

John McWhorter: We cannot allow '1619' to dumb down America in the name of a crusade

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The data are in: The New York Times' [1619 Project](#) is founded on empirical sand. The fundamental claim that the Revolutionary War was fought to preserve slavery simply does not correspond with the facts, too conclusively for the point to be dismissed as mere hair-splitting. The issue is not differing interpretations of history, but an outright misinterpretation of it.

Yet the project lives on. Its spearheaders blithely dismiss the charges of inaccuracy as mere natterings that at least verge on racism, while school districts nationwide eagerly received pedagogical materials based on the idea of offering students a fresh, revealing take on American history.

We must ask: Is there some broader aspect of the 1619 Project that justifies a certain slippage between its claims and actual fact? Just what does this project have to teach students? What does it have to teach us? And if the answer to those questions is "nothing much," then how is it that brilliant, high-placed people can be so serenely unruffled in promulgating this material to innocent young minds?

In the end, the 1619 Project is more than a history lesson. It is founded on three basic principles, none expounded with a great deal of clarity, but all of them pernicious to a truly constructive black American identity.

One takeaway from the Times' rhetoric is that the American experiment offers nothing to celebrate, definitionally polluted by its dependence for so long on unpaid labor by black people. Our red-blooded celebration of 1776 as a political and even moral and intellectual victory is, under this analysis, callow and backward. In their minds, 1776 was a culmination of a grisly beginning 157 years before, of a kind no one could dream of feteing with fireworks and barbecues.

For all of its emotional resonance, this assertion is so simplistic and anti-intellectual that both rationality and morality require dismissing it. For example, one corollary of this viewpoint is a discomfort with seeing America's Founding Fathers feted as heroes and pioneers. We are taught that, because these men either owned slaves or let pass that others did, we are to see them as morally repugnant. In a recent radio interview, a black journalist discussed a book she has written documenting the racist aspects of all of the U.S. presidents. She

argued that we must be “honest” about these figures instead of settling for a sanitized vision of what these men did and tolerated. The host, a black woman, very civilly asked her for what purpose we should keep these things about these men in mind.

The historian only repeated her point about “honesty” a few times; she seemed a tad thrown by the angle of the question. One sensed that she was refraining from saying directly that we are not to think of George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln or even Franklin D. Roosevelt as heroes, that musicals such as “1776,” films such as “Lincoln,” and the endless stream of august biographies celebrating such men, are inappropriate. The protean musical “Hamilton” actually has been critiqued in this vein for not holding front and center that slaves were keeping the New York he knew afloat, and that Alexander Hamilton was not sufficiently committed to arguing against slavery.

This way of thinking calls for pretty much any white figure before now to wear scarlet letters on their heads. The letter today presumably would be R for “racist.” Everyone knew Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne was a kind person in many ways, but Hawthorne portrayed a society whose morality decreed that her adultery be treated as a defining trait relegating all else about her to triviality. Almost all of us, including many very religious people, today look upon this as benighted; the book is used in schools as an object lesson in how censorious obsessions of the moment can lead to unthinking cruelty. However, the 1619 Project puts forth that this kind of moral absolutism is correct in the case of American slavery.

That slavery was almost universally condoned at the time, an ordinary feature of life that one grew up immersed in unquestioned, and at a time when much less was known about science or the wider world, is considered irrelevant. We are to think of the sin of slavery as overriding all considerations of context, of what it is to be a human being, of, in a word, complexity.

Here, then, is the problem: The 1619 kind of perspective, for all of its elaborate terminology and moral passion vented in serious media organs and entertained by people with PhDs, demands that we abjure complexity. It is a call for dumbing ourselves down in the name of a moral crusade.

America has always been an experiment, ever imperfect, always in rehearsal. That its beginnings 400 years ago were founded in casual bondage of other humans is appalling from our viewpoint, but should surprise no one given what was ordinary in all human societies worldwide at the time. That in this nation, slavery gradually was abolished, via a movement in which white people vigorously and crucially participated, was a kind of miracle in itself. It demonstrated that the rehearsal was a progressive one, moving ever towards justice even if never achieving its quintessence.

