

# TEACHING HISTORY FORUM: HISTORY WARS AND THE AMERICAN HISTORY SURVEY

## INTRODUCTION

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American History is in the news! A heated debate over how the history of the United States should be taught in the nation's public schools has overtaken the national public square, whether in opinion columns, cable news shows, talk radio programs, or a growing number of podcasts dedicated to discussions of politics and history. Our current history war has been brewing for years but has recently manifested in particularly heated form. This is due largely to the controversy surrounding the *1619 Project*, an award-winning curriculum published by the *New York Times* that places slavery at the heart of the narrative of American history.

The *1619 Project's* call for an intensified focus on race in the American history curriculum coincided with the national reckoning that has consumed the nation in the form of the Black Lives Matter movement. No wonder it won the Pulitzer Prize. But on the flip side, *1619* also landed at a moment when the nation's collective nerves were frayed by one crisis after another, from the incitements of the Donald Trump presidency, to the global pandemic, to the rightfully angry protests that emerged on streets across the nation following George Floyd's murder by police in the summer of 2020.

There has been a lot of push back against the *1619 Project* and related pedagogical projects such as Critical Race Theory, an academic postulation that emerged in the 1980s to explain the racist underpinnings of nominally colorblind institutions, especially the criminal justice system. Right-wing activists have flooded local school board meetings, angrily denouncing race-focused curriculum (while also loudly complaining about mask mandates, sex education, or whatever their *bête noire* happens to be that day).

Conservatives are not the only Americans expressing concern. A group of liberal and leftist historians object to the reductionist approach of the *1619 Project*. They especially oppose the argument made by the project's creator Nikole Hannah-Jones in her introductory essay, that the American Revolution was fought to protect slavery in the colonies (an example of the type of provocative revision the *1619 Project* seeks to have students contemplate). But those criticisms notwithstanding, the current history war has mostly played out in hyper-partisan terms. The Trump administration, for instance, organized a commission to respond to the *1619 Project*. The Trump commission, made up entirely of Republican operatives, right-wing activists, and conservative intellectuals, published the *1776 Report*, a profoundly problematic design for teaching American history that ignores a half-century or more of historical scholarship.

Although our contemporary history war feels especially contentious, it is nothing new. How the history of the United States is taught has always been a topic of debate, sometimes intense. In the early 1940s, conservatives successfully organized to remove from schools Harold Rugg's wildly popular textbook, *Man and His Changing Society*, which incorporated progressive historical scholarship that subjected the American past to the paradigm of class conflict.

History wars raged out of control during the 1990s. As scholars and educators worked to improve the curriculum by devising robust *National History Standards*, conservatives like Lynne Cheney and Rush Limbaugh railed against attempts to impose a politically correct narrative of American history on the nation's youth. The battle got even more heated when historians contributed to the creation of an exhibit about the *Enola Gay* that was intended for display at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. Historians and museum curators wanted the exhibit to tell a balanced story about the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, reflective of decades of sound historical scholarship. Conservatives responded by leveling charges of anti-Americanism against the entire historical profession.

Our current national scrum over American history largely ignores the fact that we have been here before. It also misses the crucial detail, known to all good history teachers, that the narrative of American history, like all

history, is constructed. With this problem in mind, I turned my graduate seminar during the summer of 2021 over to the general topic of the American history narrative.

The Master's program in history at Illinois State University attracts lots of secondary history teachers, largely because our department is home to a large and rigorous History-Social Sciences Education program. Teachers are especially known to take our graduate seminars during the summer, when they have more time to focus on coursework. Aware that most of the students set to enroll in the course would be practicing teachers (indeed, ten of the twelve students who enrolled were teachers), and after thinking about how best to tackle this problem of the narrative of American history, I determined we would critically analyze the U.S. history survey.

