

## Social Justice Isn't the Only Reason to Teach About Race

By Jeffrey Aaron Snyder

November 24, 2015

Let's talk about race. This is the clarion call voiced by educators dedicated to social justice. But you don't have to care about fighting the good fight to heed this command. It's more than enough to just want students to be able to understand the world around them. From Ferguson, Mo., to Charleston, S.C., voter ID laws to Donald Trump's build-a-wall immigration-policy platform, students will never make any sense of the United States today, so long as teachers adopt a colorblind approach.

One hundred years ago this fall, Carter G. Woodson, the "father of black history," incorporated the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in Washington. His work affirms the centrality of race to American society and the U.S. history curriculum, but also challenges the assumption that the best way to teach race is through a social-justice lens.

Woodson was passionately devoted to racial justice, an active member of the NAACP's Washington branch. He was equally committed to the pursuit of truth through rigorous historical research. The NAACP, in Woodson's view, was a "propaganda" organization that used "fire-eating agitation" tactics to pursue vital policy initiatives such as anti-lynching legislation. In contrast, Woodson saw his own association as an **educational enterprise**, offering, in his words, "no special brand for the solution of the race problem except to learn to think."

Woodson founded the association at a time of unprecedented popular and "scientific" racism. The film "Birth of a Nation"—D.W. Griffith's paean to the Ku Klux Klan and white supremacy—was completing its record-breaking opening run at theaters across the country. Best-selling history textbooks damned blacks as eternally inferior and railed against the criminal outrages of "Negro rule" during Reconstruction. Woodson's own former professors at Harvard, where he had earned his Ph.D., turned out publications that referred to blacks as savages, strangers to the nation, and natural slaves.

As the only professional historian whose parents had been born into slavery, Woodson was determined to correct the historical record's grotesque racial caricatures and biased accounts. The failure to "fathom the Negro mind" was the fatal flaw of the standard American-history narrative, according to Woodson. His association set out to show what African-Americans had "thought and felt and done," with the ambitious goal of formulating a new U.S. history free of "bias, race-hate, and religious prejudice."

From a small row house in Washington, Woodson spearheaded a movement that reached all the way from the campus of Howard University to one-room schoolhouses in Alabama. The cause was greatly advanced by the creation of an academic journal in 1916, the publication of the flagship textbook *The Negro in Our*

[← Back to Story](#)

**Math Shouldn't Be Quiet**

Discourse made doable in a core mathematics program

Ready Classroom  
Mathematics

DISCOVER WHY

History in 1922, and the advent of Negro History Week (today's Black History Month) in 1926. Black educators—including college presidents and professors, elementary school librarians, and high school history teachers—formed the backbone of the movement. They all shared Woodson's conviction that the study and celebration of black history's "cold-blooded facts" could reconfigure the racial landscape by building black pride and reducing white prejudice.

We can thank Carter G. Woodson and his colleagues for changing the tone and complexion of our history textbooks. They inducted black figures such as Harriet Tubman into our pantheon of national heroes and banished the most egregious racial stereotypes, such as the happy-go-lucky slave. The real power of Woodson's movement, though, was the insistence that black history was *our* history. With the incorporation of African-American experiences into the nation's history, the color line emerged as a principal theme. Following stringent scholarly standards, Woodson and his colleagues painstakingly revealed the racial divide that has prevented African-Americans from full participation in the social, economic, and political life of the country.

The "Negro history" movement gave us a more accurate portrait of U.S. history, one that did not shy away from exploring the darkest corners of our past. Woodson and his colleagues wrote the first textbooks that addressed the history of racial violence, including the subjection of enslaved black women "to the whims and desires of white men" and the "abysmal horror of lynching." Woodson himself used the word "terrorism" to describe the brutal measures used to keep blacks in their place.

From Woodson's point of view, race was an essential element of U.S. history. To ignore it would be like teaching biology without mentioning carbon. Even so, he would have some serious reservations about attaching the study of race in schools to the struggle for social justice. Woodson lived through a time when black activists and intellectuals had fierce debates about how to address the "race question"; answers ranged from Marcus Garvey's call for African-Americans to "go back to Africa," to exhortations to join the Communist Party's proletarian revolution. One individual's dream of social justice was another's dystopian nightmare.

Competing visions of social justice aside, Woodson was acutely aware of the threat that partisan views posed to academic scholarship. He used the term "history made to order" to characterize the use of facile or shoddy historical arguments to prop up polemical positions. His worry was that history's nuances and ironies would be lost in the rush to achieve a particular political objective. Taking sides, Woodson understood, would make the already elusive quest for truth downright unattainable.

Did Woodson want his students to go out and change the world? Absolutely. But he was convinced that they first had to grasp the "facts underlying their present situation." And he was even more adamant that the primary job of an educator was to illuminate rather than to advocate. If the American public concludes that teaching race is merely an extension of left-wing social activism, it will never gain any real traction in our public schools. It will be to the right what creationism is to the left: propaganda masquerading as a curriculum. The most compelling reason to teach race, then, is not to make a difference in the world, but to understand it.



—Getty

**"From [Carter G.] Woodson's point of view, race was an essential element of U.S. history. To ignore it would be like teaching biology without mentioning carbon."**

MORE OPINION



[Visit Opinion.](#)

---

*Jeffrey Aaron Snyder is an assistant professor of educational studies at Carleton College, in Northfield, Minn. He is completing a book, Making Black History: Race, Culture, and the Color Line in the Age of Jim Crow.*

*Follow the Education Week Commentary section on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).*

Vol. 35, Issue 13, Pages 20-21

Published in Print: December 2, 2015, as **Social Justice Is Not the Most Compelling Reason to Teach Race**