

Howard Zinn's Disappointing History of the United States

by Michael Kazin

Every work of history, according to Howard Zinn, is a political document. He titled his thick survey *A People's History* (*A People's History of the United States, 1492-Present* [NY: Perennial Classics, 2003]) so that no potential reader would wonder about his own point of view: "With all its limitations, it is a history disrespectful of governments and respectful of people's movements of resistance."

That judgment, Zinn proudly announces, sets his book apart from nearly every other account of their past that most Americans are likely to read." The mountain of history books under which we all stand leans so heavily in the other direction--so tremblingly respectful of states and statesmen and so disrespectful, by inattention, to people's movements--that we need some counterforce to avoid being crushed into submission."

His message has certainly been heard. *A People's History* may well be the most popular work of history an American leftist has ever written. First published in 1980, it has gone through five editions and multiple printings, been assigned in thousands of college courses, sold more than a million copies, and made the author something of a celebrity--although one who appears to lack the egomaniacal trappings of the breed. Matt Damon, playing a working-class wunderkind in the 1997 movie *Good Will Hunting*, quoted from Zinn's book to show up an arrogant Harvard boy (and impress a Harvard girl). Damon and his buddy Ben Affleck then signed with Fox to produce a ten-hour miniseries based on the book, before Rupert Murdoch's minions backed out of the deal.

But Zinn's big book is quite unworthy of such fame and influence. *A People's History* is bad history, albeit gilded with virtuous intentions. Zinn reduces the past to a Manichean fable and makes no serious attempt to address the biggest question a leftist can ask about U.S. history: why have most Americans accepted the legitimacy of the capitalist republic in which they live?

His failure is grounded in a premise better suited to a conspiracy-monger's Web site than to a work of scholarship. According to Zinn, "99 percent" of Americans share a "commonality" that is profoundly at odds with the interests of their rulers. And knowledge of that awesome fact is "exactly what the governments of the United States, and the wealthy elite allied to them--from the Founding Fathers to now--have tried their best to prevent."

History for Zinn is thus a painful narrative about ordinary folks who keep struggling to achieve equality, democracy, and a tolerant society, yet somehow are always defeated by a tiny band of rulers whose wiles match their greed. He describes the American Revolution as a clever device to defeat "potential rebellions and create a consensus of popular support for the rule of a new, privileged leadership." His Civil War was another elaborate confidence game. Soldiers who fought to preserve the Union got duped by "an aura of moral crusade" against slavery that "worked effectively to dim class resentments against the rich and powerful, and turn much of the anger against 'the enemy.'"

Nothing of consequence, in his view, changed during the industrial era, notwithstanding the growth of cities, railroads, and mass communications. Zinn views the tens of millions of Europeans and Asians who crossed oceans at the turn of the past century as little more than a mass of surplus labor. He details their miserable jobs in factories and mines and their desperate, often violent strikes at the end of the nineteenth century--most of which failed. The doleful narrative makes one wonder why anyone but the wealthy came to the United States at all and, after working for a spell, why anyone wished to stay.

Zinn does reveal a few moments of democratic glory--occasions when "the people," or at least a politically conscious fraction of them, temporarily broke through the elite's thick web of lies and coercion. Agrarian rebels formed cooperatives, allied with radical unionists, and charted their own financial system, the sub treasury, which they hoped would break the grip of heartless bankers. But, alas, the Populists were seduced in 1896 by William Jennings Bryan, who sold out their movement to the retrograde Democratic Party. During the Great Depression, wage earners across the industrial Midwest staged heroic sit-down strikes that demonstrated their ability to shut down the economy. But, for unexplained reasons, these working-class heroes allowed CIO unions and the New Deal state to smother their discontent within long-term contracts and bureaucratic procedures. Similarly, the civil rights movement toppled the Southern citadel of Jim Crow without taking on the capitalist system that kept the black masses mired in poverty.

This is history as cynicism. Zinn omits the real choices our left ancestors faced and the true pathos, and drama, of their decisions. In fact, most Populists cheered Bryan and voted for him because he shared their enemies and their vision of a producers' republic. Unlike Zinn, they grasped the dilemma of third parties in the American electoral system, which Richard Hofstadter likened to honey bees, "once they have stung, they die." And to bewail the fact that liberal Democrats saw an advantage to supporting rights for unions and minorities is a stunning feat of historical naiveté. Short of revolution, a strategic alliance with one element of "the Establishment" is the only way social movements ever make lasting changes in law and public policy.

Zinn's conception of American elites is akin to the medieval church's image of the Devil. For him, a governing class is motivated solely by its appetite for riches and power--and by its fear of losing them. Numerous historians may regard George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton as astute, if seriously flawed, men who erected a structure for the new nation that has endured for over two centuries. But Zinn curtly dismisses them as "leaders of the new aristocracy" and regards the nation-state itself as a cunning device to lull ordinary folks with "the fanfare of patriotism and unity."

