

Rewriting Racism with Prager University: How the Modern Political Propaganda Outlet is Shaping Global Slavery Curricula within the American Educational System

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Introduction

Did Frederick Douglass, one of the United States' most famous historical abolitionists, truly describe the system of slavery as a necessary "compromise to achieve something great: the making of the United States?"¹ Of course not. Yet, for many students in the United States, this viewpoint from Douglas is all but a fact. This diminishing statement is just one of the many historical inaccuracies peddled in educational materials, including videos, from the American political organization Prager University or PragerU. As Dr. Johnathan Zimmerman of the University of Pennsylvania put it, PragerU is not an educational tool, but rather a "political propaganda machine."² Narrated by popular political figures like Candace Owens, these videos provide a prime example of the prevalence of revisionist history in classrooms across the United States. In Florida's middle school classrooms, this rhetoric has become more prominent due to the implementation of PragerU as an educational resource for students. It is easy to overlook the broader ramifications of these political propaganda materials, like those published by PragerU, disguised as "educational" resources. However, we must understand the impact of this content on the American educational system to combat this damaging trend of disinformation effectively.

Modern political propaganda like that of PragerU has retroactively changed the way slavery is viewed by discounting its severity, whitewashing the abolitionist movement, and labeling contemporary anti-racism as anti-Americanism. By analyzing myriad examples of this social messaging, this

paper demonstrates that many modern views of enslavement have been fundamentally reformed into less drastic outlooks by political propaganda, particularly within the educational system. I argue that a concentrated effort by the US government to address propaganda within the educational system is the only way to adequately combat this phenomenon, as the issue lies largely within the nationwide educational system and its historical curriculum. As long as organizations like PragerU are given a platform in American schools, there will never be an end to the spread of political propaganda regarding slavery and racism. The United States must overhaul its current historical education curriculum, lest impressionable young people continue to be affected by propaganda.

Firstly, we must combat these inaccuracies by exploring the history of race relations in the United States by examining the true conditions of slavery during this intense era of the United States' oppressive history.

Historical Context of United States Slavery

One of the key inaccuracies peddled by PragerU and similar organizations is a false equation of modern and pre-modern forms of slavery. As Candace Owens points out in "A Short History of Slavery," enslavement has been used as a tool of historic oppression by dozens of cultures, from the indigenous Aztecs to the Roman Empire to the enslavement of African people in the Americas.³ However, while it is true that slavery has existed in some form for most cultures throughout known human history, there is a notable distinction between these premodern and modern forms of enslavement. Both were brutal and torturous violations of human rights, but their motivating factors were drastically different; particularly in regards to the role of race and perceived biological inferiorities.

³ PragerU, "A Short History of Slavery," YouTube, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NO_wmixXBdE.

¹ Timothy Sandefur, "Frederick Douglass: From Slave to Statesman," PragerU, 2021, <https://www.prageru.com>.

² Sarah Schwartz, PragerU, Creator of Controversial Social Studies Videos, Now Has a Toehold in Schools. *Education Week*, September 18, 2023. <https://www.edweek.org/prageru>.

Premodern slavery was largely the result of warfare, with prisoners of war being enslaved by conquering forces.⁴ In contrast, modern slavery (which was centered primarily around the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade) combined a demand for unpaid labor with an intensely race-based hierarchical system.⁵ When we discuss the system of slavery used by the United States, Brazil, and countless other countries, we are referencing the modern form of slavery, not the premodern. To put it simply, premodern slavery came about as the result of social hierarchy, and modern slavery was the result of racial hierarchy. The problem arises, then, when these two quite distinct classifications of enslavement are conflicted in a modern lens.⁶ They each differ in a small, yet prominent manner, which has heavy implications on contemporary perceptions of slavery: the unique role of racial oppression in modern slavery.

