience were these: Until he was twenty-one years old, Lincoln's father had rented him out to neighbors in rural Indiana at a price of ten to thirty-one cents a day, to labor as a rail splitter, farmhand, hog butcher, and ferry operator. The father collected the son's wages. Lincoln was in effect an indentured servant, a slave. He regarded his semiliterate father as domineering and himself without rights.

Lincoln's political career was dedicated to opposing the domination of the interests of the Southern slave owners on American political life, a domination they exercised after the conclusion of the so-called "Era of Good Feelings" through the newly formed Democratic Party. From the 1830s, Lincoln was attracted to and active within the Whig Party, led by Henry Clay of Kentucky, a vicious opponent of Andrew Jackson and the Democrats and an advocate of national economic development—a specter the Democratic Party and the slaveholders opposed on the grounds that economic modernization would undercut the backward slave system.

A word about the Democratic Party's ignoble roots and its long strategy of inflaming racial divisions to maintain social stability and protect private property. The Democratic Party is one of the oldest bourgeois political parties in the world, formally founded in 1828. It was consciously conceived of by Southern slave owners and Northern Tammany politicians as an alliance to protect the interests of the slave owners and preserve social stability in both South and North. The ideological glue of this alliance was an obsessive focus on race and identity, directed first and foremost against blacks, indigenous people and, later, the Chinese.

Two figures stand out in the enunciation of this strategy: John C. Calhoun and Martin Van Buren.

Democrat John C. Calhoun, South Carolina senator and vice president during the presidencies of John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson, was an extremely class conscious slave owner, aware that slavery could not politically survive on the basis of sectionalism alone. In 1828, he appealed to wealthy Northerners and said: "After we [the planters] are exhausted, the contest will be between the capitalist and operatives [workers]; for into these two classes it must, ultimately, divide society. The issue of the

struggle here must be the same as it has been in Europe.”

The historian Richard Hofstadter labeled Calhoun the “Marx of the Master Class,” writing:

Calhoun proposed that no revolution should be allowed to take place. To forestall it he suggested consistently—over a period of years—what Richard Current has called “planter-capitalist collaboration against the class enemy.” In such a collaboration the South, with its superior social stability, had much to offer as a conservative force. In return, the conservative elements in the North should be willing to hold down abolitionist agitation; and they would do well to realize that an overthrow of slavery in the South would prepare the ground for social revolution in the North.

Calhoun said in the Senate:

There is and always has been in an advanced stage of wealth and civilization a conflict between labor and capital. The condition of society in the South exempts us from the disorders and dangers resulting from this conflict; and which explains why it is that the political condition of the slaveholding states has been so much more stable and quiet than that of the North... The experience of the next generation will fully test how vastly more favorable our condition of society is to that of other sections for free and stable institutions, provided we are not disturbed by the interference of others, or shall... resist promptly and successfully such interference.

Calhoun’s alliance was forged in no small part through the political talent of New York’s Martin Van Buren, known as the “little magician” and “the Red Fox of Kinderhook.” He headed the Democratic ticket after Jackson’s second term, becoming president for one term from 1837 to 41.

Van Buren was a master politician who, well before he became president, understood that growing Northern cities would become centers of class struggle and that the ruling class needed a strategy to maintain social order. The historian Daniel Walker Howe describes Van Buren’s own class conscious political motives for forging the Democratic alliance:

Leaders preoccupied with sovereignty and authority sensed a very real problem in America: the danger of anarchy. Significantly, when Martin Van Buren was in England at the time of the Great Reform Bill of 1832, his comments on it had to do not with improving the quality of representative government but his fears for maintaining order.

Such concerns among Northern elites led Calhoun to comment that those elites feared “the needy and corrupt in their own section. They begin to feel what I have long foreseen, that they have more to fear from their own people than we from our slaves.”

