

# The New Criterion

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## Howard Zinn's fairy tale

*On the upcoming television adaptation of "A People's History of the United States."*

Some projects are born fatuous, some achieve fatuousness, some have fatuousness thrust upon them. Which melancholy comedy best fits the news that *A People's History of the United States*, Howard Zinn's anti-American fantasy masquerading as history, is—finally, at last, after so many failed attempts—going to be turned into a television show? Somehow the crowning glory of the farce was the news that the actor Matt Damon (who grew up next to Zinn) would perform in the four-hour miniseries titled "The People Speak." "Matt Damon, Matt Damon": the squeaky-voiced puppet playing Damon in the movie *Team America* offered the perfect epitome of his ostentatious, self-regarding political childishness. And here he is helping to dramatize a book whose message is that the New World, once a paradisaal playground instinct with benevolence and creativity when Columbus met the gentle Arawaks, was ruined when rapacious, war-mongering white men overran the continent.

Ho-hum, you say. Another anti-American history of America: what else is new? Isn't this just business as usual for academic historians? Yes, it is. But Howard Zinn's book is not just any left-leaning diatribe. Published in 1980, it instantly became a bestseller; even today, more than twenty-five years later, it is number 88 on Amazon. It has gone through innumerable editions and updates. And it is, we're told, the most widely assigned American history book in high schools across the country. In other words, it is a major source—in many cases, *the* major source—for students' understanding of the history of their country.

The astonishing career of *A People's History* is an object lesson in how little criticism matters, or perhaps we should say it is an object lesson in how certain sentimental narratives can utterly overwhelm criticism, be it ever so accurate and eloquent. Zinn's story—noble savages oppressed by nasty capitalists—was calculated to appeal to the politically correct, anti-American spirit that has been regnant among the country's elites since the late 1960s. But its flaws were early on pointed out with devastating precision by the Harvard historian Oscar Handlin. Handlin's brief is—or should have been—fatal. Writing in *The American Scholar* in 1980, he noted:

It simply is not true that “what Columbus did to the Arawaks of the Bahamas, Cortez did to the Aztecs of Mexico, Pizarro to the Incas of Peru, and the English settlers of Virginia and Massachusetts to the Powhatans and the Pequots.” It simply is not true that the farmers of the Chesapeake colonies in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries avidly desired the importation of black slaves, or that the gap between rich and poor widened in the eighteenth-century colonies. Zinn gulps down as literally true the proven hoax of Polly Baker and the improbable Plough Jogger, and he repeats uncritically the old charge that President Lincoln altered his views to suit his audience. The Geneva assembly of 1954 did not agree on elections in a unified Vietnam; that was simply the hope expressed by the British chairman when the parties concerned could not agree. The United States did not back Batista in 1959; it had ended aid to Cuba and washed its hands of him well before then. “Tet” was not evidence of the unpopularity of the Saigon government, but a resounding rejection of the northern invaders.

And on and on. Handlin leaves Zinn’s “deranged ... fairy tale” in tatters. It is worth noting, too, that Zinn’s contempt, though focused on America, is fired by a more global hatred. As Handlin noted, “It would be a mistake ... to regard Zinn as merely anti-American. Brendan Behan once observed that whoever hated America hated mankind, and hatred of humanity is the dominant tone of Zinn’s book. No other modern country receives a favorable mention. He speaks well of the Russian and Chinese revolutions, but not of the states they created. He lavishes indiscriminate condemnation upon all the works of man—that is, upon civilization, a word he usually encloses in quotation marks.” And yet this book is the source of choice for countless high schools seeking to teach American history. It is soon to provide the script for a television series that will reinforce and codify its anti-civilizational message. What does it mean that such a work, demonstrably a tissue of half-truths, inaccuracies, and self-hating tendentious misrepresentations, should succeed so lavishly? It is sobering to witness the corrosive progress of politically correct sentimentality, the effect of which is not so much to triumph over historical truth as to render it, while the spell lasts, irrelevant.

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