

# A People's History of the United States

## Book review

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1982

a review of

Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, Harper & Row, New York, 1980, 600 pages plus index.

Howard Zinn is a "radical revolutionary," whose *People's History* is aptly named given its kinship with the various "Peoples Republics." In fact, this "wild" book was conceived as a means of slaking Zinn's "thirst for notoriety in the pecking order of the radical left," as well as for the enrichment of himself and Harper & Row. So saith the reviewer for *Barron's* [1] the financiers' weekly.

Not to be outdone was Harvard's Oscar Handlin, ranting in the *American Scholar*. [2] "Talk of liberty and country Zinn considers a rhetorical device to conceal rule by the rich few," in Handlin's outraged estimation. "The deranged quality of his fairy tale," cannot be a total surprise, he added judiciously, "Since Zinn does not comprehend the simple meaning of words."

Of course, these comments demonstrate only that the book in question has achieved such a wide popularity as to arouse the emotions of this pair of reactionaries. And also that it has just about nothing to do with what they would consider to be the serious business of American history, namely, our political and cultural pluralism, economic abundance, and endless upward social mobility and contentment

At the very end of the book (which lacks preface or introduction), Zinn tells us what by that time we must have already figured out: his *History* is "disrespectful of governments and respectful of people's movements of resistance," and seeks to represent the "submerged, deflected, common interest" of the 99% who have been subject to "all the controls of power and punishment, enticements and concessions, diversions and decoys" of the 1% in power.

Beginning with the murderous conduct of Columbus toward the Arawaks in his quest for gold and slaves, Zinn moves quickly on through the early colonial period, pausing to focus on Bacon's Rebellion of 1676, [3] the Virginia leveler rising that was both anti-aristocratic and anti-Indian, which united black slaves and white servants.

In this general context, the narrative might have made mention of the periodic instances of whites joining Indians (or refusing repatriation following captivity by Indians). An early example was Thomas Morton of Merrymount, who found the unrestrained, playful life of the Algonquin more attractive than that of the Puritan, bringing to mind the 1679 dictum of Increase Mather: "People are ready to run wild into the woods again and to be as heathenish as ever, if you do not prevent it." [4]

Zinn notes that beginning with Bacon's Rebellion, there had been eighteen uprisings aimed at overthrowing colonial governments, six black rebellions, and forty riots "of various origins," by 1760. Demystifying such figures as Thomas Paine and Samuel Adams, as well as John Locke, the narrative provides a fine exposition of the American Independence movement in the chapter, "A Kind of Revolution." One is reminded here of Jesse Lemisch's important history-from-the-bottom-up work in the 1960s, especially concerning the radicalism of colonial sailors. Zinn

has certainly extended this approach in his *People's History*, both in his commitment to telling the story of the oppressed classes as an accessible narrative whole and in his style of often quoting the so-often suppressed or ignored words of the individuals of those classes.

His next topic, however, women in the nineteenth century, while lively and vivid, is a bit lacking in coherence. The text supplies a welter of illustrations of victimization and resistance, almost at random from assorted decades. And the changes that were being rung in during the 1820s and 1830s, in terms of the experience of women and the family, are not discussed in terms of such dominant processes as the decisive acceleration of industrialization, but only vaguely linked to the observation that “the world outside was becoming harder, more commercial, more demanding.” (These changes are discussed with much greater depth and precision in Carl Degler's *At Odds*, [5] which was not available to Zinn at the time.)

The “Jacksonian Democracy” era was an axial period in terms of basic questions of modern American politics and society. Behind the orthodox treatment of this period of the late 1820s and 1830s—the nonsense about democracy, rise of the common man, etc.—is the reality of great struggles and modernist modes of their suppression. Yet the genocide of the Cherokees while obviously worthy of attention is virtually the only aspect of the period that receives consideration. This is an example of Zinn's tendency toward an episodic and marginalist approach, to which I will return again.

Disregarding the Owenite and religious phase of American utopian socialism, which was centered in the 1820s, we are left with the secular communitarian (largely Fourierist) efforts of the early and middle 1840s, which constituted a major national phenomenon. The scores of utopian experiments, urged on by Horace Greely and others, were a major social protest, albeit one often ignored by historians. Which makes it the sadder that Zinn does not mention it, despite the surge of published works on the subject since 1970—presumably influenced by the contemporary commune revival.

