Historian Woody Holton launches 1619 Project-inspired attack on the American Revolution

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University of South Carolina historian Woody Holton is mounting a campaign in support of the *New York Times* 1619 Project's central claim that the American Revolution was a counterrevolution waged to defend the institution of slavery.

Holton began this effort on July 4, American Independence Day, in a *Washington Post* commentary in which he claimed that the American Revolution would have been averted had not Lord Dunmore, the colonial governor of Virginia, issued a proclamation granting freedom to slaves who would flee masters already in rebellion. Holton further argued that the Declaration of Independence has been misunderstood. In Holton's view, it was not a revolutionary manifesto, but a secessionist legal brief.

On September 1, Holton announced that every day on his Twitter account he would post one additional "piece of evidence" proving that the Declaration of Independence was a racist reaction against what he calls "the Anglo-Black Alliance." He intends to do so for 76 consecutive days, in a cynical reference to 1776, the year that American independence was declared. Holton assures his Twitter followers that he has many other "pieces of evidence" to support this claim.

Holton encourages skeptics to consult the works of likeminded historians, including the Stalinist Gerald Horne, whose error-filled and plagiarized book, *The Counter-Revolution of 1776*, is a major influence. Holton's embrace of Horne should be taken as a warning that he is prepared to use Horne's method: the blatant distortion and falsification of archival material. In a careful and detailed review of Horne's book posted on the *World Socialist Web Site*, Fred Schleger concluded:

> Horne's scholarship does not stand up to the slightest scrutiny. Horne's work is worse than inaccurate: it is, in large measure, a work of fiction. His interpretation of source material is so inaccurate as to be fanciful: quotes are truncated to invert their meaning, sources are misattributed, and even elementary facts are misrepresented—or are just plain wrong. … What makes Horne's misrepresentations so galling is not just their magnitude and number, but that they are central to his project of rewriting American history.

Holton agrees, and fawningly so, with Nikole Hannah-Jones, the media celebrity who is credited with inspiring the 1619 Project, in her insistence that "anti-black racism" is "endemic," residing in "the very DNA of this country." In attempting to substantiate this racialist, anti-historical and fundamentally right-wing prognosis, Holton is perfectly willing, as we will see, to abuse the historical record, reverse earlier positions he himself has taken, and to engage in provocative and debased attacks on scholarly criticism.

Holton has a new book due to be released in October, *Liberty Is Sweet: The Hidden History of the American Revolution*, in which he promises to carry forward his effort to discredit the American Revolution as a reactionary event. This will precede by one month the release by the *New York Times* of a new book, with the appropriately religious-sounding title, *1619: A New Origin Story*. Another 1619 Project book will be released at the same time, this one directed at small children.

Holton's column in the *Washington Post*

In his *Post* column, Holton says that he believes that the American Revolution was caused when "Whites" became "furious" after learning "that Blacks had forged an informal alliance with the British." It was only this uncontrollable racist fury that caused "Whites" to formally declare independence. According to Holton, the American Revolution was no revolution at all, but a "secessionist" reaction to the threat of slave liberation posed by the British Empire, and, in this, its true essence, was nothing so much as a dress rehearsal for the Confederate counterrevolution of 1861. On Twitter, Holton has even equated the Dunmore Proclamation with Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation.

To support his claim that the creation of the United States was a pro-slavery counterrevolution, Holton points to the 1772 Somerset decision, in which Lord Mansfield, judge on the Court of the King's Bench, ruled that slavery could not exist in England proper because it was not established by positive law. Holton says that this ruling caused great anxiety in the 13 colonies, even though it had no juridical application there. But he concedes that a scholar who studied the decision's impact could only find "references to Somerset in six Southern newspapers." Holton does not admit it, but Somerset was most fiercely opposed in the British Indies and Jamaica, which never wavered from the Empire during the American crisis. In any case, six "references" is infinitesimally small relative to the literally hundreds of thousands of pages of newspaper print and pamphlets that protested the Stamp, Tea and Declaratory acts, all of which Holton dismisses as nothing more than "resistance to parliamentary innovations."

