

profits. At home and abroad, they are faithfully served by the national security state with all its covert and repressive apparatus. Their faithful acolytes occupy the more powerful security agency positions and cabinet posts regardless of what party or personality controls the White House. They create international agreements like NAFTA and GATT that circumvent the democratic protections of sovereign states and undermine the ability of popular government to develop public-sector services for anyone other than these powerful interests. Their overall economic domination and their campaign contributions, media monopoly, high-paid lobbyists, and public relations experts regularly predetermine who will be treated as major political candidates and which policy parameters will prevail. These ruling elites are neither omnipotent nor infallible. They suffer confusions and setbacks, and have differences among themselves. They sometimes grope for ways to secure and advance their interests in the face of changing circumstances, learning by trial and error. Through all this, their capital accumulation continues unabated. Though relatively few in number they get the most of what there is to get. Their wealth serves their power, and their power serves their wealth.¹⁵

The Hunt for Real History

The most comprehensive federal survey, released by the U.S. Department of Education, finds that nearly six in ten high school seniors lack even a rudimentary knowledge of American history. A survey conducted by the Gallup Organization shows that 25 percent of college seniors cannot come within a half-century of locating the date of Columbus's voyage. About 40 percent do not know when the Civil War occurred. Most cannot describe the differences between World War I and World War II (though they suspect that World War II came after World War I). Another Gallup poll finds that 60 percent of adult Americans are unable to name the president who ordered the atomic bomb

to be dropped on Japan, and 22 percent have no idea that such an attack ever occurred.¹⁶ A 1995 survey in the *New York Times* reports that only 49 percent of U.S. adults knew that the Soviet Union had been an ally of the United States during World War II, with the rest either having no opinion or thinking that the Soviets were noncombatants or on the enemy side.¹⁷

The picture is no better in regard to current affairs. A survey by the National Assessment of Educational Programs reveals that 47 percent of the nation's high school juniors do not know that each state has two U.S. senators.¹⁸ A 1998 survey reports that nearly 95 percent of U.S. teenagers can name the lead actor in *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, a television show, but less than 2 percent know the name of the chief justice of the Supreme Court. And while only 41 percent of teenagers can name the three branches of government, 59 percent can name the Three Stooges—demonstrating once again that television is a more commanding teacher than school.¹⁹

Almost all these surveys focus on U.S. history. Were questions asked about the history of other nations and pre-U.S. epochs, the figures would be even more dismal. This historical and political illiteracy should come as no surprise. Most states require not more than a year of history in high school, and some states—like Alaska, Michigan, and Pennsylvania—require no history of any kind. According to the National Center for Education Standards, as of 1994, fewer than 19 percent of high-school and middle-school social studies teachers had majored or minored in history.²⁰

But something else is operating besides mass ignorance and mass media. The important question is, what is so desirable about knowing most of these facts in the first place, especially if they remain unconnected to any meaningful socio-historic explanation and often mask more than they reveal? To be sure, we cannot grasp the significance of an event or epoch if we do not even know it existed. But if all we know are a few bare facts,

we comprehend little of importance. Contrary to the popular adage, it is seldom the case that the facts speak for themselves. While factual data are a prerequisite for understanding social realities, we must find ways of making sense of them, of appreciating their import and showing their relevance to larger developments. As Lord Acton put it: "History exhibits truths as well as facts—when [the facts] are seen not merely as they follow, but as they correspond; not merely as they have happened but as they are paralleled."²¹

Instead of just wishing more students knew that the Monroe Doctrine was issued in 1823 and that it attempted to discourage European colonization in the Western Hemisphere, we might want to ask *why* U.S. leaders felt compelled to introduce this "doctrine." Was it an altruistic gesture to protect Latin countries from European despotism, as some claimed at that time and many textbooks have maintained ever since? Was it to assure the peace and safety of the United States, as the doctrine itself declares? Or could a major consideration have been to guarantee a free hand for U.S. investors in the Western Hemisphere? Secretary of State John Quincy Adams (a principal shaper of the Monroe Doctrine) understood that even the British were aware that "the new Spanish-American markets simply had to be kept open" for U.S. commercial interests, and free from colonization by the continental powers.²²

Such considerations could lead to others: Does U.S. foreign policy, as embodied in declarations such as the Monroe Doctrine, represent the interests of the American people? How so, or why not? Why would U.S. policy be so considerate of investor interests abroad? Why do U.S. corporate interests pursue overseas investments in the first place? What effects do these investments have on the people who inhabit these other lands and on our own people at home?

