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"1619" VERSUS "1776":

History as a Battleground in America's Culture Wars

Abstract: The debate over the interpretation of American history has intensified in recent years, fueled by competing narratives exemplified by the 1619 Project and its counterinitiatives, including the 1776 Commission, the 1620 Project, and 1776 Unites. The 1619 Project, launched by the *New York Times Magazine* in 2019, seeks to reframe American history by placing slavery and black Americans' contributions at the center of the national narrative. While its supporters argue that it corrects longstanding historical omissions, critics contend that it distorts history and undermines national unity. The controversy surrounding the 1619 Project reflects deeper cultural and ideological divides, which have transformed US history education into a battleground for contemporary culture wars. This article examines the origins, reception, and broader implications of this historical dispute, situating it within the context of American political and cultural polarization. Additionally, it explores how these competing visions of history shape national identity and influence public discourse on issues of race, democracy, and the American past.

Keywords: culture wars, the 1619 Project, the 1620 Project, the 1776 Commission, 1776 Unites, national identity, reframing history, American history, high school textbooks

Following the 2016 presidential election, historian Daniel K. Williams wondered in an article in the *New York Times* from November 9 whether Donald Trump's victory would end the culture wars in American society. Despite Trump's electoral success, achieved through substantial support from white evangelical voters and the backing of prominent Christian Right leaders, Williams estimated that his presidency "may portend a potential breakthrough in the nation's polarizing culture wars" ("Could Trump"). This is because Trump's presidency would not provide substantial opportunities for the Christian Right to advance their agenda at the national level, but rather would allow them to do so at the state level. Williams argued that the disputes over conflicting visions of national identity would be significantly reduced if once-controversial issues such as school prayer or abortion bans were not the subject matter of constitutional amendments, as Christian Right leaders have been striving for since the late 1970s. In other words, many saw the state-rights approach to abortion and other non-economic domestic issues as a way to move beyond the culture wars. However, a mere four years later, after reflecting on the riots in Portland, Oregon, and the heated rhetoric of the presidential campaign, *Wall Street Journal* opinion columnist Daniel Henninger concluded that the culture wars had returned ("The Culture Wars"). In a similar, perhaps even bleaker vein, James Davison Hunter, an American sociologist who has been exploring the ideological polarization of American society for more than thirty years, claims in his most recent work that "the crisis of democracy in America is apparent to all" and that "Americans themselves are increasingly fragmented and polarized, unable even to converse across their differences, much less find a way to work together in solidarity to address what is a common crisis" (*Democracy* 3). The following text aims to show that the ways in which history is selectively interpreted or adapted to serve cultural, political, or ideological needs (such as the idea of creating a "usable past") have recently become the driving force of this polarization.[1] Specifically, I argue that there are two main narratives currently clashing in the construction of a usable past. The first is the foundationalist narrative, emphasizing the US founders and constitutional principles as the stable foundation of national identity. The second narrative emphasizes injury and woundedness; rather than celebrating foundational ideals, it focuses on the stories of hardship endured by the oppressed and illustrates how national identity has also been shaped by resistance to these foundational principles. While these competing narratives are not new, there has been a noticeable shift in the intensity and prominence of the latter narrative, driven by feelings of anger, frustration, and powerlessness. A collective reckoning with historical grievances can be a natural aspect of emancipation and may even serve as a unifying force in pursuing a cohesive national identity. However, an excessive focus on these grievances could ultimately impede this effort, deepening divisions and escalating tensions in the ongoing culture wars for the future.

The Cultural Logics of the Culture War in America

By its very definition and layers of meaning, a culture war lends itself to varied interpretations. The vagueness and abstractness of this concept also leads one to question whether there is such a thing at all. A democracy that respects cultural diversity will always be an arena where different opinions, ideologies, or political visions clash. The notion that the polarization of the public discourse is only a myth, that the culture war in America is a fabrication, an exaggeration embraced by journalists and politicians, is justifiable.[2] However, it cannot be denied that modern democratic societies, including the United

States, are intrinsically polarized. In recent years, the crisis of American democracy, which is now often discussed in connection with the ideological and social conflicts polarizing American society, seems to stem more from deep-rooted cultural disagreements than from conflicts of a pure political, economic, ecological, or religious order. These cultural disagreements reflect a broader clash of values, norms, and worldviews in American life. In other words, while scrutinizing contemporary tensions and conflicts in the US political ecosystem, it is vital to focus on cultural patterns or structures that provide a meaningful and comprehensible picture of the world around us.