Holton is thus forced to base his argument 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 who took up arms against masters already in revolt against the crown.

According to Holton, the imperial crisis that had grown from the conclusion of the French and Indian War in 1763, erupting into

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insurrection with the commencement of the Revolutionary War itself in the spring of 1775, was a storm that would have blown over had it not been for Lord Dunmore. Once Dunmore issued his proclamation in November of 1775, a racist tide surged forward among white Americans in favor of "secession." Every other bit of evidence that Holton musters in his column is contingent on Lord Dunmore, perhaps history's most implausible revolutionary.

As Holton puts it,

> 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. … Whites' fury at the British for casting their lot with enslaved people drove many to the fateful step of endorsing independence…

To arrive at this conclusion, Holton must disregard the basic chronology of the Revolution. In fact, the war was already on a half year before Dunmore's order. Major battles had already taken place in New England, the Continental Army had been formed, and a situation of dual power had emerged throughout the colonies, with the imperial state crumbling and new revolutionary structures of authority taking its place, at the head of which was the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. In Virginia, British authority had rapidly dissolved over the preceding two years. In fact, Holton fails to note that Dunmore issued his order from his refuge aboard a British naval vessel in the James River! Robert Middlekauff captured the scene in his noted volume on the American Revolution, *The Glorious Cause*:

> There he sat while the Convention, the old House of Burgesses under a new name, took over the task of governing … By November, Dunmore was feeling frustration as he sat on a swaying deck and contemplated British power, which like himself was very much at sea. [1]

Historians of the American Revolution rebuke Holton

On September 6, six historians of the American Revolution—Carol Berkin, Richard D. Brown, Jane E. Calvert, Joseph J. Ellis, Jack N. Rakove, Gordon S. Wood— published an open letter that, in the space of a few paragraphs, dismantled the key claims Holton made in his *Washington Post* column. These historians are leading scholars who have published many dozens of highly regarded books and articles, and count numerous prestigious awards among them, including three Pulitzer Prizes.

The historians focus on the dubiousness of what Holton calls an "alliance" between blacks and the British Empire. In fact, only 300 out of an estimated 300,000 slaves in Virginia actually saw action in Dunmore's "Ethiopian Regiment," that is, 1 in 1,000. The historians remind Holton, who seems to have forgotten the basic sequence of events, that "[b]y November 1775 Virginia, like most of the other colonies, had already radically moved toward virtual independence from British authority." They note that "Dunmore issued his proclamation motivated by military desperation, not abolitionist ideals. In 1774, the colonists had already become effectively independent of British authority."

The war had already begun by April 1775, they explain, in the battles of Lexington and Concord. The Second Continental Congress followed this by appointing George Washington to command and authorizing an invasion of Canada. They write that already in August 1775, the king "declared the colonists in open rebellion." They conclude that "Dunmore's Proclamation three months later launched nothing; rather it sought to crush a movement already well underway." As for the Somerset decision, they point out that "None of Virginia's leaders cited Somerset in a diary or correspondence—not Washington, not Jefferson, nor any of the others."

The historians underline that the American Revolution invigorated antislavery sentiment, writing that "the first society with antislavery aims in modern history originated in Revolutionary Philadelphia in 1775" and that "during the war some northern states became the first slave-holding political entities in world history to abolish slavery by law."

The criticism is presented in the most patient and collegial terms. The historians write that they share the concerns that slavery be studied as central to American history and that they "believe in social justice, but not at the expense of historical truth."

Holton doubles down on Lord Dunmore

Holton published a censorious and defensive reply within two days. [2] He did not challenge any of the specific points the historians raised. Instead, he expressed irritation ("It saddens me…") that the historians had responded to his "700 word" essay in the *Post* —it was actually twice that long—preferring that they had waited for his forthcoming "700 page book."

