

Often the Constitution of 1787 is revered as a document drawn up by the most genius of men who had as their fundamental motivation the goals of democracy and universal equality. The Founding Fathers are thought to have considered the interests of all peoples, thus endowing inalienable rights upon all peoples. But, as Howard Zinn argues, the Founding Fathers may have had ulterior economic and class preservation motivations that were hidden by the universal language of the document.

#### Traditional Interpretation of the Constitution

In *A People's History of The United States*, Zinn quotes historian George Bancroft, writing in the early nineteenth century, to illustrate a common reading of the Constitution:

*"The Constitution establishes nothing that interferes with equality and individuality. It knows nothing of differences by descent, or opinions, of favored classes...or the political power of property....As the sea is made up of drops, American society is composed of separate, free, and constantly moving atoms, ever in reciprocal action."*

Although generalization is impossible through one example, Zinn argues that this reading exemplifies the tendency of many scholars, politicians, and citizens to read the Constitution as a document that endowed *all* individuals with the same social status and rights, separate from considerations of race, wealth, or class.

#### Critical Interpretation of the Constitution

Contrary to the traditional reading, Zinn quotes historian Charles Beard, writing in the twentieth century, to illustrate a critical reading of the Constitution:

*"Inasmuch as the primary object of government...is the making of the rules which determine the property relations of members of society, the dominant classes whose rights are thus to be determined must perforce (by necessity) obtain from the government such rules as are consonant with the larger interests necessary to the continuance of their economic processes, or they must themselves control the organs of government."*

The idea, Zinn argues, is that the rich, in order to secure their own interests and economic status, must "either control the government directly or control the laws by which government operates." Beard received censure and indignation for his suggestion, most notably from the *New York Times*, but Zinn offers evidence which to support Beard's reading.

#### Evidence for Critical Interpretation

In the first place, Beard conducted an analysis of the economic backgrounds of the fifty-five men who met in Philadelphia and drafted the Constitution. Many were lawyers, a majority were wealthy men through land and slave ownership, manufacturing or shipping; "half of them had money loaned out at interest," and "according to the records of the Treasury Department" forty of them held government bonds.

As such, Beard concludes that a majority of those who drafted the Constitution needed a strong federal government in order to protect their economic interests: "the manufacturers needed protective tariffs; the moneylenders wanted to stop the use of paper money to pay off debts; the land speculators wanted protection as they invaded Indian lands..." Essentially, the drafters sought to protect their interests through mechanisms put in place directly in the Constitution.

Equally important, Beard showed, was the explicit fact that four groups were not represented at the Constitutional Convention: "slaves, indentured servants, women, men without property." Because they were not represented at the Convention their interests were not reflected in the Constitution, in effect compromising the "universal" nature of the document. Moreover, because voting rights in most states were endowed on the basis of property ownership, men without property, women, the poor, Indians, and slaves were excluded from the notion of representative government.

Further compromised at the Convention was the provision for popular elections, and thus direct representation. Because although The House of Representatives elected officials on the basis of popular elections, it still remained that voting rights were allowed for those who had property (i.e. the wealthy). Also, Senate members were elected, at the time, by state legislators; and as is still the case, the Electoral College, not the popular vote, elects the President. And lastly, the main judiciary body for the nation, the Supreme Court, was structured to have its members elected by the President.

This interpretation of the drafting of the Constitution is surely a controversial one. But, Zinn asks, "...[I]s the aim of government simply to maintain order..? Or is it that government has some special interest in maintaining a certain kind of order, a certain distribution of wealth, a distribution in which government officials are not neutral referees but participants?"

Even if the drafters did not primarily represent their own personal economic safety, but a broader economic class which they were part of, it still remains, argues Zinn, that a critical "...interpretation makes sense when one looks at the economic interests, the social backgrounds, of the makers of the Constitution."

*Members of the modern tea party movement often take their cues from history. The only problem is the history books they read are often wrong. But that's no reason to look down on them argues Harvard historian Jill Lepore. In fact, she says, most of us don't have our facts straight when it comes to the founding of this country. Most kids learn about the American Revolution in elementary school, and they rarely visit the subject again in college. The Boston Tea Party, the Continental Congress, the entire fight for independence and the creation of a new government — our versions of these stories are often legends filled with exaggeration and oversimplification.*

*Is it just simple oversimplification an exaggeration, or is there something else at work behind the "traditional" histories we teach ourselves and our children?*

1. Please post an *initial* response to these questions of *at least* 150 words
2. Reply (2 or 3 sentences) to *at least* 3 other students' initial postings.

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