One of the most powerful forms of constructing the American history narrative can be found in surveys of U.S. history, books assigned in high school and college classrooms that sometimes even attract readers beyond the classroom. In short, the course objective was to think deeply about the construction of the narrative of American history by reading, analyzing, and critiquing five of the most popular and intriguing U.S. history surveys, written from a diverse range of perspectives and with distinct objectives. We read, in the following order: Wilfred McClay, *Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story*; Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*; Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States*; Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*; and Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*. We also read the *1619 Project* and the *1776 Report*.

For their final papers, I asked students to write on any topic related to the course theme, with the goal of publishing some of the best papers as part of a forum for *Teaching History*. Five students rose to the occasion. The essays that follow represent a diverse range of approaches to answering the question: How should we organize the American history curriculum? Andrew Erford, a teacher at Bloomington High School in Bloomington, Illinois, uses the *1619 Project* as an example to make the case that we should teach history through historical argument. Chad Kuehn, who teaches at Fieldcrest High School in Minonk, shows the value of the *1619 Project* approach by demonstrating that the narrative of American history can be told through the lens of other landmark years, specifically, as he shows, 1968. Kelly Schrems, who also teaches at Bloomington High School, argues that organizing the American history curriculum around the theme of *protest* is an effective strategy for making the content relevant and engaging for her students. Hunter Watts, a teacher at Normal Community High School in Normal, Illinois, offers a knowledgeable critique of the anti-historical *1776 Report*. And finally, Cameron Zindars, who teaches at Mahomet-Seymour High School in Mahomet, Illinois, gives an overview of the history wars, past and present, before offering friendly advice to teachers as to how they might teach history in a meaningful way while also avoiding the pitfalls of the culture wars.

I hope readers learn as much from these essays as I did. As history teachers we often complain that our subject area gets overlooked, especially in an era of standardized testing when the focus tends to be on reading and math skills. But now, all eyes are on history. Of course, not in the way we might have wished! The apocryphal Chinese saying, "May you live in interesting times," is offered as both a blessing and a curse. Let us make the most of our interesting times. Let us bring a rigorous, exciting, critical version of the American history narrative to our students, future citizens of the United States.

# THE 1619 PROJECT AND THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE AND ARGUMENTATION IN THE HISTORY AND SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM

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History has never simply been the study of a series of straightforward, unquestionable, and universal facts. Historians and importantly, students, engage in research and produce scholarship that brings meaning to the past through historical interpretation, analysis, and argumentation. In a recent iteration of America's culture wars—the history wars—a very public, vociferous, and often hostile debate rages, focusing on how history should be properly taught in American classrooms. Controversies surrounding *The New York Times Magazine's 1619 Project* typify one aspect of the current “history wars.” Editor Jake Silverstein and project creator Nikole Hannah-Jones, both journalists by training and trade, along with the other project authors, produced a work of popular historical scholarship arguing that the United States' origin story should be centered on the arrival of enslaved Africans on the English colonial shores in America in 1619.<sup>1</sup> This interpretation differs from several other approaches to American history.<sup>2</sup> By asserting that 1619 is the proper beginning to the American story, the *1619 Project* is merely positing an argument. This historical argument is controversial within the academy and across the mass media landscape. Whether it makes a strong or a weak argument, the *1619 Project's* thesis has much to offer students of history because it calls attention to historical argumentation, historical significance, and secondary sources.

Silverstein, Hannah-Jones, and the other essay authors argue that 1619 is the basis for discussing America's founding. In addition, Hannah-Jones asserted that the Revolutionary War was fought to protect the institution of slavery. Scholars pushed back. Prominent American historian Sean Wilentz was reportedly so enraged by the project's argument regarding the Revolutionary War that he threw his copy of *The New York Times Magazine* across the room upon reading it.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, former CEO of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and former social studies teacher, Janice K. Jackson was said to be left breathless after reading the *1619 Project's* interpretation.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, CPS decided to integrate the project into their social studies curriculum, and they received hundreds of copies of the publication for classroom use.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, school districts in other major cities decided to integrate the project into their social studies curriculums.<sup>6</sup> This news resulted in a legislative and media backlash, moving some to ban the project in schools and paint it as too radical for educational use.<sup>7</sup>

