

1492, 1513, 1619, 2019

It's all connected: On the Origins of the So-called United States of America

Frank Joyce

2019

Many are marking 2019 as the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first captured Africans in Jamestown. So, even more than usual, we will hear chattel slavery referred to as the nation's original sin.

It isn't.

That framing is itself a window into the white way of thinking. It's meant to perpetuate the mythologies of Christianity. That doctrine incorporates the belief that humans are flawed, weak and often badly behaved. And, since that's God given, it will always be true.

Slavery as original sin also meshes with the comforting and frequently invoked observation that other humans in other times and places also have enslaved each other. Which fits like a glove with ignoring what is so distinctive about slavery as practiced in what is now the U.S. New World slavery truly was innovative in its correlation with skin color and with capitalism.

As if that weren't enough, the U.S. version added slave breeding and a multi-generational domestic slave trade which was vastly larger than the African slave trade. To this day, most Americans believe that the overwhelming majority of those enslaved came from Africa, either directly or via the Caribbean. Not so. More than 95 percent of the enslaved were born in what is now called the United States.

The original sin trope also serves to affirm the patriarchal, male monotheistic driven perspective that is the main point of the Adam and Eve Judeo/ Christianity story. The replacement of gods (plural) and goddesses (plural) with the requirement that only one male god be worshipped was a profound turning point in human history. It is foundational to the evolution of race-based capitalism as well.

Finally, the original sin meme serves to deflect or outright deny that white supremacy and white nationalism are core values of the nation state now known as the United States of America.

So, that's the problem with the sin part. What's even worse, is the original part.

Those who want to maintain the myth of the founders' democratic ideals as a basis for their current politics express shock when the centrality of slavery to the creation of what is now called the United States is suggested. And, central it was.

But was it more important than the stealing of land from the native people? In the creation of the mythology system of whites as a superior, chosen category of homo sapiens, didn't the racializing of the Indigenous also play a role, including within the structure of the nation state itself?

To put it another way, doesn't what happened between 1492 and 1619 matter? It sure does.

Sometimes the obvious isn't. But without the development of transatlantic navigation and ship construction, there could not have been a slave trade to the New World in the first place.

Nor could it have flourished without the ever growing occupation by the Europeans of the land already occupied by Indigenous people.

A key date in that process was the arrival in 1513 of the Spanish in what is now St Augustine, Florida. Which soon enough gets us through Plymouth Rock, Jamestown, and other colonizer milestones to the Declaration of Independence in 1776.

Very few U.S. Americans know that the Declaration of Independence finishes its list of grievances against the King of England with this last straw complaint: “He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.”

Fewer still have any idea how important dealing with Indians was to the creation of the U.S. Constitution. Such information is certainly not part of any educational curriculum from 8th grade civics class through getting a PhD in American history. For that matter, it’s not exactly obvious from reading the Constitution itself.

One thing you may vaguely recall from your first civics class is that the Constitution replaced the Articles of Confederation. The Articles, we were taught, failed for reasons somehow having to do with not giving the Federal government sufficient military and taxing power.

With appreciation to Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz for alerting me to a brilliant 2014 article in the *Duke Law Journal*, “The Savage Constitution” by Gregory Ablavsky, we can now better understand just how central was the so-called Indian question to the Articles’ failure and thus the making of the Constitution.

Like most, I have always thought the origin of the never ending battle over states rights was because the Southern states feared federal power as a threat to slavery. True, but only up to a point.

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, many of the colonies that became states were more concerned with who had the authority to make deals—or not—with Indian nations.

Among the Federalists, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton had important differences on this question. As Ablavsky explains, more than Madison, Hamilton thought Federal power could and should, “turn to arms if necessary” to instill the “fear and terror” required to enable settler colonizers to seize territory from Indians and hold on to it.

Essentially, Hamilton’s view prevailed in the process that produced the Constitution. Once enacted, however, it was by no means certain that the Constitution would be ratified.

Georgia made the difference. What won the Georgians over was a promise. In Georgia and beyond to the outermost frontiers reached by the settlers, the colonizers believed that help in controlling Indians would come from the newly created government. “Many backcountry leaders, then, supported the new constitution based on the self-interested calculation that the new federalist government would fulfill the Federalists’ promises and defend them against ‘murdering savages,’ Ablavsky says.

Later, according to Ablavsky’s analysis, the architect of the Trail-of-Tears, President Andrew Jackson, invoked the ratification process. “Indian removal, Jackson informed Congress in 1830, was ‘a duty which this Government owes’ the states as it ‘was part of the compact which made them members of our confederacy’”

Why does this matter?

We are in a moment where it is both important and possible to broadly discredit white supremacy in favor of something far better, so it matters a lot.

Perhaps the greatest single misunderstanding of white supremacy, especially by well-meaning whites, is the difficulty in understanding it as a dynamic system. As such, white supremacy is complex and adaptive. Given that it has lasted for more than 500 years that should seem obvious.

It isn’t obvious though because the white way of thinking creates its own sub-systems to conceal and confuse those within it and even those outside of it. Since we have a fragmented view of white supremacy, we keep being surprised when the disease comes roaring back after one or another symptom has been treated.

Because it is dynamic as opposed to static, over the centuries, white supremacy has become its own kind of melting pot. It combines anti-black with anti-red with anti-yellow with anti-brown on an as-needed basis. It can shift from one gear to another quite smoothly.

Within the context of immigration, for example, the Chinese were once at the top of the most despised list. Later, they joined other Asians as members of the good minority. Hispanics can be white or brown depending on circumstances. Likewise with Arab Americans. That’s the thing about social constructs like race.

Most U.S. Americans are oblivious to the importance of fear and hatred toward Indians in building the extremely potent U.S. version of white supremacy. That ignorance, however, does not diminish the importance of that history. Its long tail is very much still with us.

As University of Pennsylvania law professor Maggio Blackhawk points out, unlike pro-slavery and pro-Jim Crow segregation laws, legislation allowing the abuse of Indians has never been overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court. Indeed, the plenary powers derived from the Constitution used against Native people are currently being invoked by federal courts to justify Donald Trump's mistreatment and exclusion of Muslim and South American immigrants.

Anti-Indian white supremacy isn't just embedded in the law. It's baked into every nook and cranny of the white way of thinking. Along with the other components of white superiority, especially anti-black white supremacy, it deeply corrupts our sense of hope and possibility. It limits the capacity of many white people to assimilate into a richer and more successful way of relating to other humans and, for that matter, all living things.

How do we get to a better place? It starts with rejecting the disgusting beliefs the United States birthed from the beginning.

Frank Joyce, is a lifelong Detroit based activist and writer. He is co-editor with Karin Aguilar-San Juan of *The People Make the Peace: Lessons from the Vietnam Anti-War Movement*, which has just been translated into Vietnamese.

fifth Estate

Frank Joyce

1492, 1513, 1619, 2019

It's all connected: On the Origins of the So-called United States of America

2019

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/404-summer-2019/1492-1513-1619-2019>

Fifth Estate #404, Summer, 2019

[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fiftheestate.org)