The United States is known for having especially brutal slavery when compared to countries like Brazil and South Africa,⁷ largely as a result of the lackluster legislation regarding the treatment of enslaved individuals by their masters and continued generational enslavement for the children of enslaved people. Slave owners in the early US (which were concentrated largely within Southern plantations) were free to treat their enslaved people as terribly as they chose with little government oversight or protections for enslaved individuals. One of the strongest motivating factors for this arduous treatment was the racial distinction between enslaved people and their masters; that is, the majority of enslaved people were black and almost all slave owners were white. Black people were deemed as biologically inferior due to their race, which allowed white Americans to justify this intense and torturous

treatment.⁸ For instance, enslaved individuals were deemed less intelligent and prone to violence, often likening them to wild animals. Similarly, social dominance theory was used to promote the idea that enslaved African people needed to be socially inferior to white people, due to a perceived need for hierarchy in any properly functioning society. According to this theory, societies with a reliance on hierarchical systems remained functional due to a fundamental need for one group to be socially superior, which is supported by the “inferior” social classes.⁹ This view has evolved into contemporary racism, in which individuals of color are viewed as inferior due to perceived biological inadequacies and stereotypes. By erasing the role of this racist ideology in modern enslavement, contemporary political groups work against public awareness of racism in the present day. If modern slavery is falsely considered to be disconnected from race, we risk ignoring many of the modern effects of slavery on the black population of the United States. Now, we turn to how contemporary political propaganda organizations like PragerU are doing just this by downplaying the severity of slavery, both in actuality and on its present effects.

Discounting the Severity of Slavery

Throughout a majority of PragerU historical videos, undermining language regarding slavery has been a distinctive feature, which marks the content as biased, revisionist history. The term “revisionist history” refers to the false reinterpretation of a historical event or time period, which is often achieved by challenging traditional academic views and narratives.¹⁰ One diminishing variation of this is the peddling of false information regarding enslavement in the United States. While PragerU has a trend of discounting language toward slavery

⁴ “Slavery before the Trans-Atlantic Trade,” Omeka RSS, 2022, <https://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show>

⁵ Janne Mende, “The Concept of Modern Slavery: Definition, Critique, and the Human Rights Frame.” *Human Rights Review* 20, no. 2 (December 7, 2018): 229–48. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12142-018-0538-y>.

⁶ Anthony Marx, *Making Race and Nation*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

⁷ “American Slavery in Comparative Perspective,” Digital History, 2021, <https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu>.

⁸ “Scientific Racism,” Harvard Library, 2024, <https://library.harvard.edu/anti-black-racism/scientific-racism>.

⁹ Felicia Pratto and Andrew L. Stewart, “Social Dominance Theory,” *The Encyclopedia of Peace Psychology*, December 15, 2011, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470672532.wbepp253>.

¹⁰ James M. Banner, *The Ever-Changing Past: Why All History is Revisionist History*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2021.

(such as the aforementioned concept of slavery as a “compromise” for America¹¹), we must recognize the distinction between downplaying slavery and spreading false information about the history of slavery. The spread of disinformation has far more harmful manifestations. As such, scholars of modern race relations must understand the varying pieces of disinformation that organizations like Prager University may weaponize to push their political agendas.

One of the most prominent and damaging ways that modern political propaganda undermines slavery is the spread of inaccurate statistics regarding enslavement in the early United States. As previously stated, the US implemented a particularly brutal system of slavery, both in terms of the treatment of enslaved individuals and the volume of people bought and sold within the slave trade. The torment of enslaved individuals within the system is undeniable; however, the severity of their conditions is frequently diminished by political propaganda. Take, for instance, the PragerU video, “A Short History of Slavery.” In this video, Candace Owens states that approximately 350,000 enslaved people were forcibly brought to the early United States as a result of the North Atlantic slave trade system.¹² While this number is technically, presumably accurate (though there have been varying estimates for the exact population of enslaved people), it is still, ultimately, a misleading statistic. The United States system of slavery was uniquely damaging as the descendants of enslaved people were also enslaved by default. For instance, if an enslaved couple had a child, that child would automatically be considered a slave belonging to the same master as its parents. As such, it is important to include the number of enslaved individuals who were born in the United States when estimating the total population, which recent estimates have placed at around ten million. The PragerU estimate also fails to account for the thousands of enslaved Africans who died in the Middle Passage portion of the Trans-Atlantic Slave

¹¹ Timothy Sandefur, “Frederick Douglass: From Slave to Statesman,” PragerU, 2021, <https://www.prageru.com>.

