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REEXAMINING AND REFRAMING AMERICAN HISTORY: THE 1619 PROJECT

The paper examines and analyzes the 1619 Project published in 2019 by The New York Times Magazine. The publication of the 1619 Project is a clear indication of an ongoing debate around American history and politics in which the center stage is given to the dominant white Americans who are considered the builders of the state and nation, whereas the role and contribution of people of color in American history is either overlooked or denied. The intent of the 1619 Project is to reframe and reassess American history by placing African Americans at the center of American history, acknowledging their contribution as well as debunking the dominant Eurocentric myths and discourses. The 1619 Project challenges the mainstream historical narrative that the US history started in 1776 with the signing of the Declaration of Independence, instead offering 1619 as the date of the beginning of American history with the arrival of the first enslaved people to the British colony of Virginia. By analyzing the 1619 Project it is revealed that the narrative based on the centrality of African American people in the US history in fact exposes the deep-seated institutional systemic racism in American society and deconstructs the myth of American exceptionalism. Although the 1619 Project is a forceful and dynamic endeavor in challenging the mainstream Anglo-American national discourse of American history, the dominant Anglo-American historical narratives remain deeply entrenched and prevalent in the consciousness of American public and education system.

Key words: 1619 Project, American history, slavery, whites, blacks, African Americans, racism, American exceptionalism.

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Америка тарихын қайта қарау және бағалау: 1619 жобасы

Мақалада 2019 жылдың тамызында «The New York Times Magazine» журналында жарияланған 1619 жобасы зерттеліп, талданады. 1619 жобасының жариялануы американдық тарихы мен саясаты төңірегінде дамылсыз жалғасып келе жатқан пікір-таластың айқын көрсеткіші болып табылады. Дәстүрлі американдық тарихнамасында ақ түсті американдықтар мемлекет пен ұлтты құрушы этнос ретінде қарастырылса, ал түрлі түсті халықтардың, соның ішінде қара түстілердің Америка тарихындағы рөлі мен қосқан үлесі еленбейді немесе жоққа шығарылады. 1619 жобасының мақсаты – афро-американдықтардың елдің дамуына қосқан үлесін мойындау және үстемдік етуші еуроцентристік мифтер мен дискурстарды күмән келтіру арқылы Америка тарихын қайта қарау және қайта бағалау. 1619 жобасы АҚШ тарихы 1776 жылы Тәуелсіздік Декларациясына қол қоюмен басталды деген дәстүрлі қағидаға күмән келтіріп, оның орнына бір топ қара түсті африкалықтардың алғаш рет Британияның Вирджиния отарына құл ретінде алып келінген 1619 жылды Америка тарихының басталу уақыты ретінде ұсынады. 1619 жобасын терең талдау бізге АҚШ тарихындағы афро-американдықтардың жетекші рөлін ашып, мойындауға, сонымен қатар американдық қоғамдағы институционалдық нәсілшілдіктің тамырының қаншалықты тереңге кеткенін түсінуге, американдық ерекшелік туралы мифтің жалған екенін көрсетуге мүмкіндік береді. 1619 жобасы американдық тарихындағы үстем етуші англо-американдық дискурсына қарсы тұрудағы қуатты және серпінді талпыныс болғанымен, еуроцентристік тұжырымдар американдық қоғамында және білім беру жүйесінде терең орныққан басым дискурс болып қала береді.

Түйін сөздер: 1619 жобасы, американдық тарихы, құлдық, ақ түсті американдықтар, қара түсті американдықтар, афро-американдықтар, нәсілшілдік, американдық ерекшелік.

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Пересмотр и переосмысление американской истории: Проект 1619

В статье рассматривается и анализируется проект 1619, опубликованный в журнале «The New York Times Magazine» в августе 2019 года. Публикация проекта 1619 является ярким свидетельством непрерывно продолжающихся дебатов по поводу американской истории и политики. В традиционной американской историографии белые американцы рассматриваются как государствообразующий и нациеобразующий этнос, тогда как роль и вклад цветных народов, в том числе чернокожих, в американскую историю игнорируется или исключается. Цель проекта 1619 – пересмотреть и переоценить американскую историю, признав вклад афроамериканцев в развитие страны и поставив под сомнение господствующие европоцентристские мифы и дискурсы. Проект 1619 года ставит под сомнение традиционное представление о том, что история США началась с подписания Декларации независимости в 1776 году, и вместо этого предлагает 1619 год как начало американской истории, когда группа чернокожих африканцев впервые была завезена в Британскую колонию Вирджиния в качестве рабской силы. Углубленный анализ проекта 1619 позволит раскрыть и признать ведущую роль афроамериканцев в истории США, а также глубины институционального расизма в американском обществе и опровергнуть миф об американской исключительности. Хотя Проект 1619 является мощной и динамичной попыткой противостоять доминирующему англо-американскому дискурсу в американской истории, европоцентристские взгляды продолжают оставаться глубоко укоренившимся дискурсом в американском обществе и системе образования.

