America’s Racist Founding?
An East-European View

IVO CERMÁN

By now everybody must have heard about The 1619 Project of the New York Times Magazine and the recent push to reinterpret the American Revolution as a racist enterprise which aimed at preserving slavery.¹ There is a difference between saying that the United States failed to abolish slavery at a federal level, and saying that it declared independence precisely to preserve slavery. It is one thing to claim that white racists who tortured a Black American war veteran in 1946 were betraying Jefferson’s ideals, and it is quite another thing to say they were acting on the basis of “the same racist ideology that Jefferson and the framers used as the nation’s founding.”²

The 1619 Project was a 100-page supplement to The New York Times magazine published in August 2019 to recall the 400 years since the arrival of the first Black slaves in the present-day USA. It includes an introductory essay by Nikole Hannah-Jones and ten short essays on various topics relating to slavery by multiple authors. In June 2020 it was followed by another supplement edited by Nikole Hannah-Jones that uses the historical narrative to justify reparations for Black Americans.³ Since then it has grown into an initiative that aims to reframe the entire history of the USA and make this reframed history the basis of school education. The narrative is also being imposed on historians. According to the New York Times Magazine, the preservation of slavery has been the main mission of the United States throughout its entire history. Hence the shift from 1776 to 1619, the year in which allegedly the first Black slaves arrived in the present-day USA. In the flowery language of the editor Jake Silverstein, this was the moment when the “seeds” were planted, and the racist flower took its “roots”.⁴ This metaphorical language manipulates the reader into believing that everything in American history has been determined by its “seeds”, and there is no other remedy than uprooting the whole plant that has been growing since 1619. In the words of Jake Silverstein, the aim of The 1619 Project is “to reframe American history by considering what it would mean to regard 1619 as our nation’s birth year.”⁵

¹ Nikole Hannah-Jones (ed.), The 1619 Project. The New York Times Magazine (hereafter NYTM), August 18, 2019 (= single issue magazine).
² Ibidem, pp. 14–40, here p. 24.
³ Nikole Hannah-Jones (ed.), What Is Owed. The New York Times Magazine, June 28, 2020 (single issue magazine).
⁴ Jake Silverstein, 1619, NYTM August 18, 2019, pp. 4–5.
⁵ Ibidem, p. 4–5.
Surprisingly, the project met with almost universal applause from US historians. The strongest repudiation came from the World Socialist Website, whereas only two groups of academic historians provided a critical response to the journalistic conception of American history. The first of them was a group of five experts on US history of the 18th and 19th centuries, led by Sean Wilentz of Princeton. They wrote a letter to the executive editor of the NYTM, Jake Silverstein, addressing the inadequacies of the project and urging him to correct them before the project was applied within the school curriculum.6 The other group were historians of the Civil War led by Allen C. Guelzo of Princeton who also wrote a letter to the same executive editor.7 This one was not published in the NYTM. On the other hand, Alex Liechtenstein, the editor of The American Historical Review, welcomed the 1619 Project in an editorial article in 2020 and castigated the critics.8 After Sean Wilentz submitted a response to this laudatory speech, Liechtenstein replied again with a harsher castigation.9 Neither Silverstein nor Nikole Hannah-Jones admitted any mistakes, and the NYT refused to make any corrections. Later, the conservative journal The Federalist noticed that the electronic version of Hannah Jones’s pilot essay had been silently corrected.10 The bold intention to „reframe American history“ had been retained.

In this year, the debate on the „reframing“ has been renewed because in January 2021 the 1776 Commission established by President Trump issued a report that outlined a conception of American modern history that sought to reverse the trend.11 It has been universally rejected by academic historians. Its main architect, Matthew Spalding of Hillsdale College, basically repeated the arguments of his book We Still Hold These Truths
of 2009.\textsuperscript{12} The \textit{1776 Report} argues that civic education should be based on the principles of equal rights and combat ideologies promoting group rights. These un-American ideologies were identified as slavery, progressivism, the global movements of Fascism and Communism, and finally the critical race theory. It should, however, be noted that slavery and progressivism were certainly American. What may come as a surprise is the fact that even Black civil rights activists had been opposed to the 1619 Project. In February 2020 a group led by Robert L. Woodson, a veteran of the civil rights campaigns, established the 1776Unite initiative, which sought to counter the 1619 Project with an alternative online curriculum that would emphasize the positive contributions of African-Americans to American history.\textsuperscript{13} Their conception is based mainly on personal stories. Since then, both woke journalists and conservative intellectuals continue in deadly attacks on modern US history, reaching a tragic consensus in their repudiation of the progressive era.

For all historians in the post-Communist countries, \textit{The 1619 Project} brings back painful memories of anti-American propaganda. Should we resign ourselves to the idea that the propaganda image of American history was correct? Is the view of US history presented by the NYT a corrected version that we could accept? Since we need to orientate ourselves in this „reframing process“, we have devoted the section on historiography in this issue of \textit{Opera historica} to this debate. My own contribution will be divided into three parts. Firstly, I will try to explain how anti-American propaganda shaped the East European image of the history of Black Americans. In the second section, I will discuss the propositions of the 1619 Project and explore whether their version improved in any way the conception inherited from the old propaganda. Lastly, I will try to prove that the civil rights of the Black Americans were not born out of fighting. They were constructed by intellectual work.

\textbf{The East European View of Black American History}

Since I am aware that this topic might be perceived as controversial, I would like to explain first that the historiographical context in Eastern Europe is entirely different from that of US historiography. Whereas journalists in the United States may believe that they are bringing forward something new and entirely different from the scholarly narrative, here in Eastern Europe they are actually just reaffirming the narrative that had been created by Communist propaganda. This is happening in a scholarly vacuum because home-grown academic historiography of the early republic does not exist in

\textsuperscript{12} Matthew Spalding, \textit{We Still Hold these Truths. Rediscovering Our Principles, Reclaiming Our Future}, Wilmington, DE, 2009.

\textsuperscript{13} All information is available at https://1776unites.com. In 2021 they published a volume of essays that underpins this curriculum. See Robert L. Woodson (ed.), \textit{Red, White and Black. Rescuing American History from Revisionists and Race Hustlers}, New York 2021.
Eastern Europe. An exception might be post-Soviet Russia, where American studies seem to be flourishing.¹⁴

The issue of Black Americans was weaponized by Communist regimes in their propaganda war against the United States, and all the works written on this subject were linked to these propaganda efforts. It started with a massive propaganda campaign in 1951 which sought to portray the United States as a perpetrator of genocide against Black Americans, and therefore the successor to the Nazi Germany. The stimulus to this media campaign was the establishment of the United Nations in 1945 and the adoption of the Genocide Convention and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in December 1948.¹⁵ The campaigns charging the United States of genocide had actually started already in 1946 because they were triggered by Lemkin’s campaign for the Genocide Convention, which acquired much publicity. The greatest of these campaigns came in 1951, after the Genocide Convention came into force. The Soviet Union was supporting this enterprise because it perceived it as a good opportunity to discredit its Western ideological opponent. The other aim of this campaign was to demoralize the citizens of the recently conquered East European countries.