Through the Jackson administration and afterward, fanning racial hatred of the slaves and freed blacks became the Democrats’ ideological mechanism for tying the northern political machines to the political interests of the southern slave owners. In both cases this racial politics had equal utility, maintaining slavery in the south and maintaining profits for the urban northern industrialists. Poor whites and arriving immigrants were informed by the Democrats that it was not their class, but their race that determined their social position. They should fear a race war if the

slaves were ever freed. This became the glue that held together the Democratic Party’s cross-regional alliance—solidified by efforts to twist Northern workingmen’s organic hatred of the new capitalist exploitation by idealizing slavery as the lesser evil.

There was another tradition that arose in opposition to the slave owners’ conspiracy to dominate the entire political system, North, South, East and, in particular, West. Trailblazing abolitionists like publisher William Lloyd Garrison characterized the heroic spirit of these radical iconoclasts in his letter “To the Public” in the first edition of the abolitionist *The Liberator* on January 1, 1831, three decades before the war, published when Lincoln was a young man:

I determined, at every hazard, to lift up the standard of emancipation in the eyes of the nation, *within sight of Bunker Hill and in the birth place of liberty*. That standard is now unfurled; and long may it float, unhurt by the spoliation of time or the missiles of a desperate foe—yea, till every chain be broken, and every bondman set free! Let southern oppressors tremble—let their secret abettors tremble—let their northern apologists tremble—let all the enemies of the persecuted blacks tremble.

Lincoln, though not an abolitionist, spent his young career opposing the Democratic Party, at first as a leader of the Whigs in Illinois. While Lincoln was active in the Whig Party, first in the state legislature and then as a representative in Congress, the US conquered new territory and forced its way westward—both through robbing Mexico of half its territory in the Mexican-American war and through the extermination and forced removal of Native Americans. The question of slavery was addressed in numerous “compromises” regarding the extension of slavery, orchestrated by the Whigs and by Clay himself. The American population, though not overwhelmingly or explicitly abolitionist in its political sentiments, came to view the expansionist aims of the slave owners with increasing hostility. During this period, Garrison’s isolation of the 1830s shifted greatly during the following quarter-century as the public turned against slavery.

By the early 1850s, Lincoln—and millions more—grew weary of the Whig Party’s incessant compromises with the Slave Power, which had shifted the framework of American politics to the right and more tightly under the control of the slave-owning minority. Lincoln’s former law partner, William Herndon, wrote:

The warriors [of the Whig Party], young and old, removed their armor from the walls, and began preparations for the impending conflict. Lincoln had made a few speeches in aid of [Whig candidate Winfield] Scott during the campaign of 1852, but they were efforts entirely unworthy of the man. Now, however, a live issue was presented to him. No one realized this sooner than he. In the office discussions he grew bolder in his utterances. He insisted that the social and political difference between slavery and freedom was becoming more marked; that one must overcome the other; and that postponing the struggle between them would only make it more deadly in the end. “The day of compromise,” he still contended, “has passed. These two great ideas have been kept apart only by the most artful means. They are like two wild beasts in sight of each other, but chained and held apart. Someday these deadly antagonists will one or the other break their bonds, and then the question will be settled.”

Anti-slavery sentiment continued to grow throughout the 1850s, in particular as anti-slavery forces conducted a campaign against the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, a reactionary measure orchestrated by Democrat Stephen A. Douglas that repealed the Compromise of 1850 and allowed slavery's expansion to the Kansas and Nebraska territories through "popular sovereignty." By the mid-1850s, abolitionism had acquired an unprecedented degree of popularity, and abolitionists formed a key constituency in the founding of the Republican Party on explicitly anti-slavery principles.

Lincoln left the Whigs in 1854 and joined the new Republican Party. The domination of the slave owners over the Supreme Court, the Congress and the presidency came more and more to be viewed as a conspiracy against the interests of the entire population, free and slave. Lincoln's attitude on slavery is well documented. Dozens of letters, speeches, and memoranda could be cited, not the least of which in terms of historical import was the Emancipation Proclamation.

