

SEP Summer School 2021 Lecture

The 1619 Project and the attack on the American Revolution

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The following lecture was delivered at the Socialist Equality Party (US) 2021 summer school, held August 1 through August 6, by Tom Mackaman, a writer for the World Socialist Web Site. Mackaman is co-editor with David North of The New York Times' 1619 Project and the Racialist Falsification of History, which is available from Mehring Books.

Two years ago this month the *New York Times* published its 1619 Project.

The *Times* made grandiose claims for its flagship project. Nikole Hannah-Jones, the journalist-celebrity who was its public face, said that the 1619 Project would reframe all of American history as a race struggle waged by whites against blacks. This “new narrative” would supplant social studies curricula for students who, allegedly, had been denied real history through a racist monopoly of white historians. It was finally time to tell the truth: The year 1619, when the first slaves were brought to Colonial Virginia, was the “true founding” of the United States, and not the Revolution of 1776, which was in fact a counterrevolution waged to defend slavery against the abolitionist British Empire. Beginning with that “original sin” in 1619, anti-black racism has been lodged “in the DNA” of “white Americans.” So much so, that today the inescapable racism of whites is the root cause of every conceivable social ill in America, from obesity to traffic jams.

Let us first write off with the contempt it deserves the *Times*' assertion that it launched such a far-reaching rewriting of American history and social reality as an act of public service for school children.

The *Times* cares not a whit for teachers and children, as it has shown in its advocacy of deadly school reopenings amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The *Times* is not a charity but a multi-billion-dollar media empire for which profits and share values are of utmost concern. Indeed, the 1619 Project is already being spun off into various kinds of franchising and media programming, in collaboration with billionaire entertainment mogul Oprah Winfrey.

But the *Times* is more than just a media corporation. It is the central media organ of the Democratic Party and American liberalism and, we must underline, the CIA. It is up to its neck in the filth of American politics; for example the neo-Victorian #MeToo sexual witch-hunt that it has organized and spearheaded; and in the blood of American imperialism, having most infamously promoted as fact the “weapons of mass destruction” *casus belli* for the war in Iraq, and having more recently joined in the persecution of journalist Julian Assange for daring to expose the imperialist lies it has propagated. When the masses of the Middle East and Central Asia, and the families of American soldiers killed and maimed get their day in court, we expect that a few *Times* publishers, editors, and writers will sit in the dock alongside the likes of Bush, Blair, Obama and Clinton.

In publishing the 1619 Project, the *Times* is in fact motivated by a very

earthly concern. Its aim is the racial balkanization of the American working class. I use the word “balkanization” advisedly. Whatever Hannah-Jones' intentions, the position that human beings are pitted in never-ending struggle based on the mythological category of race has, in the past century, provided the ideological justification for the murder of tens of millions all over the world. The *Times*' good friends at the CIA are well-practiced at this. Murder Incorporated has in the past few decades used the method of communal division with deadly effect in Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Ukraine.

Let us, as a point of departure, agree on a premise: *Racism* is an ideology constructed on a social categorization, *race*, that has no basis in science. *Race* and *racism* emerged historically with capitalism to justify and to naturalize exploitation. Together with capitalism they will be sunk.

What is of the greatest significance—and what I wish to deal with in my remarks today—is that the campaign for racial division has now taken the form of an all-out attack on American history, and especially its revolutions: the American Revolution and the Civil War. This runs parallel to efforts by German historian Jörg Baberowski to rehabilitate Hitler and those by British historians to defame the greatest revolutionary of the last century, Leon Trotsky, manifestations of historical falsification that our movement has intervened against decisively.

The *Times* fathomed at some point in 2018 that its wall-to-wall promotion of race, which had been ongoing since Trump's election in 2016, was not enough. Under the explosive conditions of the greatest polarization of wealth in history, it was not only necessary to falsify contemporary reality, supplanting any discussion of capitalism or class with concepts popular in academia such as “whiteness,” “white privilege” and “the racial wealth gap”—but to falsify American history.