Ключевые слова: Проект 1619, американская история, рабство, белые американцы, черные американцы, афроамериканцы, расизм, американская исключительность.

Introduction

Since the so-called Columbus discovery of the New World unknown to Europe the history of the Western Hemisphere has been shaped and forged by the European settlers who have dominated the Americas. Upon the conquest of the Americas European colonizers embarked on state building projects that entailed the import and installation of European social and political institutions that triggered the removal and erasure of indigenous cultures and civilizations, complete annihilation and genocide of Native American populations, and enslavement of people of African descent. The endeavors of creation of settler colonial societies were accompanied by the ascendancy of white European settlers who have developed a sense of racial supremacy and a superiority mentality on the one hand, and the massive victimization, dehumanization, and marginalization of the people of Native American and African descent who have been made invisible on the other. The specific focus of the paper is on the United States whose founders although painted a newly created America as the land of free and of opportunity and whose descendants have tirelessly believed in American exceptionalism, the so-called Founding Fathers forged and established a nation that was not inclusive rather was exclusionary, reactionary,

undemocratic, and racist. And the 1619 Project provides compelling evidence of the mendacity of founding ideals of the US that were intended for the dominant white majority, while being deprived of humanity people of African descent were subjected to the excruciating, suffocating and unbearable torture, terror, degradation, and dehumanization. In addition to exposing terror and crimes committed by the US government and the white majority against African Americans, the 1619 Project seeks to bring a deep paradigm change in education, public, academia and media by challenging the mainstream white American discourses of the US history and getting the enormous contribution of African Americans to the development of the nation since its birth acknowledged.

Materials and methods

The rationale behind the publication of the 1619 Project as stated by the authors was to reexamine and reframe American history by reassessing the past historical events, acknowledging the positive role of black Americans in national history, and in building a democratic society, and shifting the date of birth of the nation from 1776 to 1619 (Silverstein, 2019). The 1619 Project consists of several critical essays, each of which touches upon various episodes of the national history from the perspectives of black

Americans such as the institution of a barbaric and evil system of chattel slavery in the 17th century, revision of the American Revolutionary War, the contribution of black people to the emergence of genuine American democracy and civil society (Silverstein, 2019).

On August 14th, 2019, The New York Times Magazine published the 1619 Project that was composed of several essays, a collection of poems and fiction. In an introduction by Jake Silverstein, editor-in-chief, it is explained as to why the magazine inaugurated this special issue and the goal was to reframe American history (Silverstein, 2019). Specifically, an idea put forward for consideration was to consider 1619 to be the birth of America because 1776 is designed to serve the interests of white settlers and thereby is largely exclusive in its character. Moreover, while 1776 is widely glorified and celebrated as the foundation of the American republic, 1619 has been largely forgotten or left out of American founding myths and the arrival of more than 20 African slaves in Virginia is scarcely mentioned and remembered (Silverstein, 2019). The bottom line was that the intention of the magazine was to change the status quo and inject a new narrative into public and scholarly debate. This paper will specifically focus on the analysis of the essay written by Nikole Hannah-Jones to understand the essence of the 1619 Project and the message it has sent to American society.

Results and Discussion

Before discussing the key themes of the 1619 Project, it is worth looking at the driving forces that gave rise to the American national myths that in fact are not real rather imaginary or as Stephen Walt (2011) stressed, a myth. At the center of American national history and identity lies the idea of American exceptionalism that portrays the country and its people "... as an "empire of liberty," a "shining city on a hill," the "last best hope of Earth," the "leader of the free world," and the "indispensable nation" (Walt, 2011; Sachs, 2018), as a Promised Land, as a Chosen People (Noble, 1985), as a democratic and Christian people bringing progress, order and prosperity to savages and a barren wilderness (Wrobel, 2013, p. 4), as a nation chosen by God to save the world and fulfill a 'civilizing mission' and 'God's will' (Blum, 2013).

The second powerful myth that has been essential in American history and politics is providentialism that underpins and reinforces the myth of American exceptionalism implies the direct involvement of

God in history to guide America in the right direction (Guyatt, 2007). These mutually reinforcing myths of exceptionalism and providentialism have shaped the American religious and political thought and have played a pivotal role in the nation's history from the establishment of English colony at the beginning of the 17th century up to nowadays and have been focal in forging of an American national identity and has served as a principal strategy for achieving specific political goals (Guyatt, 2007). American providentialism is premised upon the ideas that God's interference in history is a consistent and largely unchanging force, the rise and demise of nations is determined by God, divine intervention of God in the affairs of humans, and some nations tend to be chosen by God to play a special role in history (Guyatt, 2007). As a founding myth American providentialism suggests that English settlers set in motion the divine mission, conquering North America and building a powerful empire in an empty yet hostile environment (Guyatt, 2007). Even oppression and dehumanization of Indigenous populations and black slaves was justified as a divine mission (Haynes, 2007). Having internalized such myths, white Americans perceived Native Americans and other non-whites as a "degraded, brutal race of savages, whom it was the will of God should perish at the approach of civilization ... that manifest destiny will drive the Indians from the earth" (Jackson, 2001, p. v).

