

# New York Times' Hannah-Jones demands affirmative action programs based on “lineage” from slavery

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27 March 2024

On March 13, the *New York Times Magazine* published a lengthy article by Nikole Hannah-Jones, “The ‘Colorblindness’ Trap: How a Civil Rights Ideal Got Hijacked,” which culminates in a demand that “elite institutions” like Ivy League universities and “corporations, government programs, and other organizations,” set aside college seats and professional positions for individuals who can prove their “lineage” as descendants of someone who had been enslaved in the United States.

Not only Americans of European and Asian ancestry, as well as Native Americans, but all descendants of immigrants—including Africans and Afro-Caribbeans—would be excluded from her proposed affirmative action program, Hannah-Jones makes clear.

The article is framed as a reply to *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, a Supreme Court ruling that “cut affirmative action’s final thin thread.” Yet in response to the decision “by the most conservative Supreme Court in nearly a century” Hannah-Jones has herself shifted to the right, opposing affirmative action policies that benefit “all marginalized people”—including those racial minorities who do not descend from American slavery.

This is a new and more virulent form of racism from Hannah-Jones. But the vehicle, once again, is the falsification of history—in this case the claim that the central historical purpose of both Radical Reconstruction after the Civil War and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was to create affirmative action programs as “redress for the descendants of slavery.”

Hannah-Jones is best known as the public face and “creator” of the *New York Times* 1619 Project. Now a sprawling multimedia enterprise involving film, television and children’s books, the 1619 Project was first launched in August 2019, timed to coincide with the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first slaves in colonial Virginia. The *World Socialist Web Site* subjected the 1619 Project to withering criticism from a left-wing, working class standpoint, and carried out interviews with leading scholars that exposed its falsifications about the American Revolution, the Civil War, and the civil rights movement.

Hannah-Jones then largely vanished from the pages of the *Times*, though she continued to be listed as a columnist. This is just her fourth article since 2020. An event of such vanishing rarity warrants consideration, especially because Hannah-Jones has come to embody a particularly toxic form of racialist politics dear to a privileged section of the Democratic Party “base.” If she is once again being promoted by the flagship publication of American liberalism, it is because a faction at the *Times* senses that there is a need to inject new doses of racism into popular consciousness in advance of a presidential election pitting two wildly unpopular candidates against each other, in a repeat of the 2020 election—the warmonger Joe Biden and the fascist Donald Trump.

The warning that the *World Socialist Web Site* issued after the

publication of the 1619 Project and in advance of the last presidential election can be reissued, nearly word for word. We explained that the 1619 Project

is one component of a deliberate effort to inject racial politics into the heart of the 2020 elections and foment divisions among the working class. The Democrats think it will be beneficial to shift their focus for the time being from the reactionary, militarist anti-Russia campaign to equally reactionary racial politics.

The WSWS also warned that the *Times*’ attacks on the most progressive events of American history—the Revolutionary War and the Civil War—would provide ammunition for Trump and the Republicans, summarized in their own travesty of history, the “1776 Project,” and would give political cover as they sought to overthrow the Constitution. This too, came to pass, most ominously in the form of Trump’s attempted coup of January 6, 2021. And we further explained that the 1619 Project was itself a milepost in the rightward shift of American politics and the debasement of its intellectual life. It manifested “dangerous and reactionary ideas … wafting about in bourgeois academic and political circles.”

We warned, finally, that “ideas have a logic; and authors bear responsibility for the political conclusions and consequences of their false and misguided arguments.”

## Embracing genealogical racism

In the not quite five years since the publication of the 1619 Project, the reactionary logic of racism has moved Hannah-Jones further to the right.

The specific problem she is confronting is how to promote race-based programs designed to build up the black elite after the *Fair Admissions* ruling. Her answer, which emerges in the article’s final two sections, entitled “Diversity vs. Redress” and “Taking Back the Intent of Affirmative Action,” is the distribution of positions and wealth based on genealogy, specifically on descent from American slavery. She writes:

[W]e, too, must shift our language and, in light of the latest affirmative-action ruling, focus on the specific redress for

descendants of slavery. If Yale, for instance, can apologize for its participation in slavery, as it did last month, then why can't it create special admissions programs for slavery's descendants—a program based on lineage and not race—just as it does for its legacy students? Corporations, government programs and other organizations could try the same.

These lines constitute a devastating admission. Hannah-Jones is ready to make a deal: legacy admissions for both the “traditional” wealthy who have sent their progeny to places like Yale for generations, *and* legacy admissions for the children of the grasping black elite, which aspires greater “representation” for its sons and daughters in the ruling class.

