“When the Declaration says that all men are created equal, that is no myth”

An interview with historian Gordon Wood on the New York Times’ 1619 Project

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Gordon Wood is professor emeritus at Brown University and author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, as well as* Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789–1815*, and dozens of other books and articles on the colonial period, the American Revolution and the early republic.*

Q. Let me begin by asking you your initial reaction to the 1619 Project. When did you learn about it?

A. Well, I was surprised when I opened my Sunday *New York Times* in August and found the magazine containing the project. I had no warning about this. I read the first essay by Nikole Hannah-Jones, which alleges that the Revolution occurred primarily because of the Americans’ desire to save their slaves. She claims the British were on the warpath against the slave trade and slavery and that rebellion was the only hope for American slavery. This made the American Revolution out to be like the Civil War, where the South seceded to save and protect slavery, and that the Americans 70 years earlier revolted to protect their institution of slavery. I just couldn’t believe this.

I was surprised, as many other people were, by the scope of this thing, especially since it’s going to become the basis for high school education and has the authority of the *New York Times* behind it, and yet it is so wrong in so many ways.

Q. I want to return to the question of slavery and the American Revolution, but first I wanted to follow up, because you said you were not approached. Yet you are certainly one of the foremost authorities on the American Revolution, which the 1619 Project trains much of its fire on.

A. Yes, no one ever approached me. None of the leading scholars of the whole period from the Revolution to the Civil War, as far I know, have been consulted. I read the Jim McPherson interview and he was just as surprised as I was.

Q. Can you discuss the relationship between the American Revolution and the institution of slavery?

A. One of the things that I have emphasized in my writing is how many southerners and northerners in 1776 thought slavery was on its last legs and that it would naturally die away. You can find quotation after quotation from people seriously thinking that slavery was going to wither away in several decades. Now we know they couldn’t have been more wrong. But they lived with illusions and were so wrong about so many things. We may be living with illusions too. One of the big lessons of history is to realize how the past doesn’t know its future. We know how the story turned out, and we somehow assume they should know what we know, but they don’t, of course. They don’t know their future any more than we know our future, and so many of them thought that slavery would die away, and at first there was considerable evidence that that was indeed the case.

At the time of the Revolution, the Virginians had more slaves than they knew what to do with, so they were eager to end the international slave trade. But the Georgians and the South Carolinians weren’t ready to do that yet. That was one of the compromises that came out of the Constitutional Convention. The Deep South was given 20 years to import more slaves, but most Americans were confident that the despicable transatlantic slave trade was definitely going to end in 1808.

Q. Under the Jefferson administration?

A. Yes, it was set in the Constitution at 20 years, but everyone knew this would be ended because nearly everyone knew that this was a barbaric thing, importing people and so on. Many thought that ending the slave trade would set slavery itself on the road to extinction. Of course, they were wrong.

I think the important point to make about slavery is that it had existed for thousands of years without substantial criticism, and it existed all over the New World. It also existed elsewhere in the world. Western Europe had already more or less done away with slavery. Perhaps there was nothing elsewhere comparable to the plantation slavery that existed in the New World, but slavery was widely prevalent in Africa and Asia. There is still slavery today in the world.

And it existed in all of these places without substantial criticism. Then suddenly in the middle of the 18th century you begin to get some isolated Quakers coming out against it. But it’s the American Revolution that makes it a problem for the world. And the first real anti-slave movement takes place in North America. So this is what’s missed by these essays in the 1619 Project.

Q. The claim made by Nikole Hannah-Jones in the 1619 Project that the Revolution was really about founding a slavocracy seems to be coming from arguments made elsewhere that it was really Great Britain that was the progressive contestant in the conflict, and that the American Revolution was, in fact, a counterrevolution, basically a conspiracy to defend slavery.