Overloaded with such a sense of moral superiority, the so-called Founding Fathers and subsequent American statesman developed a deep-rooted myth that while settling in North America, European colonists had left behind all their vices (Blum, 2013), notably breaking from Europe, and leaving behind oppressive social, economic, and political systems of Europe, class stratification, colonialism, imperialism, and war (Noble, 1985; Noble, 2002). Even today American leaders refer to their country as a beacon of democracy whose mission is to defend and spread democracy, liberty, freedom, and human rights across the globe, yet such a claim is untenable and not compatible with the historical reality, rather the myth of American exceptionalism in fact conceals and obscures the darkest sins, crimes and immoral acts in American history committed by white majority against Native Americans, black Americans, and other populations of color. The myth of American uniqueness and exceptionalism is closely intertwined with Christianity that reinforces and perpetuates the idea that God promised and gave North America as a Promised Land to English settlers who became

the Chosen People and the 1776 Revolution was regarded as the exodus and liberation from the European bondage and tyranny (Noble, 1985).

But how can one reconcile the deeply entrenched beliefs of American exceptionalism, uniqueness, virtuousness, and righteousness with its history of slavery, racism, genocide, oppression, imperialism, and constant war? Are they consistent with one another and how can one claim the righteousness of their country when it has committed a myriad of crimes against humanity? Questions like these are at the center of scholarly and public debates in American society today. Sachs (2018) stresses that an integral part of American exceptionalism is war not only against its real and imagined foreign foes but against own people, namely people of color. The so-called European discovery of the New World has been disastrous and pernicious not only for Native American nations as well as for millions of people of African descent who were brought to the Americas against their will. The discovery of the New World by Columbus led to the destruction and annihilation of Indigenous civilizations, and it testifies to the European greed and obsession with wealth and money that resulted in the conquest and colonization of the whole continent.

Despite the bold statements of the dawn of multiracial and a color-blind society, systemic and institutional racism, racial segregation, and discrimination evidently persist in American society (Giroux, 2006). The evidence of racial prejudice, injustice and inequality in the US has been provided by the 1619 Project whose authors highlight that the founding myths and ideals of freedom and equality were false when they were invented, and to make them true African Americans fought and sacrificed their lives, without their struggle America would not be a democracy at all. This was the key message sent to American public by the 1619 Project, especially Nikole Hannah-Jones who penned the first essay titled "America Wasn't a Democracy Until Black Americans Made It One", provides vigorous and cogent arguments regarding black people's place and role throughout American history.

Key themes and takeaways emerging from Nikole Hannah-Jones's essay are the following: first, the reason why white settlers rose in arms against the British rule in the 13 colonies lied in their aspiration to protect and keep the institution of slavery. Second, although 1619 has been omitted from the founding myths and rarely discussed, this date is as important as 1620 and 1776 and could be regarded as the birth of the American nation. Third, the irrefutable and unquestionable role and contribution

of African Americans to building the United States of America as well as to making the nation a genuine and true democracy. Fourth, consequently the claim that the US has been a true democracy is false and groundless rather the country was a slavocracy. Fifth, irrespective of whether white Americans were involved in slavery or not, every of them contributed to the inhumane racist system and believed in the racial inferiority of African Americans. Sixth, the Civil War was instigated not to put an end to the institution of slavery, rather the goal was to maintain and preserve the integrity and unity of the US. And finally, the abolition of slavery did not result in ending rampant racism, racist society, and the idea of inferiority of black people quite the contrary it took black people additional one hundred years to regain their humanity and to be treated as human beings.

Now we will turn to discuss in detail every theme emerged in Hannah-Jones's essay. In relation to the first theme in literature this issue is rarely discussed and often seen as a distortion and misrepresentation of historical facts. Although such a narrative may be seen as a drastic revision of history, it deserves a closer look and examination. It is evident that Hannah-Jones's arguments are convincing and premised upon historical facts that are hard to contest. It is true that in Britain's 13 North American colonies the institution of slavery had appeared a long before the American Revolutionary War. As Morison (1965) points out, slavery formed the basis of the American society and even though the Northerners practiced slavery in part and gradually abolished it, they also greatly benefited from this system that was prevalent in the South. It worth noting that those white men who revolted against Britain in 1776 were enslavers and thus fully sanctioned slavery, believing in the congruence of slavery with their cause (Wilentz, 2019). On the eve of the American War of Independence roughly 20 percent of the population in 13 colonies were subjected to a cruel system of slavery and slaveholders made sure that this institution was sustainable and preserved, as Hannah-Jones (2019) underlines, "Conveniently left out of our founding mythology is the fact 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" (p. 18).