The leading personality in the campaign was William C. Patterson, the secretary of the Communist-led Civil Rights Congress. In December 1951 William Patterson and Paul Robeson traveled to Paris to present the UN and the French government with a petition charging the United States with genocide against Black Americans.¹⁶

There followed a carefully prepared tour of East European countries.¹⁷ At the end of 1951 or early in 1952, Patterson flew from Paris to Budapest where he gave several speeches on American racism and then travelled to Czechoslovakia where he spoke in the official Association of Czechoslovak Authors.¹⁸ Patterson arrived in Prague in the

¹⁴ Ivan Kurilla – Victoria Zhuravleva, Проблемы развития американистики в постсоветской России, Американский Ежегодник 2005, pp. 80–93; idem – eadem, Teaching U.S. History in Russia: Issues, Challenges and Prospects, The Journal of American History 96, 2010. For more on American Studies in Russia see http://ra-studies.com.

¹⁵ Charles H. Martin, Internationalizing the American Dilemma. The Civil Rights Congress and the 1951 Genocide Petition to the United Nations, Journal of American Ethnic History 16, 1997, 4, pp. 35–61.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 48.

¹⁷ Ibidem, pp. 50–51. The flight from Paris to Budapest could not be a sudden improvisation by a despairing Patterson as Charles H. Martin implies in his article, since he had sent a package with the text to Budapest in advance and the Czech translations of his book were already prepared.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 50. Even his contacts had to be prepared in advance and could not be a free personal initiative as Martin implies in his article. The Svaz československých spisovatelů (Association of Czechoslovak Authors) was an official organization of pro-regime Communist writers, run by the state. It was impossible for a Western foreigner simply to land in Prague and spontaneously visit its headquarters to deliver a public speech.
time after the Milada Horáková trial and before the bloody Slánský trial. There was mass incarceration going on, with thousands of „bourgeois“ citizens placed in a network of forced labor camps (TNP), and the forced collectivization of agriculture had just reached the stage of regional show trials. It was in this context that Patterson arrived in Prague and announced in a dramatic tone that African American citizens were being oppressed in the United States. After delivering this shocking news the oppressed Black Communist returned to Paris, where he gave a number of interviews to the Western media.

The book-length petition *We Charge Genocide* was translated into East European languages and diffused throughout the Soviet bloc shortly afterwards. The book compares the United States to Hitler’s Germany several times and argues that the genocidal regime had been going on for 300 years. If you do your math, you will see that this petition already claims that the United States had been a racist enterprise since the 17th century. There followed a cultural campaign in Eastern Europe which included publishing stories for children, abridged editions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* for children, and history books by the chairman of the USCP, William Z. Foster and Herbert Aptheker. Both advocated an alliance between Black and white workers against the rich. It should be noticed that Russian readers were given also a translation of *The Main Currents in
American Thought by the progressive historian Vernon L. Parrington.\footnote{Vernon Louis Parrington, Основные течения американской мысли: Амер. литература со времени ее возникновения до 1920 г., I-III, Moscow 1962–1963. (A translation of idem, Main Currents in American Thought. An Interpretation of American Literature from the Beginnings till 1920, I-III, New York 1927.)} Considering that even Foster drew on Aptheker in passages on Black Americans, we can conclude that Aptheker was the main party authority on Black American history.

Aptheker’s main contribution was his 1943 dissertation on slave revolts, in which he argued that revolts and conspiracies were not exceptional events, as hitherto assumed, but regular occurrences.\footnote{Herbert Aptheker, American Negro Slave Revolts, New York 1943. The book was reedited in 1969 and 1974.} He followed various alleged revolts from colonial times until the participation of Black soldiers in the Civil War, which he interpreted as the culmination of the freedom struggle. In so doing, he convinced the readers that the Black Americans liberated themselves, and did so by continuous fighting and resistance. Since liberation in his understanding did not consist in being a citizen in a bourgeois state, the narrative did not go very far after the abolition of slavery. Even though he was concerned with the denial of the alleged civil rights in the early republic, he was not actually interested in the way that real civil rights were construed after 1865.

However, Aptheker was mostly cited, whereas his own works on Black American history were rarely translated. The Soviet regime preferred his books on contemporary America which were published mainly in Russian. The first work on Black American history translated in the Eastern bloc during the Cold War was Fight for Freedom, which was an extended version of his book To Be Free.\footnote{Idem, Boj za svobodu. Kapitoly z dějin černošského lidu, Praha 1952.} It also included an extended introduction on the nature of American slavery. So far, only a Czech version is known; possibly it was not published in other Eastern countries. In the Soviet Union, his volumes on the history of the colonial period and the American Revolution were translated.\footnote{Idem, История американского народа. Колониальная эра, Moscow 1961; idem, История американского народа. Американская революция, Moscow 1962.} In the 1970s, there followed a translation of Afro-American History: the Modern Era and a multivolume history of Black Americans.\footnote{Idem, История Афро-американцев в современную эпоху, Moscow 1976; idem, Черные американцы в истории США, Moscow 1986.}

The position of this official literature was that Black and white working classes in the United States must collaborate to destroy the rich. In this sense, race was not the most crucial value; it was argued that class identity was more important. The propaganda campaign was renewed after 1968 when the Soviet regime created the media star Angela Davis. After her release from custody, she was invited to make
a tour of the Eastern bloc in 1972. It started in Moscow, where Angela Davis received a high Soviet award, and then continued in the East European satellite states. Angela Davis declared her support for the Soviet regime everywhere, but she did not employ historical parallels. It was, however, ironic that she supported the Soviet occupation regime in Czechoslovakia and then lectured back home against the „Prison-Industrial-Complex“ in the United States. Her campaign started a new period of anti-American propaganda in which the Soviet regime sought to exploit the arts and the media. In parallel with Angela Davis’s tour, the Communist countries published translations of William Styron’s novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, which gave a fictionalized account of the bloody slave revolt that erupted in Virginia in 1831.31

After President Jimmy Carter started his famous human rights offensive in 1978, the Soviet propaganda responded with an effort to exploit the issue of Black Americans. In this period of the propaganda cold war, the main Eastern expert on Black American history was Robert Fyodorovich Ivanov from the Institute of Universal History of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR.32 However, the influence of Foster and Aptheker did not disappear, because chapters on early history in Ivanov’s books once again drew on these two Communist experts. He was also responsible for the Russian translations of Aptheker’s history works in the 1970s and 1980s.

His own book *America’s Stepchildren* of 1978 again draws on the thesis that white and Black workers must unite in the struggle against capitalism.33 Ivanov considered slavery as a form of primary accumulation of capital which made the subsequent economic expansion of the United States possible. In his view, the economic importance of Black slaves was much greater than their numbers. Slavery was also a form of estrangement of the producer from the means of production. Ivanov also believed that the church(es) and Christianity were helpful in making Black slaves more docile. He stressed, however, that the slaves were not docile at all. The Marxist-Leninist ideology required that they had to be shown fighting because „only the oppressed class is most target-oriented in the fight for her own liberation.“34 In Ivanov’s ideological interpretation, the Black and white adversaries of slavery had to join forces. His approach to this question is strongly reminiscent of East European historiography of the „second serfdom“, which also had to underline rebellions as class struggles by the serfs, but showed little interest in liberty suits and the legal protection of serfs.

