

The New York Times's 1619 Project: A racist falsification of American and world history—Part Two

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This is the second of a two-part series.

The United States heaved from crisis to crisis in the seven decades that separated the adoption of the Constitution and the election of President George Washington in 1789 from Abraham Lincoln's inauguration and the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. None of the repeated compromises which sought to balance the country between slave and free states, from the Missouri Compromise of 1820 to the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, were ever able to finally settle the issue.

It is worth bearing in mind that the 87 years of history invoked by Lincoln when he spoke at Gettysburg in 1863 is the same span of time that separates our present day from the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932. The explosive socio-economic tendencies which would do away with the entire economic system of slavery developed and erupted in this relatively concentrated period of time.

The founding of the United States set into motion a crisis which resulted in the Civil War, the second American Revolution, in which hundreds of thousands of whites gave their lives to finally put an end to slavery. It must be stressed that this was not an accidental, let alone unconscious, outcome of the Civil War. In the end, the war resulted in the greatest expropriation of private property in world history, not equaled until the Russian Revolution in 1917, when the working class, led by the Bolshevik Party, took state power for the first and so far, only time in world history.

Hannah-Jones does not view Lincoln as “the Great Emancipator,” as the freed slaves called him in the 1860s, but as a garden-variety racist who held “black people [as] the obstacle to national unity.” The author simply disregards Lincoln's own words—for example, the Gettysburg Address and the magisterial Second Inaugural Address—as well as the books written by historians such as Eric Foner, James McPherson, Allen Guelzo, David Donald, Ronald C. White, Stephen Oates, Richard Carwardine and many others that demonstrate Lincoln's emergence as a revolutionary leader fully committed to the destruction of slavery.

But an honest portrayal of Lincoln would contradict Hannah-Jones' claims that “black Americans fought back alone” to “make America a democracy.” So too would a single solitary mention, anywhere in the magazine, of the 2.2 million Union soldiers who fought and the 365,000 who died to end slavery.

Likewise, the interracial character of the abolitionist movement is blotted out. The names William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Elijah Lovejoy, John Brown, Thaddeus Stevens, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, among others, do not appear in her essay. A couple of abolitionists are selectively quoted for their criticism of the Constitution, but Hannah-Jones dares not mention that for the antislavery movement Jefferson's Declaration of Independence was, in the words of the late

historian David Brion Davis, their “touchstone, the sacred scripture.”

Hannah-Jones and the other 1619 Project contributors—claiming that slavery was the unique “original sin” of the United States, and discrediting the American Revolution and the Civil War as elaborate conspiracies to perpetuate white racism—have little to add for the rest of American history. Nothing ever changed. Slavery was simply replaced by Jim Crow segregation, and this in turn has given way to the permanent condition of racism that is the inescapable fate of being a “white American.” It all goes back to 1619 and “the root of the *endemic* racism that we still *cannot purge* from this nation to this day.” [1] [emphasis added]

This is not simply a “reframing” of history. It is an attack and falsification that ignores more than a half-century of scholarship. There is not the slightest indication that Hannah-Jones (or any of her co-essayists) have even heard of, let alone read, the work on slavery carried out by Williams, Davis, or Peter Kolchin; on the American Revolution by Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood; on the political conceptions that motivated union soldiers by James McPherson; on Reconstruction by Eric Foner; on Jim Crow segregation by C. Vann Woodward; or on the Great Migration by James N. Gregory or Joe William Trotter.

What is left out of the *Times'* racist morality tale is breathtaking, even from the vantage point of African-American scholarship. The invocation of white racism takes the place of any concrete examination of the economic, political and social history of the country.

There is no examination of the historical context, foremost the development of the class struggle, within which the struggle of the African-American population developed in the century that followed the Civil War. And there is no reference to the transformation of the United States into an industrial colossus and the most powerful imperialist country between 1865 and 1917, the year of its entry into World War I.

While the 1619 Project and its stable of well-to-do authors find in the labor exploitation of slavery a talisman to explain all of history, they pass over in deafening silence the exploitation inherent in wage labor.

A reader of the 1619 Project would not know that the struggle against slave labor gave way to a violent struggle against wage slavery, in which countless workers were killed. There is no reference to the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 which spread like wildfire along the railways from Baltimore to St. Louis and was only suppressed by the deployment of federal troops, nor to the emergence of the Knights of Labor, the fight for the eight-hour day and the Haymarket Massacre, the Homestead Steel Strike of 1892, the Pullman strike of 1894, the formation of the AFL, the founding of the Socialist Party, the emergence of the IWW, the Ludlow Massacre, the Great Steel Strike of 1919, the countless other labor struggles that followed World War I, and finally the emergence of the CIO and the massive industrial struggles of the 1930s.