But to give a sense of Lincoln's own attitude toward slavery, here is an excerpt from a diary entry, not meant for public consumption, written in 1858, the year after the Supreme Court's notorious decision in *Dred Scott v. Sanford*, which exploded the Missouri Compromise and held that people of African descent were not citizens and had no rights no matter where they were—North or South. Lincoln wrote:

I have never professed an indifference to the honors of official station; and were I to do so now, I should only make myself ridiculous. Yet I have never failed—do not now fail—to remember that in the republican cause there is a higher aim than that of mere office—I have not allowed myself to forget that the abolition of the Slave-trade by Great Britain [sic], was agitated a hundred years before it was a final success; that the measure had its open fire-eating opponents; its stealthy "don't care" opponents; its dollars and cent opponents; its inferior race opponents; its negro equality opponents; and its religion and good order opponents; that all these opponents got offices, and their adversaries got none—But I have also remembered that though they blazed, like tallow-candles for a century, at last they flickered in the socket, died out, stank in the dark for a brief season, and were remembered no more, even by the smell—School-boys know that Wilberforce, and Granville Sharpe, helped that cause forward; but who can now name a single man who labored to retard it? Remembering these things I can not but regard it as possible that the higher object of this contest may not be completely attained within the term of my natural life. But I can not doubt either that it will come in due time. Even in this view, I am proud, in my passing speck of time, to contribute an humble mite to that glorious consummation, which my own poor eyes may not last to see.

It does not undercut the unparalleled hardship and hatred for slavery felt by enslaved blacks nor reduce the historic significance of the slave rebellions of the 18th and 19th centuries to point out the courage and sacrifice of white abolitionists. The *Times*' presentation of the category of "white people" as unified in support of slavery is an insult to the heroism of many who gave their lives for the cause of abolition. In October 1859, an abolitionist veteran of the crisis of Bleeding Kansas, John Brown, was captured by a military deployment commanded by then-US Army Colonel Robert E. Lee at Harper's Ferry, Virginia after attempting to capture an arms depot and trigger a slave rebellion in the central Piedmont. He was executed for the crime of treason on December 2, 1859, at the age of 59.

One final point on Lincoln. Lincoln's assassination, less than a week after the surrender of the Confederacy, shocked the country and the world.

He was, of course, not a Marxist. But Karl Marx recognized the historical significance of Lincoln's life for the poor and oppressed of the world, writing in mid-May 1865:

The demon of the "peculiar institution," for the supremacy of which the South rose in arms, would not allow his worshippers to honorably succumb on the open field. What he had begun in treason, he must needs end in infamy... It is not our part to call words of sorrow and horror, while the heart of two worlds heaves with emotion. Even the sycophants who, year after year, and day by day, stuck to their Sisyphean work of morally assassinating Abraham Lincoln and the great republic he headed stand now aghast at this universal outburst of popular feeling, and rival with each other to strew rhetorical flowers on his open grave. They have now at last found out that he was a man neither to be browbeaten by adversity nor intoxicated by success, inflexibly pressing on to his goal, never compromising it by blind haste, slowly maturing his steps, never retracing them, carried away by no surge of popular favor, disheartened by no slackening of the popular pulse, tempering stern acts by the gleams of a kind heart, illuminating scenes dark with passion by the smile of humor, doing his titanic work as humbly and homely as heaven-born rulers do little things with the grandiloquence of pomp and state; in one word, one of the rare men who succeed in becoming great without ceasing to be good.

Beneath the change in political attitudes that had been taking place over these critical decades, major transformations were taking place in America, especially in the North and Northwest. From 1820 to 1850, the urban population increased from 7 to 18 percent of the national total. In 1820 there were just five cities with a population over 25,000. By 1850, there were 26 cities of more than 25,000 and six of more than 100,000. Mass migration from 1820 to the end of the 1830s drew approximately 667,000 overseas immigrants, not including slaves. From 1840 through the 1850s, another 4.2 million migrants came to the US from Europe and Asia.

This period was also marked by the growth of social inequality and the changing character of work. In the largest American cities of the 1840s, the richest 5 percent of free males owned 70 percent of the real and personal property. The visibility of a small group of super-rich is attested by the invention of the word "millionaire" around 1840. The historian Howe writes, "Instead of owning his tools and selling what he made with them, the mechanic now feared being left with nothing to sell but his labor. A lifetime as a wage-earner seemed a gloomy prospect to men who had imbibed the political outlook of Old Republicanism, who identified themselves with independent farmers or shopkeepers and looked upon wage labor as a form of dependency."

