

A reply to the American Historical Review's defense of the 1619 Project

David North, Tom Mackaman
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On January 23, 2020, Alex Lichtenstein, editor of the *American Historical Review* (AHR), posted an online statement defending the *New York Times Magazine's* 1619 Project against criticism from the *World Socialist Web Site* and several eminent historians. The editorial, "From the Editor's Desk: 1619 and All That," will appear in the forthcoming issue of the leading journal among American academic historians.

The fact that the 1619 Project is now being editorially defended in the AHR, despite the withering criticisms of highly respected professional historians, is a very troubling development. It reveals the extent to which racist mythology, which has provided the "theoretical" foundation of middle-class identity politics, has been accepted, and even embraced, by a substantial section of the academic community as a legitimate basis for the teaching of American history.

Published by the *Times* in August 2019, the 1619 Project essays are presented as the basis of a new curriculum, to be provided to the nation's underfunded public schools, free of charge, by the corporate-endowed Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. The 1619 Project, according to its architect Nikole Hannah-Jones, aims to "reframe" all of American history as a story of "anti-black racism" rooted in a "national DNA," which, it claims, emerged out of the allegedly unique American "original sin" of slavery.

In his effort to defend the 1619 Project, Lichtenstein argues not as a conscientious historian but as a lawyer defending what he knows to be a weak case. He is disingenuous to the point of dishonesty in his effort to dismiss the extent of the revision and falsification of history advanced by the 1619 Project. The differences, he claims, are merely a matter of emphasis or nuance.

The arguments advanced by Hannah-Jones are: a) that the establishment of the United States was a counterrevolution, whose primary purpose was the protection of slavery against the danger posed by a British-led emancipation movement; b) that Lincoln was a racist and that the Civil War therefore was unrelated to the fight to abolish slavery; c) that African Americans have fought alone in the face of relentless racism based on the universally popular doctrine of white supremacy; d) racism and slavery are the essential elements of American exceptionalism; and, therefore (and most important of all); e) all of American history is to be understood as the struggle between the white and black races. The driving forces of American history are not objective socioeconomic processes that give rise to class conflict, but, rather, eternal and supra-historical racial hatreds.

What is involved in the 1619 Project controversy is not a case of semantic differences that can be reconciled by a mere rephrasing of arguments. Two absolutely irreconcilable positions are being advanced, which cannot even be described as conflicting "interpretations." A racist narrative, which is what the 1619 Project advances, is by its very nature incompatible with empirical research and scientific methodology. It counterposes to genuine historical research a reactionary racial myth.

Lichtenstein's essay abounds with contradictions, errors, outright falsifications and cynical posturing. He begins by relating a recent visit to

New York City's Green-Wood Cemetery, where he was "struck" by the inscription on the Civil War Soldiers' Monument noting that 148,000 residents fought "in aid of the war for the preservation of the Union and the Constitution." Lichtenstein is unmoved by the fact that nearly one-fifth of the entire population of America's largest city fought in the Civil War—with all of the death and tragedy that such an astonishing statistic entailed. Instead, he is troubled by what he finds missing from the monument's inscription: "Not a word about slavery or emancipation, let alone black military service." This omission, Lichtenstein implies, proves that the Union soldiers who fought and died in the Civil War were indifferent to slavery.

However, the connection between the defense of the Union and the abolition of slavery, lost on the editor of the AHR, was understood by all contemporaries. Why, one wonders, does Lichtenstein suppose the South seceded from the Union in 1861? What does he suppose Lincoln was speaking about on November 19, 1863, at the dedication of the national cemetery at Gettysburg, when he explained to a grieving nation that the meaning of the war was a "new birth of freedom"? Or in his Second Inaugural, weeks before the end of the war and his own assassination at the hands of white supremacist John Wilkes Booth, when he stated,

One eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. *All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war.* To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union even by war, while the Government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it [emphasis added].

