

Interpretation

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Volume 46 Issue 3

- 443 Lisa Leibowitz Poetic Justice: An In-Depth Examination of Aristophanes's Portrait of Socrates
- 471 Alessandro Mulieri A Modern in Disguise? Leo Strauss on Marsilius of Padua
- 495 Devin Stauffer Locke on the Limits of Human Understanding
- 513 Charles R. Sullivan Churchill's Marlborough: The Character of a Trimmer
- 533 Ying Zhang The Guide to *The Guide*: Some Observations on "How To Begin To Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*"
- Book Reviews:**
- 565 Marco Andreacchio *Dante's Philosophical Life: Politics and Human Wisdom in "Purgatorio"* by Paul Stern
- 573 Elizabeth Corey *Michael Oakeshott and Leo Strauss: The Politics of Renaissance and Enlightenment* by David McIlwain
- 579 Emily A. Davis *The Life of Alcibiades: Dangerous Ambition and the Betrayal of Athens* by Jacqueline de Romilly; translated by Elizabeth Trapnell Rawlings
- 585 Jerome C. Foss *The Catholic Writings of Orestes Brownson* by Michael P. Federici
- 589 Steven H. Frankel *Debunking Howard Zinn: Exposing the Fake History That Turned a Generation against America* by Mary Grabar
- 595 Raymond Hain *The Soul of Statesmanship: Shakespeare on Nature, Virtue, and Political Wisdom*, edited by Khalil M. Habib and L. Joseph Hebert Jr.
- 601 Richard Jordan *Democracy and Imperialism: Irving Babbitt and Warlike Democracies* by William S. Smith
- 607 Spencer Krauss *Homer's Hero: Human Excellence in the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey"* by Michelle M. Kundmueller
- 613 Lucien Oulahbib *Lacan contra Foucault: Subjectivity, Sex and Politics*, edited by Nadia Bou Ali and Rohit Goel
- 627 Jan P. Schenkenberger *Briefwechsel 1919–1973* by Martin Heidegger and Karl Löwith, and *Fiala: Die Geschichte einer Versuchung* by Karl Löwith
- 639 Mark A. Scully *Bureaucracy in America: The Administrative State's Challenge to Constitutional Government* by Joseph Postell
- 645 Benjamin Slomski *The Rediscovery of America: Essays by Harry V. Jaffa on the New Birth of Politics* by Harry V. Jaffa, and *Unmasking the Administrative State: The Crisis of American Politics in the Twenty-First Century* by John Marini
- 655 Scott Yenor *Sparta's First Attic War: The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta, 478–446 B.C.* by Paul A. Rahe

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When Robert Goldwin put together a volume on the origins and program of the New Left in the late sixties, he wished to include opposing viewpoints. Critics of the movement, including Allan Bloom, Walter Berns, Harry Clor, and Sidney Hook, signed up and contributed essays. But, Goldwin lamented, “one after the other, leading New Left authors refused the invitation.”¹ Ostensibly, this was because a dialogue of any sort would have legitimized their critics and exposed the interlocutors to the charge of selling out to the Establishment. The sole exception was Howard Zinn, who contributed an essay on the (poor) health of American democracy. Zinn’s willingness to enter the fray, while his comrades—many of whom were students still struggling to define the movement—refused, helped make Zinn the de facto intellectual campus leader of the New Left. He was also shrewd enough to capitalize on his position. Ten years later he published his *People’s History of the United States*, a book which, as Mary Grabar aptly demonstrates, is a political program masquerading as a history textbook.