This new system was incompatible with the slave system. Slavery is a mode of production, a term that encompasses both the productive forces—how products are made, including the actual instruments and the labor involved—as well as the objective material and social relations that arise on the basis of the productive forces and exist independently of human consciousness. These were the objective forces beneath the changing attitudes on slavery which exploded in violent conflict.

The 1619 Project presents slavery as a purely racial and racist institution from which all whites benefited in the south. But such a view of slavery in the American South is not only wrong, it actually minimizes the thoroughly reactionary character of the social order which arose on the rotten foundations of human bondage, and, in a strange way, idealizes it. According to the *Times*, slavery was bad for the slaves but improved the

lives of the majority of people in the South. To put it bluntly, the *Times* is regurgitating the argument of the slaveholders.

In her 2017 book *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South*, the scholar Keri Leigh Merritt sheds critical light on the reactionary essence of slavery as an economic system. The vast majority of whites did not derive any social, political or economic benefits from the system of slavery. On the contrary, Merritt explains:

Under capitalism, labor power was the commodity of the laborer. Conversely, under feudalism, as well as under slavery, the ruling classes owned, either completely or partially, the labor power of the working classes. The system was predicated on elites coercing individuals to work, often by violent means. In the slave South, where laborers were in competition with brutalized, enslaved labor, the laborers, whether legally free or not, had little to no control over their labor power. The profitability and profusion of plantation slave labor consistently reduced the demand for free workers, lowered their wages, and rendered their bargaining power ineffective, indeed generally (except in the case of specialized skills) worthless. In essence, they were not truly “free” laborers, especially when they could be arrested and forced to labor for the state or for individuals.

In the first half of the 19th century, an oligarchy basing itself on slavery and aristocratic privilege enforced its rule through vigilante terror and police state dictatorship aimed at the whole non-slaveholding population, black and white alike.

This slaveholding class, enriching itself through trade with the ruling classes of aristocratic Europe, threatened to destroy the egalitarian and democratic principles of the American Revolution. Secession, which the oligarchy carried out in the face of broad opposition among poor whites, was not a popular movement from below. It was a counterrevolutionary rebellion from above against the principle enshrined in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal.”

What were conditions for the majority of whites under Slavery?

The antebellum South was defined by extreme inequality, not only between slaveholders and their human “property,” but among whites. In 1850, 1,000 cotton state families received \$50 million per year in income, as compared to \$60 million per year for the remaining 66,000 families. A study of Louisiana found that 43 percent of whites lived in urban areas in 1860, and that of these city dwellers, 80 percent were semi-skilled or unskilled workers. Meanwhile, half of rural white families were landless, and half of those who owned land tilled less than 50 acres. Poor whites comprised the vast majority of the free population, and only about 14 percent of Louisiana’s whites could be classified as middle class.

In 1860, 56 percent of personal wealth in the United States was concentrated in the South. In that region’s cotton belt, wealth in slaves accounted for 60 percent of all wealth, greater even than the value of the land itself. As the price of slaves rose in the final decade before the Civil War from \$82,000 per slave in 1850 to \$120,000 in 1860 (in 2011 dollars), the concentration of slave ownership at the top of Southern society increased dramatically. Slave ownership was far beyond the economic reach of even most landowning whites.

Whites lived in one-room shacks made of logs and mud, normally without windows. They had difficulty traveling from place to place, often in carts pulled by dogs. Without shoes, hookworm was a constant concern, and starvation was a threat. “Not having enough to eat was a constant worry for a sizable percentage of the white population,” Merritt writes, citing one slave who said, “We had more to eat than they did.” Of their white neighbors, the slave noted, “They were sorry folk.”

Merritt cites historian Avery Craven, who “identified several similarities between the material lives of poor whites and slaves. Their cabins differed ‘little in size or comfort,’ he wrote, as both were constructed from chinked logs and generally had only one room. Furthermore, these two underclasses ‘dressed in homespuns, [and] went barefoot in season... The women of both classes toiled in the fields or carried the burden of other manual labor and the children of both early reached the age of industrial accountability.’ Even the food they prepared and ate, Craven concluded, ‘was strikingly similar.’”