¹² PragerU, “A Short History of Slavery,” YouTube, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NO_wmixXBdE.

Trade, journeying from the African continent to North America.¹³

This is one of the most damaging pieces of misinformation currently being shared by PragerU and other political organizations, as it not only undermines the severity of slavery in the United States but also rejects the lived experiences of enslaved people throughout US history. We can see a similar rhetoric surrounding modern revisionist perceptions of the Holocaust in the early 1900s.¹⁴ During this era, over 6 million Jewish people were executed in a widespread genocide throughout the European continent, alongside members of other minority groups. In the present day, a major facet of the most prominent Holocaust-denying ideologies rests on diminishing the number of people murdered during this period. The spread of this misinformation, such as claiming that the concentration camps used to execute Holocaust victims en-masse would not have been logistically possible despite all evidence to the contrary, only serves to diminish the reality of this period of ethnic and political torment. For both the slavery system of the early United States and the Holocaust, a great deal of power comes from the impact of the events on the affected populations. By denying the truth of these atrocities, modern political propaganda works to discount the severity of these systems of injustice.

As Dr. Clint Smith put it, “The history of slavery is the history of the United States. It was not peripheral to our founding; it was central to it. It is not irrelevant to our contemporary society; it created it. This history is in our soil, it is in our policies, and it must, too, be in our memories.”¹⁵ We must work to combat attempts to undermine the severity of slavery in the United States, so we may preserve our history and honor the efforts of those who fought to abolish slavery and achieve racial equity in this

¹³ “Middle Passage,” *Slavery and Remembrance*, 2024, <https://slaveryandremembrance.org/articles/?id=A0032>.

¹⁴ “Explaining Holocaust Denial,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2024, <https://www.ushmm.org/antisemitism/holocaust-denial-and-distortion/explaining-holocaust-denial>.

¹⁵ Deborah Menkart, “Lessons for How the Word Is Passed by Clint Smith,” Zinn Education Project, November 10, 2023, <https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/lessons-how-the-word-is-passed>.

country—which were largely black Americans and other allied individuals. Unfortunately, despite their legacy and historical impact on race relations within the United States, these abolitionists are not free from the impacts of modern political propaganda, either. The next section examines how contemporary political revisionism is whitewashing the abolitionist movement and defacing the traditional influence of black abolitionists throughout the history of the American system of slavery.

Whitewashing the Abolitionist Movement

Another distinguishing feature of several PragerU videos on slavery? A false accreditation of the abolitionist movement to white European abolitionists. In “A Short History of Slavery,” for example, Owens expresses this exact sentiment, stating that white men “led the world” in putting an end to the practice of slavery.¹⁶ This could not be further from the truth. The abolitionist movement would, quite simply, cease to exist if not for the tireless efforts of black abolitionists like Sojourner Truth, David Walker, and Frederick Douglass.¹⁷ Crediting white Europeans for abolishing slavery is akin to crediting men with giving women the right to vote—that is, an outright denial of the resistance efforts required to achieve that goal. Not only does it display a complete disregard for the work of black abolitionists, but it also ignores the fact that modern slavery arose as a result of white Europeans. The role of white supremacy in the modern enslavement system cannot be overlooked.

It is also worth noting that, even if white Europeans were solely responsible for the abolitionist movement, the implementation of Jim Crow laws and other legislation that promoted racial segregation would have immediately undone any improved conditions abolition achieved for black Americans. The legacy of slavery is still ever-present in the United States as a result of the Jim Crow system, which was largely set in place by white, Southern legislators.¹⁸ It is impossible to argue that

white people were responsible for the abolitionist movement due to the prompt implementation of these policies in its aftermath. Those fighting for abolition were fighting for racial equity and improved conditions for black people in America—most definitely not in the same category as those who saw fit to implement and protect the Jim Crow system for decades to come. Thinking like this is not only harmful but unbelievable in the face of reality. This rhetoric becomes even more damaging when paired with the contemporary equation of anti-racism to anti-Americanism.

