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The 1619 Project and James Oakes: Political Motivation as a Methodological Concern

On August 14th, 2019, the cover of the New York Times Magazine — usually featuring eye-catching graphics or tasteful portrait photography — was decorated only with a gray expanse of ocean. A short paragraph, resting on the waves, explained the occasion: exactly four hundred years prior, in August of 1619, enslaved Africans had landed in the British colony of Virginia. Though they arrived more than a hundred years before independence, this, the paragraph asserts, is when America truly began. In what the magazine dubbed the "1619 Project," various authors set out to prove just that, arguing over ten different essays that much of modern American life — music, urban planning, prisons, and even sugar — was, and is, shaped by the corrosive legacy of racial slavery. But slavery wasn't the only target: in a preface to the book version of the project, its forerunner Nikole Hannah-Jones recounts her own childhood education, noting that black people were largely absent from the history she was taught in school. She discovered the significance of 1619 when a teacher recommended she read *Before the Mayflower*, a book that chronicles the story of the enslaved people who arrived in Jamestown just one year before the more famous pilgrim-led ship. Though she notes the progress of scholars in uncovering the history of slavery, she asserts that their findings have not successfully permeated American culture and worked their way into public understanding.[1]

[1] *The 1619 Project*, eds. Nikole Hannah-Jones, Caitlin Roper, Ilena Silverman, Jake Silverstein (New York City, NY: One World, 2021), 17.

The project's goal, then, is not necessarily to provide new scholarship about American slavery; a more accurate way to interpret it is an attempt at revising our national myth, a goal that squarely falls into the category of popular history. "The typical origin story of the United States begins with scrappy colonists inspired by the noble ideals declaring independence and launching the American Revolution," writes Hannah-Jones. "But for Black Americans, the traditional origin story has never rung true."[2] Predictably, the project has drawn ire from those on the right who see nothing wrong with the traditional, 1776-oriented founding story. But the project also received criticism from professional historians, including the prominent scholar of American history James Oakes. While I will not delve into the details of specific historical interpretations of slavery and its legacy, I do want to put Oakes in conversation with the project in the hopes of exploring the intersection of history and politics more broadly. In particular, I argue that, while the 1619 Project's politically-driven narrative is one of its strengths, this approach ultimately results in a mixed bag of essays, as well as avoidable factual inaccuracies. At the same time, Oakes' criticisms of the project, while valid, fail to fully give weight to the political moment in which the project was published, thereby omitting crucial context.

The 1619 Project's political motivations provide for some strong essays that effectively use history to argue for a race-based understanding of present ills. In the preface of the 1619 Project book, Hannah-Jones, quoting historian Kwame Jeffries, is explicit in stating the connection between history and politics: minimizing slavery's significance "leaves Americans ill-equipped to understand racial inequality today, and that, in turn, leads to intolerance, opposition to efforts to address racial injustice, and the enacting of laws and policies detrimental

[2] Ibid., 28.

to Black communities and America writ large."[3] Some of the strongest essays in the book likewise make clear the link between history and present-day injustices. "Sugar," by Khalil Gibran Muhammad, traces the now-ubiquitous ingredient from its production on plantations to its presence on store shelves in food deserts. Weaving together economic history and first-hand accounts from those enslaved, Gibran makes a convincing argument that "from plantation to farm to table, African Americans have always paid the highest costs for sugar cultivation."[4] "Self-Defense" by Carol Anderson, "Fear" by Michelle Alexander, and "Citizenship" by Martha Jones are additional examples of strong essays from the project. "Self-Defense," in particular, has clear political implications; after chronicling the history of self-defense as a racialized concept, Anderson turns her attention to modern "law and order" and "soft on crime" rhetoric. "In this political environment, where Black people were *the* threat, the violence that rained down on them seemed justified. Self-defense was not."[5] She closes the essay with a shocking statistic: "when a white person kills an African-American, it is 281 percent more likely to be ruled a 'justifiable homicide' than a white-on-white killing."[6] Not all of the essays, however, are this strong. In his book *In Defense of History* British historian Richard Evans provides a helpful framing of the connection between history and politics. All history is informed by present-day purpose, he acknowledges. "The question is, to what extent is this purpose paramount?"[7] In some essays from the project, the ideological and political motivations appear to take precedent over what should be paramount — treating history with care, and striving to construct a narrative that gives a true account of the past.

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[3] Ibid., 18.
[4] Ibid., 129.
[5] Ibid., 325.
[6] Ibid., 28.
[7] Richard Evans, *In Defense of History* (W.W. Norton and Company, 2000), 168.

At times, the political goals of the project interfere with good historical scholarship. One instance of this, perhaps the most heavily criticized, is Hannah-Jones' assertion that pro-slavery sentiment among the colonists was one of the primary motivators in leading them to declare independence from the British — a statement that a number of historians labeled as incorrect, including Oakes.[8] The essays "Progress" by Ibram X. Kendi and "Capitalism" by Matthew Desmond likewise suffer from narratives that are too presentist. Desmond's essay, "Capitalism," starts with the worthwhile goal of chronicling the racial history of modern capitalism. In the pursuit of this goal, however, he makes avoidable factual errors that undermine a potentially strong argument.[9] Kendi's essay attempts to detail the ways in which the idea of "progress" has been used throughout history to justify inaction with respect to substantive equality for black Americans. "Saying that the nation can progress is a necessary statement of hope. Saying that the nation *has* progressed racially is usually a statement of ideology, one that has been used all too often to obscure the opposite reality of racist progress."[10]

