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Angry parents and community members in Ashburn, Virginia, protest after the Loudoun County School Board halted its meeting because the crowd refused to quiet down June 22. Many at the meeting objected to "critical race theory" being part of the curriculum. (CNS/Reuters/Evelyn Hockstein)



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Should critical race theory be taught in school? Politico reported last week that, nationwide, Republican candidates for school board are running on the pledge that they will keep critical race theory out of the schools.

If you watch Fox News, you would think this was one of the most pressing questions facing the nation, but people like Laura Ingraham, Sean Hannity and Tucker Carlson do not argue in good faith. Nor do most of those Republican Party politicians who have attacked critical race theory. But is it even being taught?

Here at NCR, my colleague Brian Fraga published a fine explainer about what critical race theory is and what it is not. The Washington Post also published an excellent explainer. One of the first things you notice is that critical race theory is not monolithic: Like critical legal theory that preceded it, as well as critical feminist theory — or for that matter, like Thomism or Marxism — different scholars mean something different when they invoke the concept.

For purposes of this essay, I set aside entirely the question that stalks every other paragraph: Is critical race theory compatible with Catholic teaching? As Vincent Rougeau, president of the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, told Gloria Purvis on her podcast, scholars should always feel free to engage controversial theories and take what they find useful from them.

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That said, insofar as all "critical" theories in our day flow in large measure from deconstructionism, which has saturated higher education the past five decades, there is a pastoral issue. The polarization in our society has many causes but one of

the difficulties in overcoming it is that our leading thinkers have been trained to deconstruct culture, not to construct it. Insofar as the construction of culture is inherently unitive, it is what our society desperately needs and is a premise for evangelization in our day. But that is all a discussion for another day.

At Fox News, of course, they lump any form of diversity training in with critical race theory and denounce it all. Both pols and pundits have shown throughout the Trump years that they are only too willing to traffic in racist dog whistles — or worse. They suggest it teaches children to "hate America." You half expect Carlson to cite the musical "1776" as an example of what he wants by way of education in American history. However, training children to be prepared to live and work in a diverse society is as essential to their formation as teaching them the three R's.

There is a method to the conservatives' madness. As Christopher Rufo, of the conservative Manhattan Institute, wrote: "We have successfully frozen their brand — 'critical race theory' — into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions." They are not subtle about their ideological and political ambitions.

When politicians get involved in debates about school curriculum, all of our alarm bells should go off. In The New York Times, Timothy Snyder, the foremost historian of totalitarianism, warned against efforts to falsify history and turn the classroom into a forum for propaganda, drawing on Soviet (later Russian) efforts to downplay the starvation of millions of Ukrainians from famine during the forced collectivization in 1932-33. He warned that efforts in the U.S. to ban critical race theory are "Kafkaesque."

Snyder notes the especially problematic reference to students' "feelings" in some of these laws. Again, if you listen to Fox News, you know that their pundits repeatedly suggest that the objective of critical race theory is to make white students feel bad about slavery. Shouldn't we all feel bad about slavery as persons, whatever our race?

Snyder writes: "History is not therapy, and discomfort is part of growing up." I would ask Ingraham et al. if they think students should be taught *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's classic abolitionist work, which certainly made me feel uncomfortable when I read it in high school. How should students feel when they

read about the Holocaust or the Nanking Massacre or Hiroshima?

Sam Rocha, a professor of education philosophy who has written about critical race theory, told NCR, "Critical race theory is designed to analyze the law, so anything that's not law or policy or really close to something like a statute, it's not really an appropriate object of investigation."

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So, is it a myth that critical race theory is being taught in schools? Is it like the restrictive voting laws that are built on the myth that there was widespread voter fraud in the last election?

Not really. The most prominent application of critical race theory outside of law school has been The New York Times' "The 1619 Project," a series of essays that not only aimed to promote greater awareness of the impact of slavery on American institutions but contended that the key to understanding American history was slavery — and the racism that accompanied it and that remains its legacy.

The editor-in-chief of the Times' magazine, Jake Silverstein, explained the project when it was published in 2019, saying slavery was called the country's "original sin, but it is more than that. It is the country's very origin." That is a large historical claim for a newspaperman with no training in history to make.

The Pulitzer Center has curriculum materials, some for college and others labeled "all grades," all based on "The 1619 Project." According to the center's annual report , some 3,500 classrooms have used the materials.