31 William Styron, *Doznání Nata Turnera*, Praha 1972; *Wyznania Nata Turnera*, Warszawa 1973. It seems that there was no Russian edition of the novel at that time.

32 In his early years, he focused on the Civil War. His works on Black Americans include Robert Fyodorovich Ivanov, *Американская история и негритянский вопрос*, Moscow 1976; *идем*, *Черные пасынки Америки*, Moscow 1978.

33 Robert Fyodorovich Ivanov, *Nevlastní děti Ameriky*, Praha 1981 (translation of *Черные пасынки*).

34 Ibidem, p. 26.
In his interpretation of the American Revolution, Ivanov did not yet stress the Black Americans’ loyalty for the British. Under the influence of 19th century American historiography, he underlined the participation of Black heroes in the struggle for independence, such as Crispus Attucks. The aim was to show the Americans as ungrateful for the Black Americans’ sacrifice. He also argued that British loyalists were also slaveholders and their support for the slaves was a scam. Jefferson’s declaration of independence was a lie, and the revolution just hypocrisy. The thesis of the global unity of oppressed people prompted him to recall that Russian critics of serfdom, such as Novikov, Radishchev and Lomonosov were also critical of American slavery.35

The period after Jimmy Carter’s offensive also brought the propagandist weaponization of another fictionalized narrative of Black American history. This time it was the novel *Roots* by Alex Haley. The TV series based on the novel was aired in some East-European countries, and the book was translated into Polish and Czech between 1981 and 1982.36 The success of the TV series inspired Polish sociologist and legal scientist Wiktor Osiatyński to write a history of Black Americans. He also entitled it *Roots*, but it was not an original work. The chapters on early history were copied from the popular book by the journalist Robert A. Liston,37 chapters on ideology and racism from Thomas F. Grosset,38 and Marxist interpretations from Melanie Smyth’s anthology.39 All in all, the influence of Aptheker the ideologist was replaced by that of Liston the journalist.

The propagandist goal of Osiatyński’s book is to unmask a country “in which discrimination and racism were a daily fact, both were legalized“.40 The narrative begins with the first colonies in North America and ends with the race riots of the 1960s and their sociological investigation. The bottom line is that Black Americans have been exploited by capitalism since 1619 and the only remedy is the defeat of capitalism and the victory of the progressive Communist party and its scientific antiracism.41 However, the scope of facts discussed in this book is much broader than in earlier ideological works; moreover, it is not written in the same dry style. In addition, Osiatyński does not publicize Communist victory as explicitly as earlier authors. The original ending merely stressed that modern slavery still existed, whereas the epilogue written for the Czech

35 Ibidem, p. 48–49.
36 Alex Haley, *Kořeny*, Praha 1981; idem, *Korzenie*, Warzawa 1988. There was no Russian edition before 1989.
37 Robert A. Liston, *Slavery in America. The History of Slavery*, New York 1970.
38 Thomas F. Grosset, *Race. The History of an Idea in America*, Dallas 1963.
39 Melanie Smyth (ed.), *The Black American Reference Book*, Englewood Cliffs 1976.
40 Wiktor Osiatyński, *Kořeny*, Praha 1988, p. 205.
41 Ibidem, p. 215.
translation of 1988 stressed the value of Robert Bellah’s religious movement based on self-imposed „commitments“.

What is disappointing is Osiatyński’s continuous degrading of the Western liberal political thought. In keeping with the materialist worldview, he simply could not admit that any liberal thinker could have meant anything good, and therefore repeated the old talking points about John Locke’s approval of slavery and the US constitution protecting slavery, and finally he even accused the whole Enlightenment of racist intentions. He only spared the Polish patriot Tadeusz Kosciuszko. These slurs are, however, historically inaccurate. Osiatyński claims that the Constitution explicitly mentions slavery, that slaveholders would justify themselves with references to Voltaire, and that there were four regiments of Black soldiers in the US revolutionary army. In fact, the Black soldiers were actually dispersed among American units; there were no specifically Black regiments. He also maliciously overrated the significance of Lord Dunmore’s declaration, and misinformed the reader about the meaning of the three-fifths clause in the Constitution. Similarly to present-day journalists, he argued that it meant that a slave was not recognized as a full person.

In keeping with the Marxist approach, the narrative highlighted the slave revolts, and obscured the lawsuits. In spite of that, he described oppression as a violation of natural rights and apparently saw the attainment of natural rights as the aim of the struggle. The question is, how could an inherently racist Enlightenment ideology, as Osiatyński described it, produce a concept of rights? The answer lies, in my opinion, in Osiatyński’s indebtedness to Marxist materialism, which simply saw rights and law as a superstructure produced naturally by the appropriate economic basis. This could happen even without human thinking.

The further chapters of his book provide helpful lists of names, but they also continue to underrate the achievement of any American statesman who did anything positive towards the suppression of slavery. The reason is, once again, that the liberal state could not be represented as something good. For example, Abraham Lincoln is treated here on the basis of selective evidence as a racist who was compelled by circumstances to abolish slavery. Civil rights acquired after 1865 were empty because they were not supported by deeper economic changes. Here, Osiatyński did not mean to defend the slaves’ private property, but to promote the cancellation of capitalism.

It is interesting to see how East European scholars perceived the racialization of progressive academia in the United States, which slowly abandoned the socialist view of

42 Ibidem, p. 34.
43 Ibidem, pp. 51–59.
44 Ibidem, pp. 48–50.
45 Ibidem, p. 46.
a united working class that should stand above the various races. The Czech ethnologist Helena Polreichová, who specialized on twentieth-century Black Americans, had already noted in her review article of 1972 that leftist academics had lost interest in the working class. Instead of that, they were interested in „radical students and intellectuals, i.e. in themselves“. Osiałyński made a reflection on these developments in the postscript which he added to the Czech translation of his book in 1988. In it he joins the leftist intellectuals in their contempt for the working class, and argues that „racial prejudice is the strongest among the poorest and least educated Americans“.

Towards the end of the 1980s, some of these East European propagandists were working in the United States where they established ties with their American counterparts. Osiałyński was legally lecturing at the UCLA, probably from 1984 to 1986. He was not a refugee fleeing oppression; he was there as a privileged academic who returned to the People’s Republic of Poland when his task was over. Robert F. Ivanov visited the University of Kansas. He headed the Delegation of 500 Soviet scientists who met with their American counterparts at the conference in Lawrence, Kansas, in October 1990. It was an attempt at reconciliation organized by the Meeting for Peace Foundation.

It would, however, be wrong to believe that these East European propagandists planted the seeds of these destructive ideas in the United States. Their works were almost entirely based on American authors. I think that a major turning point inside the United States was the commercial success of Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* in 1980. In it he presented the American Revolution as a conspiracy of American and British elites against working classes, the aim of which was profit. Zinn’s book was followed by the establishment of non-profit organizations such as Rethinking Schools in 1986 and Teaching for Change in 1989 which spread Zinn’s narrative in American schools. In 2008 these non-profit organizations co-founded The Zinn Edu-

---

46 Helena Polreichová, *Současné proudy v historiografii Spojených států amerických a společenská úloha historie*, Československý časopis historický 20, 1972, pp. 527–547, here p. 529. Her reevaluation drew on the Soviet historians Bolkhovitinov, Kozenov and Sivanchev. See Nikolai Nikolaievich Bolkhovitinov, *Современная американская историография: новые течения и проблемы, Новая и новейшая история*, 1969, No. 6, pp. 116—129.

