

May 5, 2021

To our colleagues at CCSU:

Recently, Dr. Jay Bergman, a member of the Department of History and Professor of Russian History, wrote an email to the Superintendent of Putnam Schools and all other superintendents in Connecticut expressing his opinion that *The 1619 Project* should not be taught in Connecticut school districts, citing the project as inaccurate and racist. We, the undersigned members of the Department of History at Central Connecticut State University, object to the content of Dr. Bergman's email for the reasons below and declare that his views are not in any way representative of those in the Department who teach and research US history, African American history, the histories of enslavement, the evolution America's institutions within this context, or the histories of people of African descent elsewhere in the world.

Historians of American history have been working in recent decades to explore the histories of those who have been excluded from the dominant United States narrative, including some of the historians whom Dr. Bergman cites as critical of the *1619 Project*. We haven't worked hard enough, and the *NYT's* publication of the *Project* forced us to have conversations about it when apparently some in the academy weren't ready to have them. *The 1619 Project* has a challenging thesis that throws down a gauntlet: confront the history of enslavement and racism, root it out from where older historians have hidden it, and look at it head on. That is a valuable challenge. That kind of challenge, to look at a problem and analyze it, critique the evidence, and evaluate the interpretation, is what we ask students to do in our classrooms all the time if we are good teachers.

The email Dr. Bergman composed is most disturbing when it engages in vitriolic statements about the creator of the project, and when it charges that "blacks are the beneficiaries of preferences, misleadingly and euphemistically called 'affirmative action...'" First, affirmative action law is about creating a level playing field, not preferring one race over another. Preferences are what happened when for centuries White men were chosen over all others merely because all others were deemed not worthy. White men exercised their preferences to hire others like themselves. Affirmative action law is the very opposite of bigotry and discrimination. It is the duty to look objectively at candidates and recognize that one's own preferences may actually be excluding the best candidates. It is the mandate to recognize the value of experiences and talents of those who for centuries were denied opportunities.

The statistics Dr. Bergman cites about the number of African Americans killed by police are cherry-picked. First, he makes a point of including the word "unarmed" with the implication that if armed, then such killings must have been justified. Secondly, he knows full well, or should, that the numbers he's using are manipulated, because he manipulated different numbers in his critique of the John Lewis Center at CCSU published in the *Boston Herald* on April 8, 2021 (<https://www.bostonherald.com/author/jay-bergman/>). Neither of his set of statistics accurately represents what is happening in this country at the present time. His email

to the superintendent ignores the surge of police killings of Black men and women, the public rise of White supremacist violence, and the increasingly vocal racism happening right now.

The implication that the goal of *The 1619 Project* is to put money in the pockets of African Americans is ludicrous. There is plenty of hard evidence that the legacy of enslavement has financially harmed African American families significantly. Today, a persistent wealth gap exists, with white families having approximately \$13 in net wealth for every \$1 held by black families. Reparations as a solution may be debatable politically, but the economic harm to Black families is not and the solution of reparations to other groups worldwide who have suffered harms of great magnitude has been accepted.

Lastly, Dr. Bergman's reference to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement in his email tucks the protests against racism safely away in the past, as if nothing needs to be confronted now. Dr. King did it right, he opines, and let's move on. Historical and current evidence clearly shows that Americans have not resolved civil rights and racism, and racism will end until we confront our true history as Americans.

Our comments here have in no way fully addressed all of the inaccuracies with the email Dr. Bergman sent to the superintendent. His opinions about the schools' curriculum, if he wanted to express them, should have been delivered as a citizen, not as a professor of history opining in an area in which he lacks expertise. We do not concur with or support his statements.

Signed,

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Mary Ann Mahony, Professor of History and Director, Latin American, Latino, and Caribbean Center

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