Here we do not have time for a detailed recounting of our movement's intervention against the 1619 Project. This is provided by our recently published book, *The New York Times' 1619 Project and the Racialist Falsification of History*.

The critical point is this: Outside of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, there would have been no serious defense of the American Revolution or Civil War.

After the publication of the 1619 Project in August 2019, there was indeed little criticism whatsoever. Condemnation from anti-egalitarian right-wing figures such as former House Speaker Newt Gingrich could not be taken seriously, and only played into the fiction that the 1619 Project represented a previously suppressed “unvarnished truth.”

Then, in the first week of September 2019, the WSWs published our two-part reply, “The New York Times's 1619 Project: A racist falsification of American and world history.” That article's comprehensive analysis, which was extended and deepened in subsequent lectures, articles, and polemics—while never denying the significance of

slavery or racism in American history—rebutted every one of the *Times*' claims.

Our intervention won the support of a layer of historians. They are few, but it so happens they are among the most noted and influential scholars of their fields. They did not do interviews with us because they agreed—or disagreed—with us politically. The collaboration was based on an agreement over an honest approach to history and an opposition to the falsification of the American Revolution and Civil War. They turned to the *World Socialist Web Site* because we provided the only resistance to the *Times*. These interviews, and the WSWS articles and lectures, are assembled in the aforementioned book.

The intervention of the WSWS had an immense impact, turning the media celebration of the 1619 Project into a rearguard defensive action. Our work spilled over into the bourgeois media—including the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Atlantic*, *Politico*, the *American Historical Review*, the *Financial Times*, the *National Review*, the *Washington Post*, and others. Even the *Times* was forced to acknowledge that the *World Socialist Web Site* had led the opposition to the 1619 Project. Indeed, because of the *World Socialist Web Site*, *New York Times Magazine* editor Jake Silverstein was forced to walk back, in humiliating fashion, the key claim that 1619 was the true founding of the United States—though this was done, as is the style at the *Times*, in a most dishonest fashion.

The prominent—one might even say predominant—role played by the *World Socialist Web Site* in this debate was itself a significant development. The capitalist media in the United States has always depended on the fiction that there is no socialism in the land of apple pie and unlimited opportunity. All layers of the American media, including the tech giants, have been hell-bent on denying the very existence of the WSWS, up to and including out-and-out censorship. Yet in this struggle, the major news organ of the liberal wing of the American ruling class, the *Times*, found itself in combat with the organ of the international working class, the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Of course, every effort is now being made to stuff the cat back in the bag, to pretend that all opposition to the 1619 Project and Critical Race Theory and the like comes from the right wing. This fiction aims to disorient the population and provide political cover for the fascist maneuverings of the Republican Party. Our book is being effectively blacklisted by the review editors of the various newspapers and academic journals, though these editors surely know that it is one of the most significant volumes published on American history in recent memory. Sales have nonetheless been strong, and we will fight for our book among teachers and students, and in the working class as a whole.

Two critical questions arise from our experience: How do we account for the fact that American liberalism, through the *New York Times*, has launched a root-and-branch attack on the defining events of its emergence, the American Revolution and the Civil War? And why is it that only the socialist movement has defended these revolutions?

The answers to these questions are not to be found in the actual history of the revolutions, but in the deepening crisis of American capitalism in our own time. A landmark was reached, in this regard, late in the year 2000. In the Bush vs. Gore election of that year, the US Supreme Court, in a 5–4 decision, intervened to stop the counting of votes and hand the election to Bush. The Democratic Party and its organs, including the *Times*, fell in line.

