

Native Americans were Feminists, Not

One of the themes woven through out Zinn's opening chapters is that of the noble savage. The Native Americans lived, in Zinn's view, free of the corrupting influences of civilization. They were pacifists, egalitarians, even progressives. This portrait fits into Zinn's broader historical narrative of white Westerners as uniquely anti-progressive in the history of mankind.

As part of this narrative, Zinn draws a picture of the tribes of North America as gender egalitarians. He writes that "women were important and respected in Iroquois society,"¹ which, he claims, "was in sharp contrast to European values as brought over by the first colonists."²

He writes that the "power was shared between the sexes." The women "took general charge of village affairs," while the men were responsible for "hunting or fishing."³

Women also "had some control over military matters."⁴ According to Zinn, "the women attended clan meetings, stood behind the circle of men who spoke and voted, and removed the men from office if they strayed too far from the wishes of the women."⁵

"The senior women in the village named the men who represented the clans at village and tribal councils,"⁶ where matters of war might be discussed and decided upon.

Where in other parts of the book Zinn – being too shy to stake his claims openly – lets readers make their own inferences about the meaning and implications of such leading passages, here he is more explicit. Quoting UCLA Historian Gary B. Nash, Zinn concludes "thus power was shared between the sexes and the European idea of male dominancy and female subordination in all things was conspicuously absent."⁷

As a quick aside before going further, it's worth pointing out one area where even through the lens' of Zinn's rose-tinted glasses, there was a significant power imbalance between the sexes – divorce proceedings. Yes, despite being otherwise free of the corrupting influences of civilization, the Iroquois did have divorce, at least according to Zinn.

¹ Howard Zinn. *A People's History of the United States* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics; Reissue edition, Kindle, November 17, 2015), 992. <http://a.co/aG5aBfX>

² Zinn, 1005.

³ Zinn, 991.

⁴ Zinn, 999.

⁵ Zinn, 997.

⁶ Zinn, 995.

⁷ Zinn, 1001.

Don't worry though, because divorce always favored the wife. So it's still progressive. According to Zinn, Iroquois society was matrilineal, and so when men got married, they "joined their wives' families." This meant that if a woman grew tired of her husband, she could throw him out on the street without the patriarchy standing in her way. Or, as Zinn puts it, "when a woman wanted a divorce, she set her husband's things outside the door."⁸

Women were important and respected in Iroquois society. Families were matrilineal. That is, the family line went down through the female members, whose husbands joined the family, while sons who married then joined their wives' families. Each extended family lived in a "long house." When a woman wanted a divorce, she set her husband's things outside the door.

Families were grouped in clans, and a dozen or more clans might make up a village. The senior women in the village named the men who represented the clans at village and tribal councils. They also named the forty-nine chiefs who were the ruling council for the Five Nation confederacy of the Iroquois. The women attended clan meetings, stood behind the circle of men who spoke and voted, and removed the men from office if they strayed too far from the wishes of the women.

*The women tended the crops and took general charge of village affairs while the men were always hunting or fishing. And since they supplied the moccasins and food for warring expeditions, they had some control over military matters. As Gary B. Nash notes in his fascinating study of early America, *Red, White, and Black*: "Thus power was shared between the sexes and the European idea of male dominance and female subordination in all things was conspicuously absent in Iroquois society."*

Howard Zinn. *A People's History of the United States* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics; Reissue edition, Kindle, November 17, 2015), 992. <http://a.co/aG5a8fx>

Now let's compare Zinn's fable of the Native Americans' feminist egalitarianism to some writings on the subject by Edmund Morgan in his book *American Slavery, American Freedom*. Regarding the Native Americans near present-day Virginia, which was at one time Iroquois nation territory, Morgan tells a somewhat different story than the one we get from Zinn.

Morgan writes that "nearly any activity that could be designated as work at all was left to the women. They were the principal means of production in Indian Virginia. Having acquired a wife (for whom he may have had to pay a bride price), a man counted on her to support him."⁹

According to Morgan, "building [houses and the furniture for it] was women's work."¹⁰ With primitive tools, the women also did the back-breaking farm work, which was often a principal source of food. "The women worked the ground between the trees, using a crooked stick as a hoe and planting corn, beans, squash, and melons all together in little hills."¹¹

While it is true that the men did most of the hunting and fishing, these activities were neither a principal source of food – as noted already – nor were they considered "work" in the traditional sense. In Morgan's words, "Indians, like well-to-do Englishmen, apparently regarded hunting as sport."¹²

⁸ Zinn, 994.

