

Debating the 1619 Project

Janine Giordano Drake and Robert Cohen

Was slavery a vestigial social and political arrangement on a path to demise since the Declaration of Independence? Or, did it form the social and economic foundation of the emerging American republic since the very beginning? In some recent textbooks written for advanced high school students and the broader public, including Jill Lepore’s *These Truths: A History of the United States* (2018) and Wilfred McClay’s *Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story* (2019), scholars have de-emphasized the importance of slavery in their narratives of the early American republic. Lepore argued that “The American experiment” rests on the three “political ideals” named by Thomas Jefferson: “political equality, natural rights, and the sovereignty of the people.”¹ McClay echoed that the United States was founded on “principles of liberty and self-rule.” Both push back against the social histories of the last 40 years. They echo the older traditional story, dominant in the early twentieth century, which held that while the American founders held people in slavery, they were also deeply uncomfortable with slavery as an institution and committed to Enlightenment principles. McClay notes that “the words slave or slavery never appear in the text” of the Constitution and concludes that “it would be profoundly wrong to contend, as some do, that the United States was “founded on” slavery.² Lepore writes that “The United States rests on a dedication to equality, which is chiefly a moral idea, rooted in Christianity.”³ These books, tailor-made for American high schools in our present moment, minimize the importance of slavery within foundational institutions of the United States.

As teachers, we are not always clear about the purpose of high school history courses. Do they function primarily to instill patriotism and recruit for the military, or should they be designed to



(Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

The Life of George Washington: The Farmer. This painting by Junius Brutus Stearns (1851) depicts Washington at Mount Vernon alongside some of the hundreds of people he enslaved.

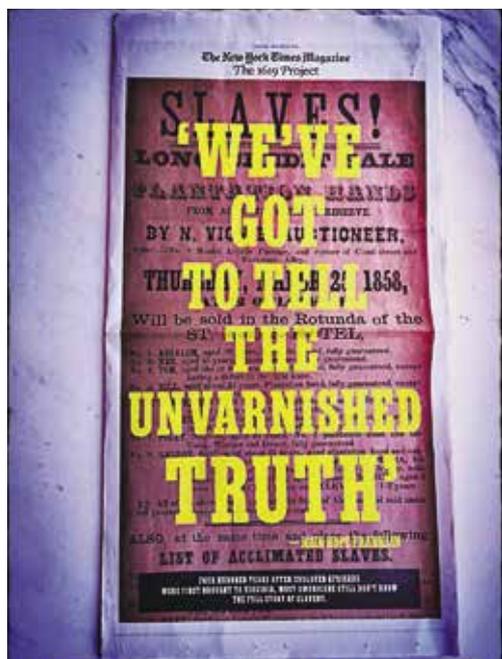
prepare students for college-level courses in the social science disciplines? College history students regularly debate the extent to which slavery was formative to the development of American systems of law, business, medicine, religion and foreign policy. In his 1935 classic *Black Reconstruction*, W.E.B. DuBois emphasized the paradox of slavery in the construction of the very concept of “American freedom.” Historian Edmund S. Morgan gave these ideas new life in his influential, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975). In his best-selling *A People’s History of the United States* (1980), Howard Zinn cast a new narrative of the United States wherein brutal mistreatment of indigenous peoples, enslaved African Americans, and other unfree laborers created the wealth that gave the planter “founders” a sense of independence. Many scholars schooled since the 1990s have taken Zinn’s narrative—which synthesized the new social history of the “Long 1960s”⁴—as a starting point

for further research in both social and political history. All this has made the recent attacks on the 1619 Project and Critical Race Theory peculiar to those of us who have been teaching at the college level. In 27 states, elected officials on school boards and legislatures press to muzzle classroom discussions on slavery, race, and white supremacy under the presumption that an emphasis on the structures of white supremacy stokes conflict over inequality and furthers unfair implications of white students' complicity in American racism.⁵

If high school history courses exist to introduce students to discussions taking place among leading scholars, then both the 1619 Project and the broader literature on Critical Race Theory belong in our primary and secondary schools. There is no good reason to wait until college to introduce students to the paradoxes and debates at the heart of our American story. After all, the stories we tell as history teachers in primary and secondary school help shape our students' understandings of which social structures should be revered as timeless and which ought to be reformed. It is never too early to raise questions about the origins of our present social and political institutions, nor about the relationship between American slavery and American freedom.