In short, there is no class struggle and, therefore, there is no real history of the African-American population and the events which shaped a population of freed slaves into a critical section of the working class. Replacing real history with a mythic racial narrative, the 1619 Project ignores the actual social development of the African-American population over the last 150 years.

Nowhere do any of the authors discuss the Great Migration between 1916 and 1970 in which millions of blacks, and whites, uprooted from the rural South and flocked to take jobs in urban areas across the US, particularly in the industrialized North. James P. Cannon, the founder of American Trotskyism, captured the revolutionary implications of this process, for both African-American and white workers, in his inimitable prose:

American capitalism took hundreds of thousands of Negroes from the South, and exploiting their ignorance, and their poverty, and their fears, and their individual helplessness, herded them into the steel mills as strikebreakers in the steel strike of 1919. And in the brief space of one generation, by its mistreatment, abuse and exploitation of these innocent and ignorant Negro strikebreakers, this same capitalism succeeded in transforming them and their sons into one of the most militant and reliable detachments of the great victorious steel strike of 1946.

This same capitalism took tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands of prejudiced hillbillies from the South, many of them members and sympathizers of the Ku Klux Klan; and thinking to use them, with their ignorance and their prejudices, as a barrier against unionism, sucked them into the auto and rubber factories of Detroit, Akron and other industrial centers. There it sweated them, humiliated them and drove and exploited them until it finally changed them and made new men out of them. In that harsh school the imported southerners learned to exchange the insignia of the KKK for the union button of the CIO, and to turn the Klansman's fiery cross into a bonfire to warm pickets at the factory gate. [2]

As late as 1910, nearly 90 percent of African-Americans lived in the former slave states, overwhelmingly in conditions of rural isolation. By the 1970s, they were highly urbanized and proletarianized. Black workers had gone through the experiences of the great industrial strikes, alongside whites, in cities like Detroit, Pittsburgh and Chicago. It is no historical accident that the civil rights movement emerged in the South in Birmingham, Alabama, a center of the steel industry and the locus of the actions of communist workers, black and white.

The struggle of wage labor against capital at the point of production united workers across racial boundaries. And so, in the fevered rhetoric of the Jim Crow politician, the civil rights movement was equated with communism and the fear of "race-mixing"—that is, that the working masses, black and white, might be united around their common interests.

Just as it leaves out the history of the working class, the 1619 Project fails to provide political history. There is no accounting of the role played by the Democratic Party, an alliance of Northern industrialists and machine politicians, on one side, and the Southern slavocracy and then Jim Crow politicians, in consciously pitting white and black workers against each other by stoking up race hatred.

In the numerous articles which make up the 1619 Project, the name of Martin Luther King, Jr. appears just once, and then only in a photo caption. The reason for this is that King's political outlook was opposed to the racist narrative advanced by the *Times*. King did not condemn the American Revolution and the Civil War. He did not believe that racism was a permanent characteristic of "whiteness." He called for the

integration of blacks and whites and set as his goal the ultimate dissolution of race itself. Targeted and harassed as a "communist" by the FBI, King was murdered after launching the interracial Poor People's Campaign and announcing his opposition to the Vietnam War.

King encouraged the involvement of white civil rights activists, several of whom lost their lives in the South, including Viola Liuzzo, the wife of a Teamsters union organizer from Detroit. His statement following the murders of the three young civil rights workers in 1964, Michael Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman (two of whom were white) was an impassioned condemnation of racism and segregation. King clearly does not fit into Hannah-Jones' narrative.

But, in its most significant and telling omission, the 1619 Project says nothing about the event that had the greatest impact on the social condition of African-Americans—the Russian Revolution of 1917. Not only did this arouse and inspire broad sections of the African-American population—including countless black intellectuals, writers, and artists, among them W.E.B. Du Bois, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Paul Robeson and Lorraine Hansberry—the Revolution undermined the political foundations of American racial apartheid.

Given the 1619 Project's black nationalist narrative, it may appear surprising that nowhere in the issue do the names Malcolm X or Black Panthers appear. Unlike the black nationalists of the 1960s, Hannah-Jones does not condemn American imperialism. She boasts that "we [i.e. African-Americans] are the most likely of all racial groups to serve in the United States military," and celebrates the fact that "we" have fought "in every war this nation has waged." Hannah-Jones does not note this fact in a manner that is at all critical. She does not condemn the creation of a "volunteer" army whose recruiters prey on poverty-stricken minority youth. There is no indication that Hannah-Jones opposes the "War on Terror" and the brutal interventions in Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Somalia and Syria—all supported by the *Times*—that have killed and made homeless upwards of 20 million people. On this issue, Hannah-Jones is remarkably "color-blind." She is unaware of, or simply indifferent to, the millions of "people of color" butchered and made refugees by the American war machine in the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa.

