

Columbus makes landfall in the New World, Zinn primes the reader

Zinn opens *A People's History of the United States* with a re-imagining of Columbus' voyages to the New World. Zinn's version of events is one in which Columbus is blinded by a single minded avarice, the sailors are ruthless thugs, the rulers back in Spain are Christian looneys, and all the natives of the new world are virtuous in every sense of the word.

From the opening paragraph of the book, Zinn begins constructing his narrative, wherein the more you have, the more evil you are. Zinn envisions a worldwide hierarchy of virtue, based on one metric, and one metric alone: How successful are you in life? The more successful, the more evil. The less successful, the more virtuous. This is economic determinism in a nutshell. This deterministic worldview is not only the basis for Zinn's entire narrative of American history, it is the basis for all leftist ideology. "If you've got a business, you didn't build that." If you're poor, or even fat, it's not your fault. "It's the system, MAN!"

In Zinn's retelling of Columbus' first landfall, Columbus supposedly robbed a poor sailor out of the fortune he deserved. The queen back in Spain had pledged a pension for life to whichever sailor made the first sighting of land in the New World. A sailor on watch announced the sighting of land at around two a.m. on October 12, 1492. But, because success makes you evil, and Columbus was more successful than the sailor – what with being the ship's captain and all – Columbus lied and told everyone he had already seen the land before the sailor had:

Then, on October 12, a sailor called Rodrigo saw the early morning moon shining on white sands, and cried out. It was an island in the Bahamas, the Caribbean sea. The first man to sight land was supposed to get a yearly pension of 10,000 maravedis for life, but Rodrigo never got it. Columbus claimed he had seen a light the evening before. He got the reward.¹

But Zinn ignores Columbus' side of the story. According to Columbus, he saw the light the night before. Columbus then called over a butler and the ship's accountant. The butler saw the light as well, though the accountant did not. The light was seen a couple more times and Columbus thought certain enough of what he saw that he told the entire assembled crew that they would soon make landfall and they should be on the lookout. Zinn leaves out this context, because it doesn't fit the narrative. Here is Bartolome de las Casas, a 16th century historian writing in 1527, based on Columbus' own papers:

The first man to sight land was a sailor called Rodrigo from Triana, who afterwards vainly claimed the reward, which was pocketed by Columbus. The Admiral, however, when on the sterncastle at ten o'clock in the night, had seen a light, though it was so indistinct he would not affirm that it was land. He called Pero Gutierrez, butler of the King's table, and told him that there seemed to be a light and asked him to look. He did so and saw it. He said the same to Rodrigo Sanchez of Segovia, whom the King and Queen had sent in the fleet as accountant, and he saw nothing because he was not in a position from which anything could be seen. After the Admiral spoke this light was seen

¹ Howard Zinn. *A People's History of the United States* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics; Reissue edition, Kindle, November 17, 2015), 638. <http://a.co/aG5aBfX>

once or twice and it was like a wax candle that went up and down. Very few thought that this was a sign of land, but the Admiral was quite certain that they were near land. Accordingly, after the recitation of the Salve in the usual manner by the assembled sailors, the Admiral most seriously urged them to keep a good lookout from the forecandle and to watch carefully for land. He promised to give a silk doublet to the first sailor who should report it. And he would be entitled also to the reward promised by the sovereigns, which was an annual payment of ten thousand maravedis.²

Did Columbus cheat Rodrigo out of a fortune? Well, maybe. Maybe even probably. But, we have no real way of knowing, and it doesn't matter anyhow. That is not the point. How does this vignette about an Italian guy sailing for Spain in the Caribbean during the 1400s affect American high school students today? The answer is it doesn't. But it helps Zinn drive his narrative.

Zinn is priming the reader for the narrative to follow. Once that is done, the plausibility of the narrative no longer matters. The reader will take for granted that if you're poor, it's through no fault of your own, it's the system; if you're rich, it's because you used the system to steal from the poor.

Imagine the roles were reversed. Many of us would still find ourselves siding with Rodrigo's version of events: Rodrigo saw a light at 10 p.m., got two people to confirm they saw land, then watched it over the course of the night. Then at 2 a.m. Columbus walks out and says, "Hey, there's land over there, I get the money." We would find Columbus' take highly dubious. That is the effect of priming.

Human beings need a framework for processing the world. Otherwise we are quickly overloaded with sense data. The same can be said for history. If a book attempted to include every factoid from every event, it would be devoid of meaning. Zinn's framework for history is that of Karl Marx, "The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle."

A reviewer of *A People's History* once remarked, "If you've read Marx, there's really no reason to read Howard Zinn."³ To that I would add, at least for the casual reader, if you've read Zinn's interpretation of Columbus' landfall in the New World, there is really no reason to read the rest of the book. Unfortunately, many people read Zinn's take on American history not for fun, but because it has become a standard American history text from graduate programs to middle school social studies curriculum.

But to cram 500 years of history into an unbroken story arch requires a lot of omission, a lot of contrivances, and a lot of downright lies. That is Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*.

² J. Cohen, translator. *The Four Voyages of Christopher Columbus* by Christopher Columbus (Penguin, New Ed edition, Kindle, February 5, 2004), 588.

<http://a.co/3fkF6eR>

³ Daniel J. Flynn. *Howard Zinn's Biased History* (Frontpage Magazine, June 9, 2003).

<http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/1493>