

The New York Times' Jake Silverstein concocts "a new origin story" for the 1619 Project

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On November 9, the *New York Times* published a new defense of the 1619 Project by Jake Silverstein, editor-in-chief of the *New York Times Magazine* ("The 1619 Project and the Long Battle Over U.S. History"). Silverstein's purpose was to prepare public opinion for the release of a book version of the project titled *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, which was released on November 16. The original magazine edition, masterminded by *Times* staff writer Nikole Hannah-Jones, suffered devastating criticism after its release in August 2019—criticism that began with the WSWS.

Silverstein has staked his reputation on the 1619 Project. This has gone badly for him. His name will forever be associated with the secretive manner through which the project invented its false and error-ridden historical interpretation, as well as the orchestration of the cover-up that has followed.

Specifically, Silverstein bears responsibility for the exclusion of leading scholars of American history—who would have objected to the 1619 Project's central historical claims—and the intentional disregarding of objections made by the project's own handpicked "fact-checkers." Silverstein penned the devious reply to leading historians who pointed to the project's errors. He then organized surreptitious changes to the already published 1619 Project, and, when exposed, claimed that it had all been a matter of word choice.

Silverstein's 8,250-word essay is just the latest in this long line of underhanded journalism and bogus history. Once again, he fails to deal with any of the substantive historical criticism of the 1619 Project—in relationship to the origins of slavery, the nature of the American Revolution, the emergence of capitalism and the interracial character of past struggles for equality.

Instead of addressing any of this, and in keeping with the modus operandi of the 1619 Project, Silverstein's essay piles new layers of falsification on old. If the original 1619 Project falsified American history, Silverstein's latest essay falsifies the history of American history-writing—and it openly embraces a historical method that privileges "narrative" over "actual fact."

Silverstein falsifies historiography

From the beginning, the 1619 Project has wobbled on a bogus claim: that the history of slavery and racial oppression has been hidden by "white historians" as Hannah-Jones put it in one of her many Twitter tirades. "It's finally time to tell the truth," the *Times* declared in its marketing campaign for the project.

The claim was untenable. Generations of historians have parsed through seemingly every aspect of "the peculiar institution." Slavery has generated far more study than the emergence of wage labor before the Civil War, by way of comparison, and it has drawn the attention of many of the most talented American historians.

None of this work left the slightest trace on the 1619 Project. Having previously excluded it, Silverstein now has to pretend as though it was there all along. So, the bulk of his essay is given over to a potted presentation of the history of American historiography. His aim is to place the 1619 Project as the inheritor of all that is noble in history writing—even the "apotheosis" of what he calls "the long struggle over US history."

Yet neither can the 1619 Project abandon its position that African American history is only truly knowable by blacks. So, Silverstein quotes approvingly from Professor Martha S. Jones, of Johns Hopkins University, who believes that black historians have a superior understanding of the past. "History is a science, a social science, but it's also politics," Jones is quoted as saying. "And Black historians have always known that. *They always know the stakes* [emphasis added]."

It must be bluntly stated that this sort of quasi-biological determinism—that "races" somehow have greater capacity to understand "their own history" than other "races"—shares a fundamental precept with the Nazi conception of history writing, in which only gentile Germans, not Jews, could truly fathom German history. It does not seem to occur to Prof. Jones, Silverstein or Hannah-Jones that the racial claim to true knowledge of history negates their own position. If only black historians can truly know what is at stake in "black history," it must follow that only whites must be able to know "white history." It follows that black historians should not concern themselves with episodes of history in which the actors were predominantly white—for example, the political history of the American Revolution or Civil War. This viewpoint is obviously reactionary to its marrow. Yet it conditioned the *Times*' attempt to choose "almost every contributor" for the 1619 Project based on black identity, as the newspaper wrote upon the project's rollout. The racial composition of the contributors was "a nonnegotiable aspect of the project that helps underscore its thesis, Ms. Hannah-Jones said."

This turned out to be "negotiable," as in fact many of the 1619 contributors, Silverstein included, are white. And now Silverstein admits that some white historians, in spite of their skin pigmentation, have made some contribution to the history of slavery. He drops the names of Stanley Elkins, Philip S. Foner, Eugene D. Genovese, Kenneth M. Stampp, C. Vann Woodward and Herbert Aptheker. One doubts he's read any of it. In any case, he should also have mentioned Winthrop Jordan, Wesley Frank Craven, David Brion Davis, James M. McPherson, Ira Berlin, Herbert Gutman, George Rawick, Peter S. Wood and Stephen Kolchin, among many others. The fact that none of these historians' work supports the

1619 Project's main contentions—that slavery was a uniquely American “original sin,” that the American Revolution was launched to defend slavery, that slavery was subsidiary to the Civil War's true struggle for national unity among white racists and that “anti-black racism” is a transcendent force that overrides American history—does not seem to trouble Silverstein.