Initially, the term "culture war" referred to the German compound *Kulturkämpfe*, a term used in 1870 to describe a new religious war in Germany, which was an effort to impose the cultural dominance of Protestantism against the Catholic minority (Bell 80). Later, between the end of the German Imperial period and the beginning of Nazi Germany, it also described a conflict between the left- and the right-wing orientations in political affairs. However, since *culture* offers manifold definitions, conflicting visions refer not only to a society's political ideologies, attitudes, and habits, but also to the habits and traditions that constitute a belief and value system, a *Weltanschauung*. From this perspective, Terry Eagleton perceives culture wars as one of the features of postmodern world politics. According to him, culture wars take place on three fronts: they may refer to quarrels between elitists and populists, between the guardians of a canon of literature or culture and those who embrace the inclusion of marginal groups. In addition to this polarity between the "highbrow" and "lowbrow" notions of culture, culture wars also include clashes over identity issues and, lastly, over the commercialization of culture (i.e., the "culture industry") (64).

As previously mentioned, a structural approach to culture offers the most rigorous and informed analysis. James D. Hunter contends that developing a hypothesis about cultural wars requires moving beyond the interpretation of culture as the mere norms and values held by individuals. Instead, culture should be understood as "systems of symbols and other cultural artifacts, institutions that produce and promulgate those symbols, discourses that articulate and legitimate particular interests, and competing fields where culture is contested" (Hunter, "The Enduring" 20). Assuming that culture has deep structures that define "the background frameworks of understanding, knowledge, interpretation," Hunter introduces the concept of "cultural logics," i.e., logics of necessity, the basic frameworks of implicit meanings that constitute a limited range of ways of seeing the world and that, on the surface, make "particular political arrangements understandable or incomprehensible, desirable or reprehensible" (Hunter, *Democracy* 12). It is also at this deep and implicit level that the culture war has unfolded. By examining the cultural logics at play—in addition to considering power structures and ideological roots of the Left-Right political divide—we can better understand the intensity of conflicts over issues such as religious freedom, family, identity, education, or interpretation of the past (Hunter, *Democracy* 10-13). Hunter's conceptualization of cultural wars in the US, articulated through the framework of "cultural logics," centers on the axis of the sacred/secular divide. In his seminal work *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, which popularized the concept of "culture war" in the early 1990s, Hunter argues that the divide in the American public life, rooted in fundamental differences in worldviews and moral authority, develops around the dispute between two moral visions: the "traditionalist or orthodox," which prioritizes traditional moral and religious values, and the "progressivist," which upholds moral relativism and the redefinition of

traditional values (*Culture Wars* 42). In his follow-up analyses, Hunter, however, shows that there is more to say when unraveling the roots of culture war. In addition to an old axis of tension and conflict anchored in political economy and class interest (the Left-Right divide) and the axis of the traditionalist/progressivist divide, one can find another conflicting orientation—"transcendental or foundationalist" and "empiric or proceduralist."

This dichotomy concerns different perceptions of reality, different understandings of what is real and what is a source of moral authority and legitimacy in this reality. While one side of the cultural divide is animated by "a sense of ultimate reality rooted in transcendent authority," the other side puts a premium on personal experience, rejecting "the possibility of fixed standards outside of human experience" (Hunter, "The Enduring" 11). The difference between these camps primarily revolves around the foundationalist belief that ruling regimes seek justification from sources outside the power of political actors. Traditionally, these sources may include God, the laws of nature, or a permanent human nature. In contrast, proceduralists believe that the legitimacy of power arises solely from the political decision-making process. This practical approach acknowledges pluralism and highlights that the notion of political justice is not defined by transcendental truths, but through a voluntary agreement among individuals to abide by a set of rules promoting peaceful coexistence. These different and competing impulses through which to organize personal and collective existence refer to more fundamental shifts that transcend the borders of the United States. They penetrate to the very conditions of modern and late modern existence in Western civilization. That is the reason previous explanations, based on economic and class interests, as well as on demographic paradigms analyzing gender, education, place of residency, age, or occupation, fall short in elucidating cultural disparity and lack of solidarity or social cohesion in fragmentated and polarized public discourse. If we accept the premise underlying Hunter's claim that American culture is "undergoing a realignment" that generates tensions and conflicts played out "at the deepest and most profound levels . . . , not just at the level of ideology but in its public symbols, its myths, its discourse" ("The Enduring" 13), the significance of the secular-sacred divide, which is endemic to the desacralized experience of modern life, is undeniably valid and essential and remains central in the debate over the very meaning and purpose of the core institutions of American civilization.