⁹ Edmund S. Morgan. *American Slavery, American Freedom* (W. W. Norton & Company; Reissue edition, October 17, 2003; Kindle, June 8, 2013), 1088.

<http://a.co/dpdvd3O>

According to the *Historie of Travell* by William Strachey (Hakluyt Society, 1849), 112, "the women plant and attend the gardeins, dresse the meate brought home, make their broaths and pockerchicory drinckes, make matts and basketts, pownd their wheat, make their bread, prepare their vessells, beare all kinds of burthens, and such like, and to which the children sett their hands, helping their mothers... The women have a great care to maynteyne and keepe fier light still within their howses, and if at any time it go out, they take yt for an evil signe, but if yt be out they kindle yt againe presently, by chauffing a dry pointed stick in a hole of a little square piece of wood; that firing ytself will so fier mosse, leaves, or any such like thing is apt quickly to burn."

<https://archive.org/details/historietravail00majooog>

¹⁰ Morgan, 1079.

¹¹ Morgan, 1091.

¹² Morgan, 1080.

Edmund Morgan is not some consensus historian whom a radical leftist such as Howard Zinn would dismiss.¹³ Zinn himself quotes Morgan repeatedly in *A People's History*.¹⁴ What's more, Zinn and Morgan do not appear to disagree on the facts of the matter - the men primarily hunting, while the women did the domestic work and the farming.

Where they diverge is in their interpretations of the significance of these gender roles. For Zinn, it's a sign of the progressive gender egalitarianism of the Native Americans. Morgan is clearly skeptical of such an interpretation. He even writes that if a man from those tribes were perceived as working too hard, he risked "losing his dignity,"¹⁵ which could presumably have led to "divorce proceedings" against him.

When we remove Zinn's Commie-loving, blood-soaked, rose-tinted glasses, the gender roles of the Native Americans start to look a lot less like "gender equality" and a lot more like "male privilege."

House and furniture alike could be put together without heavy labor. Building them was women's work.

Men provided clothing in the form of skins taken in the hunt. But Indians, like well-to-do Englishmen, apparently regarded hunting as sport. Hunting grounds might be some distance from the village; and when hunting season came round, the whole tribe picked up and moved, the women preceding the men in order to build temporary housing. The hunt itself was a cooperative venture among the men, in which they set fire to an area, enclosing a group of deer or driving them into the water, where they could be killed from canoes. The men were also in charge of fishing, which they did with weirs and nets, as well as with spears and hooks. But the Virginia Indians did not rely on hunting or fishing for most of their food. They relied principally on the nuts and fruits they gathered and on the corn, beans, and squashes or melons that they grew. Tending the crops was also women's work.

*Indeed, nearly any activity that could be designated as work at all was left to the women. They were the principal means of production in Indian Virginia, **Having acquired a wife (for whom he may have had to pay a bride price), a man counted on her to support him.** He could make canoes, weapons, and weirs without losing his dignity, but the only other labor he ordinarily engaged in was clearing fields for planting, and the method employed made this less than arduous. Clearing consisted merely of girdling the trees and burning brush around them to hasten their death. The next year the women worked the ground between the trees, using a crooked stick as a hoe and planting corn, beans, squash, and melons all together in little hills.*

Edmund S. Morgan. *American Slavery, American Freedom* (W. W. Norton & Company; Reissue edition, October 17, 2003; Kindle, June 8, 2013), 1088.
<http://a.co/dpdyd3O>

¹³ Edmund S. Morgan was Emeritus Professor of History at Yale University, where he taught from 1955 to 1986.

¹⁴ Zinn, 1320, 1496, 3874, 8094, 8724.

¹⁵ Morgan, 1089.

According to Captain John Smith's writings in *Travels and Works*, Edward Arber, ed. (Edinburgh, 1910), 67, "The men bestowe their times in fishing, hunting, wars, and such manlike exercises, scorning to be seene in any woman like exercises; which is the cause that the women be verie painefull and the men often idle. The women and children do the rest of the work. They make mats, baskets, pots, morters,; pound their corne, make their bread, prepare their victuals, plant their corne, gather their corne, beare al kind of burdens, and such like."

"In their hunting and fishing they take extreame paines; yet it being their ordinary exercise from their infancy, they esteeme it a pleasure and are very proud to be expert therein," 69, 365.

<https://archive.org/details/travelsworksofca00smituoft>