

Zinn on the greed of Columbus and the altruism of the natives

In a 700 page book, Zinn spends about a half dozen pages on Columbus' four voyages, but he manages to pack a lot of nonsense into those few pages.

Here we will look at Zinn's treatment of the native populations of the new world with whom Columbus first made contact. While Zinn is careful to use many of Columbus' own words, the slicing and dicing and re-contextualizing paints a misleadingly black and white portrait – that of naiveté, sincerity, and generosity on the part of the natives, and greed and thuggishness on the part of Columbus and his men.

Zinn uses selective word choice and deceptive editing to convey the avarice of Columbus and his men and the contrasting altruism and communism of the Arawak people who inhabited the Caribbean islands Columbus visited.¹

As we'll see, Zinn's narrative does not stand up to the scrutiny of the primary sources.

Zinn opens the book with a vivid juxtaposition – of Columbus and his men on the one hand, storming the shores, weapons drawn, and on the other hand, the native Arawaks, unfazed by the show of force, coming down to greet them, warmly offering food and other provisions.

Zinn writes of Columbus and his men “carrying swords, speaking oddly,” while the Arawaks “ran to greet them,” bringing along “food, water, gifts.” Zinn quotes Columbus, “They willingly traded everything they owned.”²

Zinn then writes of the “remarkable” hospitality of the Arawaks, whom Zinn claims were, in that regard, “much like the Indians on the mainland.”³

When Columbus and his sailors came ashore, carrying swords, speaking oddly, the Arawaks ran to greet them, brought them food, water, gifts. He later wrote of this in his log:

They . . . brought us parrots and balls of cotton and spears and many other things, which they exchanged for the glass beads and hawks' bells. **They willingly traded everything they owned...**

These Arawaks of the Bahama Islands were much like Indians on the mainland, who were remarkable (European observers were to say again and again) for their hospitality, their belief in sharing.

Howard Zinn. *A People's History of the United States* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics; Reissue edition, Kindle, November 17, 2015), 607. <http://a.co/aG5aBfX>

¹ Though Zinn doesn't tell the reader, Columbus is generally understood to have made first landfall on Watling Island in the Bahamas.

² Howard Zinn. *A People's History of the United States* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics; Reissue edition, Kindle, November 17, 2015), 607. <http://a.co/aG5aBfX>

³ Zinn, 614. Truth be told, very little is known about Arawaks outside of the writings of Columbus. Harvard historian Oscar Handlin wrote that the Arawaks “are fit objects for fantasy because nothing is known about them.” In reviewing *A People's History*, Handlin wrote, “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.” Oscar Handlin. Arawaks. *The American Scholar*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Autumn 1980), pp. 546, 548, 550.

As Zinn tells it, such traits “did not stand out” to Columbus, because he was in a “frenzy for money.” So, again being careful to quote the man directly, Zinn writes that as soon as Columbus arrived in the Indies, “on the first Island which [he] found, [he] took some of the natives by force.”⁴

These traits did not stand out in the Europe of the Renaissance, dominated as it was by the religion of popes, the government of kings, the frenzy for money that marked Western civilization and its first messenger to the Americas, Christopher Columbus. Columbus wrote:

As soon as I arrived in the Indies, on the first Island which I found, I took some of the natives by force in order that they might learn and might give me information of whatever there is in these parts.

The information that Columbus wanted most was: Where is the gold?

Howard Zinn. *A People's History of the United States* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics; Reissue edition, Kindle, November 17, 2015), 615. <http://a.co/aG5aBfX>

You see? The natives tried to come out and greet Columbus and share all they had with him, but it wasn't enough for Columbus. So, he immediately began taking the natives hostage and demanding gold from them. Straightforward right?

Not quite.

It turns out, Zinn has the timeline backwards. In Columbus' version of events, Columbus went ashore and made an effort to ingratiate himself to the locals, THEN the natives swam out and gave a bunch of trinkets to Columbus and his men.

And this makes sense. After all, so far as Columbus knew, he was in Asia and all his actions carried potentially huge political implications.

