

Introduction

In his text, “A People’s History of the United States, 1492-Present”, Howard Zinn looks into American history in a different lens than what people are used to. A large number of historical books offer a skewed view of historical events but Zinn hopes to change all this. For instance, Christopher Columbus is portrayed as a hero who discovered America. Even America has a day to celebrate him for his “good” deeds. However, Zinn does not view Columbus as a hero, but a murderer, opportunist, and a torturer who maimed the lives of the Arawak people in North America.¹ Zinn writes the book from the perspective of the common citizens whose suffering is ignored by writes. He represents the Arawak, the slaves, African Americans, victims of massacre, indigenous Indians, and also the poor. Moreover, the book highlights issues such as slavery, massacres, class conflicts, racial injustice, sexual inequality, and national arrogance.

About the Author

Howard Zinn was an American historian, social thinker, and playwright. He headed Spelman College’s department of history and social sciences and was a political science professor at Boston University.² Other than A People’s History of the United States which was his most influential book, he wrote 20 books. Zinn described himself as a democratic socialist and wrote a lot about the Civil Right Movement, the labor history of America and the anti-war movement. Zinn served as a professor of history at Selman College in the period between 1956 and 1963.³ He was also a visiting professor at the University of Paris and the University of Bologna. He also took part in the Civil Rights Movement in the south and taught at Boston

1. Howard Zinn, *A people's history of the United States*. (Routledge, 2015), 32.

2. Howard Zinn, *Howard Zinn on history* (Seven Stories Press, 2011), 5.

3. Zinn, *Howard Zinn on history*, 6.

University for 24 years.⁴ “A People’s History of the United States, 1492-Present” fits in his career in the sense that he has been a champion for human rights for many years. His books were mostly about fairness and justice for the underdog and this one fits well in that category.

Summary of argument

The ultimate purpose of Zinn’s book is to offer an alternative view of the American history by focusing on the views and feelings of the poor and the ordinary citizens, unlike the normal perspective which reports from the perspective of the rich and influential. Zinn hopes to encourage historians to focus on the most important details when talking about people, events, activities, and so on.⁵ His main intention is to influence historians to practice moral responsibility. For instance, the text reveals that it was wrong for historians to portray Columbus as a perfect man just because he discovered America and then they ignored the fact that he brutalized a whole community.

Summary of contents

The sources of information of Zinn’s text are historical books, journals, periodicals, and any authentic document that captured his interest historically in the period between 1492 and the time he was writing the book.⁶ His main focus was texts that talked about historical injustices that went unreported because the victims were powerless and unable to speak out for themselves. For instance, he talks about the Piquot tribe massacre of 600 men, women, and children that took place in 1637 in New England.⁷ Although events such as this massacre and the Civil War at Sand

4. Zinn, *Howard Zinn on history*, 6.

5. Zinn, *A people's history of the United States*, 43.

6. Zinn, *A people's history of the United States*, 126.

7. Zinn, *A people's history of the United States*, 240.

Creek whereby hundreds of Indian families were murdered are documented, they do not get the necessary highlight because historians focus on different stories in order to maintain status quo.

Strengths

Zinn's text is different from the ordinary historical texts which focus on the heroes while ignoring the victims. In every story, there is a hero and a victim and if the victims' voices are not presented then the view of the whole story will be skewed. The major strength of this text is its ability to shift the attention of readers from the normal focus and offering it from the perspective of the weak and downtrodden. Therefore, this book offers a voice to the voiceless and its information is well presented and articulated with historical examples of injustices that took place at different times of American history.

Weakness

One weakness of Zinn's text is its overemphasis that the poor and weak in the society are as such because of the oppression by the rich. When tackling class war, Zinn tends to blame the rich for all the problems that the poor experience which is not always the case. Some poor people are their own enemies of progress because they do not work hard enough. Also, not all rich people are evil and skewed because there are many who have become rich through genuine hard work.

Conclusion

Zinn's text is truly an eye-opening historical piece that offers readers a perspective that is different from what they are used to. It is amazing to learn that some historical events that people learned in school have some twists that were intentionally omitted to offer a particular view. For instance, the story of Columbus and his oppressive ways motivates readers to dig deeper and

understand historical events. All in all, it is great to understand historical events from the perspective of the oppressed and poor, unlike the usual perspective which makes things look normal while they are not.

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References

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