

The 1619 Project: Believe Your Lying Eyes

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The “1620 Project” at the website of the National Association of Scholars, nas.org, aims to counter the many fraudulent claims of the New York Times’s 1619 Project by providing a broader picture of American history, one that is informed by a thorough and unbiased assessment of historical evidence. We have chosen the name “1620” because it is the year in which pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock and signed the Mayflower Compact, paving the way for an historical trajectory that points toward a wider realization of liberty and justice. On our website the project will publish both original and previously published articles that we hope will stem the tidal wave of misinformation launched by the 1619 Project. In the effort to restore integrity and honesty to American historical education, Academic Questions will be publishing original articles under the heading “1620 Project.” Here is the first contribution to that effort.

A great clamor has erupted over the *New York Times*’s 1619 Project, the paper’s effort, through eighteen articles, fifteen artistic contributions, a book, and classroom curricula, to place slavery and racial discrimination at the heart of America’s self-understanding. Renowned historians such as Sean Wilentz, Victoria Bynum, James M. McPherson, James Oakes, and Gordon Wood have decried the lack of factual accuracy in the Project’s accounts.¹ Organizations such as the National Association of Scholars and the American Institute for Economic Research, as well as such publications as the *Wall Street Journal*,

¹Sean Wilentz, “A Matter of Facts,” *Atlantic*, January 22, 2020; “We Respond to the Historians Who Critiqued The 1619 Project,” *New York Times Magazine*, December 20, 2019; James Anderson, “U. professors send letter requesting corrections to 1619 Project,” *Daily Princetonian*, February 6, 2020.

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National Review, *City Journal*, and *Reason* have taken the project to task. Pointing to crucial factual errors, twelve scholars from universities that include Princeton, Yale, and Notre Dame wrote in a December 2019 letter to the *Times*: we “respectfully ask the *New York Times* to withhold any steps to publish and distribute the 1619 Project until these concerns can be addressed in a thorough and open fashion.”²

But amidst the rancor, an important question has gone unasked: why now? Why in the summer of 2019 did the guardian of ruling class opinion decide to mark the 400th anniversary of the arrival of “enslaved” (actually, indentured) Africans in Virginia with essays, stories, poems, and podcasts certifying that slavery has dictated the course of U.S. history?

One likely reason the question hasn’t been asked is that the proximate cause is so obvious. The *Times* is attempting to restore its credibility after playing a starring role in the capstone episode of media malpractice in the modern age: the promotion of the apparently baseless notion that a presidential candidate of a major American political party colluded with Russia to fix the outcome of the 2016 presidential election. Before special counsel Robert Mueller’s report of April 2019 found that neither “the Trump campaign, or anyone associated with it, conspired or coordinated with the Russian government,” the *Times* had been guilty of filing untold numbers of thinly sourced indictments tying the President to the Russians. Its proficiency in extending the collusion narrative was rewarded with a 2018 Pulitzer Prize for “relentlessly reported coverage . . . of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election and its connections to the Trump campaign, the President-elect’s transition team and his eventual administration.”³

Then came the deluge. From the left, critic Matt Taibbi of *Rolling Stone* took the *Times* and several other publications to task: “The Mueller report makes clear reporters were sold wolf whistles over and over, led by reams of unnamed official sources who urged them to see meaning in meaningless things and assume connections that weren’t there.”⁴ From the right, *New York Post* columnist Michael Goodwin was more direct: “My view is that top [NYT] editor Dean Baquet made a disastrous mistake by eliminating the traditional standards of fairness and impartiality in a bid to stop Trump and upend his presidency.”⁵

²“Twelve Scholars Critique the 1619 Project and the *New York Times Magazine* Editor Responds,” History News Network, December 30, 2019 (posted to website Jan. 26, 2020).

³Sean Davis, “A Catastrophic Media Failure: America’s blue-chip journalists botched the Russia story from its birth to its final breath Sunday,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 25, 2019.

⁴Matt Taibbi, “The Press Will Learn Nothing From the Russiagate Fiasco,” *Rolling Stone*, April 28, 2019.

⁵Michael Goodwin, “Trump will prevail over ‘scalp-hunting’ journalists,” *New York Post*, December 14, 2019.

