

The 1619 Project and the New York Times' glorification of the monarchy

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In its coverage of the death of Queen Elizabeth II and the coronation of King Charles, the *New York Times* has published article after article celebrating the pageantry of the British monarchy. In so doing, the newspaper responsible for publishing the 1619 Project has entangled itself in many layers of contradictions.

In its 1619 Project, published in the fall of 2019 and announced with great fanfare, the *Times* set out to fundamentally revise American history in the service of contemporary identity politics. In line with postmodern academic theories, the 1619 Project presented a new “narrative” of US history that erased the progressive significance of the first two American revolutions. It claimed that the American Revolution was a counterrevolution waged to defend slavery, and that in the Civil War the abolition of slavery was only an incidental outcome of a war waged over national unity.

In this way, the *Times* and its 1619 Project furnished the animating spirit for the removal of statues of American revolutionaries and abolitionists throughout the country. In the summer of 2020, under the influence of conceptions advanced by the 1619 Project, the city of Portland, Oregon removed a statue of Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, as well as a statue of George Washington, the revolutionary general who defeated the British in the war for independence. New York City removed a statue of Jefferson from City Hall. The city of San Francisco took down a statue of Ulysses S. Grant, who led a decisive military campaign in the war to abolish slavery and, as president during Reconstruction, suppressed the Ku Klux Klan. The city of Boston removed a public monument to Abraham Lincoln, who signed the Emancipation Proclamation. Many other cities took similar steps.

Jefferson, Lincoln, Grant and Washington were all “canceled” because they could not pass the purity test imposed by the *Times*—but over the past two weeks we learned that the same purity test, evidently, does not apply to the kings and queens of the United Kingdom.

The *Times*' lengthy obituary of Queen Elizabeth, published September 8, praised her as “the nation's anchor” and her defense of the royal family as “a rare bastion of permanence in a world of shifting values.” This obituary was accompanied by numerous fawning articles celebrating the “grace, humor and longevity” of the late monarch and countless “live updates” breathlessly describing all of the rituals around her funeral and the coronation of the inauspiciously named King Charles III—whose 17th century namesake Stuart predecessor Charles I was beheaded in the English Civil War, while his son, Charles II, was driven into years of exile. The *Times* even issued a lesson plan for students entitled, “The Life And Legacy of Queen Elizabeth.”

In throwing itself on its knees in front of institutionalized hereditary privilege, the *Times* recalls the words of Mark Twain: “Unquestionably the person that can get lowest down in cringing before royalty and nobility, and can get most satisfaction out of crawling on his belly before them, is an American. Not all Americans, but when an American does it he makes competition impossible.”

Perhaps realizing they ~~had~~ overdone it, editors wrote a somewhat defensive article on September 14 under the title “Was Elizabeth the Queen of America?” (This article appeared after *World Socialist Web Site* Managing Editor Niles Niemuth wrote on September 9: “Was Elizabeth America's Queen?... I recall a distinct break with aristocracy some 250 years ago.”) In this article, the *Times* acknowledged that “Americans fought for freedom from the British crown” but placed the blame on the American population for being “consumed with fascination by the royal family after the queen's death on Thursday.”

This excuse turns reality upside down. The *Times* and the rest of the US media establishment have been force-feeding the population with monarchist propaganda ever since the news arrived of the queen's death—but according to the *Times*, this is supposedly the fault of readers for reading it, not of the newspapers for cramming it down their throats.

A guest essay published in the *Times* by Harvard historian Maya Jasanoff is more sensitive to the knots into which the *Times* has tied itself. Politely calling for the “scaling back” of the monarchy, Jasanoff writes of Queen Elizabeth that “we should not romanticize her era” because the “queen helped obscure a bloody history of decolonization [sic] whose proportions and legacies have yet to be adequately acknowledged.”

Nevertheless, while the queen was “of course, a white face on all the coins,” Jasanoff writes: “The queen embodied a profound, sincere commitment to her duties—her final public act was to appoint her 15th prime minister—and for her unflagging performance of them, she will be rightly mourned. She has been a fixture of stability, and her death in already turbulent times will send ripples of sadness around the world.”

Here is an extraordinary double standard! In light of her “sincere commitment to her duties,” we are supposed to kindly forgive the queen for the fact that she wore the crown of a colonial empire that carved up and pillaged Africa, India and the Middle East; against which America fought its own bloody war of independence; and which presided for centuries over the ghastly transatlantic slave trade chronicled by the 1619 Project itself.

But Washington and Jefferson, who proclaimed the “self-evident” and “unalienable” right of revolution and the universal principle of equality, together with Lincoln and Grant, who led the North to victory in the war to abolish slavery, are entitled to no such subtle and sensitive consideration. Their statues had to be pulled down and locked away from public view.

Lincoln, Grant, Washington and Jefferson were revolutionary political figures with radically progressive ideas who stood at the forefront of violent social upheavals—all apparently distasteful qualities as far as the *Times* is concerned. The *Times* clearly prefers the queen's “stability” and the “permanence” of the monarchy to these revolutionary figures.

