

**Shifting Landscapes Presentation on the 1619 Project (Ludington, MI, 10
January 2022)**

Hello everyone. It's a great pleasure to be with you this evening even, if for me, this evening is really tomorrow morning. I'm speaking to you from the county of Yorkshire in northern England and hoping that the internet connection to Michigan holds up for the next couple of hours. My name is Robert Cook and I've been a British-based historian of the United States for more than forty years. Although I retired from teaching at the University of Sussex in August 2020 I remain what is called in the trade 'research active'. Although I've written and taught about the modern civil rights movement and the African American experience in the US more broadly, I'm essentially a specialist on the American Civil War and the contested memory of that watershed event. I'll draw upon my work on historical memory during my talk on the 1619 Project which I'm going to divide into three parts. First, I'll explain what the Project is and what the aims of the Project are. Second, I'll discuss some of the criticism which the Project has received -- from both left and right of the political spectrum. And third, I'll offer my own assessment of the Project in the light of my own experiences as a professional historian of the United States.

1. The Project

First, then, the Project itself. In August 2019 seven months after America's first black president had been replaced in the White House by wealthy NY businessman Donald Trump, the *New York Times Magazine* ran a special issue introducing readers to the 1619 Project. The issue contained an introductory essay by Nikole Hannah-Jones, a Black staff writer on the *Magazine* who had successfully pitched her idea for a special issue to editor Jake Silverstein. The issue contained an introductory essay by Hannah-Jones and a bunch of others. Most of the contributors were Black journalists and historians. The subject matter was wide-ranging but each of the essays attempted to connect the central themes of race and racism to other topics in US history like the American Revolution and the growth of American capitalism. A short piece by Princeton scholar Kevin Kruse linked racial discrimination to traffic chaos in contemporary Atlanta, GA, by detailing how suburban whites had resisted the expansion of the city's metro system because they didn't want African Americans from poorer parts of town having easy access to their localities. In her revealing introduction H-J made it clear that the main purpose of the Project was disruptive yet patriotic -- to end what she (and many other people) regarded as the dangerous marginalisation of Black people in the telling of America's national story. H-J was born and brought up in Waterloo, Iowa, an unlovable industrial town that had attracted many Black migrants during the

mid 20c including her own grandmother. Living on the wrong side of the tracks and educated in essentially segregated schools, she recalled that she had never understood why her father, a Black military veteran who had found himself stuck in a range of dead-end jobs, had always flown an American flag in the corner of his yard. Only now, she wrote, did she realise that he flew the Stars and Stripes to signify that Black people's contribution to America was 'indelible, that the United States simply would not exist without us.'

H-J proceeded in the same essay to detail how that contribution had been largely ignored and to show how disruptive the reinsertion of Black people's history into the national narrative would be. In a phrase clearly intended to grab readers' attention, she asserted that the United States was 'a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie' because the Founding Fathers did not believe that Thomas Jefferson's ringing claim that 'all men are created equal' applied to people of colour. America's history as a nation, she insisted, began not in 1776 as American schoolchildren are taught but in 1619 when the first boatload of enslaved people arrived in colonial Virginia. Despite being constantly oppressed, she wrote (pursuing her theme of Black patriotism), African Americans fervently adhered to Jefferson's creed. And '[t]hrough centuries of protest, we have helped the country live up to its founding ideals. And not only for ourselves --,' she continued, 'black rights struggles paved the way for every other civil rights struggle, including women's and gay rights, immigrant and

disability rights ... Without the ... strenuous and patriotic efforts of black Americans our democracy today would look very different -- it would not look like a true democracy at all.'