Holton feints a retreat from the monocausal explanation of the Revolution he had presented in the *Post*. Pretending to be aggrieved by misinterpretation, Holton now claims that he did not lay so much stress on the Dunmore Proclamation as his critics say:

> All I argued in the essay that the professors criticize is that *one* of these factors that turned these white restorationists into advocates for independence was the mother country's cooperation with their slaves. It was not *the* reason, but it was *a* reason [emphasis in original].

In point of fact, Holton's *Post* column does not mention a single other "factor" besides white racist fears over British emancipation. [3] He simply brushes aside everything that came before the Dunmore Proclamation, writing that "most White Americans … had shown little interest in independence," but "when they heard that Blacks had forged an informal alliance with the British, Whites were furious." Their inner racism unloosed by Dunmore, angry "Whites" decided for "secession."

Holton only pretends to be misunderstood. He hides his actual meaning in convoluted prose in his response to the historians. Yet it is still there. Holton continues to insist that the only real factor in the revolution was "the Anglo-Black alliance" ratified by Dunmore. He writes:

> The professors claim that white colonists were already headed toward independence in fall 1774, when these African American initiatives began. But in this they indulge in counterfactual history—assuming they know what would have happened. It seems clear to me that, even that late, had Parliament chosen to repeal all of its colonial legislation since 1762, it could have kept its American empire intact. What we are looking for are the bells that

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> could not be unrung. Especially in the south [sic], one of the British aggressions that foreclosed the possibility of reconciliation was the governors' and naval officers' decision to cooperate with the colonists' slaves.

In other words, Holton's critics do not "know what would have happened." Only he, Woody Holton, "knows what would have happened." And that is ... nothing, without Lord Dunmore! Everything that came before the Dunmore Proclamation, including the blood spilled from the war's first several thousand casualties, the King's declaration of war on the colonial rebellion, the installation of Washington at the head of the Continental Army, etc., all of these "are the bells that could … be unrung." The Dunmore Proclamation was the only "bell" that mattered. Until then, the Parliament "could have kept its American empire intact." Only the Dunmore Proclamation, because of the white racist rage it induced, "foreclosed the possibility of reconciliation."

Holton does not even appear to realize he is contradicting himself. On the one hand he implies that the Dunmore Proclamation was a catastrophic error that cost the British much of their North American empire. At the same time, he presents it as a revolutionary masterstroke. Perhaps his forthcoming "700 page book" will square this circle.

Holton's method will be familiar to those who have followed the 1619 Project controversy and the operations of Hannah-Jones and *New York Times Magazine* editor Jake Silverstein. To a popular audience, the readership of the *Washington Post*, Holton makes the most hysterical case possible: *White racist fury was the sole cause of the Revolution!* Then, when challenged by noted scholars in the field, he assumes the role of the misunderstood victim and deviously retreats from his actual position. And in still another venue, on social media, he and his followers launch vicious ad hominem attacks, accusing these same scholars of "giving BJs to hagiographers of the Founding Fathers"—Holton's own crude words—and personally attacking them.

The method is the man. Holton and his supporters are not engaging in a genuine academic debate. This is "history" contrived by an individual who has broken with the most basic scholarly standards of his field.

Holton vs. Holton

Holton has also broken with himself. His new monocausal theory of the American Revolution, which makes the Dunmore Proclamation the singular event that caused the war, is flatly contradicted by a position he presented in his Bancroft Award-winning biography of Abigail Adams, wife of the Founding Father John Adams:

> *If there was a single moment when the American Revolution became inevitable, it was the day the British ministry headed by Frederick, Lord North, determined its response to the Boston Tea Party*. Only about fifty men had participated in the destruction of the tea (although hundreds of Boston radicals cheered from the docks). Yet North decided that the punishment for this outrage must be collective. Over a nine-week period in the spring of 1774, Parliament passed four measures that spread alarm not only in Boston, not just throughout Massachusetts, but all over British North America [emphasis added]. [4]

In his biography of Abigail Adams, Holton states that the war "became inevitable" with the reaction of Parliament in the summer of 1774 to an event, the Boston Tea Party, that had taken place in December of 1773. These events took place many months before the Dunmore Proclamation. Before them a major crisis had already emerged, which he also discusses in great detail in this book, and after them the war actually erupted. Holton's 483-page volume on Abigail Adams does not include even a single reference to the Dunmore Proclamation!