In any case, Silverstein says, white historians only became interested in slavery after the 1950s. Before then, he writes, “the institution [slavery] was treated in canonical works of American history as an aberration best addressed minimally if at all.”

This is also untrue. Slavery's centrality to American society was clear to the generation that fought the Civil War, and its salience conditioned the histories that followed. When Lincoln said in his Second Inaugural Address, delivered in 1865 one month before his assassination by white supremacist John Wilkes Booth, that “all knew” that slavery “was, somehow, the cause of the war,” he was not exaggerating. The foundations of historical work on slavery emerged in this context, among *both* white and black historians.

Silverstein brushes aside George Bancroft (1800–1891), the founding figure of American historical scholarship, as the forger of a white nationalist epic uninterested in slavery. But the first volume of Bancroft's *History of the United States*, published in 1834, traced slavery from the ancient world to the British colonies. His tenth volume, published in 1876, refers to slavery 61 separate times.

Bancroft wrote at a time when American history-writing was new—at least, American history conceived of as a special branch of human knowledge in the process of separating itself from literature. This, as well as the powerful influences of romanticism and Jacksonian democracy, inevitably shaped and constrained his writing. Bancroft was certainly a nationalist. He served in the James K. Polk administration and supported the predatory Mexican-American War, but, like many northern Democrats, he came to oppose slavery, and, on this basis, was drawn to the Republican Party and Abraham Lincoln. Bancroft's national providentialism—the idea that American history represented the incarnation of the highest ideals—was undoubtedly influenced by German philosophical idealism. He was among the first Americans to earn a doctorate in Germany, where he studied under Hegel, and where he came to know Goethe and Wilhelm von Humboldt. Under the tutelage of German historians, Bancroft endeavored, he said, to write history “entirely from writings and sources which were the contemporaries of the events that are described.”

Such attention to the record might have benefited Hannah-Jones' efforts.

Silverstein is, of course, unaware that Bancroft gave substantial consideration to the role of slavery in the American Revolution. In a far more realistic appraisal than that put forward by Hannah-Jones and her historian-acolyte, Woody Holton, Bancroft recognized that there was more potential in slave revolt against the Americans than could be realized by the British, because of the empire's own investment in slavery. Bancroft surmised that the British forces, having taken considerable territory in Georgia and South Carolina in 1779,

... might have gained an enduring mastery by emancipating and arming the blacks. But the idea that slavery was a sin against humanity was unknown to parliament and to the ministry, and would have been hooted at by the army. The thought of universal emancipation had not yet conquered the convictions of the ruling class in England, nor touched the life and conscience of the nation. The English of that day rioted in the lucrative slave-trade, and the zeal of the government in upholding it had been one of the causes that provoked the American war. So the advice to organize an

army of liberated negroes, though persisted in by the royal governor of Virginia [Lord Dunmore], was crushed by the mad eagerness of the British officers and soldiers in America for plunder!

The twelfth chapter of Bancroft's tenth volume, entitled “The Rise of the Free Commonwealths,” contains a lengthy discussion of the tensions surrounding slavery that emerged toward the end of the revolution. The chapter begins with these words:

Freedom is of all races and of all nationalities. It is in them all older than bondage, and ever rises again from the enslavements laid on by the hand of violence or custom or abuse of power; for the rights of man spring from eternal law, are kept alive by the persistent energy of constant nature, and by their own indestructibility prove their lineage as the children of omnipotence.

Bancroft went on to condemn racism as a cover for slavery, writing,

In the last quarter of the eighteenth, the ownership of white men by white men still blighted more than the half of Europe. The evil shielded itself under a new plea, where a difference of skin set a visible mark on the victims of commercial avarice, and strengthened the ties of selfishness by the pride of race.

