

The Oppressed

Dr. Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* might be better titled *A Proletarian's History of the United States*. In the first three chapters Zinn looks at not only the history of the conquerors, rulers, and leaders; but also the history of the enslaved, the oppressed, and the led. Like any American History book covering the time period of 1492 until the early 1760's, *A People's History* tells the story of the "discovery" of America, early colonization by European powers, the governing of these colonies, and the rising discontent of the colonists towards their leaders. Zinn, however, stresses the role of a number of groups and ideas that most books neglect or skim over: the plight of the Native Americans that had their numbers reduced by up to 90% by European invasion, the equality of these peoples in many regards to their European counterparts, the importation of slaves into America and their unspeakable travel conditions and treatment, the callous buildup of the agricultural economy around these slaves, the discontented colonists whose plight was ignored by the ruling bourgeoisie, and most importantly, the rising class and racial struggles in America that Zinn correctly credits as being the root of many of the problems that we as a nation have today. It is refreshing to see a book that spends space based proportionately around the people that lived this history. When Columbus arrived on the Island of Haiti, there were 39 men on board his ships compared to the 250,000 Indians on Haiti. If the white race accounts for less than two hundredths of one percent of the island's population, it is only fair that the natives get more than the two or three sentences that they get in most history books. Zinn cites population figures, first person accounts, and his own interpretation of their effects to create an accurate and fair depiction of the first two and a half centuries of European life on the continent of North America.

The core part of any history book is obviously history. In the first three chapters of the book, Zinn presents the major historical facts of the first 250 years of American history starting from when Christopher Columbus's *Niña*, *Pinta*, and *Santa Maria* landed in the Bahamas on October 12, 1492. It was there that Europeans and Native Americans first came into contact; the Arawak natives came out to greet the whites, and the whites were only interested in finding the gold. From the Bahamas, Columbus sailed to Cuba and *Hispañola*, the present-day home of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. One-hundred fifteen years later and 1,500 miles to the north, the colony of Jamestown was founded by a group of English settlers led by John Smith; shortly after that the Massachusetts Bay Colony was founded by a group of Puritans known to us today as the Pilgrims. Because of uneasy and hostile relations with the nearby Pequot Indians, the Pequot War soon started between the colonists and the natives. Needless to say, the colonists won, but it was at the expense of several dozen of their own and thousands of Pequots. But despite Indian conflict, exposure, starvation, famine, disease, and other hardships, the English kept coming to America. In 1619 they were settled enough that they started bringing African slaves into the middle colonies. Before resorting to Africans, the colonists had tried to subdue the Indians, but that idea failed before it was created. Zinn writes:

"They couldn't force the Indians to work for them, as Columbus had done. They were outnumbered, and while, with superior firearms, they could massacre the Indians, they would face massacre in return. They could not capture them and keep them enslaved; the Indians were tough,

resourceful, defiant, and at home in these woods, as the transplanted Englishmen were not.

"White servants had not yet been brought over in sufficient quantity.... As for free white settlers, many of them were skilled craftsmen, or even men of leisure back in England, who were so little inclined to work the land that John Smith... had to declare a kind of martial law, organize them into work gangs, and force them into the fields for survival.....

"Black slaves were the answer. And it was natural to consider imported blacks as slaves, even if the institution of slavers would not be regularized and legalized for several decades" (25).

Black slavery became an American institution that the southern and middle colonies began to depend on for their economic success. The first stirrings of resentment began to come not from the slaves but from the proletariat in the form of the frontier whites. Nathaniel Bacon led a revolution against Virginia governor William Berkeley and his conciliatory Indian policies. Bacon and others who lived on the western frontier wanted more protection from the government against Indian attacks. Berkeley and his cronies were so concerned with their own financial and political gain that they ignored Bacon's Rebellion and continued their policies. In the end, Bacon died a natural death (he caught a nasty virus) and his friends were hanged, but for the first time ever, the government was forced to listen to the grievances of the underclass that had been for the most part largely ignorable up to that point. Meanwhile, class distinctions became sharper and the poor grew in number. Citizens were put into work houses for debt and occasionally rioted against the wealthy. More and more though, the anger turned from being just a class war to being a war of nationalities. Impressment and other British policies distracted the colonists from being mad at the bourgeoisie to being mad at their mother country. At the end of chapter three, tension is mounting, pitting the Americans against the English and the workers against the rich. The atmosphere was ripe for revolution.

The reason that this book might be better titled *A Proletarian's History of the United States* is that Zinn's main focus on the book besides the actual history is the effect of the history on the common people and the workers, or proletarians as Marx and Engels referred to them. While most history books focus on the dominating Europeans, Zinn focuses on the dominated Native Americans, who Zinn holds to be at least as advanced as their European masters. He writes that

"Columbus and his successors were not coming into an empty wilderness, but into a world which in some places was as densely populated as Europe itself, where the culture was complex, where human relations were more egalitarian than in Europe, and where the relations among men, women, children, and nature were more beautifully worked out than perhaps any place in the world.