Most middle school or high school teachers have likely experienced rampant student demands to spend

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<sup>1</sup> Jake Silverstein, “The 1619 Project,” *The New York Times Magazine*, August 18, 2019, 4; Nikole Hannah-Jones, “The 1619 Project,” *The New York Times Magazine*, August 18, 2019, 16-17.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see sociologist Matthew Desmond's essay contribution in which he argues that slavery has heavily impacted the modern American economy. This sparked intellectual criticism from a variety of perspectives: Phillip W. Magness, “The Case for Retracting Matthew Desmond's 1619 Project Essay,” *American Institute for Economic Research*, February 11, 2020, <https://www.aier.org/article/the-case-for-retracting-matthew-desmonds-1619-project-essay/>; Allen C. Guelzo, “The 1619 Project Tells a False Story About Capitalism, Too,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-1619-project-tells-a-false-story-about-capitalism-too-11588956387>; John Clegg, “How Slavery Shaped American Capitalism: The New York Times is Right That Slavery Made a Major Contribution to Capitalist Development in the United States — Just Not in the Way They Imagine,” *Jacobin*, August 28, 2019, <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/08/how-slavery-shaped-american-capitalism>

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Ellison, “How the 1619 Project took over 2020,” *The Washington Post*, October 13, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/1619-project-took-over-2020-inside-story/2020/10/13/af537092-00df-11eb-897d-3a6201d6643f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/1619-project-took-over-2020-inside-story/2020/10/13/af537092-00df-11eb-897d-3a6201d6643f_story.html).

<sup>4</sup> Janice K. Jackson, “The 1619 Project and Chicago Public Schools,” *Inside CPS*, September 17, 2019, <https://blog.cps.edu/2019/09/17/the-1619-project-and-chicago-public-schools/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Robby Soave, “Public Schools are Teaching The 1619 Project in Class, Despite Concerns from Historians,” *Reason*, January 28, 2020, <https://reason.com/2020/01/28/1619-project-new-york-times-public-schools/>

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Swartz, “Lawmakers Push to Ban ‘1619 Project’ From Schools,” *EducationWeek*, February 3, 2021.

valuable and limited class time watching or discussing the latest popular movie or discussing popular video games, memes, or sports. In the fall semester of 2020, during Zoom-based remote learning in the midst of a global pandemic, many of my students wanted to discuss the *1619 Project*, African American history, slavery, Jim Crow, institutionalized racism, Black Lives Matter, police brutality, cash bail inequity, and numerous other racially relevant topics. For all its omissions, factual errors, and its indictment by some historians as lacking intellectual rigor, the *1619 Project* not only inspired historical discussion among students and the public; it brought the concepts of historical significance and argumentation into the forefront of historical discussion. By asking students, “When did American history begin?” teachers can help students consider how and why we emphasize specific events and how they can use evidence to build arguments.

## Historical Significance

The *1619 Project* makes a historical argument with respect to historical significance. Luckily, various scholars, journalists, critics, and pundits have offered competing narratives about significant events and dates in U.S. history. These competing arguments are compelling fodder for student consumption and analysis. *1776 Unites*, an interdisciplinary and interprofessional project of ideologically and racially diverse thinkers has situated 1776 as the basis for studying American history, arguing that our founding principles and documents unite us as Americans and arguing against what they deem to be “grievance politics.”<sup>8</sup> Journalist Conor Friedersdorf takes a much softer approach, arguing that 1776 is the proper beginning of American history, because even America’s most ardent dissenters quoted the Declaration of Independence and the ideals it articulates, providing us with a shared foundation.<sup>9</sup>

In his recent book, *1620: A Critical Response to the 1619 Project*, former professor of anthropology and conservative journalist Peter W. Wood argues that 1620 and the Mayflower Compact represent the true founding of the United States.<sup>10</sup> The *New York Times*’ conservative opinion columnist, Ross Douthat, also situates U.S. origins within the colonial period. Douthat argues that the French and Indian War is one of the most important wars in world history and that it is far more important to American history than the Revolutionary War.<sup>11</sup> The *1619 Project* and its ensuing debate led *The Philadelphia Inquirer* to consult four historians to determine when the American story began.<sup>12</sup> Because the four historians present differing scholarly arguments regarding the beginning of American history within the same accessible article, students can easily read, write, and discuss the topic with minimal preparation. All of these authors are in conversation with the *1619 Project*, and their diverse perspectives should be embraced, rather than avoided. Engaging students in examining how authors build different positions is a valuable use of classroom time.

