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Reader Response 06

By studying the historic voices of all people—the “important elites” and “unimportant” average people alike—Americans have a stronger foundation for understanding how and why the past tells us a great deal about the present and the future. In the “Democracy of the Few,” Parenti says “our government more often serves the privileged few rather than the general public, principally advancing the interests of the haves at the expense of the rest of us.” Parenti is explaining how the American government rewards the elitists and seems to undermine the average lot of people despite the huge difference in populations. Parenti then goes on to explain how history is allotted towards telling the side of the elitists, thus this being another example of the privileged few getting more rewards than the vast majority. Parenti says in the textbook, “political scientists who spend their whole lives writing … without ever once mentioning capitalism.” He then goes on in his textbook about how he challenges that way of thinking and talks a lot about it. By discussing the topic of capitalism and every aspect of it, there is no way to avoid the history of both sides of the economic spectrum. By studying just exactly how and why the past happened and became to be, we can learn a great deal about the present and the future. By learning how the average majority was able to fight against a corrupt system that only benefitted the elitist few, the present day can learn to fix the corrupt system and turn it into a fair system that benefits all the citizens.

By recognizing that all history, including that found in APHUS, is selective and emphasizes some stories and some events more than others, we learn the history is really about making people think, ask questions about their own societies, their own governments, and their own sociocentricism and demand answers. All history is selective, and we know that through the trend of sources the history originates from. History is taught through the experiences and memories of people who lived or went through that certain time in the past. So in response to this realization, to correctly evaluate certain sources, we are forced to ask questions about our own surroundings, and finding out the answers to them. Parenti questions his own surroundings, due to his own realization of the credibility of the history he knows. Parenti was able to measure the credibility of Karl Marx and his opposition and decide on which opinion was most credible, and the more accurate representation of American politics. Karl Marx was “one of the first in the modern era to see the existing relationship between wealth and power as undesirable and exploitive.” In this quote, Parenti analyzes Karl Marx’s credibility and his opinion towards Marx’s ideals. Parenti believes that Karl Marx shows a greater understanding of the world around him and gives an accurate representation of politics in that ‘Modern Era.’ Because history is selective, Parenti needs to be selective himself to get a true understand of many different perspectives of people in history and their politics at different times.

History is usually told from the standpoint of the “Elites,” “The Powerful,” the “Victors.” By focusing on history only as it is perceived by the “important” people—the presidents, generals, CEOs and other opinion leaders in the corporate mass media and academia—we do not learn the stories of the ordinary people, the working men and women, people like you and me. This goes under the subject that history is selective and bias as said previously. History has shown that the government seems to always lead to the elitists classes because the elitists have all the money, which translate to all the power. History shows us what happened to the rich and wealthy, and how they prospered among the vast average majority. The history of this vast majority however is kept hidden, either because governments did not pay attention to the poorer classes, or because it displays the faults in the governments. One reason that is not mentioned is that the poor do not have an ‘interesting’ history. This is wrong, and the poorer average classes have an extensive history that is still kept hidden and should be shown. “[Their] democratic struggle is an important part of the story that will be touched upon in the pages ahead. “ All history is important because we are able to get a nice clear and different perspective of the governments and politics of the past. Learning of the common people and their history “[gives] hints of how people might behave in different conditions.” This can be used to create a system that is based on how people behave and create a cohesive altogether political world.

Ordinary people make history. By reading and hearing the voices of “unimportant” people—workers, women, slaves, American Indians, migrant farmworkers, soldiers in the trenches, the antiwar protestors, the civil rights workers, the factory workers—we a get a more complete understanding of how history unfolds and the role of ordinary people have played in its making. Ordinary people make history in the sense that without the civil rights workers, the soldiers in the trenches, or the antiwar protestors, the values governed today would not exist. These common people fought to take away racist laws, to free black slaves, and to say “NO” to war. These values created a fairer system today. The role that common people had on history was their complacency to follow the government and their unjust laws. They abided to a corrupt system, and the outliers are the ones who go against it. Seeing when and how they react to certain injustices gives us a clue on how the common people want their government to be. It creates an outline of a perfect society and government, where the vast majority is complacent and the rich still benefit. This would be ideal but learning from history will surely give us improvements on society, and keep a steady of growth of it. Parenti says that it is “desirable and necessary for democratic citizens to examine the society in which they live, possible as a step toward making fundamental improvements.” Parenti believes that history’s use is to study the behavior of certain events and governments and how to develop a better present society.

