

“Opposition to slavery has also been an important theme in American history”

An interview with historian James McPherson on the New York Times’ 1619 Project

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The World Socialist Web Site recently spoke to James McPherson, professor emeritus of history at Princeton University, on the New York Times’ 1619 Project. McPherson is the author of dozens of books and articles, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning Battle Cry of Freedom, widely regarded as the authoritative account of the Civil War.

Q. What was your initial reaction to the 1619 Project?

A. Well, I didn’t know anything about it until I got my Sunday paper, with the magazine section entirely devoted to the 1619 Project. Because this is a subject I’ve long been interested in I sat down and started to read some of the essays. I’d say that, almost from the outset, I was disturbed by what seemed like a very unbalanced, one-sided account, which lacked context and perspective on the complexity of slavery, which was clearly, obviously, not an exclusively American institution, but existed throughout history. And slavery in the United States was only a small part of a larger world process that unfolded over many centuries. And in the United States, too, there was not only slavery but also an antislavery movement. So I thought the account, which emphasized American racism—which is obviously a major part of the history, no question about it—but it focused so narrowly on that part of the story that it left most of the history out.

So I read a few of the essays and skimmed the rest, but didn’t pursue much more about it because it seemed to me that I wasn’t learning very much new. And I was a little bit unhappy with the idea that people who did not have a good knowledge of the subject would be influenced by this and would then have a biased or narrow view.

Q. Are you aware that the glossy magazine is being distributed to schools across the country, and the Chicago public school district has already announced that it will be part of the curriculum?

A. I knew that its purpose was for education, but I haven’t heard many of the details of that, including what you’ve just mentioned.

Q. When you look at the way the historiography on the Civil War and on slavery has changed over the generations—and I know you’ve made this point in the past—it’s been influenced by contemporary politics. Why do you think the 1619 Project is happening now, and being so heavily promoted?

A. I think it’s partly an outgrowth of broader social and political developments of the past twenty years or so. Just as the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s influenced a lot of new scholarship on slavery, the abolitionists, the radical Republicans, the Civil War and Reconstruction—including my own introduction to those subjects in the 1950s and 1960s—I think that the current events, and contemporary matters, are going to influence something like the 1619 Project. That is, apart from the 400th anniversary, which is the convenient hook on which this is hanging.

Q. It seems to me, however, that the mass Civil Rights movement transmitted really healthy impulses to the scholarship...

A. ...Absolutely, I think so. Up until that time, the perspective on slavery and the abolitionists was very much a southern perspective—that’s oversimplifying it, but it was there—and a kind of right-of-center perspective. And the scholarship that emerged with the Civil Rights movement—to oversimplify it again—moved in a leftward, and northern liberal perspective.

Q. You were a student of C. Vann Woodward, if I am not mistaken. Could you tell us something about him?

A. Back in the 1930s, he, like many intellectuals and artists, flirted with socialism, even the Communist Party. As a young man in the early 1930s he went to the Soviet Union. He never made the complete trip over to the Communist Party, but he was very much on the left wing of academics. And his interpretation of the southern Populists and Tom Watson grew out of that.

Over time, like most people I suppose, he became more conservative, moving toward a sort of southern liberal ideology, in his interpretation of segregation in *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, which Martin Luther King publicly called a kind of Bible of the Civil Rights movement. He was very much in that mode in the 1950s. He was one of the academics that did the research for the plaintiffs in *Brown vs. Board of Education* in the early 1950s. I studied with him at Johns Hopkins from 1958 to 1962, when, I think, he was gradually moving a little bit toward the right.

He was bothered by the countercultural aspects of liberalism that emerged in the later 1960s.

But his sympathies and his perspective were with the Civil Rights movement—even while maintaining a southern perspective, there’s no question about that. He remained interested in the South and wanted to find a southern liberal tradition, and even a radical tradition, which was the underlying motive of his interest in the southern Populists and Tom Watson, portraying them as potential racial egalitarians until the 1890s when things went sour for them, and they themselves went sour.

But he continued to pursue that through the 1950s and 1960s, and I think that influenced me as much as anything in my graduate work. Other influences on me were being in Baltimore during the Civil Rights movement, and sit-ins and demonstrations in a border city. And the Freedom Rides that started in 1961 when I was still in graduate school. While I don’t know entirely what Woodward thought of some of these things, certainly his basic underlying attitude was sympathetic to these changes. And he played a role in bringing them about.

Q. You mentioned that you were totally surprised when you found Project 1619 in your Sunday paper. You are one of the leading historians

of the Civil War and slavery. And the *Times* did not approach you?

A. No, they didn't, no.

Q. We've spoken to a lot of historians, leading scholars in the fields of slavery, the Civil War, the American Revolution, and we're finding that none of them were approached. Although the *Times* doesn't list its sources, what do you think, in terms of scholarship, this 1619 Project is basing itself on?