In his study of Abigail Adams, Holton strives to achieve the vantage point on the Revolution of an extremely articulate and political woman. The book does not suggest anything other than that she was part of a revolutionary generation, one of whose most prominent figures was her husband. Holton's biography demonstrates that he now is arguing for what he knows to be a false case.

Holton's myth of an "Anglo-Black Alliance"

When pressed, again in collegial fashion, by historian Raymond Lavertue on Twitter over what "Anglo-Black Alliance" means, concretely, Holton erupted in a foul tirade. But he did not answer Lavertue's question.

As near as can be gleaned from the evidence he has presented thus far, Holton deduces the existence of such an "alliance" from the fact that some Virginia slaves ran to British lines in 1774 and 1775. The alliance was then solidified by the Dunmore Proclamation, he says. In his *Post* column, Holton writes,

> Starting in November 1774—five months before the Battles of Lexington and Concord—Blacks in the Virginia Piedmont gathered to assess how to use the impending conflict between colonists and crown to gain their own freedom. Over the next 12 months, African Americans all over the South made essentially this pitch to beleaguered royal officials: You are outnumbered, you need us—and we will fight for you if you will free us. At first the British refused, but eventually Lord Dunmore, the last royal governor of Virginia, began quietly welcoming African Americans to what he called his "Ethiopian Regiment."

A reader who knew nothing of the events in 1774 in Virginia—a year treated in detail in a new book by Mary Beth Norton [5]—might be forgiven for assuming that an independent congress of slaves appointed representatives who then made diplomatic overtures to imperial officials in a series of high-level negotiations. Of course, no such formal gatherings would have been possible under the system of chattel slavery, a central feature of which was the denial of the right to self-organization.

Holton has stretched the definition of "alliance" well past its breaking point. What he is actually talking about is the movement of slaves as individuals and small groups, typically families, plantation by plantation, to British positions of control as the war developed. This is an important and fascinating subject. Slaves became aware of the conflict among the white masters and sought to exploit it. Some seized on the possibilities to press for their freedom before Dunmore's proclamation. But the grandiose term "alliance" has a formal meaning in the history of war that cannot be sustained by the evidence. And Holton has yet to explain how it is possible that an "alliance" that began after the war started could also have been the war's cause.

Not only logic, but basic facts undermine Holton's claims about the formation of a race-based alliance system being the cause of war.

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"Whites" were not unified among themselves on either the Revolution or on the question of slavery. Anti-slavery sentiment was certainly not a part of the calculations of Loyalists, who may have made up 20 percent of the white colonial population. On the contrary, those Loyalists who were slaveowners had their human property protected by the Empire. After their defeat in the revolution, many fled, slaves in tow, to the British Caribbean. The most notable evacuee was Dunmore himself, who assumed governorship of the slave-rich Bahamas colony. Indeed, the most staunchly Loyalist part of the British North American empire was that part with the greatest number of slaves: the Caribbean.

The idea that black Americans were unified behind the Empire in an "Anglo-Black" alliance is just as preposterous. It is well known—or at least it was at one time—that the first Patriot casualty of the American Revolution, in the Boston Massacre of 1770, was a free black, Crispus Attucks. The recently deceased historian of the American Revolution, Gary Nash, estimated that 9,000 blacks served the Patriot cause. [6] Perhaps a similar number served under British arms. But claims that 100,000 ran to British lines, and that 20,000 served the Crown, statistics that circulate widely on the internet, do not appear to be based in fact. The Australian historian Cassandra Pybus, who has done the most thorough study of the data, suggests that no more than 20,000 slaves made their way to British lines in Virginia, Maryland, Georgia and the Carolinas during the entire course of the fighting. Two other authoritative estimates, by noted historians Allan Kulikoff and Ira Berlin, also drastically reduce the 100,000 figure. [7]

But if 100,000 slaves indeed ran to British lines, or even half that number did so, then what became of them? Holton says the British "kept their promise." But he also acknowledges that only a few thousand liberated American slaves made it to Nova Scotia—where, as Canadian historian James W. St.G. Walker has demonstrated, British promises of land and lots were never fulfilled. [8] Still smaller numbers went to Britain and Sierra Leone. If the numbers are correct, this would mean, by definition, that the British did not "keep their promises" to many thousands, most of whom either died of disease, were returned to slavery, or, as Ira Berlin suggested, preserved their freedom after running away within the new United States.