Such phrases may hint of Marxism, but the old Rhinelander never took so static or simplistic a view of history. Zinn's ruling elite is a trans-historical entity, a virtual monolith; neither its interests nor its ideology change markedly from the days when its members owned slaves and wore knee-britches to the era of the Internet and Armani. Zinn thus sees nothing unusual in the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. It simply "meant that another part of the Establishment," albeit "more crass" than its immediate antecedents, was now in charge.

The ironic effect of such portraits of rulers is to rob "the people" of cultural richness and variety, characteristics that might gain the respect and not just the sympathy of contemporary readers. For Zinn, ordinary Americans seem to live only to fight the rich and haughty and, inevitably, to be fooled by them. They are like bobble-head dolls in work-shirts and overalls--ever sanguine about fighting the powers-that-be, always about to fall on their earnest faces. Zinn takes no notice of immigrants who built businesses and churches and craft unions, of women who backed both suffrage and temperance on maternalist grounds, of black Americans who merged the community-building gospel of Booker T. Washington and the militancy of W.E.B. Du Bois, or of wage-earners who took pleasure in the new cars and new houses those awful long-term contracts enabled them to buy.

From the 1960s onward, scholars, most of whom lean leftward, have patiently and empathetically illuminated such topics--and explained how progressive movements succeeded as well as why they fell short of their goals. But Zinn cares only about winners and losers in a class conflict most Americans didn't even know they were fighting. Like most propagandists, he measures individuals according to his own rigid standard of how they should have thought and acted. Thus, he depicts John Brown as an unblemished martyr but sees Lincoln as nothing more than a cautious politician who left slavery alone as

long as possible. To explain why the latter's election in 1860 convinced most slave-owners to back secession, Zinn falls back on the old saw, beloved by economic determinists, that the Civil War was "not a clash of peoples...but of elites," Southern planters vs. Northern industrialists. Pity the slaves and their abolitionist allies; in their ignorance, they viewed it as a war of liberation and wept when Lincoln was murdered.

To borrow a phrase from the British historian John Saville, Zinn expects the past to do its duty. He has been active on the left since his youth in the 1930s. During the 1960s, he fought for civil rights and against the war in Vietnam and wrote fine books that sprang directly from those experiences. But to make sense of a nation's entire history, an author has to explain the weight and meaning of worldviews that are not his own and that, as an engaged citizen, he does not favor. Zinn has no taste for such disagreeable tasks.

The fact that his text barely mentions either conservatism or Christianity is telling. The former is nothing but an excuse to grind the poor (" conservatism" itself doesn't even appear in the index), while religion gets a brief mention during Anne Hutchinson's rebellion against the Puritan fathers and then vanishes from the next 370 years of history.

Given his approach to history, Zinn's angry pages about the global reach of U.S. power are about as surprising as his support for Ralph Nader in 2000. Of course, President William McKinley decided to go to war with Spain at "the urging of the business community." Zinn ignores the scholarly verdict that most Americans from all classes and races backed the cause of "Cuba Libre"--but not the later decisions to vassalize the Caribbean island and colonize the Philippines. Of course, as an imperial bully, the United States had no right, in World War II, "to step forward as a defender of helpless countries." Zinn thins the meaning of the biggest war in history down to its meanest components: profits for military industries, racism toward the Japanese, and the senseless destruction of enemy cities--from Dresden to Hiroshima. His chapter on that conflict does ring with a special passion; Zinn served as a bombardier in the European theater and the experience made him a lifelong pacifist. But the idea that Franklin Roosevelt and his aides were motivated both by realpolitik and by an abhorrence of fascism seems not to occur to him.

The latest edition of the book includes a few paragraphs about the attacks of September 11, and they demonstrate how poorly Zinn's view of the past equips him to analyze the present. "It was an unprecedented assault against enormous symbols of American wealth and power," he writes. The nineteen hijackers" were willing to die in order to deliver a deadly blow against what they clearly saw as their enemy, a superpower that had thought itself invulnerable." Zinn then quickly moves on to condemn the United States for killing innocent people in Afghanistan.

Is this an example of how to express the "commonality" of the great majority of U.S. citizens, who believed that the gruesome strike against America's evil empire was aimed at them? Zinn's flat, dualistic view of how U.S. power has been used throughout history omits what is obvious to the most casual observer: al-Qaeda's religious fanaticism and the potential danger it poses to anyone that Osama bin Laden and his disciples deem an enemy of Islam. Surely one can hate imperialism without ignoring the odiousness of killers who mouth the same sentiment.

Not everything in A People's History is so obtuse and dogmatic. Zinn punctuates his narrative with hundreds of quotes from slaves and Populists, anonymous wage-earners and such articulate radicals as Eugene V. Debs, DuBois, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Stokely Carmichael, and Helen Keller. These supply texture and eloquence absent from the author's own predictable renderings. It's satisfying to know that a million readers have encountered the words Debs spoke upon being sentenced to jail for opposing the First World War:

Your honor, years ago I recognized my kinship with all living beings, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest on earth. I said then, and I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it; while there is a criminal element, I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.

