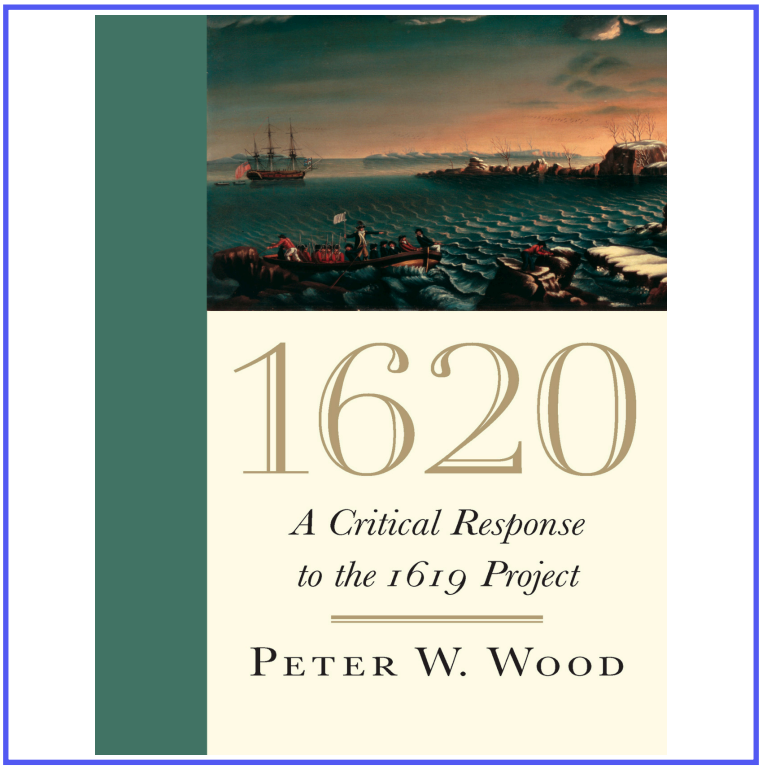


ebookbig.com

or scan the QR code to access the digital study portal.

1620

1620

A Critical Response to the 1619 Project

PETER W. WOOD



ENCOUNTER BOOKS
NEW YORK · LONDON



© 2020 by Peter W. Wood

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of Encounter Books, 900 Broadway, Suite 601, New York, New York, 10003.

First American edition published in 2020 by Encounter Books, an activity of Encounter for Culture and Education, Inc., a nonprofit, tax exempt corporation.
Encounter Books website address: www.encounterbooks.com

Manufactured in the United States and printed on acid-free paper. The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48—I992 (R 1997) *(Permanence of Paper)*.

FIRST AMERICAN EDITION

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Wood, Peter, 1953– author.
Title: 1620 : a critical response to the 1619 Project / Peter W. Wood.
Other titles: Critical response to the 1619 Project
Description: New York, NY : Encounter Books, [2020] | Includes bibliographical references and index. |
Identifiers: LCCN 2020032266 (print) | LCCN 2020032267 (ebook) | ISBN 9781641771245 (cloth) | ISBN 9781641771252 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Slavery—United States—History. | United States—History—Study and teaching. | 1619 Project. | United States—Historiography. | Critical pedagogy.
Classification: LCC E441.W873 2020 (print) | LCC E441 (ebook) | DDC 306.3/620973—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020032266
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020032267

CONTENTS

Preliminaries What Is the 1619 Project?

Preface October 1492

Chapter 1 November 1620

Chapter 2 August 1619

Chapter 3 August 2019

Chapter 4 1776

Chapter 5 1775

Chapter 6 March 2020

Chapter 7 March 1621

Chapter 8 April 1861

Chapter 9 January 1863

Chapter 10 October 1621

Chapter 11 January 2020

Chapter 12 September 2020

Chapter 13 The Future

Postscript

Notes

Index

PRELIMINARIES

WHAT IS THE 1619 PROJECT?

On Sunday, August 18, 2019, the *New York Times* published a special issue of *The New York Times Magazine* announcing "The 1619 Project." Along with the 100-page magazine, the *New York Times* released a sixteen-page newsprint section under the same title and headlined "We've Got to Tell the Unvarnished Truth," quoting the late historian John Hope Franklin.

On the opening page of the magazine, Jake Silverstein, the *Times*' editor in chief, stated the project's aim:

> *The goal of The* 1619 *Project, a major initiative from* The New York Times *that this issue of the magazine inaugurates, is to reframe American history by considering what it would mean to regard* 1619 *as our nation's birth year. Doing so requires us to place the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are as a country*.[1]

Reframing the country's history is an extraordinarily ambitious goal, and not something one would ordinarily expect to come from a newspaper. The *Times*, however, is not the least bit circumspect in announcing it. The 1619

Project is, in other words, an all-out effort to replace traditional conceptions of American history with a history refracted through the lens of black identity politics.

This approach goes far beyond the case for teaching African American Studies in colleges or making sure that black history is integrated in school curricula. Instead of asserting the need to *add* to traditional American history a fuller account of the black experience, the 1619 Project calls for *replacing* that traditional account with one that makes the black experience primary – and not just for black Americans, but for all Americans.