Terrible conditions at British camps, exacerbated by a smallpox epidemic, claimed the lives of most runaways. Of the 1,500 slaves who sought refuge with Dunmore in the initial stages of the war, two-thirds died of disease. The deaths to disease—typhoid, variola and especially smallpox—continued to decimate the former slaves under British control right on up to the surrender at Yorktown. Pybus describes the scene there in October 1781:

> In the final terrible days before Cornwallis' capitulation, most of the black recruits who could walk—men, women, and children—were sent out of the garrison, with what little rations could be found, to fend for themselves. When the victorious Americans entered Yorktown, they found it littered with people dying from wounds and smallpox. [9]

Nor did Dunmore's Proclamation of freedom extend to a large category of slaves who were labeled as "sequestered." These slaves, who numbered in the thousands, were usually captured by the British on abandoned Patriot plantations. They were impressed as slaves into service to the British military, or else they were given to Loyalist slaveowners as compensation for slaves lost to the Patriots—in clear violation of Holton's fanciful "alliance." Finally, it must be noted that there were also slaves who gained freedom through service in the Patriot cause—Virginia passed such a law of emancipation in 1783. [10]

Holton has been strangely silent on another British proclamation that came after Dunmore's that menaced free blacks with slavery. Put in effect by British General Sir Henry Clinton in June 1779, "the Philipsburg Proclamation," as it is remembered, reiterated the offer of freedom to slaves of masters in rebellion. But that was not its main purpose. It began with a complaint against the Patriot forces for having "adopted a practice of enrolling NEGROES among their Troops." And it announced that the British army would seize "all NEGROES taken in arms, or upon any military Duty" and sell them into slavery, "the money to be paid to the Captors." [11]

The fundamental point is this: The question of slavery became an issue only in the midst of the revolutionary crisis and *after* fighting had already erupted. Only then did it emerge in all its different aspects, with blacks, slave and free, fighting for both sides. It was an epiphenomenon of the revolution. Try as he might, Holton cannot escape this fact.

Once again, on the American Revolution and slavery

The flight of slaves to British lines, and the few thousand who ultimately gained freedom in this way, was one aspect of the challenge that the American Revolution delivered to slavery. But infinitely more important to the ultimate demise of slavery, "four score and seven years" later in the American Civil War, was the movement toward abolition that slavery induced in the North, and more briefly in the South.

Unlike the Civil War, the Second American Revolution, the move against slavery in the Revolution and the early republic was not an intended consequence of the revolution. But neither was it incidental. As Gordon Wood, Eric Foner, David Brion Davis, and others have explained, the American Revolution, in adopting the rhetoric of freedom and slavery as a metaphor for the colonial relationship with Britain, drew attention to chattel slavery and made it conspicuous in a way it had not before been. Another eminent historian, the late Bernard Bailyn, explained that though slavery was not destroyed in the Revolution,

> … it had been subject to severe pressure as result of the extension of revolutionary ideas, and bore the marks ever after. As long as the institution of slavery lasted, the burden of proof would lie with its advocates to show why the statement "all men are created equal" did not mean precisely what it said: *all* men, "white or black." [12]

Another group of scholars, including Alfred Young, Ray Raphael and Gary Nash, have demonstrated that the revolution cut deep and wide in American society, infusing with political thinking even its oppressed layers, including women, poor farmers, indentured servants and other propertyless whites, free blacks and the slaves themselves. This body of scholarship has shown that blacks—both slave and free, North and South—seized on the ideas and opportunities presented by the Revolution to advance the cause of freedom.