A. It’s been argued by some historians, people other than Hannah-Jones, that some planters in colonial Virginia were worried about what the British might do about slavery. Certainly, Dunmore’s proclamation in 1775, which promised the slaves freedom if they joined the Crown’s cause, provoked many hesitant Virginia planters to become patriots. There may have been individuals who were worried about their slaves in 1776, but to see the whole revolution in those terms is to miss the complexity.

In 1776, Britain, despite the Somerset decision, was certainly not the great champion of antislavery that the Project 1619 suggests. Indeed, it is the northern states in 1776 that are the world’s leaders in the antislavery

cause. The first anti-slavery meeting in the history of the world takes place in Philadelphia in 1775. That coincidence I think is important. I would have liked to have asked Hannah-Jones, how would she explain the fact that in 1791 in Virginia at the College of William and Mary, the Board of Visitors, the board of trustees, who were big slaveholding planters, awarded an honorary degree to Granville Sharp, who was the leading British abolitionist of the day. That's the kind of question that should provoke historical curiosity. You ask yourself what were these slaveholding planters thinking? It's the kind of question, the kind of seeming anomaly, that should provoke a historian into research.

The idea that the Revolution occurred as a means of protecting slavery—I just don't think there is much evidence for it, and in fact the contrary is more true to what happened. The Revolution unleashed antislavery sentiments that led to the first abolition movements in the history of the world.

Q. In fact, those who claim that the American Revolution was a counterrevolution to protect slavery focus on the timing of the Somerset ruling of 1772, which held that slavery wasn't supported by English common law, and Dunmore's promise to free slaves who escape their masters.

A. To go from these few facts to create such an enormous argument is a problem. The Somerset decision was limited to England, where there were very few slaves, and it didn't apply to the Caribbean. The British don't get around to freeing the slaves in the West Indies until 1833, and if the Revolution hadn't occurred, might never have done so then, because all of the southern colonies would have been opposed. So supposing the Americans hadn't broken away, there would have been a larger number of slaveholders in the greater British world who might have been able to prolong slavery longer than 1833. The West Indies planters were too weak in the end to resist abolition. They did try to, but if they had had all those planters in the South still being part of the British Empire with them, that would have made it more difficult for the British Parliament to move toward abolition.

Q. Hannah-Jones refers to America's founding documents as its founding myths…

A. Of course, there are great ironies in our history, but the men and the documents transcend their time. That Jefferson, a slaveholding aristocrat, has been—until recently—our spokesman for democracy, declaring that all men are created equal, is probably the greatest irony in American history. But the document he wrote and his confidence in the capacities of ordinary people are real, and not myths.

Jefferson was a very complicated figure. He took a stand against slavery as a young man in Virginia. He spoke out against it. He couldn't get his colleagues to go along, but he was certainly courageous in voicing his opposition to slavery. Despite his outspokenness on slavery and other enlightened matters, his colleagues respected him enough to keep elevating him to positions in the state. His colleagues could have, as we say today, "cancelled" him if they didn't have some sympathy for what he was saying.

Q. And after the Revolution?

A. American leaders think slavery is dying, but they couldn't have been more wrong. Slavery grows stronger after the Revolution, but it's concentrated in the South. North of the Mason-Dixon line, in every northern state by 1804, slavery is legally put on the road to extinction. Now, there's certain "grandfathering in," and so you do have slaves in New Jersey as late as the eve of the Civil War. But in the northern states, the massive movement against slavery was unprecedented in the history of the world. So to somehow turn this around and make the Revolution a means of preserving slavery is strange and contrary to the evidence.

As a result of the Revolution, slavery is confined to the South, and that puts the southern planters on the defensive. For the first time they have to defend the institution. If you go into the colonial records and look at the writings and diary of someone like William Byrd, who's a very distinguished and learned person—he's a member of the Royal Society—you'll find no expressions of guilt whatsoever about slavery. He took his slaveholding for granted. But after the Revolution that's no longer true. Southerners began to feel this anti-slave pressure now. They react to it by trying to give a positive defense of slavery. They had no need to defend slavery earlier because it was taken for granted as a natural part of a hierarchical society.

