

The 1619 Project revisited: A retrospective evaluation in light of Trump's assault on democracy

Tom Mackaman, David North
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Six years ago this month, on August 14, 2019, the *New York Times* launched its 1619 Project—a sprawling, multi-media attack on the American Revolution and Civil War, the two revolutions that shaped the American republic and democracy.

The “true founding” of the United States, Project creator Nikole Hannah-Jones claimed, was not in 1776. It was instead in 1619, when the archive first attests to the arrival of enslaved Africans in colonial Virginia. The rest of American history, the 1619 Project insisted, was one long, dark night of racism, only occasionally countered by the efforts of black Americans who “fought back alone” to redeem democracy.

In launching this enterprise, the *Times* proclaimed that it was setting out to alter decisively how the American Revolution and the Civil War were taught to students. The text of the original essays that comprised the August 14 publication was reprinted in the tens of thousands for distribution to schools throughout the country. Henceforth, the American Revolution and Civil War would be understood as shameful chapters in the history of American racism. Its leaders, from Washington to Lincoln, would be forever deprived of their undeserved reputation as heroes of democracy.

Immediately recognizing the *Times*' 1619 Project as an exercise in historical falsification, the *World Socialist Web Site* published a systematic rebuttal on September 3, 2019. This was followed by a series of interviews with leading historians, including James McPherson, Gordon Wood, Victoria Bynum, James Oakes, Dolores Janiewski, Adolph Reed Jr., Richard Carwardine and Clayborne Carson. These articles and interviews were read hundreds of thousands of times and drew national and international media attention.

On July 4, 2020, the WSWS hosted a webinar with Wood, Carwardine, Oakes, Bynum and Carson. The discussion drew an international audience from 72 countries, with about 3,000 live viewers and many thousands more in the following days. The panel addressed major historical problems, including the impact of the Declaration of Independence; the roles of Jefferson, Lincoln and Douglass; the global effects of the Civil War; historiographical debates about revolution, class and race; and the deepening crisis of social inequality.

The WSWS intervention, which also included a lecture series held at major American universities, laid bare the 1619 Project's

major errors and distortions: its portrayal of slavery as a uniquely American “original sin” unconnected to the emerging global capitalist system; its erasure of the multiracial character of the abolitionist, civil rights and labor movements; its insistence that all contemporary social ills descend from “anti-Black racism” allegedly rooted in a national “DNA”; and Hannah-Jones’ ignorant claim that generations of “white historians” had censored discussion of slavery.

As the WSWS explained, these fabrications revealed an overarching effort by the *Times* to promote racial division among American workers and youth by imposing a racialist myth on American history—an attempt, in the words of *Times* editor Dean Baquet, “to teach our readers to think a little bit more” in a racial way. The Project would itself both symbolize and project an almost zoological theory of history, which posited that only “black people” could intuit “black history.” *New York Times Magazine* Editor Jake Silverstein said, “We knew from the beginning that we wanted the magazine to be almost entirely comprised of contributions from black writers, thinkers, photographers, and artists. This was non-negotiable.”

Of all the 1619 Project's many distortions and outright fabrications, its central lie, and the one from which all the others flowed, was its claim that the American Revolution and Civil War were not progressive, world-historic milestones in the struggle for democracy and human liberation—in spite of the many limitations imposed on them by their times. They were indeed not revolutions at all, according to Hannah-Jones, but counterrevolutions animated by supra-historical white hatred of blacks. The British Empire, she suggested, was the progressive force in the American Revolution. As for the Civil War, there was no difference between North and South. It was a war between equally racist brothers.

This position—with all its vast implications for both US and world history—ultimately boiled down to the claim that there never was a democratic revolution in America and that therefore it has no democracy worth defending.

Six years ago, the WSWS warned that the 1619 Project's sweeping denigration of the American Revolution and Civil War would hand a powerful weapon to the far right. “By repudiating these foundational struggles,” we explained, “the *New York Times* has provided an opportunity for Trump”—who quickly seized the opening by menacingly pledging to impose “patriotic education”

so that “our youth will be taught to love America.”

As the WSWS predicted, the 1619 Project gave ammunition to state and federal efforts to police education, ban books and enforce nationalist curricula, including most recently Trump’s attack last week on the Smithsonian Institution. The *Times*’ effort to create a black nationalist reframing of American history has provided an opening for the attempt to officially enforce a white nationalist version.