## Building Historical Arguments Through Questions

Effective history teachers typically rely on some form of “hook” to foster student interest, such as a controversial or funny image, video, or quote, or even a short activity to demonstrate an injustice or controversy. Beginning an American history course with a spirited debate over the question, “When did American history begin?” allows students to consider competing historical perspectives: those that are based on patriotism and the founding of the United States, those that focus on a specific demographic population, such as African Americans, and those that embrace American history prior to the arrival of Europeans on

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<sup>8</sup> 1776 Unites, “Our Declaration,” *1776 Unites*, <https://1776unites.com/>

<sup>9</sup> Conor Friedersdorf, “1776 Honors America’s Diversity in a Way 1619 Does Not,” *The Atlantic*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/inclusive-case-1776-not-1619/604435/>

<sup>10</sup> Peter W. Wood, *1620: A Critical Response to the 1619 Project* (New York: Encounter Books, 2020), 23-24.

<sup>11</sup> Ross Douthat, “The War That Made Our World,” *The New York Times*, July 13, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/13/opinion/french-indian-war-american-history.html>

<sup>12</sup> Staff Reports, “The 1619 Anniversary: Where Does the American Story Begin? Opinion,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 15, 2019.

American shores. Even within the focus on European arrival, perspectives differ, as some historians may focus on British, French, or Spanish colonialization, while others may focus on the Caribbean or Central and South American colonization by Europeans. Regardless, all of these perspectives have merits and faults, each presenting students with choices when formulating their historical arguments. This is not a new concept, nor is it particularly profound. However, students who are below grade level in literacy levels, students who demonstrate an average level of mastery in historical thinking, and students who are the highest motivated and highest achieving in the history classroom can all access and benefit from considering the following questions and amassing evidence to build their argument:

- When did American history begin?
- When is the true founding of the United States?
- When does the American story begin?

Likewise, the same instructional approach can be applied to defining the idea of America:

- What is America?
- What is an American?
- What does it mean to be an American?
- Where is America?
- How has America influenced and shaped the rest of the world?

Teaching history and social studies in the K-12 classroom is always a challenging endeavor. It is impossible to “cover” everything in history in a single academic year, and even seven years of instruction across middle school and high school are not enough time to cover the entirety of American and world history, as well as civics, geography, economics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and various other electives. The use of simple, fundamental questions, whether using time, place, or definition, offers students the opportunity to apply historical thinking skills, employ historical arguments, and engage historical controversies in a straightforward manner that is compatible with the time limitations and often chaotic nature of K-12 teaching and learning in the United States.

### **Student-Centered Classrooms to Promote Building Arguments**

One of the most damning critiques of history and social studies education in the United States is that students are not the driving force in most classrooms. The use of significance as a starting point for teaching and learning history and engaging students in building arguments aligns with Paulo Freire’s argument against “banking” models of education that keep content in the hands of the instructor. As Freire points out, peasants typically identify themselves as ignorant and see their teachers as those who have the knowledge that they need. Freire notes that they rarely believe they know things that are relevant to what is being studied.<sup>13</sup> The obvious benefit of all types of inquiry-based teaching and learning is that it pushes back against the inherently teacher-centered forms of instruction that most often take root in K-12 classrooms. When students drive the learning process by engaging fundamental questions, students are able to assert their agency and tailor their historical education to their needs. History textbooks and lecture-based history often lead with essential questions, but then follow with answers. This approach teaches students that there is either one correct answer to every historical question, or it influences students to fall in line with arguments presented by their teachers and/or textbooks. If the goal of history and social studies education in the United States is to produce citizens capable of thinking critically about our shared past, present, and future, then students need to become adept at engaging difficult historical questions and developing strong historical arguments that they believe in. In other words, parroting reflexive responses to historical questions that use one or more primary sources to “prove” an argument does not have