Zinn’s success has been astonishing and nothing short of an American rags-to-riches story. The son of poor Russian-Jewish immigrants, Zinn was best known for his political activism on behalf of the New Left at Boston University in the late sixties and the seventies. His scholarly output was rather thin, and greatly eclipsed by his political writings, particularly against the

¹ Robert Goldwin, editor’s preface to *How Democratic Is America? Responses to the New Left Challenge* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969), i.

war in Vietnam. Zinn's focus on political action at the expense of scholarship earned him the lasting rancor of John Silber, Boston University's president. Silber was particularly annoyed at Zinn for attempting to suppress campus speakers with whom he disagreed, as well as with Zinn's unusual method of grading. According to Silber, Zinn would pass around a "hat in his class to let people draw their grades, and he told them in advance that there were only A's and B's in the hat."² Silber was also alarmed by Zinn's rejection of scholarship and contemplation, a charge that Zinn, with a decided preference for impetuosity over circumspection, happily confirms: "The best kind of education you can get is when you're involved in social struggles for a cause" (59). The skirmishes with Silber continued until Zinn's retirement in 1988.

Zinn's textbook survey, *A People's History of the United States*, was published in 1980 and received a cool reception in the academic community. Scholars on both the left and the right challenged its credibility and suggested that it distorted the facts in pursuit of a political agenda. Zinn's publisher, perhaps anticipating only modest sales, decided to publish a modest four thousand copies of the work. It soon became clear that supply of the book could not keep pace with the growing demand. Twenty-four printings later, the book had sold nearly a million copies and catapulted Zinn into celebrity status. Moving quickly to capitalize on this success, Zinn released a second, expanded edition, along with *A Young People's History of the United States*. In addition, Zinn spun off movies, documentaries, and the nonprofit Zinn Education Project, which he described as "a collaborative effort with Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change" (xxix). By 2012, more than two million copies of the book had been sold. Zinn's fame in the popular culture—Grabar calls him "the icon and rock star of historians"—has been astonishing (xxxv).

Grabar sets out to expose the shoddiness of Zinn's history. She builds a convincing case that, on every page, Zinn's history is "distorted, manipulative, and plain dishonest.... No other historian has gotten away with as much as Zinn has" (xv). Zinn's analysis exaggerates certain elements and silences others to craft a version of American history, from the Founding to the Civil Rights movement, that presents America as corrupt and oppressive. Where no case can be made, Zinn is hardly above using innuendo and leading questions to make his point. In his account of the Allies' victory over Nazism, he observes: "With the defeat of the Axis, were fascism's essential elements—militarism, racism, and imperialism—now gone? Or were they absorbed

² See <http://hnn.us/roundup/entries/18775.html>.

into the already poisoned bones of their victors?” (cf. xiii). The outrageous identification of the Allied victory with fascism is typical of Zinn’s approach, which deploys outlandish claims to shock some readers and tantalize others with the promise of revealing the true story behind the official history.

Perhaps the best-known part of Zinn’s account is his grim presentation of Christopher Columbus. Today, following Zinn, nearly every college textbook begins with some version of Zinn’s account of the European destruction of the Indians (3–4). This account is critical because it allows him to tell the story of the discovery of the new world as part of a broader tale of European exploitation and brutality. Grabar shows that Zinn simply lifted his account from a high-school history textbook by his fellow antiwar colleague Hans Koning. No wonder academic historians were unimpressed with Zinn’s work.

Koning’s account is a straightforward morality tale, where the European explorers are presented as nefarious agents of the nascent modern state. Their motives are confined wholly to material greed, in pursuit of which their brutality knows no bounds. The protagonists in the story are the natives, who live simply in peace and communal harmony. Zinn sharpens the story around an oppressor/oppressed narrative by exaggerating and suppressing details as necessary. He also adds a decidedly socialist narrative. In his account, the native peoples have little concept of either private property or war (cf. 77–87). Indeed, Zinn reports that Arawak Indians had a simple society “based on village communes where most property was jointly held” (7). Nor were the natives well versed in the art of war: “having never seen iron, [they] accidentally cut themselves on the Europeans’ swords when they touch them” (4). In Zinn’s account, Columbus quickly realizes that he can exploit the natural goodness of the natives in order to enrich himself.

