

**“Historical Research is not ‘White’
or ‘Black’”**

A 5 star Review by Dick Burkhardt of

**“The New York Times’
1619 Project & the Racist
Falsification of History:
Essays & Interviews”**

Edited by David North & Thomas
Mackaman (2021)



This is a well-organized and written collection of persuasive critiques under the auspices of the World Socialist Web Site (WSWS). These are real leftist writers and scholars of the worldly, anti-Stalin, Trotskyite type, not the “pseudo leftists” of Critical Race Theory (CRT). They’ve interviewed many of the top historians on slavery and politics in the US, especially during the Revolutionary and Civil War periods. Their impressive historical research was ignored by Nikole Hannah-Jones, the lead journalist of the New York Times 1619 Project. Only later, after WSWS critiques were published, was the Times forced to back off on its narrative, changing a few words and reinterpreting its story as “metaphor” instead as fact.

The featured falsifications are that (1) the Revolutionary War was fought to preserve slavery and (2) that Lincoln was actually a racist. Why the egregious distortions of US history, as if (1) Britain was not profiting handsomely from the slave trade and (2) as if the Civil War was not fought to end the aggressive legal and political stranglehold of the Southern slave owning class?

The answer is that, by its own admission, the Times chose to exclude ‘white’ contributions as much as possible. Even one black historian, who was familiar with the full range of scholarship, said that Hannah-Jones had ignored her critique in favor of the long discredited theories of certain earlier black racial-nationalist historians. In other words, anti-white prejudice is the new orthodoxy at the Times, which should surprise no one who is familiar with the “whiteness” studies of Critical Race Theory or its doctrine of authentic voices.

The Marxist orientation of the North and Mackaman comes through, legitimately, in such statements as “the 1619 Project, by prioritizing racial conflict, marginalizes and even eliminates class conflict as a notable factor in history and politics” (p xiii). Otherwise, they are in the mainstream, historically speaking, but focused on overall history, rather than as

specialists focused on particular places and times. Thus the interviews with the specialists on the American Revolution and the Civil War, plus quotes from broad-view historians to provide the context missing from the 1619 project. For example, they quote Jonathan Israel that “the American Revolution formed part of a wider transatlantic revolutionary sequence, a series of revolutions in France, Italy, Holland, Switzerland, Germany, Ireland, Haiti, Poland, Spain, Greece, Spanish” with the American revolution providing the “primary model for universal change”. They emphasized that “Slavery had existed for several thousand years but the specific form ... was bound up with the development and expansion of capitalism” (p xvi).

Even more damning is the quote from Hannah-Jones that the “1619 project is not a history” but a “new narrative” to replace the supposedly “white narrative”. Thus they conclude that, according to Hannah-Jones, “the purpose of history is ... to be nothing more than ... a narrative for the realization of one or another political agenda. The truth or untruth of the narrative is not a matter of concern” (p xviii). North and Mackaman note that this “national myth-making” approach to history is a direct consequence of CRT, what with its emphasis on both language as an instrument of power and on identity politics as the primary explanatory factor in civic matters.

The authors blast Ibram Kendi for a “ridiculous concoction that attributes to the word ‘Enlightenment’ a racial significance that has absolutely no foundation in etymology let alone history” (p xx), noting that it was adopted as a literary English translation for the German word whose literal meaning is “clarification” or “clearing up”, having nothing to do with black or white. Indeed they point out that “modern racism is connected historically and intellectually with the Anti-Enlightenment”, as developed by Count Gobineau and others.

Even the theory of classical music has been labeled as “white” in CRT, with North and Mackaman noting “more than a passing resemblance between this call to liberate music from ‘whiteness’ and the efforts of Nazi academics ...to liberate music from ‘Jewishness’”. In fact, “Academic journals covering virtually every field of study are exploding ignorant rubbish of this sort” (p xxi). As to the rationale for all this, the authors proclaim that “the Democratic Party – as a political instrument of the capitalist class - is anxious to shift the focus of the discussion away from issues that raise the specter of social inequality and class conflict” (p xxiv) while the corresponding media instrument is the New York Times. To sum up, “the structures of American democracy are breaking down beneath the

weight of the social contradictions produced by a staggering level of wealth concentration” (p xxv).