Lichtenstein's cynical disparagement of the cemetery monument would be uninteresting except for its centrality to his aim—to lend weight to central premises of the 1619 Project: that race is the axis of American history, that African Americans fought for freedom alone, and that the two seminal events of American history—the Revolution and Civil War—were either opposed or unrelated to the liberation of the slaves.

Lichtenstein claims that the 1619 Project's "reframing" is a mere "rhetorical move ... that impressed upon a wider public an interpretive framework that many historians probably already accept." In other words—and here he approvingly quotes from *New York Times Magazine* editor Jake Silverstein—"slavery and racism lie at the root of 'nearly everything that has truly made America exceptional.'"

The editor of the AHR palms off as "widely accepted" what is actually a disputed and untenable generalization: that "slavery and racism lie at the root of 'nearly everything that has truly made America exceptional.'" This, as a matter of historical fact, cannot be true, as neither slavery nor

racism is unique to America. Both have existed in innumerable societies, from the ancient world to modern times.

In fact, what makes American slavery truly “unique” was not that it existed, but that it gave rise to the most powerful and intransigent antislavery movement the world has ever known, and that it was destroyed in a great civil war during four years of fighting in which approximately as many Americans perished as in all other US wars combined. This, in turn, led to the enactment of constitutional amendments that, at least in law, established the equality of the former slaves.

The version of North American history advanced by the 1619 Project and defended by Lichtenstein has not only to negate 1776, but to cancel 1492.

It is no small matter that the authors and editors of the *Times* manage to ignore all that occurred in the 127 years that preceded the arrival of Africans in Virginia. The “uniqueness” of American history, indeed, that of the entire New World, is entirely bound up with the emergence of capitalism as a new economic world system. All the brutalities of the New World, beginning with the long and horrible process of the extermination of the aboriginal population, developed out of this process. As Marx stated so powerfully in his description of the “genesis” of industrial capitalism:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signaled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation. On their heels treads the commercial war of the European nations, with the globe for a theatre.... If money according to Augier, ‘comes into the world with a congenital blood-stain on one cheek’, capital comes dripping from head to foot from every pore with blood and dirt.

However, the horrors of slavery and the dispossession of the indigenous populations, what Bernard Bailyn has aptly characterized as the “barbarous years” in colonial history, intersected with other economic, social, and political processes that also contributed to American “uniqueness.”

The societies of the thirteen colonies were characterized by the absence of a feudal past, a distinct feature of American development that has been the subject of prolonged and significant discussion among serious historians. Also “unique” was the profound influence of the English Civil War of the seventeenth century and the Enlightenment philosophy of the eighteenth, whose revolutionary defense of liberty and revolutionary ideas reached deep into the colonial population—indeed, even to the slaves themselves, as Professor Clayborne Carson pointed out in his interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*. All of these “unique” aspects of the colonies intersected with the imperial crisis of the mid-to-late eighteenth century, the Seven Years’ War (1756–63), and the global conflict between France and Britain, setting the stage for the confrontation that erupted in 1775. The victory of the colonial rebellion stunned the world and sounded the tocsin for revolutions in France and Haiti.

But Lichtenstein cynically dismisses the world-historical significance of the American Revolution. “The first republic and its Constitution, so revered, lasted about as long as the USSR, a mere seventy-four years, before dissolving into the bloodiest conflict of the nineteenth century,” he sneers. “For my part, I always considered this a pretty weak foundation on which to erect unconditional veneration.”

Serious historians do not “venerate” events. They attempt to understand and explain them, and to trace back their roots in the past as well as their

consequences. The latter is particularly important in the study of the American Revolution, for if it had achieved *only* the preconditions for the destruction of slavery within a “mere seventy-four years”—and it in fact achieved far more than that—it would still rank as one of the most consequential political events in history. To compound the confusion, the Civil War, which Lichtenstein also minimizes, is made exclusively dependent on the “black freedom struggle,” implying that the latter’s development was unconnected with the American Revolution and the political conflicts within the United States that unfolded between 1787 and 1861.