No assertion demonstrated the disruptive intention of the 1619 Project more clearly than H-J's claim that the American republic had been born in slavery not liberty. The FFs, she claimed, had revolted against Britain in the 18c not because they loved freedom but because they feared that growing British hostility to slavery would lead to the destruction of what slavemasters like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson regarded as their right to own fellow human beings as property. I'll talk more about how this dubious contention came close to derailing the Project in a moment, but for now I'll just say that the Project has survived the substantial criticism that it attracted from a range of opponents including mainstream historians, conservative commentators and politicians, and outraged communists. With the aid of the liberal Pulitzer Center the special edition of the *NYTM* has been turned into a web-based teaching resource used by thousands of teachers in all 50 states. At the end of last year a greatly expanded version of the project was published in book form and a children's version appeared at the same time. Although three states -- Georgia, Florida and Texas -- have explicitly banned use of the Project in state schools, it is clear that the brainchild of N H-J has legs. The Project is being used by

significant numbers of teachers across the United States and will continue to be for a good while yet.

Before I move on to discussing criticism of the 1619 Project I want to stress that the Project is not the same thing as Critical Race Theory which has been weaponised by some politicians and consequently been the subject of so much criticism recently. Advocates of CRT argue that white supremacy has been and remains embedded in American jurisprudence and institutions of all kinds. It is a theory not only taught but also critiqued in graduate schools. It is not being disseminated by high-school teachers. As one contributor to a recent edition of NBC's *Meet The Press* rightly commented: If any child at an American school is proficient at CRT, you have a genius on your hands. The stated aim of the 1619 Project is to demonstrate the active, central and positive role of African Americans in US history in order to promote better understanding between the races and certainly not, as some politicians allege, to foster guilt among white children. Its educational purpose, certainly from the point of view of N H-J and her allies, is therefore patriotic rather than seditious.

2. Criticism

Whatever the underlying motivation behind the Project (and I'll say more about this in a minute), its appearance in the *NYTM* unleashed a storm of criticism,

some of it predictable, some of it less so. Most predictable perhaps was the reaction of conservative commentators and politicians who, rightly, saw the Project as an attack on the familiar linear narrative of American history. That narrative is, as you all know, grounded in the view that the US was founded as a nation of liberty by freedom-loving patriots opposed to the tyrannical rule of Great Britain. Although today even the standard narrative acknowledges that the persistence of slavery in the nineteenth century generated friction and ultimately civil war between North and South, it stresses the ability of Americans to overcome their differences in the shared effort to build a diverse and dynamic democracy, the city on a shining hill, that is the envy of the world. The emphases are on the exceptional nature of the American story, on the positive aspects of capitalist economic development and on the remarkable ability of American democracy and the Constitution that underpins it to respond effectively to internal and external threats. The thrust of this American folktale is broadly consensual. [US not exceptional in this respect]. Divisive themes and events in the nation's past are remembered selectively. Northerners and Southerners are reunited quickly after the tragic Civil War, the complex but critically important Reconstruction period is largely passed over, and the Black Power movement of the 1960s is rarely incorporated into the story of the civil rights movement that is routinely rendered an uplifting and over-simplistic tale of American democracy righting itself with the help of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech. The US victory over the Axis powers

in WW2, of course, is a touchstone of this traditional narrative. For surely no event exemplifies the moral and political superiority of the American republic than its hard-fought and ultimately crushing defeat of evil, genocidal Nazis and fanatical Japanese militarists.

Conservatives, as I say, rushed to defend this comforting narrative from what they saw as the destabilising untruths of the 1619 Project. Condemning the Project as a seditious and dangerous attempt to pollute the minds of American children with the idea that US history should be reframed as essentially racist, they quickly mobilised to oppose its use in the public schools. In the spring of 2020 Republican senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas introduced the ‘Saving American History Act’ to prohibit federal money being used to assist teaching of the 1619 Project and over the next few months 27 states passed versions of ‘divisive concepts’ legislation to prevent the teaching of historical narratives with white supremacy at their core. At least three states as I’ve said -- Georgia, Florida and Texas -- explicitly prohibit use of the 1619 Project in their schools. President Trump weighed into the controversy by announcing the creation of his ‘1776 Commission’ to disseminate what he called ‘patriotic education.’ The new commission would protect children from the Left’s alleged attempt to distort US history by giving them ‘access to what is genuinely inspiring and unifying in our history’ in order to generate ‘the informed and honest patriotism that is essential for a successful republic.’

