

# Inquiring Minds– 16 July 2021

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## How Should We Teach Social Studies?

*The New York Times* publication of Nikole Hannah-Jones’s work on the 1619 Project kicked off a nation-wide controversy over how history should be taught. In Nov. 2020, President Trump established a “1776 Commission” to promote “patriotic education.” On Inauguration Day, President Biden cancelled the commission. According to *Politifact*, “lawmakers in over a dozen states. . . have introduced bills aimed at barring critical race theory in the classroom. The bills generally forbid teachers from offering any instruction that suggests that the United States is fundamentally racist, or that leads students to feel guilty for past actions by white people.” In May, 20-some Attorneys-General sent a letter to Washington lawmakers opposing the teaching of “critical race theory” and, in Florida, Gov. DeSantis lashed out at critical race theory and argued that civics needs “to be taught accurately. It needs to be taught in a fact-based way, not an ideological-based way.”

But what does that mean? What should students be taught about their nation and its past? Whose past is it? Who should decide? How can fact and ideology be distinguished?

Steven Mintz, “The 1619 Project and Uses and Abuses of History” *Inside Higher Ed*, Oct. 28, 2020.

*How a special newspaper section can prompt a serious reflection about this nation’s past and about history education more broadly.*

Not since the late 1960s has U.S. history has seemed so relevant. Students are actually quite eager to know about the impact of past pandemics, the effectiveness of mass protests in precipitating social change and, above all, the roots and persistence of today’s racial inequalities. A special section of *The New York Times* has played a powerful role in framing public debate. The paper’s 1619 Project, an attempt to recenter U.S. history around slavery and its legacies, touched a nerve with several of its claims:

- that racism is embedded in the nation’s DNA.
- that much of the nation’s wealth and its “uniquely severe and unbridled” form of capitalism are due to slavery.
- that many of the undemocratic elements in the American system of government are vestiges of concessions made to slaveowners.
- that history is mistaught in many public schools, by failing to adequately describe slavery and its impact, and, more controversially, to recognize that the American Revolution was motivated in large measure, by a desire to defend slavery, that African Americans were foundational to the idea of American freedom and that Abraham Lincoln regarded Blacks as a “troublesome presence.”

The Pulitzer Prize-winning 1619 Project represents a thought experiment that asks how U.S. history would be understood differently if 1619 and the arrival of the first Africans into English-speaking North America were regarded as its founding date. But the project also represents something more:

- A corrective to histories that marginalized the significance of slavery and racism in American history, economics and culture.
- A counterbalance to Whiggish, Anglo-centric histories that describe U.S. history largely in terms of struggles to realize ideals of liberty and equality.
- A counternarrative that prods readers to rethink the nation's past in terms of the crucial role that Black Americans have played in shaping every facet of this nation's culture, from its music to its gradual embrace of democracy.

A hot-off-the-press opinion piece by columnist Bret Stephens, following President Donald J. Trump's call for a 1776 Commission to promote a more patriotic version of U.S. history in public schools, has reignited controversy over the 1619 Project.

The Stephens essay deals largely with the press's proper role and responsibilities. He views the Times' effort to reframe the narrative of American history and the national conversation over race and to alter classroom teaching as overreach. "The job of journalism is to take account of that complexity, not simplify it out of existence through the adoption of some ideological orthodoxy."

His piece raises a seemingly rhetorical question: Should a deep-pocketed corporation be able to distribute a curriculum to K-12 schools without serious professional vetting?

My own view is that the 1619 Project represents a huge missed opportunity by the leading historical associations to prompt public discussion about the important factual and conceptual issues the project raises. These groups failed, in my judgment, to provide the essential background that K-12 teachers need if they are to teach the issues raised by the project effectively, or even to provide forums where key controversies could be debated and discussed. No serious historian doubts the centrality of slavery in the period up through the Civil War or its ongoing legacies, evident in the persistence of racism, systemic discrimination and gross disparities in income, wealth, health, educational attainment and criminal justice -- as well as upon every facet of American culture, including the nation's foodways, music, religious practices, speech patterns, vocabulary, literature and much more.

Criticisms of the 1619 Project by major historians instead focus on:

- Its omissions, including the failure to discuss the dispossession of indigenous homelands and of economic class.
- Its racial essentialism, apparent in its failure to take into account the biracial struggle against slavery and discrimination.
- Its dismissal of the revolutionary ideals of liberty and equality as a sham, and failure to recognize that U.S. history has involved an ongoing, incomplete struggle about whether this country will live up to its founding ideals.
- Its lack of nuance, whether about the motives of the American revolutionaries or Abraham Lincoln's attitudes toward slavery and racial equality.
- Its overstatement of slavery's role in the nation's wealth accumulation and economic growth.
- Its ahistoricism, in minimizing the importance of change and struggle over time.

The 1619 Project is part of a broader argument that the underlying forces driving U.S. history are racism and xenophobia, capitalist exploitation of labor and natural resources, hierarchy (including gendered hierarchies), and greed and that has produced a society that is distinctive in its propensity toward violence, veneration of guns and extreme and corrosive individualism.