Historical parallels could be entertained. Thus, how does the Monroe Doctrine compare to the Truman Doctrine, the

Eisenhower Doctrine, the Nixon Doctrine, the Carter Doctrine, and other assertions of U.S. primacy in various regions of the world? Why do so many U.S. presidents feel compelled to promulgate such "doctrines"? Is there a common pattern behind these various proclamations? By linking the Monroe Doctrine to a broader set of questions about past and present events, we make it a more relevant and more interesting topic of study. The important thing is not just to identify specific historical events—as might a quiz show contestant—but to think intelligently and critically about them, and be able to relate them to broader social relations.

If people know little about standard history, they know even less about the silenced, hidden parts of history. More meaningful than remembering the date of Columbus's voyage is knowing about the cold-blooded slaughter and plunder he perpetrated against Native Americans, a homicidal rapacity that was reenacted and surpassed by many who came after him, many whose crimes also are whitewashed in mainstream narratives.

Other underplayed parts of North American history would include the early agrarian rebellions, the industrial class struggles of the last two centuries, the suppression of radical political dissent, the private plunder and spoliation of public resources, the bloody expansionism inflicted on indigenous peoples in North America and throughout the world, U.S. global expansionism, and U.S.-sponsored atrocities against revolutionaries and reformers throughout the Third World.²³

Despite the miseducation they may have endured—or *because* of it—many people are hungry for real history. Far from being bored, they start paying attention when history offers an analysis that advances their understanding of events. They enjoy history when it is written in an accessible way (but not necessarily in a facile, light-handed manner), when it presents interesting narrative and provocative observations that relate to broader questions of social conflict and development, when it

offers revealing parallels to what is going on now, suggesting that current events are not merely the result of particular personalities and passing phenomena but have compelling analogues in times long past.

Real history is interesting also when it deconstructs the pap we learned in school or from the media, when it demonstrates how we have been misled. More exciting than learning history is *un*learning the disinformational history we have been taught. Real history goes the extra step and challenges existing icons, offering interpretations that have a healthy subverting effect on mainstream ideology.

Attempts at real history are dismissed by conservatives as “revisionism.” To use “revisionism” as an epithet is to say that there is no room for historical reinterpretation, that the standard version is objective and factual, and that any departure from it can only be ideological and faddish. Revisionism’s real sin is that it challenges many time-honored bourgeois beliefs about the world, including the happy-faced image of America the Beautiful, the image “to which most Americans particularly those raised on ‘consensus history’ textbooks, [have] become accustomed.”²⁴

Revisionism also opens up new areas of inquiry. It is remarkable the things that most of us never learn in school about our own history, the topics and inquiries we are never introduced to. Consider this incomplete listing:

§ Why were human beings held in slavery through a good part of U.S. history? Why were they not given any land to till after their emancipation? Why were Native American Indians systematically massacred time and again?

§ What is property in the context of American civilization? What is wealth? How have large concentrations of capital been accumulated? Is there a causal relationship between wealth for the few and poverty for the many?

§ What role has government played in the formation of great

fortunes and giant corporations? What effect has this had on the democratic process?

§ Why in past generations did people work twelve hours a day or longer, six and seven days a week? Where did the weekend and the eight-hour day come from? Why were labor unions considered unconstitutional through much of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century?

§ Who were the Wobblies, the Knights of Labor, the Populists, and the Progressives? Why did tens of thousands of Americans consider themselves anarchists, socialists, or communists? Why did hundreds of thousands vote for radical candidates?

§ How did poor children get to go to public schools? How did communities get public libraries? What role has social class played in education and in American life in general?

§ How did we get laws on behalf of occupational safety, minimum wage, environmental protection, and retirement and disability benefits? How effective have they been? Who still opposes them and why?

§ What historic role has corporate America played in advancing or retarding the conditions of workers, women, African Americans, Native Americans, and various other ethnic groups? Why are most corporate decisions regarding investments, jobs, use of resources, and markets considered to be private?

§ Why have U.S. military forces intervened directly or indirectly in so many countries over the last century?

§ Why have U.S. leaders opposed revolutionary and even reformist governments, and supported right-wing autocracies around the world?

Questions of this sort are seldom asked in our media, schools, or textbooks.

Textbooks: America the Beautiful

In failing to teach us about class conflict and class domination, mainstream history shows itself to be an extension of that