As was the case in her previous demand for race-based reparations, “What is Owed,”—part of the 1619 Project book version—Hannah-Jones leaves aside completely the depredations American capitalism has visited on other parts of the population, including the American Indians, whom she mentions not at all. And, as before, Hannah-Jones is silent on how such “lineage” from slavery would be proved and counted. For example, to secure a reserved seat at Yale, what percentage of an applicant’s ancestors should have been enslaved? If one parent is white, as is the case for Hannah-Jones herself, should the student get half the admittance odds? And how could the difference be established between someone of African American descent, and, say, Afro-Jamaican descent—whose ancestors were also overwhelmingly slaves, only in another country?

Hannah-Jones particularly objects to the descendants of immigrants, groups whose ancestors have “chosen to immigrate to this country”—i.e., most everyone else—though she makes no accounting of the forced immigration of convict indenture in the colonial period, the brutal “coolie” contract labor of Chinese immigrants in the 19th century, or the masses of immigrants who came as refugees, very often compelled to emigrate to the US because of destruction in their homelands caused by American imperialism, such as Filipinos of the last century or the Central American migrants being hounded at the Texas border at present.

In the racialist worldview, other “marginalized groups” are mere competition for spoils. So, pointing her finger at “Asian immigrants and their children,” Hannah-Jones condemns “this idea that unique efforts to address the extraordinary conditions of people who were enslaved or descended from slavery [are] unfair to another group.” And she laments that affirmative action programs have “flattened all African-descended people into a single category, *regardless of their particular lineage*,” [emphasis added]. This, Hannah-Jones says, has unduly benefited unworthy African and Afro-Caribbean immigrants: “At elite universities, research shows, the Black population consists disproportionately of immigrants and children of immigrants rather than students whose ancestors were enslaved here.”

Hannah-Jones does not acknowledge it, but her positions are taken, point for point, from a right-wing black nationalist organization called American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS). Wikipedia summarizes ADOS members’ positions thusly:

They want colleges, employers and the federal government to prioritize ADOS and argue that affirmative action policies originally designed to help ADOS have been used largely to benefit other groups. Supporters of the ADOS movement say they should have their own ethnic designation on census forms and college applications, and should not be lumped in with other Black people—namely modern Black African immigrants to the United States and Black immigrants from the Caribbean.

ADOS opposes immigration and has won accolades from fascists including Ann Coulter and Ali Alexander, a progenitor of the “Stop the Steal” myth that the 2020 election was stolen. The founder of ADOS, Yvette Carnell, has even openly defended the use of the Nazi slogan “blood and soil,” in a Twitter post about black Americans’ service in US foreign wars—in remarks very similar to rhetoric in Hannah-Jones’ lead essay to the 1619 Project. “And what does ‘Blood and Soil’ mean?,” Carnell wrote. “It certainly means to me that #ADOS have fought in every American war since this country’s inception, and yes, we want the fruit of that citizenship.” In her “framing” article of the 1619 Project, Hannah-Jones wrote, “In every war this nation has waged since that first one, black Americans have fought.”

## Radical Reconstruction and Jim Crow segregation

Hannah-Jones’ call for a genealogical approach to race is built on a deeply false presentation of history, in which the affirmative action programs of the late 1960s and early 1970s are portrayed as the apotheosis of both the Radical Reconstruction period after the Civil War and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

To Hannah-Jones, these advances, “moments of national clarity” she calls them, inevitably gave way to “white backlash.” But Hannah-Jones is not able to say why it is in history that at some moments “white people in power embraced the idea that racial subordination is antidemocratic” and at other times new “alignment[s] of white power against racial justice and redress” emerged. With race as her exclusive focus and her sole framework of analysis, any attempt at an explanation would be mere tautology.

Thus, while in the 1619 Project Hannah-Jones insisted that “black Americans fought back alone” to redeem American democracy, now she allows some room for the white Radical Republicans of the 1860s. But she cannot explain why these radicals came to power, why they were returned to office election after election by overwhelmingly white districts in states like Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, or why their radical faction of the Republican Party ultimately lost power. To do so would be to recognize that Radical Reconstruction fell apart not on the shoals of “white backlash,” but on those of capitalist property.

The most radical of the Republicans, led by Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania, sought to forge a coalition in the South consisting of the freed slaves and poor whites, many of whom had remained loyal to the Union in the Civil War. Stevens, condemned as a “leveler” by his opponents, was convinced that the means to achieve this was through the confiscation of the land from the treacherous southern plantation owners and its re-division among the poor, black and white alike. “In Steven’s view,” Eric Foner concludes, “the confiscation plan would allow southern Republicans to transcend the troublesome race issue by uniting freedmen and poor whites on an economic basis.”

There had even been a precedent for such a measure during the war, in Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman’s Special Field Order 15, issued early in 1865 and the origin of the slogan of giving out “40 acres and a mule” to freed slaves—an entirely justified demand after “two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil,” in Lincoln’s words.

