

Book Review

The New York Times 1619 Project: A New Origin Story: History as the emanation of race

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20 February 2022

The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story, edited by Nikole Hannah-Jones, Caitlin Roper, Ilena Silverman and Jake Silverstein. New York, One World, 2021.

An old idiom advises to never judge a book by its cover. Yet the front cover of the recently released book version of the *New York Times*' 1619 Project speaks as much in a few short words as the following 600 pages of text. The Project, the over title reads, is "A New Origin Story," that has been "Created by Nikole Hannah-Jones." The dust jacket flap adds a touch of clairvoyance, explaining that the volume "offers a profoundly revealing vision of the American past and present."

The *Times*, which wishes readers to take the 1619 Project seriously as a "reframing of American history," has said more than it intended.

Origin stories lie in the realm of myth, not history. Premodern societies produced, but did not "create," origin stories. They were the work of whole cultures, emerging out of oral traditions that first humanized nature and then naturalized social relations. But in modern times, origin stories have indeed been created. Closely linked with nationalism in politics and irrationalism in philosophy, origin stories aim to fuse groups of people by lifting "the race" above the material class relations of history. Indeed, from the racist vantage point, history is merely "the emanation of the race," as Trotsky put it in words he aimed at Nazi racial mythmaking, but that serve just as well to indict the 1619 Project, which sorts actors in history into two categories: "white people" and "Black people," and deduces motive and action from this *a priori* racial classification. [1]

That the 1619 Project was a racist falsification of history was the central criticism the *World Socialist Web Site* leveled at it immediately after its release in August 2019, timing ostensibly chosen to commemorate the arrival of the first slaves in Virginia 400 years earlier. All of the 1619 Project's errors, distortions, and omissions—its insinuation that slavery was a uniquely American "original sin"; its claim that the American Revolution was a counterrevolution launched to defend slavery against British abolition; its selective use of quotes to suggest that Abraham Lincoln was a racist indifferent to slavery; its censoring of the interracial character of the abolitionist, civil rights, and labor movements; its insistence that all present social problems are the fruit of slavery; its stance that historians had ignored slavery—all of this flowed from the *Times*' singular effort to impose a racial myth on the past, the better "to teach our readers to think a little bit more" in the racial way, in the leaked words of *Times* editor Dean Baquet. [2]

The exposure of the 1619 Project by the WSWWS, and by leading historians it interviewed, has never been met forthrightly by the *Times*. Instead, Hannah-Jones, the Project's journalist-celebrity "creator," egged on race-baiting and red-baiting social media attacks against critics, while *New York Times Magazine* editor Jake Silverstein demeaned them on the pages of the *Times* as jealous careerists, even as he surreptitiously altered

the Project. All the while, backers of the 1619 Project said, "Just wait for the book. It will erase all doubts." This drumroll lasted for two years.

The mountains have labored and brought forth a mouse.

The central achievement of the book version of the 1619 Project, released in December, appears to be that it is bigger. Weighing in at two pounds and costing \$23, it is probably 10 times heavier than the magazine given out free by the thousands, errors and all, to cash-strapped public schools. Unfortunately for the *Times*, the added weight lends no new *gravitas* to the content, which, in spite of all the lofty rhetoric about "finally telling the truth," "new narratives," and "reframing," remains unoriginal to the point of banality. The book does not inch much beyond the warmed-over racial essentialism that has long been the stock-in-trade of right-wing black nationalism, and which has always had a special purchase on the guilt feelings of wealthy liberals. The late *Ebony* editor, Lerone Bennett, Jr., remains unmistakably the dominant intellectual influence on Hannah-Jones and the entire project. [3]

The *Times* has spared no expense to keep afloat its flagship project. This much shows. The volume is handsomely presented. The book's 18 chapters include seven new historical essays, interspersed with 36 poems and short stories, as well as 18 photographs. If anything justifies the book, it is these photographs, which alone among the contents manage to convey something truthful about American society. Yet, in their artistic depiction of everyday black men, women, and children, the photographs actually express the commonness of humanity, contradicting the 1619 Project's racist aims.

The rest of the volume, the poetry and fiction included, bears the fatal marks of the racist perspective. What emerges is an even darker and more unyielding interpretation of race in America than that which came across in the magazine. The book is replete with blatantly anti-historical passages, such as: "*There has never been a time in United States history when Black rebellions did not spark existential fear among white people ...*" (p. 101); "*In the eyes of white people, Black criminality was broadly defined*" (p. 281.) One could go on. Every contributor engages in this sort of crude racial reductionism. There are no immigrants, Asians, Jews, Catholics, or Muslims, and only a few pages on Native Americans. The 1619 Project sees only "white Americans" and "black Americans." And these monoliths, undivided by class or any other material factor, had already appeared in colonial Virginia in 1619 in their present form, prepared to act out their racially defined destinies.