The 1619 Project, the most popular offender to conservative lawmakers everywhere, fills a real gap in primary and secondary school curricula. Many state standards in U.S. History downplay or even leave out the histories of slavery and white supremacy in the period before the Civil War. In such states as Missouri and Indiana, only in middle school do students study antebellum U.S. history. These states start high school "U.S. History" after Reconstruction, a strategy that absolves high school teachers of having to grapple with the prominent role of slavery in American politics, law, and economics from the colonial era through the Civil War.

In other states, such as Montana and North Dakota, "high school" U.S. history begins somewhat sooner, but African American history does not appear in the state standards outside of the "social, economic, and political causes of the Civil War." Almost all U.S. historians would agree that to suggest the Civil War is the only time that



Front page of *The New York Times* 1619 Project

slavery matters is to significantly misrepresent its role in American history. Yet even within the study of the Civil War, slavery is getting short shrift. A 2018 Southern Poverty Law Center report indicated that only 8 percent of high school seniors surveyed can identify slavery as the root cause of the Civil War and "only 32 percent of students correctly identified the 13th Amendment as the formal end to slavery..."⁶ To this extent, high school history courses diverge widely from those taught in college.

Nonetheless, there has been a tidal wave of resistance to the 1619 Project, even though that Project represents the preeminent attempt to promote historical literacy on slavery in schools. Instead of welcoming this new curriculum as fodder for debate, reactionary politicians have been legislating to ban it from schools. It is the latest surge of a culture war against the Left-liberal social movements of the Long 1960s and the historiographical revolution they inspired. From attempts in the 1980s to ban Howard Zinn's iconoclastic *People's History of the United States*, to defunding the multicultural U.S. history standards championed by New Left social historian Gary Nash in the 1990s, to the barring of LGBTQ history from classrooms in the twenty-first century, there has been a consistent attempt by

“Plantation Slaves, Beaufort, South Carolina, 1862.” *Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora.*



www.slaveryimages.org/slaveryimages/item/1367

conservatives to divorce school history texts and instruction from new and more critical scholarship on the American past.

Many teachers are already standing up to this version of cancel culture by using textbooks and readings that diverge from their minimalist state standards. The Stanford History Education Group’s “Reading Like a Historian,” the American Social History Project’s “History Matters,” and the Zinn Education Project’s “Teaching People’s History” are extraordinarily popular databases with primary sources and lesson plan ideas for teachers. But textbooks have been much slower to shift their emphases away from the traditional narratives of the last century. As James Loewen explained in his 2008 preface to the 1998 *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, the intervening decade made little difference in the fundamental story arcs told in high school textbooks.⁷ Most high school textbooks make historical debate appear



www.slaveryimages.org/slaveryimages/item/1175

“Picking Cotton, U.S. South, 1873–74.” Although post-emancipation, this scene is evocative of the slavery period. *Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora.*

to be marginal, rather than central, to the academic discipline of history.