47 W. Osiałyński, *Kořeny*, p. 278.

48 See the postscript to the Czech edition, ibidem, pp. 273–299.

49 University of Kansas, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, Meeting for Peace Foundation, Call Number: RH MS P698.

50 Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States*, London 1980. Surprisingly, Zinn’s history was not published in Eastern Europe during the Communist regime. It has been published only recently, and its Russian edition was financed by the US Embassy. See Howard Zinn, *Народная история США*, Moscow 2006; idem, *Dějiny lidu Spojených států amerických I*, Praha 2012; idem, *Ludowa historia Stanów Zjednoczonych. Od roku 1492 do dziś*, Warszawa 2016.

51 All the information comes from https://www.zinnedproject.org.
cation Project which provides teaching material online, and right now they are collaborating with the 1619 Project.

What the East European propagandists contributed was an ideological request for a change to the political system. Since every dramatic story needs an appropriate ending, this ideological request has also been repurposed by American authors today to heighten the dramatic effect.

**The New York Times Corrects History**

The main idea of the 1619 Project is summed up in Nikole Hannah-Jones’s introductory essay titled *Our democracy’s founding ideals were false when they were written. Black Americans have fought to make them true.* These two phrases sum it all up. The founders of the United States established the new republic on completely false racist principles because they were white slaveholders. Fortunately Black Americans knew better, and over time they replaced these false racist ideals with good deeds. Hannah-Jones implies that Black Americans replaced this idea of inalienable rights with something new, but she does not say with what. She only focuses on their racial origin, which is presented as a guarantee of their right orientation.

Just consider the vocabulary: The racism of white people is „endemic“ and „runs in the DNA of this country“, whereas the good convictions of Black Americans are guaranteed by what they are because they „cherish freedom“ and „embrace the democratic ideals of a common good“. This is a racist way of thinking because it implies that convictions are innate, and each race has its own different ideas. She does not even consider that white people could differ in their opinions, just as Black Americans could differ in their views, beliefs and suggested solutions. According to Hannah-Jones the source of the new ideas was „fight“ and „resistance“. This sounds like an echo of Aptheker’s belief in 250 slave revolts. Hannah-Jones claims, „This nation’s white founders set up a decidedly undemocratic Constitution […] But the laws born out of black resistance guarantee the franchise for all and ban discrimination.“ If this were true, then it would mean that the republican model of state had been ready even before the revolution, and James Madison would not have to test anything. This way of thinking is also expressed in her discussion of the Reconstruction.

---

52 N. Hannah-Jones, *America Wasn’t a Democracy Until Black Americans Made It One*, p. 14.
53 A few lines lower Hannah-Jones implies that the principles were good, but the founding fathers did not believe in them. Black Americans did. Actually, even the title is not quite logical as it implies that Black Americans sought to implement these „false founding ideas“.
54 N. Hannah-Jones, *America*, p. 19.
55 Ibídem, p. 21.
56 Ibídem, p. 26.
57 Ibídem, p. 26. Emphasis added.
It is important to point out an error in Hannah-Jones’s thinking about norms and facts. All this utopian thinking implies that things were wrong because legal norms did not describe things as they were. But describing facts would be the task of a historical narrative, not of normative sentences. In particular, constitutions issued in times of transition usually set guidelines for realities and laws that do not exist yet. Even after the laws are issued, norms and human behavior never match each other perfectly. Journalists who promote utopian thinking may then easily brand normative systems as „false“ because they wrongly assume that ought-sentences should describe what really is.

An essential part of Hannah-Jones’s rhetoric is the fluid „we“ which is used in the title. „We“ is used interchangeably to denote the white people who were responsible for the racist principles, and the Black Americans who were the victims and repairers of their mistakes. „Our democracy’s founding ideals were false“, she says, but she also says „It is we who have been perfecters of our democracy.“ A careful reader must be totally confused when he reads, „We may never have revolted against Britain…“ Most often, this „plural exclusive“ is used to fake self-criticism. However, self-criticism is totally missing from this accusatory narrative. In phrases where she speaks critically about „our principles“, she means actually „your principles“. That is journalism, not honest historiography. The essay is also framed with subjective unverifiable claims about her father; it is riddled with hyperboles that supersede reality, and with isolated examples that are supposed to prove general phenomena.

In her discussion of the American Revolution, she argues that the founding fathers revolted because Great Britain wanted to abolish slavery. „In London, there were growing calls to abolish the slave trade.“ According to Hannah-Jones, Jefferson and other founding fathers realized that they would lose „dizzying profits generated by chattel slavery“. They understood that „independence was required in order to ensure that slavery would continue.“

Just for the record, neither the Somerset case of 1772 nor Lord Dunmore’s proclamation of 1775 meant the abolition of slavery. There were also no abolitionist societies in England before the revolution, and the first such association was founded in Philadelphia PA, with Benjamin Franklin as a founding member. The Somerset case did not have any bearing on North America, and Lord Dunmore issued his proclamation in November 1775 after the fighting had already begun. At that moment he was already in exile, not controlling an inch of Virginia’s territory. The claim that his proclamation was the impulse for starting the War of Independence reverses the sequence of events. First there was the war and Dunmore’s flight from Virginia, and then there was Lord Dunmore’s proclamation. The text of the proclamation promises freedom

58 Ibidem, p. 18.
59 Ibidem.
only for slaves who would join Dunmore’s army. In other words, that would be only a few males of productive age. Children, old men and women would be excluded. This proclamation meant even less than the proclamation of New York of 1799 which promised freedom for all women over the age of 25 and men over the age of 28. Lord Dunmore’s proclamation is similar to the measure taken by Emperor Ferdinand III during the Thirty Years War in Bohemia. In 1648 he promised freedom to children of serfs who would fight the Swedish invaders.\(^\text{60}\) It is also similar to Maria Theresia’s measure of 1742 when she promised freedom to serfs who would fight the Prussian invaders and serve in the army for three years.\(^\text{61}\) Nobody has ever called these measures an abolition of serfdom.

Yet Hannah-Jones did not invent this and other malicious misunderstandings. She was able to build on the work of malicious historians who paved the way for this disaster. Why malicious? It should be noted that all the sensitive issues „discovered“ in *The 1619 Project* had been discussed before. They were not taboo topics. Yet several historians have crossed the line between critical historiography and malicious misrepresentation of the issues of the past. These are historians who deliberately omitted what recent research had shown, and tailored their narrative to the purpose of indicting the state. This malicious historiography is not a recent phenomenon.