Bancroft was not alone in considering slavery crucial to American history. His near contemporary, Richard Hildreth, historian and abolitionist, addressed slavery and racism in his own six-volume *History of the United States*, published in 1856. As Silverstein himself notes, George Washington Williams (1849–1891), a pioneering black historian, published *History of the Negro Race in America From 1619 to 1880: Negroes as Slaves, as Soldiers and as Citizens*, in 1882. Frederic Bancroft (1860–1945), a distant relative of George Bancroft and one of the namesakes of the prestigious Bancroft Prize, published *A Sketch of the Negro in Politics, Especially in South Carolina and Mississippi* in 1885 and followed it up with *Slavery in Missouri* in 1914. James C. Ballagh published *A History of Slavery in Virginia* in 1902. His student, John H. Russell, published *The Free Negro in Virginia, 1619–1865* in 1913. One could go on.

The attempt to write slavery out of American history, and to reduce Lincoln to a mere national unifier rather than the leader of the Second American Revolution, would have to wait for the so-called Dunning School of historiography. It may seem odd, given his aims, that Silverstein passes over in silence this, among the most racist of all iterations of American historiography. Named after William Archibald Dunning (1857–1922) of Columbia University, the Dunning School assumed that blacks were incapable of engaging in effective citizenship and that, therefore, the only period to date in which there had been a degree of interracial political cooperation in the South, Reconstruction (1865–1877), was the nadir of all of American history.

Silverstein's failure to mention Dunning is odd only on the surface. The 1619 Project's approach to American history is actually Dunning's mirror image. Like the 1619 Project, the Dunning School—among whose practitioners was Woodrow Wilson, the president of Princeton University before becoming New Jersey governor and then US president—saw the Civil War as the accidental outcome of overheated politics. Like the 1619 Project, it held that Lincoln's overriding aim in the Civil War was

preservation of the Union, with the emergence of the slavery question only incidental to the war itself. Heavily influenced by pseudoscientific racial theories of the day—theories that emerged to justify and rationalize the eruption of American imperialism abroad and capitalist exploitation at home—the Dunning School saw whites and blacks as separate “folk” with different interests that required segregation for the protection of each, much like Critical Race Theory proposes “safe spaces” for different races today.

There was significant intellectual overlap between the Dunning School and the Progressive historians, whom Silverstein lauds. Progressive historians like Charles and Mary Beard believed that the intense political controversy over slavery before the Civil War was merely a cloak behind which the “real” fight over competing economic interests took place—economic interests that they somehow separated from slavery. The overlap between Dunning and the Progressives was not merely intellectual. One of the leading figures in both groups was Ulrich B. Phillips—a student of Dunning and a close associate of leading Progressive historian Frederick Jackson Turner. Phillips saw slavery as largely beneficial to the slaves. Silverstein mentions Phillips, but, curiously, only to note that the historian had found slavery to be an essentially inefficient economic system.

Perhaps the most pernicious aspect of Silverstein’s historiography is his attempt to place Hannah-Jones and the 1619 Project as the inheritors of major African American historians, including the aforementioned George Washington Williams, as well as Carter G. Woodson, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Benjamin Quarles, among others. His unmistakable implication is that Hannah-Jones stands in their tradition because she is black. In fact, this may be the only thing that Hannah-Jones has in common with these historians!

Attempting to enlist Quarles, who died in 1996, Silverstein writes that the historian’s “work posed profound questions about the traditional narrative of the founding era.” He insinuates that Quarles predicted the 1619 Project’s claim that the American Revolution was a counterrevolution waged to defend slavery. This is in fact not at all what Quarles thought. The following lines are from his Preface to *The Negro in the American Revolution*:

[B]lack Americans quickly caught the spirit of ‘76. In the words of Frederick Douglass, the most prominent colored American of the nineteenth century, the Revolutionary War announced to Negroes “the advent of a nation based upon human brotherhood and the self-evident truths of liberty and equality.” There were portents of a new era. Individual slaves petitioned for their manumission; groups of slaves memorialized state legislatures to abolish slavery. For the first time, a gallery of distinguished Negroes made their appearance, among them Phillis Wheatley, precocious poet; Prince Hall, founder of Negro Masonry; and Benjamin Banneker, mathematician and astronomer... [T]he changed American sentiment toward drawing Negroes into the war ... was in part a reflection of the humanitarian impulse which inspired the Revolution and was engendered by it. Anti-slavery sentiment mounted rapidly, and action was taken on both Continental and state levels.

Unfortunately for Silverstein, American historiography does not yield the results he wants. But in the end his discussion of historiography is a red herring. There was, in fact, no historiography behind the 1619 Project when it was released. There were no sources listed; no historians referenced. Ex post facto, a group of historians have rallied to the banner of the 1619 Project. These include Woody Holton of the University of

South Carolina, David Waldstreicher of City University of New York and Nicholas Guyatt of Cambridge University. Evidently motivated by career interests, or to be on the right side of the current fad, these historians are perfectly willing to lead non-collegial and intemperate attacks on those who have criticized the 1619 Project. Their efforts to lend scholarly legitimacy to the 1619 Project only serve to undermine the credibility of their own work.