PragerU's Rhetoric of Anti-Racism = Anti-Americanism

The Prager University website states that the non-profit organization aims to “[spread] the message of freedom and liberty” to its millions of viewers, with an evident focus on domestic politics within the United States.¹⁹ As such, one of the major tenets of PragerU content aims to share pro-American rhetoric. While this is not outright harmful, the manner in which this message is distributed is often at odds with modern race relations in the US, as well as efforts to increase contemporary accountability for America’s problematic history of racial injustices.

To pull from PragerU’s “A Short History of Slavery” once more, Owens claims that, “if black Americans began to view themselves as partners in the American dream,” then racism would be defunct in the modern United States.²⁰ Not only is this a horrendous outlook on contemporary race relations, but this is also a flawed perspective on the role of racism in the US. As we’ve explored, the United States was built on the system of slavery in many ways. The belief that black Americans should simply ignore this reality is, to put it frankly, deluded. Likewise, the rhetoric that black Americans are responsible for modern racism by drawing attention to the systems of injustice at play is inaccurate at best and quite damaging at worst. This outlook is also similar to the ideology of anti-racism being equivalent to anti-Americanism in the present day. Accusing members of minority groups of hating their country because

¹⁶ PragerU, “A Short History of Slavery,” YouTube, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NO_wmixXBdE.

¹⁷ US History, “African-American Abolitionists” Independence Hall Association (Philadelphia, 2008).

¹⁸ Meghan Whitfield. *Unmasking Southern White Evangelicalism in U.S. History Education: Racialized Theopolitical Discourses at Work*, May 29, 2024, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2024.2356493>.

¹⁹ “About Us.” PragerU. Accessed December 8, 2024. <https://www.prageru.com/about>.

²⁰ PragerU, “A Short History of Slavery,” YouTube, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NO_wmixXBdE.

they dared to draw attention to systemic oppression is indicative of a broader hatred and disrespect for those affected by inequality.²¹ Patriotism is not, and shouldn't be, likened to idealizing one's nation. This ideology undermines the very democratic principles that the United States was founded on. It is critical that the concept of Anti-Americanism, which refers to unfounded prejudice against the United States government or the American people, not become falsely conflated with a well-founded criticism of America's racist history and its legacy. This issue is particularly prominent given the current state of polarization within United States politics. With young Americans being the primary target of this messaging, however, it is crucial that we examine the effect of this content on students within the United States.

Impact of this Messaging on American Students

With American politics becoming even more divided due to political propaganda outlets like PragerU, young people have become one of the largest demographics caught in the crossfire. As the Prager University website states, sixty percent of its viewers on YouTube are under the age of thirty-five with up to five million views each day, which is reflective of the rise of political propaganda content available en masse in the modern day.²² It is undeniable that this level of revisionist history would have a detrimental effect on young people in America, particularly those who are exposed to this content in their middle and high school curricula.

This expectation was reflected in a 1998 survey of textbooks in middle and high schools across the United States, where Peter Kolchin, professor of an American history survey course, reviewed the presence of limited or revisionist history in educational materials.²³ According to Kolchin's

findings, several noteworthy trends emerged in the coverage of systems of enslavement during various eras of US history. For one, slavery was frequently explored as an "issue" of early American society—that is, a point of contention among white political thinkers and a leading factor in the Southern secession of 1860, rather than a system of oppression in and of itself. Given the torturous nature of enslavement in the United States, it stands to reason that contemporary coverage ought to focus more on the lived experiences of enslaved individuals and the lasting legacy of slavery in modern America. Unfortunately, that is not the case in a vast majority of United States educational facilities. Similarly, Kolchin notes that modern history courses often fail to convey the concentration of enslaved people amongst slave owners during this period. While a majority of antebellum slave owners owned less than ten slaves each, about 75% of the enslaved individuals in the United States system belonged to masters with ten or more slaves. A small point of contention, once again, but an aspect of this system that is worth noting, as it contextualizes slavery as being a heavily industrial system, rather than being based on the individual level. To put it frankly, the United States has failed to educate its youth on the reality of enslavement in a myriad of ways, a problem no doubt exacerbated by the broadening influence of PragerU and other political propaganda outlets in statewide educational curricula, particularly within the midwestern and southern United States.

