

Teaching the New American Histories

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There is a strong trend in American middle schools and high schools, particularly in high school Advanced Placement (AP) classes, to teach non-traditional views of American history. These "new" histories focus not on the unparalleled freedom, opportunity, and achievements of America, but on the American experience interpreted through the eyes of race, class, and gender. The rationale behind teaching the new histories is: a) traditional history teaching is deficient, b) we live in a multi-cultural society, c) history can be a powerful force for social change, and d) telling students that traditional American history is a massive con job really livens up class discussion.

A fair-minded person would concede that all four of these assertions are correct. Are the new histories the answer? It is clear that today's students, even college graduates, are largely ignorant of American history. Universities, in addition to adopting much of the new history approach, have exacerbated the "history problem" by de-emphasizing American history. Of the top fifty-five universities in America (as ranked by U.S. News and World Report), not one requires even one semester of American history to earn a diploma. Alongside withering American history departments stand growing departments of European Studies, Middle-Eastern Studies, Far-Eastern Studies, etc, and entire departments teaching the new "viewpoint" histories such as Women's Studies, African-American Studies, Latino Studies, and Peace Studies. This is a radical departure from traditional history instruction. There are now K-12 "Africentric" schools where the entire student experience revolves around a race-based viewpoint. The new history approach does promote "diversity," and does address the concerns of several special interest groups. More importantly, the university approach is shaping American opinion and culture, and the worldview of current and future history teachers.

Our position is that an emphasis on the new histories is detrimental to middle school and high school students, and should not be used at all for elementary students, for at least the following reasons: a) students must acquire a common body of information to participate in civic discourse,

and the "new" histories interfere with that acquisition, b) students become radicalized at a young, impressionable age, c) such history encourages cynicism, rather than virtue, and d) much of what is presented in alternative histories is misleading or false.

Schools already attempt too much for the benefit of too many. Curriculum is often shallow and too diverse. Schools have also assumed responsibility for a broad array of non academic functions which compete for time and funding. Can we afford to invest precious teaching time for each new history viewpoint? Do they all deserve equal time? Who's viewpoint should we exclude? Who decides? All good teachers want their students to apply the lessons they learn for the benefit of their families and society. But there is a risk in teacher led activism. American politics is highly polarized already. What the public lacks in knowledge they seem to make up for in volume. Teachers must prepare students to participate in the great public discourse of democracy. If we are too strident, or too unbalanced, we intensify the feelings of "us" vs. "them" already prevalent in our culture. One value of introducing new histories, carefully, is to help students understand that not everyone has the same understanding, the same experiences, of history. People who differ from us, from our experiences, need not be seen as "bad" people or "stupid" people. They are often simply "different" people, worthy of our compassion and respect.

A meaningful education includes direct and indirect instruction encouraging virtue. While good teachers may disagree on a list of virtues, or the relative value of each virtue, most teachers agree that virtue is important. New histories make the teaching of virtue more difficult. It's exciting to discuss controversial subjects, and to tell students things they don't know. That's part of the joy of teaching. But some teachers find it intoxicating to share non-traditional, avante garde lessons contradicting the "common wisdom." They relish telling students "what *really* happened." Caution is in order. Students often mistake ambiguity and ambivalence for relativism. It is an article of faith in some circles to believe that everything is relative, and there is not real Truth. But there is a big difference between saying, "the Truth is hard to know," and "there is no Truth." When new histories are emphasized, it is easy for a student to hear, "well, this group thinks this happened, that group says it was another way, another group believes it was totally different from

either of those. Everybody has an angle. Everybody tells the version that promotes their own interest. How can you know? Maybe there is no truth." This promotes a cynical view of life and history. Cynicism is not a virtue of youth.

The last objection of emphasizing the new histories is that because they are often agenda-driven, they are often misleading or false. An example may help illustrate. The worldwide triumph of free market liberal democracy (capitalism) has been so complete that in 1992 a philosopher/historian Francis Fukuyama famously declared "The End of History." Fukuyama's argument was that the evolution of human societies was complete. Tribalism, Monarchy and now Marxism as a compelling worldview had been defeated. Free market liberal democracy was victorious. Only utopian leftists cling to Marxism. Even communist China, trying to avoid the fate of the now defunct USSR, is embracing capitalism, hoping to somehow separate free-market economics from liberal democracy. Socialist Europe (a mixed economy) is now reluctantly lowering taxes and decreasing social benefits in response to falling birth rates, global competition and 10% unemployment. In contrast, a dynamic American economy produces 50% of the world's annual income with just 5% of the world's population, and offers the world's highest standard of living. Yet, many Americans complain about "high unemployment (its 5%)," "low wages" and a "jobless recovery." How is this possible? How can Americans not know the fundamentals of American history and economics?