On December 3, 2000, nine days before that ruling was handed down, David North, chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site* International Editorial Board and national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (US), gave a lecture to a public meeting of the Socialist Equality Party of Australia in Sydney, in which he stated:

What the decision of this court will reveal is how far the

American ruling class is prepared to go in breaking with traditional bourgeois-democratic and constitutional norms. Is it prepared to sanction ballot fraud and the suppression of votes and install in the White House a candidate who has attained that office through blatantly illegal and anti-democratic methods? [1]

The *Bush v. Gore* ruling demonstrated that there was no longer any significant constituency within the American corporate and political establishment for the defense of democratic rights. The defense and expansion of democratic rights—which in the bourgeois-democratic state are always unequal, and frequently revoked entirely for workers, the poor, minorities, and socialists—fell to the working class.

The publication of the 1619 Project marked a new stage in the process of ruling-class degeneration that had been revealed in the Supreme Court's intervention in the 2000 election. Even as democratic rights have come under attack in the United States over the past several decades, the ruling class continued to pay lip service to the American Revolution and Civil War, which birthed those rights. To be sure, ruling class deference to the revolutions was always dishonest, as James P. Cannon once noted, in the manner of “beneficiaries of privilege ... imposters, phonies, and desecrators of a noble dream.”

But now powerful sections of the ruling class, speaking through the *New York Times*, have turned decisively against the democratic revolutions that formed the United States in the 1770s and the 1860s.

The *Times*' attack on the American Revolution and the Civil War does not run counter to the fascist coup-plotting from Trump and the Republican Party. It emerges from the same historical putrefaction, and in fact nurtures and encourages fascism. Just as the defense and expansion of democratic rights falls to the working class, so too does the defense of the revolutionary patrimony of the American Revolution and the Civil War. They are pieces of a whole. The historical struggle is the prerequisite for the development within the working class of an international, revolutionary perspective and culture. It is bound up with our defense of historical truth in relationship to Trotsky, who spent the last decades of his life painstakingly exposing Stalinist lies. The lie, Trotsky said, is the cement of political reaction. This is why our movement has intervened against the attack on the American revolutions with such vigor.

The particular vehicle for the strike against the American Revolution is what we have called racist falsification. Like all forms of historical falsification—to quote the great historian of the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union, Vadim Rogovin—the *Times*' method entails “the concealment of some historical facts or the tendentious exaggeration and distorted interpretation of others.”

Such methods threaten, as a field of inquiry, history itself. It is therefore deeply disturbing that so few professional historians have lifted a finger against the 1619 Project. It demonstrates the extent to which, as David North and I wrote in a reply to Alex Lichtenstein, editor of *The American Historical Review*:

... 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. [2]

Furthermore, we wrote, the attack on leading historians who criticized the 1619 Project—Gordon Wood, James McPherson, James Oakes, Victoria Bynum, Sean Wilentz and others—“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.”

It is a sad fact that more historians have rallied to the defense of the 1619 Project’s racist mythology than have criticized it. And efforts are now being made to provide a scholarly cover for the 1619 Project, which is due to come out in book form this fall under the name *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*. “Origin Story” is an apt title for what the Project actually is. The scientific study of history does not deal in “origin stories,” except to expose them. Origin stories have traditionally been the enterprise of racist politicians, the most notable example being Hitler’s theory of an eternal Aryan nation.

Recently, in separate opinion pieces published in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and *Time* magazine, historians Woody Holton and Robert Parkinson have joined the *Times*’ 1619 Project in its assertion that the American Revolution was a counterrevolution waged to defend slavery.

The essays were timed to coincide with the July 4 Independence Day weekend. Holton’s essay appeared in the *Post* on July 2 (“The Declaration of Independence’s debt to Black America.”) Parkinson’s both appeared on July 4, one in the *Times* (“Did a Fear of Slave Revolts Drive American Independence?”) and one in *Time* magazine (“You Can’t Tell the Story of 1776 Without Talking About Race and Slavery”).

Holton, at the University of South Carolina, and Parkinson, at SUNY-Binghamton, and scholars like them are routinely presented as “left.” Such historians, however, are deeply opposed to the Marxist conception that the American Revolution was an event of world-historical significance that, despite its many contradictions—that is, despite the fact that it was a bourgeois-democratic revolution—contributed immensely to the struggle for human equality, in whose name it was waged.