If you look up the sources of the issues discussed, you could find they go very far back into the past, and sometimes even to the beginning of the twentieth century. For example, the fanciful idea that the English overwhelmingly wished to abolish slavery had been articulated by Gerald Horne in a book published in 2014 which argues that Americans perpetrated a Counter-Revolution to save slavery.\(^\text{62}\) Horne claims that the Dunmore proclamation gave orders „to free and arm enslaved Africans“.\(^\text{63}\) That was not the case; the proclamation did not give orders to free Africans. Obviously Mr. Horne had a predecessor in Howard Zinn, who had claimed approximately the same thing in his *A People’s History of the United States*, published in 1980.\(^\text{64}\) Compare this outlandish narrative with the realistic account provided by the Black American historian Benjamin Quarles in his *The Negro in the American Revolution* from 1960.\(^\text{65}\) You will see the difference between a malicious fabrication and honest criticism.

\(^{60}\) Ivo Cerman, *Die böhmischen Robotpatente von 1680 und der Rechtsschutz von Untertanen*, Opera historica 20, 2019, pp. 228–287, here p. 247.

\(^{61}\) Jaroslav Kašpar, *Tajná jednání o návrhu na zrušení nevolnictví a poddanství v Čechách a na Moravě roku 1742*, Zápisky katedry československých dějin 5, 1961, pp. 61–68.

\(^{62}\) Gerald Horne, *The Counter-Revolution of 1776*, New York 2014.

\(^{63}\) Ibidem, p. 16.

\(^{64}\) H. Zinn, *A People’s History*, pp. 76–102.

\(^{65}\) Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, Chapel Hill 1996\(^2\), pp. 17–24.
The Racist Constitution?

Hannah-Jones’ discussion of the Federal Constitution of 1787 is a similar case. She interprets it conventionally as a device to protect slavery, but she is silent about the fact that the slave trade had been prohibited in several states, and that slavery was being outlawed in the northern states. How would this match with the claim that the whole revolution was started to preserve slavery? In a text that is to be the basis of school education, Hannah-Jones claims the Constitution was a „carefully constructed document that preserved and protected slavery without ever using the word.” If the framers wished to use the Constitution to protect slavery, they could have used that word.

If there was a consensus among them about it, if they really started the revolution to preserve slavery, why would they conceal it among themselves? But we know that Samuel Hopkins, Benjamin Rush and William Gordon were aware that there was a contradiction between the promise of equality and the existence of slavery in the new republic. We may learn what the framers of the Constitution were thinking about the issue from the records of the constitutional convention. James Madison rejected the word „slavery“ because he believed „it would be wrong to admit in the Constitution that there should be property in men“.

Yes, the Constitution promises to return runaway slaves – without calling them so – but the northern states also issued Liberty Laws that were meant to protect runaway slaves from being returned. The discussion on the issue of the slave trade in the records of the constitutional convention is worth reading, for it shows what their choices were. The delegation of South Carolina put them under pressure, but the framers were still considering either prohibiting the slave trade immediately or excluding the Carolinas and Georgia from the union.

There is also the three-fifths clause in the Constitution which stipulates that in the process of calculating the number of congressional seats for each state, slaves would count as three-fifths of a „all other persons“. The Huffington Post chose to imitate the NYT and felt obliged to explain to their readers that this clause was an expression of the founders’ belief in the racial inferiority of Black Americans, who were declared to be less

66 N. Hannah-Jones, America, p. 18.
67 Max Farrand (ed.), The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787, New Haven 1911, here vol. II, August 25, 1787, p. 417.
68 Thomas D. Morris, Free Men All. The Personal Liberty Laws of the North 1780–1861, Baltimore 1974.
69 M. Farrand (ed.), The Records II, pp. 415–416.
70 Robert Allen Rutland, The Birth of the Bill of Rights 1776–1791, London 1962, p. 165.
than a person. This is an issue which can illustrate why this superficial moral bashing may do more harm than good. The three-fifths clause was the result of the conviction that population and not land should be the basis of congressional representation, as the legal historian Don Fehrenbacher explains in his critical analysis of the Constitution. Donald G. Nieman provided a harsh but well-founded criticism of the role of slavery in the Constitution. He shows that the three-fifths clause was indeed a very bad stipulation that helped the slaveholders. But it helped them for the opposite reasons than those which the Huffington Post claims. Since the slaves could not vote anyway, it was a bad thing that they were included in the calculation at all because it helped the southern slaveholders to increase their congressional representation. The decision to count them as less than a full person mitigated the advantage of the slaveholders because it lowered the number of seats to which they would have been entitled. Now, students will believe that the good solution would have been to count slaves as whole persons to respect their dignity, without knowing that this solution would have helped the slaveholders to acquire an even higher number of seats in the Congress. Yes, the Constitution „tacitly recognized slavery“, as Nieman concludes, but he also says that „the framers created an open-ended document that (…) contained a reservoir of anti-slavery potential.“ It paved the way for the abolition of slavery in the future, and avoided giving it any guarantees in the present.

However, there are also malicious constitutional historians, such as Paul Finkelman, who argues in his Slavery and the Founders of 2001 that the Constitution was intentionally designed to protect slavery. Obviously even he had a predecessor in Howard Zinn, who in turn was referring to Charles Beard’s Marxist Economic Interpretation of the American Revolution from the early 1900s.

If you look at the sources, you will see that the Pulitzer Prize-winning essay by Hannah-Jones actually looks like a contradictory assemblage of snippets from various sources.

---

71 Sarah Ruiz-Gossmann, Trump Administration’s ’1776 Report’ Justifies Slavery, Three-Fifths Compromise, Huffington Post, January 18, 2021.
72 Don Fehrenbacher, The Slaveholding Republic. An Account of United States’ Government Relation to Slavery, Oxford–New York 2001, p. 24–25.
73 Donald G. Nieman, Slavery and the Constitution, in: Sean Wilentz (ed.), Major Problems in the Early Republic 1787–1848, Lexington 1992, pp. 49–53.
74 Ibidem, p. 52.
75 Paul Finkelman, Slavery and the Founders. Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson, New York 2001. For assessment see Tim Hubner, Founding a Slaveholding Republic, Tulsa Law Review 37, 2001, pp. 387–396.
76 Charles Beard, An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States, New York 1913.
periods of Black American historiography. This can best be seen if you check what she says about the loyalty of Black Americans towards the United States. She pulls together celebratory stories from abolitionist 19th-century historiography, which sought to prove that Black Americans were fighting for the revolution, with stories from the twentieth century when it had already been revealed how many Black Americans joined the British against the Revolution. The earlier stories were designed to support the abolition, and their aim was to convince white Americans that they owed something to the Black Americans. This was also the case with Crispus Attucks, who is celebrated in Hannah-Jones’s essay. The twentieth-century stories capitalized on the revelations of positivist historiography, but sought to repurpose them to question the moral validity of the revolutionary cause. Black Americans fighting alongside the British against the Revolution are also celebrated in the essay.

Even the significance of 1619 is not a new idea. Hannah-Jones only capitalizes on the discovery made at the close of the 19th century by the positivist Black American historian William George Williams, who proved that the Dutch man-of-war that brought the first Black servants to Virginia did not arrive in 1620 as hitherto assumed, but a year earlier. The data about the ship’s arrival come from a letter by John Rolfe which says that the ship arrived „towards the end of August“, but does not say in which year. Williams’ discovery made it clear that the first Black Americans had arrived even before the Mayflower. The idea of utilizing this coincidence to reframe American history is not new either. It was exploited as early as 1962, when Lerone Benett wrote a book entitled Before the Mayflower.