The original 1619 Project, in addition to the *1619 Project* book, offers teachers a set of historical essays they can assign, debate, and discuss with their students. Mary Elliot and Jazmin Hughes's "A Brief History of Slavery That You Didn't Learn in School" builds upon the wealth of scholarship on slavery over the past decade, locating the history of "New World" slavery in the Portuguese exploitation of the African slave trade. That trade enriched European nations and the nascent North American colonies with "political power, social standing and wealth," helping to form the economic foundation of what would become the United States. Mathew Desmond's "Capitalism" builds on the research of Cedric Robinson, Eric Williams, and Edward Baptist, illustrating that a key engine of early American prosperity was the New World slave plantation. Jamelle Bouie explains how early American slave states existed primarily to protect the commercial ambitions of plantation owners. Southern states protected "not the liberty of the citizen but the liberty of the master, the liberty of those who claimed a right to property and a position at the top of the racial and economic hierarchy."

Synthesizing this recent research on slavery in the Americas, Nikole Hannah-Jones, the journalist who led the project and edited the essays, concludes that "Our democracy's founding ideals were false when they were written." Jones argues that the claims to human rights within the *Declaration of Independence* were never intended to apply to everyone. As she points out, enslaved people

laid the foundations of the White House and the Capitol, even placing with their unfree hands the Statue of Freedom atop the Capitol dome. They lugged the heavy wooden tracks of the railroads that crisscrossed the South and that helped take the cotton they picked to Northern textile mills, fueling the Industrial Revolution.⁸

Jones stands on the shoulders of prominent historians, including Annette Gordon-Reed and

Heather Cox Richardson, who have argued that the Founders' understanding of human liberty was heavily constrained by their private desires, as enslavers and oligarchs, to maintain the revenue stream at the foundation of their social status. Some historians claim that the 1619 Project overstates the conclusions we can reach based on this scholarship. In a recent Letter to the Editor in the *New York Times*, senior scholars including James McPherson, Victoria Bynum, James Oakes, Sean Wilentz, and Gordon Wood pointed to the Founders' earnest attempts at enacting Enlightenment principles of human rights and natural law.⁹ Sean Wilentz expounds on the context of a "moral revolution of the 1740s and 1750s" that animated a large cross-section of society, including slaves and servants, to assert their "English rights and liberties" as "tests of universal principles and natural rights."¹⁰ This letter's liberty-centered reading of the American past can and should be used by teachers to debate the 1619 Project's slavery-centered reading of that past. Both are valuable teaching tools that when placed in conversation with each other enable students to see and engage with the contested nature of historical interpretation.

When politicians encourage teachers to censor the historical record and thus prevent discussion of controversies, they reduce primary and secondary education in social studies to nationalistic indoctrination. During the summer of 2020, Senator Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) charged that the 1619 Project offers a "revisionist account of history that denies the noble principles of freedom and equality on which our nation was founded." Congressman Rick Allen (R-Colo.) echoed the sentiment: "The 1619 Project's goal is to indoctrinate the idea in our nation's young people that America is an evil country."¹¹ Cotton and Allen want to suppress the connections between high school and college-level history, denying social studies classes access to a large and important body of primary and secondary sources. Together with Congressman Ken Buck (R-Colo.), the group has threatened to block funds for the "left wing garbage." They sponsored the Orwellian titled "Saving American History Act of 2020 (S4292)" to starve schools of

federal funding if they use the 1619 Project in their classes.¹² Momentum for the bill has been steadily growing.

In September of 2020, then-president Donald Trump publicly sponsored this censorship work by establishing the “1776 Commission” to promote “patriotic” education, calling the framing of U.S. History around race and racism “toxic propaganda”¹³ The commission did not dispute the scholarship in the field of U.S. history in terms of historical truth and accuracy, but rejected as a threat to “liberal democracy”¹⁴ all scholarship that troubled the “Enlightenment” mythology of the United States.

Put another way, the 1776 Commission publicly confessed that it was more interested in celebrating the theoretical ideals of the United States as a “liberal democracy” than exploring the extent to which the United States has achieved those ideals. They reject the idea that primary and secondary school students should encounter the historical record, grapple with real debates within the historical profession, and evaluate the evidence in proportion to their growing understanding of history. As historian James M. Banner Jr. recently wrote in his book, *The Ever-Changing Past* (2021), “all history is revisionist history.” He explained,

History as a branch of knowledge is always a search for meaning and a constant source of argument.... All historians are revisionists while they seek to more fully understand the past.... They always bring their distinct minds, dispositions, perspectives, and purposes to bear on the subjects they study.¹⁵

While college students will continue to debate whether or not our “democracy’s founding ideals were false when they were written,” just about every U.S. historian agrees that historical research involves subjectivity in the search for truth.