A. I don't really know. One of the people they approached is Kevin Kruse, who wrote about Atlanta. He's a colleague, a professor here at Princeton. He doesn't quite fit the mold of the other writers. But I don't know who advised them, and what motivated them to choose the people they did choose.

Q. Nikole Hannah-Jones, the lead writer and leader of the 1619 Project, includes a statement in her essay—and I would say that this is the thesis of the project—that “anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country.”

A. Yes, I saw that too. It does not make very much sense to me. I suppose she's using DNA metaphorically. She argues that racism is the central theme of American history. It is certainly part of the history. But again, I think it lacks context, lacks perspective on the entire course of slavery and how slavery began and how slavery in the United States was hardly unique. And racial convictions, or “anti-other” convictions, have been central to many societies.

But the idea that racism is a permanent condition, well that's just not true. And it also doesn't account for the countervailing tendencies in American history as well. Because opposition to slavery, and opposition to racism, has also been an important theme in American history.

Q. Could you speak on this a little bit more? Because elsewhere in her essay, Hannah-Jones writes that “black Americans have fought back alone” to make America a democracy.

A. From the Quakers in the 18th century, on through the abolitionists in the antebellum, to the radical Republicans in the Civil War and Reconstruction, to the NAACP which was an interracial organization founded in 1909, down through the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, there have been a lot of whites who have fought against slavery and racial discrimination, and against racism. Almost from the beginning of American history that's been true. And that's what's missing from this perspective.

Q. Could you speak specifically on what motivated Union soldiers in the Civil War? I know you've written on this question.

A. Attitudes in the Union Army ranged from extreme racism to a kind of radical idealism and anti-slavery. I think that any one statement about “the soldiers” in the Union Army would not make any sense. I read the letters and diaries of well over 1,000 of them, and their attitudes on this question ranged all the way from a racist, pro-slavery position to a kind of radical egalitarian perspective. I tried to quantify these things, but it's hard to make a generalization about two-and-a-half million soldiers.

Q. The motivations are complex, and the major political perspectives of the time are bound up with the soldiers' motivations, whether it was a war to preserve the Union or a war to end slavery, or a combination of the two...

A. ...Well the initial motivation was revenge for the attack on the flag. The response in the North, and especially among the men who signed up—and they were all volunteers for the first two years of the Civil War, and they were mostly volunteers throughout—viewed it at first as an unprovoked attack on the flag. And that broadened into an idea of not only revenging the flag, and the ideas that it stood for, but of taking revenge against what they were increasingly calling “the Slave Power.” So, almost from the beginning, there was not really a sharp division between fighting for the integrity of the United States, and against the institution that had attacked it.

So while the official motivation was preservation of the union, that increasingly became merged with the destruction of slavery, which had

launched the attack on the flag in the first place. And so I don't think you can really separate those two motives. While the emphasis originally was on fighting for the Union, fighting for the United States, fighting to defend the flag, increasingly that became bound up with a conviction that the only way the North was going to win the war, preserve the Union, and prevent further, future rebellions against the Union, was to destroy slavery, which had brought the war on in the first place.

Q. The analysis you've just given fits with the very good histories of the era, which acknowledge the complexities and contradictory character of the politics, and the way that that interacted with the movement of many, many people. It seems to me that much of that complexity finds manifestation in the figure of Abraham Lincoln.

A. Oh, absolutely.

Q. Maybe you could speak on Lincoln. Nikole Hannah-Jones refers to Lincoln as viewing African Americans as “an obstacle to national unity.” And then she moves on. I think that that's a vast oversimplification.

A. It is a vast oversimplification. Lincoln became increasingly convinced, as many of the Union soldiers did, that that the Union could not be preserved if that disturbing factor—slavery—remained. And Lincoln's frequently quoted statement, in his famous letter to Horace Greeley, that, ‘my primary object is to preserve the Union. If I could do that without freeing the slaves, I would do that. But if I could do it by freeing the slaves, I would do that.’ (The full text of Lincoln's letter to Greeley's New York Tribune.) He'd in fact already made up his mind when he wrote that letter. He had already drafted the Emancipation Proclamation, and he was preparing the way for it. He had become convinced by the summer of 1862 that he could never achieve his primary goal—the preservation of the Union—without getting rid of slavery. And this was the first step toward doing that.

Q. Is it correct to say that by the end of his life Lincoln had drawn to a position proximate to that of the Radical Republicans?

A. He was moving in that direction. In his last speech—it turned out to be his last speech—he came out in favor of qualified suffrage for freed slaves, those who could pass a literacy test and those who were veterans of the Union army.