According to Hannah-Jones (2019), the rationale behind the revolt against Britain was that at that time the British government was increasingly seeking to put an end to slave trade as it was a barbaric and inhumane practice that started to be considered incompatible with its policy, which was right away

perceived by white slaveholders in colonies as a threat to their well-being and immeasurable profits yielded by chattel slavery. So as chattel slavery was a very lucrative business, the rebels were deeply interested in maintaining this system even if it would entail the secession from Britain. In other words, the revolt would unlikely have broken out, had slavery not empowered the rebels to do so, and they were also convinced that only independence could ensure the further continuation and maintenance of slavery (Hannah-Jones, 2019, p. 18). As a result, it is not accidental that 10 of the country's first 12 presidents were slaveholders, and despite all of which spoke about liberty, equality, and freedom as loudly as possible, they were ardent supporters of slavery (Hannah-Jones, 2019; Morgan, 1975). In this matter particularly the representatives from Virginia were at the forefront of the armed insurrection drafting not only the Declaration of Independence but also the Constitution and the Bill of Rights and later held prominent positions as statesmen, yet they were all enslavers (Morgan, 1975).

Thomas Jefferson who penned the Declaration of Independence knew of hypocrisy of white settlers' actions that slavery was an inhumane and immoral practice which was at odds with liberal values and human rights. Yet in the initial draft of the Declaration of Independence Jefferson sought to put the blame on Britain for slavery that allegedly the system was imposed on colonists, considering human trafficking and the enslavement of blacks a crime (Hannah-Jones, 2019). However, as this allegation conflicted with the interests of slaveholders, Jefferson's segment was ultimately removed by the Continental Congress (Zinn, 1980). At the same time, colonists felt oppressed and enslaved by the British king as if they were themselves slaves of Britain, for this hypocrisy settlers faced scorching criticism from all sides, yet none of the founders intended to get rid of slavery (Hannah-Jones, 2019). It is apparent that after getting independence, the founders had no moral right to continue to blame Britain for slavery as with independence they had every opportunity and legitimacy to abolish this institution. Yet deeply interested in keeping slavery, the founders violated their own political principles, inheriting the institution of slavery, and thereby the sin became the nation's own (Hannah-Jones, 2019). The newly born American nation's constitution was closely intertwined with slavery which was possible because the founders of the country skillfully concealed their intention and hypocrisy to keep slavery and the Declaration of Independence did not include this term (Hannah-Jones, 2019).

Regarding the second theme, in American history two key defining dates or events are traditionally revered and regarded as the genesis of the United States, notably 1620 and 1776. While the former was marked by the arrival of English settlers in Massachusetts, the latter is the hallmark event in the US history when the colonists revolted against Britain with the intent to establish a new independent nation state. Nevertheless, the authors of the 1619 Project call for the revision of the US history by acknowledging the historical importance of 1619 and challenging the white American discourses of history. Silverstein (2019) emphasizes that what has been traditionally taught in American schools and the conventional celebration of 1776 is in fact wrong because the genuine date of the nation's birth was 1619. Despite the fact that European slavery in North America preceded this date, in Silverstein's (2019) view, on the one hand the arrival of the first African slaves paved the way for inhumane treatment of blacks and inaugurated the institution of slavery, and on the other, this event not only known as the nation's original sin, yet it is the beginning of the United States. Silverstein (2019) hence argues that 1619 is as notable as 1620 and 1776 in terms of its historical and national significance, stressing the need that 1619 ought to be given recognition and formal acknowledgment. The greatness and importance of this hallmark event in American history ought not to be trivialized and belittled, quite contrary the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans need to be placed at the very center of the history. Although the official national narratives do mention 1619, this event has been excluded from American founding myths (Silverstein, 2019).

In relation to the role and contribution of black Americans to building the nation, it is generally and customarily believed that the United States is a nation state founded and owned entirely by English settlers and other people of European ancestry. These belief and myth are deeply entrenched in the minds of Americans that the US is a country of white people, which in turn results in either denial or rejection of the role that populations of color has played throughout American history. The framers of the 1619 Project draw attention to the tremendous role that African Americans have played in building the US, without their contribution this country would not exist at all (Hannah-Jones, 2019). Driven and dictated by the capitalist greed, the use of slave labor helped the US turn into the most powerful industrial and economic nation on the globe as millions of Africans brought to North America, before and

after the American independence, transformed the land across the US by growing strategic agricultural crops, especially cotton, which was the nation's most precious commodity, building plantations of the founders and cities like Washington, enriching both white people in South and North, building schools and prestigious universities and facilitating the further development of American capitalist economy (Hannah-Jones, 2019). Yet it would be a grave mistake to confine the contributions of African Americans only to the immense material wealth created by their bondage as they have always been central to the idea and myth of American liberty, freedom, and democracy (Hannah-Jones, 2019).