Baquet himself pretended not to notice, telling staff at a “secret” meeting leaked to *Slate* in August of 2019, “We built our newsroom to cover one story, and we did it truly well.” But this faux triumphalism was no cover for the *Times* being exposed as a partisan combatant on the side of the “resistance,” and the chief editor grasped for redemption in the only way the privileged class knows how: channeling the ideological nostrums of the left. But unlike convicted sexual predator Harvey Weinstein, who promised to dedicate enormous sums to “defeat the NRA” after sexual harassment charges were brought against him, Baquet opted for tried and true racial posturing. “Now we have to regroup, and shift resources and emphasis to take on a different story,” he told staff. It is a “story that requires imaginative use of all our muscles to write about race and class in a deeper way than we have in years.”⁶ Thus was the 1619 Project born.

But if the *Times*’s flagging industry status was the immediate catalyst for the Project, its ultimate cause was, naturally, politics. The editors’ Hail Mary comes at a critical political juncture. Donald Trump is the enemy, he is up for re-election, and there are indications that the left’s largest voting block, African Americans, might be warming to him. Several polls in early 2020 showed the president’s approval rating hovering in the 30 percent range among blacks, while Republicans have averaged only nine percent of the black vote in recent presidential elections.⁷ There is little doubt that Gallup’s finding in January of 2020 that Americans’ “satisfaction with race relations has increased 14 percent since Donald Trump’s inauguration,” is seen as a palpable threat to the world over which the *Times* presides, or that the Project is the paper’s riposte.⁸

The irony of striving for journalistic redemption through reportage largely devoid of objectivity must be lost on the *Times*. Its editors and authors have made no secret of their low regard for disinterested reporting in the 1619 Project. “We understand as Black people that there’s never been a day in America where journalism has been able to be objective,” lead author Nikole Hannah-Jones has said.⁹ And one could be forgiven for thinking the Project might have had a preconceived goal in mind. “If you read the whole project,” Hannah-Jones told the *Chicago Tribune*, “I don’t think you can come away from it without understanding the project is an argument for reparations.”¹⁰

⁶Ashley Feinberg, “The *New York Times* Unites vs. Twitter,” *Slate*, August 15, 2019.

⁷Michael Graham, “New Polls Show Black Support for Trump Surging,” [InsideSources.com](https://www.insidesources.com) reported in *Newsday*, December 3, 2019.

⁸Lydia Saad, “Americans’ Take on the U.S. Is Improved, but Still Mixed,” [Gallup.org](https://www.gallup.com), January 27, 2020.

⁹Nylah Burton, “Nikole Hannah-Jones Made Black History With the 1619 Project, And She’s Not Done Yet,” *Essence*, February 3, 2020.

¹⁰Darcel Rockett, “5 minutes with Nikole Hannah-Jones, the architect behind *New York Times*’s ‘1619 Project,’” *Chicago Tribune*, Oct 10, 2019.

The *Times's* open embrace of political advocacy in its journalism and historiography comes as no surprise to anyone with passing knowledge of American intellectual life. For almost half a century, American academia has operated under a regime of strict multiculturalism, which posits that all truths are political and that Western standards of scholarship are not valid for understanding other cultures. According to philosopher Richard Rorty, multiculturalism seeks “to abandon the traditional notions of rationality, objectivity, method and truth.”¹¹

The study of black history was at the center of this revolt against scholarly empiricism, as multiculturalists began to redefine U.S. blacks as a colonized, “Third World” people within the larger Western culture. Since blacks were part of an international majority of oppressed nonwhites, scholars of black history rejected the traditional tools of Western scholarship, drawing heavily on subjectivity, deconstructionism, and “anticolonialism.” By the 1960s, Peter Novick explains in *That Noble Dream* (1988), his magisterial disquisition on the “objectivity question” in the historical profession, historians of the “New Black History” “scoffed” at “white” notions of detachment and objectivity. Novick explains that these younger scholars had “abandoned the traditional universalist, ‘ideal observer’” posture which had been so central to the history profession’s “ethos of objectivity.”¹²

This lurch away from empiricism allowed scholars of black history to shape an historical narrative around contemporary political exigencies, which, with legal equality won, centered around consolidating political power. In 1965, when U.S. Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan issued his seminal report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, it became clear that this goal would be accomplished largely through crafting a narrative that enshrines black victimhood and idealizes a distinct black culture.

Moynihan was only the most prominent critic to suggest that black social patterns may be the most serious obstacle to black progress in America, describing black ghettos as a “tangle of pathology” holding blacks down. Referring primarily to the (then) “shocking” illegitimacy rate of 25 percent, Moynihan described black communities in which “the fabric of conventional social relationships has all but disintegrated.” While he allowed that such tumult might have been the consequence of white racism, Moynihan insisted that it was by now fully “capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world.”¹³

¹¹Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972-1980* (University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 204.