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<sup>13</sup> Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (New York: Continuum, 2005), 63.

the same value or rigor as interrogating the question of when American history began. Student arguments and products, such as their verbal and written responses, are likely to be sloppy and look nothing like graduate and professional historical scholarship, but that is okay. Students benefit when they think big and attempt to place themselves and others within the context of history. The *1619 Project* and the competing reactions it inspired are useful because they are not final answers to historical questions. Rather, they can engage students in a perpetual conversation of historical study.

### The Value of Secondary Sources

Former President Trump's short-lived 1776 Commission, which produced the *1776 Report*, places immense importance upon producing good American citizens and the teaching and learning of facts within the study of history and social studies. The commission argues that we must "reject false and fashionable ideologies that obscure facts, ignore historical context, and tell America's story solely as one of oppression and victimhood rather than one of imperfection but also unprecedented achievement toward freedom, happiness, and fairness for all."<sup>14</sup> The commission also argues that civics and government education should "rely almost exclusively on primary sources."<sup>15</sup> This a subtle, yet substantial argument against the use of secondary sources in social studies instruction. When students traffic in historical argumentation, they are joining the discourses contained within various historiographies. Though primary sources are undoubtedly important to the study of history, so is the wonderfully diverse library of secondary analysis.

To the members of the 1776 Commission, students become damaged goods when they read thinkers such as Howard Zinn, Noam Chomsky, Ayn Rand, Karl Marx, Paulo Freire, and Max Weber. But, students are only damaged when they read secondary sources as an/the end truth. Otherwise, students grow by adding more and more perspectives to their understanding of history. Reading Hitler's *Mein Kampf* does not make the reader a Nazi, nor does reading Marx's *Communist Manifesto* make the reader a communist. However, reading either text as absolute truth can be detrimental.

Textbook publishers are notoriously bad at engaging Native American history and incorporating Native Americans into their for-profit textbooks. Students reap only benefits by reading and discussing Native American scholars such as Vine Deloria, Jr., Nick Estes, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, David Treuer, Dino Gilio-Whitaker, and Thomas King. Students can benefit even more by juxtaposing these scholars' arguments with those posited by previous generations of Native American scholars, finding where they agree, disagree, and what they ignore. Excerpts, book chapters, and articles are as easily consumed by students as primary source documents, which are often difficult due to the unfamiliar writing styles and vocabulary words employed by the authors. The 1776 Commission appears to have an interest in keeping students away from secondary sources, such as the *1619 Project*, which make historical arguments with which students can easily engage.

### Conclusion

No historian or social studies educator has unequivocally found the perfect approach to teaching history. Not every student will respond to even the most controversial, fun, and/or exciting readings and instructional activities. A simple and affordable way to engage students at the beginning of a history course and at the beginning of units and modules is to work through questions of when, where, and what. This demonstrates the importance of historical perspective, interpretation, and argument, easily dispelling the notion that studying history is merely the acquisition of a series of irrefutable facts. It also naturally provides students with agency, as their arguments take center stage, while still requiring students to engage primary and secondary sources and support their arguments with evidence. Because of this, the *1619 Project* is not an evil or indoctrinating document that will damage those students who read and examine it. Nor is it a publication that an entire curriculum should be centered around—American history is just too vast to center around any single text. It is

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<sup>14</sup>The President's Advisory 1776 Commission, "The 1776 Report," January 2021, 18.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 38.

merely another great contribution to the historiography of American history. The *1619 Project*, with every other worthy historical argument, needs to be discussed, critiqued, and defended, rather than censored or placed upon a divine intellectual pedestal.