Lincoln’s Republicans had overseen the largest seizure of private property in history prior to Lenin’s Bolsheviks, in the form of the uncompensated freeing of the slaves. In this, its destruction of slavery, the Republican Party was a revolutionary party. Yet the Republican Party was also a bourgeois party. This part of its nature had been nurtured by the stunning development of capitalist industry and finance during the war. Moreover, as Marx had anticipated, the Civil War had likewise given a

mighty impulse to the development of the working class. He wrote in *Capital*,

In the United States of North America, every independent movement of the workers was paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded. But out of the death of slavery a new life at once arose. The first fruit of the Civil War was the eight hours' agitation that ran with the seven-leagued boots of the locomotive from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California.

In this context of rising labor struggles in the North, the dominant factions of the Republican Party began to fear Stevens and his redistribution plans—including the *New York Times*, whose present defense of private property is hardly new. In 1867, in response to Stevens' call for the confiscation and re-division of the southern oligarchy's lands, the *Times* wrote:

If Congress is to take cognizance of the claims of labor against capital ... there can be no decent pretense for confining the task to the slave-holder of the South. It is a question not of humanity, not of loyalty, but of the fundamental relation of industry to capital; and sooner or later, if begun in the South, it will find its way into the cities of the North. ... *An attempt to justify the confiscation of Southern land under the pretense of bringing justice to the freedmen, strikes at the root of all property rights in both sections.* It concerns Massachusetts quite as much as Mississippi. [emphasis added]

Whatever remained that had been radical in the Republican Party did not survive the 1870s. Stevens died in 1868—"an emancipation of the Republican party," said the conservative James G. Blaine. Then came the Paris Commune of 1871, which terrified an American capitalist class that was rapidly enriching itself at the expense of a growing working class. The *Times* admitted that the Commune revealed the explosive force that lay

beneath every large city—not so easily exploded in America as in Europe—but existing with all its terrible elements even here ... the toiling, ignorant and impoverished multitude, demanding an equal share in the wealth of the rich.

These fears were warranted. The class struggle hit the US itself with tremendous force in "the Great Uprising of 1877," a massive strike of railroad workers, sympathy walkouts, and general strikes that stretched across the country—and which came, not incidentally, the very year Reconstruction in the South came to a final end.

Hannah-Jones' subtitle for her discussion of Radical Reconstruction—"The End of Slavery, and the Instant Backlash"—betrays confusion over the period's politics and even its basic chronology. Reconstruction passed through several phases between 1865 and 1877—presidential, congressional and military, as traditionally categorized by historians. Hannah-Jones collapses all of these together, and then asserts that the formal conclusion of Reconstruction in 1877 brought to an end "the nation's first experiment with race-based redress and multiracial

democracy."

Yet forms of interracial political cooperation, limited as they were, actually continued through the 1880s and into the 1890s, centered largely on widespread agrarian protest among sharecroppers, and to a lesser extent strikes and union organizing among southern wage laborers. It was the threatening interracial *potential* of this movement that brought the "Bourbon restoration" of the southern oligarchy and its imposition of Jim Crow segregation, as C. Vann Woodward showed long ago in his *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, a book Martin Luther King Jr. called "the bible of the civil rights movement."

## The civil rights movement

Hannah-Jones' presentation of the civil rights movement, "Using Race to End Racial Inequality," imagines, first, that the entire *purpose* of the mass movement of oppressed black workers in the South was oriented toward affirmative action programs. In the racialist way of seeing things, creating rich black people—but only those descended from American slavery!—must really have been what the civil rights movement and indeed all of history is about. Equality will not have been achieved until there is no "disparity" between the number of white and black billionaires and millionaires, relative to their shares of the population!

In fact, the civil rights movement, under the leadership of King, had focused, first and foremost, on the achievement of legal equality for blacks in the South. This entailed a fight against Jim Crow segregation, which since the 1890s had enforced a second-class citizenship on blacks. This is why the civil rights movement invoked the language of color-blindness. It is a basic historical reality, endlessly attested to by the archive, which Hannah-Jones' essay cannot wiggle its way around.

The Jim Crow regime stripped African Americans of the right to vote, constantly menaced the exercise of other citizenship rights, and imposed all manner of day-to-day humiliations. It was propped up by the one-party rule of the Democrats and ultimately by murderous violence—some 4,000 blacks were lynched between the 1870s and 1950s. But it must be stressed, first, that Jim Crow's central purpose dating back to the 1890s was to segregate white workers from black, and, second, that its degradation of black workers in no way benefited white workers. The South, as a whole, remained the poorest part of the country, with the lowest wages, the worst public education, and, most crucially, the weakest labor movement.