Students deserve to know what historians debate and why they consider these debates worthwhile. To name one example, historians have spent years discussing to what extent American colonists resisted British control out of fear that colonial governors might someday outlaw slavery in the colonies. After all, both the Somerset Decision,

which outlawed slavery in England (1772), and Lord Dunmore’s Proclamation (1775), which gave freedom to enslaved Africans serving with the British military during the American Revolution, suggested that British authorities were less enthusiastic about supporting the continuity and expansion of slavery than were the American patriots.¹⁶ When McPherson and his colleagues suggested that the 1619 Project overemphasized the Somerset Decision, they were disputing the claims by a body of historians, including Gerald Horne’s *Counter Revolution of 1776: Slave Resistance and the Origins of the United States of America* (2016), which argued that the defense of the institution of slavery played a major role in the rebellion against the Crown. Students should know that these historian critics of the 1619 Project do not dispute the importance of slavery in colonial America. They differ about *the relative importance* of slavery and racial conflict to the story of the American Revolution and the Early Republic. This debate over the urgency of a topic and the *relative importance* of one historical causality or another is at the heart of most historical debates.

Further historical critique of the 1619 Project might observe that its focus on slavery underemphasizes the body of scholarship on the centrality of genocide and indigenous peoples’ resistance to the formation of the United States. Robert G. Parkinson recently argued in *Thirteen Clocks: How Race United the Colonies and Made the Declaration of Independence* (2021) that the patriot cause, and by extension white American identity, arose out of a sense of entitlement to Native American land. His book joins Jeffrey Ostler’s *Surviving Genocide: Native Nations and the United States from the American Revolution to Bleeding Kansas* (2019) in pointing to the Quebec Act as a measure that threatened colonists’ “perceived right to Indian lands.” After all, Richard Henry Lee, a Virginia delegate to the First Continental Congress in 1774, called this infringement the “worst grievance” of all against the British Empire.¹⁷ Thus, while conservative politicians obsess on denouncing the 1619 Project from the right, students might also be encouraged to examine criticism from the Left, exploring whether the 1619 Project’s sharp focus on the legacies of slavery in American history, stirring and

complete as it is, underemphasizes the connections between slavery and white settler colonialism.

A history teacher's job is not to hand down truths from a higher power but to raise questions and direct discussion. Just as Nikole Hannah-Jones draws on a body of historical scholarship, conservative lawmakers draw on a different body of literature, if not a full-fledged historiographical turn, which celebrates what David Barton has called the "constitutional heritage" of liberty and justice for all. Indeed, books like Larry Schweikart's *A Patriot's History of the United States* (2004), Eric Metaxas's *If You Can Keep It: The Forgotten Promise of American Liberty* (2017), and David Barton's *The American Story* (2020), not to mention McClay and Lepore, both minimize the importance of slavery to the American republic and suggest that United States history is a story of the unfinished work of American heroes. What do these American heroes reveal about those who revere them? What does it tell us that some Americans prefer these

celebratory narratives of the triumph of "democracy" to those that emphasize ongoing social and economic conflict? We ought to invite our students into these conversations *before* they get to college.