Yet the insistence on seeing 1619 as the beginning of the history of Black Americans in the United States is actually no longer tenable if we are to perceive early America from a multicultural perspective. Spanish Florida should not be ignored, for it too was a British colony in 1776. Black Americans had settled there as early as the 1560s. On the other hand, the history of Black slaves in New England did not start until 1638, when the settlers exchanged captives from the Pequot War for Black slaves from the West Indies. The Black American historian Earl Thorpe would proudly recall that free

77 For an overview see Gary B. Nash, Introduction, in: Benjamin Quarles, The Negro in the American Revolution, Chapel Hill 1996, pp. xiii-xxvii.
78 George Washington Williams, History of the Negro Race from 1619 to 1880, New York 1883, vol. I, pp. 154–155.
79 Lerone Benett, Before the Mayflower. A History of the Negro in America 1619–1962, New York 1962. Subsequent editions changed the subtitle.
80 Jane Landers, Black Society in Spanish Florida, Chicago 1999, pp. 14–15.
81 Joanne Pope Melish, Disowning Slavery. Gradual Emancipation and ‘Race’ in New England, 1780–1860, Ithaca NY, 1998, p. 18–19; Lorenzo J. Greene, The Negro in Colonial New England 1620–1776, New York 1942, pp. 14–18.
Black Americans had settled in South Carolina as early as 1526, after they were left there by the unsuccessful expedition of Lucas Vázquez de Ayllón.\textsuperscript{82} Washington Williams himself implied that Black servants may have been shipped in Virginia even a year before 1619.\textsuperscript{83} The insistence on 1619 as the traditional beginning of Black American history is itself an old-fashioned idea, and using it as a starting point for reframing the American history does not lend credibility to the expertise of the project promoters.

It is implied in the essay that the racist message of the constitution was perpetuated by a racist culture that denied all rights to slaves and resulted in the Dred Scott case of 1857. Let us now put aside individual moral attitudes, and let us focus instead on the relevance of legal culture. Hannah-Jones says, „Enslaved people were not recognized as human beings but as property.“\textsuperscript{84} Their bondage was secured by a „network of laws and customs“ that ensured that they would not be treated as human beings. However, since every legal relation has two ends, no legal culture can be intentionally built up and maintained in such a straightforward manner. The point is that legal relations that would arise from daily interactions made it impossible to treat slaves just as things, i.e. to deny their agency. Even the most insensitive slaveholders sometimes needed to sentence a slave for theft or for homicide of his master, or to get his testimony to reveal a planned slave conspiracy.\textsuperscript{85} Even relations among slaves required some legal interventions. It also must be acknowledged that – even though they were victims of violence – there were also efforts to guarantee them some minimal rights.\textsuperscript{86} However, Thomas D. Morris shows that these efforts were not escalating; there was no gradual evolution toward a more humane slave law before 1861.\textsuperscript{87} Some of the rights were recognized only in certain regions. For example, slaves in Louisiana were permitted to possess \textit{peculium}, which denoted movables which they possessed as personal property.\textsuperscript{88}

What I am trying to say is that we should not see historical development only as a series of major turning points and underrate these small changes that occurred over time. However, the problem of this journalistic approach is that it only admits such great

\textsuperscript{82} Earl E. Thorpe, \textit{The Mind of the Negro. An Intellectual History of African–Americans}, Baton Rouge 1961, p. 1. In October 2019, The Miami New Times published „The 1526 Project“. See Jess Nelson, \textit{The 1526 Project: Horrors of Florida’s Black History You Didn’t Learn at School}, Miami New Times, October 24, 2019 – https://www.miaminewtimes.com (June 15, 2021).

\textsuperscript{83} G. W. Williams, \textit{History}, pp. 156–157.

\textsuperscript{84} N. Hannah-Jones, \textit{America}, p. 17.

\textsuperscript{85} See Thomas D. Morris, \textit{Southern Slavery and the Law 1619–1860}, Chapel Hill–London 1996.

\textsuperscript{86} \textit{Ibidem}, pp. 193–208.

\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Ibidem}, pp. 423–444.

\textsuperscript{88} \textit{Ibidem}, pp. 337–339. Aptheker claims that \textit{peculium} was recognized everywhere in the colonies. See H. Aptheker, \textit{Boj}, p. 55.
turning points, because the continuous changes would destroy the dramatic effect. In consequence, they actually take the story out of the context of a real place and time.

**The 1619 Essays**

This is best seen on the ten short essays that follow the long introductory article. All of them have in common that they seek to relate various phenomena of the present – for example, traffic jams – to the slavery of the past. The result is a narrative which turns around in time loopholes, as if time was cancelled. This impression is reinforced by a frequent use of the present tense. The authors imply that everything has been the same, and that real change will come only with a dramatic reversal of the whole political order. Since they also insist that racism is in „our DNA“, change appears to be impossible.

I would stop only at three of them. Khalil Gibran Muhamad, a Harvard historian, reveals in his essay the economic benefit of sugar from Louisiana for the global economy. He believes that trade in people „fueled in the wealth of European nations“. He is basically developing a theme from the introduction where Hannah-Jones argued that the slaves were the source of all material well-being in the colonies. Nobody had to work. Gibran Muhamad extends this conviction to Europe as well. It is basically a racialized version of the Marxist doctrine of primary accumulation, which has merely been reduced to the belief that the only people who have ever worked worldwide were Africans in North America. The belief of this American historian that European nations were rich must be astonishing to every East European historian. It is not only the ignorance of famines, poverty and malnutrition that is surprising; it is also the straightforward idea that global economy is just a one-way road. Economy is about exchange, and countries wished to have a positive saldo in international trade. Cheap products from the colonies were destroying economic branches in parts of Europe. Bohemian wool production was destroyed in the 1830s by the import of cheap wool from Australia, and beet sugar produced by hard-working peasants had to compete with cane sugar imported from the slave colony of Cuba and from the Dutch colony of Java. After the abolition of the subject status in Bohemia in 1848, the emancipated peasants were destroyed in the 1870s by the import of cheap corn from the United States.