White men often spent months apart from their families as they walked through the country looking for work. “In contrast to the low divorce rates of the upper class,” Merritt writes, “poor whites’ relationships were similar to slaves in some respects” due to this lack of economic stability.

Alcoholism and illiteracy were widespread. The southern antislavery advocate Hinton Helper explained that among Southern whites, “Thousands... die at an advanced age as ignorant of the common alphabet as if it had never been invented.” While a widespread system of “common school” public education had taken root in the North, there were hardly any schools in the antebellum South. Curtailing access to public education was a deliberate measure to socially control whites who were natural opponents of slavery. As Merritt explains:

Whether the means involved disenfranchising poor whites, keeping them uneducated and illiterate, heavily policing them and monitoring their behaviors, or simply leaving them to wallow in cyclical poverty, the ends were always the same: the South’s master class continued to lord over the region, attempting to control an increasingly unwieldy hierarchy. Slaveholders’ worst fears were coming to pass as the ranks of disaffected poor whites grew. As one editorial out of South Carolina contended, the biggest danger to southern society was neither northern abolitionists nor black slaves. Instead, the owners of flesh needed to concern themselves with the masterless men and women in their own neighborhoods—this “servile class of mechanics and laborers, unfit for self-government, and yet clothed with the attributes and powers of citizens.”

To maintain order under conditions of extreme social inequality, an entire legal code was established to police non-slaveholding whites. The South’s first police forces and prison systems were established “to impose social and racial conformity,” with police “jailing individuals for the most benign behavioral infractions. Indeed, the rise of professional law enforcement changed the entire system of criminal justice.” In the antebellum South it was whites who filled the new jails, since black property was too valuable to remove from labor through incarceration. White convicts were subjected to brutal acts of public whipping and even water torture. Slave owners illegalized trade between poor whites and slaves and arrested whites suspected of befriending or engaging in sexual relationships with slaves.

Slaveowners established vigilante groups, especially following the devastating Panic of 1837, “in an effort to force the population into acquiescence.” They were not, as the *Times* claims, comprised merely of “white people,” but rather of wealthy white people.

Merritt explains that these vigilante groups were:

[E]ssentially bands of slave- and property-holders who monitored both the behaviors and beliefs of less affluent whites. [Historian Charles] Bolton described the targeted whites as those “whose poverty or indolence made them undesirable.” Slaveless

whites increasingly found themselves inhabiting a world in which they had to censor every utterance and defend every action.

Under the direction of this oligarchic terror:

[L]ocal mobs lynching and killing poorer whites abounded in the late antebellum period. The majority of those brutalized were accused of abolitionism of some sort—whether they were distributing reading materials, talking to other non-slaveholders about workers' rights, or simply seemed too friendly with African Americans.

This contradicts a claim made by the *Times'* 1619 project that “slave patrols throughout the nation were created by white people who were fearful of rebellion,” and showed “our nation’s unflinching willingness to use violence on nonwhite people.”

Far from gaining political privilege as a result of slavery, poor whites’ supposed rights existed at the mercy of the masters. They could be jailed without charge, arrested for “vagrancy,” and even executed for committing property crimes like burglary and forgery. As Merritt notes, “for all intents and purposes, due process was nullified.”

Nor is it true, as the *Times* claims, that whites failed to oppose slavery in the South. Within the South, these class tensions made it impossible—politically, economically and militarily—for the Confederacy to continue fighting the war. The *Times'* falsification is aimed at eliminating the role of class and economic divisions from any study of US history. It is attempting to create a new “narrative” to abolish the class struggle from history to serve its reactionary contemporary aims.

Professor David Williams, author of the 2008 book *Bitterly Divided: The South’s Inner Civil War*, writes: “Instead of the united front that has been passed down in Southern mythology, the South was in fact fighting two civil wars—an external one that we know so much about and an internal one about which there is scant literature and virtually no public awareness.”