It is a widely held belief and myth that America is the greatest democracy in the world which is basically easy to challenge and deconstruct. The 1619 Project asserts that the idea that the nation was created as a democracy is false and a lie rather the US was a slavocracy ruled by the master race obsessed with racial superiority and domination. The founders as well as every generation of American leaders up to the Civil War firmly believed in racial superiority of whites and racial inferiority of blacks, yet such ethnocentric, racist, and pseudoscientific beliefs did not confine to the pre-Civil War era, patently manifesting themselves in the post-Civil War as well when racial discrimination and segregation was legalized in the country. Another deeply held belief was, especially among the Southerners, that slavery was perfectly consistent with democracy and vice versa, for example, a proslavery doctrine rooted in the Southern political culture suggested that slavery was an essential condition of democracy (Morison, 1965). Despite the Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution held inalienable rights of all people in high regard, the overwhelming majority of blacks in the US were kept in bondage and their children were regarded as slaves inheriting their parents' status (Morison, 1965). While Thomas Jefferson was writing the Declaration of Independence, a black boy serving his master, whose name was Robert Hemings the half-brother of Jefferson's wife, would enjoy none of those freedoms and rights enshrined in the Declaration as such rights and liberties were the exclusive privilege of the English colonists and were exclusively designed for the master race (Hannah-Jones, 2019).

When the Declaration of Independence was drafted, Thomas Jefferson placed the blame on Britain for imposing this institution on the English colonists, yet after the English settlers gained independence from the metropole, they could have abolished slavery as they had every opportunity

to do so (Hannah-Jones, 2019). After the US was founded as a sovereign nation state, the founders had no moral right to blame the United Kingdom for slavery, and the question that arises is why did not the US abolish this institution and follow the example of Britain, France and former Spanish colonies in Latin America who put an end to slave trade and emancipated slaves in their respective territories? (Morison, 1965). The framers of the 1619 Project argue that the English settlers arrived at the conclusion to rebel against Britain because they strived to protect the institution of slavery that was threatened by Britain's attempt to ban slave trade and emancipate slaves (Hannah-Jones, 2019). Even after independence none of the founders intended to terminate slavery as many of them were enslavers themselves (Hannah-Jones, 2019). During this time about one-fifth of the population in the US struggled under a brutal system of slavery being subjected to unbearable torture, unrestrained terror, and inhumane treatment not only in slave states of the South but in the so-called free states of the North (Hannah-Jones, 2019). Rooted in the colonizer's mind the culture of terror and hatred prompted racial oppression and dehumanization of populations of color that translated into the national abuse and mistreatment of black slaves who were considered sub-humans and inferior race as well as recognized as property or commodity that could be sold, used, purchased, and disposed when they became unnecessary (Hannah-Jones, 2019).

Hannah-Jones (2019) maintains that the founders and white settlers knew that black people were human beings but categorically denied their humanity and to translate their ethnocentric racist beliefs into practice the dominant white majority created a network of laws that institutionalized, reproduced, and perpetuated slavery and oppression of black people. Thus, English settlers created a society that completely excluded populations of color from citizenship, freedom, and human rights. In fact, the founders of the US claimed that the nation that they had just created was distinct from the former metropole and that American society based not on tyranny rather premised on liberal values and human dignity. Yet they ended up establishing a deeply ethnocentric exclusionary society that pretended to be a democracy, in reality it was a slavocracy (Hannah-Jones, 2019). It is true that in the North slavery was rarely practiced and in the course of time it was abolished, yet the Northerners harbored the same hostility and hatred towards black people seeing them as a racially inferior race. In the South a belief in the goodness and righteousness

of slavery took root in white people's mind, and policy premised upon two principles: first, blacks were an inferior race and must be kept under whites' control like children, and second, keeping them in a slave status was the only way to translate the former into reality (Morison, 1965, p. 515). It was widely believed that slavery was divinely sanctioned and Christian churches made the case for slavery defending the perpetuation of this institution (Morison, 1965).

To perpetuate slavery the slave states in the South adopted the so-called "black codes" to keep black slaves in order and under white masters' control. It was assumed that slavery was good and beneficial for blacks, and they lived a happy life under white control. The practice of slavery was justified not only through Christianity and the Bible, but in terms of science as well. A positive proslavery theory suggested that slavery was the fertilizer of classical culture and in ancient societies like Greece and Rome people believed in moral validity of slavery and civilization is built and prospered provided that many would work while the few would think (Morison, 1965). George Fitzhugh, one of the ardent defenders of slavery in the US, argued that blacks were less than human, whereas considering slavery the linchpin of democracy John C. Calhoun of South Carolina stressed that, "no civilized society could exist unless one portion of the community lived upon the labor of another" (Morison, 1965, p. 512). Although the slaveholders at that time may have emulated the ancient Greeks and Romans, they were not as humane as the Romans who generally freed talented slaves and their children were free as well, quite the opposite no law in the US granted freedom to talented black slaves (Morison, 1965). It was beyond the imagination of white Americans that Blacks would be free and equal to them, as for them blacks could only be slaves but nothing else (Morison, 1965).