An invaluable guide to the cultural conflicts in America throughout the twentieth century is Andrew Hartman's *A War for the Soul of America*. The title directly echoes the phrase famously articulated by Patrick Buchanan in his 1992 Republican National Convention speech: "There is a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as was the Cold War itself, for this war is for the soul of America" ("Culture War Speech"). Buchanan, who served as an assistant and consultant to US presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Ronal Reagan, and who is known for his staunch conservative views, framed these cultural conflicts—prominent in national discourse during the 1980s and 1990s—as a battle for the nation's moral and spiritual identity. Tracing the development of the deep-rooted divisions over American identity, values, and education from the 1960s onward, Hartmann argues that the culture wars in America revolve around conflicting normative conceptions of Americanism, with the sixties as the crucial decade in ushering in "an intense new form of polarization that hinged on the very question of America and its meaning" (10). Unlike the secular-sacred divide, these debates center on differing visions of national identity, values, and what it means to be

American, fueled by neoconservative backlash against the New Left ethos of the sixties, as well as anxieties over the emergence of a "new class" at the expense of cultural, social, and moral standards that characterized mainstream American society during the 1950s.

This "new class," which Hartman likens to Lionel Trilling's "adversary culture," was characterized by skepticism toward established institutions and conventions, often promoting alternative perspectives that challenged the status quo. Primarily composed of left-wing professionals, intellectuals, and educators, as well as progressive avant-garde artists and cultural elites who emerged in the post-World War II era, this "new class," characterized by its progressive values and influence over cultural institutions including universities, media, and the arts, played a pivotal role in advancing the liberal and secular ideals of the 1960s and 1970s. While normative Americanism of the fifties was built on the ideas of American Exceptionalism, the Protestant ethic, traditional family structures (i.e., the nuclear family), gender roles, and a strong emphasis on conformity, patriotism, and religious faith, promoting the idealized image of a homogeneous, middle-class suburban life, the sixties saw the birth of many liberation movements aiming at forming an entirely new, more inclusive national identity that would foreground the diversity of culture. Embracing the premises of secular humanism and identitarian politics, the members of the "new class" saw themselves as being on the side of barricade advocating for a more pluralist vision of America. Since it was the rise of the New Left and the countercultural movements in the sixties that sparked a conservative backlash, another "background framework" of the culture wars unfolds along the axis of a normative vision of a unified moral order versus a pluralist vision that embraces diversity within society (Hartman 10).

However, within the context of American society, the clashes between traditionalist and progressive, foundationalist and proceduralist, or conservative and liberal camps over different cultural ideals, beliefs, or philosophies reveal a much longer history—they may even be traced as far back as excited debates about the Alien and Sedition Act of 1798, perhaps the first large-scale clash over immigration policy in the United States. Of course, there were other controversial issues, such as the abolition of slavery, the prohibition of alcohol, and the reading of the Bible in public schools, to name just a few. It cannot be denied, at least in the context of the United States, that the cultural logics of liberal democracy—particularly its emphasis on political pluralism and democratic inclusion—have provided a fertile ground for culture wars to flourish. It is also important to note that these conflicts are dynamic. Whereas, for example, in the 1980s, the culture war significantly revolved around sexuality, family, and religion, the 1990s witnessed a new set of conflicting visions underwritten by issues such as globalization, immigration, and multiculturalism (Jenkins 17). This conflict was often accompanied by growing tensions between universalist or trans-national and nationalistic modes of existence, or between a cosmopolitan mindset and one embracing local community (Hunter, "The Culture War" 1309).

In sum, the cultural divide in America is deeply rooted in two interrelated yet distinct tensions. The first revolves around the conflict between sacred and secular values, driven by the ongoing secularization of American public institutions. The second centers on the limits of acceptable pluralism, on the amount of diversity a society can accommodate without fracturing its sense of shared identity and purpose. While these frameworks are often interconnected, the cultural conflicts of the early twenty-first century increasingly focus on issues of diversity (Hartman 302). Efforts to reinterpret or reframe the American past, particularly the debates about how

history is taught in US schools, are part of this ongoing transformation. As Jonathan Zimmerman puts it in his study *Whose America? Culture Wars in Public Schools*, in the twenty-first century, public schools—particularly through the dispute over the nature and content of history textbooks—have become a major battlefield of culture wars in America (220). A clear example of this is the controversy over the 1619 Project, which aims to challenge the dominant narrative found in American history textbooks. The following section will examine how this project reflects the disagreements over the dominant views of the American past, and consequently over setting criteria for US history standards in public schools—issues that continue to fuel debate over the core of the American national narrative.

The 1619 Project and Progressive Interpretations of American History

Although there are no mandatory national history standards that are binding for all individual states, controversies over historical learning and the content of the public school history curriculum—which is intended to foster civic identity and shared values—have become a significant point of ideological and political contention. Defining what constitutes the American national narrative, the American story, is inherently elusive. The category of national narrative itself is ambiguous and suggests multiple perspectives. Nevertheless, certain competing paradigms reappear throughout history.

