

“It’s a much more complicated story than reducing it down to slavery being the engine of capitalism”

## An interview with historian Dolores Janiewski on the New York Times’ 1619 Project

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*The World Socialist Web Site recently interviewed historian Dolores Janiewski about the distortions of the New York Times’ 1619 Project. The WWS has extensively analysed the project, which falsifies history by presenting it as a never-ending conflict of “white” against “black” people ingrained in the “DNA” of the United States.*

*Professor Janiewski, who grew up in Florida and whose family participated in the struggle against segregation, now lectures at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand on US history, including the post-Civil War reconstruction, the Civil Rights movement and anti-communist witch hunts. Her many works include Sisterhood Denied: Race, Gender and Class in a New South Community and New Rights New Zealand: Myths, Markets and Moralities (with Paul Morris).*

*This interview has been edited for length.*

WSWS: What is your overall response to the 1619 Project and particularly the way it leaves out the class struggle in the United States?

DJ: That’s been one of the submerged things in American thinking for a terribly long time. Identity politics in the recent period has buried class under race and gender and so forth. I was an intersectional person before the word got invented, because I was writing about race, gender and class in the 1970s.

I went through the two main articles in the 1619 Project, and what I was immediately struck by from the beginning is it leaves out indigenous people. It starts with slavery in 1619. Hannah-Jones only has one or two paragraphs about the Indians getting removed from Georgia. But in the course I’ve just been teaching, in 1512, the leader of the Taino people in the Caribbean was burned at the stake for leading an indigenous rebellion against the Spanish.

Part of the way capitalism develops in North America is about dispossession. That’s also true in the British Isles, dispossessing the Highlanders, dispossessing the Irish. The first plantations are actually in Ireland. The British take over and deprive the peasants of the land. It’s a much more complicated story than reducing it down to slavery being the engine of capitalism.

WSWS: Slavery is also narrowed down. Hannah-Jones claims that slavery has always existed, but in the US it’s special.

DJ: Yes, it’s an exceptionalist, US original sin story. She ignores slavery in Cuba, Brazil, other places. And if you want to talk about original sin, America has many original sins, one of them is the dispossession of the indigenous people.

WSWS: She uses the expression that slavery is part of America’s DNA.

DJ: It’s somewhat of an ahistorical concept. A lot of the colonising in America was because those people were driven off the land in Europe. They’re indentured servants. Two thirds of the people who crossed the

Atlantic in the first 200 years are unfree, some of them are indentured and some of them are slaves.

A really good book by Edmund Morgan called *American Freedom, American Slavery*, which Hannah-Jones doesn’t seem to look at, is about how, in the first period, they don’t have permanent slavery. So those people coming in 1619 are, in some sense, treated like indentureds. Eventually they can become free along with the indentured white people, and then they become problems. The poor people, black and white, share common interests.

By the late 1600s the wealthy Virginia planters start passing laws to distinguish between black and white, and they create permanent slavery for the African that will be inherited by the children. They make race a privilege: a sign of freedom versus slavery. They change the laws to break up those alliances between poor whites and poor blacks. And they treat women differently: white women are assumed not to have to work in the field as part of that new set of laws, and black women are assumed as laborers.

Slavery isn’t a fully developed system from 1619; it evolves. Likewise, Indians were initially seen as whites and then, by the 1850s, they’re seen as “redskins.” So, race is an evolving system developed by people with an economic stake in evolving it.

WSWS: Hannah-Jones says that after the Civil War, “White southerners of all economic classes ... experienced substantial improvement in their lives even as they forced black people back into a quasi-slavery.” What do you make of these statements about this period?

DJ: Well, it’s a pretty broad generalisation. If you’re talking about economics, the southern income is half of the national average at 1900. The South doesn’t really recover from the destruction of the Civil War. In the 1930s poverty in the South is one of the major problems for Roosevelt. So, it’s not true that every white person’s life improved. In some sense poverty helped to entrench the racial system over time, because you had one thing that made you better: being white. It wasn’t that you were economically, necessarily, better off. The ideology of white skin privilege was part of the system, but it doesn’t mean in material fact that was actually the case.

My family were the town liberals in Okeechobee, Florida, and my mother would talk about poor whites, the ones who didn’t have shoes and had never left the county. She was a great teacher and she would take kids to the ocean which was 36 miles away; they’d never seen the ocean. She was a New Deal liberal, French Canadian, relatively enlightened in racial and class terms; she organised a teachers’ union and tried to integrate the schools and make sure black teachers didn’t lose their jobs.

WSWS: Can you talk about the development of unions and class

conflict in the early 20th century in the South? Were there attempts to integrate black and white workers' struggles?