We should understand that slavery in the colonial period seemed to be simply the most base status in a whole hierarchy of dependencies and degrees of unfreedom. Indentured servitude was prevalent everywhere. Half the population that came to the colonies in the 18th century came as bonded servants. Servitude, of course, was not slavery, but it was a form of dependency and unfreedom that tended to obscure the uniqueness of racial slavery. Servants were bound over to masters for five or seven years. They couldn't marry. They couldn't own property. They belonged to their masters, who could sell them. Servitude was not life-time and was not racially-based, but it was a form of dependency and unfreedom. The Revolution attacked bonded servitude and by 1800 it scarcely existed anywhere in the US.

The elimination of servitude suddenly made slavery more conspicuous than it had been in a world of degrees of unfreedom. The antislavery movements arose out of these circumstances. As far as most northerners were concerned, this most base and despicable form of unfreedom must be eliminated along with all the other forms of unfreedom. These dependencies were simply incompatible with the meaning of the Revolution.

After the Revolution, Virginia had no vested interest in the international slave trade. Quite the contrary. Virginians began to grow wheat in place of tobacco. Washington does this, and he comes to see himself as more a farmer than a planter. He and other farmers begin renting out their slaves to people in Norfolk and Richmond, where they are paid wages. And many people thought that this might be the first step toward the eventual elimination of slavery. These anti-slave sentiments don't last long in Virginia, but for a moment it seemed that Virginia, which dominated the country as no other state ever has, might abolish slavery as the northern states were doing. In fact, there were lots of manumissions and other anti-slave moves in Virginia in the 1780s.

But the black rebellion in Saint-Domingue—the Haitian Revolution—scares the bejesus out of the southerners. Many of the white Frenchmen fled to North America—to Louisiana, to Charleston, and they brought their fears of slave uprisings with them. Then, with Gabriel's Rebellion in Virginia in 1800, most of the optimism that Virginians had in 1776—1790 is gone.

Of course, I think the ultimate turning point for both sections is the Missouri crisis of 1819–1820. Up to that point, both sections lived with illusions. The Missouri crisis causes the scales to fall away from the eyes of both northerners and southerners. Northerners come to realize that the South really intended to perpetuate slavery and extend it into the West. And southerners come to realize that the North is so opposed to slavery that it will attempt to block them from extending it into the West. From that moment on I think the Civil War became inevitable.

Q. There's the famous quote from Jefferson that the Missouri crisis awakened him like a fire bell in the night and that in it he perceived the death of the union...

A. Right. He's absolutely panicked by what's happening, and these last years of his life leading up to 1826 are really quite sad because he's saying these things. Reading his writings between 1819 and his death in 1826 makes you wince because he so often sounds like a southern fire-eater of the 1850s. Whereas his friend Madison has a much more balanced view of things, Jefferson becomes a furious and frightened defender of the South. He sees a catastrophe in the works, and he can't do anything about

it.

His friend Adams was, of course, opposed to slavery from the beginning, and this is something that Hannah-Jones should have been aware of. John Adams is the leading advocate in the Continental Congress for independence. He's never been a slaveowner. He hates slavery and he has no vested interest in it. By 1819–1820, however, he more or less takes the view that the Virginians have a serious problem with slavery and they are going to have to work it out for themselves. He's not going to preach to them. That's essentially what he says to Jefferson.

By the early nineteenth century, Jefferson had what Annette Gordon-Reed calls "New England envy." His granddaughter marries a New Englander and moves there, and she tells him how everything's flourishing in Connecticut. The farms are all neat, clean and green, and there are no slaves. He envies the town meetings of New England, those little ward republics. And he just yearns for something like that for Virginia.

Q. How it is that the American Revolution raises the dignity of labor? Because it seems to me that this concept certainly becomes a burning issue by the time of the Civil War.