89 Khali Gibran Muhammad, *The Sugar that Saturates the American Diet has a Barbaric History as the White Gold that Fuelled Slavery*, in: N. Hannah-Jones (ed.), The 1619 Project, p. 72.
90 Robert Randýsek – Helena Janáková, *Krajský úřad Prácheň 1696–1850*, Třeboň 1967, p. 9.
91 For the history of the sugar industry in Bohemia, see František Dudek, *Počátky řepného cukrovarnictví v Čechách*, Poděbrady 1973; Vincenc Čapka, *Cukrovarnictví do roku 1938 a agrární strana*, Brno 2011.
92 Kamil Krofta, *Přehled dějin selského stavu v Čechách a na Moravě*, Praha 1919, p. 256; Zdeněk Jindra – Ivan Jakubec et alii, *Hospodářský vzestup českých zemí od poloviny 18. století do konce monarchie*, Praha 2015, p. 256.
The other curious essay is Bryan Stevenson’s chapter on „Mass Incarceration“ which seeks to prove that modern American prisons are a disguised survival of slave plantations. To prove this, he uses the „fluid we“, just like Hannah Jones, and makes sweeping claims about American exceptionalism. He makes a strange comparison in saying that the United States has „the highest rate of incarceration of any nation on Earth“. He then switches to the past and provides examples of measures limiting slaves’ freedom of movement in the 17th century which appear to be copied from Willie Lee Rose’s anthology for students of 1976. He concludes with an exaggerated claim about inherent racism that is so typical of this kind of „compelling historiography“. „The smog created by our history of racial injustice is suffocating. We are too practiced in ignoring the victimization of any black people tagged as criminal.“ As the only statement on the role of law in the volume, this essay is rather disappointing.

Finally, Jamelle Bouie’s essay on „Undemocratic Democracy“ explains why all the outlandish talk about fighting is justified because there is a conservative counterrevolution going on that seeks to undo all that America had hitherto achieved. There is no mention of the fact that this same America has been repeatedly labelled as „racist“ in this volume. She ends up with a strange declaration of war in which „we“ declare war on „us“: „There is a homegrown ideology of reaction in the United States, inextricably tied to our system of slavery. And while the racial content of that ideology has attenuated over time, the basic framework remains: fear of rival political majorities; of demographic ‘replacement’; of a government that threatens privilege and hierarchy.“

We may end our essay by pointing again to the inconsistency regarding the loyalty of African Americans to the United States and the far-left fantasies that are related to it. Whereas Abraham Lincoln is excoriated for wanting to „ship black people, once freed, to another country“, Hannah-Jones herself concludes her introductory essay with a wish to „pick a random African country and claim it as my own.“ These are obviously mere rhetorical tricks that are not meant seriously. This is the greatest tragedy of this enterprise: it spits out into the public space exaggerated rhetorical demands that are actually not meant seriously, but non-compliance is taken as excuse for demanding even

93 Bryan Stevenson, Mass Incarceration, in: N. Hannah-Jones (ed.), The 1619 Project, p. 81.
94 Willie Lee Rose (ed.), A Documentary History of Slavery in America, Athens–London 1976, pp. 16–27.
95 B. Stevenson, Mass Incarceration, p. 81.
96 Jamelle Bouie, Undemocratic Democracy, in: N. Hannah-Jones (ed.), The 1619 Project, p. 50–55.
97 Ibidem, p. 54.
98 N. Hannah-Jones, America, p. 20.
99 Ibidem, p. 26.
more. America must change, so that Hannah-Jones stops dreaming about moving to „a random African country“.

Let us compare her lighthearted rejection of American comfort with the attitude of Black Americans in 1817 when they were provided with a real possibility of leaving the United States for Africa. They weighed the pros and cons of the United States versus a „random African country“ and finally reached this conclusion: „That without arts, without science, without a proper knowledge of government to cast into the savage wilds of Africa the free people of color, seems to us the circuitous route through which they must return to perpetual bondage.“ 100 What we see here is that Black Americans in the 19th century did not see the benefits of a modern state as worthless. It is also interesting to see that they did not believe in fine words, and assessed rightly that life without securities would not be freedom, but „perpetual bondage“.

Neither Angela Davis nor Howard Zinn left the United States, even though their over-the-top rhetoric might have suggested that they would no longer stay in the most racist country on Earth. And neither did Hannah-Jones.

**From Slaves to Citizens**

The belief in the magical power of revolts and resistance is a link connecting the old Communist narratives with the present journalistic „reframing“. The reason for this unexpected influence might be simply the fact that fighting makes a more compelling story than explanations of complex issues. Fighting and protests can also be photographed, and therefore all these „reframing“ magazines support their narrative with photos of protest marches and victims of violence.

But the history of revolutions shows that the transition from serfs, subjects or slaves to citizens depends on what happens after the fight. The Bohemian peasants liberated in 1848 entered an absolutist monarchy that abolished its constitution in 1851. They could not be called citizens, for there was no citizenship.101 American slaves could hope to become citizens because they were living in a republican state that made citizenship possible. In other words, the historian must also seek to describe the status that was attained after emancipation, because stories of emancipation without an ending may also be weaponized for the propagation of evil political goals. A fight for freedom does not always result in freedom. For example, Nazi historiography also produced stories of Bauernbefreiung. Few readers are aware that the aim of these Nazi historians was not to promote a society of free citizens, but a homogenous Volksgemeinschaft.102 Czech Marxist

100 E. Thorpe, *The Mind*, p. 22.

101 Ivo Cerman, *Zrušení poddanství – zrození občana?*, in: idem (ed.), Habsburkové 1740–1918. Vznikání občanské společnosti, Praha 2016, pp. 395–408.

102 Günther Franz, *Bücherkunde zur Geschichte des deutschen Bauerntums*, Berlin 1938; idem, *Deutsches Bauerntum II. Neuzeit*, Weimar 1939.
Historiography was interested in peasant uprisings that were supposed finally to result in collectivized agriculture. If we want to make sure that a freedom fight really established freedom, we also have to explore the status that prevailed after the fight. The 1619 Project focuses solely on the racial identity of the freedom fighters and pretends that good results were guaranteed by a kind of circular logic: the freedom fighters were mainly Black Americans, and the result of this fight was good because they were Black. Let us check firstly whether this logic worked in the case of colonial slave revolts, and secondly in the case of the civil rights struggle after 1865.

If we look at the revolts of the colonial era, it is difficult to explain how this mechanism of liberation through revolts could have worked. In the Bauernbefreiung in Central Europe, we may observe a pattern in which revolts were followed by the issuance of a Robotpatent which alleviated the situation a bit, and these improvements went on escalating until they culminated in the abolition of subject status (Untertänigkeit/poddanství). In the case of slave revolts in the thirteen colonies, there was only one revolt that corresponds to this pattern. It was the Stono rebellion in South Carolina in 1739, which was followed by the issuance of a new Slave Law for South Carolina, which set hours of work and limited the power of the master over the slave. But contrary to Aptheker’s thesis of the 250 revolts, there was no chain of revolts that would link this event to the Civil War.

There were, however, the highly interesting freedom suits in courts of justice and the petitions asking for rights and equality. In this regard, the Black Americans’ desire for freedom was very different from the attitude of the skeptical East European serfs. Marxist historiography generally ignored these phenomena as they would have shown the state in a good light, and because they were considered unimportant. Historical materialism taught that improvements would come automatically with the change in the economic basis. However, Aptheker in his book To Be Free of 1948 did show an interest in the legal protection of slaves, and even acknowledged the emancipation laws in the North and the compassion of the white abolitionists. He annulled their importance by integrating them into a rising curve of protests which culminated in the Civil War. In this context, the court suits, petitions and other legal means appeared merely as modest underdeveloped forms of class struggle which had to evolve into violent abolitionism and open warfare to achieve any results.