It was in this historical context that the first concentrated move against slavery took place. In Virginia and Maryland a manumission movement among American masters increased the number of free blacks more than sixfold between 1790 and 1810. Even in South Carolina, the number of free blacks tripled, from 1,800 to 4,500. [13] The northern states immediately after the revolution set about putting in place laws that abolished slavery gradually over the coming decades. Vermont, the first state to enter the union after 1776, also became the first governing

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authority in the Western Hemisphere to abolish slavery by law. The very first abolitionist society in the world emerged in Philadelphia in 1775. Perhaps Jefferson had these developments in mind when he optimistically wrote, in 1782, that he detected

> a change already perceptible, since the origin of the present revolution. The spirit of the master is abating, that of the slave rising from the dust, his condition mollifying, the way, I hope, preparing, under the auspices of heaven, for a total emancipation; and that this is disposed, in the order of events, to be with the consent of the masters, rather than by their extirpation. [14]

As historian Kate Masur shows in her new book on the first civil rights movement, presently the most authoritative volume on the subject, the "revolutionary era's abolitionist movement sought not only the end of race-based slavery but also the recognition of the newly freed." Accordingly, anti-slavery organizations fought for anti-racist laws and provided legal defense for free blacks targeted by racist lawmaking in the early republic. Anti-slavery and anti-racism, on one side, and slavery and racism, were completely bound up. [15]

More fundamentally, the rapid capitalist development in the North hinged on the emergence of what came to be called "free labor," a category that, in the thinking of the time, subsumed wage labor, productive capitalist enterprise, and small farmers and businessmen. Not only slavery, but indentured servitude and other forms of personal dependency, including the ancient guild system, gave way. But in the South, the enormous expansion of the plantation system after the deployment of the cotton gin in the late 1790s caused a staggering expansion of slavery, a development that was integral to the larger global capitalist growth paced by British industrialization.

Out of these complex and contradictory historical processes there emerged the first mass abolitionist political movement in world history in the 1820s and 1830s, followed in the 1850s by the anti-slavery Republican Party and Abraham Lincoln, and then in the 1860s the Civil War—in which some 700,000 Americans fought and died, and which, with the freeing of the slaves, effected the largest seizure of private property in world history prior to Russia's 1917 October Revolution.

The Declaration of Independence

Holton tries to reduce the Declaration of Independence, certainly among the most important revolutionary manifestos in world history, to little more than a public announcement of a counterrevolutionary plot. He dismisses the Declaration's preamble, containing arguably the most famous lines in the history of American letters, in which Jefferson wrote: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." Jefferson further detailed, in soaring language, the inherent and natural right to revolution, and explained that "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind" required that the "Facts be submitted to a candid world."

Holton doesn't see much to any of this. "[T]he Declaration briefly mentions human rights but focuses on states' (nations') rights, specifically the right of entities like the 13 colonies to break away from their mother countries," he opines. "[M]ost Whites who quoted it went straight to its secessionist clauses."

Among these "secessionist clauses," Holton finds only one to be of any interest—but it was one that did not make the final Declaration. This was Jefferson's condemnation of the transatlantic slave trade, which was cut, Jefferson later explained, owing to opposition from South Carolina and Georgia slave interests, as well as New England slave traders. Holton does not see this deleted passage as evidence of Jefferson's anti-slavery beliefs at the time. But Jefferson's clause spoke powerfully against slavery in its condemnation of the British crown, which, he wrote,

> [H]as waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian King of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where Men should be bought & sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or restrain this execrable commerce.

Holton attaches immense significance to the fact that this clause was "three times longer" than any other Jefferson wrote. But Holton cynically disregards the first portion, with its condemnation of both slavery and the slave trade, as these undermine his thesis. Because he wishes to twist an anti-slavery clause into a pro-slavery and racist justification for "secession," Holton considers only the last sentence, in which Jefferson wrote,

> And that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people on whom he has obtruded them: thus paying off former crimes committed against the Liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another.

