

How the Other Half Lived

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March 23, 1980

HOWARD ZINN HAS EARNED his medals as a radical academic and social activist. He served nobly in the civil rights movement during the 1960s and subsequently became an outspoken critic of our tragic involvement in Vietnam. He is now in the news because the president of Boston University, where Zinn is a professor of political science, is trying to fire five tenured faculty members who led a strike last fall against the president's authoritarian policies. Howard Zinn is one of the "B. U. 5."

Most of the previous publications have dealt with American history in the 20th century, especially southern and black history, our Vietnam fiasco and related aspects of injustice in the United States. His collected essays, *The Politics of History* (1970), accused his fellow historians of "elitism," and pleaded for a new approach to history, history from "the bottom up" -- a more egalitarian history that would de-emphasize the role of great white men and give adequate attention to workers, women and minorities.

A People's History of the United States takes such an approach and seeks to fill that need. I wish that I could pronounce Zinn's book a great success; but it is not. It is a synthesis of the radical and revisionist historiography of the past decade, incorporating many of the strengths and most of the weaknesses of that highly uneven body of literature. Zinn's America is not a land of liberty but a land of relentless exploitation and hypocrisy. The traditional treatment of U.S. history is turned upside down. Zinn might well have borrowed the title of a novel by Jack London (which he cites on p. 315), *People of the Abyss*. That would be a fair summary of the story that Zinn relates.

Zinn's gravest error of commission is to include too many tedious snippets as well as lengthy quotations from radical historians. Not only does the book read like a scissors-and-paste-pot job, but, even less attractive, so much attention to historians, historiography and historical polemic leaves precious little space for the substance of history. Thus Phillip Foner, a radical historian, is cited nine times, while Thomas Jefferson is mentioned only eight.

Zinn's sins of omission are even more serious. He has virtually no interest in religion, for example, a force that for three centuries was phenomenal rather than epiphenomenal in American life. Puritanism, despite its profound impact upon American culture, gets short shrift. The Great Awakening, the single most consequential social movement between colonization and the coming of the American Revolution -- and a movement fraught with egalitarian consequences -- is not discussed. The Mormons are totally ignored, as is Brigham Young (I suppose because he was an exploitative sexist), despite the fact that he led one of the most remarkable folk ("people's") movements in all of American history. Zinn has no place for major evangelists, like Jonathan Edwards and Charles G. Finney, and no time for leading theologians like Horace Bushnell and Reinhold Niebuhr.

It could be argued, however, that such individuals, functioning as writers, preachers and social activists, had a major impact upon "the people."

Zinn has little interest in ideas: either the philosophical variety or the more practical, technological sort. He talks about the Berrigan brothers but mentions just once, and in passing, John C. Calhoun, one of the two or three Americans who have made a truly original contribution to political philosophy. Zinn mentions Karl Marx on numerous occasions, but never Thorstein Veblen, whose penetrating analyses of industrial development, 1870-1920, deserve close attention. Key figures who transformed the lives of ordinary Americans at home, at work, and in getting from one to the other -- Robert Fulton, Eli Whitney, Thomas A. Edison, Alexander Graham Bell and Henry Ford -- are rarely mentioned (Edison once, Ford twice, the others not at all). Radio and television as innovations with great impact upon "the people"? Simply not examined.

Well then, who and what is discussed? Figures of social protest and political criticism. Bob Dylan and Pete Seeger, but not Stephen Foster, whose music for more than a century was very much "the people's" music and eventually had considerable influence upon black music in the 20th century. We get H. Rap Brown, Huey Newton and Julian Bond, but not George Washington Carver. We get Pablo Picasso but not Charles Sheeler, an artist who is central to the American esthetic tradition and had important things to "say" about the way technology altered the quality of life in America. We get Catharine Beecher, who deserves to be in any "people's history" because she transformed American notions of "domestic economy"; but we do not get her father, Lyman, an extraordinary evangelist, or her brother, Henry Ward Beecher, the most widely known clergyman in Victorian America. We get Eartha Kitt but not Florence Kelley and Jane Addams, who pioneered the settlement house movement for the urban underprivileged. We get W. E. B. DuBois repeatedly, but nary a mention of John Dewey. We get William Z. Foster, a communist leader, but not Jacob Riis, the muckraking reformer and photographer whose book, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), called dramatic attention to life in the slums. We get Black Panthers galore but not Hugo Black, one of the greatest civil libertarians to have graced the Supreme Court.

We do deserve a people's history; but not a singleminded, simpleminded history, too often of fools, knaves and Robin Hoods. We need a judicious people's history because the people are entitled to have their history whole; not just those parts that will anger or embarrass them.

I find history from "the bottom up" as unsatisfactory as "elitist" history. "Histoire totale" has a somewhat different meaning in French historical thought than a direct translation might suggest. Nevertheless, we would do well to adapt that phrase and ask future historians of the United States who are prepared to devote 600 pages to the American experience, from Columbus to Jimmy Carter, to give us truly total history. If that is asking for the moon, then we will cheerfully settle for balanced history. Ours has encompassed grandeur as well as tragedy, magnanimity as well as muddle, honor as well as shame. Like Walt Whitman, we must embrace it all.