The 1619 adherent rolls their eyes to hear that, as if some larger and obvious point is being missed. However, they have failed to communicate any such point that stands up to basic scrutiny and, meanwhile, it is they who miss a larger point: what social history actually is. Frankly, the 1619 vision, in pretending that the roiling, complex history of the United States

can be reduced to the fate of one group of people within it, abused, oppressed, and dismissed though they were for so very long, is lazy. Constitutional history matters only in that slaves were counted as three-fifths of a person. Feminism matters only in that white feminists were racists by our standards. Economic history matters only in relation to the yield from plantations. Geopolitics matters only in terms of whether the British would have abolished slavery in America. Technology matters only in terms of the cotton gin.

The entire business absolves one of the responsibility to engage the vast spectrum of human affairs that history constitutes, with the methods of inquiry and engagement long established as its *modus operandi*. To engage history openly and thoroughly becomes almost disloyal, inauthentic. History itself does not interest these people as much as something more local, personal, even.

Thought experiment: Imagine the 1619 crowd's response to a version of American history stressing the fate of white women, asserting that the patriarchy always has and continues to deny women's humanity and that this is the guiding force of American history, having made the rise of the republic possible. Immediately, our 1619-ers would grasp that as grievous as the history of women in America (and worldwide) is, a vision of this kind is reductive, appealing largely to a small group most would see as highly ideological.

Yet the 1619 idea is similar. Slavery was hideous in endless ways, but it was still, in the grand scheme of things — and there was one — just one of a great many things going on. And if all of those things can be cleverly traced to the black people toiling in fields, sheds and pantries, then so can they be traced to the women often doing similar things and undergoing different kinds of abuse, including what women historians today convincingly limn as denials of their humanity.

And never mind how often people of the 1619 mindset get even their history wrong. Their guiding idea is that to closely engage all of this “white” history, and certainly to see anything in it to praise, is as if one were doing all of this while a slave was being whipped just beyond the corner of one's eye.

Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation doesn't matter because he also for a while thought slaves, once freed, should be transported back to Africa. Lyndon Johnson's Great Society must be remembered as the product of a man who had gleefully referred to “niggers” in private and made nice with open segregationists. Black women who love Hillary Clinton must ever recall that she once referred to certain black gang members as “superpredators.”

We are to keep ever at the forefront of our minds that all of these blights and torts are the spawn of something conclusively revolting that eliminates any reason to seriously consider anything else about these people in evaluating them as human figures or, by extension, America as an accomplishment. America's very foundation, the heart of what America has

ever been, is a denial of black people's humanity. As such, we must conceive of all of these white big names with big Rs on their foreheads — and of course, all modern whites must wear big Ps for “privilege” on theirs.

A smart 10-year-old could see through the willful cluelessness on which this supposedly enlightened conception of social history is based. Who seriously condemns persons of the past for being unable to see beyond the confines of their time, when the ability to do this is precisely what we otherwise consider one of the quintessences of greatness? Or to anticipate a likely objection, who thinks the ability to see beyond the confines of one's time is the very definition of greatness, such that we must disqualify the Founding Fathers because whatever else they did that might seem to court greatness, they could not see beyond their time enough to grasp the full humanity of black people and therefore fell conclusively short?

The illogic here is plain to anyone. Only a certain etiquette today makes enough non-blacks refrain from acknowledging that the types who promulgate tropes such as the 1619 Project are able to do so with so little self-questioning and such impatience with critique. This is a way of looking at the past familiar from Marxist ideology, training adherents Zen-style to carefully stanch reasonable disbelief in favor of slogans, to tamp down a desire to explore, discover and reason with a commitment to broad-stroked evangelism. If the 1619 Project has a defensible justification, this perspective on history is not one of them.

Or, suppose it is? One might understand that 1619-style history is propaganda masquerading as thought, while supposing that to wink and let it pass is worthwhile in view of a larger agenda. Take the evangelism I referred to above — is the 1619 perspective geared towards achieving a result beyond the historiographical, that will uplift black America in such a way that we might hearken to John Ford's call to “print the legend” when it serves a worthy purpose?