As for the *Times*' suggestion that the queen should be admired as an “individual,” somehow separate from the monarchy, this argument was answered by Irish socialist James Connolly during a royal visit by King George V in 1911: “We will not blame him for the crimes of his ancestors

if he relinquishes the royal rights of his ancestors; but as long as he claims their rights, by virtue of descent, then, by virtue of descent, he must shoulder the responsibility for their crimes.”

Perhaps at a surface level, there is no direct contradiction between the 1619 Project and the glorification of the monarchy. The American Revolution, according to the 1619 Project, was supposedly a right-wing, counterrevolutionary event, an attempt to preserve slavery when the British Empire was supposedly trying to abolish it. The logical implication of this false premise is that the whole project of American independence was politically reactionary—and it follows therefore that Americans might as well at long last admit their mistake, return to the fold and bend the knee.

And perhaps in the wealthy social circles inhabited by the writers of the *Times* it is no exaggeration to state that these sentiments are in the air: These people spend their evenings watching TV shows like *Bridgerton*, fantasize about themselves as royalty and are extremely impressed by the medieval rituals being observed with great solemnity across the Atlantic.

It is not teachers, autoworkers, nurses or railroad engineers in America or anywhere else who are “consumed with fascination by the royal family.” The *Times*’ writers should speak for themselves! It is the parasitic layers saturated with money—the oligarchs and their corporate, financial, military, government and academic hangers-on for which the *Times* speaks—which grasp at privilege and clamor for authority and respectability, for whom the monarchy represents an icon at the pinnacle of their social outlook: a shameless state-sanctioned celebration of hereditary privilege and of the inequality between social classes. It is these layers that resent their American drivers, waiters and maids for failing to treat them with the kind of deference they may imagine that their wealthy counterparts enjoy abroad.

In the final analysis, in the *Times*’ attacks on the American Revolution and Civil War, followed by its prostration before the institution of the monarchy, deeper processes and contradictions are reflected.

Leon Trotsky once wrote that the British capitalist class was able to “consecrate” its rule and its state with the trappings of the old aristocracy, adapting those trappings to its own purposes. “More than anything else,” Trotsky wrote, “the British bourgeoisie is proud that it has not destroyed old buildings and old beliefs, but has gradually adapted the old royal and noble castle to the requirements of the business firm. In this castle, in the corners of it, there were its icons, its symbols, its fetishes, and the bourgeoisie did not remove them. It made use of them to consecrate its own rule.”

What has “consecrated” the rule of American ruling class in this sense? It has not been ancient castles or titles, but the American Revolution and the Civil War and the ability of the American state to point to those revolutionary events as the source of its authority. Whatever obscene fortunes were piled up, they were always piled up, at least in theory, within the limits of bourgeois legality established by that state, which in turn enjoyed that historical prestige. While they exploited workers, even the most rapacious American capitalists always paid reluctant and cynical tribute to the “freedom” and “liberty” and even “equality” of the workers they exploited.

In that sense, by attacking the American Revolution and Civil War, the American ruling class tramples on its own crown and scepter. The *Times* helped bring down the statues of Jefferson and Lincoln like a spoiled child who smashes his own toys in a fit of irrational anger. Having spat on the sources of its own authority in an attempt to pander to identity politics, and now sensing with great anxiety that the world has become very “turbulent” and “unstable,” the sections of the American ruling class for which the *Times* speaks look with unconcealed envy at the bearskin hats and Tudor uniforms projecting the appearance of “stability” and “tradition” in the old country.

This helps explain what can only be otherwise described as the chaotic

and incoherent political “line” of America’s supposed newspaper of record: Down with Jefferson and Lincoln—and Long live the King!

The *Times* is, of course, no stranger to hypocrisy—it is perhaps the world’s foremost specialist in the practice. This is the same newspaper that selectively invokes “human rights” against every victim of American military aggression, which warns against “Russian disinformation” while pumping out misinformation of its own and which denounces “privilege” from its own ramparts at the summit of privilege. The discovery of inconsistency in the pages of the *New York Times* is not, in itself, a major event.

In its analysis of the 1619 Project, the WSWs from the beginning recognized that the newspaper’s many errors did not simply reflect factual mistakes or the work of less diligent or intelligent historians. Instead, the WSWs saw the attacks on the democratic legacies of the American Revolution and Civil War—which the *Times* had defended in an earlier period—as the product of deeper social dynamics. The same is true of the US media’s adulation of the monarchy.

In publishing and promoting the 1619 Project, the *New York Times*, as a mouthpiece of a substantial faction of the American ruling class grouped around the Democratic Party, was expressly abandoning the defense of what was democratic or progressive in this country’s history, including, by implication, all the social gains of those struggles. The WSWs immediately signaled that the international working class would defend what the American ruling class would not.

“The bourgeoisie has shamefully betrayed all the traditions of its historical youth,” Trotsky once wrote. “The proletariat has taken the honor of the revolutionary past of the bourgeoisie under its protection.”

Rapid shifts at the level of official political discourse have always reflected and anticipated more explosive and qualitative changes in the broader social dynamic of the class struggle—which embraces the material needs and aspirations of hundreds of millions of people. In its falsification of American history, in its subsequent shameless prostration before the monarchy, and in its ever more hypocritical and shrilly incoherent articles, the *New York Times* expresses the acute crisis of bourgeois rule in America as colossal social upheavals loom on the immediate horizon.



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