Oppressed Essay, Research Paper

The Oppressed Dr. Howard Zinn s A People s History of the United States might bebetter titled A Proletarian s History of the United States. In the firstthree chapters Zinn looks at not only the history of the conquerors,rulers, and leaders; but also the history of the enslaved, theoppressed, and the led. Like any American History book covering the timeperiod of 1492 until the early 1760 s, A People s History tells thestory of the discovery of America, early colonization by Europeanpowers, the governing of these colonies, and the rising discontent ofthe colonists towards their leaders. Zinn, however, stresses the role ofa number of groups and ideas that most books neglect or skim over: theplight of the Native Americans that had their numbers reduced by up to90% by European invasion, the equality of these peoples in many regardsto their European counterparts, the importation of slaves into Americaand their unspeakable travel conditions and treatment, the callousbuildup of the agricultural economy around these slaves, thediscontented colonists whose plight was ignored by the rulingbourgeoisie, and most importantly, the rising class and racial strugglesin America that Zinn correctly credits as being the root of many of theproblems that we as a nation have today. It is refreshing to see a bookthat spends space based proportionately around the people that livedthis history. When Columbus arrived on the Island of Haiti, there were39 men on board his ships compared to the 250,000 Indians on Haiti. Ifthe white race accounts for less than two hundredths of one percent ofthe island s population, it is only fair that the natives get more thanthe two or three sentences that they get in most history books. Zinncites population figures, first person accounts, and his owninterpretation of their effects to create an accurate and fair depictionof the first two and a half centuries of European life on the continentof North America. The core part of any history book is obviously history. In the firstthree chapters of the book, Zinn presents the major historical facts ofthe first 250 years of American history starting from when ChristopherColumbus s Ni a, Pinta, and Santa Maria landed in the Bahamas on October12, 1492. It was there that Europeans and Native Americans first cameinto contact; the Arawak natives came out to greet the whites, and thewhites were only interested in finding the gold. From the Bahamas,Columbus sailed to Cuba and Hispa ola, the present-day home of Haiti andthe Dominican Republic. One-hundred fifteen years later and 1,500 milesto the north, the colony of Jamestown was founded by a group of Englishsettlers led by John Smith; shortly after that the Massachusetts BayColony was founded by a group of Puritans known to us today as thePilgrims. Because of uneasy and hostile relations with the nearby PequotIndians, the Pequot War soon started between the colonists and thenatives. Needless to say, the colonists won, but it was at the expenseof several dozen of their own and thousands of Pequots. But despiteIndian conflict, exposure, starvation, famine, disease, and otherhardships, the English kept coming to America. In 1619 they were settledenough that they started bringing African slaves into the middlecolonies. Before resorting to Africans, the colonists had tried tosubdue the Indians, but that idea failed before it was created. Zinnwrites: They couldn t force the Indians to work for them, as Columbus haddone. They were outnumbered, and while, with superior firearms, theycould massacre the Indians, they would face massacre in return. Theycould not capture them and keep them enslaved; the Indians were tough,resourceful, defiant, and at home in these woods, as the transplantedEnglishmen were not. White servants had not yet been brought over in sufficientquantity…. As for free white settlers, many of them were skilledcraftsmen, or even men of leisure back in England, who were so littleinclined to work the land that John Smith… had to declare a kind ofmartial law, organize them into work gangs, and force them into thefields for survival….. Black slaves were the answer. And it was natural to consider importedblacks as slaves, even if the institution of slavers would not beregularized and legalized for several decades (25). Black slavery became an American institution that the southern andmiddle colonies began to depend on for their economic success. The firststirrings of resentment began to come not from the slaves but from theproletariat in the form of the frontier whites. Nathaniel Bacon led arevolution against Virginia governor William Berkeley and hisconciliatory Indian policies. Bacon and others who lived on the westernfrontier wanted more protection from the government against Indianattacks. Berkeley and his cronies were so concerned with their ownfinancial and political gain that they ignored Bacon s Rebellion andcontinued their policies. In the end, Bacon died a natural death (hecaught a nasty virus) and his friends were hanged, but for the firsttime ever, the government was forced to listen to the grievances of theunderclass that had been for the most part largely ignorable up to thatpoint. Meanwhile, class distinctions became sharper and the poor grew innumber. Citizens were put into work houses for debt and occasionallyrioted against the wealthy. More and more though, the anger turned frombeing just a class war to being a war of nationalities. Impressment andother British policies distracted the colonists from being mad at thebourgeoisie to being mad at their mother country. At the end of chapterthree, tension is mounting, pitting the Americans against the Englishand the workers against the rich. The atmosphere was ripe forrevolution. The reason that this book might be better titled A Proletarian sHistory of the United States is that Zinn s main focus on the bookbesides the actual history is the effect of the history on the commonpeople and the workers, or proletarians as Marx and Engels referred tothem. While most history books focus on the dominating Europeans, Zinn

