

Introduction

Howard Zinn. Voices of a People's History

Readers of my book *A People's History of the United States*¹ almost always point to the wealth of quoted material in it—the words of fugitive slaves, Native Americans, farmers and factory workers, dissenters and dissidents of all kinds. These readers are struck, I must reluctantly admit, more by the words of the people I quote than by my own running commentary on the history of the nation.

I can't say I blame them. Any historian would have difficulty matching the eloquence of the Native American leader Powhatan, pleading with the white settler in the year 1607: "Why will you take by force what you may have quietly by love?"

Or the black scientist Benjamin Banneker, writing to Thomas Jefferson: "I apprehend you will readily embrace every opportunity, to eradicate that train of absurd and false ideas and opinions which so generally prevails with respect to us, and that your Sentiments are concurrent with mine, which are that one universal Father hath given being to us all, and that he hath not only made us all of one flesh, but that he hath also without partiality afforded us all the Same Sensations and [endowed] us all with the same faculties."

Or Sarah Grimké, a white Southern woman and abolitionist, writing: "I ask no favors for my sex. . . . All I ask of our brethren, is that they will take their feet from off our necks, and permit us to stand upright on that ground which God designed us to occupy."

Or Henry David Thoreau, protesting the Mexican War, writing on civil disobedience: "A common and natural result of an undue respect for law is, that you may see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder-monkeys, and all, marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences, which makes it very steep marching indeed, and produces a palpitation of the heart."

Or Jermain Wesley Loguen, escaped slave, speaking in Syracuse on the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850: "I received my freedom from Heaven and with it came the command to defend my title to it. . . . I don't respect this law—I don't fear it—I won't obey it! It outlaws me, and I outlaw it."

Or the populist orator Mary Elizabeth Lease of Kansas: "Wall Street owns the



country. It is no longer a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, but a government of Wall Street, by Wall Street, and for Wall Street."

Or Emma Goldman, speaking to the jury at her trial for opposing World War I: "Verily poor as we are in democracy, how can we give of it to the world? . . . [A] democracy conceived in the military servitude of the masses, in their economic enslavement, and nurtured in their tears and blood, is not democracy at all."

Or Mississippi sharecropper Fannie Lou Hamer, testifying in 1964 about the dangers to blacks who tried to register to vote: "[T]he plantation owner came, and said, 'Fannie Lou. . . If you don't go down and withdraw your registration, you will have to leave . . . because we are not ready for that in Mississippi.' And I addressed him and told him and said, 'I didn't try to register for you. I tried to register for myself.'"

Or the young black people in McComb, Mississippi, who, learning of a classmate killed in Vietnam, distributed a leaflet: "No Mississippi Negroes should be fighting in Vietnam for the White Man's freedom, until all the Negro People are free in Mississippi."

Or the poet Adrienne Rich, writing in the 1970s: "I know of no woman—virgin, mother, lesbian, married, celibate—whether she earns her keep as a housewife, a cocktail waitress, or a scanner of brain waves—for whom the body is not a fundamental problem: its clouded meanings, its fertility, its desire, its so-called frigidity, its bloody speech, its silences, its changes and mutilations, its rapes and ripenings."

Or Alex Molnar, whose twenty-one-year-old son was a marine in the Persian Gulf, writing an angry letter to the first President Bush: "Where were you, Mr. President, when Iraq was killing its own people with poison gas? . . . I intend to support my son and his fellow soldiers by doing everything I can to oppose any offensive American military action in the Persian Gulf."

What is common to all these voices is that they have mostly been shut out of the orthodox histories, the major media, the standard textbooks, the controlled culture. The result of having our history dominated by presidents and generals and other "important" people is to create a passive citizenry, not knowing its own powers, always waiting for some savior on high—God or the next president—to bring peace and justice.

History, looked at under the surface, in the streets and on the farms, in GI barracks and trailer camps, in factories and offices, tells a different story. Whenever injustices have been remedied, wars halted, women and blacks and Native Americans given their due, it has been because "unimportant" people spoke up, organized, protested, and brought democracy alive.