A lesson plan for "The 1619 Project" on the Pulitzer Center website (NCR screenshot)

"The 1619 Project" was and is controversial not because some yahoos on Fox News said so, but because when it was published, serious, liberal historians like Sean Wilentz and Gordon Wood correctly made the case that it was riddled with errors.

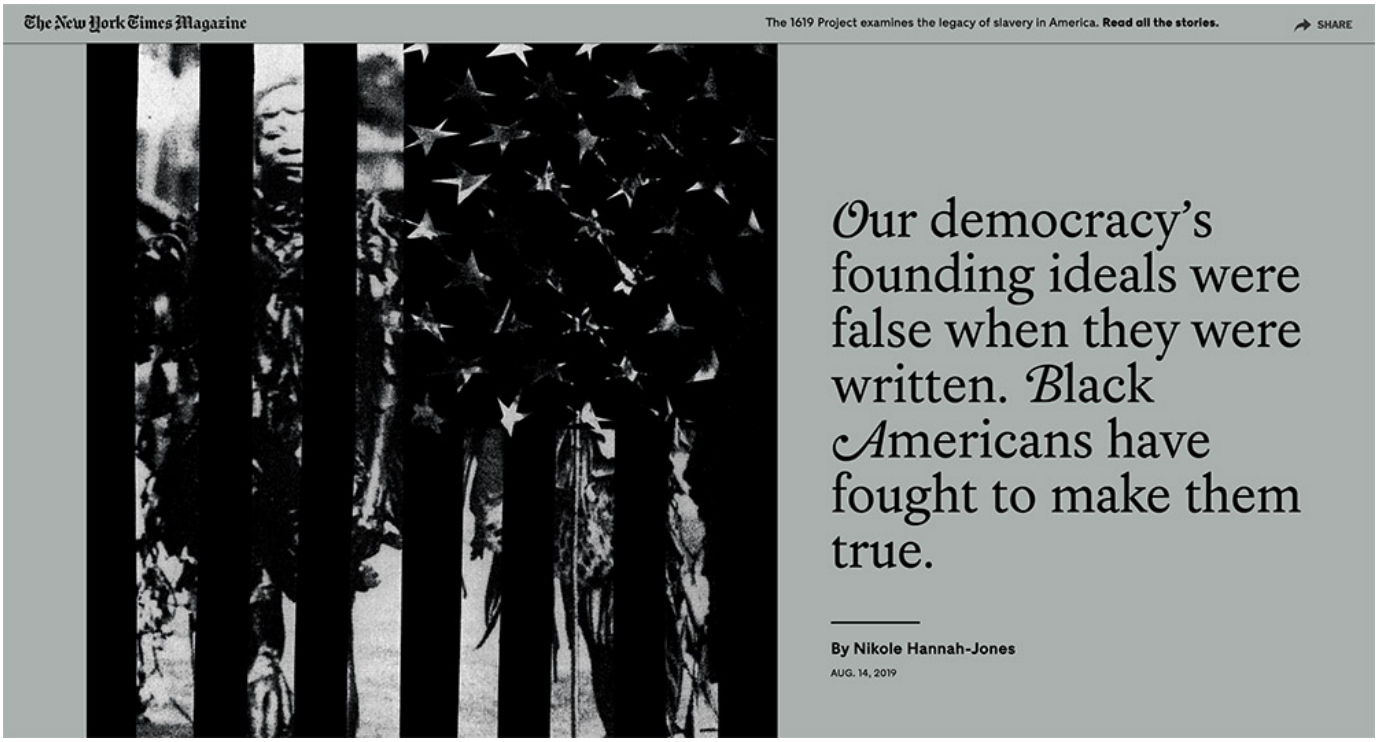
The Washington Post's Sarah Ellison did a fine job rounding up the contentious debate that followed the publication of "The 1619 Project." While questions were raised around several essays, the most contentious was Nikole Hannah-Jones' essay about the American Revolution, which correctly pointed out the hypocrisy of so many slaveholders demanding freedom, but then she went further. She wrote that "one of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery." Most of the critics focused on that large claim, which seemed unsupported by facts.