Injustices are remedied when ordinary people speak up, stand up, organize and protest. By learning about the actions of those who acted outside the bounds of, or in opposition to, “legitimate” political institutions, we get a better understanding of how they made democracy come alive. History is made when the common man can go against the social norm and speak up against injustices. Parenti believes that we can learn from our history. He says that it is “desirable and necessary for democratic citizens to examine the society in which they live, possible as a step toward making fundamental improvements.” He also says that “[a] nation’s greatness can be measured by the democratic nature of its institutions, by its ability to create a society free of poverty, racism, sexism, exploitation, imperialism, and environmental devastation.” He is trying to explain his theme that moment where the common man can find power and use the government’s rules and constitution; they can show that they have more power than most think. Despite that most of the power resides within the rich mass media conglomerates, the average class citizens always have some power to fight against unjust laws. If the average class citizen doesn’t fight against these unjust laws, it’s their responsibility when they get treated lesser than how they deserve. Many people have shown the true authority that common citizens hold in this country.

Based on the four diaries, my opinion of Christopher Columbus has changed from the stereotypical good guy I thought he was. The diaries told of the ruthlessness of Columbus and his genocidal reign on the Native Americans that he had conquered. He decimated almost half of the entire population of the Haiti in only 2 years. He was ruthless for the search of gold and spices. Despite, the kind and sharing nature of the natives, Columbus used their kind nature to his advantage and forced them to search for gold and spices. Columbus and the New World settlers were corrupted “by the religion of popes, the government of kings, [and] the frenzy for money.” These values greatly contrasted with the almost socialist way of thinking from the native tribes that they met. Columbus even tried to enslave the natives, however, without such avail due to the outbreak of small pox. The Native Americans didn’t even make it back to Europe on the ships due to this deathly illness. Columbus truly destroyed the Native American’s way of life forever. Columbus is shown in the history and children books as heroic and larger than life. He is shown as discovering America, and having a week long feast with the natives called Thanksgiving. This is true but it is censored, and doesn’t show the true imprint that Columbus left behind to the Native Americans. Columbus was a kidnapper, a conqueror, and a genocidal killer but is depicted as the discoverer of a great country, and a hero for doing so. This simply shows the tainted view of history and makes many question the credibility of what is taught in schools.

Columbus thought of the Native Americans as great workers but crazy in the head. Christopher Columbus wrote in his log “They ... brought us parrots and balls of cotton and spears and many other things, which they exchanged for the glass beads and hawks' bells. They willingly traded everything they owned.... They were well-built, with good bodies and handsome features.... They do not bear arms, and do not know them, for I showed them a sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance. They have no iron. Their spears are made of cane.... They would make fine servants.... With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want.” He thought their kindness and underdevelopment of weapons made them ignorant and of a lesser mental status than his own people. Their ignorance of the weapons and different values of items is what made Columbus believe that they were pretty much crazy. This understanding is what made Columbus come to the conclusion that they were disposable and could become tools for the King and Queen of Spain. Columbus thought of the natives as good servants for the King and Queen, and as good slaves to find gold and spices for them. He also thought of them as disposable and could be used by the European settlers as slaves, for hunting, and searching purposes. They were able to take everything from the Natives and the natives were shown to be helpless against these settlers. This historic character that is in the textbooks as a great hero was not that great. He found helplessness as a weakness and monopolized against it.

Bartoleme de Las Cases wrote these two accounts because he began to sympathize with the Native Americans. Bartoleme de Las Cases was originally a priest who was part of the conquest in Cuba. He owned a plantation with native slaves, but soon gave that up and became a critic of the Spanish cruelty. He began to realize the cruelty of the Spanish people against the Native Americans. He saw that the natives had their own civilizations, were mutually respectful to their members of their tribes, and had a great community with happy civilians. There were no fights with the men and women as he quotes “Marriage laws are non-existent men and women alike choose their mates and leave them as they please, without offense, jealousy or anger. They multiply in great abundance; pregnant women work to the last minute and give birth almost painlessly; up the next day, they bathe in the river and are as clean and healthy as before giving birth. If they tire of their men, they give themselves abortions with herbs that force stillbirths’, covering their shameful parts with leaves or cotton cloth; although on the whole, Indian men and women look upon total nakedness with as much casualness as we look upon a man's head or at his hands.” He realize there was an infrastructure, where there was no direct laws governing marriage. They simply did as they please. Once the Spanish invaded, he saw that these peaceful tribes were being ripped apart; they were having their way of life destroyed. He saw “Endless testimonies... prove the mild and pacific temperament of the natives.... But our work was to exasperate, ravage, kill, mangle and destroy; small wonder, then, if they tried to kill one of us now and then.... The admiral, it is true, was blind as those who came after him, and he was so anxious to please the King that he committed irreparable crimes against the Indians....” This showing of cruelty is what made Bartoleme de Las Cases become a critic of the Spanish conquests and why he wrote those two accounts.