focuses on the dominated Native Americans, who Zinn holds to be at leastas 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 Europeitself, where the culture was complex, where human relations were moreegalitarian than in Europe, and where the relations among men, women,children, and nature were more beautifully worked out than perhaps anyplace in the world. They were a people without a written language, but with their ownlaws, their poetry, their history kept in memory and passed on, in anoral vocabulary more complex than Europe s, accompanied by song, dance,and ceremonial drama. They paid careful attention to the development ofpersonality, intensity of will, independence and flexibility, passionand potency, to their partnership with one another and with nature (21-22). In the middle of the first chapter, Zinn uses the historical treatmentof Columbus to explain his own view on teaching history. Thus began the history, five hundred years ago, of the Europeaninvasion of Indian settlements in America. That beginning, when you read[Bartolom de] Las Casas… is conquest, slavery, death. When we readhistory books given to the children in the United States, it all startswith heroic adventure — there is no bloodshed — and Columbus Day is acelebration (7). He goes on to vituperate historian Samuel Eliot Morison for his briefand buried mention of Columbus s genocide of the natives. This is one ofthe 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 statethe facts, however, and then bury them in a mass of other information isto say to the reader: yes, mass murder took place, but it s not thatimportant… it should effect very little what we do in the world (8). Zinn says that selection, simplification, [and] emphasis (8) arenecessary to the historian, but he chooses to take a different stance inhis writings. …I prefer to tell the story of the discovery of America from theviewpoint of the Arawaks, of the Constitution from the standpoint of theslaves, of Andrew Jackson as seen by the Cherokees, of the Civil War asseen by the New York Irish… of the First World War as seen bysocialists, the Second World War as seen by pacifists, the New Deal asseen by the blacks in Harlem, the postwar American empire as seen bypeons in Latin America. And so on, to the limited extent that any oneperson, however he or she strains, can see history from the standpointof others (10). Zinn continues his identification with the oppressed as he discussesblack-white relations. He says that blacks and whites are not naturallyprejudiced against each other as some would have us believe; he pointsto the fact that laws actually had to be passed to keep blacks andwhites from fraternizing. Servants and slaves of different races saweach other as oppressed workers first and as members of a specific racesecond. 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 hadslavery 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 ofEurope — 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 80years, Zinn cites routine injustices against the working and underclasses, saying that it seems quite clear that the class lines hardenedthrough the colonial period; the distinction between rich and poorbecame sharper (47). It is refreshing and commendable to see a history text that takes astance 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 mento have ever lived. If your value as a human being is measured by thenumber of lives you ruin, people you kill, and civilizations youdestroy, then Columbus is on par with Josef Stalin. This example mayseem extreme, but both men were directly responsible for the deaths ofmillions on innocent civilians and caused sheer terror and panic amongmillions of other people. The difference is that Columbus did it in thename of exploration and human progress, which Zinn correctly calls a bitof a misnomer, while Stalin did it to achieve his political ambitions,which Columbus was certainly not without himself. Columbus committedhorrible atrocities, and Zinn accurately portrays them from a uniquestandpoint, which gives long overdue respect and recognition to themillions of Indians who died in the name of progress. Equally accurateis Zinn s portrayal of colonial relations. Both African slaves andproletarian whites were pushed around, tormented, and used as pawns inthe political game of chess for the benefit of the bourgeoisie. Zinnasserts that there were clear contentions between the races thatultimately led to the revolution when the anger of the masses that wasoriginally directed primarily at the bourgeoisie was redirected againstEngland in the form of rhetoric, concessions, and propaganda calling forloyalty to America s upper classes and rebellion, first quiet and thenloud, against England. [The bind of loyalty] was the language ofliberty and equality, which could unite just enough whites to fight aRevolution against England, without ending either slavery or inequality (58). Zinn is absolutely correct in seeing the ulterior motives of ourfounding fathers; they realized that splitting from England would begood for them financially, socially, and politically. What they did washarness 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 wasoppression and class warfare on varying scales that are traditionallyignored or unemphasized by traditional history texts, but Zinnmasterfully shows the reader are major and influencial parts of Americanhistory. To ignore the plight of the conquored and oppressed is toignore a part of history that cannot be ignored.