When I read Hannah-Jones' essay, that was the sentence that caught my attention. In my years of studying the late colonial and revolutionary era, I do not remember encountering pamphlets or newspaper accounts that would support that claim. Compared to the varied, repeated and lengthy coverage, throughout the colonies, of a variety of British parliamentary acts or the magnificent newspaper debate between Massachusettensis (Daniel Leonard) and Novanglus (John Adams) regarding

the proceedings of the First Continental Congress or Thomas Paine's "Common Sense," the coverage of the 1772 Somerset case that restricted slavery in parts of the British empire but not in its colonies was meager.

The Times tried to ignore the critics until they received a letter from Danielle Allen, the esteemed African American classicist at Harvard. She wrote: "If it instead said, 'some colonists' or 'one of the primary reasons motivating influential factions among the colonists' it would be correct. But as it stands the sentence is false."

After the Times got that letter, it amended the original text of Hannah-Jones' essay.



Nikole Hannah-Jones' essay for "The 1619 Project" is seen on The New York Times Magazine website. (NCR screenshot)

One of the more interesting criticisms came from Leslie Harris, an African American historian of slavery at Northwestern University, and interesting for three reasons. First, she not only criticized some of "The 1619 Project" essays, she also criticizes the critics, such as Wilentz, who she thinks have paid insufficient attention to the role of slavery and racism in American history.

Second, Harris was contacted by the Times' fact-checker and she warned them specifically about that sentence. She also concluded that "the paper's characterizations of slavery in early America reflected laws and practices more common in the antebellum era than in Colonial times, and did not accurately illustrate the varied experiences of the first generation of enslaved people that arrived in Virginia in 1619." The Times has not corrected these difficulties.

Third, Harris directed readers to the work of several other, mostly younger historians who have been analyzing the history of slavery and the impact of racism on American institutions. I was familiar with some of these historians but not all. For example, Woody Holton published an essay at The Washington Post last year that discussed the well-known Dunmore Proclamation by which the last royal governor of Virginia offered freedom to Black slaves if they joined the British forces.

A different group of historians, including such scholars as Richard Brown, emeritus professor of history at the University of Connecticut, convincingly examined Holton's claims and found them wanting. Dunmore's declaration came after most Virginians had abandoned their loyalty to the British crown and, in the event, only about 300 Black slaves out of 300,000 in Virginia took Dunmore up on his offer. Holton, in turn, replied. This back-and-forth is how academic life should proceed, right?



Nikole Hannah-Jones in 2018 (Flickr/Associação Brasileira de Jornalismo Investigativo/Abraji/Alice Vergueiro)

The history of a person, and even more of a nation, is like a large river. There may be many tributaries. As the historiography of an era develops, new tributaries are discovered, especially in the case of populations that did not leave extensive written documentary evidence of their thoughts and deeds, such as slaves in the British North American colonies and young United States. If the goal of "The 1619 Project" was merely to point to the need for more attention on the many and varied

contributions of Black Americans to the nation's history, who would object?

The essays are also distinguishable by the excellent narrative they weave. That, too, is part of a historian's job, bringing together disparate facts into a coherent narrative.

There is a middle step the historian must make, however, and that is where this essay in "The 1619 Project" failed, namely, assigning the proper significance to the facts you have discovered and relating them to other facts, fitting the new evidence into the extant historiography. The author wants to show that racism, the desire to sustain white supremacy, is the key paradigm for understanding American history.

Paradigms tend to be monocausal. History isn't. In the case of Hannah-Jones' now-modified claim, you might say she mistook a tributary for the headwaters of the historiographic river of the American Revolution.

Complications will save the universe from ideologues of all kinds, left and right, but only if we teach our young people to appreciate them, not to see them as an impediment to a preferred political or ideological outcome.

If, then, critical race theory calls us to embrace legal ideas such as affirmative action, sign me up. To overcome something with a long and ugly history like racism, it is not enough to wish our society into some colorblind state of equality. You must pay attention to race to overcome the legacy of racism. This is clear.

If, however, critical race theory is to move beyond the halls of the law school, readers and students deserve better than the intellectually imperialistic ideology on display in "The 1619 Project." Scholars, not journalists, still less politicians and pundits, should be given the task of posing new questions to the historical record, integrating new perspectives and insights, and finding ways to communicate them to rising generations. Unfortunately, the whole episode is now just one more battlefront in the culture wars and our students deserve better.