

The AMERICAN SCHOLAR

Arawaks

A People's History of the United States by Howard Zinn

Review by: Oscar Handlin

The American Scholar, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Autumn 1980), pp. 546, 548, 550

Published by: [The Phi Beta Kappa Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41210677>

Accessed: 10/11/2012 18:17

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Phi Beta Kappa Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The American Scholar*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

that led him to take, against his own grain, the most banal of subjects (adultery) in the drabest possible environment (the French provinces), and work on it for years of solitary drudgery, was the conscience of a great artist. He was a sculptor with words, not a confessional-analytic parader of his heart; even about his own self and his own writing, he wrote best when he wrote as through veils of irony and distance. Nowhere are we closer to bare autobiography in *Madame Bovary* than when Rodolphe, just before deciding to break with Emma, reflects on her frenzied phrases of adoration:

He had so often heard these things said that they did not strike him as original. Emma was like all his mistresses; and the charm of novelty, gradually falling away like a garment, laid bare the eternal monotony of passion, that has always the same forms and the same language. He did not distinguish, this man of so much experience, the difference of sentiment beneath the sameness of expression. Because lips libertine and venal had murmured such words to him, he believed but little in the candor of hers; he thought that exaggerated speeches hiding mediocre affections must be discounted;—as if the soul did not sometimes overflow in the emptiest metaphors, since no one can ever give the exact measure of his needs, nor of his conceptions, nor of his sorrows; and since human speech is like a cracked tin kettle on which we hammer out tunes to make bears dance when we long to move the stars.

What's so elegant about this much admired passage is that we're never sure when we're in Rodolphe's mind and when we're in Flaubert's. If passion is eternally monotonous, always with the same forms and the same language, then there is no difference between Emma and any other easy pickings, and there is also no difference between Rodolphe's cynicism and Flaubert's. But apparently there is a difference of sentiment beneath sameness of expression; the two attitudes have an impact on one another, and the disparity between desire and its expression is drawn out in those last murmuring, expanding phrases. About the mind that could form that paragraph (artists, Flaubert told Mme Colet, are all triple thinkers) we can never know too much; the delight of this volume is that it helps us measure the extraordinary bluntness and many delicacies of that mind.

Harvard University Press is to be con-

gratulated, not only for an unusually handsome volume but for pricing it—not unreasonably, by the standards of our ridiculous day—at \$12.50. An oddity one can't help wondering about is why Mr. Steegmuller's footnotes cite, in all seriousness, Jean-Paul Sartre's three-volume study of Flaubert when his brief bibliography lists a review by Harry Levin that absolutely and permanently demolishes it. Special kudos for footnote 4 on page 136, which includes the notable information that "Alberto Moravia greeted the present translator in Athens with the words: 'Have you been to the Parthenon yet? It's like lobster meat.'" Scholarly books should include more such tasty morsels.

Arawaks

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES. *By Howard Zinn. Harper & Row. \$20.*

Reviewed by OSCAR HANDLIN

This is a book about Arawaks.

Once upon a time, people remarkable for their belief in sharing and for their hospitality lived blissfully without commerce; they relied exclusively on the natural environment for sustenance. They valued the arts, and accorded each sex freedom and dignity. Ages before the Arawaks, the Mound Builders, also devoted to the arts, had occupied the same continent. And from across the ocean came blacks out of such idyllic communal groups that they hardly needed law; even slavery was benign. Then the destructive white strangers arrived—and after that it was downhill all the way.

Such is the story Zinn purports to unfold. He ascribes the topsy-turvy quality of his description to its perspective—the Constitution viewed by the slaves, Andrew Jackson by the Cherokees, the Civil War by the New York Irish, the Spanish-American War by Cubans, the New Deal by Harlem blacks, and the recent American empire by Latin-American peons. Alas, he can produce little proof that the people he names, from slaves to peons,

✪ OSCAR HANDLIN, Carl H. Pforzheimer University Professor at Harvard University, is the author of many historical works.

saw matters as he does. Hence the deranged quality of his fairy tale, in which the incidents are made to fit the legend, no matter how intractable the evidence of American history.

It may be unfair to expose to critical scrutiny a work patched together from secondary sources, many used uncritically (Jennings, Williams), others ravaged for material torn out of context (Young, Pike). Any careful reader will perceive that Zinn is a stranger to evidence bearing upon the peoples about whom he purports to write. But only critics who know the sources will recognize the complex array of devices that pervert his pages.

This book pays only casual regard to factual accuracy. It simply is not true that "what Columbus did to the Arawaks of the Bahamas, Cortez did to the Aztecs of Mexico, Pizarro to the Incas of Peru, and the English settlers of Virginia and Massachusetts to the Powhatans and the Pequots." It simply is not true that the farmers of the Chesapeake colonies in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries avidly desired the importation of black slaves, or that the gap between rich and poor widened in the eighteenth-century colonies. Zinn gulps down as literally true the proven hoax of Polly Baker and the improbable Plough Jogger, and he repeats uncritically the old charge that President Lincoln altered his views to suit his audience. The Geneva assembly of 1954 did not agree on elections in a unified Vietnam; that was simply the hope expressed by the British chairman when the parties concerned could not agree. The United States did not back Batista in 1959; it had ended aid to Cuba and washed its hands of him well before then. "Tet" was not evidence of the unpopularity of the Saigon government, but a resounding rejection of the northern invaders.

Since Zinn does not comprehend the simple meaning of words, he labels John Adams an aristocrat and Theodore Parker a racist, and turns free trade into imperialism. Talk of liberty and country Zinn considers a rhetorical device to conceal rule by the rich few, and the Revolution of 1776 he describes as just the creation of a legal entity to take over land, profits, and power. Woman, in status, was "akin to a house slave."