The only way we will "save" American history as a worthy and thought-provoking enterprise, the only way we can imagine meaningful national unity, is by introducing students to the pressing historiographical questions of our day and inviting them to participate in resolving them. Censorship yields truncated history that is so one-sided, nationalistic, and boring that it fails to prepare students for college and the world thereafter. The would-be censors of history, whose nationalist faith leads them to seek to restrict critical discussion of race in the American past, would be wise to reflect upon the compatibility of history with any whitewashed celebratory narrative of a nation. As E.J. Hobsbawm put it, "No serious historian of nations can be a committed political nationalist. Nationalism requires too much belief in what is patently not true."¹⁸ ■

Notes

1. Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018), xiv.
2. Wilfred McClay, *Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story* (New York: Encounter Books, 2020), 53.
3. Lepore, *These Truths*, xv.
4. The "Long 1960s" is a term used to describe the political, social, and cultural developments during the period spanning roughly from 1955 to 1973.
5. "Map: Where Critical Race Theory is Under Attack," *Education Week* (June 11, 2021, updated Sept 2, 2021), www.edweek.org/policy-politics/map-where-critical-race-theory-is-under-attack/2021/06; see also Nathan I. Huggins, "The Deforming Mirror of Truth: Slavery and the Master Narrative of American History," *Radical History Review* 49 (1991): 25–48.
6. Hasan Kwame Jeffries, "Teaching Hard History: American Slavery" *Southern Poverty Law Center* (2018), www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/tt_hard_history_american_slavery.pdf
7. James Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: New Press, 1997, revised edition, 2007), xv.
8. *New York Times Magazine*, *The 1619 Project* (first published online and in print, August 2019), www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/12/20/magazine/1619-intro.html
9. Letter to the Editor, "Re: The 1619 Project," *New York Times Magazine* (Dec. 29, 2019), [www.nytimes.com/2019/12/20/magazine/we-respond-to-the-historians-who-critiqued-](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/20/magazine/we-respond-to-the-historians-who-critiqued-the-1619-project.html)
10. Sean Wilentz, "American Slavery and the 'Relentless Unforeseen,'" *New York Review of Books* (Nov. 19, 2019), www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/11/19/american-slavery-and-the-relentless-unforeseen/
11. "Reps. Buck and Allen to Defund Historically Inaccurate 1619 Project Curriculum," *Ken Buck: Congressman for Colorado's 4th District* (Sept. 17, 2020) <https://buck.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/rep-buck-and-allen-defund-historically-inaccurate-1619-project>
12. "Saving American History Act of 2020," *Congress.gov*, www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/4292
13. Shannon Petteypiece, "Trump Calls for Patriotic Education..." www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/trump-calls-patriotic-education-says-anti-racism-teachings-are-child-n1240372 (Sept. 17, 2020); Robert Cohen, "Will Trump's Last Fight Be Against Howard Zinn (And America's History Teachers)?" (Nov. 8, 2020) History News Network: <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/178138>
14. Peter Wood, at "White House Conference on American History," www.youtube.com/watch?v=0RLdpptsCHs (Sept. 17, 2020).
15. James Banner, *The Ever Changing Past: Why All History is Revisionist History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 9–10.

16. Alfred Blumrosen and Ruth Blumrosen, *Slave Nation: How Slavery United the Colonies and Sparked the American Revolution* (Naperville, IL.: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2005), 12, 15–16, 145–155; for the most recent iteration of this debate, see Sean Wilentz’s critique of Woody Holton’s claim (made in Holton’s *Liberty is Sweet: The Hidden History of the American Revolution*, 2021) that Virginia’s “hysteria” over Lord Dunmore’s proclamation attested that the American Revolution was “in fundamental ways a racist, pro-slavery ‘secession from Britain’” (Wilentz, “The Paradox of the American Revolution,” *New York Review of Books*, Jan 13, 2022, p. 27); it is worth noting that, in the 1619 Project book, Nikole Hannah-Jones modified her phrasing to suggest that slavery was not the only issue motivating the American colonists to rebel against Great Britain.
17. J. Kent McGaughey, *Richard Henry Lee of Virginia: A Portrait of An American Revolutionary* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 111.

18. Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992, reprinted 2012), 12.



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