An important theme that emerged from the 1619 Project is so-called white guilt that refers to the term 'collective guilt' attributed to the period of slavery and Jim Crow era when the dominant white Americans oppressed black minority and perpetrated other atrocities against African Americans, as it is stated in the 1619 Project, white Americans, whether they engaged in slavery or not, "had a considerable psychological as well as economic investment in the doctrine of black inferiority" (Hannah-Jones, 2019, p. 19). Literature on slavery in America draws attention to the prevalence of racism and a sense of racial superiority among white Americans and that the ideology of racism preceded the enslavement of

people of African ancestry (Zinn, 1980; Morison, 1965). As Zinn (1980) puts it, American slavery was the cruelest form of slavery in history, and people of African descent were subjected to this most inhumane practice. Whereas in the South slavery and racism were mutually reinforcing and deeply ingrained in the minds of white people, in the North racism was prevalent and as entrenched as slavery in the South (Zinn, 1980). Convinced of their racial superiority, white Americans believed that God created the black race to serve his chosen people and in return the White master race showed compassion and kindness saving slaves from misery and poverty (Morison, 1965, p. 512).

Racially constructed social order put blacks at the bottom of society, and even the abandonment of their African identities and complete assimilation into white American culture, did not allow them to gain access to privileged white society as Morison (1965) explains, "his color prevented him from infiltrating his master's society" (p. 506). Free black men were anathema to white Americans, and many of them, even those who were not slaveowners tended to disdain and show their contempt for blacks, agreeing with the slaveholders that black slaves should never be emancipated, and the institution of slavery should be perpetuated (Morison, 1965). Reducing black people to slaves and complete denial of citizenship to them reflected in the 1857 Dred Scott decision by the US Supreme Court that unequivocally stated that regardless of their legal status, free or enslaved, black people came from a slave race and inferior to whites, hence civil rights and privileges enshrined in the US Constitution could not apply to blacks who were inconsistent with American democracy (Hannah-Jones, 2019). Thus, the US Supreme Court officially legitimated the widely held belief among white Americans that black people were not merely enslaved but were a slave race that God may indeed have created them to serve the master race (Hannah-Jones, 2019, p. 19). Moreover, this belief became the root and source of the endemic racism that has made African Americans suffer and the American nation is yet struggling to get rid of racism that makes the US still a deeply divided and polarized society along racial lines (Hannah-Jones, 2019).

The slavery had become a contentious and controversial issue that divided the antebellum American society, gradually leading the country to its possible disintegration. By 1861 the nation had already been divided into two different socio-economic and political systems in which while the states that concentrated in the North were free from slavery, those in the South were cotton states who

heavily relied on slave labor. Whereas the Northern free states had gradually abolished slavery, the Southerners were determined to perpetuate the institution of slavery. The abolitionist movement in the US that was very active in the North sought to put an end to slavery that was fiercely opposed by the Southern slaveholders. As many countries in Europe and the Americas had already abolished slavery at this time, the US was compelled to follow their example but at a great cost. The integrity of the country was at stake and the nation was on the verge of being torn apart due to slavery. The South saw the secession from the Union as the only solution to continue to keep the institution of slavery, which led to the Civil War. Yet the framers of the 1619 Project argue that the root cause of the war was not the desire to put an end to slavery rather the goal was to keep the country united and force the Southern states to remain in the Union (Hannah-Jones, 2019). In literature on American slavery the issues related to the abolition and emancipation have been discussed in depth offering multiple and conflicting perspectives, namely in the mainstream narratives Abraham Lincoln is depicted as the greatest American president who has been excessively idolized, lionized and even deified as the ‘Savior’ of black slaves; yet literature on the abolition of slavery increasingly calls into question Abraham Lincoln’s image as the “great emancipator” and his intention to free slaves (Bennett, 2000; Zinn, 1980; Fredrickson, 2008; DiLorenzo, 2003; DiLorenzo, 2007; DiLorenzo; 2020; Dirck, 2012; Striner, 2012).

The incessant promotion and reverence of Lincoln’s top-down policy towards the abolishment of slavery renders insignificant the role of the bottom-up abolitionist movement at the grassroots level that contributed greatly to the emancipation of slaves eventually. Zinn (1980) highlights that although Lincoln did object to slavery, like any white supremacist of his time he saw blacks as inferior. Even if ultimately forced to grant freedom to black slaves, Lincoln could not envisage the nation’s future where blacks would be equal to whites and various races would coexist, hence he persistently sought to have freed blacks transferred to Africa (Zinn, 1980). When asked by a group of black abolitionists why Lincoln was pursuing such a goal, he replied, “You and we are different races... Your race suffer very greatly, many of them, by living among us, while ours suffer from your presence. In a word, we suffer on each side” (Hannah-Jones, 2019, p. 20). The ultimate goal of such policy may have been a dream of building a racially pure country, yet the idea of transferring freed slaves to Africa was mostly

hypothetical, infeasible and difficult to translate into action as Morison (1965) mentions, Black slaves had already been assimilated and integrated into their masters’ culture and society.