DJ: In terms of unions, there were attempts in the 1890s that didn't last very long and then in about 1919-1920 another effort and that was largely destroyed. I looked at textile executives' papers at the University of North Carolina, and they were using various methods including the Ku Klux Klan, industrial spies and things like that against the workers.

Then in the 1930s, because of the New Deal you start having CIO unions in the textile industry, and I interviewed several union stalwarts from that time. The textile industry was organized on a racially segregated basis and there's almost no place for black labor except unpacking bales of cotton and other forms of 'outside' work in the factory yard. Tobacco is a more stratified labor system. I went on a tour of a cigarette factory when I was doing my thesis and you could still see the hierarchy. The black people were pushing the brooms and the white women were doing the cigarette machines and the white men were the machinists. So, there was a racial and gender hierarchy. Black women did the preparation of the leaf, the dustiest and the dirtiest job.

The tobacco industry was organized on a segregated basis by the AFL; they had a black local and a white local. But in Winston-Salem there was a CIO tobacco workers' union. The CIO was much more progressive on racial matters, and there was a leftist organizer, a Communist. He decided, after serving in World War II, that he was going to organize in the factories. They organized a much more progressive union with black workers, but they had trouble getting white workers. Then he gets rebaited and loses all capacity to have any job, and eventually he sets up a nursery in Greensboro, North Carolina.

WSWS: So, the employers saw the unity of black and white workers as a real threat?

DJ: Yeah, divide and rule is a common technique. Different industries did it in various ways. The steel industry hired lots of different ethnic groups so they couldn't speak the same language. That was quite useful. There's a picture of Uncle Sam, after the great steel strike of 1919, saying "go back to work!" in about 12 languages.

In North Carolina there was an attempt at organizing, under the Farmers Alliance, black and white farmers in the 1890s. They formed a Fusion ticket and they won the state government. It was a Republican-Populist alliance. Blacks and whites were working together but blacks were mostly in the Republican Party and whites were mostly in the Populist Party.

In response to that, in 1898 the white Democrats start whipping up calls for a "white man's government." There was a black newspaper in Wilmington, North Carolina and it had an editorial suggesting that white women weren't always so hostile to black men, and that created this big outrage, you know: "how dare he, how dare he!" The white newspapers kept talking about the editor besmirching the morality of white women.

They also had guns and threatened any African American who'd actually tried to vote in the 1898 election. The Republicans and Populists managed to win the election and then a mob marches on the black newspaper in Wilmington and on the black community, and we don't know how many people get killed. That overturns that city government.

So, blacks had some political rights up until 1898. It's not the full story that after the Civil War everything collapses. But it was pretty systematic from 1890 onwards. In different states there are these ways of driving blacks out of the political system, starting with Mississippi in 1890. But in North Carolina it takes this major upheaval in 1898. Then in 1900 they passed a constitutional amendment that you cannot vote if you're illiterate unless your grandfather could vote in 1867 [which only white people could do then]. Then you have segregation and all the rest.

There were still people who were critical of it and opposing it. Then in the 1930s the Communists and others in the CIO wanted to prevent workers being divided on racial matters.

WSWS: We are very critical that the *Times* doesn't talk about the CIO.

DJ: They're sort of running roughshod over a lot of history in a few paragraphs. It's not an in-depth analysis.

WSWS: Writing about the beginning of the Civil Rights struggle, Hannah-Jones says, "for the most part black Americans fought back alone."

DJ: Well, of course that isn't completely the truth. The tobacco workers' union was involved in organizing in South Carolina in 1945 and the song that they're singing as they march on their picket line is "We shall overcome," which is then taken to a labor history training centre called Highlander, and it becomes the song of the Civil Rights movement. A lot of the labor activists become Civil Rights activists. There is an interaction between them. Bob Korstad has written about how these two movements merged in a book called *Civil Rights Unionism*.

There were Communists in the 1930s defending the rights of blacks in one way or another, but there were also relatively progressive whites, Christians and people criticising racism. So, it's not just blacks alone.

The NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] was founded by a group of progressive whites and blacks in the North. In North Carolina in the late Reconstruction era, Albion Tourg  e, a white progressive from the South, tried to organise poor whites and blacks for the Republican Party in 1868, helped write a non-racial state constitution, then became a judge and had poor whites and blacks as his allies. Then, systematically, the Klan lynched a poor white activist, lynched some of the blacks he knows, and then tried to assassinate Tourg  e. Ultimately, he's forced out of North Carolina in 1878. He then wrote an antilynching column, he tried to challenge segregation in the Supreme Court, then he helped to create the predecessor to the NAACP.