One aspect of Kendi's argument is true: the path of racial progress from 1619 to the present cannot be drawn with a straight line. But this story of dueling American impulses is different than saying that the country has always been committed to an ideal of racial egalitarianism — and that incremental steps towards this commitment have been used to rationalize not making more radical changes. His first piece of evidence is that some proponents of slavery "held that slavery was justified by the fact that enslavers had improved the lot of the Africans they were enslaving."[11] This racial "improvement" is surely not the type Barack Obama

[8] James Oakes, "What the 1619 Project Got Wrong," *Catalyst* 5, no. 3 (Fall 2021), accessed March 3 2023, https://catalyst-journal.com/2021/12/what-the-1619-project-got-wrong.
[9] Ibid.
[10] *The 1619 Project*, eds. Nikole Hannah-Jones, Caitlin Roper, Ilena Silverman, Jake Silverstein (New York City, NY: One World, 2021), 496.
[11] Ibid.

had in mind when he talked of “a constant widening of our founding creed,” a quote that Kendi uses at the beginning of the essay. While using past progress towards equality to justify the status quo is undoubtedly a problem today, Kendi does not present a convincing argument that this has always been a problem — in part because, throughout American history, the country has in fact not always been committed to the type of racial egalitarianism many modern day Americans strive for. Conflating different definitions of progress weakens his argument, and results in a confused essay. Such factual errors and thin narratives were part of what made the project a locus of criticism. And yet, many of the critiques, including James Oakes do not provide a satisfying examination of it.

Oakes is correct in pointing out the places where the 1619 Project fell short; his overall assessment, though, fails to adequately explore the connected issues of the project’s political context and the difference between popular history and academic scholarship. Journalism is a fundamentally different endeavor than academic writing. While historians try to craft narratives that are largely uninfluenced by their own era, it is a journalist’s responsibility to react to the current climate, often putting history in conversation with present-day events. In that sense, while popular history (often relayed and propagated through media) must actively combat dominant narratives, academic history is relieved from that burden. Students and professional scholars — the primary audience for academic history — are more well-informed than members of the general public about the most up-to-date and accurate historical interpretations of events. The person aiming to change popular history faces a public with varying levels of education, and has no real way of determining what most people know. They must, then, take their best guess at what they think is the prevailing narrative and situate their work around that point.

Because perceptions of prevailing narratives are fundamentally determined by politics, political context must be considered when evaluating popular histories. In 2019, the United States was three years into a dramatic rightward shift in the overton window that started with the election of Donald Trump to the office of the president. Obama — who had inspired talk of a "post-racial" America — was now supplanted by a man who had launched his political career by questioning the validity of Obama's citizenship.[12] Oakes claims that anti-racism is a continuous force in American history, one just as strong as racism.[13] But at the time the project got published, it looked very much like the country was headed in a direction not at all aligned with its more anti-racist impulses. One of Oakes' central claims is that the project erases the anti-slavery movement, as well as white allyship in the black freedom struggle.[14] While he includes black nationalism in his discussion of this — asserting, without any evidence or further justification, that black nationalism is the "dominant ideology of the black professional managerial class" — white nationalism is absent from his article. A curious omission, given that white nationalism was a key concern during the political era in which the 1619 project was published. As a historian, Oakes should know that every source needs to be correctly situated within its context. Even academic history needs to be read this way; we cannot compare Ulrich Phillips, say, to Eric Foden without talking about the prevailing racial attitudes, and political climates, that shaped the discourse of their respective time periods. Similarly, the 1619 project needs to be examined as an attempt at popular, not academic, history, and a product of its political climate. Such crucial context may transform understanding of what Oakes deems

[12] Alana Abramson, "How Donald Trump Perpetuated the 'Birther' Movement for Years," ABC News, September 16, 2016, accessed March 3, 2023, https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/donald-trump-perpetuated-birther-movement-years/story?id=42138176.
[13] James Oakes, "What the 1619 Project Got Wrong," *Catalyst* 5, no. 3 (Fall 2021), accessed March 3 2023, https://catalyst-journal.com/2021/12/what-the-1619-project-got-wrong.
[14] Ibid.

"erasure" of anti-slavery and white allyship into an attempt to highlight black history at a time when it, as well as black Americans at large, seemed vulnerable. Thus, while Oakes' criticisms of the way the project conceives of slavery's economic history and slavery's relationship to capitalism may be valid, a better critique would have probed more deeply the relationship between a work of popular history and its particular political context.

Ultimately, the good intentions and worthwhile goals of the 1619 Project did not always translate directly into the kind of rigorous scholarship that black history deserves. As Evans notes, "history can provide convincing support for social and political empowerment in the present only if it can convincingly claim to be true, and this in turn demands a rigorous and self-critical approach to evidence on the part of the historian…"[15] While many of the essays were excellent examples of historical scholarship, the ones that fell short cast an unfortunate shadow on the rest of the project. The project succeeded, however, in bringing black history, and discussions about the legacy of slavery, into public discourse at a time when white supremacy appeared to be becoming a more powerful force in American life; and this, in and of itself, is a triumph that should not be understated. National history and national memory are powerful forces that have the power to shape both public policy and private understandings of how individuals relate to their country. It is hard to imagine trying to tell a nation's history without thinking of either — and this certainly presents methodological difficulties. But, as Evans aptly states "how can we learn from the past if we cannot gain reliable knowledge of it?"[16] History is an invaluable resource in trying to fight for a more just world; and hope of future justice demands rigorous assessment of past injustice.

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[15] Richard Evans, *In Defense of History* (W.W. Norton and Company, 2000), 191.
[16] Ibid., 188.

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