Hannah-Jones (2019) notes that in spite of Lincoln’s objection to slavery, he opposed black equality, believing that the further presence of free blacks on American soil was unacceptable and intolerable, as blacks were incompatible with a democracy intended only for white people, which is the obvious manifestation and reflection of the 1857 Dred Scott decision by the US Supreme Court. As an individual born and growing up in an increasingly racist environment, Lincoln felt that the great mass of white people would not admit such an outcome, namely racial equality, and multiracial society. This was just unacceptable for the white majority. The very presence of blacks, especially those free ones, greatly irritated whites, including Lincoln who said white race suffers from the presence of black race (Hannah-Jones, 2019, p. 20). In fact, Lincoln was literally blaming blacks for the Civil War, by saying that, “without the institution of slavery and the colored race as a basis, the war could not have an existence... It is better for us both, therefore, to be separated” (Hannah-Jones, 2019, p. 20).

As a result of the end of the Civil War all of a sudden four million American Africans became free, there was an ephemeral period during the era of the Reconstruction when formerly enslaved people were diligently involved in the democratic process with the restraint of white violence by federal forces. Free black people started to organize themselves, establishing civil society groups with the intent to fight racial discrimination and mobilize voters (Hannah-Jones, 2019). Due to this process, the South that had been once the hotbed of slavery and white supremacy, started to resemble a genuine democracy with black Americans elected to key offices at local, state, and federal levels, 16 black men served in Congress, and more than 600 served in state legislatures (Hannah-Jones, 2019, pp. 20-21).

In 1865, the 13th Amendment was passed by Congress that officially abolished slavery in the US, and three years later Congress passed the 14th Amendment that was designed to grant citizenship and equal civil rights to African Americans and to any person born on American soil (Hannah-Jones, 2019). As a result of such progressive developments, citizenship, civil rights, and liberties were extended to the long oppressed black people. Thanks to the endeavor of black legislators, public school system and compulsory education were

introduced in the South for the first time in its history in which both white and black children were required to attend schools, even in certain Southern states children from both races attended the same schools though briefly (Hannah-Jones, 2019). It seemed that the country was ready to move a step forward, overcome racial prejudices and embrace multicultural and multiracial democratic society that black Americans genuinely sought to build (Hannah-Jones, 2019).

Yet as Morison (1965) rightly indicates, free black men were anathema to white Americans and the very idea of extending citizenship, civil rights and equality to black people was out of the question, which was clearly reflected in the 1857 Dred Scott decision by the US Supreme Court. Although the 13th and 14th Amendments ultimately put an end to slavery and granted citizenship and equality to freed slaves, all the achievements gained during the Reconstruction era were reduced to nothing due to the white resistance, who wished to see blacks only as slaves but not equal human beings who would enjoy the same rights and privileges enshrined in the constitution. In the traditionalist nationalist historiography, the Reconstruction era is depicted as a tragic time, perpetuating the idea of racial inferiority of African Americans, emphasizing that blacks were not yet ready for embracing citizenship and equality, as they were naturally submissive and childlike creatures (Kolchin, 1972). White America fiercely resisted democratic changes and were not willing to overcome racism and prejudices against African Americans, being determined to struggle to the death for the preservation and perpetuation of old ways (Kolchin, 1972).

The Civil War did usher in a new era of black emancipation making the transition from a slave to a free society possible, at the same time shattering the Southern economy and society based on slavery. With the tacit support of the Andrew Johnson administration, the Southern whites did their best to undo and revoke democratic progress and black equality, successfully eradicating accomplishments of the Reconstruction era (Morison, 1965; Hannah-Jones, 2019). This in turn illustrates how race has been central throughout American history, becoming a vital element of master-slave and subsequently white-black relations (Kolchin, 1990). As a consequence, an emerging racially inclusive society ceased to exist, which implied the return to the old social system in which blacks remained at the bottom of society (Kolchin, 1972). The promises given by Northerners turned out to be empty who

were less willing to translate civil rights into practice, rendering blacks oppressed, free on paper only (Kolchin, 1972).