Indeed, these historians do not present the war for independence as a revolution at all, but as a reactionary eruption of racism waged against the true progressive contestant in the struggle ... the British Empire! Holton and Parkinson allege that it was only because the Empire moved against the institution of slavery that the revolution happened at all. This is the same thesis of the 1619 Project and historian Gerald Horne, whose error-filled book, *The Counter-Revolution of 1776*, is a clear influence.

Holton’s entire argument hinges on the Dunmore Proclamation, issued in November of 1775 by the last royal governor of Virginia (John Murray, Fourth Earl of Dunmore), offering freedom to slaves and servants who took up arms against masters already in revolt against the crown.

Holton writes in the *Post*, “Whites’ fury at the British for casting their lot with enslaved people drove many to the fateful step of endorsing independence.” He continues, “Until 1775, most White Americans had resisted parliamentary innovations like the Stamp Act and the tea tax but had shown little interest in independence. Yet when they heard that Blacks had forged an informal alliance with the British, Whites were furious.” [3]

The first reaction to reading such a passage is a combination of shock and revulsion at its abysmally low intellectual level. This tenured university historian has dissolved all the myriad social, geographical, ethnic, and political divisions in the colonies—all of which were in a profound state of flux in 1775—into two, anachronistic and supra-historical categories: “Whites” and “Blacks.” “Blacks had forged an alliance,” “Whites were furious,” and so it goes throughout. Holton is not a fascist. One assumes he is a Democrat in good standing—his father was a governor of Virginia and his brother-in-law is Senator Tim Kaine, Hillary Clinton’s 2016 vice presidential candidate. But, whatever his intentions, Holton’s reduction of social reality to a conflict among races is an approach to history shared by the Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan.

Parkinson also starts from the Dunmore Proclamation and similar efforts by the Empire to enlist both slaves and Indians. The Colonial reaction to

Dunmore, which Parkinson read about in the back pages of Patriot newspapers, proves that, “[S]eparation from Britain was as much, if not more, about racial fear and exclusion as it was about inalienable rights.” And in his *Time* magazine essay, Parkinson has the following to say:

We have given the founding fathers passes when it comes to race. ... For too long we have taken an elderly John Adams at his word about what brought the thirteen colonies together. He had forgotten—purposefully—how four decades earlier he had mobilized American prejudices about Black people (what today we would call racism) to get the colonies to come together as one union. That effort made America independent, but it also buried race deep in the cornerstone of the American republic... [4]

The combination of ignorance and ahistorical moralizing here is staggering. Historians do not “give passes” to historical figures. They locate historical actors, concretely, within a given historical context that in turn forms part of a broader arc of historical development. Parkinson seems to think that the task of the historian is to sift through the past and sort actors into good and bad heaps, based on the dubious bourgeois morality of America, 2021, which proclaims the president’s right to carry out drone assassinations at will, and which prioritizes profits over human lives in a pandemic that has killed upwards of 600,000. Parkinson’s hectoring against the past recalls E.P. Thompson’s warning against history written as “the enormous condescension of posterity,” but nothing so much as Engels’ criticism of history writing that “divides men who act in history into noble and ignoble and then finds that as a rule the noble are defrauded and the ignoble are victorious.” [5]

As Rogovin also pointed out, historical falsification can only “be refuted by restoring historical truth—the honest presentation of actual facts and tendencies of the past.” David North and Eric London have already dismantled the claims made about his Lordship Dunmore, who lived out his days as the royal governor of slave-rich Barbados.