Q. Another element implicit in the 1619 Project is that all white people in the South were unified behind slavery.

A. George Fredrickson [(1934-2008) - TM] came up with the idea of “herrenvolk democracy.” He was a historian at Stanford University who wrote on the ideology of white supremacy in the US, and comparatively with South Africa. I think it gets at a powerful element in the southern ideology in the antebellum. That even though two-thirds to three-quarters of southern whites did not own slaves, they all owned the white skin. So with the slave system, as Senator Hammond of South Carolina put it, the slaves are the “mudsill” of the society, and all whites were above that mudsill because they were white. And that's a good definition of white privilege.

It did exist, at least in theory. Whether it existed in practical relations is another matter. But it existed in the ideology of the pro-slavery argument.

Q. I think in *Battle Cry of Freedom* you refer to this as “holding the line” in the South—in the context of the war in which the Confederacy has to muster all these soldiers into the ranks. But it's not so simple, as it turns out.

A. Yes. In the parts of the South where slavery was a minimal factor—in the Appalachian Mountain chain for example, in western Virginia and in eastern Tennessee, where there are very few slaves and very few slaveholders, a lot of the whites did not want to fight for the Confederacy, to risk their lives for what they saw as a slaveholders' war. So you had strong currents of unionism in those parts of the South. In fact West Virginia becomes a union state—one-third of the state of Virginia—in the Civil War.

The herrenvolk idea was an ideological effort to undercut class conflict

among whites in the South by saying that all whites are superior to all blacks, all whites are in the same category, they are not of different classes. You may not be a slaveholder and you may not have much money, but you are white. Well, not every white southerner bought that argument. And that's especially true in parts of the South where slavery was marginal to the social order: western Virginia, eastern Tennessee, western North Carolina.

Q. Part of the Republican critique of slavery that emerges in the 1850s is the idea that slavery degraded all labor.

A. That was a part of the "free labor ideology" that 50 years ago Eric Foner wrote about so effectively. Slavery undermined the concept of the dignity of labor and held down the white working man because labor was identified in the South with slavery. Hinton Rowan Helper made that a theme of his famous book.

Q. Can you explain who Hinton Helper was?

A. He was a sort of middle class resident of western North Carolina who became in the 1850s increasingly resentful of the control of southern society, of the suppression of the non-slaveholders, by the slaveholding elite that held them back, as he saw it. And he wrote a book in 1857 called *The Impending Crisis of the South*, in which he attacked the slaveholders and the Slave Power controlling society in their interest, and using this argument of herrenvolk democracy to keep down, to mitigate, class resentment and class conflict among whites in the South. And Republicans in the North seized on that as part of their free labor ideology.

Q. Another argument frequently made, and that is at least implicit in the 1619 Project, is that the Civil War didn't accomplish all that much, that what followed it in the South—Jim Crow—was simply slavery by another name.

A. The Civil War accomplished three things. First, it preserved the United States as one nation. Second, it abolished the institution of slavery. Those two were, in effect, permanent achievements. The United States is still a single nation. Slavery doesn't exist anymore. The third thing the Civil War accomplished was a potential, and partial, transformation, in the status of the freed slaves, who with the 14th and 15th amendments achieved, on paper at least, civil and political equality. But the struggle ever since 1870, when the 15th amendment was ratified, has been how to transform this achievement on paper into real achievement in the society.

The people you're talking about claim that it's never gone beyond slavery, or that something almost as bad as slavery replaced slavery. The way I see it, while the bottle is not full, it is half full. I acknowledge that it is half empty. But it's also half full. So with the abolition of slavery you have at least the partial achievement of a substantive freedom for the freed slaves.

Even though Jim Crow, segregation, disenfranchisement, lynching, all of these things became blots on the United States in the later 19th century, and well into the 20th, at least children couldn't be sold apart from their parents, wives couldn't be sold apart from their husbands, and marriage was now a legal institution for freedpeople. That's a significant step beyond slavery as it existed before 1865. It's the ancient question about whether the glass is half full or half empty. It's both. And this is what the people who say the Civil War didn't accomplish anything are missing. The Civil War did fill up half the bottle.

Q. Let me ask you a counterfactual question. Suppose the South had won the Civil War. What would have happened with the slavery institution?

A. I get asked this question a lot. Nobody knows for sure. It's like the question of what would have happened had Lincoln not been assassinated. I think slavery would have continued for another generation. It did continue to exist in Brazil and Cuba for another generation, and it might not have come to an end as it did those two countries had it not already been abolished in the United States. So another generation of black people would have been slaves, another generation of children being sold apart

from their parents, and so on. Clearly that would have gone on. We can't say for sure when slavery would have come to an end, and under what conditions it would have come to an end, but clearly there would have been no 14th and 15th amendments for a long time, if ever.

