

## Contested Histories: Whose Story Gets Told and Why Should I Care? Kathleen Kesson

In 1980, historian Howard Zinn released *A People's History of the United States*, a reader that became wildly popular in high schools across the country and sparked a revolution in the way that history is taught. Rather than putting students to sleep with factoids and timelines, teachers began to rely more on primary source materials, including documents and texts that narrate history from multiple perspectives. A handful of illuminating books followed Zinn's initiative: *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (by University of Vermont Professor Emeritus James Loewen [1995, 2007, 2018]); *Civic Illiteracy and Education: The Battle for the Hearts and Minds of American Youth* (by John Marciano, 1997), and Oliver Stone's 2012 documentary series, *The Untold History of the United States*. The online Zinn Education Project provides resources used by many Vermont teachers to spur analysis and critical thinking about these alternative and contested historical narratives.

It is no accident that the teaching of history becomes a lightning rod in times of cultural crisis, like the one we are living through at the present. The culture wars are heating up with the threat from the White House to cut off Federal funds from schools that utilize the New York Times Pulitzer Prize winning [1619 Project](#), with Trump calling it "toxic propaganda," and then doubling down on those comments and actions when questioned about them during the first Presidential debate. At a recent White House sponsored event on American History, Trump also denounced the "propaganda tracts, *like those of Howard Zinn*, that try to make students ashamed of their own history" (<https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/trump-attacks-zinn-and-zep/>). Denouncing these curriculum materials comes on the heels of Trump's [M-20-34](#) memorandum of September 4 calling for the suspension of any Federal trainings in implicit bias, or any content that references white privilege, systemic racism, or critical race theory. The war of words rages. Presenting knowledge from multiple perspectives becomes "propaganda" while learning the facts of history becomes "divisive." Universities be warned – this memo has been sent to higher education institutions that receive federal funding, and deans of schools, many of whom sense that academic freedom is at stake, are considering its potential impact.

The major contenders in the social science culture wars divide along conventional Right and Left positions. Conservatives, who tend to be defenders of United States exceptionalism claim widely distributed liberties, global leadership, prosperity, attention to human rights, and democratic ideals as validating its "Manifest Destiny" (a historical term that justified the conquest, theft, settlement, and control of the continent thorough whatever means necessary, including genocide). In this view, academic content should instill loyalty and patriotism, whitewashing the nation's past with the premise that "despite recurring problems and inequalities, the United States is and has been a democratic and humane society, in many ways the last and best hope for freedom and justice in the world" (Marciano, 1997, p. 31). Defenders of this position believe that students need exposure to the ideas of the Founding Fathers and lofty ideals such as duty, discipline, loyalty, obedience, and patriotism that have shaped the country. It is in this spirit that Trump has announced his intention to create a national commission to promote patriotic education.

Critics of this position maintain that the loyalty and patriotism curriculum is a form of indoctrination that underemphasizes our tragic past: the destruction of the Indigenous nations that existed here before European colonizers, a system of enslavement at the root of United States prosperity that lasted almost 250 years, a system of legal segregation that lasted well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the suppression of women's political rights until 1920, and the exploitation of working people. They remind us that it also ignores anti-democratic conditions in the present: the mass incarceration of people of color, the re-segregation of schools, the inhumane treatment of migrants at the border, and the soul killing work of low wage laborers. Students would be better served, they maintain, by an honest appraisal of the past and a truthful reckoning with the present, so that they might become informed and involved in efforts to shape a more just and democratic future.

Many people are likening the present moment, with its protests and uprisings and awakenings to the turmoil of the 1960's. It's an apt comparison. At the end of the 60's we had experienced a decade of foment and unrest. The emergence of the counterculture and its rejection of timeworn ways of thinking about gender, work, sexuality, race, etc., civil disorder over the assassinations of the decade's liberal/progressive icons (Malcolm X, the Kennedys, MLK), and the increasingly militant resistance to the Vietnam War combined to present a threat to the ruling class. A short lived but widespread and robust "free school movement" advocated a radically democratic approach to education (see Vermont historian Ron Miller's book *Free Schools, Free People* [2002] for an excellent cultural history of this movement).

Educational critics of the time recognized that schools in a technocratic, capitalist society existed to harness human capital to serve an economy governed by elites. Rejecting the conventional curriculum, young people immersed themselves in studying "hidden histories" (Black, Indigenous, and Chicano studies, women's history, labor history), about American imperialism and the military-industrial complex, and about the damage being done to our environment through pollution generated by extractive capitalism. Elites rightly perceived the uprisings of the various marginalized groups – African-Americans, women, youth, the Chicano movement, Indigenous people, gays and lesbians, as a direct threat to the status quo, though the loosely affiliated social movements failed to mobilize the majority white working class, which marred hopes for a genuine social revolution.