It was in fact clear from the outset that Hannah-Jones’ “framing essay” relied exclusively on only two books from just one historian, the late black nationalist Lerone Bennett Jr. (1928–2018), the longtime editor of *Ebony* magazine. For her assessment of the Civil War, Hannah-Jones utilized Bennett’s widely criticized *Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln’s White Dream* (2000), even choosing the very same moments from the sixteenth president’s long career, and in the same tendentious way, Bennett had used in his effort to portray Lincoln as a simple racist.

Hannah-Jones has repeatedly said she was inspired by Bennett’s *Before the Mayflower* (1962). In fairness to Bennett, it must be said that this volume, though inevitably limited by his bourgeois nationalist bent, is a far worthier introduction to African American history than the 1619 Project. Bennett’s earlier work is actually populated by historical actors. There are very few *people* in the pages of the 1619 Project. Those that appear are the mere playthings of the real actor: the supra-historical impulses referred to as “whiteness” and “anti-black racism.”

Silverstein’s anti-historical method

In a highly revealing passage, Silverstein writes that, in “privileging ‘actual fact’ over ‘narrative,’” critics of the 1619 Project “seem to proceed from the premise that history is a fixed thing; that somehow, long ago, the nation’s historians identified the relevant set of facts about our past, and it is the job of subsequent generations to simply protect and disseminate them.” This passage comes after a lengthy discussion of efforts by far-right Republicans who have sought to censor the 1619 Project—efforts which the WSWS opposes. Silverstein’s aim is to conflate scholarly and left-wing criticism of the 1619 Project with the likes of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and Arkansas Senator Tom Cotton, who have seized on the 1619 Project’s attack on the American Revolution to posture as defenders of democracy, and with earlier efforts by the Republican Party in the 1990s to eliminate what they derided as “revisionist history” from high school textbooks.

That the writing of history involves interpretation of evidence is the most elementary proposition of the profession. To suggest that historians such as Gordon Wood and James McPherson have viewed their task to be to “protect and disseminate” facts reveals far more of Silverstein’s own ignorance than it does these historians’ monumental achievements in researching and writing the histories of the American Revolution and the Civil War.

But it is not really interpretation of the archive that Silverstein has in mind. His brief and reckless foray into historical methodology aims to provide a permission slip for the 1619 Project’s *disregarding* of facts, whenever these contradict the settled-upon “narrative.” Silverstein gives away the game by his placement within cynical quotations marks the word *facts*, and by his admission that he does not view history to be “a fixed thing.”

But history is “a fixed thing” in at least one sense. The past actually happened. Generations of people lived, worked, created, struggled, loved, fought and died. They did so under conditions not of their own choosing, but those handed down to them from preceding generations. And they did not do so alone. Out of the development of the productive forces, as Marx

long ago explained, classes emerged—lord and vassal, master and slave, capitalist and worker—now in hidden, now in open conflict. On top of all of this culture, law, politics, language, nation—and, with apologies to Hannah-Jones—*race* developed, always reflecting the ideology of the ruling layers, and always interacting dynamically with the class structure.

The racist conception of history has an unpleasant pedigree. It emerged as part of the counter-Enlightenment's irrationalist and anti-scientific attack on the principle of human equality as a justification for actually existing *inequality*. A landmark in this vein was the French aristocrat Arthur de Gobineau's *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, a counterrevolutionary tract written after the crushing of the French Revolution of 1848. Gobineau's theories were picked up by the southern slaveowners in the 1850s, and in the late 19th century they fed into the false application of Darwinian evolution to "human races" and, from there, merged into the ideology of the Third Reich. It is noteworthy in the highest degree that Ibram Kendi, one of the leading racialists at present (and a contributor to the new 1619 Project book) follows in this tradition in his own attack on the Enlightenment, *Stamped from the Beginning*, which, as its title implies, holds that race and racism have always been present.

Gobineau's racist conception of history appeared as a ruling class response to the emergence of the working class, and, in that connection, to the development of the materialist conception of history. This Marx and Engels had begun to develop in the 1840s as a critique of the Hegelian dialectic, which, not dissimilarly from Bancroft's conception of American history, had imagined history to be the working out of a transcendent idea into the real world. Among the many expositions Marx and Engels gave of the materialist conception of history, perhaps the most succinct is a portion of Engels' eulogy at Marx's graveside in 1883:

Marx discovered the law of development of human history: the simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc.; that therefore the production of the immediate material means, and consequently the degree of economic development attained by a given people or during a given epoch, form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, art, and even the ideas on religion, of the people concerned have been evolved, and in the light of which they must, therefore, be explained, instead of vice versa, as had hitherto been the case.