A stimulating and insightful analysis of the sets of values which underscore the American narrative is offered by William Chafe. Challenging traditional views, Chafe frames the American narrative as a series of moral contests, each reflecting the nation's struggle to reconcile its democratic promises with historical injustices. Chafe argues that from the first moments of the founding of the British colonies in America, this narrative has been shaped by a fundamental conflict between two competing paradigms: one emphasizing the primacy of communal well-being, the other prioritizing the ethos of self-reliance and unfettered individual freedom as the guiding principles of political and social life (11, 12). Later, this conflict was intensified by westward expansion, which prioritized the values of individual liberty and self-reliance. The tendency is antisocial. Free enterprise, or laissez-faire individualism, and an emphasis on freedom, equality, the pursuit of happiness, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and freedom of political expression echo the right to unbridled individual freedom, recognizing self-determination, resilience, and opportunity to forge one's path as the founding principles of the US. However, Chafe's analysis largely applies to trends in American political life, and less so to the framework of history wars. Within the contested space of high school history textbooks, a more significant dispute revolves around the idea of American exceptionalism and the changing boundaries of legitimate pluralism (Hartman 266-74).

Although the viewpoints in American history have evolved over time—shaped by changing immigration policies and progressive agendas—a strong tendency remains in textbooks to celebrate, or even glorify, the positive roles of the Founding Fathers and other eminent WASP nation builders. From the 1920s onward, textbooks began to show greater respect for differentiated communities, reflecting Horace Kallen's call for cultural pluralism (Jařab 132). In his 1924 essay "Americanization and the Cultural Prospect," Kallen argues that schools should recognize and celebrate the talents and achievements of the entire ethnic panoply of America, expanding the historical canon beyond traditionally revered figures and events (132). Kallen wrote this text in response to a proposed bill in New Jersey that sought to ban "un-American" history textbooks

from the classroom. These so called "un-American" texts, which incorporated culturally plural voices, were criticized for allegedly belittling America's illustrious patriots and undermining the concept of American exceptionalism—the belief, deeply rooted in America's founding principles, that the United States is inherently unique and, in terms of moral and spiritual purity, superior to other nations, its people chosen by God to pursue a mission to promote democracy, freedom, and progress (Zimmerman 11, 12).

Concerns that the shift toward a culturally pluralistic approach in representing American history could undermine a tale of national greatness and unbroken progress were raised throughout the twentieth century. In the 1930s, during the Great Depression, debates emerged around textbooks with perceived pro-collectivist and anti-capitalist biases. These controversies persisted through the Cold War, peaking in the early 1950s with accusations that some study materials promoted world government and pro-collectivist internationalism. Subsequently, under the considerable influence of the civil rights movement, demands for desegregated textbooks began to emerge. This movement aimed to provide African Americans with the opportunity to accurately portray the role and contribution of former Black slaves and Black Americans. By the 1990s, debates over history education had become entangled in the broader culture wars (Zimmerman 225). Zimmerman highlights how these disputes have repeatedly shaped public schools, with history textbooks and curricula becoming battlegrounds for competing ideological visions of the nation's past. He cogently posits that, starting with the emergence of "new history" in modern scholarship in the early twentieth century, progressives aimed to include marginalized perspectives, while conservatives pushed back against what they perceived as historical revisionism that undermined national unity and patriotism. Triggered by the History-Social Science Framework put into effect in California in 1988, the 1992 New York Report on multicultural textbooks, and the 1994 publication of National Standards for United States History, a government-sponsored project that aimed at developing comprehensive national history standards, the divide between the traditional, celebratory, patriotic approach to American history and a more critical and inclusive view of the past grew wider. Advocates of the celebratory perspective argued that the "progressive" interpretation of American history promotes "victim status," paying too much attention to slavery and the displacement, exploitation, and denigration of Native Americans by white men (Symcox 93, 95).

A similar dispute emerged in 2010, with controversies surrounding social studies revisions in Texas and a ban on ethnic studies in Arizona. In addition to a heated debate about who has the authority to determine the story of the entire nation, the crux of the dispute was about diminishing the role of acclaimed heroes and denouncing "America's ugly narrative." In Texas, conservative advocates of the traditional interpretation viewed it as almost sacrilegious to portray the Founding Fathers in social studies programs as slaveholders. They sought to incorporate God into history courses, introduce new Confederate heroes, and emphasize conservative political actors such as Ronald Reagan and the Moral Majority. The decision to ban ethnic studies in Arizona originated from the concern that such programs foster resentment toward specific racial groups and allegedly favor group rights over individual rights (Jensen 85).