Lichtenstein writes that he is “perplexed” by criticism of the 1619 Project. But then he proceeds to provide a concise summary of the critique developed by the *World Socialist Web Site*:

As good Marxists, the adherents of the Fourth International denounced the project for its “idealism,” that is to say, its tendency to reduce historical causation to a “supra-historical emotional impulse.” By mischaracterizing anti-black racism as an irreducible element built into the “DNA” of the nation and its white citizens, the Trotskyists declared, the 1619 Project is ahistorical and “irrationalist.” This idealist fallacy requires that racism “must persist independently of any change in political and economic conditions,” naturally the very thing that any materialist historian would want to attend to. “The invocation of white racism,” they proclaim, “takes the place of any concrete examination of the economic, political and social history of the country.” Perhaps even worse, “the 1619 Project says nothing about the event that had the greatest impact on the social condition of African-Americans—the Russian Revolution of 1917.” (Well, OK, I was with them up to that point.)

Taking Lichtenstein at his word—i.e., that, except for its estimation of the significance of the 1917 October Revolution, he was “with” the WSWS—he contradicts his defense of the 1619 Project. Because the WSWS’s position is diametrically opposed to that of the *Times*, to the extent Lichtenstein acknowledges the legitimacy, and even correctness of its critique, he is discrediting the 1619 Project.

Lichtenstein goes on to concede the high quality of the WSWS’s discussions with leading scholars. “Frankly, I wish the *AHR* had published these interviews, and I hope they get wide circulation,” he writes. But Lichtenstein proceeds to insinuate that the historians were tricked into speaking, imagining the interviewed scholars “trying to avoid saying what the Trotskyists would like them to say,” and even resisting “the Trotskyists’ bait.”

Lichtenstein claims that “it is safe to say that [James McPherson] would not sign on to the Marxist version of the Civil War preferred by the ICFI—the greatest expropriation of private property in world history, not equaled until the Russian Revolution in 1917.” Sadly for Lichtenstein, this point is made explicitly by Professor McPherson in *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*, with which the editor of the *AHR* is evidently unfamiliar. McPherson wrote:

The abolition of slavery represented a confiscation of about three billion dollars of property—the equivalent as a proportion of national wealth to about three *trillion* dollars in 1990. In effect, the government in 1865 confiscated the principal form of property in one-third of the country, without compensation. That was without parallel in American history. ... When such a massive confiscation of property takes place as a consequence of violent internal

upheaval on the scale of the American Civil War, it is quite properly called revolutionary.

Lichtenstein takes gratuitous and insulting jabs against his colleagues throughout. He accuses Professor Gordon Wood, who has dedicated his life to the study of the American Revolution, of being motivated by egotistical concerns. Wood, he baldly asserts, “seems affronted mostly by the failure of the 1619 Project to solicit his advice.” He contends that Professor Victoria Bynum, author of the landmark *The Free State of Jones*, is “best known for her attention to *glimmers* of anti-slavery *sentiment* among southern whites” (emphasis added), as if the fact that a substantial proportion of white southerners *took up arms* against the Confederacy, helping to ensure its defeat, is a trivial matter. As for James Oakes, Lichtenstein claims that the two-time Lincoln Prize winner “doesn’t really direct much fire at the 1619 Project.” This is simply not so. In his interview with the WSWS, Oakes issued a scathing critique of the 1619 Project. As for Sean Wilentz of Princeton, Lichtenstein dismisses him out of hand for leading the aforementioned historians in writing “a far less enlightening” letter to the *Times* criticizing the 1619 Project than the “spirited rebuttal” that came in reply from *New York Times Magazine* editor Jake Silverstein. In fact, Silverstein’s reply, like Lichtenstein’s own editorial, was a simple evasion that failed to approach the content of the historians’ criticisms, much less their more substantial interviews with the WSWS.

In a manner unfitting the office of AHR editor, Lichtenstein scoffs at all of these eminent historians—with multiple Bancroft, Lincoln, Pulitzer, and National Book Award prizes among them—as a “motley crew,” and “Wilentz and the gang of four.” He then attributes to them positions they have never taken, claiming that they were aggrieved by the *Times* “practicing history without a license” and consulting “with the *wrong* historians” (emphasis in the original).