Readers of Rousseau’s *Second Discourse* know how this story ends. But Rousseau was not so foolish as to suggest that natural man was social, that he lived peacefully in harmony with his fellows with neither political nor religious institutions to govern relations between the sexes. Zinn attempts to confine *amour-propre*, and the violent passions that accompany it, entirely to the Europeans, who rape and enslave the natives at will. Grabar patiently points to the distortions and omissions in Zinn’s account, but Zinn’s response to such criticism, namely, that scholarly protocol should not prevail against the “noble political purpose behind [his] history,” seems to have persuaded many of his readers (25). The long-term effects of this moral indoctrination, as Mark Blitz observes, undermine the very means of correcting them: “Silly or dangerous academic views no longer bounce so easily off healthy young

souls. Years of repetition from high school and earlier weaken natural defenses, and more and more foolishness is absorbed. The number of students who see only the errors of capitalism but not its merits, who define our country by its faults and not by the structures of liberty it has established, and who believe reason to be a weapon of privilege and not the essence of our humanity is astounding.”³

Zinn’s treatment of other episodes in American history continues in the same vein. His account of the Founding merely reiterates the conclusions of Charles Beard’s *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*. It goes without saying that Zinn is uninterested in Herbert Storing’s work on the anti-Federalists or the actual debate surrounding the adoption of the Constitution. Rather he imagines a cabal among the nefarious Founders who discovered that “by creating a nation, a symbol, a legal unity called the United States, they could take over land, profits, and political power from favorites of the British Empire” (35). Zinn’s goal is to deny nationhood, to see the Founding as the assertion of one set of economic interests against another, and to dismiss any higher claims as part of a justifying ideology.

Inverting Leo Strauss’s maxim about interpreting the low in the light of the high, Zinn *always* interprets the high in the light of the low. With exceptional consistency, Zinn deftly reduces every claim to justice or nobility in American history to a crude power—or profit—grab. Once Zinn’s formula is exposed, it is easy to see how every episode in American history can be explained in terms of exploitation. Zinn is particularly interested in showing that the United States is as culpable for the Cold War as the Soviets. Grabar tirelessly details Zinn’s omissions and distortions. Her account is persuasive and consequently raises an important question: Why has Zinn’s work been so influential?

The appeal of Zinn cannot be traced back simply to his Marxism. One searches Zinn’s history in vain for a discussion of Marxism, or a critique of the labor theory of value, the scientific account of the material forces that undergird ideology. Rather, as Grabar shows, Zinn presents a bucolic account of pristine nature in the lifestyles of native peoples such as the Arawak Indians. Zinn thus presents a set of anthropological and moral claims that are closer to Rousseau than to Marx. Zinn’s case lacks the depth of Rousseau’s

³ Mark Bliz, “The Academy of Mediocrity,” *The American Mind*, Nov. 28, 2018, <https://american-mind.org/features/the-reichstag-is-still-burning/the-academy-of-mediocrity/>.

psychological anthropology. Like the Sophists, he tells young people the story they want to hear, a story that coincidentally supports Zinn's reputation as a social activist.

Zinn's portrait of simple, virtuous, and peace-loving souls who share their labor, wealth, and love in the spirit of true community presents an appealing alternative to the self-interest and restless pursuit of gain of the bourgeois. Rousseau challenges us to consider whether the strength of a community requires the suppression of individuality, freedom, and the arts. In contrast, Zinn does not discern how politics and tightly knit communities might pose a threat to individual enlightenment or, for that matter, the censorship or elimination of the theater, of which Zinn was so fond. Nor has Zinn considered whether equality alone is sufficient to build a community, or the love of others, as brothers and sisters in his account of native peoples, requires a common father (or mother). Instead, Zinn conceives of history in the light of his fondest political hopes and dreams while failing to consider the most violent and terrible political possibilities. His account therefore lacks moderation and encourages fanaticism. That young people should be attracted to such an account is hardly a surprise.

Howard Zinn set out to debunk the view that America is a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to equality. His history has proven so successful that it makes it nearly impossible to consider the merits of the earlier view of the Founding. In debunking Zinn's history, Mary Grabar has loosened his dogmatic account of American history and allows us to reflect once again on the unfinished work of the Founders.