After this hard-hitting forward, the book dives deeper, sometimes with unexpected results. When I read the Hannah-Jones claim that “anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country”, I took this metaphorically, as postmodern philosophy emphasizes the “social construction” of reality, not biological difference. But then North and Mackaman found a recent CRT-type article by Robert Sapolsky proclaiming biological and cognitive differences between the races. Of course, superficial differences are visible to all, and a few medical differences are known to researchers, but educational and cultural developments appear to overwhelm most genetic differences, even though statistical variations in IQ and the like are not yet fully understood. Thus the authors wonder if CRT, in its zeal for inherent racial differences, is reverting to 19th century social Darwinism or to the 1930s Nazi pseudo-science of race.

A deep dive into slavery reveals that Africa was been “a major source of slaves for ancient civilizations, the Islamic world, India” (p 6), long before it arrived in the Americas, where less than 1 out of 30 slaves ended up in the 13 colonies. The initial Africans were treated more like the indentured servants from Europe, and “Slavery was not born of racism: rather, racism was the consequence of slavery” according the renowned West Indian historian Eric Williams. After losing the US revolutionary war, Britain was also less able to extract profits from the slave economies of the “sugar islands” of the Caribbean, a key factor in British the ending of slavery. The founding fathers who owned slaves, like Jefferson, thought that slavery was on the decline (Virginia had a surplus of slaves) and would be gone in another generation. This prediction only failed because of the invention of the cotton gin in 1793.

Also critiqued are some very glaring omissions of the 1619 Project. For example, Frederick Douglass is never mentioned, and Martin Luther King, Jr, is only named in one photo. Both Douglass and King admired Lincoln and Jefferson, viewing the ideals of the Enlightenment as achievable ends, not the hypocrisies portrayed by the 1619 Project. Neither does this project discuss the role of the industrial revolution, with the transformation of most slave and free labor into wage labor. This became the basis for a large reduction in racism, though it took a century of social battles after the Civil War for this to really take hold after the Civil Rights era.

Of course, there is no mention of how the Russian Revolution inspired many black leaders of the 1930s, but also not even of Malcom X or the Black Panthers from the 1960s. The elitist origins of the 1619 Project are

even more evident in its failure to cast a critical eye on US militarism and imperialism, especially where it was the Soviets, not the US, which allied itself more closely with the aspirations of non-Western racial and ethnic groups. Meanwhile the US deindustrialization of the last 40 years has hit the working class and lower middle class hard, setting the stage of renewed racial tensions. Again, this was engineered by economic elites of the ruling class, targeting whites, who had more to lose, more than blacks, who had affirmative action. Since most of these elites were still white, this says that today, as in the past, it's profits that come first, not race, giving the lie to the entire 1619 narrative. Or, as North and Mackaman put it, "Historical falsification and identity politics are strategic weapons in the hands of the ruling class" (p 30).

In fact, the basic thesis of this book is that "race and racism are not immutable but emerge out of material and political interests" (p 19). "Historians have searched in vain for any racial justification for slavery in colonial Virginia...To the extent that there was any ideological rationale for slavery, it was first religious, not racial" (p 22). "Not until the final decades before the Civil War did a fully developed system of racist ideology exist to justify slavery" (p 23). Meanwhile Washington had hoped for a plan to abolish slavery and Jefferson yearned for a "total emancipation", even authoring the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, banning slavery in the territories covered by Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. "Hannah-Jones, ironically, finds herself in league with the fire-eating advocates of slavery, including John Calhoun, who called Jefferson's claim of human equality 'the most false and dangerous of all political errors'" (p 28).

Especially egregious is the 1619 portrayal of Lincoln as a racist at heart, with the Emancipation Proclamation as "a reluctant act of last resort". In fact his anti-racism had deep roots and, politically speaking, he was always at the leading edge of anti-racism, though, being politically astute, he occasionally had to make compromises. According to biographer Sidney Blumenthal, "Lincoln's deepening understanding of slavery in its full complexity as a moral, political, and constitutional dilemma began in his childhood among the Primitive Baptist antislavery dissidents in the backwoods of Kentucky and Indiana" (p 32). And he later told how he, himself, "used to be a slave", since his father rented him out as day laborer, a common practice among slave owners when this brought in more money than plantation work.