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When I decided, in the late 1970s, to write *A People's History of the United States*, I had been teaching history for twenty years. Half of that time I was involved in the civil rights movement in the South, when I was teaching at Spelman College, a black women's college in Atlanta, Georgia. And then there were ten years of activity against the war in Vietnam. Those experiences were not a recipe for neutrality in the teaching and writing of history.

But my partisanship was undoubtedly shaped even earlier, by my upbringing in a family of working-class immigrants in New York, by my three years as a shipyard worker, starting at the age of eighteen, and then by my experience as an air force bombardier in World War II, flying out of England and bombing targets in various parts of Europe, including the Atlantic coast of France.

After the war I went to college under the GI Bill of Rights. That was a piece of wartime legislation that enabled millions of veterans to go to college without paying any tuition, and so allowed the sons of working-class families who ordinarily would never be able to afford it to get a college education.

I received my doctorate in history at Columbia University, but my own experience made me aware that the history I learned in the university omitted crucial elements in the history of the country.

From the start of my teaching and writing, I had no illusions about "objectivity," if that meant avoiding a point of view. I knew that a historian (or a journalist, or anyone telling a story) was forced to choose, from an infinite number of facts, what to present, what to omit. And that decision inevitably would reflect, whether consciously or not, the interests of the historian.

There is an insistence, among certain educators and politicians in the United States, that students must learn *facts*. I am reminded of the character in Charles Dickens's book *Hard Times*, Gradgrind, who admonishes a younger teacher: "Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life."

But there is no such thing as a pure fact, innocent of interpretation. Behind every fact presented to the world—by a teacher, a writer, anyone—is a judgment. The judgment that has been made is that this fact is important, and that other facts are not important and so they are omitted from the presentation.

There were themes of profound importance to me that I found missing in the orthodox histories that dominated American culture. The consequence of these omissions has been not simply to give a distorted view of the past but, more importantly, to mislead us all about the present.

For instance, there is the issue of class. The dominant culture in the United States—in education, among politicians, in the media—pretends that we live in a classless society, with one common interest. The Preamble to the United States

Constitution, which declares that "we the people" wrote this document, is a great deception. The Constitution was written in 1787 by fifty-five rich white men—slave owners, bondholders, merchants—who established a strong central government that would serve their class interests.

That use of government for class purposes, to serve the needs of the wealthy and powerful, has continued throughout American history, down to the present day. It is disguised by language that suggests all of us, rich and poor and middle class, have a common interest.

Thus, the state of the nation is described in universal terms. When the president declares happily that "our economy is sound," he will not acknowledge that it is not sound for forty or fifty million people who are struggling to survive, although it may be moderately sound for many in the middle class, and extremely sound for the richest 1 percent of the nation who own 40 percent of the nation's wealth.

Class interest has always been obscured behind an all-encompassing veil called "the national interest."

My own war experience, and the history of all those military interventions in which the United States was engaged, made me skeptical when I heard people in high political office invoke "the national interest" or "national security" to justify their policies. It was with such justifications that Harry Truman initiated a "police action" in Korea that killed several million people, that Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon carried out a war in Southeast Asia in which perhaps three million people died, that Ronald Reagan invaded Grenada, that the elder Bush attacked Panama and then Iraq, and that Bill Clinton bombed Iraq again and again.

The claim made in spring of 2003 by the new Bush that invading and bombing Iraq was in the national interest was particularly absurd, and could only be accepted by people in the United States because of a blanket of lies spread across the country by the government and the major organs of public information—lies about "weapons of mass destruction," lies about Iraq's connections with Al Qaeda.

When I decided to write *A People's History of the United States*, I decided I wanted to tell the story of the nation's wars not through the eyes of the generals and the political leaders but from the viewpoints of the working-class youngsters who became GIs, or the parents or wives who received the black-bordered telegrams.

