

**NEPC REVIEW: CAPITALISM IN THE
1619 PROJECT (HERITAGE FOUNDATION,
JANUARY 2021)**

*The 1619
Project*

Reviewed by:

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March 2021

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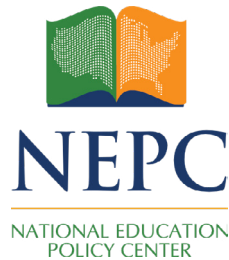
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Executive Summary

The 1619 Project of the *New York Times* re-examines United States history with the experiences of Black Americans at the center. Since its appearance in August 2019—the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first enslaved Africans to the British colonies that would become the United States—the 1619 Project has elicited a significant backlash, culminating recently in the efforts of multiple state legislatures to ban the use of its curricular materials. Consistent with those efforts, this Heritage Foundation report seeks to disqualify the 1619 Project curricular materials as insufficiently celebratory of American capitalism. The report asserts that the 1619 Project overstates slavery’s importance to U.S. economic history. However, the report is less concerned with potential students’ content knowledge about slavery than with students’ receptivity to the libertarian policy preferences of the Heritage Foundation. The report states an explicit fear that the 1619 Project’s discussion of slavery will compel students to hold redistributive and regulatory economic policies in higher esteem. Disconnected from the current scholarly literature on both American slavery and history pedagogy, the report commits the exact sin with which it besmirches the 1619 Project: substituting ideology and political motives for an accurate engagement with the past.



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Introduction

In August 2019, a special issue of the *New York Times Magazine* asked how the stories we collectively tell about the United States would look different with Black people’s experiences at the center. In the lead essay, for example, Nikole Hannah-Jones suggested that the unceasing efforts of Black citizens to fight for democracy might serve to crystalize the meaning of that elusive American value. More than a dozen articles and essays followed on topics ranging from public health and mass incarceration to popular culture. Contributors included journalists, academics, novelists, and artists.¹ The 1619 Project would comprise a magazine issue, a podcast series, a website, and a K-12 curriculum. By invoking the year in which the first enslaved Africans arrived in the British colonies that would become the United States, the 1619 Project proposed a new “birth date” for the nation— one that would necessitate a confrontation with the inhumane violence of slavery and ongoing legacies of anti-Black racism, but that might also point toward “a more just future.”² The 1619 Project received critical acclaim, including a 2020 Pulitzer Prize.³

From the moment of its publication when former House speaker Newt Gingrich denounced it as “propaganda” through the Trump Administration’s short-lived *1776 Report*, the 1619 Project has been a lightning rod for those who fear for Americans’ patriotism. These critiques promote an “exceptional” version of the national past in which an unbending commitment to freedom has distinguished the United States from all other nations.⁴ Needless to say, foregrounding the experiences of enslaved African and African-descended people in the American past—and the centrality of their enslavement to other Americans’ liberty and prosperity— undermines the credibility of these claims. A U.S. Senator and several state legislators have sought to ban the use of 1619 Project materials in the classroom.⁵

Samuel Gregg’s *Capitalism in the 1619 Project* is consistent with these legal efforts to (in current parlance) “cancel” the 1619 Project. The report disputes the 1619 Project’s account

of slavery as a foundational element of American capitalism, attributing errors to authors' (mis)understandings of such present-day economic issues as the 2008 financial crisis. Although the report proclaims an investment in "complete and accurate histories," its primary concern is with students' receptivity to libertarian policy preferences. The danger of the 1619 Project curriculum, the report argues, is that "it will encourage students to take a more favorable view of extensive government intervention into the economy."⁶ Disconnected from current historical scholarship and contemporary K-12 social studies pedagogy, the report's anxieties serve to confirm the premise of the 1619 Project: An American history that takes slavery and its legacies of anti-Black racism seriously is an American history that reduces libertarian mantras about market freedom and human freedom to empty slogans at odds with four hundred years of facts.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

Urging educators to avoid 1619 Project curricular materials, this report challenges factual claims that slavery was formative to American capitalism, while also suggesting that an "animosity against American capitalism" predisposed 1619 Project authors to overlook evidence that would absolve capitalism from the taint of association with slavery.⁷

The report is primarily a response to the 1619 Project essay by Princeton sociologist Matthew Desmond, which begins with the provocative exhortation, "In order to understand the brutality of American capitalism, you have to start on the plantation."⁸ This report presumes, however, that there is nothing particularly brutal about American capitalism, and as a result, no reason to give credibility to historical analysis that presupposes otherwise. Indeed, the report suggests that Desmond's arguments about slavery are inherently suspect on account of his concurrent critiques of economic inequality in the twenty-first century. The same is alleged for several shorter Project 1619 essays by the legal scholar Mehrsa Baradaran.