Conservatives were assisted, perhaps unwittingly, in their efforts to denigrate the Project by the response of several leading mainstream American historians. Led by the eminent Princeton scholar and commentator Sean Wilentz the academics signed a letter to the *NYT* criticising the project for propagating intellectual falsehoods, notably the claim that I mentioned earlier that the American Revolution had been triggered by fears that Britain was on the verge of abolishing slavery. There was, indeed, very little substance to this argument. The Revolution, like all great historical convulsions, was a complex event but there is no evidence to suggest that the Founders, many of whom of course held slaves, were motivated to rebel against Great Britain by fears that the British government was about to deprive them of their human property. Antislavery in Britain was in its infancy in the 1770s, so the Founders could not have been moved by fears of British abolitionism. Such fears did influence American slaveholders but not until the late 1830s and 1840s i.e. long after the Revolution and *after* Britain had emancipated enslaved people in its empire and the cotton and slavery nexus had become entrenched in the southern states.

The professional historians also pointed out other problems with the Project, including its downplaying of interracial efforts to promote social change in American history. This proved to be the central mode of attack for another group of critics, American communists, who hold that class -- not racial -- conflict is the key to American history. The Project, they insisted, wilfully

ignored evidence of revolutionary cooperation between progressive whites and blacks in the abolitionist movement of the 1840s and 50s, for example, and the assertive labor movement of the 1930s. They also pointed out that the American Revolution and the American Civil War had triggered progressive social change throughout the western hemisphere during the late eighteenth and mid nineteenth centuries.

As well as insisting that the Project falsified American history, the communists discerned a covert motive behind the *NYT*'s decision to encourage its teaching in schools. *The Times*, they contended, was an ally of the Democratic Party whose moderate, pro-capitalist wing had a vested interest in dividing American workers by advancing identity politics rather than proletarian and interracial opposition to capitalist oppression at home and US militarism abroad. They also denounced the Project as an instrument designed to advance the interests of the Black middle class who, historically -- in recent decades certainly -- have benefited from an emphasis on race rather than class. (Affirmative action policies might be a case in point). For the Project's left-wing opponents Hannah-Jones's avowed patriotic intent and evident failure to condemn US imperialism in the shape of the failed war in Afghanistan and disastrous invasion of Iraq were just more evidence of the Project's political and intellectual bankruptcy.

The 1619 Project, then, has been and continues to be attacked by politicians and commentators from both sides of the political spectrum. There is no doubt that it was, in its original incarnation, deeply flawed in terms of its interpretive content. While neither Hannah-Jones nor editor Jake Silverstein have been particularly good at responding to criticism (a flaw that is not unique to themselves, of course), they made significant changes in the Project's account of American history. In particular they have largely backed down on the potentially disastrous claim about the linkage between the Revolution and proslavery. Nevertheless, the central thrust remains the same. Slavery, race and racism should be regarded as central themes in the American story and the Black contribution to US history must be celebrated, not marginalized or ignored.

What Is History?

In this final section of my talk (which I hope will trigger some constructive conversation tonight) I'm going to suggest that the 1619 Project, flawed though it is, should not be condemned automatically and certainly not banned by legislators from the classroom. To do this, I'll need to address some popular misconceptions about History as a discipline and explain how the Project can be used to teach a more intellectually honest, inclusive and probing account of the American past and one that is more useful to the development of what President

Trump's executive order creating the now defunct 1776 Commission referred to as an 'informed and honest patriotism that is essential for a successful republic.'