¹²Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (University of Cambridge Press, 1988), 484.

¹³Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), 43, 93, 66, 62, 76.

Black activists and their allies exploded at Moynihan's "damage" thesis, seeing it as a slander against blacks and the disavowal of ongoing racial discrimination. Repulsed by the idea that white racism should be losing its explanatory power in relation to black impoverishment, activist scholars focused their energies on defending black culture. Renowned historians such as Herbert Gutman, George Rawick, Leslie Owens, Lawrence Levine, and John Blassingame portrayed black culture and institutions as unequivocally strong and resilient. Sociologist William Julius Wilson wrote decades later that "aspects of ghetto behavior described as pathological in the studies of the mid-1960s were reinterpreted or redefined as functional . . . Ghetto families were described as resilient and as adapting creatively to an oppressive racist society."¹⁴

Since this time, the effort to understand the black experience in America has been subordinated to the left's political imperatives. Even as the U.S. political system demonstrated remarkable flexibility—the number of black elected officials in the U.S. went from fewer than 1,000 in 1960 to more than 10,000 by 2012—activist scholars redoubled their efforts to retain black oppression as their most powerful claim to the levers of power.¹⁵

Sustaining the narrative that blacks had been permanently deprived of opportunity and power in an age when billions were being spent on the "urban crisis," affirmative action was being widely implemented, and fair housing laws were being passed, was difficult enough. But studies in the 1970s and 1980s by Thomas Sowell challenged the contention that slavery and Jim Crow were still, in the late twentieth century, the defining features of black life. Sowell showed that on many social measures—poverty reduction, crime, and joblessness—blacks had made the most progress in the decades prior to the 1960s civil rights era, when black families were mostly intact.¹⁶ Activist scholars making the case that a radical restructuring of society was necessary, not conformity to *bourgeois* habits, desperately needed a new research model. They found it in the rise of "whiteness studies," an approach to race history focusing less on such obvious maladies as slavery and more on discrete, sometimes hidden forms of racism. With whiteness studies, indeterminate concepts such as "institutional" or "systemic" racism arose to replace the "legacy of Jim Crow" as the primary means of explaining black disadvantage.

¹⁴William Julius Wilson, "The Black Underclass," *Wilson Quarterly* 8 (Spring 1984): 89.

¹⁵Stephan Thernstrom, Abigail Thernstrom, *America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 289.

¹⁶Thomas Sowell, *Race and Economics* (David McKay, 1975); *Markets and Minorities* (Basic, 1981); *The Economics and Politics of Race: An International Perspective* (William Morrow, 1983); Thomas Sowell, "A Legacy of Liberalism," [Creators.com](http://creators.com), blog post, November 18, 2014.

Whiteness studies attempted to bolster racism as the primary cause of racial inequality by focusing on white advantages. Drawing sharp distinctions between the white and black experience in America, by the 1980s and 1990s scholars such as Ron Takaki, David Roedinger, Noel Ignatiev, Michael Paul Rogin, and Matthew Frye Jacobson sought to dispel any notion that the Irish, Italians, Jews, Greeks, and Poles achieved middle-class status in America by conforming to middle-class social patterns or through individual effort. They did so, in fact, by exploiting America's racism, taking advantage of timely New Deal programs less available to blacks, and "becoming" fully white.¹⁷

Seen in the context of this tireless academic crusade to expunge non-racial factors from our understanding of economic mobility, the 1619 Project is hardly revolutionary. How far afield, really, is the Project's proclamation that "[a]nti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country" from the New Black History's discovery of "institutional racism," or the whiteness scholars' dissection of New Deal programs for discriminatory intent?

If the Project's narrative of permanent black exclusion seems extreme, that is likely because its claims have become nearly impossible to sustain. Since the civil rights apex in the 1960s, the U.S. has become a complex, multifarious, and multiethnic country in which racial boundary lines are increasingly difficult to discern. Hispanics now outnumber blacks as the nation's largest non-white group and seventeen percent of all marriages are now interracial.¹⁸ Asian Americans have higher median household incomes than whites, led by Indians and Filipinos.¹⁹

Blacks have been a big part of this transformation. The population of black-white mixed race people more than doubled between 2000 and 2010 and 23 million people now identify as "mixed race." The 2010 census also revealed that residential segregation for blacks is at its lowest level ever (the average black lives in a community that is 54 percent nonblack).²⁰ A Pew study showed that black adults experienced the largest income increase from 1971 to 2015 and were the only racial group to see a decrease in the percentage of low income earners.²¹ As early as 1980, census data showed the earnings of black women

¹⁷Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 9.