The clash between conservative and liberal perspectives resurfaced in 2014 during revisions to the Advanced Placement US History (APUSH) curriculum, the curriculum often regarded as the closest thing to a shared national history curriculum (Zimmerman 220). In Jefferson County, Colorado, controversy erupted when

conservative school board members deemed the revised APUSH materials too progressive and anti-American. In response, the Jefferson County School Board came up with its own proposal to revise the APUSH curriculum, emphasizing "patriotism, the free market, and respect for authority" (Tampio 30). Although this dispute was significantly motivated by political partisanship, it illuminated a changing landscape in history education. The core of the dispute centers on how to approach the more troubling aspects of American history, often referred to as "difficult history," and how to interpret the past through conservative or liberal perspectives. The current division concerning American history largely stems from the struggle to find a reasonable balance between two competing educational approaches. One approach emphasizes patriotic education, celebrating American exceptionalism and the nation's achievements. By contrast, the other seeks to contextualize historical hardship and injustices while highlighting talents and the contributions of various ethnic groups and races.

The ongoing, unresolved nature of this dispute is likely to continue provoking strong emotions in the future. This is evident in the efforts of the 1619 Project, developed by Nicole Hannah-Jones and a group of contributors from the *New York Times* and the *New York Times Magazine*. Their goal is to reframe American history by placing "the consequences of slavery and contributions of black Americans at the very center of our [American] national narrative" (Silverstein 4). In addition, the Project aims to educate Americans about their history while challenging the dominant narrative in American history education. In her introductory essay, Hannah-Jones argues that the founding documents of American democracy were inherently flawed since these documents reflected the prevailing attitudes, institutions, and business practices of their time, failing to recognize enslaved Black individuals as citizens or grant them basic human dignity:

> The United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie. Our Declaration of Independence, approved on July 4, 1776, proclaims that "all men are created equal" and "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." But the white men who drafted those words did not believe them to be true for the hundreds of thousands of black people in their midst. "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" did not apply to fully one-fifth of the country. Yet despite being violently denied the freedom and justice promised to all, black Americans believed fervently in the American creed. Through centuries of black resistance and protest, we have helped the country live up to its founding ideals. And not only for ourselves—black rights struggles paved the way for every other rights struggle, including women's and gay rights, immigrant and disability rights. (Hannah-Jones 16)

The Project, marking *in its title* the arrival of more than twenty enslaved Africans in Virginia on August 14, 1619, seeks to include new figures and voices into the old story—this, in general, has become a major driving force behind many progressive revisions of American history. Moreover—and this is the reason why, out of numerous attempts to retell the past, this project stands out—it takes a critical view of traditionally reverenced events and people in American history, suggesting that the current form of American democracy is not the result of the Founding Fathers' wisdom, but rather of Black defiance and resistance. According to Hannah-Jones, the true perfectors and master builders of American democracy are not the prominent figures of WASP culture, such as Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln, who are traditionally

regarded as champions and defenders of American democracy. Instead, she argues that the true defenders are African Americans. Through their tireless fight for freedom and civil rights, they have significantly contributed to American society's ability to fulfill its founding ideals (Hannah-Jones 17).

By offering such a radical, thought-provoking interpretation of pivotal moments in American history, the 1619 Project has induced a conservative backlash. Critics argue that the project is driven more by progressivist ideology than by an impartial quest for knowledge. On the one hand, the project zeroes in on neglected events and voices from the American past, bringing to light some grim practices such as slave breeding and the rape of Black slave women in the South; on the other hand, as Sean Wilentz has emphasized, when dealing with founding principles and founding mythology, it sometimes builds on false assertions that undermine otherwise praiseworthy intentions ("A Matter"). Historical accuracy regarding the causes that impelled the British colonies in America to dissolve the bonds with the British king and declare independence has been questioned, for Hannah-Jones downplays "a long train of abuses and usurpations," which are enumerated in the text of the Declaration of Independence. She suggests that the rebellion against "absolute despotism" might not have resulted in the separation if some of the founders had not been aware that they could thereby protect the institution of slavery: "Conveniently left out of our founding mythology is the fact that one of the primary reasons some of the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery" (Hannah-Jones 18). Seen from this perspective, Hannah-Jones concludes, America as a nation was founded not as a "democracy" but as a "slavocracy." Similarly, Hannah-Jones discusses the Civil War and the long history of resistance to white supremacy from the Reconstruction Era to the civil rights movement, further exploring her basic assumption that, from a historical point of view, Black Americans were predominantly viewed as an obstacle to national unity. Furthermore, the project points out that the legacy of slavery and rampant discrimination against Black Americans is not a closed chapter and that black racism, although officially prohibited by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, "runs in the very DNA of this country" (Hannah-Jones 21).

