

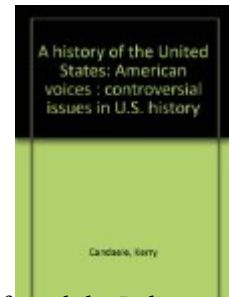
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Carol Berkin Carson, Alan Brinkley, Clayborne. *American Voices: A History of the United States*. Glenview, I.L.: Scott Foresman, 1992. xli + 997 pp. ISBN 978-0-673-35239-2.

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Published on H-High-S (December, 1995)



Studies conducted in recent years, including those done by Paul Gagnon and Gary Nash, suggest that the reading level of all textbooks, especially those in history and the social sciences, has declined during the past two decades. In Gagnon's study, American history texts routinely "omit or dumb-down the Old World background of the American experience." He also cites the lack of "religious and political principles" presented in examinations of significant historical figures and laments the avoidance of examining the influences which aided in the development of said principles. In *American Voices: A History of the United States*, one would be hard pressed to find that any of Gagnon's concerns have been addressed in the seven years since his study was published.

Written by a committee which includes such distinguished historians as Alan Brinkley and Eric Foner, *American Voices* begins with considerable promise by describing in detail the critical thinking strategies which the study of history, and this text, are supposed to develop (p. xxv). The seventeen-point program is an excellent list of goals for the student (and instructor) to attempt to achieve. However, when the reader actually reaches the text proper, the issues addressed by Gagnon and others become altogether too apparent. Information provided in each chapter is presented in little more than advanced laundry-list fashion. Little narrative form is used to entice the reader, be they student or instructor, into becoming more interested in any of the subjects examined. An example of this may be found in the first chapter in a segment entitled, "Spain's Southern Colonies" (p. 30). The opening sentences of the section read, "Much of the Spanish system encouraged the subjugation of the Indians. First, the vast wealth of the Americas lay in rich silver mines and in fertile fields of sugar cane. Both enterprises required intensive labor by many

men and women, so the Spaniards forced the Indians to serve the Crown as laborers." At no time in the text prior to this point or following it are there any references to the atrocities of Cortes, Pizarro or others, no studies appear to examine the effect non-indigenous disease played in the process of conquest, nor is any narrative forthcoming about the division of the New World into Spanish and Portuguese-controlled spheres, a division which has proven significant in the development of the New World. While a total examination of Europe's Age of Exploration is not needed in studying United States history, much vital, detailed information about the effect of Spanish, Portuguese, and later English, Dutch, and French exploration would go a long way towards establishing a firm foundation upon which to develop a better understanding of America's own development.

Textual shortcomings are not merely limited to the events surrounding the immediate post-Columbian era. *American Voices* habitually short- changes some of the more fascinating aspects of American history in exchange for numerous illustrations, map studies, mini-biographies of the presidents, and listings of "Point - Counterpoint" issues. Jefferson's struggle with the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clarke expedition issues (p. 118) are essentially dismissed in one short column. There is little mention of Napoleon or the Spanish in relation to this region, no mention at all of the Haitian revolution which toppled the French colonial government of Haiti and placed Toussant L'Overture in the governor's mansion, and nothing of the mental struggles of Madison and Livingston over Napoleon's offer to sell the entire region and its Constitutional implications. By comparison, Boorstin and Kelley examine the issues over a space of nearly seven full pages of text and do so using a detailed narrative format. Other texts offering more in-

depth examinations of similar issues include Bailey and Kennedy (5 pages), Todd and Curti (4 pages), and Risjord and Heywood (4 pages). In examining the sectional issues leading to the Civil War (or War Between the States), the whole Northern European immigration to the industrial North during the 1850's is summed up in a brief, one-column section (p. 185) just prior to the five pages devoted to examining the slavery issues and compromises leading into the shelling of Fort Sumter. The Boorstin and Bailey volumes dedicate an entire chapter to the economic growth of the North with no fewer than five pages of these examining the effect of immigration on industrialization, including studies of Lowell and the "Lowell girls," a subject ignored entirely by *American Voices*.

In evaluating this text, the imbalance in the distribution of chapters by historical periods becomes disturbing. Given that so much of American/United States history takes place before 1877, it is incomprehensible to find only five (out of a total of twenty-four) chapters devoted to historical periods prior to the end of Reconstruction. In a comprehensive text, a more balanced examination of United States history, rather than a study top-heavy with a twentieth-century emphasis would have made a considerable difference in the overall quality of this text. It becomes increasingly obvious in reading *American Voices* that, for all intents and purposes, it is a work dedicated more to the post-bellum era, leading the reader, whether student or instructor, to the conclusion that the authors do not regard early American history as being quite as important or necessary to study as the more modern era.

Where minimalism is the hallmark of the five chapters devoted to antebellum America, considerable information, in the form of primary source materials and literary passages are found in the remaining nineteen chapters. Each chapter throughout the text, especially those devoted to the post-Reconstruction era contains several "Source Readings," consisting of letters, diary entries, official documents, and published articles and writings. Examples of these include transcripts from Anne

Hutchinson's heretic trial (p. 78), the description of Elizabeth Keckley's viewing of Lincoln's body in Washington (p. 258), Muriel Rukeyser's Depression-era poetry (p. 549), and Rosa Park's account of her part in beginning the Montgomery bus boycott (p. 778). The range and breadth of these documentary sources is commendable for it brings the views and voices of each period's participants into the reach of the reader. Serving both an illustrative and analytic role, the readings are excellent tools which appear well chosen. They, in fact, constitute the principal appeal of *American Voices* for few texts at any level, contribute more than a few well-used sources for students to examine (i.e. Washington's Farwell Address, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, etc.). Their inclusion, however, does not make up for the lack of engaging and properly detailed narrative which would make this text more palatable.

In so far as the use of source materials and the establishment of critical thinking goals are concerned, *American Voices* is an advance in U.S. history textbook publication. However, until the authors make the effort to "flesh out" the stories of the past and present them in an engaging and interesting manner, this text will merely exist as yet another with far too many shortcomings and far too few assets. While much of the commentary here has been devoted to castigating the limited information and minimal text, this should not be dismissed as mere "bean-counting." For many students in many school districts, history text books are the end-all and be-all for sources of information. Schools possessing limited resources based on budgetary restraints often need to rely on well-informed texts to provide the base information that can and will constitute the foundation of class discussion. *American Voices* falls far short of this need and, in essence, makes a statement to the educational community that substance in a textbook has been supplanted by style, that illustration is of greater importance than strong writing. It is hoped that subsequent editions of *American Voices* will address these issues so as to reaffirm the primacy of reading as the foundation of learning.

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**Citation:** Joseph J. Ferreira, Jr. Review of Carson, Carol Berkin; Brinkley, Alan; Clayborne, *American Voices: A History of the United States*. H-High-S, H-Net Reviews. December, 1995.

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