In the 1950s the writings of Kenneth Stampp and Stanley Elkins provided the dominant view of black history, namely, that it was so harsh as to reduce blacks to docile, servile Samboes who possessed no autonomous family life or culture. Since the 1960s, Eugene Genovese, George Rawick, Herbert Gutman, John Biassingame, and others have effectively destroyed the slave-as-Sambo stereotype, producing much evidence that, despite the horror that was chattel slavery, a family stability and cultural integrity was maintained. Zinn makes use of much of the recent critical scholarship and certainly conveys effectively the rigors and resistance involved, in his very strong “Slavery without Submission.”

One omission, however, is any reference to the huge mid-'70s fracas occasioned by Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman's *Time on the Cross* (1974). The controversy, which quickly overran the confines of academe, centered on their contention, purportedly demonstrated by quantification analysis of economic data, that slaves were very productive workers with a high standard of living compared to Northern wage-laborers, and that slavery was viable, profitable political economy which utilized some very modern industrial relations practices of subjugation.

It is beyond the scope of this review to delineate and discuss the arguments, the main lines of which are discernible merely via summarizing Fogel and Engerman's thesis. The Marxists, it may be noted, seemed to boil over the most, apparently—though this was not always revealed—due to the damage *Time on the Cross* offers to the historical schema of an inevitably failing slavery giving way to the more progressive industrial capitalism, with its modern worker advanced beyond crude slave exploitation. [6]

No one has yet come forth to do for the U.S. what E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* does for England regarding depth of historical treatment of the Industrial Revolution's arrival. Probably the closest is Norman Ware's *The Industrial Worker, 1840–1860* (1924) [7], plus there are, recently, some excellent local studies, the best of which is probably Anthony F.C. Wallace's *Rockdale: The Growth of an American Village in the Early Industrial Revolution* (1978).

As Zinn seems to prefer focusing on the most submerged elements at any given time, his work tends to neglect the totality of development and to exhibit the episodic and often marginalist cast referred to above. Which is not to say that his book is not engaging, informative, passionate, and extremely well-written, not even to say that it isn't the best critical survey of American history available. But there is a neglect of process and structure and of the underlying socio-cultural matrix. [8]

One example is the absence of attention to education, a central mode of socialization. No mention of Horace Mann, the reproduction of the mythology of equality, the need to create a modern disciplined work force, no reference to works like Colin Greer's *The Great School Legend* (1972) or Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis' *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976).

Similarly, a book on domination and revolt would do well, one would think, to delve into the areas of popular culture and containing ideologies. To discuss—or at least mention such topics as Horatio Alger, Social Darwinism, religious expression, spectator sports, etc. of the welter and web of American capitalism's evolving context, perhaps employing works like Daniel Rodgers' *The Work Ethic in Industrial America* (1978), Lawrence Chenoweth's *The American Dream of Success* (1974), or Stewart Ewen's *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of Consumer Culture* (1976). [9]

Returning to the specifics of *A People's History*, one finds a persistent use of firsthand/participant accounts, which often provide unique insights as well as a compelling feel for the events recounted. Sometimes, however, the reader is confronted with what amounts to little more than lists of dramatic strikes and riots, which lack continuity or analysis.

On one page the fact that episodes of insurrection “have gone unrecorded in traditional histories” is noted, and on the next, that (during the 1830s) “trade unions were forming.” [10] The relation of unions to the general disappearance of insurgency, a pregnant topic, is not addressed. On the very next two pages is a brief account of the 1837 Flour Riot in New York, which took place following a protest of high prices by the Equal Rights Party (locofocos). [11] A casual connection is strongly implied, but the narrative perhaps should have noted that not one of the 53 rioters arrested was a member of the Equal Rights Party [12] which might have been used to shed light on reform politics vis-a-vis anti-commodity violence.

Following a lucid treatment of the “Robber Baron” era, the Great Explosion of 1877, Haymarket, and the Populist movements of the 1880s and '90s, with special attention to the double exploitation of blacks and women, Zinn proceeds to explore the nature of Progressive era reform, as the necessary self-regulation of the new corporate order. Here he skillfully draws on such disparate historians as Gabriel Kolko, Robert Wiebe, James Weinstein, and Richard Hofstadter in a strong and cogent section, which also dissects the usually neglected but important National Civic Federation.

Twice as much space (25 pages) is devoted to the Industrial Workers of the World, an exciting panorama emphasizing the romantic and heroically militant side of the IWW. A deeper treatment might have raised questions about the integrative nature of even the IWW (qua unionism) [13], e.g. its industrial union structure, support of Taylorism.

“War Is the Health of the State” is a very adequate if brief chapter on World War I, but not without one or two minor errors. The number of casualties in the first Battle of the Marne is set far too high at 500,000 for each side, and Jack London, who died in 1916, is cited as a Socialist who became pro-war after U.S. entry in 1917.