There are probably about 20,000 blacks who are killed and 5,000 whites who are killed in this Reconstruction period by the Klan and those kinds of groups. It's like death squads in Latin America; you go after activists and organisers using terror. White activists were seen as race traitors.

WSWS: Did any trade unionists who attempted an integrated struggle have any success?

DJ: There was a short period. You can look at Bob Korstad's book on what happened with his father's organising in Winston-Salem. That union was fairly progressive. But the other union, the AFL, started raiding, because of the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947. Those unions that don't sign affidavits and get rid of their communists are no longer protected by the labor law. So, there are times when there are efforts. But the use of race and anti-communism together are very effective.

WSWS: That's an interesting connection that you make, that the segregationists used anti-communism as a weapon.

DJ: Because communists had been progressive on the race question, and anyone who's interested in racial equality is by definition a subversive. This goes back to the Red Scare of 1919, when you have the first Communist Parties and the Bolsheviks have just had the revolution, and those people like A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen are editing a socialist paper in Harlem. They get targeted. There's a New York State Senate committee investigating communism in 1919-1920 and they target those people in the North.

Randolph goes on to help form the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters union. He's the one in 1941 who organizes for a march on Washington and he tells Roosevelt: unless you desegregate the war plants, we'll march, and Roosevelt issues an order to desegregate war plants in the North. So, the war allows blacks to go into the automobile industry and others; that is very important in terms of wages.

The NAACP has about 8,000 members before the war. After the war they get 400,000 members and they start the legal battle that leads to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Veterans came home determined to fight against segregation. The war itself and Germany made racism look somewhat suspect, and so you have a period where a lot of Americans are embarrassed that in a big part of their country blacks can't

vote. So, in the 1950s and 60s there are some kinds of changes. Tobacco workers I interviewed who came back from the war were very determined to fight segregation.

There was a big union presence in the 1963 March on Washington, which in some sense was repeating what Randolph threatened to do. King, when he's killed in Memphis, he's there to support organizing garbage workers. The UAW, one of the CIO unions, helped to organize the March on Washington in 1963.

WSWS: The 1619 Project jumps over Martin Luther King. He's just absent.

DJ: There's a lot of absences in there.

WSWS: To them it is simply blacks versus whites.

DJ: They're imposing identity politics all the way back. And in certain times, people don't even think in terms of categories of white and black. They have to be taught that skin color is significant. Racial identity politics is real in terms of what it does to you, but also unreal because it has no actual scientific basis, although some people keep trying to reinvent it over and over again. Saying racism is in America's "DNA," I don't think Hannah-Jones really meant it, I think that's just a metaphor. But still, it's using a genetic explanation for this stuff, which isn't necessarily true.

*Dolores Janiewski also described some of her personal experiences growing up during the Civil Rights struggle.*

DJ: My mother gradually got the schools integrated and did her best to try and make sure the black teachers didn't lose their jobs. She was a teacher and she took it upon herself to do those kinds of things. She created a stir one day when she called the black principal "Mister." That was a no-no, to give a black man a title of respect. She was an oppositionist and she was trying to educate us.

My sister and I tore down Klan posters in the park, I think when I was 12, around 1960 or thereabouts. It said, "Be a Man, Join the Klan." There was a post office box address, so I wrote a letter to the Klan to denounce them saying, "you're not men!" The deputy sheriff was supposed to be head of the Klan, which was very typical in the South. I kept looking out the front door to see if there was a burning cross.

The Klan threatened to bomb the high school where my mother was working with black teachers. We were doing a literacy project with black children and we were forced to move to the Episcopal church. Then we were accused of stealing hymn books, so we were forced to move to the black part of town. I took some black children into the local public library and the librarian was not pleased with me. But I thought they deserved to go there.

When I went to Tallahassee to Florida State university, we did Freedom Schools: setting up schools for black children to teach real history. We went to the black university too. That was one of our subversive activities.

It was a pretty repressive regime in much of the south, and violent too. Those three civil rights workers who were killed [James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner]—part of why they were killed was because it was two white guys with a black guy.

WSWS: Were there connections and overlaps between the anti-war movement and the Civil Rights movement?

DJ: Certainly, the fact that African Americans were a large share of those who were fighting and dying in Vietnam, Martin Luther King made that connection when he came out against the war in 1967. He talked about how the US was spending \$200,000 or \$300,000 for every enemy killed and about \$50 for every poor person. That was when he was starting to organize the Poor People's Campaign. So certainly, there were people who were making the connection. Cassius Clay before he became Mohammad Ali said: "The Viet Cong never called me 'nigger.'"

In southern states at universities like Duke University in North Carolina, where I did my PhD, there were progressive whites who held vigils against the war. They were called the Southern Organizing Committee,

which was linked to the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society].



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