Zinn’s argument about Samuel Eliot Morison’s telling of Columbus’ story is that he glosses over the subject of the genocide. According to Zinn, Samuel Eliot Morison barely puts any emphasis on the mass genocide that Columbus had done. Morison simply states the murderous event and simply talks about other information not pertaining to the huge topic of genocide. Zinn’s interpretation of Morison’s telling of Columbus’ story is that he is “emphasiz[ing] the heroism of Columbus and his successors as navigators and discoverers, and deemphasize[ing] their genocide.” He makes this a huge point to show the effect of how in schools they brain wash children to believe that Columbus was a heroic figure and to let the mass genocide brush off. Zinn emphasizes the point that people should not ignore the fact of Columbus being a mass murderer, and by ignoring the fact, we are celebrating the genocide and claiming what he did was reasonable. This is celebrating the death of all the natives and saying that the genocide happened, but at least he discovered America.

Howard Zinn believes in his textbook that “[i]f history is to be creative, to anticipate a possible future without denying the past, it should, I believe, emphasize new possibilities by disclosing those hidden episodes of the past when, even if in brief flashes, people showed their ability to resist, to join together, occasionally to win.” What Zinn is trying to say is that history should not be censored and should not be based on a lie or an incomplete truth. The article “Christopher Columbus: No Monuments for Murderers” unveils questions asking about should Christopher Columbus be censored in schools and should he be celebrated, all while avoiding the fact that many lives of the Native Americans were the cost of such. Zinn believes that Columbus should not be celebrated at all and the history that is told of him should not be censored and show the true history of him. He believes if we do not tell the true history of Columbus, we are not doing justice or respect to the countless lives of the murdered Native Americans that was at the hands of the European settlers.

People use “superpatriotism” to hide, lie or conceal true histories in order to self-justify one’s “patriotic ideals.” Howard Zinn explains this in his textbook by saying that what is “largely untaught is the darker side of our history. What is there to love about the extermination of Native American Indian nations, a bloodletting that extended over four centuries along with the grabbing of millions of acres of their lands?” People use their patriotism to justify the countless wrong doings of their own nation. One likes to believe that their country is the best and no one has ever done anything wrong because of their strong morals. This results in the hiding of Columbus’ genocide and mass murders. People, including historians and educators, want to believe Columbus founded the Americas and was the start of the great Nation we know today, all while hiding the fact that he murdered all the indigenous people to do so. Zinn says that “to cover up serious conflicts of interest in that consensus, and to cover up, also, the omission of large parts of the human race,” is to cover real history. This superpatriotism is what falters the direct and real truth of what really happened. Hiding the truth is disrespectful to the people who faced these hardships. This justification is not a good one to simply ignore a nation’s ignorance.

Patriotism can be used as a form of mass social propaganda to mobilize people. By teaching children early on to love their country and to take in incomplete truths about their country’s history to even further their patriotism, the nation can used this to mobilize the masses. They are taught to love their country and this helps hide the fact that their country has faults. It justifies the faults of the country as simple good old American way. For example, by having this great superpatriotism, citizens are justified in their racism that America belongs only to the whites and the other ethnicities don’t belong in the great country of America. The patriotism justifies many killings in the name of America, such as the Vietnam War or the war in the Middle East. These involvements of wars are justified in the aspect that America is the greatest country and their involvement will help other countries.

Superpatriotism is an uncritical ideology or “secular religion.” Secular means to have no religious or spiritual basis. Religion is to have a deep connection to an abstract figure that is bonded by a strong faith, or belief. Superpatriotism is the strong connection to one’s country without the basis of a religious spirit or entity. Despite many confirmations and other explanations of opposition about the religion or in this case the country, one still believes that their way of living is the best way. Superpatriotism is a huge way of living where Americans will justify that they have the best country despite the racism, sexism, and the genocide of many indigenous people being the foundation of their nation.

Superpatriotism is very similar to individual dissent. They both deny that there is anything wrong with their beliefs all while the facts say otherwise. They say many things that are not backed by evidence and deny the evidence that is so easily in front of them. The only difference is that Superpatriotism is shared among groups who will support each other while individual dissents are people by themselves.

Superpatriotism influences scholarship because it may distort the whole truth and the make students write about an incomplete truth or even a lie to protect the sensitivity of the Americans. Parenti believes that students are graded upon the memorization of textbooks that display false information, and citation of real information would be a downgrade due to the opposition of the grader’s superpatriotism. Zinn believes that the censorship of history in textbooks or the glazing over of such events only lies to students and doesn’t show the true faults in American governments. These authors both believe that by teaching these lies and hiding the faults of their own nation, Americans won’t find any reason to improve the society they live in today. Superpatriotism is making scholars look down upon socialism despite it being “a network of cooperatives, in communication with one another.” A peaceful time would be called “a neighborly socialism avoiding the class hierarchies of capitalism and the harsh dictatorships that have taken the name "socialist." Schools look down upon the real truth because of their own scholarship and this creates an incomplete education system that will harm students.