One purpose the 1619 idea could serve is to reanimate the idea that black Americans are owed reparations for the salary denied their slave ancestors. Nikole Hannah-Jones has stated that this is the ultimate goal of the proposal she has been central in spearheading, for example.

However, we must ask why Hannah-Jones has only stated this in an almost parenthetical fashion. If the point is intended to get black people reparational payments, then we would expect that this would have been headlined front and center, rather than the idea being largely presented as a mere history lesson.

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A charitable explanation for why the reparations aim has been backgrounded so by 1619 proponents is a sense among them that the reparations argument is so poorly received in so many quarters — including many black ones — that it is most effectively presented in a back-door manner. After all, the initial national discussion of the idea in the 1970s went nowhere, and its revival in the late 1990s also was longer on heat than result, leaving Congressman John Conyers, Jr. quietly entering his reparations bill year after year in what became a kind of quiet gesture of protest rather than a plan of action. When Ta-Nehisi Coates' noteworthy article reignited the idea, after all of the attention paid, it would be hard to say that the idea has gotten any further, beyond the stirring but empty symbolism of the 2020 Democratic presidential candidates paying lip service to it in line with current “woke” expectations.

Possibly, then, reparations is best put over via stealth, in the way that an evangelist might try to bring someone into their fold by first asking their interlocutor whether they sense a lack of direction in their lives, whether they believe in something larger, etc. Here, we learn that the American experiment actually begins with black people brought to these shores in bondage (actually, they apparently were indentured servants, not slaves). So generations of black people after this worked without pay under brutal conditions, and then after Emancipation their descendants were treated little better, in many quarters until as late as the 1960s. It might seem to naturally follow that modern black people are owed some money.

Note, however, that the last sentence above feels a touch hasty to most readers beyond those already converted to the reparations idea. The entire argument always has been a fragile one in countless dimensions, with this having as much to do with the resistance to it as racism and indifference. For one, the very notion that today's problems in black America trace to what happened in 1619 is more a Rube Goldberg-style mental stunt than actual social history, vastly oversimplifying a much more complex, and in many ways more heartening, story; Coleman Hughes has outlined this^[1] ^[BF2] quite usefully.

Then, Yale University law professor Boris Bittker's book on reparations, now 48 years old, politely but comprehensively filetted the whole idea so conclusively that it continues to stand as the last word on the matter. Those under the impression that Coates' article in The Atlantic has superseded it would feel otherwise if they read Bittker's book — unless they operate under the indefensible conceit that a book on reparations is logically and morally valid only if written by someone black. Both Coates' article and Randall Robinson's “The Debt” of 2000, as eagerly and widely discussed just 20 years ago as Coates' article has been, are largely eloquent *cris de coeur* in the place of pragmatic analysis. Coates brings in some information about redlining; Robinson was more concerned with Africa. Both, however, largely punt on specifics.

In general, then, if the 1619 idea is an indirect way of calling for reparations for slavery, there are two problems. One is that this call has failed to bear real fruit for longer than most black people now have been alive. It renders the 1619 proposal old wine in what is now a battered and half-empty bottle. Second is that the proponents of the 1619 idea apparently lack the confidence in their reparational aims to even present them directly — or at best, are under an

impression that hints, implications, and parentheticals can be an effective way of swaying a vast and diverse populace regarding a radical, controversial proposal. This is not only old wine in an old bottle, but to borrow another alcohol-related metaphor that Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.) used in reference to something else during the Democratic debates of summer 2019, this is “all foam and no beer.”

The 1619 analysis is also designed to serve as an explanation for disparities between black and white achievement. The lesson, sometimes openly stated, is that all such deficits trace to the disadvantage that black people were saddled with by being brought to America in chains.

This grows from a basic tenet among perhaps most black academics in the humanities and social sciences, as well as other black people of the “woke” mindset. That tenet is that America must understand that there is “nothing wrong with” black people. These people fairly ache to see Americans master the mental trick, the moral generosity, to look upon black-white disparities and understand that the reason for these is black people’s lack of “agency,” as sociologists put it. We must understand that tomatoes are fruits, that gravity means that people in the Southern Hemisphere do not fall off the earth, that mountains wear down to create sand — and that black problems are “not our fault.”

