

American Historical Association president issues groveling apology after racist social media attack

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The president of the American Historical Association (AHA), Professor James Sweet of the University of Wisconsin, has issued a groveling apology for a mild criticism he made of the 1619 Project and the influence of identity politics on historical writing.

Sweet's column on the 1619 Project was published in the most recent *Perspectives on History* newsletter of the AHA, the largest organization of American historians. It can be read in full here. Entitled "Is History History? Identity Politics and Teleologies of the Present," Sweet's article made two overarching points.

First, it criticized the dominance of "presentism" in historical writing. In Sweet's view, this means the tendency to view history "through the prism of contemporary social justice issues—race, gender, sexuality, nationalism, capitalism," while minimizing "the values and mores of people in their own times." The relationship between present and past is an important and complicated subject, which raises questions of both method—the way sources are used and interpreted—and philosophy. Suffice it to say that the subject is certainly worthy of discussion, not apology and retraction.

He suggests that this presentism manifests itself not only in the imposition of present-day thinking onto the past but in a decline in what historians call "pre-modern" subjects—roughly speaking, things that happened before the 19th century. This is a fair warning. The teaching of ancient history, medieval history, early modern history—in all geographical areas—is vanishing from curricula across the country, even at very large universities. Budget cuts have played their role. But, so too have attacks from the quarters of identity politics, who find no "usable past" in subjects such as Ancient Rome, as we have argued elsewhere.

Sweet's second point gets at the 1619 Project's insinuation that slavery was a uniquely American "original sin." An accomplished scholar of African history and the slave trade, Sweet notes that at a single slaving site he

recently visited in Ghana, Elmina, "[l]ess than one percent of the Africans passing through ... arrived in North America." Most of the other 99 percent, presumably, were bound to destinations in Latin America and the Caribbean. Sweet warns, rather gently, that efforts such as the 1619 Project that purport "to claim a usable African American past [may] reify elements of American hegemony and exceptionalism such narratives aim to dismantle."

His article was posted on Twitter at 1:18 p.m. Eastern, on Wednesday, August 17. Almost immediately, it brought forward deranged ad hominem attacks from race-obsessed Twitter users. Sadly, many of these tweets came from historians.

The attacks fell into three categories. Many implied or stated openly that Sweet is racist, or that as a "white man" he has no right to make critical commentary on black or African history. Some speculated about what they imagined to be Sweet's true, unstated and nefarious motives. Others accused him of being reactionary, bound to some earlier period of history writing. Some engaged in simple name-calling. A number threatened to cancel memberships to the AHA. At a certain point, the AHA was forced to take its Twitter account private.

As far as hysterical replies go, Kevin Gannon takes the cake. Gannon, a professor of history at Queens University in Charlotte, North Carolina, joined in the censorious Twitter attack on Sweet, and then quickly hurried off a lengthier piece on his blog in which he compared Sweet to the Nazis! Gannon wrote:

Given the pervasive and obvious ways in which Right-wingers, Nazis, and other bad-faith actors have deployed strikingly similar tactics in the service of white supremacy and misogyny (and misogynoir), one might wonder why a white, male historian of Africa and the African diaspora would deploy a

rhetorical strategy that centers these particular examples. I mean, I certainly do.

But whatever the particular method—amalgams such as the one planted by Gannon, or name-calling, straw man arguments, boycott threats, etc.—none of these attacks engaged with Sweet’s actual arguments. As if to prove his point on presentism, the criticism made no effort to engage with history. And as if to prove his point on American exceptionalism, the Twitter attacks said nothing about slavery in Africa or Latin America or the Caribbean.

Instead, the hyperventilating Twitter users demanded, explicitly or implicitly, that Sweet’s article be retracted and even that he be disciplined. Catherine Denial, History Department Chair at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, went so far as to call for a letter-writing campaign to the AHA, presumably to get a retraction and an apology and perhaps Sweet’s dismissal. She even Tweeted out e-mail addresses for AHA board members.

Unfortunately, and much to his discredit, Sweet crumpled in record speed, issuing an abject *mea culpa maxima* on Twitter after one day of abuse. The same apology, boxed out in grey, now prefaces his article, which, for the moment at least, is still available. In a note of just 260 words, Sweet apologizes three times for “causing harm” or “damage” to “colleagues, the discipline, and the Association.” The following phrases all appear: “I take full responsibility;” “I am deeply sorry;” “I sincerely regret;” “it wasn’t my intention;” and the especially scraping, “I hope to redeem myself.” If one did not know the context, it might be assumed that this was a confession extracted after torture before the Inquisition. *Eppur si muove!*

This self-debasement did not satisfy Sweet’s critics, who continued to denounce him and gloat over his retraction. How far will Sweet have to go to “redeem himself”? He indicated in his column that he had been at work on a “critical response to the 1619 Project for a forthcoming forum in the *American Historical Review*.” Will it still appear? How “critical” will it now be?

Tellingly, Sweet did not explain what it was, concretely, that had caused all the “damage” and “harm” he now confesses to have inflicted. If he were to explain, he would have to admit that his column hurt no one, that there was nothing offensive about it. Instead, he would have to say that his column violated the unspoken rules of censorship that hold sway over academia and circumscribe American intellectual life. Having stepped out of line—the president of the AHA, no less!—it was necessary that Sweet be brought to heel, and it was no less essential that he flog himself before his censors. The problem for Sweet is that the embrace of

identity politics, which is a religion of the phony “progressive wing” of the Democratic Party (and also the main route to funding and career opportunities for many academics) must be total—observed in public statements as well as private thought. He will remain suspect!

Alas, it is unfortunate that Sweet capitulated so quickly and so abjectly. The “Twitterstorians” who engage in these ritual acts of public censorship are a small, intemperate and, as their tweets show, generally crude lot. What they fear most is that someone will interfere with their mob. And there were in fact many historians who replied to the Twitter furor in defense of Sweet, and within a day or two, his defenders appeared to far outnumber the attackers. Many of these Tweets, unlike those of his attackers, actually tried to engage with the arguments.

Sweet’s self-flagellation before a social media witch-hunt indicates the advanced level of censorship and decline in American intellectual life. To be sure, there certainly have been major fights in the AHA over politics and presentism in the past, very famously during the Vietnam War. And the theme of American exceptionalism, which Sweet raised to no avail, has its own rich, and heavily-debated, history. But there is no precedent for such an act of public contrition by the president of the AHA, not even in the McCarthy era.

There are two possible outcomes. Either Sweet’s retraction will be remembered as another signpost in the decline of the historical profession. Or else it might yet become the occasion for a thoroughgoing discussion of the deadening, and essentially reactionary, effects of postmodernism and identity politics on historical thought.

As David North and I wrote in a letter published in the April 2020 issue of the *American Historical Review*:

It is high time for an intense and critical examination of the politics and social interests underlying the contemporary fixation with the unscientific category of racial identity, and its use as a battering ram against genuine historical scholarship.

The Sweet Affair reveals that the time for this critical examination is well past due.



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