I wanted to tell the story of the nation's wars from the viewpoint of the enemy: the viewpoint of the Mexicans who were invaded in the Mexican War, the Cubans whose country was taken over by the United States in 1898, the Filipinos who suffered a devastating aggressive war at the beginning of the twentieth century, with perhaps 600,000 people dead as a result of the determination of the U.S. government to conquer the Philippines.

What struck me as I began to study history, and what I wanted to convey in my own writing of history, was how nationalist fervor—inculcated from childhood by pledges of allegiance, national anthems, waving flags, and militaristic rhetoric—permeated the educational systems of all countries, including our own.

I wondered how the foreign policies of the United States would look if we wiped out the national boundaries of the world, at least in our minds, and thought of children everywhere as our own. Then we could never drop an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, or napalm on Vietnam, or cluster bombs on Afghanistan or Iraq, because wars, especially in our time, are always wars against children.

When I began to write "people's history," I was influenced by my own experience, living in a black community in the South with my family, teaching at a black women's college, and becoming involved in the movement against racial segregation. I became aware of how badly twisted was the teaching and writing of history by its submersion of nonwhite people. Yes, Native Americans were there in the history, but quickly gone. Black people were visible as slaves, then supposedly free, but invisible. It was a white man's history.

From elementary school to graduate school, I was given no suggestion that the landing of Christopher Columbus in the New World initiated a genocide, in which the indigenous population of Hispaniola was annihilated. Or that this was the first stage of what was presented as a benign expansion of the new nation, but which involved the violent expulsion of Native Americans, accompanied by unspeakable atrocities, from every square mile of the continent, until there was nothing to do but herd them into reservations.

Every American schoolchild learns about the Boston Massacre, which preceded the Revolutionary War against England. Five colonists were killed by British troops in 1770.

But how many schoolchildren learned about the massacre of six hundred men, women, and children of the Pequot tribe in New England in 1637? Or the massacre, in the midst of the Civil War, of hundreds of Native American families at Sand Creek, Colorado, by U.S. soldiers?

Nowhere in my history education did I learn about the massacres of black people that took place again and again, amid the silence of a national government pledged by the Constitution to protect equal rights for all.

For instance, in 1917 there occurred in East St. Louis one of the many "race riots" that took place in what our white-oriented history books called the "Progressive Era." White workers, angered by an influx of black workers, killed perhaps two hundred people, provoking an angry article by the African-American writer W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Massacre of East St. Louis," and causing the performing artist Josephine Baker to say: "The very idea of America makes me shake and tremble and gives me nightmares."

I wanted, in writing people's history, to awaken a great consciousness of class conflict, racial injustice, sexual inequality, and national arrogance.

But I also wanted to bring into the light the hidden resistance of the people against the power of the establishment: the refusal of Native Americans to simply die and disappear; the rebellion of black people in the anti-slavery movement and in the more recent movement against racial segregation; the strikes carried out by working people to improve their lives.

When I began work, five years ago, on what would become the present volume, *Voices of a People's History of the United States*, I wanted the voices of struggle, mostly absent in our history books, to be given the place they deserve. I wanted labor history, which has been the battleground, decade after decade, century after century, of an ongoing fight for human dignity, to come to the fore. And I wanted my readers to experience how at key moments in our history some of the bravest and most effective political acts were the sounds of the human voice itself. When John Brown proclaimed at his trial that his insurrection was "not wrong, but right," when Fannie Lou Hamer testified in 1964 about the dangers to blacks who tried to register to vote, when during the first Gulf War, in 1991, Alex Molnar defied the president on behalf of his son and of all of us, their words influenced and inspired so many people. They were not just words but actions.

To omit or to minimize these voices of resistance is to create the idea that power only rests with those who have the guns, who possess the wealth, who own the newspapers and the television stations. I want to point out that people who seem to have no power, whether working people, people of color, or women—once they organize and protest and create movements—have a voice no government can suppress.