Counterprojects and Competing Visions of a Usable Past

The effort to insert more people of color and more women into the dominant narrative has shaped most disputes over history since the 1920s; however, the 1619 Project has introduced into the discussion the question of not just who should be included in the story, but of what the inclusion of other voices and issues does to the dominant narrative. It is this challenge that initiated a response by many academic historians, who pointed out factual errors.[3] In addition, the development of an educational portal, supported by the Pulitzer Center, sparked significant backlash among right-wing and conservative audiences as the project aimed to equip educators and librarians with materials that could help them offer a more comprehensive representation of history to their students.[4]

Criticism of the 1619 Project can be divided into two categories: direct and indirect. The former explicitly targets the 1619 Project's framing of American history, especially its curriculum and reading guides, activities, and other resources, which were designed for teaching American history in high schools. The latter challenges other "divisive concepts" including racism and sexism, calling for legislative measures that would limit or ban activities labeled "critical race theory," as well as discussions in schools that touch on sensitive topics that could make students feel guilty

about belonging to a group of oppressors of any kind based on race, ethnicity, sex, or gender. In this broader context, the 1619 Project has become an imaginary lightning rod for a larger culture war crusade against critical race theory, which has been framed by conservative lawmakers and activists as a radical ideological agenda infiltrating schools (Goldberg 3).

Despite this intense backlash, the actual classroom implementation of the 1619 Project has been relatively limited. According to the Pulitzer Center's annual report released in 2019, more than 3,500 classrooms in the United States used the materials (2019 Annual Report). Five school systems adopted the project district-wide (Buffalo, New York; Chicago, Illinois; Washington, DC; Wilmington, Delaware; and Winston-Salem, North Carolina). With a total of 35,195 high schools in the United States (including middle and junior high schools), this figure represents less than ten percent ("How Many Schools"). Nevertheless, the controversy over the project prompts an inquiry into the underlying reasons for the significant public opposition, which has led to legislative actions in forty-four states. From the publication of the 1619 Project to the present, eighteen states have passed laws or issued executive orders restricting how teachers can discuss "divisive concepts." Some of them—Florida, Arkansas, and Wisconsin, to name just a few—prohibited lessons or training that promote "indoctrination" or critical race theory, or any other training that teaches that "individuals are inherently racist or sexist because of their race or sex" (Schwartz). Most of the legislative measures of the opposition to the 1619 Project seek to ban schools from promoting either theories seen as anti-American or theories that put a premium on the idea that individuals bear collective responsibility for acts committed by members of their race and that racist or patriarchal societal structures and systems create social problems. The direct bans on the 1619 Project were introduced only in a few states—Alaska, New York, Rhode Island, and Florida—and, with the exception of Florida, none have been enacted into law.

In response to state legislation, the 1619 Project has initiated the creation of various counterprojects supported not only by a political party, but also by nonprofit and nonpartisan organizations and think tanks. One such initiative is the 1620 Project, created by the National Association of Scholars. While it claims to be a nonpartisan organization that "fosters intellectual freedom, searches for the truth, and promotes virtuous citizenship," many of its activities and policy positions reflect conservative viewpoints. This makes it a significant player in the ongoing culture wars surrounding education and historical interpretation. As a nonprofit organization committed to reforming higher education by upholding the standards of a liberal arts education, the NAS initiated a critical examination of the 1619 Project, debunking it as pseudohistorical propaganda that, according to Mary Grabar, seeks only to divide American society (see *Debunking*). The proponents of the 1620 Project refuse the 1619 Project's revision of history by questioning the idea of collective responsibility. They reject the perspective that American history is primarily a narrative of systemic racism that emphasizes racial oppression while downplaying the pursuit of liberty and justice—principles that are often regarded as core values. This is also why the project links the commitment to intellectual freedom to 1620, particularly to the Mayflower Compact, as a more fitting conceptual starting point for understanding the origins of American self-government, embracing American exceptionalism. In his article "1619 Again: Revisiting the Project's Troubled Past," Peter Wood, the president of the NAS and the chief initiator of the 1620 Project, articulates deep concern about the grave faults and the potential harm it may inflict on America:

> The six biggest errors in my view are (1) that slavery was somehow new to America in 1619; (2) that the American Revolution was fought to preserve slavery from the threat of emancipation; (3) that Lincoln was a racist intent on separating blacks and whites; (4) that the blacks "fought back alone" to secure their rights; (5) that Plantation slavery was the foundation of American capitalism; and (6) that the nation's entire history is best seen as a struggle by blacks against white supremacy. (Wood, "1619")

This criticism arises because the 1619 Project asserts that it is grounded in historiography, not fiction. The rhetoric of the 1620 counterproject builds on a call to curb the spread of what its authors perceive as a new, off-the-wall reframing of history running against well-established facts. Even though the backlash is primarily driven by the pursuit of accuracy and the professional duty to safeguard history against misinterpretation or abuse, it firmly subscribes to the belief that such a progressive, unorthodox interpretation of the past undermines American democracy and, by extension, the West itself. Argumentation unfolds in the spirit of a lost cause narrative that builds on the assumption that Western civilization is dying and the American mind is declining because of a retreat from, as Allan Bloom puts it, "the truth or superiority of American principles and our [American] heroes" (56). While acknowledging that oppression, exploitation, and racism have shaped the American past, the 1620 initiative is not focused solely on issuing a warning . Instead, it aims to promote discussions on how these darker aspects can be successfully integrated with the founding principles and ideals on which American democracy was founded and continues to evolve.