Even if you grant that Columbus and his men were more than willing to use force to get what they wanted, it doesn't follow that Columbus would therefore default to such action in an unfamiliar foreign land with a limited crew.

It defies credulity that he would have behaved in any manner other than the sort you would expect from a man sailing on behalf of a royal crown into what was potentially the territory of one of the greatest empires in human history.

That Zinn is distorting the timeline, and offering a narrative which contradicts the facts is borne out by Columbus' records. Columbus wrote of being conscious of the long term intentions of spreading Christianity “by love and friendship rather than by force.”⁵

And so, “in order to win their friendship,”⁶ Columbus “gave some of them red caps and glass beads... [and] also many other trifles.”⁷ According to Columbus, it was AFTER doing so that the natives then “willingly traded everything they owned.”⁸

As Columbus wrote, “These things pleased them greatly and they became marvellously friendly to us.”

⁴ Zinn, 618.

⁵ Christopher Columbus. J. Cohen, translator. *The Four Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (Penguin; New Ed edition, Kindle, February 5, 2004), 610. <http://a.co/9CNOxOt>

⁶ Columbus, 610.

⁷ Columbus, 610.

⁸ Zinn, 607.

He continued, "They afterwards swam out to the ship's boats in which we were sitting, bringing us parrots and balls of cotton thread and spears and many other things, which they exchanged with us for such objects as glass beads, hawks and bells. In fact, they very willingly traded everything they had."⁹

Two hours after midnight land appeared, some two leagues away. This was Friday, on which they reached a small island of the Lucayos, called in the Indian language Guana-hani. Immediately some naked people appeared and the Admiral went ashore in the armed boat... What follows are the Admiral's actual words in his account of his first voyage and the discovery of these Indies:

In order to win their friendship, since I knew they were a people to be converted and won to our holy faith by love and friendship rather than by force, I gave some of them red caps and glass beads which they hung round their necks, also many other trifles. These things pleased them greatly and they became marvellously friendly to us. They afterwards swam out to the ship's boats in which we were sitting, bringing us parrots and balls of cotton thread and spears and many other things, which they exchanged with us for such objects as glass beads, hawks and bells. In fact, they very willingly traded everything they had.

Christopher Columbus. J. Cohen, translator. *The Four Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (Penguin; New Ed edition, Kindle, February 5, 2004), 598. <http://a.co/9CNOxOt>

Then, even as some of the natives attempted to run off with stuff from the ship, Columbus kept an open mind and appeared more concerned about making sure any trades his men made did not take unfair advantage of the natives. Columbus wrote that some natives would go aboard his ship with "nothing to give," then would "take anything they can, jump into the water and swim away."¹⁰

Zinn and Columbus are free to call these people generous if they like. But that is not generosity. That is simply a people with no concept of property rights.

How did Columbus react to these incidents of theft? He waved it off, instead stressing that his men not take advantage of the locals by making one-sided trades. Columbus wrote that the natives would "give all they possess" in exchange for "anything that is given to them," even accepting "bits of crockery or broken glass cups" in trades with Columbus' men. Of such trades, Columbus wrote "I should like to forbid this."¹¹

The people are very gentle and anxious to have the things we bring. Thinking that nothing will be given them, however, unless they give something in exchange, and having nothing to give, they take anything they can, jump into the water and swim away. But they will give all that they do possess for anything that is given to them, exchanging things even for bits of broken crockery or broken glass cups. I saw one give sixteen balls of cotton for three Portuguese ceotis, the equivalent of the Castilian blanca and in these balls there was more than an aroba of cotton thread [A trivial amount of copper in exchange for a large amount – about 25 lbs – of cotton.] I should like to forbid this and let no one take any cotton except at my command; then if there were any quantity I would order it all to be taken for your Majesties.

Christopher Columbus. J. Cohen, translator. *The Four Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (Penguin; New Ed edition, Kindle, February 5, 2004), 643. <http://a.co/9CNOxOt>

As for Zinn's assertion that Columbus made landfall then immediately took "some of the natives by force," well, Columbus did write as much. But for Zinn to leave the story there is not to be biased, it is to omit facts which – if included – would have the effect of undermining Zinn's entire thesis of Columbus as a boorish oaf. My purpose here is not to attempt to make Columbus out to be something he was not, but only to illustrate Zinn's attempt to do so.

