

American Historical Review publishes letter on 1619 Project by Tom Mackaman and David North

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The following is the text of a letter written by Tom Mackaman, World Socialist Web Site writer and historian, and David North, the chairman of the World Socialist Web Site International Editorial Board. It was published in the April issue of the American Historical Review, the leading US journal of academic historians. The letter responded to a column by AHR Editor Alex Lichtenstein, published in the February issue of the AHR, defending the New York Times' 1619 Project and attacking the WSWS and the historians it had interviewed for their criticism of the project's racist "reframing" of American history.

Also in the current issue of the AHR are letters criticizing Lichtenstein from historians Victoria Bynum and Dolores Janiewski, both of whom were interviewed by the WSWS, and from Sean Wilentz, who, together with four historians interviewed by the WSWS—Bynum, James McPherson, James Oakes, and Gordon Wood—wrote a letter to the New York Times Magazine in December asking that it correct historical errors and distortions in the 1619 Project. The letters are followed by an evasive response from Lichtenstein.

TO THE EDITORS:

Having long appreciated Alex Lichtenstein's scholarly work, we are disappointed by the tone and content of his editorial defending the *New York Times'* 1619 Project in the February *AHR*. He evades the criticisms of the Project by the *World Socialist Web Site* and crudely attacks some of the scholars it has interviewed—Victoria Bynum, James McPherson, James Oakes, and Gordon Wood.

Lichtenstein writes that Wood "seems affronted mostly by the failure of the 1619 Project to solicit his advice." He contends that Bynum, author of the landmark *Free State of Jones*, is "best known for her

attention glimmers of anti-slavery sentiment among southern whites" (emphasis added), as if the fact that a substantial proportion of white Southerners took up arms against the Confederacy, helping to ensure its defeat, is a trivial matter. As for Oakes, Lichtenstein claims that the two-time Lincoln Prize winner "doesn't really direct much fire at the 1619 Project." This is not so. In his interview Oakes issued a scathing critique of the 1619 Project.

Lichtenstein scoffs at these historians as "a motley crew" and "the gang of four." He claims they were aggrieved by the *Times* "practicing history without a license" and "consult[ing] with the wrong historians" (emphasis in the original).

The objection of the historians interviewed by the WSWS to the 1619 Project is not that its authors are "practicing history without a license," but that they are concocting a historical narrative without facts.

Nikole Hannah-Jones, *Times* journalist and Project initiator, and her backers on Twitter have engaged in race-baiting of these historians, as well as the WSWS, for criticizing her work. Lichtenstein alludes to this, writing that, "as many critics hastened to note, all of these historians are white," adding that "in principle, of course, that should do nothing to invalidate their views." Then why state it? The insinuation is that one's understanding of history is determined by one's race. It is unfortunate that we should even have to point out that two of the scholars interviewed by the WSWS (Adolph Reed Jr. and Clayborne Carson) are African American.

Lichtenstein claims there is really nothing at stake in the *Times'* racist presentation of the two American revolutions. He concludes, "While Hannah-Jones may be guilty of overstatement, this is more a matter of

emphasis than it is of a correct or incorrect interpretation.”

The WSWS’s critique of the 1619 Project is not over conflicting interpretations of well-established facts. The 1619 Project is a travesty of history. The essays and interviews posted by the WSWS have demonstrated that the *Times* and Hannah-Jones are advancing a racialist narrative based on distortions, half-truths, and the falsification of historical events.

The arguments of Hannah-Jones are: a) the American Revolution was a counterrevolution, whose purpose was the protection of slavery against British emancipation; b) Lincoln was a racist, and the Civil War was hardly related to the movement to abolish slavery; c) African Americans have fought alone in the face of relentless racism based on the universally popular doctrine of white supremacy; d) racism and slavery are the essential elements of American exceptionalism; and, therefore (and most important of all), e) all of American history is essentially the struggle between the white and black races. The driving forces of American history are not socioeconomic processes that give rise to class conflict, but rather, eternal and suprahistorical racial hatreds.

The 1619 Project either ignores or minimizes events and actors that contradict this narrative. Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King do not appear, and the abolitionist and civil rights movements receive only passing reference. There is no mention of the labor movement. It is impossible to present a coherent narrative of the African American experience over the last 150 years apart from the history of class conflict in the US and the development of its multiracial labor movement.

Lichtenstein palms off as widely accepted what is actually a disputed and untenable generalization: that “slavery and racism lie at the root of ‘nearly everything that has truly made America exceptional.’” This cannot be true, as neither slavery nor racism is unique to America. Both have existed in innumerable societies, from the ancient world to modern times. The “exceptionalism” of American history is bound up with the emergence of capitalism as a world economic system, which came into being, as Marx said, “dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt.” All the brutalities of the New World, beginning with the extermination of the aboriginal population,

developed out of this process.

No serious historian disputes that slavery is a critical element of American history. But the uniqueness of this tragic experience was that it gave rise to the most intransigent antislavery movement the world has ever known; and that slavery was destroyed in a civil war in which approximately as many Americans perished as in all other US wars combined. Three constitutional amendments were passed as a consequence of the war that transformed the legal status of the former slaves and vastly expanded democratic rights for all citizens. Much of the promise of equality was betrayed, but this does not lessen the historical significance of the Civil War and the presidency of Abraham Lincoln, which determined to an extraordinary degree the subsequent economic, social, political, and cultural development of the United States.

The 1619 Project advances a race-based perspective that is, in both its theoretical foundations and its political perspective, intellectually untenable. Lichtenstein indicates that he knows this to be the case, writing, “Marxists may find the substitution of ‘race’ for class relations disconcerting.”

Yes, we do, and for good reason. As George Lukács noted in *The Destruction of Reason*, his study of the intellectual origins of fascism, “Biologism in philosophy and sociology has always been a basis for reactionary philosophical tendencies.” It is high time for an intense and critical examination of the politics and social interests underlying the contemporary fixation with the unscientific category of racial identity, and its use as a battering ram against genuine historical scholarship.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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