A nasty and cynical gibe. The objection of the historians interviewed by the WSWS to the 1619 Project is not that its authors are “practicing history without a license,” but that they are concocting a historical narrative without facts.

Lichtenstein, who has chosen to adapt himself to the pressures exerted by identity politics, finds it difficult to believe that there are historians—with spines less flexible than his own—who conduct work as principled scholars and are not afraid to engage in discussions of history with Marxists. As Bynum has stated in an open letter replying to Lichtenstein:

I entirely agree with Marxist scholars, however, that neither race nor gender can be understood apart from the class systems in which they are experienced. In this regard, I may care a bit more deeply than my fellow letter signers about what *is not*, as well as what *is*, in the 1619 Project. For, as you suggest, the Project does ignore “class and class conflict.” It is for just that reason that my concerns are more closely aligned with the WSWS than you have surmised.

Perhaps it’s not surprising that racial essentialism forms the basis of much of the public reaction against historians critical of 1619, since the same essentialism underlies the Project itself. My understanding of class deeply informs my analysis of race, both of which I addressed in my interview with the WSWS, and my essay, “A Historian Critiques the 1619 Project,” published on my blog, *Renegade South*, and by the WSWS. In both the interview and the essay, I dismissed pseudoscientific theories about separate races and argued that such beliefs predispose one to embrace a theory of hypodescent (i.e., the “one-drop-rule” of race), which

posits certain ancestral “bloodlines” as more powerful than others.

Lichtenstein is certainly aware that Hannah-Jones and her backers on Twitter have engaged in the most shameless race-baiting of these historians, as well as the WSWS, for daring to criticize the *New York Times*. In a disgrace to the AHR, Lichtenstein alludes to this approvingly, writing that, “as many critics hastened to note, all of these historians are white,” before quickly adding that, “in principle, of course, that should do nothing to invalidate their views.” Then why state it? His unmistakable insinuation—that speaking to “white” historians was a “choice on the part of the Trotskyist left”—is that one’s understanding of history is determined by one’s race.

In fact, Lichtenstein’s claim is itself another lie. He simply chose to disregard the WSWS interviews with Clayborne Carson, editor of the papers of Martin Luther King Jr., and leading political scientist Adolph Reed Jr.

Curiously, Lichtenstein chastises the WSWS specifically for not reaching out to Barbara Fields, a leading scholar of slavery and the Civil War at Columbia University, who is also African American. As a matter of fact, though we have been unable as yet to arrange an interview, Professor Fields has sent us a letter via email which provides a succinct assessment of the 1619 Project:

I could hardly miss the hype of The 1619 Project, particularly since I am a print subscriber to the NYT. Although I have saved the issue (knowing that some of my students will have seen it, most likely online, and will have been seduced by its tendentious and ignorant history), I’m afraid I have not troubled to read the issue all the way through. The pre-launch publicity warned me of racecraft in the offing. And once I had the issue in hand, the first few bars disinclined me to waste my time on the rest of the operetta. Not that I would have expected anything more of the Times. Ask their writers to take the time to read Edmund Morgan or David Brion Davis or Eugene Genovese or Eric Williams or any of the explosion of rich literature about slavery in the United States and the hemisphere published over the past century? What an idea! And the packaged history they have assembled fits well with neo-liberal politics.

Having race-baited, mocked, and attributed to his colleagues positions that they did not in fact take, Lichtenstein retreats to his position that, after all, there is really nothing at stake in the *Times*’ racialist presentation of the two American revolutions. He allows that Hannah-Jones’s statement that the Revolution was waged to defend slavery “admittedly ... overstates” the case. He then imagines that the entire project might be acceptable if a few words were changed, softening Hannah-Jones’s monocausal explanation for 1776 with qualifiers such as “one of the primary reasons” that “*some* of the Patriots” revolted was to defend slavery. He concludes, “While Hannah-Jones may be guilty of overstatement, this is more a matter of emphasis than it is of a correct or incorrect interpretation.”

