

Reviews

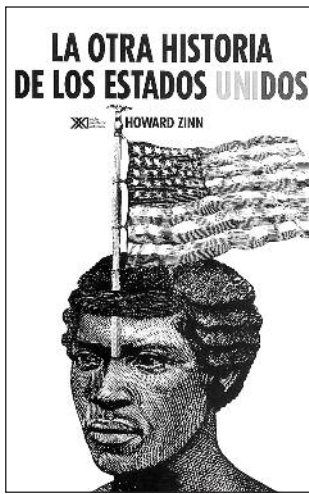
La otra historia de los Estados Unidos

(A People's History of the United States)

Howard Zinn

Siglo XXI Editores

Mexico City, 1999, 519 pp.



Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, originally published in 1980 and updated several times, was recently published in Spanish for the first time. The Spanish-language title, which translates "The Other History of the United States," is quite appropriate since Zinn tells the little known other side of many well known events. From the outset it is very clear that the lifestyle

of the Europeans who bumped into America on their way to the Orient was completely incompatible with the way the indigenous peoples lived. This became more and more evident as colonization proceeded in what is now the United States. The author has rescued from oblivion and presented the reader with some of the innumerable testimonies of what Buffy Saintmarie called, "the genocide basic to this country's birth."

He offers the reader some valuable insights about the other side of the United States' "peculiar institution," slavery, which, along with other elements in the book, make it clear that racism is also "basic to this country's birth." Zinn dispels the oft repeated myths of how African slaves passively submitted to their fate. After tremendous struggles and sacrifices, the civil rights movement, which emerged almost a hundred years after the Civil War, has only successfully eliminated the most obvious and overt forms of racial discrimination. The disproportionate number of incarcerated African-American males in the United

States today testifies to the fact that Martin Luther King's dream has not yet come true.

In addition Zinn tells of how women were oppressed in this new country that declared from the outset that "all men are created equal." He recounts the strong will and defiant deeds of both early and contemporary feminists. The author himself speaks out clearly in favor of every woman's right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" on an absolutely equal footing with men.

Mexican readers will certainly welcome this telling of how the Mexican-American War came about, which differs on several counts from the most widely disseminated U.S. textbook versions. However, we should also recognize that those north of the border were not the only culprits in the chain of events that led to the sale of what was at that time half of Mexico's territory. Our recent history also demonstrates that those in power often abandon the ones in whose name they govern to what is presumably "their fate."

Zinn shows that this is clearly the case for growing numbers of low income Americans today. He points to the contradiction that, at least according to public opinion polls, most people in the U.S. are in favor of "providing more help for the poor" even though they oppose any increase in government social spending. Furthermore, he recognizes that most Americans believe that poverty is the result of individual shortcomings, rather than of any basic fault within the existing social order.

Some of the horrors and atrocities of the Vietnam War are well known almost everywhere, but this story cannot be retold too often. Zinn's retelling is rich with moving and heart rending accounts. He tells the other side of the more recent Persian Gulf War as well. One of the most important lessons to be derived from Zinn's book—and something he states very early on in the text—is that none of the abhorrent and terrible events he relates, all perpetrated in the name of progress, were inevitable.

For this author, the villain in the piece today is corporate America or the richest one percent of the population that

owns about one-third of all the wealth. The lower classes are imprisoned by their poverty and, according to him, middle-class Americans are the jailers, albeit unwittingly so. Yet despite his severe criticisms of the existing economic, political and social order, and the emphasis he places on the untold episodes of American history, Zinn —like many other social critics both past and present— is highly utopian. He believes that it just might be possible, in tomorrow's America, to achieve something that "the system" has never been able to accomplish before: a great change with very little violence.

Given what Zinn adds at the end of the book about the Clinton administration, he clearly thinks that that tomorrow is still a long way off. However he himself maintains that such a possibility is not totally divorced from America's past, which provides some indications that it may be possible. Besides, in how many other countries would a seven-year-old girl write a letter to the nation's president —just before Bush ordered the bombing of Iraq— to reprimand him for his actions?

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