First of all, cards on the table. No well-informed, tolerant and rational person can doubt that race and racism have played a central role in US history. Diverse and divergent attitudes to slavery informed the writing of the federal Constitution in 1787 [e.g. its fugitive slave provision and infamous three-fifths clause that inflated southern political power in the Early Republic], the creation of the American abolitionist movement in the 1830s, the founding of the modern Republican party in the 1850s, the secession of the southern states in response to Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860, and the outcome and consequences of the American Civil War. The hostility of large numbers of white people to African Americans helps, among other things, to explain the ultimate failure of Reconstruction, the development of a racially segregated society in the United States during the late 19th and early 20th century, the continuing impoverishment of many Black folk after slavery, the limited gains of the nonviolent civil rights movement in the 1960s, and the mass incarceration of Black men and women in recent decades. Put simply, it isn't possible to tell the American story fully and accurately without integrating the African American experience effectively.

But saying this does not mean that all American history can be explained by referencing slavery and the Black experience. Take, for example, the outbreak

of the most important event in US history, the American Civil War, in April 1861. The war killed at least 750K Americans and, as the continuing furore over Confederate statue removals makes clear, it still has repercussions today. The current wisdom, reinforced by the 1619 project, is that the Civil War can't be explained without reference to slavery. This is true, it can't. However, slavery alone -- northerners' opposition to it, and southern slaveholders' determination to defend it from attack -- will not suffice to explain the outbreak of war. The southern defence of slavery and northern opposition to it do explain the decision of the cotton states to leave the Union in the winter of 1860-61. We know this because mid-19c southern whites were honest enough to tell us this in their secession ordinances and speeches. The rebel Confederacy was founded, in the words of Confederate vice president Alexander H. Stephens, 'upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery -- subordination to the superior race -- is his natural and moral condition.' Stephens' chilling cornerstone address of March 1861 should be required reading for all American high-school students because it gives the lie to those people today who claim /that the Civil War was all about the desire to defend states' rights or sectional conflict over economic tariffs. But while slavery and racism explain the act of southern secession, they do not explain why the vast majority of northerners, Michiganders included, refused to allow the southern states to leave the Union peaceably. Northerners determined to combat secession because they believed the Union was worth saving. In their view it was, as President Lincoln put it,

‘the last, best hope of earth’ -- a unique and viable democratic republic that provided hope for all people in a world dominated by authoritarian monarchical regimes. What I’m saying then is that the most important event in American history, the Civil War, cannot be explained with reference solely to race. We need to factor in as well the emotional and political pull of Unionism -- mid-19c American nationalism -- in order to explain why northerners opted to fight what they saw as treason, rather than yield to it, in the spring of 1861.

Here is the central flaw in the 1619 Project. It makes race the primary determinant of American history. I’m quite prepared to accept that race was a primary determinant but it was not the only one. I’m not a communist myself but those hard-left critics of the Project have a point. Class conflict has always played a major role in American history -- key topics like the Revolution, the CW, the agrarian radicalism of the 1890s, the labor organising drives of the New Deal era, and even the African American experience itself cannot be understood without reference to it. There have been other leading forces in US history: religion and anti-communism, for example, as well as patriarchy and many women’s fight to rid themselves of it.

So where does this leave us? Well, one thing to be avoided is a knee-jerk reaction. The discipline of History is not about facts. It’s about the interpretation of facts -- or more precisely, the interpretation of different forms of historical evidence. Widely accepted interpretations of key events -- what we might call

