

Recent U.S. public events reveal an intense ongoing debate over national history education. At its center lies a conflict over how to frame the country's history of chattel slavery, as well as its pre- and post-slavery racial history, especially vis-à-vis liberated Black slaves and their descendants.

Current high-visibility conflicts include state-level educational bans, notably in Florida and Texas, on race-related viewpoints and curricula (e.g., so-called “woke ideology” and “critical race theory” and the 1619 Project). In the background: backlash to the Black Lives Matter movement, and the polarized discourse that has been boiling at least since Donald Trump's 2016 Presidential election, itself viewable as a form of backlash to Barack Obama's presidency.

160 years after slavery's abolition, how can white Americans possibly “still” be so divided in their perceptions of, and reactions to, black American civil activism?

I view this as a multi-layered problem of knowledge: a problem of *divergent knowledges*—i.e., a pair of conflicting epistemologies or understandings of one national history [1]—further problematized by its invisibility, that is, the *difficulty of perceiving, discussing, and understanding* it.

The second problem, I argue, arises because certain knowledge elements critical to this situation are presumptively self-evident to Americans and/or viewed by them as discursively taboo. Hence, Americans fail to explicitly identify or write about them, in turn hindering the information and viewpoint access of less-biased outside observers.

Relevant to the first problem are the following points:

- Contemporary U.S. geographical/ political fracture lines mirror those of its so-called “conservative”-versus-“liberal” “culture wars,” which, in turn, echo the split between the “Confederate” (slave-holding) and non-Confederate (“free”) states before and during the U.S. Civil War (1861-1865). [2]
- U.S. educational curricula are decided at the state—not national—level, with no national regularizing mechanism. [3]
- This has been the case throughout the nation's history.
- Substantial evidence documents deliberate intervention in Southern history teaching, as early as 1865, by Confederate- and Lost-Cause-ideologically affiliated “knowledge groups.” [4]

Using discourse-analysis tools, and the non-moralizing psychological model of systems-justification theory, I argue that, lacking a standardized history curriculum, after over 160 years of divergent education, Americans at this point exist in a phenomenological and epistemological divide regarding “the facts” of race, slavery, and

the U.S. Civil War. Presented with a subtly but meaningfully different set of “facts,” documented via a regionally canonized set of mediated-historical texts depicting “benign” slavery and “proof” of inherent Black violence, students in “Confederate-curriculum” areas extrapolate the inevitable distorted, *but internally logical*, conclusions—including a terrifying, readily triggered conviction that Black political empowerment creates a direct threat to their and their loved ones’ lives.

U.S. polarization on race, I argue, is thus not merely a question of “beliefs” or opinion, but of identifiable differences in *the “knowledge” we start from*. Clarifying specifics of misrepresentation is—perhaps—a step toward potentially unlearning it.

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[1] Conceptually, I draw here on the concept of “dual/ duelling epistemologies” recently elucidated by researchers of the knowledge-and-belief schisms between neighboring Palestinians and Israelis regarding their mutual territorial history. Notably, this work is being done by scholars from “both sides” of the divide.

[2] This point is both self-evident, and fraught with taboo, in contemporary U.S. “mainstream” discourse.

It is also conditioned by the wider spread of “Confederate” meanings beyond the historical U.S. Confederacy (as see e.g. David A. Graham, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/10/confederate-monuments-survey-race-religion-education-divide/671639/> ).

[3] This remarkable fact seems to strike most Americans as so natural as to be unworthy of comment, much less scholarly analysis.

[4] Cf., e.g., the “Confederate Catechism” of the Daughters of the American Revolution, as at <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/stone-cornelia-branch> .