

# The New York Times's 1619 Project: A racist falsification of American history—Part One

By Niles Niemuth, Tom Mackaman and David North  
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*This is the first of a two-part series, the second part will be published on September 4.*

“The 1619 Project,” published by the *New York Times* as a special 100-page edition of its Sunday magazine on August 19, presents and interprets American history entirely through the prism of race and racial conflict. The occasion for this publication is the 400th anniversary of the initial arrival of 20 African slaves at Port Comfort in Virginia, a British colony in North America. On the very next day, the slaves were traded for food.

The Project, according to the *Times*, intends to “reframe the country’s history, understanding 1619 as our true founding, and placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are.”

Despite the pretense of establishing the United States’ “true” foundation, the 1619 Project is a politically motivated falsification of history. Its aim is to create a historical narrative that legitimizes the effort of the Democratic Party to construct an electoral coalition based on the prioritizing of personal “identities”—i.e., gender, sexual preference, ethnicity, and, above all, race.

The *Times* is promoting the Project with an unprecedented and lavishly financed publicity blitz. It is working with the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, which has developed a proposed teaching curriculum that will be sent to schools for teachers to use in their classes. Hundreds of thousands of extra copies of the magazine and a special supplement have been printed for free distribution at schools, libraries and museums across the country. Nikole Hannah-Jones, the staff writer and New America Foundation fellow who first pitched the idea for the Project, oversaw its production and authored the introduction, will be sent on a national lecture tour of schools.

The essays featured in the magazine are organized around the central premise that all of American history is rooted in race hatred—specifically, the uncontrollable hatred of “black people” by “white people.” Hannah-Jones writes in the series’ introduction: “Anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country.”

This is a false and dangerous conception. DNA is a chemical molecule that contains the genetic code of living organisms and determines their physical characteristics and development. The transfer of this critical biological term to the study of a country—even if meant only in a metaphorical sense—leads to bad history and reactionary politics. Countries do not have DNA, they have historically formed economic structures, antagonistic classes and complex political relationships. These do not exist apart from a certain level of technological development, nor independently of a more or less developed network of global economic interconnections.

The methodology that underlies the 1619 Project is idealist (i.e., it

derives social being from thought, rather than the other way around) and, in the most fundamental sense of the word, irrationalist. All of history is to be explained from the existence of a supra-historical emotional impulse. Slavery is viewed and analyzed not as a specific economically rooted form of the exploitation of labor, but, rather, as the manifestation of white racism. But where does this racism come from? It is embedded, claims Hannah-Jones, in the historical DNA of American “white people.” Thus, it must persist independently of any change in political or economic conditions.

Hannah-Jones’s reference to DNA is part of a growing tendency to derive racial antagonisms from innate biological processes. Democratic Party politician Stacey Abrams, in an essay published recently in *Foreign Affairs*, claims that whites and African Americans are separated by an “intrinsic difference.”

This irrational and scientifically absurd claim serves to legitimize the reactionary view—entirely compatible with the political perspective of fascism—that blacks and whites are hostile and incompatible species.

In yet another article, published in the current edition of *Foreign Affairs*, the neurologist Robert Sapolsky argues that the antagonism between human groups is rooted in biology. Extrapolating from bloody territorial conflicts between chimpanzees, with whom humans “share more than 98 percent of their DNA,” Sapolsky asserts that understanding “the dynamics of human group identity, including the resurgence of nationalism—that potentially most destructive form of in-group bias—requires grasping the biological and cognitive underpinnings that shape them.”

Sapolsky’s simplistic dissolution of history into biology recalls not only the reactionary invocation of “Social Darwinism” to legitimize imperialist conquest by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century imperialists, but also the efforts of German geneticists to provide a pseudo-scientific justification for Nazi anti-Semitism and racism.

Dangerous and reactionary ideas are wafting about in bourgeois academic and political circles. No doubt, the authors of the Project 1619 essays would deny that they are predicting race war, let alone justifying fascism. But ideas have a logic; and authors bear responsibility for the political conclusions and consequences of their false and misguided arguments.

American slavery is a monumental subject with vast and enduring historical and political significance. The events of 1619 are part of that history. But what occurred at Port Comfort is one episode in the global history of slavery, which extends back into the ancient world, and of the origins and development of the world capitalist system. There is a vast body of literature dealing with the widespread practice of slavery outside the Americas. As Professor G. Ogo Nwokeji of the Department of African American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, has explained,

slavery was practiced by African societies. It existed in West Africa “well before the fifteenth century, when the Europeans arrived there via the Atlantic Ocean.”[1]

Historian Rudolph T. Ware III of the University of Michigan writes, “Between the beginning of the fifteenth century and the end of the eighteenth, millions lived and died as slaves in African Muslim societies.”[2] Among the most important of contemporary scholarly works on the subject is *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, originally published in 1983, by the Canadian historian Paul E. Lovejoy. He explained:

Slavery has been an important phenomenon throughout history. It has been found in many places, from classical antiquity to very recent times. Africa has been intimately connected with this history, both as a major source of slaves for ancient civilizations, the Islamic world, India, and the Americas, and as one of the principal areas where slavery was common. Indeed, in Africa slavery lasted well into the twentieth century—notably longer than in the Americas. Such antiquity and persistence requires explanation, both to understand the historical development of slavery in Africa and to evaluate the relative importance of the slave trade to this development. Broadly speaking, slavery expanded in at least three stages—1350 to 1600, 1600 to 1800, and 1800 to 1900—by which time slavery had become a fundamental feature of the African political economy. [3]

Professor Lovejoy remarked in the preface to the Third Edition of his now-classic study that one of his aims in undertaking his research “was to confront the reality that there was slavery in the history of Africa, at a time when some romantic visionaries and hopeful nationalists wanted to deny the clear facts.” [4]

In relation to the New World, the phenomenon of slavery in modern history cannot be understood apart from its role in the economic development of capitalism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As Karl Marx explained in the chapter titled “The Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist” in Volume One of *Das Kapital* :

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation. On their heels treads the commercial war of the European nations, with the globe for a theatre. It begins with the revolt of the Netherlands from Spain, assumes giant dimensions in England’s Anti-Jacobin War, and is still going on in the opium wars against China, &c.

Marx’s analysis inspired the critical insight of the brilliant West Indian historian Eric Williams, who wrote in his pioneering study *Capitalism and Slavery*, published in 1944:

Slavery in the Caribbean has been too narrowly identified with the Negro. A racial twist has thereby been given to what is basically an economic phenomenon. Slavery was not born of racism: rather, racism was the consequence of slavery. Unfree labor in the New World was brown, white, black, and yellow; Catholic, Protestant and

pagan.

The formation and development of the United States cannot be understood apart from the international economic and political processes that gave rise to capitalism and the New World. Slavery was an international economic institution that stretched from the heart of Africa to the shipyards of Britain, the banking houses of Amsterdam, and the plantations of South Carolina, Brazil and the Caribbean. Every colonial power was involved, from the Dutch who operated slave trading posts in West Africa, to the Portuguese who imported millions of slaves to Brazil. An estimated 15 to 20 million Africans were forcibly sent to the Americas throughout the entire period of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Of these, 400,000 ended up in the 13 British colonies/United States.

Slavery was the inescapable and politically tragic legacy of the global foundation of the United States. It is not difficult to recognize the contradiction between the ideals proclaimed by the leaders of the American Revolution—which were expressed with extraordinary force by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence—and the existence of slavery in the newly formed United States.

But history is not a morality tale. The efforts to discredit the Revolution by focusing on the alleged hypocrisy of Jefferson and other founders contribute nothing to an understanding of history. The American Revolution cannot be understood as the sum of the subjective intentions and moral limitations of those who led it. The world-historical significance of the Revolution is best understood through an examination of its objective causes and consequences.

The analysis provided by Williams refutes the scurrilous attempt by the 1619 Project to portray the Revolution as a sinister attempt to uphold the slave system. Apart from the massive political impact of Jefferson’s Declaration and the subsequent overthrow of British rule, Williams stressed the objective impact of the Revolution on the economic viability of slavery. He wrote:

”When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another...” Jefferson wrote only part of the truth. It was economic, not political, bands that were being dissolved. A new age had begun. The year 1776 marked the Declaration of Independence and the publication of the Wealth of Nations. Far from accentuating the value of the sugar islands [in the Caribbean], American independence marked the beginning of their uninterrupted decline, and it was a current saying at the time that the British ministry had lost not only thirteen colonies but eight islands as well.

It was not an accident that the victorious conclusion of the revolutionary war in 1783 was followed just four years later by the famous call of English abolitionist William Wilberforce for the ending of Britain’s slave trade.

In examining the emergence of British opposition to the slave trade, Williams made a fundamental point about the study of history that serves as an indictment of the subjective and anti-historical method employed by the 1619 Project. He wrote:

The decisive forces in the period of history we have discussed are the developing economic forces. These economic changes are gradual, imperceptible, but they have an irresistible cumulative effect. Men, pursuing their interests, are rarely aware of the ultimate results of their activity. The commercial capitalism of the eighteenth

century developed the wealth of Europe by means of slavery and monopoly. But in so doing it helped to create the industrial capitalism of the nineteenth century, which turned round and destroyed the power of commercial capitalism, slavery, and all its works. Without a grasp of these economic changes the history of the period is meaningless.

The victory of the American Revolution and the establishment of the United States did not solve the problem of slavery. The economic and political conditions for its abolition had not sufficiently matured. But the economic development of the United States—the simultaneous development of industry in the North and the noxious growth of the cotton-based plantation system in the South (as a consequence of the invention of the cotton gin in 1793)—intensified the contradictions between two increasingly incompatible economic systems—one based on wage labor and the other on slavery.

*To be continued...*

[1] *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, Volume 3, AD 1420-AD1804, edited by David Eltis and Stanley L. Engerman, [Cambridge: 2011], p. 81

[2] *Ibid*, p. 47

[3] Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery* (Cambridge: 2012), p. 1

[4] *Ibid*, Location 489

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