Now, as US President Donald Trump and several prominent conservative politicians have indicated interest in shutting down the federal Department of Education,²⁴ alongside increasing numbers of banned books across the country,²⁵ it seems impossible for these conditions to improve under the current administration. Nevertheless, this paper will attempt to provide a framework for the future in its final section.

²¹ Meghan Whitfield. *Unmasking Southern White Evangelicalism in U.S. History Education: Racialized Theopolitical Discourses at Work*, May 29, 2024, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2024.2356493>.

²² "About Us." PragerU. Accessed December 8, 2024. <https://www.prageru.com/about>.

²³ Peter Kolchin, "Slavery in United States Survey Textbooks." *The Journal of American History* 84, no. 4 (March 1998): 1425. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2568089>.

²⁴ Meckler, Laura. "Trump Wants to Get Rid of the Department of Education. What Would That Do?" *Washington Post*, November 12, 2024.

²⁵ "Banned in the USA: Beyond the Shelves," PEN America, November 1, 2024, <https://pen.org/report/beyond-the-shelves/>.

Conclusion: Now What?

Throughout recent memory, the United States has perpetuated racist ideology in both a systemic and social manner, with one of the most noteworthy topics being the legacy of slavery.²⁶ Modern political propaganda has changed the way slavery is viewed in the contemporary era by diminishing its legacy, crediting the abolitionist movement to white leaders, and labeling modern anti-racism as anti-Americanism. By exploring a plethora of examples of this social messaging, this paper aims to convey that many contemporary views of American slavery have been altered to appear less dramatic, particularly within the curriculum of the American educational system.

The United States is now tasked with repairing its portrayal of slavery in the educational sector, lest the true legacy of slavery be lost forever. This critical shift in the historical education curriculum must be both comprehensive and expeditious, especially as US political leaders begin to propose limits on the Education Department²⁷ and American politics become even more divided due to political propaganda outlets like PragerU. As was discussed in this paper, the United States education system is in dire need of an overhaul, from its classroom materials and textbooks to its broader historical curriculum. If the United States aims to combat the growing trend of politically motivated historical revisionism, it must start with the education of its youth.

The educational system in Germany is a strong example of how this historical education can be presented effectively in the modern day. One of the most prevalent (and shameful) pieces of German history is the Holocaust, where millions of Jews, Romanis, communists, and gay people were persecuted by Adolf Hitler and the dominant regime. In the present day, Germany has implemented a strong historical curriculum to ensure that this genocidal period is remembered by the public.²⁸

²⁶ Anthony Marx, *Making Race and Nation*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

²⁷ Meckler, Laura. "Trump Wants to Get Rid of the Department of Education. What Would That Do?" *Washington Post*, November 12, 2024.

²⁸ Vitale, Monica. "Holocaust Education in Germany: Ensuring Relevance And ..." US Department of Education, 2019. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1207646.pdf>.

This curriculum includes a thorough, truthful explanation of the role of the German public in perpetuating violent rhetoric and an inclusion of firsthand experiences from Holocaust victims, such as Anne Frank and Elie Wiesel. South Africa is another example of a state with an effective historical education curriculum, through its Truth and Reconciliation Commission's work within the education sector.²⁹

While it is true that the United States' federal government has little jurisdiction on educational curricula as it currently operates,³⁰ it would be possible to support a more accurate historical curriculum without infringing on states' rights to regulate their educational systems. The US government is able to push for changes in curricula through funding, for example. If directed toward equitable policies for educators, placing greater emphasis on equitable practices when training US teachers, it stands to reason that more accurate historical curricula would follow. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that these changes will be prioritized within the current federal government. Regardless, it is undeniable that the historical curriculum in America is in need of an upgrade, whether the United States opts to follow these routes or not. Education reform is a critical factor in limiting the spread of historical revisionism in this country, particularly regarding slavery education. It will not be a painless correction for the United States to implement, given the current role of political partisanship in historical revisionism, but it must be done as soon as possible. If not, we risk forgetting the intense pain and legacy of slavery once and for all.

²⁹ "Truth Commission: South Africa," United States Institute of Peace, accessed December 8, 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/1995/12/truth-commission-south-africa>.

³⁰ "Federal Role in Education," U.S. Department of Education, accessed December 8, 2024, <https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-overview/federal-role-in-education>.

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