The report acknowledges at the outset that there is a value for studying "slavery's impact on the American economy," but devotes its energies to contesting Desmond's and Baradaran's claims that slavery was a site of capitalist innovation in accounting practices and the development of agricultural futures markets. The report offers counterexamples—for example, the emergence of double-entry bookkeeping in Renaissance Italy or the use of rice futures contracts in seventeenth-century Japan—to minimize slavery's importance to American capitalism.

The report suggests that Desmond and Baradaran consulted too limited a range of historical research, relying primarily on peer-reviewed academic scholarship produced in the last decade. The report labels this wide-ranging—and often divergent—scholarship as the "New History of Capitalism" and gives it the status of a "school." The report criticizes the 1619 Project for not acknowledging that this "NHC" scholarship has been subject to critique and debate. While mobilizing critical reviews of Cornell University professor Edward Baptist's 2014 *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*, the report does not directly engage other "NHC" scholarship nor introduce a competing academic literature that might be more useful in supporting the author's stated goal of "under-

standing how slavery affected the development of American capitalism.”⁹

The report briefly addresses the 1619 Project curricular materials, noting that classroom activities derived from Desmond’s essay “appear driven by a desire to promote particular ideological outlooks.”¹⁰ While the report expresses reservations about students’ factual knowledge regarding slavery’s relationship to capitalism, its primary concern is that curricular materials will render students sympathetic to “more public ownership, greater regulation, or wider redistributions of income and wealth.”¹¹ The report concludes with a set of claims regarding social welfare policies as historically harmful to Black Americans.

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report is predicated on three rationales: that “only complete and accurate histories belong in classroom curricula”¹²; that curricula should guide “students to develop their critical reasoning and grow in appreciation of the intricacies of historical truth”¹³; and that whenever “historians study the past to shape contemporary policy,” inaccurate versions of the past must follow.¹⁴

IV. The Report’s Use of Research Literature

The report is disconnected from educational research literature, as well as recent scholarship on slavery and capitalism in American economic development. There are no citations to research on student learning in the report. Literature on K-12 social studies pedagogy has championed students’ capacity to grasp ambiguity within the narratives we teach about the past and to engage the past in dialogue with the present.¹⁵ In contrast to these prevailing models of “thinking historically” and despite its proclaimed commitment to students’ critical thinking, the report implicitly endorses an outmoded pedagogy in which historical “truth” stands outside the structures, subjectivities, and indeed, the politics of the present moment and the needs of the present generation.

The scholarship on slavery and capitalism is some of the most dynamic in the profession over the last decade. This report does not, however, engage this literature firsthand to evaluate its mobilization in the 1619 Project. If the report sought to determine whether Desmond and the 1619 Project had gone beyond what the current scholarship could sustain, it would have been worthwhile to look directly at texts like Caitlin Rosenthal’s *Accounting for Slavery* or Calvin Schermerhorn’s *The Business of Slavery and the Rise of American Capitalism*.¹⁶ Rosenthal, for example, resists making primacy claims for plantation accounting practices even as she argues for the plantation as a crucial site of innovation in quantitative record-keeping. The report relies primarily on polemical evaluations of the scholarship produced by Phillip W. Magness, the affiliate of a different libertarian think tank.¹⁷ The report shows no sustained engagement with scholarship in African American history, beginning with Eric Williams’s famous *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944)—a text that might have provided a more apt example of interpretive debate than the report’s misleading introductory discussion of

Charles Beard's 1913 scholarship on the Constitution.¹⁸

Like all interpretive debates in the discipline of history, recent work on slavery and capitalism has been the subject of numerous scholarly appraisals.¹⁹ Rather than seeing this critical process as the normal mode by which academic historians refine and sharpen their claims, the report translates debate into evidence of uncertainty. A misunderstanding of how academic historians reach interpretive conclusions converts a diverse body of research on slavery and capitalism into a "a highly contested school of thought." The report would benefit from a more robust engagement with the scholarship it calls "New History of Capitalism" and the productive debate that has emerged in scholarly journals about its interpretive implications. "Study of slavery's role in shaping economic life in America is essential if we are to understand American capitalism," reads the report's conclusion, albeit without citing any scholarship that would accomplish that goal and avoid the pitfalls that the report attributes to the 1619 Project and the scholarly literature on which it stands.²⁰