Zinn covers two of the major post-war strikes, that of Seattle and steel, noting that both were throttled by the unions, while ignoring the 1919 coal strike. The several months' walk-out of 400,000 miners was the third major strike, also betrayed by its union.

The U.S. since 1920 occupies about 225 of the book's 600 pages, but the '20s receive short shrift indeed—5 pages. There are fewer than two lines on the Ku Klux Klan, the major social phenomenon of the decade with its sudden rise to a peak membership of almost 5 million members. [14] The '20s are described as a period of “mob violence and race hatred everywhere,” however, which is somewhat misleading. Actually, race riots—compared with the immediate post-war years had virtually disappeared, and lynchings declined very sharply from the early 1920s on.

It is not surprising, given the space accorded to it, that standard works, like Frederick Lewis Allen's *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen-Twenties* (1931), as well as recent ones, such as Paul Carter's *Another Part of the Twenties* (1977), are not included in the bibliography.

Arriving at the Great Depression of the '30s—which for some reason receives less attention than World War II—several questions about popular opposition arise. One question mark concerns the widespread passivity of the urban proletariat during the Depression. Many writers have compared the militancy of say, farmers, miners, and lumberjacks (especially farmers) to workers in the industrial cities with some surprise, [15] a situation with obvious implications for Marxist theory, and one evidently undetected by Zinn.

Another difficulty arises in the matter of government recognition of unions. The text tells us more than once that big business opposed unions, but that the 1935 Wagner Act was passed to stabilize the system via federal assistance to union organizing. This puzzling description raises a basic question about the nature of the state, by ignoring evidence which depicts some corporations in the '30s as recognizing the rationalizing and disciplining role of industrial unionism in the face of a slowly-building worker initiative. [16]

A third problem in the area of '30s movements concerns Zinn's non-appraisal of the Communist Party. We are told that the CP led textile strikes in the late '20s, established councils of the unemployed, and organized against race discrimination, and further on that by "around 1960" the CP leaders were in jail and McCarthy period attacks had been successful in breaking up the "Communist-radical upsurge of the New Deal and wartime years." An obvious omission is the list of reasons why people voluntarily, aside from Cold War pressures, withdrew support from the CP. The Party's general subservience to instructions from the USSR, its Popular Front conservatism, the Moscow Trials, the Soviet pact with Hitler in 1939, the vigorous role of the Party cadre in policing the World War II strike ban, the crushing of the Hungarian Revolt of 1956—Zinn mentions none of these things.

The mechanics of McCarthyism, with emphasis on its genesis as a liberal project, is well-handled (even without Alger Hiss), but the '50s are seen only in terms of political repression. Besides Russia, military spending, and fallout shelters, there isn't a word on suburbs, tranquilizers, the persistence of wildcat strikes, the Beat Generation, rock 'n roll, consumption and conformism, etc. Nothing on American character and values as discussed, for example, by the critical yet popular works of David Riesman (*The Lonely Crowd*, 1961), William H. Whyte (*The Organization Man*, 1956), or Vance Packard.

The '60s are portrayed in two chapters, on blacks and Vietnam; the '70s in "Surprises," evenly divided among women, prisoners and Indians, and in a chapter devoted to Watergate, Carter, CIA excesses and the general decline of political legitimacy.

In a book which catalogs so much active discontent, it is surprising the Mayaguez incident of 1975 is accorded several pages while the farm worker movement is ignored and gay rights and the whole ecology/technology question [17] merit about a page each. And in a time when Martin Jay's dictum as to "our culture's uncanny ability to absorb and defuse even its most uncompromising opponents" [18] comes to mind with maddening insistence, the absence of any cultural critique is disappointing.

*A People's History* concludes with a most provocative chapter, "The Coming Revolt of the Guards," in which Zinn finds that "for the first time in the nation's history, perhaps, both the lower classes and the middle classes, the prisoners and the guards, have become disillusioned with the system" and that this points in the direction of a "general withdrawal of loyalty" from the dominant order. Very briefly sketching what he calls "not a prediction, but a hope," he is not afraid to point in a revolutionary direction from the clearly mounting, massive alienation of our time, which reminds one of Zinn's activist stance over the years. Evidence of erosion of the dominant values is, in fact, legion and yet he is one of the very few to see the real possibilities for liberation which, since the '60s, are opening before us. [19] I find this sense of utopian anticipation a stimulating and fitting end to such a strongly partisan work.