The toxic identity politics that underlies this indifference does not serve the interests of the working class in the United States or anywhere else, which is dependent for its very survival on unifying across racial and national boundaries. It does, however, serve the class interests of privileged sections of the American upper-middle class.

In a revealing passage at the end of her essay, Hannah-Jones declares that since the 1960s "black Americans have made astounding progress, not only for ourselves but also for all Americans." She is speaking here not for her "race" but a tiny layer of the African-American elite, beneficiaries of affirmative action policies, who came to political maturity in the years leading up to and through the administration of Barack Obama, the United States' first black president.

A 2017 analysis of economic data found extreme levels of wealth inequality within racial groupings. Among those who identify as African-American the richest 10 percent controlled 75 percent of all wealth; during Obama's tenure the wealthiest 1 percent increased their share of wealth amongst all African-Americans from 19.4 percent to 40.5 percent. Meanwhile, it is estimated that the bottom half of African-American households have zero or negative wealth.

While a very narrow layer of black millionaires and billionaires has been deliberately cultivated in response to the mass unrest of the 1960s and 1970s, the conditions for working class African-Americans are worse than they were 40 years ago. This has been the period of deindustrialization, which saw the systematic shutdown of auto, steel and other factories across the United States, devastating working-class cities such as Detroit, Milwaukee, and Youngstown, Ohio.

The major social gains won by workers in the bitter struggles of the 20th century have been rolled back so that an immense amount of wealth could be transferred from the bottom 90 percent of the population to the top. Poverty, declining life expectancy, deaths of despair and other forms of social misery are drawing together workers of all racial and national backgrounds.

It is no coincidence that the promotion of this racial narrative of American history by the *Times*, the mouthpiece of the Democratic Party and the privileged upper-middle-class layers it represents, comes amid the growth of class struggle in the US and around the world.

Earlier this year, auto parts workers in Matamoros, Mexico called on their American counterparts, white and black, to join them in wildcat strikes. Across the South, black, white and Hispanic workers took strike action together against telecommunications giant AT&T. In Tennessee, black and white neighbors defended an immigrant working class family against deportation. Now, the multi-racial and multi-ethnic American auto industry labor force finds itself entering a pitched battle against the global auto giants and the corrupt unions.

At the same time, opinion polls demonstrate growing support in the population for socialism—that is, the conscious political unity of the working class across all boundaries and divisions imposed on it. Under these conditions the American capitalist elite, Democrats and Republican alike, are terrified of social revolution. They are joining with their ruling class counterparts around the world in deploying sectarian politics, be it based on race, religion, nationality, ethnicity or language to block this development.

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 *Times'* executive editor, Dean Baquet, was explicit in this regard, telling staffers in a taped meeting in August that the narrative upon which the paper was focused would change from “being a story about whether the Trump campaign had colluded with Russia and obstruction of justice to being a more head-on story about the president’s character.” As a result, reporters will be directed to “write more deeply about the country, race, and other divisions.”

Baquet declared:

[R]ace and understanding of race should be a part of how we cover the American story ... one reason we all signed off on the 1619 Project and made it so ambitious and expansive was to teach our readers to think a little bit more like that. Race in the next year—and I think this is, to be frank, what I would hope you come away from this discussion with—race in the next year is going to be a huge part of the American story.

This focus on race is a mirror image of Trump’s own racial politics, and it bears a disturbing resemblance to the race-based world view of the Nazis. The central role of race in the politics of fascism was explained concisely in Trotsky’s analysis of the ideology of German fascism:

In order to raise it above history, the nation is given the support of the race. History is viewed as the emanation of the race. The qualities of the race are construed without relation to changing social conditions. Rejecting “economic thought” as base, National Socialism descends a stage lower: from economic materialism it appeals to zoologic materialism. [3]

There are many scholars, students and workers who know that the 1619 Project makes a travesty of history. It is their responsibility to take a stand and reject the coordinated attempt, spearheaded by the *Times*, to dredge up and rehabilitate a reactionary race-based falsification of American and world history.

Above all the working class must reject any such effort to divide it, efforts which will become ever more ferocious and pernicious as the class struggle develops. The great issue of this epoch is the fight for the international unity of the working class against all forms of racism, nationalism and related forms of identity politics.

In the weeks and months to come, the *World Socialist Web Site* will publicize and report on lectures that will be organized by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), in which the reactionary anti-working-class politics and historical falsifications promoted by the 1619 Project will be exposed.

Concluded

[1] *The New York Times Magazine*, August 18, 2019, p. 19.

[2] James P. Cannon, “The Coming American Revolution,” Speech delivered at the Twelfth National Convention of the Socialist Workers Party, 1946.

[3] Leon Trotsky, “*What Is National Socialism?*” available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1933/330610.htm>

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>