

Newsweek

Why HBO's 'Confederate' Series Will Inevitably End Up Condoning Racism

By [James Thornton Harris](#) On 8/16/17 at 6:45 AM

[This article first appeared on the History News Network.](#)

Does it matter that a new HBO series on a modern-day confederacy, complete with black slavery, will be produced by two white men?

I believe that the race of the creators and directors is secondary. If the network announced that this TV show was to be directed by black men (or women) and had an all-black cast and crew, it would be laudatory, but not exculpatory.

No matter who writes, directs and acts in it, it will still be offensive and a prime example of what philosopher [Herbert Marcuse](#) called "repressive tolerance."

The series will turn four hundred years of African-American struggle into a glossy package, a sixty-minute commodity to be consumed by a white audience.

By way of background, in mid-July, HBO announced that the writers and "showrunners" of the hit series *Game of Thrones*, David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, would produce a new series titled *Confederate*, to be shown in 2018 or 2019.

The network said the new series will depict events that culminate in the Third American Civil War and will include characters from opposing sides of a Mason-Dixon Demilitarized Zone, including slave hunters and abolitionists.

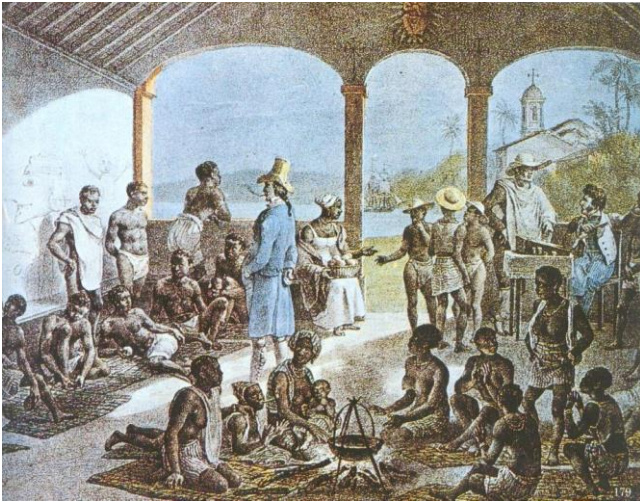
Ironically (and perhaps not coincidentally) in 2019 we will mark the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first Africans in colonial Virginia.

After HBO's surprise announcement, the network was immediately criticized for assigning two white men to this treatment of American history.

As author Roxanne Gay stated in the *New York Times*,

My exhaustion with the idea of Confederate is multiplied by the realization that this show is the brainchild of two white men who oversee a show (Game of Thrones) that has few people of color to speak of and where sexual violence is often gratuitous and treated as no big deal.

In its defense, HBO pointed out that two of the new show's executive producers are African Americans, Nichelle Tramble Spellman (*The Good Wife*) and Malcolm Spellman (*Empire*). If we view this network's announcement in the light of Marcuse's theory, we can see employing black producers in no way reduces the exploitative, regressive nature of the series.



Marche aux Negres, engraved by Isidore Laurent Deroy (1797–1886) between 1827 and 1835, after the painting by Johann Moritz Rugendas. Public domain

Marcuse (1898-1979) originally set forth his theory of repressive tolerance in [A Critique of Pure Tolerance](#), first published in 1965. While space does not permit a detailed explanation of his thesis, this controversial new TV series is a prime example of the philosopher's point that "what is proclaimed and practiced as tolerance today, is in many of its most effective manifestations serving the cause of oppression."

According to Marcuse, by portraying what may at first seem "subversive" or "liberating" to mainstream audiences, the nation's mass media make the continuing oppression of certain groups acceptable. The rarely stated but central purpose of the broadcast media is to promote mass consumption and to reinforce the status quo.

The America-based philosopher wrote, "Toleration toward that which is radically evil now appears as good because it serves the cohesion of the whole on the road to affluence or more affluence."

He added that in his view, the "toleration" or publication of dissenting or minority viewpoints is one of the establishment's "most effective manifestations serving the cause of oppression."

If Marcuse was commenting on CNN today, I think he would note that the proposed HBO show will not illuminate or clarify the harm that four hundred years of racism has done in our nation. It will only serve to inure the bubble-dwelling white viewers of HBO to the actual impact of discrimination.

The centuries long struggle of African Americans will be served up as a commodity. It will be consumed by the well-heeled audience, digested by them and finally excreted out, devoid of value.

It will allow HBO viewers to think "Oh, that's slavery. Wow, that was terrible. I'm glad it's over and our nation has moved on."

It is possible that Benioff and Weiss are well meaning progressives, but their actual political beliefs are irrelevant. Their new show will be undoubtedly touted by HBO as “the shocking new series from the creators of *Game of Thrones*.”

The audience will be expecting battles with dragons, White Walkers, Cersei Lannister and Daenerys Targaryen. Anything else will be disappointing to the network’s image-gorged viewers.

After the series is ended, the ugly reality of slavery and the enormous economic benefits it brought to 18th and 19th century white America, will once again be consigned to the back shelf of American history.

The terrible legacy of racism, which our country is just beginning to address, will be presented as a fantastic show, with evil villains (probably white) and superficial heroes (probably black). The difficult complexities of racial interaction in America will be simplified to us vs. them and past (bad) vs. future (good).

Herbert Marcuse is best known for his books *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) and *Eros and Civilization* (1955). Although his political theories are grounded in Marxist philosophy, he was a severe critic of the Soviet Union. From 1943-1950 he worked for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) as an analyst of the Russian government.

While Marcuse had great popularity among college students in the 1960s, his Marxist-tinged ideas fell out of favor in the post-Cold War period. In the Trump era, reading Marcuse has again become highly relevant, even though he wrote *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* in 1965 when the Vietnam War was in its infancy, Martin Luther King Jr. was leading the march to Selma and cable television was a service limited to a few isolated valleys in Pennsylvania.

(Note that a large portion of Marcuse’s original essay can be found [online](#).)

Finally, I must admit that I am a dedicated Game of Thrones viewer. I’ve seen every episode and frequently watch them with friends in a viewing party. The characters are fascinating, the acting impeccable and the graphics are eye-popping.

But if TV viewers really want to understand slavery, they would be better served by visiting the new National Museum of African American History in Washington D.C. or the museum of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in Alabama.

James Thornton Harris is the author of www.TheEvilInOurSoil.com, a history of the creation of slavery in colonial America.