And to be sure, in terms of how these disparities began, they are not “our fault.” If black people had come to America on their own steam, and somehow not been processed by whites here as animals, we can be quite sure there would not be the disproportion of black people in urban inner-city neighborhoods, the subpar scholastic achievement (if anyone doubts that, consult studies that documented sky-high IQs among plenty of black students in Chicago in the 1930s), and so much else. The pathway from 1619 to 2020 is vastly more tortuous than we are being taught to believe — i.e., today we would not find that kind of IQ performance among those very students’ great-grandchildren, for reasons that trace to “racism” only in ways the 1619 crowd would find inconvenient; consult Stuart Buck’s “Acting White: The Ironic Legacy of Desegregation.” However, in the grand scheme of things, it is indeed not “our fault.”

Too seldom asked, however, is why it is so important what white people think of us. To precisely what end must white people master a complex, nuanced social history lesson when it comes to black people? What are the chances that this ever will, or even could, happen, given that very few people are historians or professors? Of course, we must battle the kind of acrid contempt that leads to violence and murder. However, when it comes to matters of whites’ quieter dismissive attitudes and misimpressions, the black intelligentsia’s Ahab-like commitment to transforming their mentality has always perplexed me. Under what conception of human strength do we teach a group of people to obsess over how they are seen in the eyes of others?

More specifically, how is this Black Power? The idea seems to be that for black people — and only us — it is a kind of human strength to obsess with Talmudic intensity over whether white people like us, value us, truly see us equals, and in just which ways. For black people, the cry of powerlessness is somehow a form of strength, and even racial authenticity. However, actual defenses of that idea seem not to exist. The detractor objects that no one has said that whites' attitudes were so important — but the fact that the 1619 Project is founded upon exactly such a concern neatly deep-sixes this objection. And the fact remains that this obsession with white people understanding that it “isn't our fault” goes against the basics of what we consider healthy tutelage to any human being. “Who cares what he thinks about you?” we tell our child. The psychologist treats minimization of obstacles, an almost willful denial, as a healthy kind of coping strategy for busy humans grappling with the challenges of life.

But our wise ones tell us that when it comes to black people, things are different. Authentic blackness means refraining from any natural inclination to minimization. Our entire self-conception as a race is supposed to be founded on the fact that whites see us as inferior, upon a wariness of how whites feel about us, and even a sense of fellowship as people communally “oppressed” by the fact that whites don't quite see us with the dignity and precision we would prefer.

My intent here is not to encourage the reader to simply dismiss people such as the 1619 advocates as “crazy.” We must attempt to get at the heart of what these intelligent, morally concerned people suppose. Here, it is reasonable to surmise that they think this focus on whether it's “our fault” has some kind of benefit that makes it worth it to battle minimization, that makes it somehow advanced, progressive, to obsess with obstacles, rather than seek to get around them.

For example, one might suppose that if more people understood that “it isn't our fault,” then societal changes that would elevate black America would happen faster. That vision is easy to accommodate from a distant, vague perspective. However, we must ask: What is the evidence that this is true? In what other human society did the ruling class's understanding that “it isn't their fault” condition a change in an oppressed group's fortunes? Note that the only real example is this very society, where exactly this happened with black people during the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s. It seems that today's warriors suppose that further, deeper understanding of this kind could fashion even more change.

However, the simple question is: Who are the people who, if they underwent a grand realization that “It isn't their fault” beyond the basic “root causes” wisdom, now entrenched among the educated for 50 years, would fashion impactful changes in legislation on health, drugs, education, or housing? Which officials, in which positions? What exactly are we thinking they would do? “I finally understood that the problems in black communities trace back to injustices that began in the 17th century, and that is what finally made me _____.” With what would the 1619 people fill in that blank?

A common riposte here will be that what makes the “It’s not their fault” argument especially important is that the black experience is defined by experiencing racism not just as a passing attitude but in the form of violence at the hands of the police. We will leave aside that the universality of this experience among black people is vastly exaggerated — as Ellis Cose, likely in favor of the 1619 position, has stated[3] [JM4] , “Most middle-class blacks know that they are not very likely to find themselves on the wrong side of a policeman’s baton.”