A new preface by Hannah-Jones attempts to motivate the book by noting that Americans know little about slavery. She points to a Southern Poverty Law Center study that found only 8 percent of high school students can cite slavery as the central cause of the Civil War. This statistic is not surprising. It would also not be surprising to learn that less than 8 percent of recent high school graduates know, even roughly, when

the Vietnam War happened, or whether *The Great Gatsby* is a novel or a submarine sandwich. This is not the fault of students or of teachers. The public schools have been starved of funding by Republicans and Democrats alike. History and art have been especially savaged in favor of supposedly more practical “funding priorities.”

In any case, the 1619 Project will help no one understand why the Civil War happened. The book’s overriding theme is that all “white Americans” were (and are still) the beneficiaries of slavery. This makes the Civil War incomprehensible. Why was the country split apart in 1861? Why did it wage a bloody war over the next four years, fighting battles whose death tolls stunned the world? Why did 50,000 men fall dead or maimed at Gettysburg in the first three days of July 1863, a half year after Lincoln’s issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation? Historian James McPherson, in works such as *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* and *For Cause and Comrades*, answers these questions. The 1619 Project cannot.

The 1619 Project’s denial of slavery’s role in the Civil War is probably clearest in the essays by Matthew Desmond, Martha S. Jones, and Ibram Kendi. Desmond’s essay, “Capitalism,” which appeared in the original version and now reappears in slightly longer form, argues that Southern slavery was the dynamic part of the antebellum economy, and that the wealth generated from it also built Northern capitalism. Desmond has it backwards. The demand for cotton in the North, and especially in Great Britain—a demand itself contingent on capitalist economic growth—gave a new impulse to Southern slavery, and not the other way around. When the slave masters seceded and launched the Civil War, among their miscalculations was to overestimate their worth in the global economy, an error Desmond repeats.

Over the years of 1861-1865 the Southern planters were destroyed as a class. Yet their clients in Britain and the North found new sources of cotton and emerged still richer. Desmond, a Princeton sociologist, was brought on by the 1619 Project to pay some attention to economics. But he winds up denying a material cause *and* a material effect of the Civil War. Desmond’s theory cannot explain why the war happened, why the North defeated the supposedly more advanced slave South, and why it is that today we live in a world dominated by the exploitation of wage workers, and not chattel slaves.

In her essay, entitled “Citizenship,” Martha S. Jones reduces the antebellum struggle for equality to the activity of the small free black population in the North, focusing on the Colored Conventions movement that began in 1830. She simply writes out of existence the abolitionist movement, which was majority white and eventually reached even into small towns across the North. The abolitionist movement was undoubtedly a major political factor in the expansion of civil rights to free blacks—ostensibly Jones’ subject—and in the coming of the Civil War, ultimately fusing with the anti-slavery Republican Party through figures such as Frederick Douglass. This counts for little to Jones and historians like her. They erect a wall between agitation against slavery, which they dismiss as mere cover for white racial interest, and what they call “anti-racism,” a contemporary moral-political posture they impose on history. “White Americans” of the past, even the most dedicated and egalitarian opponents of slavery, can never pass muster before these examiners.

This “immense condescension of posterity,” to borrow a phrase from the late English historian E.P. Thompson, reaches new depths in the essay by Kendi, whose career as an “anti-racist” has been so challenging to the powers-that-be that he has been showered with millions of dollars by the “white institutions” of the publishing, academic, and corporate endowment worlds. Kendi thinks he has discovered that the pioneering abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison was a patronizing hypocrite who “actually reinforced racism and slavery” (p. 430). No one in Garrison’s time, neither friend nor enemy, thought so. It should be recalled that Garrison was himself nearly lynched by a racist mob in 1835. Frederick

Douglass, in his beautiful eulogy delivered in 1879, said that Garrison

moved not with the tide, but against it. He rose not by the power of the Church or the State, but in bold, inflexible and defiant opposition to the mighty power of both. It was the glory of this man that he could stand alone with the truth, and calmly await the result... [L]et us guard his memory as a precious inheritance, let us teach our children the story of his life.

After tarnishing the “precious inheritance” of Garrison, Kendi moves on to Lincoln. He rehashes the thoroughly debunked claim that the Emancipation Proclamation, the greatest revolutionary document in American history after the Declaration of Independence, was a mere military tactic. In Kendi’s way of seeing things, Lincoln’s order only made it “incumbent on Black people to emancipate themselves.” He goes on, “And that is precisely what they did, running away from enslavers to Union lines...” (p. 431).

