The Opressed Essay, Research Paper

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 Ni?a, 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 Hispa?ola, 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

[Bartolom? 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 bind 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 influencial parts of American

history. To ignore the plight of the conquored and oppressed is to

ignore a part of history that cannot be ignored.