A few brief points may still be in order: 1) The Dunmore Proclamation came a *half year after* fighting in the war for independence had begun, over *one year after* the formation of the Continental Congress, and amidst a situation of dual power in which the imperial authority had all but disintegrated, including in Virginia; 2) In this context of war, the Proclamation was a military expedient, and no more, that specifically upheld slavery among Loyalists. In this sense, if the overriding aim of the Patriots had been to hold onto their slaves, they might have been wiser to cast their lot with Dunmore; 3) The British-controlled slave trade continued to import slaves to its Indies and American possessions, in all, 1.5 million men women and children in the years of the imperial crisis and the early American Republic; 4) The British Parliament ended slavery in the Indies only in 1833. This was done very differently than in the bloody revolution of the American Civil War. It was achieved by handing 40 million pounds off to the masters, many of whom rarely if ever set foot in the Indies. This was the largest bailout in British history until Labour PM Gordon’s Brown great transfer of working-class wealth to the City of London banking industry in 2009.

We have here another “origin story.” Whereas Nikole Hannah-Jones held that the “true founding” of the United States was the day Dutch privateers brought ashore the first slaves in 1619, Holton and Parkinson believe that the Dunmore Proclamation was “the true founding,” and indeed far more important than the Declaration of Independence, which they heap scorn upon. If Holton is to be believed, he has revealed in Lord Dunmore the author of one of history’s truly great revolutionary manifestos, ranked alongside Luther’s *95 Theses*, *The Declaration of the Rights of Man*, and the *Communist Manifesto*. This discovery had been

inexplicably missed by all previous generations of American historians—and also all the contemporaries of the War for Independence, British and American alike. Alas, unfortunately for Holton, Dunmore was a reactionary through-and-through. And he was a minor figure, one of many interchangeable functionaries of the Crown in a far-flung corner of the empire.

As we have detailed elsewhere, the American Revolution raised slavery as a political issue for the first time in world history. The first antislavery societies in the world sprang up in the colonies immediately after the revolution. The northern states, where slavery was less economically crucial, immediately set about putting an end to the barbarous institution.

These developments infused antislavery sentiment in Britain and elsewhere, and abolitionism came to be a transatlantic movement. Economically, the American Revolution undermined the British mercantilist system, tilting the balance of forces in British politics to the rising industrial class, as the Afro-Caribbean historian Eric Williams long ago explained. But in perverse fashion, the very growth of British industry became evermore wed to the cotton-slave economy of the American South, which grew by leaps and bounds after the invention of the cotton gin in 1793.

However, in the North, the American Revolution also set off a dynamic economic development that was based on what came to be called, tellingly, “free labor.” The revolution cast off or weakened forms of personal dependency, from the crown to the bottom of society, doing away with slavery and indentured servitude and raising “the dignity of labor.” Aristocratic European visitors were horrified by the lack of groveling humility among everyday Americans in the northern states, which was reflected in the development of American English: The word “help” replaced “servant,” and “boss” supplanted “master.” But in the South, for the first time in history, a positive ideological defense of slavery—racism—was conjured up and promoted throughout the union by the Democratic Party. The great divergence of North and South led inexorably to the American Civil War.

Holton and Parkinson make a number of false claims and suppositions, but one other warrants special consideration. They assume that because some slaves and Indians supported the British side in the American Revolution, and that because slaves and Indians were oppressed, it then follows that the British Empire was the progressive contestant in the struggle.

First, as a point of fact, neither Indians nor slaves responded in a unified way to the American Revolution. Some Indian nations and bands sided with the British, but others did not. The Iroquois Federation was split. The Creek were too. The Catawba backed the colonists. The Cherokee largely supported the British. It was likely the case that most free blacks sided with the revolution, and some slaves gained freedom by serving in the Continental Army or the various militias. On the other hand, many slaves ran to British lines, and 20,000 served. But no one at the time thought that this military emancipation was anything other than in keeping with the laws of war, which recognized the seizure of enemy property as legitimate.

We deny neither the brutality of slavery nor the horrific dispossession of the American Indians. But it does not follow that, because of these indisputable horrors, the British imperial cause was progressive and the American reactionary. During the American Civil War, the Sioux Indians of Minnesota rose up, taking advantage of the war to retaliate for criminal mistreatment at the hands of the state and national governments. Renae Cassimeda deals very ably with this episode in an essay included in our book. We sympathize with the plight of the Sioux against the frontier state. It is easy to understand why their uprising took place in 1862. The United States stole their land and was denying them treaty rights, including food. But it does not follow from this that the Confederate cause, with which the Sioux found themselves in de facto alliance, was

thereby progressive, nor that of the Union reactionary. History is full of such episodes. One thinks of the Indian nationalists who allied with Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany against the British Raj during World War II.

