

## **A People's History of . . .**

**HOWARD ZINN** died last week at the age of 87. A radical historian, he was most famous for his book, *A People's History of the United States: 1492 – Present*. It was published in 1980 and rose in popularity without much promotion or advertising, and now regularly sells around a hundred thousand copies a year; to date it has sold more than two million. The reason that the book found such a ready audience is because it challenges the grand narrative of American history in which the doings of the 'great' and the 'good' are woven into a tale of *daring do* and liberal endeavour in which the common people fail to make an appearance except as the beneficiaries of the wise acts of audacious and enlightened men.

Zinn tells an entirely different story: "If you look through high school textbooks and elementary school textbooks in American history, you will find [Andrew] Jackson the frontiersman, soldier, democrat, man of the people – not Jackson the slaveholder, land speculator, executioner of dissident soldiers, exterminator of Indians." Zinn challenges the humbug and self-serving account of American history that has been dished up as the heroic story of the gleaming city on a hill, a beacon for the dispossessed, the "huddled masses yearning to breathe free". In contrast Zinn gives us a history of unremitting struggle in which Americans of all sorts have had to battle hard every step of the way against the power of money, privilege, and prejudice.

The book is full of surprising incidents. For example, Zinn in a very quick sketch tells us about the struggle of the Anti-Renter movement in the Hudson Valley during the 1840s and '50s against a form of feudal land tenure known as the "Patroonship system" in which a few families ruled over three hundred

thousand people and two million acres of land. It is an inspiring tale of a popular struggle in which tenant farmers used a combination of armed force, political pressure, and election campaigns, to gain full possession of the land.

Zinn's principal challenge is to the kind of historical narrative of nationhood in which mythical notions of community and progress are woven effortlessly into a wholly false story of common origins and common interests that seek to justify the exercise of power by the privileged few. In contrast he wants to emphasise the role of the turbulent, fractious, common people, who have insisted since the founding of America on making their own history.

Reading Howard Zinn I am reminded of being told as a child about the Tolpuddle Martyrs, the farm labourers who were transported to Australia in chains for daring to form an agricultural workers trade union. I am also reminded of my Dad's tale of being a sixteen year-old lad in Glasgow's George Square in 1919 when the government brought soldiers and tanks onto the streets of the city in order to crush the strike of engineering workers who were fighting to cut the length of the working week from 54 hours to 40.

I was raised on A. L. Morton's *A People's History of England* and Gordon Childe's *Man Makes Himself*. At my Secondary Modern School our geography master, Mr Andrews, taught us to have a healthy scepticism regarding the British Empire as he advised us to take the text-book's photographs of the smiling "darkies" picking tea and tapping rubber trees in "our" colonies with a pinch of salt. The racism, which we imbibed like our mothers' milk, was tangled up with an entirely socialistic sentiment and a truly republican hatred of the people that ruled Britain in the nineteen fifties. At fourteen and fifteen, in the Young Communist League, I was taught about Bessie Smith, Paul Robeson and the Harlem Renaissance, and the struggles in America of the people, who at the time we respectfully referred to as "Negroes".

Consequently, I find the intention and inflection of

Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* entirely familiar; from the counter-history of Christopher Columbus onwards it bangs the drum for "history from below" in a way that results in an historical approach, which is as partial as the account that it seeks to challenge.

For example, Zinn upbraids the Harvard historian, Samuel Eliot Morison, for refusing to allow his acknowledgement of the "genocide" initiated against the native peoples of the Caribbean to dislodge his account of Columbus as an "indomitable" and faithful Christian, and an outstanding seaman. Zinn damns Morison for opting for a view, which downgrades repression in favour of celebrating the courage and determination of the 'discoverers' and conquistadors.

However, in a strikingly similar manner Zinn himself briefly acknowledges the Aztec's practice of human sacrifice but hurries on to emphasise the positive side of aboriginal America in which the native peoples are presented as living in largely peaceful tribal communes in which women had considerable rights and all shared equally in the bounty of nature. This sylvan arcadia is then counter posed to the bloody King and Pope-ridden world of money-grubbing Europeans. The savage imperial grandeur and brutal domination of their subjects practiced by the Aztecs and others are passed over without discussion.

There is, however, another and perhaps more serious problem with this kind of radical history. This is the way in which popular histories like Zinn's by emphasising 'history from below' help to shape an entirely one-sided outlook. They contribute to a view that tends to see all struggles, by anybody at all in the past, as intrinsically radical and progressive. To this is added a tendency to assimilate all resistance to arbitrary power or oppression into a socialist narrative in which all social progress and liberal improvement in the conditions and rights of the people are held to be entirely the work of radical figures and campaigns. In this way contempt for the development of bourgeois democratic institutions is promoted in which

democracy is held to be largely fraudulent, and when it isn't, it is said to be entirely the product of struggle from below.

Consequently, despite all the evidence to the contrary, the extension of the franchise to workingmen in England is imagined to be the result of the tireless efforts of Chartists and trade unionists. The work of Cobden and Bright and any number of mill owners and capitalist reformers is buried in the popularising myths of history from below. Similarly, the resistance of slaves to their bondage is emphasised beyond any practical role it may have actually played in their emancipation, in order to demote the efforts of bourgeois abolitionists and the complex economic and social forces which sought to consign the institution of slavery to the dustbin of history.

The advance of democracy and of what we now call "human rights", the view that all men (and women) are created equal, and that they are endowed with inalienable rights, comes through a tortuous process of historical experience from a room full of wealthy slave-owning planters who had no more idea of creating a democracy than flying to the moon. This is one of the bitter paradoxes of history. The oppressors have often played a leading role in the emancipation of those whom they oppress.

It is simply not true that the masses of labouring or oppressed people have been the authors of their own liberation and enlightenment. This is a false historical narrative promoted by socialist and anti-capitalist campaigners who seek to heighten and exaggerate their own positive role in social development. The real historical development of capitalism has been much messier than this. It is a development in which the struggles of the enslaved and dispossessed have insinuated themselves into the discourse of bourgeois improvement from which the capitalist class in America and elsewhere has been able to fashion stable and law governed societies. Consequently we need an historical synthesis in which historians tell the whole story, giving due weight to *all* the forces at work.