This argument contains much more than a kernel of truth, but it isn't, of course, the whole story, which also includes an ongoing moral civil war over what kind of country this will be. Among the issues at stake in this debate is how societal improvement comes about and especially the role of pragmatic politicians like Lincoln, the two Roosevelts, Wilson and Lyndon B. Johnson as forces for transformation.

Alongside the factual dispute are broader conceptual issues that the 1619 Project raises that deserve much more reflection than so far received.

### **1. Who Owns the Past?**

If war is too important to be left to the generals, ditto for history. Professional historians have no monopoly over the past, nor should they. To echo Carl Becker's 1931 American Historical Association presidential address, all of us should strive to "understand the past and anticipate the future in the light of its own restricted experience." We all, in short, should be historians.

But what does it mean to be a historian? It entails constructing a narrative out of the past's surviving shards, many of which are themselves problematic. Because history is constructed out of fragments of the past, historical knowledge is necessarily contingent and subject to revision and evidence must be evaluated in terms of authenticity, authorship, bias, context, perspective, reliability and a host of other variables.

What ultimately distinguishes history from other ways of connecting to the past -- legend, myth, nostalgia, yes, and fiction and film -- lies in a respect for evidence and a willingness to accept uncertainty, ambiguity, complexity, varied perspectives and multiple causation in an effort to get the past right.

### **2. What Should Be Taught in K-12 Classrooms and Who Should Decide?**

U.S. history and social studies, perhaps more than any other K-12 fields of study, evoke controversy over what should be taught and who should decide. Legislatures frequently intervene and mandate coverage of particular topics. State boards of education sometimes select textbooks and spell out curricula. The College Board, through its Advanced Placement courses, helps dictate topical coverage and the way the subjects are treated. Then there are classroom teachers who have some leeway in how and what to teach. And finally, there is a diverse public, which, through its protests and complaints, can help shape pedagogy, topical coverage and interpretation.

In an effort to avoid controversy and better align middle and high school curricula with college expectations, history and social studies teachers increasingly say that they teach students how to think rather than what to think. The recommended approach is to emphasize critical thinking skills rather than simply describe foundational events, by teaching students how to formulate questions, conduct research, evaluate sources and synthesize information.

Teaching students how to think historically is a noble ideal, but an aim that is very difficult to implement in practice. Without a firm grounding in historical facts and without an organizing framework or narrative in which to locate key episodes, the past will no doubt strike most students as a fragmentary, disjointed and incoherent mass of disconnected facts. Worse yet, some essential historical questions, like slavery's contribution to American economic growth, involve highly technical calculations that are difficult to bring into college classrooms, let alone their high school counterparts.

In my view, it is impossible for students to grasp history without some sense of the big picture. This requires students to view history not as a succession of heroes or separate, disconnected events, but in terms of overarching themes, critical debates and periodization.

History without an organizing narrative is nothing more than antiquarianism.

### **3. Objective Truth Versus Historical Truth**

Perhaps you remember Johnny Cash's 1971 anti-Vietnam War protest song "What Is Truth?"

Well, there's no easy answer.

The front page of the 1619 Project includes the words "It is finally time to tell our story truthfully." But what does that phrase mean? Objectively? Comprehensively? Conclusively?

Typically, historians distinguish between mutually agreed-upon facts and facts that while true are nevertheless misleading because of a lack of proper context. I've often experienced this in class, when a student says "Isn't it true ..." before voicing a disingenuous, deceptive argument.

Sigmund Freud offers another way of thinking about truth that I find valuable. The founder of psychoanalysis drew a useful distinction between literal or objective truth -- a set of agreed-upon names, dates and events -- and historical truth: how events are remembered, experienced and felt. For Freud, whose trauma-driven approach to understanding was rooted in a recognition that the past invariably impinges upon the present, lived experience possesses truth value even if it isn't exactly correct.

Anticipating postmodern modes of thought, Freud refused to draw a sharp dichotomy between past and present. For Freud, the meaning of past incidents only becomes apparent in retrospect. Such a perspective might help us understand that the true meaning and consequences of this society's experience with slavery only manifests itself over time.

Factual and human truths may differ fundamentally, but both fall under truth's rubric.

History is best understood not as a fixed body of knowledge but as an ongoing debate. It is constantly rewritten as public interests shift, new voices enter the conversation and new interpretive frameworks arise.

We should always welcome fresh viewpoints, no matter how unsettling or controversial. But we should also subject those views to close, critical scrutiny.

Robert Penn Warren ended his 1946 classic *All the King's Men*, the only great novel with a history graduate student as narrator, with a classic concluding line: "And soon now we shall go out of the house and go into the convulsion of the world, out of history into history and the awful responsibility of Time."

What the novelist meant, I think, is that history -- a balanced, nuanced understanding of the complexities of the past "as it was" -- is necessarily different from the uses to which history is put. Each is important.

Our students need an honest, fair-minded understanding of the past, not a whitewashed, sanitized version. They need to engage with this country's profound contradictions: that a land of opportunity and a haven for religious freedom, with its soaring ideals of liberty and equality and unmatched technological and scientific achievements, could, simultaneously, be a place of displacement and dispossession, slavery, discrimination and violence and death without a counterpart in the 19th-century Western world.

As F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote in 1936, "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function."

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