"They were a people without a written language, but with their own laws, their poetry, their history kept in memory and passed on, in an oral vocabulary more complex than Europe's, accompanied by song, dance, and ceremonial drama. They paid careful attention to the development of personality, intensity of will, independence and flexibility, passion and potency, to their partnership with one another and with nature" (21-22).

In the middle of the first chapter, Zinn uses the historical treatment of Columbus to explain his own view on teaching history.

"Thus began the history, five hundred years ago, of the European invasion of Indian settlements in America. That beginning, when you read [Bartolomé de] Las Casas... is conquest, slavery, death. When we read

history books given to the children in the United States, it all starts with heroic adventure -- there is no bloodshed -- and Columbus Day is a celebration" (7).

He goes on to vituperate historian Samuel Eliot Morison for his brief and buried mention of Columbus's genocide of the natives. This is one of the most heinous crimes a historian can commit, Zinn says, because "Outright lying or quiet omission takes the risk of discovery which, when made, might arouse the reader to rebel against the writer. To state the facts, however, and then bury them in a mass of other information is to say to the reader: yes, mass murder took place, but it's not that important... it should effect very little what we do in the world" (8). Zinn says that "selection, simplification, [and] emphasis" (8) are necessary to the historian, but he chooses to take a different stance in his writings.

"...I prefer to tell the story of the discovery of America from the viewpoint of the Arawaks, of the Constitution from the standpoint of the slaves, of Andrew Jackson as seen by the Cherokees, of the Civil War as seen by the New York Irish... of the First World War as seen by socialists, the Second World War as seen by pacifists, the New Deal as seen by the blacks in Harlem, the postwar American empire as seen by peons in Latin America. And so on, to the limited extent that any one person, however he or she strains, can "see" history from the standpoint of others" (10).

Zinn continues his identification with the oppressed as he discusses black-white relations. He says that blacks and whites are not naturally prejudiced against each other as some would have us believe; he points to the fact that laws actually had to be passed to keep blacks and whites from fraternizing. Servants and slaves of different races saw each other as oppressed workers first and as members of a specific race second. On the topic of slavery, Zinn berates the American system, calling it "lifelong, morally crippling, destructive of family ties, without hope of any future" (27). Some argue that African tribes had slavery of their own so it was a part of their culture to begin with, but Zinn says that "the 'slaves' of Africa were more like the serfs of Europe -- in other words, like most of the population of Europe" (27). Zinn commiserates with the plight of the oppressed frontier whites, making Nathaniel Bacon out to be a hero. Over the course of the next 80 years, Zinn cites routine injustices against the working and under classes, saying that it "seems quite clear that the class lines hardened through the colonial period; the distinction between rich and poor became sharper" (47).

It is refreshing and commendable to see a history text that takes a stance on the side of the peoples that seldom get represented. Columbus's treatment of the Native Americans was atrocious, abominable, and abhorrent, yet most history texts treat him as one the greatest men to have ever lived. If your value as a human being is measured by the number of lives you ruin, people you kill, and civilizations you destroy, then Columbus is on par with Josef Stalin. This example may seem extreme, but both men were directly responsible for the deaths of millions on innocent civilians and caused sheer terror and panic among millions of other people. The difference is that Columbus did it in the name of exploration and human progress, which Zinn correctly calls a bit of a misnomer, while Stalin did it to achieve his political ambitions, which Columbus was certainly not without himself. Columbus committed horrible atrocities, and Zinn accurately portrays them from a unique standpoint, which gives long overdue respect and recognition to the millions of Indians who died in the name of progress. Equally accurate

is Zinn's portrayal of colonial relations. Both African slaves and proletarian whites were pushed around, tormented, and used as pawns in the political game of chess for the benefit of the bourgeoisie. Zinn asserts that there were clear contentions between the races that ultimately led to the revolution when the anger of the masses that was originally directed primarily at the bourgeoisie was redirected against England in the form of rhetoric, concessions, and propaganda calling for loyalty to America's upper classes and rebellion, first quiet and then loud, against England. "[The bond of loyalty] was the language of liberty and equality, which could unite just enough whites to fight a Revolution against England, without ending either slavery or inequality" (58). Zinn is absolutely correct in seeing the ulterior motives of our founding fathers; they realized that splitting from England would be good for them financially, socially, and politically. What they did was harness the people's anger against them and used it, quite ironically, for their own advancement.

Ultimately, for the first 250 years of America's history, there was oppression and class warfare on varying scales that are traditionally ignored or unemphasized by traditional history texts, but Zinn masterfully shows the reader are major and influential parts of American history. To ignore the plight of the conquered and oppressed is to ignore a part of history that cannot be ignored.