This short book responds to the 1619 Project, but it is not a point-by-point examination of everything the contributors to the 1619 Project first wrote or of what they and others have said since. I aim instead to take the reader on a hike through the main themes of the 1619 Project, pointing out the dizzying vistas, treacherous paths, poisonous snakes, sudden drop-offs, and hungry grizzly bears. The central tenets of the 1619 Project are that Americans have grossly misunderstood the origins and nature of American society, and that slavery is the pivotal institution in American history.

The contributors to the 1619 Project are, of course, more specific. Their claims include the idea that America began with the arrival of slaves in Virginia in August 1619; that the primary purpose of the colonists who declared independence from Britain in 1776 was to preserve American slavery from the danger of Britain's outlawing it; that the Southern plantation system of growing cotton with slave labor is the foundation of modern American capitalism; and that Lincoln was a racist who had no interest in conferring real citizenship on those who were enslaved.

The project's contributors undoubtedly knew these to be provocative claims. In their statements and behavior in the months that followed the release of the special issue of the magazine, some of them relished both the adulation they

received from supporters and the dismay of critics, who proved ineffectual in stemming public attention to the *Times*' splash.

It quickly became clear that the 1619 Project was a lot more than the initial publication of the magazine and the newspaper supplement. It was and still is a "project" in the fullest sense of the term. The Pulitzer Center partnered with the *Times* to plant a 1619 Project curriculum in the nation's schools. Nikole Hannah-Jones, the architect of the 1619 Project and author of its lead essay, went on a nationwide speaking tour and was met by friendly audiences. The *Times* not only heavily advertised the project, it seeded themes from the project in hundreds of news stories and columns. It added a podcast devoted to the project, and it used its weekly online newsletter, "Race/ Related," to stoke the fire. Given the *Times*' status as the nation's "newspaper of record" and the lodestar for other news organizations, 1619 Project themes and conceits began to appear everywhere in the nation's press, with or without explicit mention of the project itself.

The larger aim of the 1619 Project is to change America's understanding of itself. Whether it will ultimately succeed in doing so remains to be seen, but it certainly has already succeeded in shaping how Americans now argue about key aspects of our history. The 1619 Project aligns with the views of those on the progressive left who hate America and would like to transform it radically into a different kind of nation. Such a transformation would be a terrible mistake: it would endanger our hard-won liberty, our self-government, and our virtues as a people. Little is to be gained, however, by progressives and conservatives lobbing boulder-sized principles back and forth across the line that divides them.

Instead, this book explores the 1619 Project as a cultural phenomenon: a testimony to the beliefs and ambitions of one faction. That I do not share these beliefs and ambitions gives me the freedom to consider them from angles that the

project’s adherents might not entertain. That freedom also allows me to examine criticisms of the 1619 Project coming from many whose premises I don’t share: hard-core Marxists, liberal statists, hard-core free-market advocates, and Southern apologists, among others. My own views, which I have presented in other books and articles, are of a mildly conservative and traditionalist sort. I regard the primary values of our nation as stated clearly in the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence, namely, “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

On matters of race, I uphold the principle that our Constitution and our laws should be colorblind, and that our society should strive for the common good, which is best achieved by treating one another as individuals, not as representatives of identity groups. We do, however, have the freedom to form our own communities and to enjoy shared cultural affinities. “Race” in that sense is not likely to disappear anytime soon in a general cultural amalgamation. People will separate and divide themselves as often as people will “appropriate” from the cultural traditions of others. There is nothing sinister in either impulse.

But this leaves open the question of how racist and how oppressive American society really is. I believe there is abundant exaggeration on both left and right, much of it driven by politics. Some exaggerate the degree to which racism pervades American society. Some exaggerate the degree to which racism is a thing of the past that contemporary America has moved beyond. It is very difficult for most Americans to avoid exaggerating in one direction or the other. If you have experienced overt racism or seen it up close, it is likely to loom very large in your assessment of

the nation. If you have not experienced racism first-hand, it is likely to appear to you to be merely a talking point for those who cling to a particular narrative, when they could just as easily enjoy the full freedoms that the country offers. Who is right?

The 1619 Project offers the fullest and most vigorous exposition of the view that America is a racist, oppressive country. Fringe groups of black nationalists take an even grimmer view, but the 1619 Project has taken ideas that a few years ago were exclusively fringe a good way into the realm of mainstream opinion. The idea, for example, that the American Revolution was a pro-slavery event once circulated only among conspiracy-minded activists with comic-book-style theories of history. The 1619 Project has brought it from the playground into the classroom, to the consternation of serious historians everywhere.

Slavery, of course, was not an American invention, or a European one. It has existed in human societies for thousands of years. In north and east Africa, slave capture and trading were pursued on an enormous scale by Arabs. When Europeans encountered native kingdoms on Africa's Atlantic coast in the fifteenth century, they discovered slavery as a deeply embedded practice. That the Portuguese and the Spanish fostered this practice by creating a market for African slaves in the New World is among the great tragedies of human history. Other European powers eventually joined in perpetuating that tragedy.

By comparison with the Caribbean and South American colonies, the English colonies that would one day become the United States were lightly touched by the slave trade, especially during their first hundred years. The 1619 Project argues to the contrary that the enslavement of Africans was central to the formation of American social order and the American economy as early as the seventeenth century.

The usual way for disputes about history to be resolved is for historians to present their best arguments, and their