The failure of the American labor movement to take the lead in combating Jim Crow left the initiative to the black middle class, led by the clergy. Yet by the late 1960s, King became aware of the fundamental limitation of a perspective whose aim was the achievement of a nominal equality before the law under conditions of enormous social inequality. Furthermore, the legalistic perspective of the civil rights movement had little appeal to young black workers in the urban North, where segregation and other forms of discrimination did not depend on laws, but on capitalist politicians and capitalist markets.

It was at this point that King launched his interracial Poor People's Campaign and came out in the open against the Vietnam War, then overseen by Democratic President Lyndon Johnson—a figure Hannah-Jones lauds in her essay. The head of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, had long been convinced that King was a communist. The FBI's campaign of wiretapping and harassment intensified until his assassination on April 4, 1968—an event for which King's widow, Coretta Scott King, never accepted the official narrative. Whatever the FBI's role may have been, King's murder was a political killing that helped to clear the way for right-wing tendencies in the leadership of the civil rights movement to take

hold.

As is her habit, Hannah-Jones quotes selectively to enlist King to her essentially pecuniary aims. She cites a passage of a 1968 speech in which King said, “A society that has done something special against the Negro for hundreds of years must now do something special for him.” Hannah-Jones must hope that her audience will not actually read King’s speech, delivered four days before his assassination. It was one of his more radical. The majority of it was given over to a discussion of his plans for the Poor People’s Campaign to march on Washington—he was not announcing plans for an “American Descendants of Slavery March on Washington for Seats at Yale.”

The second-largest portion of speech was dedicated to his most searing indictment of the Vietnam War—“one of the most unjust wars that has ever been fought in the history of the world”—and his fears that American militarism might ultimately bring “nuclear annihilation” leading to “a civilization plunged into the abyss of annihilation, and our earthly habitat … transformed into an inferno that even the mind of Dante could not imagine.” Today’s money-obsessed racialists do not speak in this language.

In any case, affirmative action was no victory of the civil rights movement. It was a ruling class policy response to the collapse of the imperialist war in Vietnam, the erosion of the global supremacy of the US dollar, and the mass wave of urban uprisings in the late 1960s.

The ruling class embrace of affirmative action in the late 1960s and early 1970s signaled that the era of social reformism, which had lasted from the election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932 to the collapse of the Johnson administration in the late 1960s, was over. Instead of broad-based policies designed to ameliorate conditions affecting masses of working class people regardless of race, affirmative action imposed a policy of cultivating a black elite loyal to the existing order, what Republican President Richard Nixon hailed as “black capitalism.”

It has succeeded in this aim. Meanwhile, the absolute failure of affirmative action to benefit the broad masses of black workers is manifest in the devastation of America’s cities and rural South, the two areas where most of the African American population remains concentrated. Indeed, since the adoption of affirmative action politics in the late 1960s and early 1970s, social inequality among blacks has increased as rapidly as it has in the population as a whole.

It is this wealthy, grasping layer of the black bourgeoisie that Hannah-Jones represents. Together with other identity-based constituencies, as well as the privileged trade union bureaucracy and the highest strata of tenured professors, it forms “the base” of the Democratic Party.

## Conclusion

Hannah-Jones’ essay is more than 11,000 words long. Yet the following words and phrases make no appearance: “capitalism,” “working class,” “poverty,” “union,” “imperialism,” “colonialism,” and “militarism.” These last omissions are most egregious. Hannah-Jones’ followers wish her to be taken as standing in the tradition of what has been called “the black freedom struggle.” But unlike King, W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, Hubert Harrison, Claude McKay and so many more, and unlike even radical black nationalist figures such as Malcolm X, Hannah-Jones offers not a peep of criticism of American imperialism, which is currently responsible for the genocide being carried out against the Palestinian people. There is no mention in her essay of the fact that the American war machine devours more than half of the discretionary federal budget, while programs that benefit working class people of all races and nationalities—including public education, Medicare, and the pittance set

aside for the arts—are left to starve. Hannah-Jones, instead, is concerned about seats at Yale University.

She represents a different tradition—that of black capitalism. Her forebears are Marcus Garvey and her intellectual idol, Lerone Bennett Jr., not Du Bois and King. Hannah-Jones does not question the existence of capitalist private property, which in the end is the progenitor of all forms of inequality and scarcity. She merely demands a greater share of the spoils for the African American elite. This represents no threat to the status quo. Indeed, her sort of politics is encouraged and rewarded by the powers-that-be, precisely *because* racial division among the working class and the youth is fundamental to the perpetuation of that very status quo.

Which is why, of course, Hannah-Jones finds platforms for her work with the *Times*, Shell Oil, and Walt Disney; why she has been given her own center at Howard University; and why she has been showered with money from corporate foundations such as the Ford and MacArthur foundations. If her thought were at all “oppositional,” none of this would happen.



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