

## What Makes History Matter

In August, 2022, James Sweet, president of the American Historical Association, asked a seemingly reasonable question: “Is history history?” This question incited and inspired a divisive and contentious conversation among historians that was interpreted by both academics and the mainstream press as an indication of dueling academic extremes – wokeness and white supremacy. Sweet argued that presentism, or interpreting the past through the lens of the present, was threatening the integrity of the discipline. Sweet stated “Too many Americans have become accustomed to the idea of history as an evidentiary grab bag to articulate their political positions,” suggesting that historians were sacrificing objectivity for ideology or identity politics. In contrast, he suggested that historians should refrain from using history to speak to present concerns. He questioned the supposition hypothetically made by critical educators: “If we don’t read the past through the prism of contemporary social justice issues—race, gender, sexuality, nationalism, capitalism — are we doing history that matters?”<sup>1</sup>

Historians, especially those historically marginalized due to race, class or gender, bristled under the assumption that history had ever been apolitical, that identity politics had no place in the discipline. Replying to Sweet, Keisha Blain of Brown University argued that historians must not only “reject the ideals of detachment” but “undertake a new mission to confront societies around them with a record of their faults and crimes.” In a similar statement, Stanford’s Priya Satia wrote in her 2020 book *Time’s Monster, How History Makes History*, “It is the continuing struggle for justice that matters.”<sup>2</sup>

This debate is not restricted to the realm of higher education. Along with historians, K-12 social studies teachers ponder and debate our purpose. Is social justice the task of the historian? What makes history matter? Who is entitled to speak in the classroom and what will we speak about? While our answers to these questions have always been diverse, how we answer these questions can now be considered dangerous.

As social justice movements challenged acts of racial oppression and violence, culminating with the global protest of the 2020 murder of George Floyd, more and more students and communities called upon educators to teach a more inclusive curriculum and to use the social studies classroom as a vehicle for social change. Some communities responded by integrating the *New York Times* 1619 Project curriculum. Inspired by the

project, I began my twelfth grade twentieth century history course with the prompt: 1619 or 1776 – Consider the significance of each date and how it shapes our understanding of American history. I took from the project what I believed was most essential, the concept that history is created by historians, teachers and students through the simple act of choosing a starting point. Through our historical inquiry and dialogue we collectively explored the content and context of those two singular moments and reflected upon their resonance in our current world. By grounding our year with the understanding that history is contestable; that dialogue must be based on the totality of known evidence; that our goal was discourse and shared understanding not a zero sum game debate; I believed that comity, if not social justice, was possible.<sup>3</sup>

I know that *The 1619 Project* was the creation of journalists, not the work of historians. Many have rightly argued that journalism cannot and should not replace historical scholarship. But, in this moment of social and political conflict, it was the act of journalism which wed contemporary issues to historical inquiry for me, the secondary social studies teacher. My love for history runs deep, triggered when I was in high school, not by the textbooks used in social studies classes, but by the satire of Jonathan Swift and Howard Fast's historical fiction *April Morning*. Literature brought me to history, and the historians of the new left welcomed me when they revealed that I too could find models of personal agency in the historical past. The new left historians emerged from the eras of Jim Crow and Civil Rights but spoke to the world in which they were living. As a student of history I was influenced by the implicit and explicit “presentism” of scholars such as Joan Scott, David Roediger, Jacqueline Dowd Hall, and Deborah Gray White. They are historians first and foremost, but they also mattered to me because they spoke to our current condition. In return, I wanted to spend my life making history matter to the next generations, my students.

Is social justice the task of the historian? What makes history matter? Who is entitled to speak in the classroom and what will we speak about? Social studies teachers are also learners, constantly evolving while harnessed to the constraints of the 183 day school year. Within those constraints we must also respond to the needs and questions of our students as events and issues arise. We do not have the privilege to wait for the benefit of historical hindsight. For these reasons, The New York State Department of Education provides a guideline for essential historical knowledge and entrusts me to construct curriculum and lessons to fulfill the goal of civic literacy. The American Historical Association also affirms the activist role of historians and teachers by advocating for “Supporting historians and emphasizing the value of history in contemporary policy and civic life” and “Providing historical perspectives on contemporary issues.”<sup>4</sup>

Our ability to fulfill our responsibilities and freely explore the contours of our evolving understanding of history has been confronted in recent years by a reactionary culture uncomfortable with an inclusive curriculum concerned with social justice. The

divisive concepts laws which have been enacted in more than ten states, the “tip lines” of Virginia and New Hampshire, and the more than 300 book challenges across the country are threats to academic freedom everywhere.<sup>5</sup>

Dr. Singer offers a clear summation of the nature of academic freedom and speech and the distinctions between the right to free speech and incendiary and hate speech. To understand the nuance between these two positions, we as social studies teachers have to be able to engage our students in speech and model speech practices with them. This is risky behavior, both for ourselves and our students, but it is the stuff of a healthy and functioning democracy. Local schools are the closest touchpoint for citizens and their governments, which is why they are ground zero for so many culture wars. This is where we – adults and students – must learn to confront difficult and divisive topics, in an atmosphere which values shared inquiry and rejects fear mongering. Unlike historians who may rightly stay anchored in the past, social studies teachers must bridge the past to the present. By providing our students with the content, knowledge and skills needed to both value and participate in this shared enterprise, we are the stewards of democracy.

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**Cynthia Vitere** teaches high school in Rockville Centre, New York and is a doctoral student at Hofstra University where she is examining how secondary school teachers are responding to the campaign against the teaching of “divisive content.” She can be reached at [cvitere1@pride.hofstra.edu](mailto:cvitere1@pride.hofstra.edu).

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> James H. Sweet, “Is History History? Identity Politics and Teleologies of the Present.” *Perspectives on History*, August 17, 2022, <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/september-2022/is-history-history-identity-politics-and-teleologies-of-the-present>.

<sup>2</sup> David Frum, “The New History Wars, Inside the strife set off by an essay from the president of the American Historical Association.” *The Atlantic*, October 30, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/10/american-historical-association-james-sweet/671853/>; Keisha N. Blain, “Black Historians Know There’s No Such Thing as Objective History.” *New Republic*, September 9, 2022. <https://newrepublic.com/article/167680/presentism-history-debate-black-scholarship>; Priya Satia, *Time’s Monster, How History Makes History*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Nikole Hannah-Jones, editor, “The 1619 Project.” *New York Times Magazine*, August 14, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>; Jake Silverstein, “A Nation Of Argument.” *New York Times Magazine*, November 14, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/09/magazine/1619-project-us-history.html>.

<sup>4</sup> New York State Education Department, “K-12 Social Studies Framework.” 2014, <http://www.nysed.gov/curriculum-instruction/k-12-social-studies-framework>; American Historical Association, “About the AHA,” n.d. <https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership>.

<sup>5</sup> Alia Wong, Nirvi Shah, and Nick Penzenstadler, “Virginia’s governor set up a tip line to crack down on CRT. Parents used it for other reasons,” *USA Today*, November 3, 2022, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2022/11/03/youngkins-critical-race-theory-tip-line-virginia-parents/10655007002/>; Annmarie Timmons, “State releases ‘divisive concepts’ guidance for educators, public employers.” *New Hampshire Bulletin*, July 21, 2021, <https://newhampshirebulletin.com/2021/07/21/state-releases-divisive-concepts-guidance-for-educators-public-employers/>.