Q. Yet another argument that's made is that the Civil War, and emancipation in the United States, came late, compared to Great Britain which did in 1833, and it's argued, "Look, the British did it voluntarily without a great civil war."

A. Well antislavery in Great Britain emerged in the late 18th century, with Wilberforce and Buxton and so on, and became focused early on the abolition of slavery everywhere. In the British constitution Parliament is all-powerful. And there's nothing like the protections for the institution of slavery that exist in the American Constitution in the British political order. If you gain a majority in Parliament, which the antislavery forces in Britain did in the early 1830s, you can pass legislation banning slavery, which is exactly what happened. And the slaveholders in the Caribbean, who obviously opposed this, had very little power in Parliament.

Meanwhile, the slaveholders in the United States actually controlled the government through their domination of the Democratic Party, right through the 1850s. In fact, the principal reason for secession in 1861 was because they had lost control of the United States government for the first time ever.

Q. This relates to your concept of the "counterrevolution of 1861." Can you explain that?

A. I called it a "preemptive counterrevolution." This is a concept I borrowed shamelessly from my colleague here at Princeton, Arno Mayer, who wrote on preemptive counterrevolution in Europe in the 20th century. The slaveholders saw the triumph of the Republicans in 1860 as a potential revolution that would abolish slavery. That's how the Republicans got votes in 1860. They saw Abraham Lincoln and his Republican Party as just as bad as the abolitionists. In order to preempt that revolution that would have overthrown slavery in the South, they undertook what I called, and borrowing this from Arno Mayer, a preemptive counterrevolution, which was secession. But secession, ironically, brought on the very revolution that it attempted to preempt, through the war: the abolition of slavery.

Q. Have you read Karl Marx's writings on the Civil War?

A. Yes I have.

Q. What do you think of them?

A. Well, I think they have a lot of very good insight into what was going on in the American Civil War. Marx certainly saw the abolition of slavery as a kind of bourgeois revolution that paved the way for the proletarian revolution that he hoped would come in another generation or so. It was a crucial step on the way to the eventual proletarian revolution, as Marx perceived it.

Q. Have you had a chance to review any of the literature on slavery and capitalism, by for example Sven Beckert, Ed Baptist, and Walter Johnson? [1]

A. It's been some time since I've read it.

Q. It looks like that literature informs the 1619 Project, especially the essay by Matthew Desmond. I find it problematic. These authors draw an equal sign between what they perceive to be a fully developed capitalist South, and the North. I don't think that any serious historian ever denied that the South was bound up with the global capitalist system. But this scholarship is going further with the argument.

A. Yes, that's right. That part of it—that the South is as capitalist as the North, or Great Britain—is unpersuasive to me. Certainly, they were part of a capitalist world order. There's no question about that. Cotton and sugar were central. But the idea that the ideology of the planter class in the South was a capitalist ideology, there I've always been a little bit more on the side of Eugene Genovese, [2] who sees the southern ideology as seigneurial.

Q. It seems to me that all of these books jump over the Civil War. One of the problems they run into is that, if it's the case that everyone agreed...

A. ...Then why was there a war?

Q. Exactly. Let me ask you about the American Revolution, even though I know this was not your research field. The 1619 Project also attacks it as founding a slavocracy. There is a historian, Gerald Horne, who has recently argued that it was waged as a slaveholders' counterrevolution, to protect their property rights.

A. Well, the American Revolution was first and foremost a war for independence. But there was also a more social dimension to the American Revolution, and a movement toward greater democracy, though they didn't like to use that term. And it coincided with, and partially caused, the abolition of slavery in half of the states, the northern states, as well as a manumission movement among Virginia slaveholders. It was not a revolution in the sense of the French Revolution, which followed it by a decade, or the Soviet Revolution of 1917, but that doesn't mean it didn't accomplish anything. It's accomplishments were more political than social and economic, but nevertheless there were some social and economic dimensions to it, progressive dimensions I would say.

Out of the Revolution came an anti-slavery ethos, which never disappeared, even though the period from the 1790s to the 1830s was a quiet period in the antislavery movement—though there was the Missouri Compromise of 1820. Nevertheless, the anti-slavery ethos that did come out of the Revolution was a subterranean movement that erupted in the 1830s and shaped American political discourse.

Q. David Brion Davis says that the abolitionists viewed the Declaration of Independence as sacred scripture...

A. So did Lincoln. It was basic to the Republican Party.

Q. Do you recommend any recent books on the subjects we've discussed today?

A. I thought that Eric Foner's biography of Lincoln was excellent. *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and Slavery*

[1] Beckert (*Empire of Cotton*) is at Harvard University. Baptist (*The Half has Never Been Told*) is at Cornell University. Johnson (*River of Dark Dreams*) is also at Harvard.

[2] Eugene Genovese (1930-2012). His most noted work was *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*.



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