A. It's a good question. Central to the middle class revolution was an unprecedented celebration of work, especially manual labor, including the working for money. For centuries going back to the ancient Greeks, work with one's hands had been held in contempt. Aristotle had said that those who worked with their hands and especially those who worked for money lacked the capacity for virtue. This remained the common view until the American Revolution changed everything.

The northern celebration of work made the slaveholding South seem even more anomalous than it was. Assuming that work was despicable and mean was what justified slavery. Scorn for work and slavery were two sides of the same coin. Now the middle-class northerners—clerks, petty merchants, farmers, etc.—began attacking the leisured gentry as parasites living off the work of others. That was the gist of the writings of William Manning, the obscure Massachusetts farmer, writing in the 1790s. This celebration of work, of course, forced the slaveholding planters to be even more defensive and they began celebrating leisure as the source of high culture in contrast with the money-grubbing North.

Slavery required a culture that held labor in contempt. The North, with its celebration of labor, especially working for money, became even more different from the lazy, slaveholding South. By the 1850s, the two sections, though both American, possessed two different cultures.

Q. In my discussion with James Oakes, he made the point about the emergence of the Democratic Party in the 1820s, that in the North it can't do what the southern slave owners really want it to do, which is to say slaves are property, but what they do instead is to begin to promote racism.

A. That's right. When you have a republican society, it's based on equality of all citizens; and now many whites found that difficult to accept. And they had to justify the segregation and the inferior status of the freed blacks by saying blacks were an inferior race. As I said earlier, in the Colonial period whites didn't have to mount any racist arguments to justify the lowly status of blacks. In a hierarchical society with many degrees of unfreedom, you don't bother with trying to explain or justify slavery or the unequal treatment of anyone. Someone like William Byrd never tries to justify slavery. He never argues that blacks are inferior. He doesn't need to do that because he takes his whole world of inequality and hierarchy for granted. Racism develops in the decades following the Revolution because in a free republican society, whites needed a new justification for keeping blacks in an inferior and segregated place. And it became even more complicated when freed blacks with the suffrage tended to vote for the doomed parties of the Federalists and the Whigs.

Q. The 1619 Project claims basically that nothing has ever gotten any better. That it's as bad now as it was during slavery, and instead what you're describing is a very changed world...

A. Imagine the inequalities that existed before the Revolution. Not just in wealth—I mean, we have that now—but in the way in which people were treated. Consider the huge number of people who were servants of some kind. I just think that people need to know just how bad the Ancién Regime was. In France, we always had this Charles Dickens *Tale of Two Cities* view of the society, with a nobleman riding through the village and running over children and so on. But similar kinds of brutalities and cruelties existed in the English-speaking world in the way common people were treated. In England, there must have been 200 capital crimes on the books. Consequently, juries became somewhat reluctant to convict to hanging a person for stealing a handkerchief. So the convict was sent as a bonded servant to the colonies, 50,000 of them. And then when the American Revolution occurs, Australia becomes the replacement.

I don't think people realize just what a cruel and brutal world existed in the Ancién Regime, in the premodern societies of the West, not just for slaves, but for lots of people who were considered the mean or lowly sort. And they don't appreciate what a radical message is involved in declaring that all men are created equal and what that message means for our obsession with education, and the implications of that for our society.

Q. You spoke of the "consensus school" on American history before, from the 1950s, that saw the Revolution, I think, as essentially a conservative event. And one of the things that they stressed was that there was no aristocracy, no native aristocracy, in America, but you find, if I recall your argument in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, that though aristocracy was not strong, it was something that was still a powerful factor.

A. There's no European-type aristocracy, the kind of rich, hereditary aristocracy of the sort that existed in England—great landholders living off the rents of their tenants. But we had an aristocracy of sorts. The southern slaveholding planters certainly came closest to the English model, but even in the more egalitarian North there was an aristocracy of sorts. Men of wealth and distinction that we would label elites sought to make the title of gentlemen equal some kind of aristocracy. "Gentleman" was a legal distinction, and such gentlemen were treated differently in the society because of that distinction. With the Revolution, all this came under assault.