The Times’ Project is a politically-motivated falsification of history. It presents the origins of the United States entirely through the prism of racial conflict.

The larger historical issue here is the attempt to portray British imperialism as a progressive, emancipatory, even revolutionary force. This argument makes incomprehensible not only American, but world history. The British Empire in the 18th and 19th centuries, like the United States after WWII, was the cockpit of global reaction. The crimes of imperial plunder are too long to list. But they stretch from Ireland, where the anti-Catholic laws were imposed by the early 18th century, and where in the 1840s and 1850s in the Great Famine, several million peasants were starved to death, and even while beef was being exported to the wealthy of England, Lord Russell denied famine relief, worrying over the Irish becoming “wards of the state”; to China, where, because there was little market for British goods, London set into motion the opium epidemic, addicting tens of millions and provoking two wars, and thereby resolving the trade imbalance; to Africa, where for 150 years Britain dominated the slave trade, securing the capital for its industrialization that came, as Marx said, dripping from every pore with blood and filth; to the “Crown Jewel” of the Empire, India, whose wealth Britain mercilessly plundered, abandoning it in the 1940s only after its communal division among Hindus and Muslims could be ensured; to the factories and mines of England itself, where workers had their first cruel experiences with the capitalists, horrors documented by Engels in his *Conditions of the Working Class in England*.

Sri Lankan Trotskyist Colvin de Silva said it well when he stated, responding to the slogan “the sun never sets on the British Empire”: “That’s because not even God trusts the British in the dark.” Are Holton, Parkinson, Horne, and the rest simply unaware of all of this?

This is not just bad history. There is emergent in American politics and culture a clear and growing attraction to aristocracy. In part, the American ruling class wishes to discard the troublesome heritage of the American Revolution and the Civil War, with all the talk of inalienable rights such as freedom of speech and assembly and so on. In part, it gravitates to the fantasy of somehow transforming its ill-gotten capitalist wealth into a form that is immutable, hereditary, divinely sanctioned—in short, feudal. These aspects of the attempt to rehabilitate the British Empire are two sides of the same coin. The American ruling class wishes to be approached by the commoners on bended knee, and to dispense with all the equality nonsense. It is not because Jefferson was a slaveowner or a hypocrite that he has become so reviled—there were, after all, many slaveowners in history, and even more hypocrites—but because it was Jefferson who wrote:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed ... with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed—That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends ... it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security. [6]

We Marxists do not deny that material interests motivated the patriots in the 1770s. But the ideology of the first bourgeois-democratic revolutions

overwhelmed individual motives, and cloaked class motives such that they were obscure even to participants, concealed, to cite a line once used by Engels, “by an overgrowth of ideology.” The propertied classes imagined they spoke for “the people” in drafting the Constitution of 1787. In 1789, their French equivalents spoke for “the nation.” Everywhere the bourgeois republican ideology declared equality, fraternity, and the rights of man. Yet the revolutions invariably substituted new forms of class domination for old. Had they not, history as such would have ended. But history did not end. And history is not a morality tale. It advances precisely through contradiction: in the final analysis, through the struggle of opposed social classes. As Trotsky later observed, “America developed economically not in accordance with the principles of Jefferson, but in accordance with the ideas of Marx.”

Indeed, Marx and Engels developed modern socialism through the most searching analysis and withering criticism—economic, historical, and political—of this new capitalist order, revealing the explosive contradiction between its declarations of equality and the actual existence of brutal exploitation, including chattel slavery.

Yet in spite of this, Marxists have always insisted on the progressive, world-historic impact of the American Revolution.