Zinn also fills several pages with excerpts from poems by Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen and from the autobiography of Richard Wright. But the richness of these lines doesn't mitigate the poverty of his interpretations. Rage at injustice does not explain why that injustice occurs.

Pointing out what's wrong with Zinn's passionate tome is not difficult for anyone with a smattering of knowledge about the American past. By why has this polemic disguised as history attracted so many enthusiastic readers?

For the majority of reviewers on Amazon.com (381, as of February 2004), *A People's History* has the force and authority of revelation. "Zinn single-handedly initiated a Copernican revolution in historicism," writes "eco-william" from Oregon. Others rave about his "compassion and eye for detail" and proclaim the survey "a top contender for greatest book ever written." Zinn's admirers have a quick retort to conservatives who claim his work is "biased." Writes "culov" from Anaheim: "The book is purposely meant to be biased. It tells the story of American history from the point of view of 'the losers' because we all know that the winners write history. If you want something written from George Washington's point of view, go buy a textbook . . . those are as biased as possible."

The unqualified directness of Zinn's prose clearly appeals to his readers. Unlike scholars who aspire to add one or two new bricks to an edifice that has been under construction for decades or even centuries, he brings dynamite to the job. "To understand," wrote Frederick Douglass, "one must stand under." Although Zinn doesn't quote that axiom, the sensibility appears on every page of his book. His fans can supply the corollary themselves: only the utterly contemptible stand on top.

Many radicals and some liberals clearly want to hear this moral stated and re-stated. Even Eric Foner, whose splendid scholarship delivers no such easy lessons, praised Zinn's book in the *New York Times* as "a coherent new version of American history." *The Story of American Freedom*, Foner's own 1996 attempt to write a survey for non-academic readers, is far more scrupulous--and far less popular.

Zinn fills a need shaped by our recent past. The years since 1980 have not been good ones for the American left. Three Republicans and one centrist Democrat occupied the White House; conservatives captured both houses of Congress; the phantom hope of state socialism vanished almost overnight; and progressive movements spent most of their time struggling to preserve earlier gains instead of daring to envision and fight for new ideas and programs.

In the face of such unrelenting grimness, *A People's History* offers a certain consolation. "The American system is the most ingenious system of control in world history," writes Zinn. It uses wealth to "turn those in the 99 percent against one another" and employs war, patriotism, and the National Guard to "absorb and divert" the occasional rebellion. So "the people" can never really win, unless and until they make a revolution. But they can comprehend the evil of this four-hundred-year-old order, and that knowledge will, to an extent, set them free.

Thus, a narrative about demonic elites becomes an apology for political failure. By Zinn's account, the modern left made no errors of judgment, rhetoric, or strategy. He never mentions the Communist Party's lockstep praise of Stalin or the New Left's fantasy of guerilla warfare. Radical activists simply failed to muster enough clear-eyed troops to pierce through the enemy's mighty, sophisticated defenses.

Perhaps the greatest flaw of his book is that Zinn encourages readers to view so formidable a force as just a pack of lying bullies. He refuses to acknowledge that when they speak about their ideals, those who

hold national power usually mean what they say. If FDR lied to Americans about the threat posed by Japanese-Americans during World War II, why should anyone believe his prattle about the Four Freedoms? So there's no point in debating conservatives who prescribe libertarian economics, Victorian moral values, and preemptive interventions for what ails the United States and the world. All right-wingers really care about is keeping all the resources and power for themselves.

This cynical myopia afflicts an alarming number of people on the left today. The gloom of defeat tends to obscure the landscape of real politics, which has always witnessed a clash of ideologies as well as interests, persuasion as well as buy-offs and sellouts. Zinn fiercely details the outrages committed by America's rulers at home and abroad. But he makes no serious attempt to examine why these rulers kept getting elected, or how economic and social reform improved the lives of millions even if they sapped whatever mass appetite existed for radical change.

No work of history can substitute for a social movement. Yet intelligent, sober studies can make sense of how changing structures of power and ideas provide openings for challenges from below, while also shifting the basis on which a reigning order claims legitimacy for itself. These qualities mark the work of such influential (and widely read) historians on the left as Eric Hobsbawm, E.P. Thompson, Gerda Lerner, C.L.R. James, and the erstwhile populist C. Vann Woodward. Reading their work makes one wiser about the obstacles to change as well as encouraged about the capacity of ordinary men and women to achieve a degree of independence and happiness, even within unjust societies. In contrast, Howard Zinn is an evangelist of little imagination for whom history is one long chain of stark moral dualities. His fatalistic vision can only keep the left just where it is: on the margins of American political life.

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