It's interesting to look at the debates that occur in the New York ratifying convention in 1788. The leading Anti-Federalist, Melancton Smith, a very smart guy but a middling sort and with no college graduate degree, gives the highly educated Alexander Hamilton and Robert Livingston a run for their money. He calls Hamilton and Livingston aristocrats and charges that the proposed Constitution was designed to give more power to the likes of them. Hamilton, who certainly felt superior to Smith, denied he was an aristocrat. There were no aristocrats in America, he said; they existed only in Europe. That kind of concession was multiplied ten thousand-fold in the following decades in the North, and this denial of obvious social superiority in the face of middling criticism is denied even today. You see politicians wanting to play down their distinctiveness, their elite status. "I can have a beer with Joe Six-pack," they say, denying their social superiority. That was already present in the late 1780s. That's what I mean by radicalism. It's a middle-class revolution, and it is essentially confined to the North.

Q. You were speaking earlier of the despair of Madison, Adams and Jefferson late in life. And it just occurred to me that they lived to see Martin Van Buren.

A. That's right. Van Buren is probably the first real politician in America elected to the presidency. Unlike his predecessors, he never did anything great; he never made a great speech, he never wrote a great document, he never won a great battle. He simply was the most politically astute operator that the United States had ever seen. He organized a party in New York that was the basis of his success.

Van Buren regarded the founding fathers as passé. He told his fellow Americans, look, we don't need to pay too much attention to those guys. They were aristocrats, he said. We're Democrats—meaning both small "d" and also capital "D." Those aristocrats don't have much to say to us.

Did you know that the "founding fathers" in the antebellum period are not Jefferson and Madison and Washington and Hamilton? In the antebellum period when most Americans referred to the "founders," they meant John Smith, William Penn, William Bradford, John Winthrop and so on, the founders of the seventeenth century. There's a good book on this subject by Wesley Frank Craven [*The Legend of the Founding Fathers* (1956)].

It's Lincoln who rescues the eighteenth-century founders for us. From the Civil War on, the "founders" become the ones we celebrate today, the revolutionary leaders. Lincoln makes Jefferson the great hero of America. "All honor to Jefferson," he says. Only because of the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson didn't have anything to do with the Constitution, and so Lincoln makes the Declaration the most important document in American history, which I think is true.

Q. For our readership, perhaps you could discuss something of the world-historical significance of the Revolution. Of course, we are under no illusion that it represented a socialist transformation. Yet it was a powerful revolution in its time.

A. It was very important that the American colonial crisis, the imperial crisis, occurred right at the height of what we call the Enlightenment, where Western Europe was full of new ideas and was confident that culture—what people believed and thought—was man-made and thus could be changed. The Old World, the Ancién Regime, could be transformed and made anew. It was an age of revolution, and it's not surprising that the French Revolution and other revolutions occur in in the wake of the American Revolution.

The notion of equality was really crucial. When the Declaration says that all men are created equal, that is no myth. It is the most powerful statement ever made in our history, and it lies behind almost everything we Americans believe in and attempt to do. What that statement meant is that we are all born equal and the all the differences that we see among us as adults are due solely to our differing educations, differing upbringings and differing environments. The Declaration is an Enlightenment document because it repudiated the Ancién Regime assumption that all men are created unequal and that nothing much could be done about it. That's what it meant to be a subject in the old society. You were born a patrician or a plebeian and that was your fate.

Q. One of the ironies of this Project 1619 is that they are saying the same things about the Declaration of Independence as the fire-eating proponents of slavery said—that it's a fraud. Meanwhile, abolitionists like Frederick Douglass upheld it and said we're going to make this "all men are created equal" real.

A. That points up the problem with the whole project. It's too bad that it's going out into the schools with the authority of the *New York Times* behind it. That's sad because it will color the views of all these youngsters who will receive the message of the 1619 Project.