

The significance of the July 4 online discussion, “The Place of the Two American Revolutions: Past, Present and Future”

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On July 4, the *World Socialist Web Site* marked the 244th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence by hosting a discussion with five significant historians: Victoria Bynum, Clayborne Carson, Richard Carwardine, James Oakes and Gordon Wood.

The discussion, “The Place of the Two American Revolutions—Past, Present and Future,” moderated by Kings College Professor Tom Mackaman and WSWWS International Editorial Board Chairman David North, made for a fascinating, thought-provoking experience. (It can be viewed in its entirety here.)

The discussion attracted a large international audience from 72 countries. It was viewed live by approximately 3,000 people, and by several thousand more in the first 24 hours after the event was posted on YouTube and other social media forums. This testifies to the immense interest in historical issues and their relation to contemporary problems.

In an honest and forthright manner, the event addressed what any objective observer must consider some of the most pressing and vexing issues in regard to American and world history, including the intellectual and social influence of the Declaration of Independence, the parts played by such figures as Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, the international impact of the American Civil War, the presence or absence of the concepts of “revolution” and “class” in contemporary historiography, the ongoing attacks on the two American revolutions and the malignant growth of social inequality today, deepened and worsened by the horrific COVID-19 pandemic.

While it addressed primarily events that took place on US soil, the discussion had nothing parochial or provincial about it. All the substantive issues under consideration, including the problems of nationalism, race and racially-based politics, are international ones. Moreover, considering the vast role of American imperialism in world events, this revolutionary history had to be of great interest to a global audience, as indeed it was. The panel debate was followed by viewers on every inhabited continent.

Introducing the discussion, David North took note of the fact that there was no use in pretending that historical issues could or should be separated from present concerns. But, he argued,

history, as history, has its claims. However one may interpret the past, a serious effort should be made to base interpretations on a principled concern for the factual basis of one’s arguments. A “version” of history that is not grounded in facts—let alone one that is based on the deliberate distortion or outright falsification of the historical record—is of no intellectual value.

Referencing the present attacks on the legacy of the first and second

American revolutions and those who led it, North stated, “I must admit to concern over the implications of arriving at the conclusion that the world would have been a better place if the American Revolution had been lost and if Abraham Lincoln had never been born.”

Within the framework of a principled defense of the American Revolution and the Civil War, critical historical issues were examined.

Gordon Wood, professor emeritus of history at Brown University and the author of numerous works, including *The Creation of the Republic*, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* and *Empire of Liberty*, pointed early in the discussion to the implications of the invocation of human equality in the Declaration of Independence.

Little did its authors realize, Wood asserted,

how significant... those words would become not too long after, as people picked them up and used them, especially “equality.” The idea that all men are created equal is, I think, the most powerful force in American life and maybe in the world as well... Many people thought that this was a great moment in world history.

In her work on Southern Unionists, i.e., Southerners who opposed the Confederacy, and, in many cases, ended up fighting for the Union, Victoria Bynum, distinguished professor emeritus of history at Texas State University, found that the principles of the Enlightenment and the Declaration of Independence continued to live on.

The author of *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi’s Longest Civil War* and *The Long Shadow of the Civil War: Southern Dissent and Its Legacies* commented:

I discovered that the American Revolution was always prominent in the minds... of Southern Unionists all those years later during the Civil War.

Asked about Abraham Lincoln’s attitude toward Thomas Jefferson, Richard Carwardine, professor for many years at Sheffield and Oxford universities and the author of the Lincoln Prize-winning biography, *Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power*, observed that while Lincoln had no admiration for the agrarian order Jefferson championed or the slave-holding class to which he belonged, “Lincoln’s view of Jefferson the man is to be separated, I think, from his view of the Declaration of Independence for which he honored him.” He stressed that the Declaration

was “absolutely central to Lincoln’s political career between 1854 and 1860.” After he became president, Lincoln sought “to bring public opinion toward the principles of the Declaration, which, of course, he then does so magnificently at Gettysburg in November of 1863.”

In his first comments, James Oakes, a distinguished professor of history at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and author of the Lincoln Prize-winning *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics* and *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865*, pointed to the fact that not until the American Revolution had there appeared “an organized movement to abolish slavery, and it [the Revolution] sets in motion that 88-year struggle that culminates in the Civil War.”

It’s hard for me to imagine how that movement could have justified itself, certainly it’s hard to imagine Abraham Lincoln justifying it, without constant recourse to the principle of fundamental human equality and the Declaration.

Professor Wood later commented, in regard to the consequences of the Enlightenment and “the beginning of modernity,”

So all of that is part of this grand story that we have that links these two revolutions. I have no doubt that... the North’s victory in the Civil War is the culmination of the American Revolution.

Clayborne Carson, professor of American history at Stanford University, the editor of the Martin Luther King Jr. papers and director of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, brought up the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass and his famed speech, delivered July 5, 1852, now known as “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?”