On behalf of the First International, Marx famously wrote to Lincoln in the middle of the Civil War that the American Revolution had been the moment where “the idea of one great Democratic Republic had first sprung up, whence the first Declaration of the Rights of Man was issued, and the first impulse given to the European revolution of the eighteenth century” and that Europe’s socialists felt “sure that, as the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so the American Antislavery War will do for the working classes.”

Lenin, in his 1918 letter to American workingmen wrote, “The history of modern, civilised America opened with one of those great, really liberating, really revolutionary wars of which there have been so few compared to the vast number of wars of conquest which, like the present imperialist war, were caused by squabbles among kings, landowners or capitalists over the division of usurped lands or ill-gotten gains. That was the war the American people waged against the British robbers who oppressed America and held her in colonial slavery...” [7]

The Marxist assessment that the American Revolution was progressive was nothing new. All its contemporaries had viewed it as a revolution. To be sure, the American Revolution had its opponents among the European aristocrats. But even they acknowledged it was democratic. It was just that they detested democracy. Yet whether friend or enemy, there was never any doubt but that the American Revolution was the first great event in a concatenation of democratic revolutions that swept back and forth across the Atlantic from 1776 until the American Civil War, including of course both the French and Haitian revolutions.

This makes all the more revealing the palpable hatred of the American Revolution that has taken hold in academic and pseudo-left circles, from Stalinists such as Gerald Horne to the Pabloite provocateur Louis Proyect, whose miserable website, “The Unrepentant Marxist,” would be more accurately called The Unremittent Liar. This hostility to the democratic revolutions can only be understood as an expression of the yawning class chasm separating workers from the privileged sections of the upper-middle class.

Let us return to Jefferson, who, next to Tom Paine, was the most left-wing figure of the American Revolution, and who has now become the *bête noire* of the American pseudo-left. David North, in his important essay, *The Two American Revolutions in world history*,” wrote,

It is, of course, an undeniable historical fact that Jefferson’s personal ownership of slaves and his compromises with slavery represent the great irony and even tragedy of his life. They were

the expression in his personal biography of the existing social conditions and contradictions of the world into which he was born—a world in which slavery, serfdom, and numerous forms of indentured servitude flourished and whose legitimacy was hardly questioned. No doubt, the moralizing philistines of academia will continue to condemn Jefferson. But their condemnations do not alter by one iota the revolutionary impact of the Declaration of the Independence. [8]

It may be appropriate then to leave the last word to Jefferson. In his final letter, dated June 26, 1826, he declined an invitation to attend festivities marking the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. In a remarkable irony, both he and John Adams, who had served together with Benjamin Franklin on the committee that drafted the document, died that anniversary day, July 4, 1826. Adam’s last words in his Braintree, Massachusetts home were, “Thomas Jefferson lives on,” though he could not have known that his friend and political rival had died hours earlier, in far-away Virginia.

Jefferson lived as a slaveowner, and he died as one. Yet in his final letter he was still capable of conjuring up the revolutionary meaning of the Declaration of Independence. He wrote:

may it be to the world, what I believe it will be, (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all,) the Signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves ... all eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man. the general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of god. [9]

Notes:

[1] David North, “Lessons from history: the 2000 elections and the new ‘irrepressible conflict’”

[2] David North, Tom Mackaman, Letter to the *American Historical Review*, *World Socialist Web Site*, January 31, 2020

[3] Woody Holton, “The Declaration of Independence’s debt to Black America,” the *Washington Post*, July 2, 2021

[4] Robert G. Parkinson, You Can’t Tell the Story of 1776 Without Talking About Race and Slavery, *Washington Post*, July 4, 2021

[5] Frederick Engels, Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy

[6] Declaration of Independence

[7] V.I. Lenin, Letter to American Workers, *Pravda*, No. 178, August 22, 1918

[8] David North, “The two American Revolutions in World History,” *World Socialist Web Site*, July 4, 2020

[9] Thomas Jefferson to Roger Weightman, June 24, 1826



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