Politically, Lincoln first aligned himself with the Whig Party, and later the new Republican Party, in opposition to the racial politics of the Democrats.

Lincoln began the Civil War “to save the Union” because that was the political center at the time but quickly moved “to abolish slavery” as public sentiment shifted. Later Lincoln was preparing to grant former slaves full citizenship, first “for very educated blacks and those who had fought for the Union” (p 142), when he was assassinated by the white supremacist John Wilkes Booth for precisely this reason.

North and Mackaman also refute the 1619 presentation of “slavery as a purely racial institution from which all whites benefited in the South”, regurgitating the argument of the slave holders. They quote historian Keri Merritt, “In the slave South, where white laborers were in competition with brutalized enslaved labor, the laborers, whether legally free or not, had little to no control over their labor power” (p 40). “Succession ... was not a popular movement from below”.

Most non-landowning whites survived as itinerant day laborers in extreme poverty, living in “one room shacks made of logs and mud, normally without windows. They had difficulty in traveling from place to place, often in carts pulled by dogs” (p 41). Of their white neighbors, one slave noted “We had more to eat than them...They were sorry folk”. Historians noted that “alcoholism and illiteracy were widespread” (p 42) with a deliberate paucity of public schools. The jails were full of poor whites for minor infractions, much as it was later for blacks under Jim Crow. Mob lynching of poor whites was common, nullifying due process.

“These class tensions made it impossible – politically, economically, and militarily – for the Confederacy to continue fighting the war ... The poor counties in Alabama, for example, voted to elect antiseccessionist delegates by margins of up to 90%” (p 44). “300,000 Southerners fled the South at the onset of the war to fight for the Union army”, while “up to 2/3 of all Southern soldiers deserted”, contributing greatly to the Southern losses at Vicksburg and Gettysburg” (p 45). “Bread riots spread in 1863” (p 46), with thousands of spontaneous pro-Union groups, often integrated, forming to conduct guerilla warfare and establish safe routes for deserters and abolitionists. The slave owners introduced poll taxes but the people often responded with popular votes. “Britain and France were prevented from intervening militarily on the side of the South by the overwhelming support among British and French workers for the cause of abolition” (p 47).

Moving to the origins of Critical Race Theory and identity politics in the current era, North and Mackaman examined the highly influential Combahee River Collective, concluding that “The aim was not social equality and the liberation of all mankind, but one’s own personal advancement, leveraging various categories of identity to achieve positions

of power and prestige ... Poor whites, and particularly white men, were categorized by the Combahee Collective under the general heading of 'white male rule'." (p 65).

The authors note that in recent years "the vast majority of black Americans, as with the vast majority of the working class as a whole, have, in fact, suffered historic retrogression in their conditions of life. A small section, however, has made significant progress" (p 67). Marxist call this group the 'black bourgeoisie' – the professionals, managers, sports and entertainment stars, etc., who were educated and promoted to diversify the ranks of the ruling class.

From the authors point of view - the traditional Left - the new, identity-based pseudo-Left is in "increasing alignment with the conceptions and politics of the far Right" (p 68), especially its anti-Enlightenment and anti-working class perspectives. That is, increasingly the antagonists in the cultural wars are two sides of the same coin, not fundamentally different directions; that is, opposing authoritarian ideologies and oppressions, not economic and political democracy versus oligarchy and imperial rule. Reality points in the opposite direction: "Attitudes toward race have been transformed enormously over that last half century" (p 69).

In the rest of the book we get fascinating details and perspectives from interviews with 8 historians and extensive documentation of the controversy with the Times. This was especially true for the eminent black Marxist Adolph Reed, who echoes John McWhorter when he says that "What the Afro-pessimist types or black nationalist types get out of it is that we can't ever talk about anything except race. And that's partly because talking about race is the thing they have to sell" (p 127). He also studied how New Orleans was affected by Hurricane Katrina and discovered that "blacks weren't displaced at a higher rate than whites" or die at a higher rate. "Class was a better predictor than race" (p 129), and New Orleans emerged with a more interracial ruling class. Also, "listening to how people talk about intersectionality, it just seems like dissociative personality disorder" (p 131). What refreshing honesty, versus the ideologically driven falsification coming out of CRT and the 1619 Project.