---

103 For a historical overview see I. Cerman, Robotpatente, pp. 228–238.
104 Most recently this has been asserted in Padraig Riley, Slavery and Democratic Conscience. Political Life in Jeffersonian America, Philadelphia 2016.
105 Slave code of South Carolina, May 1740, in David J. McCord (ed.), The Statutes at Large of South Carolina, vol. 7, Columbia, SC 1840, p. 397.
106 H. Aptheker, Boj, pp. 53–62.
Nikole Hannah-Jones took over this belief, and also developed a theory of how this struggle went on evolving after the Civil War. She explains that all that it took to get Civil Rights was to push white legislators to permit the Black Americans to have them. The Republican party allowed „the greatest expansion of human and civil rights,“ but Black legislators and a human rights organization were the driving force behind it. The recalcitrant white republicans were pushed to further concessions: „In 1865, Congress passed the 13th Amendment, making the United States one of the last nations in the Americas to outlaw slavery. The following year, black Americans, exerting their new political power, pushed white legislators to pass the Civil Rights Act (…).“

The beauty of this narrative is that it implies that civil rights were already there, and it was only necessary to defeat those who were blocking the way.

We should, however, understand that civil rights had to be construed and this process was related to the federal Constitution which Hannah-Jones had condemned as racist. As I understand it, the issuance of a Civil Rights Act was an emergency expedient for establishing equality before the law after the codification movement of David Dudley Field had failed. Systematic codification had been an ongoing dream of American legal scientists that had been pursued ever since the Revolution.

Since the American law had not been systematized, rights were still conceived of as privileges. Consequently, the legislators construed a list of civil rights that were supposed to be guaranteed to all citizens in equal measure. The idea was based on the Constitution of 1787, which says in Article IV, section 2 that „the citizens of each state shall be entitled to all privileges and immunities of citizens in several states. “ The Congress defined „civil rights“ in the Freedmen’s Bureau Bill of 1866 as privileges and immunities belonging to each citizen on the basis of this section of the Constitution. They added a list that included „personal property“ and the „equal benefit of all laws“. Even though this bill was defeated, the concept of civil rights was there. Subsequently they were protected by the Civil Rights Acts of 1866, 1871 and 1875. This impressive series of acts, to which must be added the three Constitutional Amendments and the Reconstruction Act, are evidence of what Milton Konvitz called an „obsessive concern with the establishment of fundamental rights“.

This obsessive concern can hardly be explained by the pressure of two Black American senators and three to seven Congressmen. The number of sixteen Black members

\[\text{107} \quad \text{N. Hannah-Jones, America, p. 21.}\]
\[\text{108} \quad \text{See Charles M. Cook, The American Codification Movement. A Study of Antebellum Legal Reform, Westport 1981.}\]
\[\text{109} \quad \text{See Ellen Holmes Pearson, Remaking Custom. Law and Identity in the Early Republic, Charlotte-ville, VA 2011, pp. 173–193.}\]
\[\text{110} \quad \text{Milton Konvitz, A Century of Civil Rights, New York 1961, p. 44.}\]
\[\text{111} \quad \text{Ibidem, p. 60.}\]
of Congress which Hannah-Jones gives, were members serving from 1870 to 1887 successively.\textsuperscript{112} If this new legislation had depended only on a handful of Black American legislators, it would have never been passed. Aside from that, they were not the violent protesters that the NYT journalists adore. The Black senators Hiram R. Revers and Blanche K. Bruce were teachers, and the first Black Congressmen were said to be „studious, earnest and ambitious men“\textsuperscript{113}

In the subsequent era, civil rights became the concern of protesters such as H. Rap Brown, but also of legal theorists such as Milton Konvitz. Unlike his partner and collaborator Martin Luther King Jr., Konvitz seems to be completely forgotten in the United States. There is no „Milton Konvitz Human Rights Center“. The banishment of this Cornell University professor from historical memory is a symbolic marker of the regress into primitivism in present-day American political culture.

Conclusion

Our contribution has sought to provide an East European view of the current movement to „reframe“ the history of the United States, as if it was founded in 1619 and the preservation of slavery were its main goal. In the introduction I sum up the basic facts concerning the campaign of the New York Times called \textit{The 1619 Project} and the subsequent reactions from historians (S. Wilentz, A. Guelzo), from conservatives (M. Spalding), and from Black civil rights activists (R. Woodson).

After that I reconstruct the genesis of the East European image of Black American history as it evolved under the influence of anti-American propaganda. I show that the Black American issue was exploited right at the beginning of the Cold War when the Soviet Bloc and US communists started the international campaign \textit{We Charge Genocide}. Its aim was to show the USA as a rogue state that had been perpetrating genocide of Black Americans for 300 years. The educational campaign in Eastern Europe that followed was based mainly on the historical interpretations provided by the American communists Herbert Aptheker and William Z. Foster. In the later stages of the campaign, even works of fiction were weaponized (W. Styron, A. Haley). While the Soviet author Robert F. Ivanov still drew on Aptheker, the Polish author Wiktor Osiatyński was already closer to modern American liberals. The East European Communist approach was based on the idea that Black and white workers should unite against the ruling class and overthrow „fascism“. The racialization of leftist ideology in the United States was perceived as treason.

After that, we ask in which way the 1619 Project elaborates on the arguments of the Communist interpretation of American history. We explore the content of the 1619

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{112} See the official website of the history of the Congress https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/BAIC/Black-Americans-in-Congress (accessed May 30, 2021).}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{113} M. Konvitz, \textit{A Century}, p. 91.}
Project and reveal some flaws in the way the American Revolution is portrayed here. Even though the narrative inherited the emphasis on fighting, it is no longer a class struggle, but a racial struggle. The journalistic rhetoric abandoned the idea of an alliance of Black and white workers and argued that only Black Americans had been exploited.

In the last section, I discuss whether fighting alone produced freedom and civil rights. I seek to show that the slave rebellions did not follow the pattern of a gradual improvement that could have culminated in the abolition of slavery, but that Black Americans employed more intelligent weapons such as lawsuits and petitions. The idea that Black Americans have been given civil rights thanks to the pressure of Black American legislators seems odd. Civil rights had to be construed first. The Black American legislators were such a small group that they would have never pushed through such legislation, if it depended solely on them. Attitudes to civil rights were not determined by race.
Ivo Cerman

America’s Racist Founding? An East-European View

Abstract
The article discusses the recent movement initiated by the NYT to „reframe“ American history, as if the United States was established in 1619 and its main aim was to preserve slavery at any price. We sum up the timeline of the discussion from 2019 till the present. Since an East European historian sees the striking similarities with the Communist anti-American propaganda, we ask here, to what extent is this present approach dependent on the propagandist image of the past. In the first part, we explore the way history of Black Americans had been exploited by the propaganda from 1951 to 1990, then we examine the arguments put forward by the present-day 1619 Project. Whereas the Communist propaganda put emphasis on the principle that Black and white workers should unite against capitalism (or „fascism“), the present-day approach sees Black Americans as the only exploited class in the US. It has racialized also many other elements of the Marxist historiography (e.g. primary accumulation, class struggles).

KEY WORDS:
The 1619 Project; historiography; slavery; American revolution; civil rights; marxist history.