dominant narratives -- change over time, usually as a result of social change in society. Here's an example. In the late 19c and early 20c the mainstream interpretation of Reconstruction was that it was a 'tragic era' in American history when Black rule was imposed on the brave but defeated Confederates. The emancipated slaves, the story ran, had been given the vote too soon, before they had been educated to the duties and responsibilities of citizenship. The result was rampant corruption in the postwar South and widespread unrest caused by white southerners' justifiable determination to resist the imposition of carpetbag government. This line changed in the 1970s and 1980s when professional historians, influenced by the nonviolent campaigns of the CRM and violent southern resistance to it, revisited Reconstruction and reinterpreted it as a remarkable attempt to forge an interracial democracy in the defeated Confederacy -- an attempt that was thwarted by violence inflicted on Blacks by the former ex-Confederates (who held fast to their belief in white supremacy) and the failure of the federal government to secure justice for the freedpeople whose rights it had appeared to guarantee via the XIII, XIV and XV Amendments to the Constitution. It was no accident that this positive account of Reconstruction was the same as the longstanding African American narrative of the post-war era that had circulated beyond the gaze of most white historians in the Age of Jim Crow. The collapse of racial segregation and the growth of a more assertive Black political and cultural voice belatedly moved white

historians to shift their perspective on a vital period in US history that continues to be poorly studied and understood at the high-school level.

Shifting interpretations of past events -- shifting historical landscapes -- are to be expected. Some folks may find this unsettling. Up to a point I can empathise with them. I'm currently working on how and why the northern victors' memory of the Civil War -- what northerners' routinely called the War of the Rebellion -- faded quickly during the late 19c and early 20c. Think for a moment of those Union veterans, some of whose graves can be found in cemeteries close to you [e.g. the Towns cemetery]. They assumed their version of events would persist for all time. But when those men who had survived the war reached middle age in the 1890s they began to realise they were wrong. Younger northerners had little interest in raising what they regarded as old issues like Black civil rights and demonising defeated white southerners as rebels and traitors. And the ex-Confederates had regained political power in the South and were now rebranding themselves as patriotic Americans who, during the Civil War, had been defending their rights and their homes. Union veterans who had risked their lives to save the Republic had to witness the eclipse of their heroic Unionist narrative by a sentimental reconciliatory account of the war -- one that recognised the Confederates as courageous and principled fellow Americans -- that served the consensual purposes of the United States in the late 19c. They watched textbook histories being rewritten to better reflect

contemporary realities -- books that refuted their deep conviction that they had fought for a morally superior cause. They watched too not only as white southerners raised monuments to celebrate traitors like Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis as heroes but also as they paraded around southern streets with Confederate flags. Very many of them were profoundly anxious about how the history of the War of the Rebellion was being rewritten before their very eyes..

So historical interpretations change over time. That's to be expected. It's certainly not the job of the trained historian to craft and bolster familiar, feel-good narratives. That's what politicians do, usually to promote their own agendas. Historians try to explain the past to a modern audience by weighing the available evidence as rigorously and dispassionately as possible. Sure, they're crafting a story of sorts and certainly they approach their material with agendas that are shaped by the times in which they live. There is no such thing as objective history. Historical truth, like happiness, can be maddeningly elusive, but -- just like happiness -- it is something we all can and should pursue. The historian's task is a tough one -- to comprehend societies that no longer exist and explain events that, at best, are only selectively remembered. They do this by scrutinising their own motives as rigorously as possible in order to ensure that they are not, like politicians, moulding the evidence to fit their own preconceived ideas. History, metaphorically, is not black and white because past societies, just like our own, are complex entities. It's nuanced, full

of grey areas. No major event can have a single cause. Certainly not watershed events in American history like the Revolution and the Civil War. Good history writing requires robust contextualisation, close attention to cause and effect -- the connectedness of events -- and the ability to synthesise, to bring together in a seamless and convincing argument, copious amounts of documentary evidence and contemporary research on a particular topic. As a college-level history teacher my job was to develop my students' critical skills -- to encourage them not only to ask hard and intellectually useful questions about their chosen historical projects and materials but also to scrutinise their own work as rigorously as possible so that they could produce the most persuasive arguments possible.