To be blunt, this tendentious and highly selective use of evidence is not dignified for a professional historian, and it must call into question the validity of all the evidence Holton claims to have found in support of his claim that the American Revolution was a racist counterrevolution. How many of the rest of the "pieces of evidence" that he is dribbling out on Twitter are so highly edited and torn from their context as his treatment of this single passage from the Declaration of Independence?

The American Revolution, like all the bourgeois-democratic revolutions of the era, could only raise in ideological form the question of equality. It was capable of posing the question, but not resolving it. The power of historian Gordon Wood's writing on the epoch lies in his recognition of the paradox, indeed the essential tragedy, of the inability of the Founding Fathers to bring into the world the republican society that they imagined. Nonetheless, they had entered into a struggle that, in spite of their illusions, was of monumental importance. As the great contradictions of the revolution matured, most notably slavery, they became factors in the revolution's furtherance, coming to a head in the American Civil War.

Holton's British Empire as revolutionary force

Holton's thesis that the American Revolution was a counterrevolution—a position shared by the 1619 Project and Horne—backs him into an

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impossible corner when it comes to world history. If the American Revolution was launched preemptively to defend slavery against threats of British emancipation—in other words, if the American Revolution was in essence the same as southern secession at the time of the Civil War—it necessarily follows that the British Empire, in "alliance" with "Blacks" against "American Whites," was the progressive contestant in the struggle. The argument of Holton, Horne, and the 1619 Project is that the cause of historical progress rested with King George III, and that it would have been better had the United States not been formed.

This disregards not only subsequent American history—most notably the powerful connections of the American Revolution to the Civil War and the abolition of slavery—but also world history. Holton has always had a narrow national approach. He was even capable of writing in a 2016 book review, "Almost inevitably, placing the War for Independence in a global context diminishes it." [16] His hopelessly provincial view turns inside out, but does not overthrow, national-patriotic narratives. It is in fact not possible to understand the American Revolution outside of placing it in its global context.

The American Revolution's connection to the French Revolution was clear and known in its time. Jefferson, then ambassador to France, personally attended the opening of the French Estates-General at Versailles, in May 1789. The following month he joined with Lafayette in drafting a statement of rights that served as the basis for the Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen. Then, in July, after the storming of the Bastille, French revolutionaries gathered clandestinely to discuss a new government at Jefferson's residence at the Hôtel de Langeac. Many French soldiers and officers absorbed the ideals of "liberty, equality, and fraternity" in the American Revolution, Lafayette most notable among them, and French intellectuals followed the American events with rapture. In recognition of the American contribution to the French Revolution, in 1790 Lafayette gave the key to the Bastille to the new American president, George Washington.

The revolution in France soon triggered a revolution in its richest and most important colony, Saint-Domingue, or Haiti, that had the twofold character of a democratic revolution and a massive slave uprising. Haiti was 90 percent slave and also had a substantial share of free blacks who helped spearhead the revolution. Hundreds of these free blacks had served in " *gens de couleur* " regiments alongside the French against the British in the American Revolution. Though the Haitian Revolution terrified American slaveholders—and a large number of Haitian slave masters relocated to the US after it, especially in Louisiana—the connection between the American and Haitian revolution is undeniable. As indeed were the connections among all the revolutions that took place in the Atlantic world between 1776 and the failed European revolutions of 1848. [17]

The British Empire, on the other hand, was the cockpit of global reaction throughout the late 18th and the entire 19th century. It fought to suppress the American, French and Haitian revolutions, as well as every democratic, revolutionary and anti-colonial stirring that followed in Ireland, Europe, India, Africa, the Arab countries and China. Within England itself, the British ruling class was willing to unleash brutal suppression to block even elemental demands, such as the right to vote for working class men, as was the case in the Peterloo Massacre of 1819. During the American Civil War, the British government under Lord Palmerston inclined strongly to the Confederate cause. London's drift toward diplomatic recognition of the Confederacy, which would have been an act tantamount to war, was blocked chiefly by the British working class, which, in spite of the immense suffering of the "cotton famine," identified overwhelmingly with the cause of freedom after Lincoln's issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation.