Briefly, the Great Depression caused intellectuals in America and elsewhere to doubt the future of capitalism. Although World War II and the post war years showed the vigor and resilience of the American system, many intellectuals had already been seduced by Marxist doctrine. The turbulent 1960's brought the Feminist Movement, Stonewall, the culmination of the Civil Rights Movement, and the Vietnam War. The stunning success of these "people's movements" in reshaping America caused historians to rethink the way history was taught in public schools, and gave Marxist apologists an opportunity to move into the educational mainstream. Traditional history was great men making big decisions with profound consequences. Teaching "Manifest Destiny," "Providential History," and "American Exceptionalism," was the norm. There was a cultural consensus that despite its flaws, the "American Experiment" was a smashing success.

Critics of traditional history correctly observed that history in America was not taught from the "black perspective," the "women's perspective," or from a "class perspective." These voices were under-represented. Much has changed since 1965.

The best-selling and best-known new historian is Howard Zinn. His textbook, "A Peoples History of the United States," published in 1980, is used by high schools and colleges all over America. Zinn describes himself at various times and places as a "Marxist, socialist, anarchist, radical, anticapitalist and democratic socialist." He concedes, in the conclusion of the book's 1995 edition, his book is "a biased account."

I am not troubled by that, because the mountain of history books under which we all stand leans so heavily in the other direction - so tremblingly respectful of states and statesmen and so disrespectful, by inattention, to people's movements - that we need some counterforce to avoid being crushed into submission.

Zinn describes his political awakening after attending a Communist rally with some friends in the

1930's:

From that moment on, I was no longer a liberal, a believer in the self-correcting character of American democracy. I was a radical, believing that something fundamental was wrong with this country... something rotten at the root.

The Communist Manifesto begins, "The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle." Zinn writes of the U.S. Constitution:

For instance, there is the issue of class. It is pretended that, as in the Preamble to the Constitution, it is "we the people" who wrote that document, rather than fifty-five privileged white males whose class interest required a strong central government. 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 idle class - have a common interest. "We the people of the United States" did not mean Indians or blacks or women or white servants. In fact, there were more indentured servants than ever, and the Revolution did nothing to end and little to ameliorate white bondage.

And of the Revolutionary War, he writes:

Around 1776, certain important people in the English colonies made a discovery that would prove enormously useful for the next two hundred years. They found that by creating a nation, a symbol, a legal unity called the United States, they could take over land, profits, and political power from the favorites of the British Empire. In the process, they could hold back a number of potential rebellions and create a consensus of popular support for the rule of a new, privileged leadership. The war brought glory for the generals, death to the privates, wealth for the merchants, unemployment for the poor.

In Zinn's retelling of history, every issue, every argument is an appeal to race, gender, and class - especially class.

For example, one of the great achievements of Western Civilization is the establishment of the rule of law. Zinn sees class conspiracy. Quoting English historian Christopher Hill in *The Puritan Revolution*: "The establishment of parliamentary supremacy, of the rule of law, no doubt mainly benefited the men of property." For Zinn, this is another proof that law is primarily for the benefit of the wealthy. America at the time of Revolution had the largest middle class in the world. Land was inexpensive and readily available. Secure title to land has always been the foundation of liberty and order, and fundamental to economic prosperity.

Military service in early America was an honorable way to serve your country, and to make a name for yourself. The middle class was especially eager to serve. Officers were often from the upper classes. Zinn sees tyranny in the draft:

The Boston Committee of Correspondence ordered the townsmen to show up on the Common for a military draft. The rich, it turned out, could avoid the draft by paying for substitutes; the poor had to serve. This led to rioting, and shouting: "Tyranny is Tyranny let it come from whom it may."

It is clear from Zinn's quote that "the rich" were drafted, rather than exempted. Who did "the rich" pay to substitute for them if they chose not to serve? Obviously, willing men who were not drafted. These men would receive military pay plus payment from the man they replaced. An unusual definition of Tyranny.

One of America's stellar achievements is the passage of the Bill of Rights, which protects man's God-given rights from the federal government. The Bill of Rights has been the envy of the world for over 200 years. The 1st Amendment to the Constitution, for example, guarantees religious freedom to Americans, and prohibits the federal Congress from establishing a national religion. Zinn sees the issue differently:

The American Revolution is sometimes said to have brought about the separation of church and state. The northern states made such declarations, but after 1776 they adopted taxes that forced everyone to support Christian teachings. William G. McLoughlin, quoting Supreme Court Justice David Brewer in 1892 that "this is a Christian nations," says of the separation of church and state in the Revolution that it "was neither conceived nor carried out ... Far from being left to itself,

religion was imbedded into every aspect and institution of American life."

The American left often goes to great lengths arguing that America was never a Christian nation, and that the Constitution has always guaranteed separation. Zinn disagrees. He sees America's Christian heritage as one more proof of bigotry and exclusion.

Zinn's book is an example of the benefits and dangers of the new histories. He offers information not readily available in traditional histories, but he is unreliable in his presentation. Many teachers are not able to discern the logical fallacies and unsupported arguments in his book, particularly when they support their own biases and understandings. It is too much to expect students who lack broader knowledge of history, politics, and economics to interpret his writing. New histories are more properly used for students who already possess this knowledge.