In that address, Douglass explained that he too celebrated the Declaration of Independence, but asked his mostly white audience, in Carson’s words, “What is the meaning of this document that you created, this principle of equality that you’ve created?” He then painted a devastating picture of “the reality... that this nation has not lived up to those principles.”

Carson went on,

Perhaps we need a two-day holiday—one of them on the 4th of July to celebrate the Declaration, then on the 5th of July we critique what has happened... whether or not we’ve lived up to that Declaration.

In regard to the “disjunction between the words of the Declaration of Independence and the reality,” Professor Oakes suggested that Lincoln considered the former document “not a description of reality, [but] an aspiration, it’s the idea we hold up and hold ourselves to, our best selves.”

Professor Carson commented that in any “time of great change... the outcomes are always uncertain.” He suggested that Lincoln, shortly before he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, had considered the notion of allowing the South to keep slavery and made it clear “that his goal is ultimately the Union, his secondary goal is ending slavery.”

In introducing a comment about the international impact of the Civil War, Professor Carwardine referred to Lincoln’s comment “that he wanted to see the emancipation of all men everywhere. The Civil War was

not just about preserving the Union, it was about preserving a certain kind of Union, a Union that would actually be an anti-slavery Union.”

Carwardine stressed that Lincoln was sincere in his belief that “the American Union had a special place in world history.” Immigrants from many nations signed up to fight for the Union Army, because of what its outcome meant for America and what it meant for the countries where they came from. Movingly, Carwardine explained,

When Lincoln died... throughout Europe there was stunned weeping, [by] adult men and women, who felt that what had been taken away from them was the democrat par excellence, the representation of the new world.

The various participants weighed in on contemporary problems and events.

James Oakes importantly pointed to the tendency in historiography “to erase revolutions from all of human history.” The process, he noted, had been going on for decades.

First... the English revisionists said there was no English Revolution, and then François Furet came along and said there was no French Revolution. We have historians telling us that the Spanish-American revolutions were really just fights among colonial elites that got out of hand and happened to result in the abolition of slavery.

The Russian Revolution too is being eliminated, “and of course we have a historiography... telling us there was no American Revolution and telling us that the Civil War was not a revolutionary transformation.” Such tendencies, Oakes argued, “give us no place to plant our feet in the past, to see how things got done, how things got undone, and it worries me.”

Oakes expressed concern that the present generation is being led to believe that there were no antiracists in American history, and that there were never progressive victories. He said that it was important not only to celebrate revolutions, “but also to understand what a revolution is, and why revolutions are so important in American and human history.”

In the final portion of the discussion, some attention was paid to—and certain differences of interpretation arose—over the current efforts to remove statues of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant and various abolitionists. David North asked the historians whether they were worried about a situation in which such figures were dismissed or vilified on the basis of a racial interpretation of history. “What would happen... if people came to see the American Revolution, the American Civil War, as essentially racist conspiracies of no interest to the broad mass of the people?”

Responding to North, Professor Carson stated that he shared these concerns, but felt that such actions as the statue removals were “part of the tumult that goes with any large social movement... I’m much more hopeful that sometimes historical learning comes after the activism.”

He later added that he hoped people watching the panel discussion would

make their own decisions about how to move forward in a progressive way toward another revolutionary moment in history... it’s not going to result in a perfect world, but a better world.

Victoria Bynum too referred to “excesses” that “go with the territory,” in relation to the current mass protests. She went on to point out that

the pandemic has certainly exposed many of the issues of inequality in our society. We have some people getting very rich off of it. We have some people being forced into situations where they may die from it, and so it’s got everybody thinking more about the structure of society, and that’s a good thing.

Later, Bynum expressed her concern that “class is less and less being emphasized in history” and referred powerfully to the “well-documented class disparities that really present us today with an American nightmare of inequality.”

In this brief review, it is possible only to provide the flavor of the discussion and some reference to the complex questions, questions of the highest historical and social order, that were tackled. The approach of all the participants was entirely principled and sincere. How often do such meetings take place, in which the stultifying banalities of present-day academic discourse, fixated on issues of personal identity, are clearly challenged, and in which the centrality of social class and revolution in the historical process is openly discussed?

In this important and intriguing exchange of ideas, there was not agreement on every question, nor was every issue resolved. This is a debate that needs to develop and expand from this point. More voices need to be heard. The historical examination and criticism will only deepen. There is no need for apologetic history, or the slightest degree of myth-making. Again, above all, honesty is required, along with democratic values.

In concluding the discussion, North suggested that the July 4 discussion was “a cause for great optimism.” The participants and the audience, he hoped, would take away from the event “an awareness that... something new is emerging,” that the panel debate was “a reflection of a far broader process.” The present pandemic and its consequences were setting “masses of people into motion,” and that in the profoundly changed situation, “great historical questions are forcing their way to the surface, and I think we all can take heart from this and be very optimistic.”



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