Kendi does not seem to fathom that the Emancipation Proclamation made these men and women *legally* free when they ran to Union lines, rather than runaway slaves with the property claims of their masters still operative. But then again, Kendi does not even ask himself what the Union army was doing in the South. His essay is called “Progress.” This must be meant ironically. Kendi sees no progress in history.

The bringing in of Jones, of Johns Hopkins University, and Kendi, of Boston University, is meant to clothe the 1619 Project in immense authority. A couple of other efforts have been made along these lines. Here too, a law of diminishing returns seems to have imposed itself on the *Times*.

Stung by criticism that she had no sources in the original publication, Hannah-Jones has plugged in, *ex post facto*, 94 endnotes to her “framing essay,” which the editors have now given the title “Democracy.” Not much else has changed from the original version, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in commentary—not history—for what the prize committee charitably called Hannah-Jones’ “highly personal” style. The new footnotes lead to many URLs as well as personal conversations with historians, including Woody Holton of the University of South Carolina, who has staked his professional reputation to the 1619 Project.

Sent in to provide authority, Holton is responsible for the most clamorous new error introduced into the present volume. Hannah-Jones quotes Holton as saying that the Dunmore Proclamation of November 7, 1775, a British offer of freedom to slaves of masters already in revolt, “ignited the turn to independence” for the Virginian founding fathers George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison (p. 16), supposedly because they feared losing their human property. Unfortunately for Holton, at that point Washington was already commanding the Continental Army in war, Jefferson had drafted his tract *A Declaration of the Causes & Necessity for Taking Up Arms*, and Madison, then only 24, had joined a revolutionary organ, the Orange County Virginia Committee of Safety.

This is not an innocent mistake. Holton and the *1619 Project* get the sequence of events wrong to support another fiction: that the true, never-before-revealed (and undocumented!) motivation of the Founding Fathers in 1776 was to defend slavery. These are fatal errors. And yet there is a still larger issue. Whatever the *individual motives* of Washington, Jefferson, and Madison—even if a single letter, article, or diary entry might one day be found from among their voluminous writings demonstrating that they “staked their lives and sacred honor” to defend slavery—in assessing the significance of the American Revolution much more than this must still be taken into consideration. Why was it that the great slaveless majority of colonists supported America’s second-bloodiest war

for six long years? Why did thousands of free blacks enlist? And further, what was the relationship between the American Revolution and the Enlightenment, whose thought contemporaries believed that it embodied? What was its relationship to that which historian R.R. Palmer called “the age of the democratic revolution” that swept the Atlantic in its wake? What was its connection to the destruction of slavery in the US and elsewhere over the next century? How did it relate, ideologically, to subsequent anti-colonial struggles? An utter lack of curiosity about these and other critical questions characterizes the entire volume.

A few contributors manage to make certain valid historical points. *Times* columnist Jamelle Bouie provides treatment of the vociferous pro-slavery advocate, John C. Calhoun of South Carolina “who saw no difference between slavery and other forms of labor in the modern world” (p. 199). Kahlil Gibran Muhammad gives a useful survey of the sugar plantation system. But as a whole, and Bouie and Muhammad notwithstanding, the book’s various chapters are formulaic in the extreme. They identify present-day social, political, and cultural problems in exclusively racial terms, and then, each performing the same *salto mortale*, impose the present diagnosis on history.

Health care, the massive prison population, gun violence, obesity, traffic jams—these, and many more problems, the *Times* wishes us to believe, are rooted in “endemic” “anti-black racism” first imprinted in a national “DNA” in 1619. The *Times*, a multi-billion dollar corporation closely tied to Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus, does not want readers to consider more obvious, and much more proximate, causes for America’s social and political ills—for example, the extreme polarization of wealth that has reduced 70 percent of the population to paycheck-to-paycheck existence, while the ranks of billionaires swell, their wealth doubling with astonishing frequency.

As it turns out, it is all about wealth, and more specifically, cash, as Hannah-Jones admits in a concluding essay: “[W]hat steals opportunities is the lack of wealth ... the defining feature of Black life,” she writes (p. 456). This essay is entitled “Justice.” A call for race-based reparations for blacks—any individual who can show “documentation that he or she identified as a Black person for at least ten years...” (p. 472)—it originally appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* on June 30, 2020, under the title “What is Owed.”