History as a discipline then promotes scrutiny: of oneself, of the past and of the world around us today. Its practice is, I believe, essential to the workings of a healthy democracy. The historian's pursuit of the truth, of course, is why authoritarian states seek to control and monopolise the discipline by embedding their chosen, self-serving narratives of a nation's past into the minds of the people. Anyone with the skills and determination to bust politically instrumental narratives like Vladimir Putin's heroic account of the Soviet Union's Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany is a threat to the regime. Hence the desire of authoritarian states and authoritarian politicians more generally to control the way the past is written about and remembered. The Chinese government's

ongoing determination to wipe out any traces of the Tiananmen Square massacre in Chinese history and memory is a case in point.

The 1619 Project is best thought of as an African American counter narrative of American history -- one that runs counter to the orthodox account of the nation's past that Donald Trump wanted to convey. It's certainly no less patriotic than Trump's and may be considered more so. What could be more patriotic than wanting to improve your homeland by rendering its history more honest and inclusive? Here again we come back to the importance of self-scrutiny. Self-scrutiny is vital for the health of individuals, communities and nations. Unless you recognise your flaws, you can't get rid of them. Continuous scrutiny is hard but necessary work. If you don't scrutinise yourself and the world around you -- ask genuinely hard, purposeful questions about your own narratives and the ones peddled by the media and politicians of all political stripes -- you weaken the fabric of democracy. You fail the test of being an active and properly informed citizen. You become, let's make no bones about it, an ally of authoritarianism.

If the 1619 Project is being taught in a school near you, my advice is not to call for the head of the teacher. I'd expect this kind of action in Florida and Texas but not in the old free state of Michigan and certainly not in Mason County where so many of the townships are named after Union heroes like Grant, Meade and Logan. Most parents are not trained historians -- leave the job of

teaching history to those with an understanding of the discipline. Instead I'd be inclined to see the positive aspects of having an alternative narrative being taught in class. One that fosters not guilt on the part of students but one that encourages them to discern the linkages between the injustices of the past and the present and to recognise the gap between the glittering promise and sometimes difficult reality of American life for many people, white and non-white. Awareness of that gap has often been a highly creative one in US history. It fuelled the abolitionist and agrarian populist movements of the nineteenth century and the Progressive and civil rights movements of the twentieth. But by all means encourage your children to ask their teachers intelligent, informed questions about their material. How, for example, does the 1619 Project's narrative, centred around the experience of African Americans, explain the role of Native Americans, Hispanics and Chinese immigrants in US history or, for that matter, the very significant part played by whites in the antislavery movement of the 19c and the civil rights movement of the 20c?

In my experience young people want to know the truth. They don't want to be fobbed off with complacent tales of national greatness disseminated by designing adults. Such stories just don't sound convincing in the turbulent era of Trump, BLM and COVID. Good history teachers, and I doubt not there are many of them in the Michigan school system (whether they're using the 1619 Project or not), will welcome probing, intelligent questions from their students.

Some people might not like it, but in a functioning democracy truth will out eventually. The white citizens of Tulsa, Oklahoma, succeeded in covering up the mass killing of Black citizens in 1921 for many decades. But after much hard work by individuals like historian Scott Ellsworth who teaches at the University of Michigan the truth of the massacre -- one of several such mass killings of Blacks in US history -- is now widely known and the bodies -- just like those of the republican victims of Franco's authoritarian regime in Spain -- are being located and exhumed. Only with a widespread public recognition of the truth about the past and a frank acknowledgement on the part of the city of Tulsa that a great wrong was committed in 1921 is any kind of intercommunal reconciliation possible in present-day Oklahoma. What applies to one community, surely applies to the nation as a whole.

We live in depressingly polarised times in which authoritarianism is on the rise across the globe. Many politicians in our own avowedly democratic countries are reluctant to confront the often difficult truths of history. It is up to all of us to hold them to standards of democracy that the best of our forebears -- including those patriotic Michiganders who defied the profoundly racist regimes of the Confederacy and Nazi Germany -- would recognise and respect.

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