Zinn does not scruple to use insidious rhe-

torical questions to convey affirmations he is too shy to make openly. "Could patriotic fervor and the military spirit cover up class struggle? Unemployment, hard times, were growing in 1914. Could guns divert attention and create some national consensus against an external enemy?" Thereupon the First World War becomes an effort by the American elite to divert attention from its internal problems. Other paragraphs sprinkled with question marks reveal the Supreme Court "doing its bit for the ruling elite," almost justify the attack on Pearl Harbor, and distort the internment of the Japanese Americans.

Biased selections falsify events. A chapter entitled "The Other Civil War," for instance, covers the years between 1837 and 1877. It includes anti-rent riots in New York State, the Astor Place riot in New York City, Dorr's War in Rhode Island, and the railroad strikes of 1877—thus bracketing quite dissimilar and unrelated outbreaks of violence to give the impression of a country torn by ceaseless civil conflict.

On the other hand, the book conveniently omits whatever does not fit its overriding thesis. In view of the epilogue, it is startling to find no notice taken of the long series of communal experiments stretching from the eighteenth-century Moravians down through Brook Farm and on to Oneida. Humanitarianism, benevolence, idealism would not jibe with the portrayal of a totally materialistic nation. For the same reason, there is no explanation of why the discontent that welled up in Shays' Rebellion subsided as quickly as it did. But then Zinn freely tears evidence out of context and distorts it—for example, in the discussion of the period down to 1941 when imperial ambitions led the United States into war. American aggression continued after Vietnam, rearranged but pursuing the same vile military and economic goals. Not a word about the Soviet Union, of course.

Focusing upon the dimly known Arawaks of the past, whose shadowy shapes can take any form, the book cannot do justice to the great variety of actual people who inhabited the United States. The blacks and whites, immigrants and natives, laborers and farmers, merchants and manufacturers cannot be known when treated as lay figures to be manipulated according to the author's fantasies.

The description of how the eighteenth-century population understood the First Amendment is pure invention. Reactions to the Mexican War are scarcely more substantial. Nor can Zinn understand the men and women, indiscriminately labeled the elite, who helped shape American society and its institutions. By his account, only one motive moved them: greed—from Columbus rapacious in the quest for gold to Carnegie lusting for profit. Hence the blank incomprehensibility of those who acted contrary to their interests. Why did John Marshall come to the aid of the Cherokees? Why did the Grimkés turn against slavery? Why was Andrew Carnegie an active anti-imperialist? To answer such questions would have called for an examination of intellectual and social forces beyond Zinn's ken. Indeed, since the dominant tradition of liberal reform in the United States was staunchly pro-American, he must interpret it as only a device by which the elite protected its own interests.

It would be a mistake, however, to regard Zinn as merely anti-American. Brendan Behan once observed that whoever hated America hated mankind, and hatred of humanity is the dominant tone of Zinn's book. No other modern country receives a favorable mention. He speaks well of the Russian and Chinese revolutions, but not of the states they created. He lavishes indiscriminate condemnation upon all the works of man—that is, upon civilization, a word he usually encloses in quotation marks.

Against it, in the epilogue he juxtaposes a loving community of neighbors who cooperated without coercion—a community exemplified by the Arawaks, who are fit objects for fantasy because nothing is known about them. Early in the book, Zinn quotes a Spaniard's description of other pre-invasion Indians who lived in peace and amity, six hundred in a conical hut. Life may have been carefree, even idyllic, but it could not have been easy under those circumstances. No doubt a twentieth-century American would find the actuality of six hundred people to a hut difficult to imagine. And perhaps the events in Guyana show what can happen to such numbers cooped up together, driven in upon one another in their loving community.

Few such societies are driven to suicide, as was that in Jonestown. But rarely are any of

them capable of dealing with the crises and contingencies of human experience.

And in that regard we can learn something from the Arawaks, although Zinn is too obtuse to do so. What discussion ensued among those Indians who greeted Columbus or Cortez we shall never know. Perhaps they hoped by friendly gestures to propitiate the strangers and persuade them to leave. Perhaps, already aware of their own helplessness, they thought to stave off attack by appeasement. Perhaps internal dissension, or lack of organization, or will weakened by ease prevented them from following another course. Lacking evidence, we cannot know. But the outcome we do know, and from it we can learn. From Montezuma to Tecumseh, people who lacked the political means to defend themselves were helpless to resist the invaders animated by a vision of what they wanted and driven by the will to seize it.

The American people of actuality—whom Zinn does not discuss—were not Arawaks in the past. Nor are many likely now to respond to his invitation to share the fate either of Jonestown or of the Aztecs.

Pun and Games

GÖDEL, ESCHER, BACH: AN ETERNAL GOLDEN BRAID. *By Douglas R. Hofstadter. Basic Books. \$18.50.*

Reviewed by MAX DELBRÜCK and SOLOMON W. GOLOMB

Hofstadter's book, like the subject matter it describes, exists simultaneously on many strangely intersecting levels. It is at once a dissertation on mathematical logic, a treatise on the intricacies of Bach's musical compositions, a text to accompany a rather extensive assemblage of Escher prints, a collection of dialogues involving Achilles and the Tortoise,

• MAX DELBRÜCK, a professor of biology at the California Institute of Technology since 1947, was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine in 1969 for his work in molecular biology.

• SOLOMON W. GOLOMB is a professor of electrical engineering and mathematics at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.