“Lack of wealth” is not the defining feature of “black life” in America. It defines life for the vast majority of the American and world population. But Hannah-Jones is not calling for any sort of class redistribution of wealth. On the contrary, if her proposal were put into effect, the federal government, which has not authored a substantial social reform since the 1960s, would inevitably direct money away from the little that remains to support students, the poor, the sick, and the elderly of all races. The proceeds would go to blacks *regardless* of their wealth, including to people such as herself, for whom “lack of wealth” is not a “defining feature” of life. Only recently, for instance, Hannah-Jones charged a California community college \$25,000 for a one-hour, virtual engagement—this being the charitable discount rate of her speaking fees.

In putting its imprimatur on a call for race-based reparations, the *Times* could not have come up with an “issue” more beneficial to the Trump-led Republican Party than if it had been dreamed up by Stephen Bannon himself. Hannah-Jones, of course, claims that her proposal is not meant to pit races against each other. She simply takes it for granted that “the races” have separate and opposed interests. On this, black nationalists and white supremacists have always agreed. Indeed, Hannah-Jones appears to be completely oblivious to the dangerous implications of “the federal government,” which would distribute the money, dividing Americans up by race (p. 472). The categorization of people into races by the state has been the starting point of some of history’s worst crimes—the Third Reich’s annihilation of Germany’s Jews being only the most horrific example.

The existence of chattel slavery is also one of history’s monumental crimes. But it was a crime in an unusual, premodern way. Slavery was inherited blindly, without questioning, from the colonial past. It was the most degraded status in a world where personal dependency and unfree labor were the rule, and not the exception—a world of serfdom, indentured servitude, penal labor, *corvée*, and peonage. The American Revolution, for the first time in world history, raised slavery up *as a historical problem*—in the sense that it could now be consciously identified as such, both because its existence was obnoxious to the revolution’s assertion of human equality and because slavery stood in contradistinction to “free” wage labor, which grew rapidly in its aftermath. These contradictions breathed life into various attempts to end slavery peacefully. Such efforts came to naught. In a cruel paradox, the growth of capitalism, and its insatiable demand for cotton, nurtured the development of what historians have called a “second slavery” in the antebellum. Historical problems as deep-rooted as slavery are not given to simple solutions.

Yet, “four score and seven years” later, the Civil War, the Second American Revolution, ended American slavery, hastening its demise in Brazil and Cuba as well. In the *longue durée* of slavery’s history, which reaches back to the ancient world, this is a remarkably compressed period. There are many people alive today who are 87 years old, a time span that separates us from 1935. That year, the high-water mark of the social reformism of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, the Wagner Act was passed, securing the legal right for workers to form trade unions of their own choosing. The New Deal never did succeed in securing a national health care system, a relatively modest reform that has since been realized by many nations, but which has eluded the US for the intervening 87 years. By way of comparison, in the 87 years separating the Declaration of Independence from the Gettysburg Address, the United States destroyed slavery, an entire system of private property in man. It did so at a terrible cost. Lincoln was not far off when he said in his Second Inaugural Address that “every drop of blood drawn with the lash” might be “paid by another drawn with the sword.” Some 700,000 Americans had already died when he said those words.

Lincoln’s political genius lay in his unique capacity to link the enormous crisis of the Civil War to the American Revolution, and to the still larger question of human equality—that is, to extract from the maelstrom of events the true, the essential. He did this most famously at Gettysburg, when he explained that the war was a test of whether or not the founding principle “that all men are created equal ... shall perish from the earth.” Lincoln knew well, as he put it in another speech, that “the occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise—with the occasion,” before quickly adding, “We cannot escape history.”

Our time is also “piled high with difficulty,” and we can no less escape history than those alive in the 1860s. Nearly 1 million Americans have now died in the COVID-19 pandemic, part of a global death toll of some 6 million, according to the official counting. There is a clear and present danger of war with nuclear-armed Russia and China. Social inequality has reached nearly unfathomable levels. Basic democratic principles are under assault. Manmade climate change threatens the ecology, and ultimately the habitability, of the planet. These are major historical problems, to say the least. It was once commonplace—and certainly not unique to Marxists, as Lincoln’s words show—to appreciate that major problems cannot even be understood, let alone acted upon, without an objective, truthful, approach to history.

[1] “Leon Trotsky: What Is National Socialism? (1933).”

[2] “Inside the New York Times Town Hall.” *Slate*. Accessed February 8, 2022.

[3] Hannah-Jones has repeatedly acknowledged Bennett’s influence. See *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America*. Chicago, Ill.: Johnson Pub. Co., 2007; and *Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln’s White Dream*. Chicago: Johnson Pub. Co., 2007.



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