

500 YEARS OF OPPRESSION, PATRIARCHY, AND RACISM

Howard Zinn's book, *A People's History of the United States, 1492—Present*, has given us a "rereading" of U.S. history "from the underside," i.e. from the perspective of Native Americans, poor white serfs, African Americans, women, workers, and worldwide victims of U.S. "Manifest Destiny." It should be required reading, if not in schools and universities, certainly in our churches, as a necessary part of our education and preparation for life in this terribly unjust world.

From the beginning of our history there have been, of course, various mechanisms by which powerful and wealthy elites have gained and maintained and augmented their privileges at the expense of those at the bottom of the social and economic pyramids. White craftsmen and poor whites were invited to make common use of their racial "superiority" in exploitation and abuse of Blacks and Indians. White men exploited and abused both White and non-White women because of their gender "superiority." Periodically, concessions and compromises were made with middle class and other "inferiors" so that the rebellious sectors could be quelled and the basic socio-economic pyramids could be kept relatively stable.

Zinn analyzes the peculiar nature of the exploitation and oppression of women, who have been largely absent from earlier histories of our country. Among African and Native Americans and among the poor they have been doubly oppressed. And among all groups they were for so long given tasks as "a convenience for men, who could use, exploit, and cherish someone who was at the same time servant, sex mate, companion, and bearer-teacher-warden of his children." (102) In the early years "women were imported as sex slaves, child-bearers, companions." (103) Many came as indentured servants. Servant and slave girls were commonly abused sexually. Black slave women were often separated from their husbands and even from their children. According to the dominant cultural and religious ideology, women were expected to be subject to their husbands, to be occupied in the home and not in public affairs, to turn over their property to their husbands, and to be sexually pure, but the vicissitudes of life in the colonies and on the frontier often forced them to assume responsibilities on a par with men.

The struggle of Native North Americans is perhaps the most tragic of all. From the time of the original colonies, through the great White migrations across the Appalachian Mountains, on to the Rockies, and finally to the West Coast, the great Indian Nations have had their lands taken, their villages burned, their women raped, their cultures and religions vilified, their right to life denied. Their story is replete with official deceit and betrayal, massacres and forced removals, and endless treaties leading to genocide. It can be argued that the wars and skirmishes against the Native Peoples played a decisive role in the formation of the heroic, military, chauvinistic American mind that in the 20th Century has wrecked havoc on Third World peoples around the world through military intervention, secret operations, and economic imperialism.

The human cost of the slave system will forever be incalculable and incomprehensible, especially to Whites. The heritage of slavery in the U.S. psyche, both Black and White, may never be fully exorcised. By 1860 there were 4 million slaves in the South, producing enormous profits for their White owners, and there were 200,000 free Blacks in the North. The fruits of this iniquitous system are still being borne by the women, children, and men of Harlem, South Chicago, and South Central Los Angeles and also among the still largely White suburbs of all our cities, among rich and poor of both races whose humanity will be fundamentally deformed as long as this racism, sometimes referred to as America's original sin, persists.

Consider what U.S. history might have been like if the Jubilee vision and mandates had--as some Native peoples, settlers, and freed slaves proposed--prevailed.