On an Imperative to Educate People on the History of Race in America

By Rachel Robison-Greene - Feb 24, 2021

2020 was a historic year for more than one reason. As a pandemic raged, in many areas unchecked in the United States, police brutality that caused the death of George Floyd brought to a boil racial strife that has been simmering in this country for many years. Black Lives Matter demonstrations across the globe motivated many to educate themselves, to improve their historical and cultural understanding of race in the United States. Others, most notably former President Trump, reacted quite differently. He exercised his power to implement a handful of policies on the topic of race, diversity, and inclusion. First, he issued an executive order banning diversity and inclusion trainings, ostensibly to “combat offensive and anti-American race and sex stereotyping and scapegoating.” He referred to anti-racism education as “child abuse.” Shortly thereafter, a judge issued an injunction against the ban in response to a lawsuit filed by a civil rights organization. The judge’s order explained that there was very good reason to believe that the plaintiff’s argument that the ban violates their constitutional right to free speech would prevail in court. President Biden overturned the ban on his first day in office. Had the order taken effect, federal institutions that offered diversity and inclusion trainings would lose federal funding. This led various organizations, including colleges and universities such as the University of Iowa and John A. Logan College in Illinois to cancel scheduled diversity and inclusion events and trainings on campus, including a Hispanic Heritage Month event.

Former President Trump also signed an executive order calling for “patriotic education.” The order created the “1776 Commission” which was tasked with offering a narrative to counter the one offered by The New York Times 1619 Project. The 1619 project began in 2019 — the 400th anniversary of the beginning of slavery in America. Its mission is to tell the stories of the impact of slavery and to amplify black voices in the discussion. On Martin Luther King Jr. Day in 2021, the 1776 Commission released a report offering a narrative according to which the founding fathers paved the way for the abolition of slavery. It undermines the degree to which racism shaped our nation, and it claims that the United States is and has always been “the most just and glorious country in all of human history.” This is the report’s description of a country in which powerful whites were permitted to own and direct the lives of millions of human beings. There were no professional historians on the commission. The American Historical Association, a group composed of the nation’s foremost historians, denounced the report. The executive director, James Grossman said, “It’s a hack job. It’s not a work of history. It’s a work of contentious politics designed to stoke culture wars.”
On January 6th, the United States’s capital was attacked. Many of the people who were arrested for their role in the insurrection were determined to be members of white supremacist groups. Trump’s narrative on race did more than contribute to a violent attack on our capital and our very democracy, it also generated a very skeptical outlook among many of his supporters on all education related to the topic of race. For instance, the Maria Montessori School in North Ogden, Utah sent a letter home to parents offering them the option for their children to opt out of the curriculum taught as a part of Black History Month. The school later revoked the option in response to public outcry.

Many people don’t have much occasion to observe racism in the United States. This means that, for some, knowledge about the topic can only come in the form of testimony. Most of the things we know, we come to know not by investigating the matter personally, but instead on the basis of what we’ve been told by others. Human beings encounter all sorts of hurdles when it comes to attaining belief through testimony. Consider, for example, the challenges our country has faced when it comes to controlling the pandemic. The testimony and advice of experts in infectious disease are often tossed aside and even vilified in favor of instead accepting the viewpoints and advice from people on YouTube telling people what they want to hear.

This happens often when it comes to discussions of race. From the perspective of many, racism is the stuff of history books. Implementation of racist policies is the kind of thing that it would only be possible to observe in a black and white photograph; racism ended with the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. There is already a strong tendency to engage in confirmation bias when it comes to this issue — people are inclined to believe that racism ended years ago, so they are resistant and often even offended when presented with testimonial evidence to the contrary. People are also inclined to seek out others who agree with their position, especially if those people are Black. As a result, even though the views of these individuals are not the consensus view, the fact that they are willing to articulate the idea that the country is not systemically racist makes these individuals tremendously popular with people who were inclined to believe them before they ever opened their mouths.

Listening to testimonial evidence can also be challenging for people because learning about our country’s racist past and about how that racism, present in all of our institutions, has not been completely eliminated in the course of fewer than 70 years, seems to conflict with their desire to be patriotic. For some, patriotism consists in loyalty, love, and pride for one’s country. If we are unwilling to accept American exceptionalism in all of its forms, how can we count ourselves as patriots?

In response to these concerns, many argue that blind patriotism is nothing more than the acceptance of propaganda. Defenders of such patriotism encourage people not to read books like Ibram X. Kendi’s *How to be an Anti-racist* or Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me*, claiming that this work is “liberal brainwashing.” Book banning, either implemented by public policy or strongly encouraged by public sentiment has occurred so often and so nefariously that if one finds oneself on that side of the issue, there is good inductive evidence that one is on the wrong side of history. Responsible members of a community, members that want their country to be the best place it can be, should be willing to think critically about various positions, to engage and respond to them rather than to simply avoid them because they’ve been told that they are “unpatriotic.” Our country has such a problematic history when it comes to listening to Black voices, that when we’re being told we shouldn’t listen to Black accounts of Black history, our propaganda sensors should be on high alert.

Still others argue that projects that attempt to understand the full effects of racism, slavery, and segregation are counterproductive — they only lead to tribalism. We should relegate discussions of race to the past and move forward into a post-racial world with a commitment to unity and equality. In response to this, people argue that to tell a group of people that we should just abandon a thoroughgoing investigation into the history of their ancestors because engaging in such an inquiry causes too much division is itself a racist idea — one that defenders of the status quo have been articulating for centuries.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. beautifully articulates the value of understanding Black history in a passage from *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*:
“Even the Negroes’ contribution to the music of America is sometimes overlooked in astonishing ways. In 1965 my oldest son and daughter entered an integrated school in Atlanta. A few months later my wife and I were invited to attend a program entitled “Music that has made America great.” As the evening unfolded, we listened to the folk songs and melodies of the various immigrant groups. We were certain that the program would end with the most original of all American music, the Negro spiritual. But we were mistaken. Instead, all the students, including our children, ended the program by singing “Dixie.” As we rose to leave the hall, my wife and I looked at each other with a combination of indignation and amazement. All the students, black and white, all the parents present that night, and all the faculty members had been victimized by just another expression of America’s penchant for ignoring the Negro, making him invisible and making his contributions insignificant. I wept within that night. I wept for my children and all black children who have been denied a knowledge of their heritage; I wept for all white children, who, through daily miseducation, are taught that the Negro is an irrelevant entity in American society; I wept for all the white parents and teachers who are forced to overlook the fact that the wealth of cultural and technological progress in America is a result of the commonwealth of inpouring contributions.”

Understanding the history of our people, all of them, fully and truthfully, is valuable for its own sake. It is also valuable for our actions going forward. We can’t understand who we are without understanding who we’ve been, and without understanding who we’ve been, we can’t construct a blueprint for who we want to be as a nation.

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Rachel Robison-Greene

Rachel is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Utah State University. Her research interests include the nature of personhood and the self, animal minds and animal ethics, environmental ethics, and ethics and technology. She is the co-host of the pop culture and philosophy podcast I Think Therefore I Fan.