A considerably more radical and therefore controversial rhetoric defines the 1776 Commission (also called the 1776 Project), an advisory commission appointed one year after the publication of the 1619 Project by Donald Trump. The then-American president established the commission to call for a centralized approach to the national curriculum, supporting so-called patriotic education that promotes positive stories and images of the country's founders. In addition to teaching students the basic skills needed for functioning in society, this approach to education emphasizes that educators have another essential task to fulfill: "to convey a sense of enlightened patriotism that equips each generation with a knowledge of America's founding principles, a deeper reverence for their liberties, and a profound love of their country" (*1776 Report* 17). The 1776 Project highlights the founding principles outlined in the Declaration of Independence including the rule of law, freedom, an individual's right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and the importance of constitutional restraint. According to this logic, the 1619 Project is considered a threat to American principles because it prioritizes the rights of groups over the rights of individuals. Progressivism, affirmative action, and identity politics are perceived as a departure from the focus on equality of outcome. This is evident, for example, in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives that prioritize the full participation of all individuals, especially those from historically discriminated, underrepresented, or marginalized groups. While the proponents of DEI initiatives perceive them as necessary correctives to social injustices, the critics of DEI efforts argue that any preferential treatment of individuals on the basis of race, ethnicity, and other classifications such as sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, or national origin undermines meritocracy and individual rights. Furthermore, similar to the claims made by the 1620 Project, the emphasis on identity-related issues in response to historical wrongs and injustices reinforces the notion that American society is divided into two groups: oppressors and oppressed. This perspective

may imply that individuals are inherently racist, sexist, or paternalistic based solely on their race, sex, or ethnicity.

The Report released by the 1776 Commission has faced significant criticism for its insufficient consultation with professional experts in American history and its overt alignment with partisan politics, which reduces American history to a political document focused primarily on hero worship, glorifying positive and inspiring tales and images of the country's founders. At the same time, another project emerged, inspired by the events and ethos of 1776—the 1776 Unites Project. This Black-led movement of scholars and grassroots activists recognizes the unquestionable state-building role of the founding fathers and perceives them not as pragmatic slaveholders, but as educated men and visionaries who, in their actions, managed to transcend the limits of their time and showed America, and the world, the way to freedom and democracy. As one of the project's initiators, Robert L. Woodson, writes, this counterproject aims to dispel the myth that the current divisions in American society are the result of the past or that current social unrest is directly related to slavery. While acknowledging that there is racial discrimination, 1776 Unites dissents "from contemporary groupthink and rhetoric about race, class, and American history that defames our national heritage," maintaining "a special focus on voices in the black community who celebrate black excellence and reject victimhood culture" (Woodson, "1776 Unites" 6). In other words, America should not be defined by its past failures; instead, it should be defined by its promises, for people are prone to overcome difficulties and challenges when they learn about inspiring victories that are possible despite long-lasting and systemic forms of oppression (Woodson, "Introduction" 20, 21).

Although America may be flawed, 1776 Unites asserts that the nation's promise—the Spirit of '76, which forged core values such as self-determination, equality, resilience, and the opportunity to create one's own path—remains relevant and continues to strengthen American national identity. It also maintains that America functions as a source of inspiration, reinforcing the notion that the nation continues to serve as a symbol of hope for people worldwide. Seen from this perspective, curricula should narrate stories of resilience and upward mobility, drawing from both the past and the present. Priority should be given to promoting American ideals such as the pursuit of happiness and the equal opportunity to succeed given hard work and personal responsibility and stories that show examples of self-determination, self-reliance, and human resilience in overcoming adversity. Therefore, 1776 Unites, although consisting primarily of African American scholars, journalists, and activists, rejects narratives that foreground historical grievances of African Americans, emphasizing instead their achievements and contributions. One example of this perspective is their critique of proposed reparations that the federal government would pay to African Americans for historical wrongs (Black 75). According to 1776 Unites, critical race theory, by focusing on a racial power struggle between oppressors and oppressed in history curricula, negates the principle of self-reliance. The initiative argues that this framework promotes the idea that the federal government must treat its citizens as innocent, infantile victims who need protection from an irredeemably immoral world that would destroy them, if it were not for government intervention (Mitchell 127).