Secession was held to statewide votes across the South, and was roundly defeated by poor whites. Williams notes:

“The balloting for state convention delegates [preceding the war] makes clear that the Deep South was badly divided. It also suggests that those divisions were largely class related.”

Williams explains that non-slaveholding whites in Louisiana saw “the whole secession movement as an effort simply to maintain ‘the peculiar rights of a privileged class,’” and that poor counties in Alabama, for example, voted to elect anti-secessionist delegates by margins of up to 90 percent.

Anti-Confederate rebellions broke out as early as 1861. In Winston County, Alabama, several union leaders organized mass meetings of unionists and declared the “Free State of Winston,” while poor whites did the same in areas across the South. A similar rebellion took place in Jones County, Mississippi, as described in Victoria Bynum’s critical work *Free State of Jones: Mississippi’s Long War*.

In April 1862, the Confederate legislature passed the first conscription act, followed in October by the “Twenty Slaves Act,” which exempted slave owners from military service.

It is estimated that up to two thirds of all Southern soldiers deserted from the army during the war. What’s more, 300,000 Southerners fled the South at the onset of the war to fight for the Union army. This number nearly equals the total number of Union soldiers killed throughout the course of the war.

The Confederate government sought to provide for the army by stealing

from the poor through a process called “impressment,” depicted skillfully in the film *Free State of Jones*, based on the book by Bynum. Indeed, thousands of poor Southern whites opposed attempts by the Confederacy to steal their property. Industrial accidents were also extremely common as Southern industrialists cut costs to feed the war machine. Factory explosions killed hundreds in places like Jackson, Mississippi. In Virginia, a cartridge-manufacturing plant exploded, “scattering workers like confetti.” Child labor was especially common. Wrote one mother to Jefferson Davis in 1862:

“It is folly for a poor mother to call on the rich people about here. There [sic] hearts are of steel. They would sooner throw what they have to spare to their dogs than give it to a starving child.”

Strikes broke out from the onset of the war, beginning with a strike of ironworkers at Richmond, Virginia’s Tredegar Iron Works. In retaliation, the Confederacy’s Conscription Act of 1862 included a provision requiring conscription for striking workers.

The inner civil war deepened in 1863. On the war front, high desertion rates contributed greatly to the Southern losses at Vicksburg and Gettysburg in July. On the home front, the enmity of the poor toward the big planters threatened to take on political forms.

In several cities throughout the South, white workers organized Mechanics’ and Working Men’s Tickets to challenge the planter class’s control of the Confederate legislature and state legislatures. One South Carolina planter wrote: “The poor hate the rich & make war on them everywhere & here especially with universal suffrage.” Planters devised the idea of a poll tax to limit class opposition from finding reflection during the 1863 elections.

Bread riots spread in 1863 as well. Shops were ransacked, planters’ stores of tobacco and cotton were burned, and soldiers were sent to attack and jail demonstrators. A Mobile, Alabama newspaper noted in April 1863 that an “army of women” with “axes, hatchets, hammers and brooms,” swept through the town with banners that read “Bread or Blood” and “Bread and Peace.” According to a local merchant, “The military was withdrawn from the field as soon as possible—for there were unmistakable signs of fraternizing with the mob.”

As the war dragged on, opposition to the Confederacy took on increasingly insurrectionary forms, especially guerrilla warfare. Pro-Union groups, often composed of blacks and whites, numbered in the tens, if not hundreds of thousands. They constructed their own lines of communication, supply chains and fortifications and attacked confederate soldiers. A network of safe houses was set up for deserters and abolitionists from Alabama through Chattanooga, the Sequatchie Valley and Possum Creek, Kentucky, leading to Union territory.

By 1864, wide sections of the South began to initiate popular votes to end the war or secede from the Confederacy.

The profound anger over the war that was boiling over by 1865 was expressed by one poor Southerner, who wrote a letter directed to the wealthy in a local newspaper:

That is right. Pile up wealth—no matter whether bread be drawn from the mouth of the soldier’s orphan or the one-armed, one limbed hero who hungry walks your streets—take every dollar you can, pay out as little as possible, deprive your noble warriors of every comfort and luxury, increase in every way the necessities of life, make everybody but yourself and non-producers bear the taxes of the war; but be very careful to parade everything you give before the public—talk boldly on the street corners of your love of country, be a grand home general—and, when the war is over, point to your princely palace and its magnificent surroundings and exclaim with pompous swell, “these are the results of my patriotism.”