It is entirely understandable that some slaves sought support from Britain. But the empire's very limited encouragement of slave flight in the Revolution was an example of calculated realpolitik, entirely in keeping with its methods of divide and conquer that would go on to devastating effect all over the world for the next two centuries, from Ulster to Kenya to Mumbai to Guangdong. The crimes of British imperialism, which are far too long to list, cannot be an apology for American slavery. But neither can the objective nature of what the British Empire represented on a global scale be disregarded in any assessment of the political character of the American Revolution.

As for slavery, the British-dominated trade in human chattel continued to its Indies and American possessions, with some 1.5 million men women and children taken from Africa in the years of the imperial crisis and the early American Republic, roughly 1760–1805. 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 Brown's great transfer of wealth to the City of London banking industry in 2009.

The racialist "theory" of history

Holton's assumption of an "Anglo-Black Alliance" emerges from a larger problem. He believes he has divined the motives of the actors in the American Revolution by sorting them into "White" and "Black" races. In his *Post* column and his Twitter "pieces of evidence," Holton deduces all the action of the imperial crisis and the war from these two categories. Thus he can write the following phrases: "*Blacks had forged an alliance"; "Whites were furious"; "Dunmore's emancipation proclamation enraged Whites*." He does not qualify any of this by differentiating, for example, between Patriot and Loyalist slaveholders, between Pennsylvania Quakers or South Carolina frontiersmen, or between free blacks in Boston and chattel slaves in South Carolina.

Racialism rides roughshod over history. What is left out of Holton's account is staggering. There is no English Civil War, no Enlightenment, no concept of the struggle against feudalism and aristocracy. There is no reference to decisive economic factors, such as the abundance of land and scarcity of labor in North America. There is no acknowledgement of mercantilist capitalism, let alone reference to the financial crisis it was undergoing, a crucial aspect of the larger imperial crisis. [18]

And what theory of causation does the racialist approach to history offer? It bestows on race an overriding significance, but where does race itself come from? Holton, following Hannah-Jones, appears to posit a new form of what was once called "American exceptionalism." The "races" are peculiarly American, and of real significance are only the "White" and "Black" races, not the Indians, and not the scores of immigrant groups that have also suffered oppression in America, from the colonial era to the present.

The belief that history is determined by race has long been associated, quite correctly, with the right wing. This was the historical philosophy of the Ku Klux Klan in the US and the Nazis in Germany. But contrary to the fascists' deranged mythology, race did not emerge from nature. It grew historically with capitalism as a means of justifying and making "natural" various forms of exploitation.

This "reification of race" took on increasingly concrete intellectual form in the early 19th century, in the ruling class intellectual retreat from Enlightenment rationalism. In Europe and the United States, the promotion of race as a means of imposing a false interpretation on social reality was inextricably bound up with—indeed was an antidote against—the emergence of the working class and socialism. As Georg Lukacs

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observed, “the obfuscating and disordering of the social sciences in the imperialist age proceeded largely along the lines of racial theory (race replacing class).” [19]

Holton does not think he is a racist. No doubt he believes he is fighting racism, and that in this fight it is permissible to play fast and loose with the facts of history—even its very chronology—all the better to achieve “a usable past” for the present.

He is mistaken. The oppressed masses of all races and all nationalities require an honest and objective understanding of the past, just as much as they do the present.

The imposition of racialist mythology on history, whatever its short-term and, frankly, pecuniary aims, will only provide fodder for the unscientific and irrationalist miasma out of which the far right emerges. The attack on the American Revolution and Civil War, and the broader historic struggle for equality in which these revolutions formed twin peaks, only strengthens the right wing. It comes at a dangerous moment, when democracy in the United States, and elsewhere, is in a state of peril. Indeed, the far right finds its own “usable past” in the historical territory abandoned, and now denounced, by American liberalism. The attack on the American Revolution by the *New York Times* and historians like Woody Holton allows Trump and the Republican Party to posture as defenders of 1776. Behind this screen the coup-plotting against democracy deepens.

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