Conclusion

In his book *The Death of the West*, published at the outset of the new millennium, Patrick

Buchanan warns that "an older America is passing away, and a new America is coming into its own" (6). Claiming that there are two countries and two peoples within the United States, he echoes his earlier claim that a battle for the soul of America is raging in American society. The division persists, although the idea of a final encounter regarding the nature of American identity seems exaggerated. Nevertheless, there is a noteworthy shift in the rationale behind culture wars. Whereas conflicts between worldviews unfolded in the twentieth century on the axis of the sacred and the secular, of Godly versus Worldly America, more recent conflicts have evolved around contradictory approaches toward the interpretation of American past, becoming a battle over stories, values, and symbols from the past that will form American national identity. The disputes over control of the nation's history within cultural institutions and educational facilities are not novel; their origins can be traced back to the 1920s, when new trends in history textbooks emerged,[5] advocating for greater scholarly focus on the pluralistic nature of American society, often at the expense of "Anglo-biased" viewpoints. In the present, several recent controversial attempts to establish national history standards through shaping curricula show that public schools have become a major culture war battlefield.

Compared with tensions and conflicts that fueled culture wars until the 1990s, the dispute over history extends beyond the traditional clash over different moral visions and orientations, the "orthodox" versus the "progressivist" and the "foundationalist" versus the "proceduralist." While the orthodox moral vision and foundationalist approach tend to be more resistant to change, viewing the achievements and principles passed down from the past as valuable references for addressing present challenges, the progressivist vision and proceduralist approach are prone to see the fixed standards and norms from the past as constraints that hinder further social progress and emancipation (see Hunter, "The Enduring" 14-15). Recent efforts to reframe American history via new teaching materials, however, show that another salient distinction exists between the patriotic (exceptionalist) vision and the woke vision that promotes the narrative of injury and woundedness. The tension between those two visions raises the question of whether educators should focus on promoting positive stories from the past, instilling in each generation a profound love for patria and a deep reverence of core values and founding principles, or whether they should aim to commemorate the oppressed, draw attention to past wrongs, and deconstruct power structures that may perpetuate social injustice.

At the heart of this conflict, intensified by the 1619 Project initiative, lies the ongoing struggle over what constitutes a usable past for contemporary America. Is history meant to serve as a unifying force, reinforcing social cohesion through shared national myths and ideals, or should it function as a tool for reckoning with past injustices, fostering a more critical and inclusive national identity? Despite acknowledging the fundamental cultural and ethnic diversity of contemporary America, as well as perceiving slavery and segregation as despicable acts of inhumanity, the various camps promoting either the 1619, 1620, or 1776 narratives differ regarding what they consider a usable past. The 1776 and 1620 narratives espouse American exceptionalism, individualism, and self-reliance and argue for the commitment to the promise of America's founding principles. On the other hand, the 1619 camp places the consequences of slavery and racial discrimination at the very center of the national narrative. The latter partly echoes the post-1950s plea for the repudiation of "white skin" privilege and Western civilization's legacy, including the retreat from required reading of classical works in the university curriculum or the acceptance of collective responsibility for acts committed in the past by members

of a dominant culture, race, or national group. Ultimately, the clash of 1619 and 1776 initiatives indicates that the dispute over history is, to a great extent, a contest over identity, values, and the moral legitimacy of the nation's past. The past is not just something to be remembered; it is a tool used to shape the present and future. It is evident that America has yet to fully reckon with the lasting impacts of white supremacist ideology, as embodied in slavery and Jim Crow laws. Collective self-understanding, which is grounded in deep-seated frustration over past injustices, is a common and natural part of emancipation. However, the strategic focus on historical grievances, particularly through the emphasis on victimhood and ressentiment in initiatives such as the 1619 Project, may finally undermine the quest for a cohesive national identity in America, an endeavor that has been both contested and inspiring and auspicious since the founding of the US.

Notes

1. The idea of a "usable past" was articulated by the American literary critic Van Wyck Brooks in 1918. In his study *On Creating Usable Past*, he sought to find usable models in the American past that would be meaningful for contemporary cultural production. Although Brooks's concept originally refers to another moment of polarization (WWI and the struggle for cultural self-determination with or without European influences), it aligns with the broader debate on the nature and content of national identity.

2. In the context of the United States, see, for example, Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*.

3. See Wood, Bynum, McPherson, Wilentz, and Oakes and their letter to the *New York Times* editors ("We Respond to the Historians Who Critiqued The 1619 Project").

4. While assessing the accuracy of the critique regarding the 1619 Project's portrayal of American history is beyond the scope of this article, I aim to examine the public discourse surrounding it. This includes exploring reactions and counterprojects, as well as considering implications of this dispute for shaping American cultural identity.

5. See Arthur M. Schlesinger and his *New Viewpoints in American History* (1922), focusing on the influence of immigration on American history; Mary and Charles Beard and their *Rise of American Civilization* (1927), interpreting the Civil War primarily as a class-driven conflict between northern capitalists against southern planters.

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