However, in general, after the room is done clapping and amen-ing and snapping their fingers, to bring the cops into this is more something someone would think of as a defense than an actual argument. Via what strategy are we hoping to teach the typical cop the lesson “It isn’t their fault,” and most importantly, how would that relate to whether or not they hurt or killed a black person in the heat of the moment? The 1619 advocate is caught in a bind here, dedicated to pointing out how ineradicably racism is imprinted in the white soul while also preparing to claim that some articles in the New York Times Magazine are going to transform that white soul’s psyche.

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Countless human groups have succeeded amidst dismissive attitudes, and in societies in which no one cared the slightest about the intricacies of how social history held them back. The modern black intelligentsia’s claim is that for some reason, in the late 20th century in the United States there emerged a situation in which one particular oppressed class, the descendants of African slaves, could only fitfully succeed unless the ruling class underwent a profound transformation not just in how it ran things, but in how it thought, down all the way to its basal, precortical impulses.

Gone are the days when a true civil rights leader such as Bayard Rustin could, in his renowned Commentary article in 1965, carefully outline just how black people could succeed despite the challenges of automation and what the ruling culture would need to provide, in the concrete rather than psychological sense, to allow this to be so. Nowhere are we taught why today’s psychological focus is a preferable approach, rather than a mere fashion. And perplexingly, nowhere in these people’s writings and talks do we see any hint of the shame that you would expect someone to feel in lustily proclaiming their own people as uniquely incapable of coping with a challenging reality.

To the extent that answers to the questions raised here either dance around or dismiss them, we understand that the entire 1619 edifice is founded on something other than pragmatism.

To accept the implication of the 1619 ideology that heroic figures should be dismissed for not fully understanding the horrors of slavery, and that the American story is defined by nothing except the treatment of black people, would be to disrespect them as infantile minds. As

such, we must evaluate the project on what it portends for forging socio-political change. Sadly, here the project would seem to yield nothing. A revivification of the reparations argument is longer on theatre than politics. The concern with whites understanding that “It isn’t our fault” may seem a form of political engagement but in fact is quite irrelevant to change in actual lives.

Rather, the 1619 message is, alone, the action in itself. To many black thinkers today, they sense that the Cassandra role is what makes black thought most interesting. It also makes a black thinker feel important, like they matter. There is an insecurity being assuaged here, an understandable product of a race subjected to such dismissal for centuries. Black America is still working that out, despite the new freedoms afforded us 50 years ago, and among the black intelligentsia, this also explains the hypersensitivity about whether whites “understand.” That kind of hypersensitivity is a product of self-doubt. A people who truly like themselves don’t give a damn whether other people like them, and take pride in the very act of succeeding regardless.

But what this means is that, evaluated honestly, the 1619 Project is a kind of performance art. Facts, therefore, are less important than attitude. Hannah-Jones has predictably dismissed serious and comprehensive empirical critiques, as if for black thinkers, truth is somehow ranked second to fierceness and battle poses. For many, questioning the 1619 Project elicits irritation, of a kind that suggests personal insult rather than difference of opinion. This is because the 1619 Project is indeed all about personality, a certain persona that smart black people are encouraged to adopt as a modern version of being a civil rights warrior.

For this 2.0 version of civil rights warrior, authentic blackness, significant blackness, requires eternal opposition, bitter indignation, and claims of being owed. Whether all of this is rooted in reality in a way that can create change for actual human beings is of less concern than whether all of this is expressed, on a regular basis. It keeps The Struggle going, we are told.

How sad that the wandering socio-historical trajectory that got us from 1619 to here can create a caste among the oppressed who, in all sincerity, mistake performance for activism. If we really want to get anywhere, the tragedy is that today we must take a deep breath and forge a new Struggle against them and their influence. Ironically, we must understand, despite the performers’ tongue-clucking and nasty tweets and GIFs, that it will be those engaged in this new Struggle who will qualify, in a truly proactive sense, as authentically black.

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