Within this vast arena history has unfolded. It is "fixed" because none of what happened can ever be changed even by one whit. And therein lies both the tragedy of history and its powerful capacity to speak to that which is progressive in the present. The tragedy of history and "the lessons" go together. This is the *Via Dolorosa* of the working class, Rosa Luxemburg said.

But the past cannot speak directly to the present. It requires a medium. That medium is history. *Narrative* to the historian—at least as traditionally understood—entails the structuring of the facts of history—thematically, chronologically, geographically, etc.—to abstract a coherent whole, and to make it understandable to a contemporary audience. This inevitably requires a degree of subjectivity. The historian must choose what part of the record to address. Interpretation and narrative, moreover, are conditioned by the demands of the present, and, in this sense, the relationship between present and past is dialectical. As E.H. Carr put it, history "is an unending dialogue between past and present."

Moved by the mass civil rights movement of the 1960s, a generation of historians, including McPherson, turned their attention to the history of

the fight against slavery. If historians now turn once again to the question of Hitler's rise to power, or to the great disease pandemics of the past, this is for good reason! Yet, without honest interpretation, the wall separating history from fiction is torn down. It cannot be insisted too loudly that historical narrative—as opposed to racial mythmaking—is derived from, and is entirely subordinate to, the historical record.

To this it must be added that the best histories have always endeavored to approach the relationship between past and present objectively—to understand the separateness of the past, to fathom that those who came before could not know the future. Good history avoids the deadly condition E.P. Thompson called "the enormous condescension of posterity," by which the past is evaluated according to the prejudices of the present, prejudices that, wittingly or not, very often reflect aspects of the ruling ideology. Objectivity imparts to good historical writing its own literary quality precisely by placing actors in the drama of their time, with outcomes unknown to them. In certain hands—and one could mention here Wood's and McPherson's respective contributions to the Oxford History of the United States, *Empire of Liberty* and *Battle Cry of Freedom* as exemplars—it brings the episodes of the past very nearly to the level of living phenomena. When it is said of good historical writing that "it takes you there" or that it "brings the past to life," it is this quality that is at play.

This is not at all what Silverstein and Hannah-Jones have in mind. To them, narrative is simply one "story" that can be told about the past—indeed, they have even subtitled the just-released 1619 book *A New Origin Story*. In their way of seeing the past, one story is just as good as any other. What actually happened is of secondary interest, and historical context—the conditions that shaped the past—counts for nothing at all. History is rummaged through as a junk drawer. That found to be useful can be packaged together with the item up for sale. Those stubborn facts that refuse to obey are cast aside. Thus, Silverstein and Hannah-Jones sees it as entirely legitimate to select a few quotes from Lincoln designed to make him appear to be a racist (for example, his defensive remarks in debates against the archracist Stephen A. Douglas) and to throw out the many more examples of Lincoln's speeches and writings that would give the opposite impression (for example, the Gettysburg Address).

Silverstein says of history that "we can perceive it only from our present reality." This statement, taken at face value, is a mere truism. But what, one may ask, does "present reality" consist of for Silverstein, Hannah-Jones and their co-thinkers? Do they pause to consider how the future will consider their "present reality"?

Hannah-Jones professes outrage over the African slavery of the past. But how will the future view the fact that she accepts sponsorship from the oil giant Royal Dutch Shell, the scourge of Africa in the present? Or that she accepts an expensive sinecure at historically black Howard University, while the college administration forces students in the present to cohabitate with rats, fleas, cockroaches and mold? Silverstein encourages history to be more like journalism, which he says, provides "democracy its greatest service when most unshackled and critical." Is Silverstein unaware, or just indifferent, to the fact that the world's most critical journalist, Julian Assange, is right now shackled, and muzzled, in a maximum-security British prison for daring to expose the lies propagated by the *Times* about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan?

For the working class, "present reality" is a hard thing. It consists of the worst economic crisis and the greatest threat of world war since the Great Depression, a raging pandemic, the threat of environmental catastrophe and ruling classes everywhere lurching toward fascism. To make their way forward, workers and youth require an objective, truthful understanding of the past, just as they do the present.



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