It is true that various natives traveled around with Columbus while he explored the Caribbean, and that some also journeyed back with him to Spain. However, it is also clear from Columbus' own writings that he was often sensitive to making and keeping friendly relations with the native population he hoped to eventually convert to Christianity.

⁹ Columbus, 610. Notice here in J. Cohen's translation, the use of the word "had" instead of "owned." Changes the connotation quite a bit, if someone trades everything they brought to trade, versus if someone trades all their worldly possessions, as Zinn's translation to "owned" implies.

¹⁰ Columbus, 643.

¹¹ Columbus, 643.

Columbus wrote, for example, of an instance in which his men grabbed a native who had approached the ship in his canoe. After the men “jumped down and seized” the native, Columbus intervened. Columbus brought the man to his quarters. There Columbus gave the native a few gifts before returning his canoe and sending him ashore. Columbus was cordial with the man because he was, in his own words, “anxious that [the natives] should think well of us so that they may not be unfriendly when your Majesties send a second expedition here.”¹²

We took the canoe they had abandoned aboard the caravel Niña; it was approached by another small canoe with a man who had come to barter a ball of cotton. Since he would not board the caravel some sailors jumped down and seized him. Having seen all this from the forecabin where I was standing, I sent for him and gave him a red cap and some green glass beads which I put on his arm and two hawk's bells which I put in his ears. I told the sailors to give him back his canoe which they had taken on to the ship's boat, and sent him ashore. I then raised sail for the other large island which I saw to the west and ordered that the second canoe which the Niña was towing astern should be set adrift. Shortly afterwards I saw the man to whom I had given these gifts come ashore. I had not taken the ball of cotton from him, although he wished to give it to me. The people gathered round him and he appeared astonished. It seemed to him that we were good people and that the man who had escaped in the canoe must have wronged us or we should not have carried him off. It was to create this impression that I had him set free and gave him presents. I was anxious that they should think well of us so that they may not be unfriendly when your Majesties send a second expedition here.

Christopher Columbus. J. Cohen, translator. *The Four Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (Penguin; New Ed edition, Kindle, February 5, 2004), 698. <http://a.co/9CNOxQt>

In another, later instance, Columbus displayed similar cordiality towards a lone native, this time feeding the man and giving him safe passage aboard the ship. Columbus wrote that he “had his canoe hauled aboard also and all that he carried kept safe.” Columbus then “ordered that he should be given bread and honey and something to drink.” According to Columbus, he did all this with aim that the native would “give a good account of us.” Again, Columbus wrote of his intentions to maintain good relations with the natives to set the tenor for future envoys: “when, God willing, your Highnesses send others here, we shall be favourably received.”¹³

I found a man alone in a canoe crossing from the one to the other. He was carrying a lump of their bread, about the size of a fist, and a gourd of water and a bit of red earth which had been powdered and then kneaded; also some dried leaves which they must value very highly since they gave me a present of them. He also carried a native basket containing some glass beads and two blancas, by which I knew that he had come from San Salvador to Santa Maria and was now on his way to Fernandina. He came alongside and I let him come aboard as he asked. I had his canoe hauled aboard also and all that he carried kept safe. I ordered that he should be given bread and honey and something to drink. I shall carry him to Fernandina and restore all his possessions to him so that he may give a good account of us. Then when, God willing, your Highnesses send others here, we shall be favourably received and the natives may give us of all they possess.

Christopher Columbus. J. Cohen, translator. *The Four Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (Penguin; New Ed edition, Kindle, February 5, 2004), 720. <http://a.co/9CNOxQt>

We get none of this from Zinn. Instead we get the silly caricatures of his propagandized mind – natives almost too generous to be concerned with their own self-interest and at the opposite end, explorers too petty and short sighted to do things in *their* self-interest.

All this from a book that remains a bestseller decades after its first run, and which is increasingly used in primary, secondary, and university curriculum across the country.

¹² Columbus, 698.

¹³ Columbus, 720.