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The report is predicated on the existence of an objective historical truth that conveniently aligns with libertarian policy preferences. When historians or journalists deviate from that version of the past, it is alleged that they have substituted activism for dispassionate scholarly inquiry. The report shows a remarkable lack of self-awareness regarding its own embeddedness in a political project to mobilize the past in the service of a particular vision of the future. Similarly, the report discounts the ability of historians and journalists to separate their own present-day opinions from their interpretations of the past: A scholar who attributes the 2008 financial crisis to deregulation, for example, could not be trusted to offer a fair assessment of slavery's importance to capitalist economic development.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusion

Because the report views the 1619 Project as "an effort to tarnish contemporary capitalism with an association with slavery," the report's definition of capitalism is central to its claims.²¹ Initially, the report makes an anachronistic distinction between Europe's mercantilist economies circa 1492–1776 and the capitalist ones that followed. The report contends that slavery mattered to the former but ceased to matter in the latter. However, the current scholarship on capitalism has recognized the mercantilist empires of the early modern period as wholly consistent with capitalism.²² Likewise, the current scholarship has recognized slavery's intensification in the nineteenth century, a "Second Slavery" in which the commerce in African and African-descended people accelerated to record rates and as the United States became the primary producer of the most valuable commodity to the industrial revolution, cotton.²³

The report posits a series of characteristics that presumably define "the habits and institutions of capitalism."²⁴ Each of these features demands an engagement with slavery. For

example, if capitalism is defined by its dedication to private property, it would presumably matter that enslaved men, women, and children constituted one of the largest stores of private property in the United States.²⁵ If capitalism is defined by entrepreneurship, it would presumably matter that the plantation South was a foremost destination for young men on-the-make and for investors (including Nicholas Biddle of the Bank of the United States) to maximize returns on their investments.²⁶ The report does not pause to consider these possibilities, and in doing so, stubbornly resists the question at the heart of the 1619 Project: What comes into focus about our national history if we acknowledge slavery as central, rather than peripheral, to the American past?

In one case, the report finds itself in agreement with the recent scholarship on capitalism. Discussing present-day economic policy, the report contrasts an “American capitalism” with “capitalism in many other countries.”²⁷ Doing so, the report acknowledges that there are numerous ways to organize societies around private contracts, rule of law, limited government, and other capitalist attributes. This recognition of multiple varieties of capitalism (or rather, capitalisms) is precisely why scholars have interpreted nineteenth-century US slavery as capitalist. Not all instantiations of capitalism have embraced the buying and selling of human beings to produce commodities for global markets, but the capitalism that flourished in the nineteenth-century United States did. Just because other forms of capitalism—whether in the Lowell textile mills of the 1830s, the Pittsburgh steel plants of the 1910s, or the Amazon warehouses of 2021—have not created property rights in the lifetime ownership of human beings does not automatically define capitalism as the absence of slavery.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

Educational policymakers of a certain age may recall the 1994 release of the National History Standards Project, when a federally funded consortium of agencies proposed a more multicultural version of American history that was met with fierce rebuke by right-wing commentators and elected officials.²⁸ Responses to the 1619 Project, such as the report under review here, replay that drama in predictable and unproductive ways. To be sure, the 1619 Project is not immune to critique and has generated a robust scholarly debate regarding its interpretive emphases.²⁹ The best of those critiques, however, have not been predicated on the assumption that America’s children will be turned against the country by virtue of reckoning with slavery. Without saying it, the report does cede the central premise of the 1619 Project: Talking about American history as though Black people’s lives and experiences matter necessarily disrupts “exceptionalist” national mythology. To foreground the history of Black people in America, it simply ceases to be believable that markets, entrepreneurship, and property rights will maximize human freedom. Indeed, those facets of capitalism gave slavery a longevity over 245 years in the United States. It has been scarcely 150 years since emancipation, an event not brought about by market forces but by, alas, dreaded governmental regulation in the form of the 13th Amendment.

If the goal of history education is to instill uncritical patriotism into children, then this re-

port will make a plausible case for avoiding the 1619 curriculum. If the goal of history education is to empower students to think critically about the structures that organize American society today, there is little to find in this report other than ideological handwringing that a fuller American past will turn students away from a libertarian future.

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