¹⁸Kim Parker, Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Rich Morin, Mark Hugo Lopes, "Multiracial in America: Proud, Diverse and Growing in Numbers," Pew Research Center, June 11, 2015.

¹⁹"Racial Wealth Snapshot: Asian Americans," Prosperitynow.com, May 10, 2018.

²⁰Parker et. al, "Multiracial in America"; "Black Segregation in U.S. Drops to Lowest in Century," *Associated Press*, December 16, 2010.

²¹Cited by Steven Brown, "Urban Wire: Race and Ethnicity," Urban Institute, February 9, 2016.

with college degrees surpassed those of white female baccalaureates, and that black college-educated couples outearned their white counterparts.²²

Most importantly perhaps, Moynihan's "damage" thesis—at least the part about the importance of family structure—has been largely vindicated. Data show the economic gap between blacks and whites virtually disappears when family structure is controlled for. Despite higher rates of poverty among black Americans, the poverty rate among married black Americans has been less than 10 percent in every year since 1994, consistently lower than the overall white poverty rate.²³

One need not deny that blacks still face obstacles that whites do not in order to observe that blacks who have risen to middle-class status have done so primarily by conforming to social patterns broadly associated with economic mobility. As black social critic Coleman Hughes has written, "culture matters, and black culture is no exception."²⁴

The 1619 Project tells us to pay no attention to the historical legacy that gave birth to the nation's remarkable transformation. Instead, it depicts an America in which racism is so deeply rooted in every event and time period that these changes are simply not to be believed. It was not just that blacks were no more free after the Revolutionary War than before it. The Revolutionary War was fought specifically to keep blacks in chains, to rescue slavery from a certain British onslaught. The Founders didn't just fail to apply the Constitution's revolutionary principles to blacks, they enshrined slavery—without even saying the word—in that document for the next century. Americans were even willing to put up with severe traffic jams in order to pass an Interstate Highway Act in 1956 designed to destroy black neighborhoods. We eat too much sugar in our diets today because slavery made "white gold" plentiful. We have more people in jail than other developed countries because "[s]lavery gave America a fear of black people and a taste for violent punishment." And on it goes.

If this narrative seems inconsistent with the deeply layered, richly textured country we see around us today, so what? The narrative is perceived as crucial to contemporary political outcomes. Nikole Hannah Jones has said as much. "When my editor asks me, like, what's your ultimate goal for the project, my ultimate goal is that there'll be a reparations bill passed."²⁵ In a world in which

²²Mary C. Waters, Karl Eschbach, "Immigration and Ethnic and Racial Inequality in the United States," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 21 (August, 1995): 419-446; Coleman Hughes, "The Racism Treadmill," *Quillette*, May 14, 2018; Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, Maggie Jones, and Sonya R. Porter, "Race and Economic Opportunity in the United States," Executive Summary, The Equality of Opportunity Act, January 2, 2020.

²³Vincent Harinam, Rob Henderson, "Why White Privilege is Wrong," *Quillette*, October 16, 2019.

²⁴Hughes, "Racism Treadmill."

²⁵John Murawski, "Disputed New York Times '1619 Project' Already Shaping Schoolkids' Minds on Race," *Daily Signal*, February 3, 2020

racism has little social power, the cudgel of victimization in the service of political power must strike harder.

The renowned historians who have criticized the Project deserve praise. But in none of their objections is there any recognition that the academy which they have presided over capitulated long ago to the politicization of race scholarship. Columbia University linguist John McWhorter said it best: “The problem here is the general assumption that on race issues, empiricism is but one pathway to the truth, with a larger goal being to identify and revile racism in all of its facets, a goal so paramount that where necessary, we are to elide fact and consider instead what we might call—especially *à propos* the 1619 case—a narrative.”²⁶ It will take a lot more than a few irritable gestures from a handful of great scholars to rescue black history from the grip of that narrative.

²⁶John McWhorter, “The 1619 Project Depicts an America Tainted by Original Sin,” *Reason*, January 30, 2020.