Among Northern soldiers, the war which began as a fight for national unity began to be viewed by millions—including hundreds of thousands of soldiers—as a war for abolition. As James McPherson writes in his book *What They Fought For*, the Union Army was a highly political army, where soldiers were “eagerly snapping up newspapers that were sometimes available in camp only a day or two after publication.” McPherson quotes letters from several soldiers: One said he “spent a good portion of my time reading the news and arguing politics,” another referenced “considerable excitement on politics in camp,” a third: “politics the principal topic of the day,” and so on.

But even those many soldiers who held racial prejudices and previously opposed a war to free the slaves came to view abolition as a military necessity and the emancipation proclamation as a blow against the Southern slave owners, whose armies they were fighting. Many Union soldiers also interacted—most for the first time—with “contraband” slaves who had escaped to Northern lines. In the course of this revolutionary cultural experience, the masses of people underwent a remarkable political transformation.

“It is astonishing how things has changed in reference to freeing the Negroes,” wrote one Illinois farmer and union soldier. “It allwais has been plane to me that this rase must be freed befor god would recognize us... we bost liberty and we Should not be Selfish in it as god gives us chanes will Soon be bursted... now I belive we are on gods side... now I can fight with a good heart.”

A Michigan soldier wrote, “the more I learn of the cursed institution of Slavery, the more I feel willing to endure, for its final destruction... After this war is over, this whole country will undergo a change for the better... abolishing slavery will dignify labor; that fact of itself will revolutionize everything.”

It would require an additional lecture to address another critical fact: that the reactionary governments of Britain and France were prevented from intervening militarily on the side of the South by the overwhelming support among British and French workers for the cause of abolition.

Beneath the surface of the Civil War, profound changes had been taking place both in class relations and the development of the means of production. In *The Republic For Which It Stands*, Richard White explains that the Civil War saw the replacement of the small “shop” by the “factory” as the central workplace. “Factories did differ from shops,” White writes. “They were not just larger, but they also imposed a distance between the owner, who no longer worked alongside his men and who often did not know them by name.”

White notes that by the early 1870s, “the number of factories in the United States, most of them in the North East, New England, and parts of the Midwest, had nearly doubled in the ten years since 1860. These factories vastly increased the number of workers involved in manufacturing. New York City alone had 130,000 manufacturing workers by 1873... Industry was becoming more capital-intensive, and the trend was accelerating in the 1870s as manufacturers switched to coal and steam, added machines, and built larger factories.”

As a result of this growth, “Between 1863 and 1867 nineteen new unions arose” in the city of Chicago, for example. “These unions were multiethnic, and their members considered themselves part of a permanent working class. They no longer anticipated, as Lincoln had, that wage labor formed a transitory stage in their lives.”

A leading labor publication, the *Boston Daily Evening Voice*, expressed the feeling of many workingmen at the end of the Civil War: “All this talk about Republican equality and the rights of man is as water spilled upon sand, if the right of the laboring man to govern those affairs which pertain to his political, social and moral standing in society be denied him.”

The Civil War and its major achievements—the abolition of slavery, the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, and the first federal Civil Rights Act—represented a dramatic step forward for all workers.

However, the war accomplished bourgeois tasks and the Republican Party was a capitalist party. Having carried out emancipation, the largest seizure of private property in world history prior to the Russian Revolution, it proved to be far more assertive in representing the interests of private property and the railroad corporations than in defending the interests and rights of the freed slaves.

The former slave-owning class, deprived of their human property but not of their land, viewed forced racial division as necessary for maintaining social order and defending extreme levels of social inequality. The political mechanism through which this was achieved was, as before, the Democratic Party, this time overseeing a political monopoly based on Jim Crow segregation—whose aim was the total division of black workers from white.

For millions of Southern blacks, the initial celebration of freedom soon transformed into a realization that wage labor marked a new type of exploitation.