This is pure sophistry. To claim that the differences are merely over a somewhat careless wording is at once a conscious distortion and absurd. The claim that the colonials separated in order to preserve slavery is the very heart of the entire 1619 Project. In fact, Hannah-Jones has been on a lecture tour making the argument even more stridently than she did in her essay. In the curriculum being sent to the schools—a matter Lichtenstein also distorts—children are being asked to “rewrite” the Declaration of Independence in light of the lead essay’s claims.

Lichtenstein uses the same tactic in relationship to Hannah-Jones' distortion of Lincoln, which she clearly borrowed, unattributed, from the late black nationalist historian Lerone Bennett Jr. Like Bennett, the 1619 Project rips from their context two episodes in order to present Lincoln as a racist—from one of his debates with the arch-racist Stephen Douglas and another his meeting with five black leaders in the summer of 1862 on colonization. The contexts of these episodes were ably discussed by Oxford historian Richard Carwardine and Oakes in their interviews. As Carwardine explained, many more quotes could be mustered to defend the opposite conclusion: that Lincoln believed the concept of equality in the Declaration of Independence extended to blacks. But to Lichtenstein, the 1619 Project's tentatively selective quotation "is a matter of emphasis and nuance."

Drawn into the 1619 Project's tangled web, Lichtenstein extends the falsification of Lincoln to Frederick Douglass—a figure who, like Martin Luther King Jr., is not mentioned in the entire magazine that purports to offer a new version of American race relations. The AHR editor points to Douglass's 1876 oration on Lincoln and homes in on partial statements in which the black abolitionist said that Lincoln "shared the prejudices of his white fellow-countrymen against the negro" and "was preeminently the white man's President, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men." Astonishingly, Lichtenstein concludes this section by equating Douglass, the towering figure of abolitionism, to Hannah-Jones!

Yet the bulk of Douglass's magnificent speech was a brilliant exposition of Lincoln as a historical figure in which, among other things, Douglass said: "The name of Abraham Lincoln was near and dear to our hearts in the darkest and most perilous hours of the Republic. We were no more ashamed of him when shrouded in clouds of darkness, of doubt, and defeat than when we saw him crowned with victory, honor, and glory. Our faith in him was often taxed and strained to the uttermost, but it never failed." Elsewhere, in his autobiography, Douglass said of Lincoln:

In all my interviews with Mr. Lincoln I was impressed with his entire freedom from popular prejudice against the colored race. He was the first great man that I talked with in the United States freely, who in no single instance reminded me of the difference between himself and myself, of the difference of color, and I thought that all the more remarkable because he came from a State where there were black laws.

Douglass's speech on Lincoln came in 1876, at the end of Reconstruction and its promise of full racial equality. Yet this was still two decades before the full implementation of Jim Crow segregation, which the 1619 Project's racialist narrative suggests demonstrates the immutability of "anti-black racism." On the contrary, the oppression of the African American population after the Civil War exemplified, in the most profound and tragic manner, the inability of a bourgeois revolution that had led to the unfettered and explosive development of capitalism to realize Lincoln's promise of "a new birth of freedom."

Here again, however, the African American population was hardly "alone," as the 1619 Project claims. In answering this claim, it is necessary to call attention to other facets of the American experience that are totally absent from the race-based narrative of the 1619 Project.

Beginning during the Civil War and intensifying over the next three decades, the American military waged a ruthless war against the Indians of the American West, culminating in the conversion of their communal lands to private property under the Dawes Act of 1887 and the murderous rampage against the Sioux at Wounded Knee in 1890. The Indians, whose cultures could not be reconciled to capitalist notions of private property, occupied land demanded by the robber barons for the railroads and for the

plunder of its mineral wealth.