Though the capitalist economic system was never really in jeopardy, the rebellions of the 1960's induced a call to action by those determined to preserve the dominant political/economic system. In a 1971 "confidential memorandum" directed to the United States Chamber of Commerce, Lewis F. Powell Jr., a champion of the tobacco industry who later went on to serve on the Supreme Court, chastised the business community (who possessed significantly less political and economic power than they do today) for "appeasement, ineptitude, and ignoring the problem." Powell's "blueprint" ("Attack on America's Free Enterprise System") was designed to retake America and return it to its pro-business, anti-socialist, pre-New Deal heyday, last century's version of **Make American Great Again**. The memo initiated the rise of the conservative movement, the proliferation of right wing think tanks, the funneling of enormous amounts of money into

conservative foundations, and the aggressive impact of corporate wealth on politics that culminated in *Citizen's United* (2010), which overturned a century-old precedent that allowed government regulation of election spending. It also put a damper on the teaching of the "people's history," putting in its place an emphasis on standards, testing and accountability and ushering in a vigorous effort to privatize education which survives to this day.

So here we are more than fifty years later in a rerun of a very old movie, with a somewhat revised script. Today, the white supremacy at the core of elite resistance to progressive change is blatant, rather than tacit. Today's young people are widely aware of the disproportionate impact of mass incarceration and police brutality on people of color. They have a much more nuanced understanding of capitalism, and are alert to the differences between small scale, socially responsible "free enterprise" and mega-corporate giants like the fossil fuel industries that are poisoning our planet and hauling humanity to the brink of extinction. They no longer have a knee jerk reaction to socialism, having witnessed the democratic socialism of many European countries where unlike in the U.S., people are not homeless, hungry, or without medical care. They look to these countries with their affordable or free college tuition and compare it to their own debt-burdened lives. And the effects of living through a tragically mishandled pandemic, a deepening climate and environmental crisis, an imploding economy, and a looming crisis over the peaceful transfer of presidential power may have finally eradicated the notion of American exceptionalism.

It's no secret that knowledge of American history has been on the decline for years, a predictable outcome of the "factoids and timelines" approach. It certainly put me to sleep in high school, and I did not develop a love of history until I started reading well-researched historical fiction, which often sent me to the reference books. Conventional textbooks emphasize the central role of (usually white, mostly male) heroes in history, and it's well understood that history is written by the winners. The Zinn materials, in contrast, awaken students to the fact that ordinary people make history, that we are all participants in the grand human drama, and that we can claim the agency to challenge injustice, discrimination, and crimes against humanity. The stories told from multiple perspectives enlighten students to the impact of the conquering heroes on the lives of ordinary people. If you need to be convinced of this, read the meticulously documented *An Indigenous People's History of the United States*, and begin to wonder why virtually none of this information was included in your education.

Educating for life in a democracy is fraught with conflicts over the meaning of democracy, the tensions between liberty and equality, and what skills, attitudes and concepts are necessary in order to educate people for active participation in public life. It has never been more important to be able to critically analyze the barrage of information and fake news coming at us every day, to challenge the manipulations and the lies, and to examine the myths that shape consciousness, including the myths of progress, of white superiority, and of American exceptionalism. Without a deep understanding of the patterns of history, and an honest reckoning with our past, young people will lack the tools they need to create a better world.

In our research on civic education at the John Dewey Project on Progressive Education at the University of Vermont, (1997-2003) we analyzed the effectiveness of various approaches to educating young people for informed citizenship and civic action. We examined the academic content approach, the loyalty and patriotism approach, critical thinking and moral reasoning, values clarification, the study of how governments work, and direct experience in civic and political activity (see Kesson, Koliba, & Paxton, 2002). Our conclusion was that young people learn best how to become citizens in a “strong democracy” (Barber, 1998) when their learning is embedded in an active, experiential, problem-focused context that integrates pieces of all of these different pedagogies. While it is certainly necessary to have academic content under the belt in order to understand the historical nature of problems-to-be solved, it is crucial to apply critical reasoning to the facts as they are given. It’s essential for students to explore their values, and develop an inner moral compass to guide their actions. And clearly, one must gain an understanding of how governments work in order to get anything accomplished. But in order to have the *inclination* to solve social problems, the *desire* to create a better world, young people must have a sense of *agency*, and this is why it is critical that they see themselves as historical actors, not passive people waiting around for the next exceptional leader to emerge. Finally, loyalty and patriotism are not the sole property of any one group. Martin Luther King, considered by many to be an exemplar of patriotism, urged us to “rise up and live out the true meaning of (our nation’s) creed.” We should not tremble when each new generation calls us to this moral task.

(Word count 1908)

Barber, B. (1998). *A place for us: How to make society civil and democracy strong*. NY: Hill and Wang.

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