Following the end of Reconstruction, thousands of blacks were lynched, tens of thousands more thrown in jail, and blacks as an entire segment of Southern society were forced into legal and social second-class citizenship in what was a racial caste system.

Skin color made a qualitative difference in the life of a Southern person living under Jim Crow. Share croppers and agricultural workers were attacked and killed for seeking to organize. The cultivation of racism as a political program was a response to efforts by reformers like the Populist Party to unite black and white farmers in a common movement against the railroad companies and big landowners.

But segregation did not provide poor whites with positive political or social benefits that would lead to an improvement of their living standards. In economic and political terms, racial segregation drove wages down for all races, it reduced social spending on schools, hospitals and other social services, and entrenched the backward political and cultural climate that dominated the South.

In a larger sense, regardless of what an individual poor white person thought (and racism was not the sole property of the rich), the Jim Crow system did not provide the majority of whites with “privilege” because segregation ultimately blocked the development of a united movement from below, which was the only thing that could have improved the living conditions of all workers and farmers.

American politics and the development of the war and its aftermath were followed closely by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who recognized that the explosive growth of American capitalism was transforming world history and the dynamics of the class struggle on an international scale. Before the conclusion of the Civil War, in a letter to the Marxist Union General Joseph Weydemeyer on November 24, 1864, Friedrich Engels made the following point:

Your war over there is one of the most imposing experiences one can ever live through... A people’s war of this sort, on both sides, is unprecedented ever since the establishment of powerful states; its outcome will doubtless determine the future of America for hundreds of years to come. As soon as slavery—that greatest of obstacles to the political and social development of the United States—has been smashed, the country will experience a boom that will very soon assure it an altogether different place in the history of the world.

In Marx’s address to the National Labor Union of the US, published on May 12, 1869, four years after the war, Marx wrote, “The victorious termination of the antislavery war has opened a new epoch in the annals of the working class. In the states themselves, an independent working class

movement, looked upon with an evil eye by your old parties and their professional politicians, has since that date sprung into life.”

Engels emphasized the critical importance of the struggles of the American working class for the success of the world revolution. He wrote: “What the breakdown of Russian Czarism would be for the great military monarchies of Europe—the snapping of their mainstay—that is for the bourgeois of the whole world the breaking out of class war in America.”

At the same time, Engels was acutely aware of the challenges Marxists would confront in fighting for the political unity of the working class of all races in America.

The ruling class “divides the workers into two groups: the native-born and the foreigners, and the latter into (1) the Irish, (2) the Germans, (3) the many small groups, each of which understands only itself: Czechs, Poles, Italians, Scandinavians, etc. And then the Negroes. To form a single party out of these requires quite unusually powerful incentives.”

Elsewhere he wrote, “your bourgeoisie knows much better even than the Austrian government how to play off one nationality against the other: Jews, Italians, Bohemians, etc., against Germans and Irish, and each one against the other, so that differences in living standards exist, I believe, in New York to an extent unheard of elsewhere.”

But an amendment to these prescient words by Engels is required. The Democratic Party and *New York Times*’ campaign to falsify history is more than a tactic to divide the working class. That it is, but the initiative has far more dangerous implications.

Today’s bourgeoisie is repudiating any association with anything progressive in its own past. By denouncing the revolutions it led—the bourgeois revolutions of 1776 and 1861-65—today’s ruling class is signaling its hostility to the Declaration of Independence, to the principle of equality before the law, to the Constitution, to the Enlightenment and rationalist thought, and to the fundamental principle that the people are endowed with certain inalienable rights.

In an era of skyrocketing social inequality, these principles—those “truths” the bourgeoisie once held to be “self-evident”—are now too dangerous to remain embedded in the popular consciousness. To prepare for future wars and attacks on living standards and to maintain the unbridled profits of American corporations, the democratic traditions of the country must be undermined. To accomplish this, history must be falsified. Lincoln must become a racist. Jefferson must become a racist. Race—not reason—must become the guiding principle for the study of history.

The ruling class is admitting that the progressive development of mankind is dependent upon removing it from power and transforming the world through socialist revolution.



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