And then there is the fact that in the half century separating the end of the Civil War with the beginning of World War I, millions upon millions of immigrants poured in from Europe and Asia—Irish, German, Italian, Jewish, Polish, Chinese, Japanese, and many others. Lichtenstein writes that "the African American experience must be considered central to every aspect of American history." This is the sort of vast generalization that can mean almost anything. But would it be less true to state that "the immigrant experience must be considered central to every aspect of American history"? It should be noted, in this connection, that the primary targets of immigration exclusion in the 1920s, and the central target of the revived Ku Klux Klan, were European immigrants. The exclusion of the Chinese and Japanese came earlier still, in 1882 and 1907, respectively.

In this half century the American working class faced enormous difficulties in unifying over racial and national barriers. Nonetheless, workers—immigrant and native-born, white and black—fought innumerable bloody battles against factory owners and their hired gunmen and allies in the police departments and state militias. The class struggle in the United States was vicious. Hundreds of thousands died on the job, and many more died from poor living conditions, realities brought to an international audience by Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, as well as other works of American realist literature. Many hundreds of workers died in labor massacres, from assassinations, and behind bars, in the precise same decades that hundreds of Southern blacks were lynched, typically, as Ida Wells established, on false allegations of assaults against women.

None of this is to minimize the experience of African Americans, who have been, with the single exception of the American Indians, the most oppressed part of the American population. However, notwithstanding its specific origins and characteristics, the struggle of African Americans to overcome the legacy of slavery and achieve the democratic rights guaranteed by the Constitution becomes inextricably connected with the broader mass struggle of the American working class against capitalist exploitation.

Lichtenstein pretends that there is nothing at stake in this debate. Yet the imposition on history of a racialist narrative must have contemporary political consequences. It was clear from the outset that the effort of the *New York Times* to utilize the 1619 Project as the basis of new educational curricula has definite political aims. These have become undeniable in light of the many public statements made by Hannah-Jones, including a boast made in Chicago in October that should stop historians in their tracks: "I'm making a moral argument. My method is guilt."

The 1619 Project is, first of all, intended to bolster the Democratic Party's efforts to utilize racial identity, and the concept that blacks and whites have historically opposed interests, as a central electoral strategy. Ironically, this is a reworking of the political method that was employed by white supremacists in the South to maintain the dominance of the Democratic Party well into the 1960s, and which was later taken over by the Republicans in Richard Nixon's "Southern strategy."

Second, and still more fundamentally, it is aimed at undermining the growth of interracial class solidarity at a time of growing popular opposition, within the American and *international* working class, to massive social inequality. A historical interpretation that focuses on the centrality of economic forces and class conflict leads to demands for, at the very least, the curtailment of corporate power and an equitable redistribution of wealth. But the race-based interpretation advanced by the 1619 Project, reflecting the social aspirations of the more affluent sections of the African American middle class, serves to bolster demands for reparation payments. This is not incidental to the Project's aims. Hannah-Jones has already announced that her forthcoming project will be a demand for racially based reparations.

The disrespect expressed by Lichtenstein and the 1619 Project defenders toward leading historians such as Wood, McPherson, Oakes, Carwardine,

Bynum, and Sean Wilentz expresses the rejection of a progressive democratic tendency in American historiography. The historians who have stressed the world-historical and progressive character of the two American Revolutions (1775–83 and 1861–65) tended to legitimize, even if that was not their intention, the perspective of a third American, socialist, revolution.

The 1619 Project, which takes no notice of the class struggle in its mythological narrative, advances a perspective that is, both in its theoretical foundations and political perspective, deeply reactionary. Lichtenstein knows this to be the case. He writes, at the conclusion of his essay, it is not his intention to “defend unconditionally what appears in the 1619 Project.” The editor admits to feeling “frustration” with the exaggerated claims of the journalists behind the 1619 Project. “And, as the Trotskyists point out,” Lichtenstein writes, “Marxists may find the substitution of ‘race’ for class relations disconcerting.”

Coming at the conclusion of a lengthy defense of the 1619 Project, Lichtenstein’s admission of reservations testifies not only to the unprincipled character of his essay but also to the degraded state of those sections of the academic community that have been drawn to racialist theories of history.



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