

Marco Tomassi on The 1619 Project

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What's at Stake

The 1619 Project argues that the founding date of the nation (commonly 1776) should be 1619, when the first African slaves were kidnapped and sold in North America. Nikole Hannah-Jones, a *NY Times* columnist and chief contributor to the project, believes that because American culture today is so deeply rooted in the traditions of these slaves, that 1619 should be regarded as the founding of the United States. This project encourages discussion about the impact of enslaved people in early Colonial America, immigration during that period, and what exactly *national sovereignty* is and how a “start date” of a country can or ought to be determined.

The 1619 Project, at its crux, brings up an interesting question: What is an “origin date” of a country, and how is one determined? Can one evaluate this culturally? Politically? Economically? For my project, I chose to focus on cultural and political elements to evaluate Hannah-Jones’ claims. It seems to me they neither fully support or deny but throw into jeopardy the exact standing of The 1619 Project.

The Declaration of Independence

The Declaration of Independence, written in 1776 to formally sever ties between Great Britain and the thirteen rebellious colonies, does not support nor deny Hannah-Jones’ claims in The 1619 Project but rather changes the approach to what it means for a nation to exist. From an administrative perspective, which is typically crucial when evaluating national origins, Hannah-Jones’s arguments fail to pass muster. The colonists’ appeal to the “Supreme Judge of the world” and declaration of “total [dissolution]” of all ties to Britain illustrates that fact that political severance and administrative separation came completely in the following years. The nation’s cultural existence/genesis was not immediate and developed over years, but this probably took place before the political independence, as political independence could not have happened without a distinct cultural identity. On this analysis, it is not possible to declare 1619 as a “founding date” of a nation if sovereignty and self-governance is not yet achieved even with a cultural identity beginning to form.

“The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America, When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.”

Declaration of Independence

Native Americans & Representation

The 1619 Project does not acknowledge any other minority groups that can be considered foundational towards the creation and culture of the United States, notably indigenous nations and European religious-minorities. The contributions of indigenous peoples is chronically underexplored in literature and is only now beginning to see a rise in academic and popular interest. Although, today, these influences are not yet easily observed on a national level, they are clear and strong in regional and local focuses, such as in Northern New York or New Mexico. The roles of European religious minorities in settling the “frontier” of Early America cannot be understated, too. According to SUNY Potsdam professor Tom Baker, towns like New Paltz and others in the Hudson Valley were settled by religious refugees from the area now known as Germany, and their influence still lasts today in the form of architecture and tradition. Thus, by neglecting to acknowledge the contributions to America by these groups, The 1619 Project’s arguments are weakened.



Origin Dates: Balancing Culture & Government

The use of the word “nation” in the sense we know it today is a relatively new phenomenon. Starting in early nineteenth-century Europe, the process of associating ancestry/ethnicity with nationality has been a harmful one but has contributed further understanding towards how we can view The 1619 Project. I argue that the rise of nation-states in the nineteenth century resulted from the existence of a cohesive cultural (and linguistic) identity along with a centralized administration. This nuance is wholly lacking in Hannah-Jones’ arguments.

Using this framework, one could easily argue that the United States, although having a similar-enough culture, was not centralized enough until even after the Civil War to be considered a nation. I personally do not believe this, but as a thesis it carries the same weight as 1619. In 1619, the area that would become the thirteen British Colonies completely lacked any sort of cultural identity and centralization, effectively eliminating this potential.

“The people who now reside in the U.S. and call themselves Latinos have long and complex historical genealogies in this country. Many of them entered the U.S. willingly as immigrants in the 20th century, but just as many were territorially incorporated through America's wars of imperial expansion in the 19th century.”

Ramón A. Gutiérrez

Takeaways

The 1619 Project altered my understanding about early United States history by first enriching my knowledge of cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity in the Thirteen Colonies and post-revolutionary America. What Hannah-Jones does well is to establish the impact slave labor had on both the economy and social identity of the United States.

Lacking, however, and what led me to reinforce my knowledge of the early United States, is a clear political and cultural bracing of her arguments. Without this and a clear argument of what an “origin date” ought to be, her arguments fail. Overall, this project encourages discussion about the impact of slaves in early Colonial America, immigration during that period, and what exactly national sovereignty is and how a “start date” of a country can be determined.