The politics of the 1619 Project played no small role in Trump’s victory. The Democratic Party’s cynical belief that the focus on race would outweigh social and economic grievances was a disastrous political miscalculation. The 2024 election saw pronounced shifts among poor and working class voters—including a historic increase in support for Trump from black Americans, more than doubling his share from previous cycles.

In reconsidering the struggle over the 1619 Project six years later, we have no interest in scoring points on the beleaguered and largely discredited Hannah-Jones, who was after all never more than a figurehead. Our purpose, rather, is to pose the question of what lessons can be drawn from the experience.

One of the crucial problems exposed by the entire affair is the protracted decline in American intellectual life. The decades-long promotion of identity politics in academia and the corresponding attack on Marxism, materialism, social class and the very concept of progress in history—what the postmodernists deride as a “meta-narrative”—has contributed significantly to the political vulnerability of the population before the fascist threat.

If, as Hannah-Jones claimed, the promise of liberty and equality spelled out in the Declaration of Independence “were false when they were written”; if, as she insisted, the Civil War was waged to achieve a “reconciliation with the former Confederates and the restoration of white supremacy,” then there is no American democracy to defend. Not the Declaration of Independence; not the Constitution; not the Bill of Rights; not the Civil War Amendments that expanded citizenship and due process to the entire population, including the children of immigrants—a massive share of the American population past and present that the 1619 Project mentions not at all.

The 1619 Project must itself be understood in class terms. It is not simply that the *Times* was “mistaken” about history or that it miscalculated in its embrace of racialist politics before the 2020 elections. The 1619 Project catered to the worldview and class interests of the Democratic Party’s “base” in the privileged upper-middle class. It is this layer of the population that seeks to obscure the class question in the past and present in favor of various forms of identity, through which it hopes to milk positions and benefits in the present.

The *Times* was clearly not alone. In the wake of its publication, “left” academics and the various pseudo-left groupings that orbit around the Democratic Party, as if to a man and a woman, rallied to endorse and propagate the 1619 Project’s claims, framing dissent as bad faith or even racist and shutting down genuine scholarly debate. This attack was aimed, above all else, at the WSWS and the principled scholars it had interviewed.

And where are these forces now? What have they to say about the Gaza genocide? The growth of dictatorship and inequality?

The advancing world war? Hannah-Jones, who made millions off the 1619 Project, has been mute, authoring one article in the last two years for the *Times*—though in a recent MSNBC interview she claimed that Trump’s policies are aimed at making “working white people … feel racially ascendant and powerful.”

As for the pseudo-left groups that proclaimed the 1619 Project, they have been largely silent in the face of the encroaching dictatorship of the Trump administration. *Jacobin*, for example, has not produced a single article or comment opposing Trump’s deployment of federal troops to Washington D.C. Its editors are awaiting a lead from the Democratic Party.

Working class people—white, black and immigrant—for whom the defense of democracy is a life-and-death issue, cannot be so indifferent. On June 14, 2025, more than 6 million people participated in the “No Kings” protests across over 2,000 cities and towns throughout the country, making it one of the largest coordinated demonstrations in US history. The massive turnout saw protesters carrying handmade “No Kings” signs—an explicit invocation of the anti-monarchist spirit and democratic principles of the American Revolution—as they rallied in opposition to rising authoritarianism.

Long ago, Marx perceived that the first two American revolutions augured a dramatic development of the class struggle. In the American Civil War, the workers of Europe “felt instinctively that the star-spangled banner carried the destiny of their class,” he wrote to Lincoln. “[Just] as the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so the American Antislavery War will do for the working classes.”

Now, following the monarchical Tories of the 1770s and the aristocratic slavocracy of the 1860s, a third and much more violent ruling class, represented by Trump, confronts the population. It is not at all an accident that Trump is attempting to rehabilitate the leaders of the Old South. It is as if he is trying to achieve what he thinks America would have looked like if the Confederacy had won the Civil War.

But Trump as well as the 1619 Project are very wrong about American history. Among the working class’s most powerful weapons against oligarchy is the revolutionary legacy of the American Revolution and Civil War. These epochal struggles show that no entrenched power—monarchs or slaveholders or capitalists—is beyond the reach of revolution, provided the revolution’s political program corresponds with the demands of the times. This tradition of radical, universal egalitarianism, born of Enlightenment ideals and carried forward in the Marxist movement, provides the progressive alternative to the politics of racial and national division.



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