## ENDNOTES:

1. Edward J. Walsh, "A People's History of the United States," BARRON'S, March 24, 1980.
2. Oscar Handlin, "Arawaks," AMERICAN SCHOLAR, Autumn, 1980. Handlin has distinguished himself by such historical revelations as "Boston [in 18457 was a comfortable and well-to-do city in which the people managed to lead contented and healthy lives" From BOSTON'S IMMIGRANTS; his most recent work, simultaneous with Zinn's, is LINCOLN AND THE UNION, a pathetic piece of hagiography.
3. The more obvious candidate for emphasis would be Shay's Rebellion, though a less revealing choice given the compelling proximity of that Massachusetts phenomenon to the framing of the Constitution. An example of the near consensus of this relationship—the demonstrated need to "insure domestic tranquility"—is Daniel Boorstin, THE REPUBLIC OF TECHNOLOGY (New York, 1978), p. 54.

4. Increase Mather, *A DISCOURSE CONCERNING THE DANGER OF APOSTASY*, 1679. A fine monograph about a 19<sup>th</sup> century captive who became a champion of Indian values is Richard Drinnon's *WHITE SAVAGE: THE CASE OF JOHN DUNN HUNTER* (New York, 1972).
5. Carl Degler, *AT ODDS: WOMEN AND THE FAMILY IN AMERICA FROM THE REVOLUTION TO THE PRESENT* (New York, 1980). An indispensable work for its treatment of sexuality and industrialization alone.
6. For example, Sarah Elbert, in her "Good Times on the Cross: A Marxian Review" (*REVIEW OF RADICAL POLITICAL ECONOMICS*), is clearly less concerned with the condition of slaves than with Fogel and Engerman's lack of a "proper historical materialist approach."
7. Norman Ware, *THE INDUSTRIAL WORKER, 1840–1860: THE REACTION OF AMERICAN INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY TO THE ADVANCE OF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION* (Boston, 1924).
8. Attention to the social and cultural texture of modernizing America is perhaps the signal strength of Peter Carroll and David Noble's very valuable *THE FREE AND THE UNFREE: A NEW HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES* (New York, 1977).
9. A significant overview of social history is Rowland Berthoff, *AN UNSETTLED PEOPLE: SOCIAL ORDER AND DISORDER IN AMERICAN HISTORY* (New York, 1971). The "new cultural history" is ably represented by Daniel Calhoun's look at intelligence as a social relation, *THE INTELLIGENCE OF A PEOPLE* (Princeton, 1973).
10. Zinn, pp. 217, 21a
11. Zinn, pp. 219, 220.
12. Walter Hugins, *JACKSONIAN DEMOCRACY AND THE WORKING CLASS* (Stanford, 1960), P. 46.
13. Philip S. Foner, *HISTORY OF THE LABOR MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES, VOL. 4; THE IWW, 1905–1917* (New York, 1965), p. 168: "On one occasion, a member of the U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations suggested that the body might recommend the I.W.W. program to the Congress in order to minimize the industrial unrest." Frank Tannenbaum, *THE LABOR MOVEMENT: ITS CONSERVATIVE FUNCTIONS AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES* (New York, 1921). Minimizes the distinction between "conservative" and "radical" unions in terms of the basic stabilizing role of unions, and submits the IWW's industrial unionism as effective modern control.
14. Vital is Kenneth T. Jackson, *THE KU KLUX KLAN IN THE CITIES, 1915–1930* (New York, 1967) regarding major misconceptions as to the nature of the only nationally important KKK.
15. For example, Edmund Wilson, *THE AMERICAN JITTERS* (New York, 1932) p. 169; Sherwood Anderson, *PUZZLED AMERICA*. (New York, 1936) p. 106; Malcolm Cowley, *THE DREAM OF THE GOLDEN MOUNTAINS: REMEMBERING THE 1930s* (New York, 1980) pp. 104–105, 158.
16. John Zerzan, "Unionization in America," *TELOS* No. 27.
17. Donald Worster, in his review of two books on energy in the December 1981 *JOURNAL OF AMERICAN HISTORY* (p. 745), exemplifies a growing attitude of refusal in this area: "Is there something about technology itself that encourages, even requires, a disregarding attitude toward public welfare?... It may be that dismantling the machines as well as changing the political structure—a Luddite response as well as a populist one—is now called for."
18. Martin Jay, *THE DIALECTICAL IMAGINATION* (Boston, 1973) p. xiii.
19. One (pro-capital) observer sees a life-or-death crisis of capitalism, reflecting "the decline of the private social and economic institutions on which our value system is built and through which most of our daily lives are experienced." Richard Eels, *THE POLITICAL CRISIS OF THE ENTERPRISE SYSTEM* (New York, 1980), p. xx.

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