Dominant white majority did not allow for a truly democratic, liberal, and inclusive society, kept seeing blacks as racially inferior and not worthy of equality, continuing to oppress, terrorize, and dehumanize them. In this case, Hannah-Jones argues that “Anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country”, indicating that African Americans have always been scapegoated by the white majority and by white-controlled American government for their own sins and wrongdoings (2019, p. 21). As Lincoln told, even the presence of blacks on American soil made whites suffer and feel irritated, and blacks were blamed for the Civil War as well as considered to be the hindrance to national unity (Hannah-Jones, 2019). When whites in the South unleashed unspeakable violence and terror against blacks, the federal government again saw blacks as the culprit and cause of the problem, giving Southerners a free hand in running the South, concomitantly rendering the black minority at the mercy of the Southern whites. Although racism as an institution was abolished, the idea of white supremacy and anti-black racism did not end. Furthermore, the oppression and marginalization of African Americans was possible as a result of the compromise between the North and the South: first, before 1861 the North turned a blind eye to the practice of slavery in the South, and after the Civil War, it not only consented but was complicit in racial oppression, discrimination, disenfranchisement and segregation of blacks in the South (Vann Woodward & McFeely, 2002). Jim Crow laws of racial segregation directed against African Americans were passed in the South in the last quarter of the 19th century with the purpose to force blacks into a quasi-slavery or the second slavery (Hannah-Jones, 2019).

The new compromise between the North and the South in 1877 was again at the expense of black people, which effectively led to the disfranchisement of blacks, relegating them to the lower rungs of the social system (Vann Woodward & McFeely, 2002). The inferior position and racial segregation of blacks were perpetuated by Jim Crow laws which resembled the black codes in the antebellum South (Vann Woodward & McFeely, 2002). Regarding this matter, Hannah-Jones (2019) explains that the ideology of black inferiority did not simply vanish when slavery came to an end, free black people were seen as a threat to the nation’s idea of American exceptionalism.

Conclusion

The 1619 Project has evidently shown that American history is a highly contentious and divisive issue with multiple narratives and counternarratives manifesting themselves in academia, media and public. With the dominant Anglo-American white discourses of history being at the core of American society, there are multiple nondominant discourses that tend to challenge the mainstream white American narratives and looking for recognition from society. These nondominant discourses of American history emanate from historically marginalized and oppressed ethnic and racial groups such as African Americans whose intellectuals and scholars are striving to bring a deep paradigm shift and change in public and scholarly debates and teaching of history at schools. Specifically, what message has been sent by the 1619 Project to American public is that what has long been taught about American history is wrong and a lie because the conventional white discourses of history premised upon the myths of exceptionalism, and providentialism are intended to promote and glorify the contribution of white American history, contemporaneously trivializing and marginalizing the role played by populations of color throughout national history.

As it was noted in the 1619 Project “For centuries, white Americans have been trying to solve the “Negro problem” (Hannah-Jones, 2019, p. 26). On the other hand, it seems America has been at war with its populations of color since its foundation, not only in a literal sense, but this war has manifested in realms of culture, education, media, and a wider society. The 1619 Project has demonstrated that the American exceptionalism and the dominant Anglo-American discourse of history entirely omit and fail to mention the oppressed and colonized, namely Indigenous nations and African Americans because such an inclusion would debunk the myths and reveal that racial and ethnic domination, power, hegemony, imperialism, and war had not been given up and left behind in Europe (Noble, 2002). Those English settlers who felt persecuted and oppressed at home back in England by the English monarchy, upon arriving in North America started to act and behave as the master race treating Indigenous people and African slaves as uncivilized savages

and inferior childlike creatures (Noble, 2002). In this case Noble (2002) points out that white master race claimed and assumed leadership over these inferior sub-humans, creating a racially hierarchical society, entirely excluding non-Europeans from constitutional rights, considering citizenship to be the exclusive privilege of European settlers.

Even though the historical narratives in the US have been dominated by Eurocentric Anglo-American settler discourses, American history remains rather a contentious issue with the heated debates and prevailing counter-narratives at the center of scholarly discussion. In school and college history textbooks America is mostly depicted and conceptualized as a nation solely created by the white European settlers and this dominant national discourse is instilled in every generation of Americans. At the same time, the contribution of non-white people to the establishment and development of the US as a nation state largely remains unacknowledged and even denied. Yet the 1619 Project brings into public, media, and scholarly discussion a new dynamic, but a non-dominant discourse with the purpose to induce a paradigm shift in the national history and politics. Conventional mainstream historical narratives about American history are dominated by Eurocentrism that places two key events at the core of national history as the inception of American history: first, 1776 the year when the Declaration of Independence was signed; and second, 1620 the year when a group of English settlers known as the Pilgrims established a new colony in North America (Silverstein, 2019). In Eurocentric discourses these two events, especially the former is seen as the beginning and the birth of America. However, in the 1619 Project the arrival of first African slaves in the colony of Virginia in 1619 is regarded as the moment when America came into being (Silverstein, 2019). The 1619 Project thus suggests an alternative yet genuine interpretation of American history in which the disregard of the historical fact that before 1776 the development of British colonies had been closely linked to slavery would be wrong and unjust. The publication of the 1619 Project was coincided with the commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the arrival of first African slaves in North America and in such circumstances the history itself demanded that the past events be told truthfully.

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