

Challenging History: Why the Oppressed Must Tell Their Own Story

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Theme: [History](#)

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When American historian Howard Zinn passed away recently, he left behind a legacy that redefined our relationship to history altogether.

Professor Zinn dared to challenge the way history was told and written. In fact he went as far as to defy the conventional construction of historical discourses through the pen of victor or of elites who earned the right of narration through their might, power and affluence.

This kind of history might be considered accurate insofar as it reflects a self-seeking and self-righteous interpretation of the world by a very small number of people. But it is also highly inaccurate when taking into account the vast majority of peoples everywhere.

The oppressor is the one who often articulates his relationship to the oppressed, the colonialist to the colonized, and the slave-master to the slave. The readings of such relationships are fairly predictable.

Even valiant histories that most of us embrace and welcome, such as those celebrating the legacy of human rights, equality and freedom left behind by Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and Nelson Mandela still tend to be selective at times. Martin Luther King's vision might have prevailed, but some tend to limit their admiration to his 'I have a dream' speech. The civil rights hero was an ardent anti-war champion as well, but that is often relegated as non-essential history. Malcolm X is often dismissed altogether, despite the fact that his self-assertive words have reached the hearts and minds of millions of black people throughout the United States, and many more millions around the world. His speech was in fact so radical that it could not be 'sanitized' or reinterpreted in any controllable way. Mandela, the freedom fighter, is celebrated with endless accolades by the very foes that branded him a terrorist. Of course, his insistence on his people's rights to armed struggle is not to be discussed. It is too flammable a subject to even mention at a time when anyone who dares wield a gun against the self-designated champions of 'democracy' gets automatically classified a terrorist.

Therefore, Zinn's peoples' histories of the United States and of the world have represented a milestone in historical narration.

As a Palestinian writer who is fond with such luminaries, I too felt the need to provide an alternative reading of history, in this case, Palestinian history. I envisioned, with much hesitation, a book that serves as a people's history of Palestine. I felt that I have earned the right to present such a possible version of history, being the son of Palestinian refugees, who lost everything and were exiled to live dismal lives in a Gaza refugee camp. I am the

descendant of 'peasants' – Fellahin – whose odyssey of pain, struggle, but also heroic resistance is constantly misrepresented, distorted, and at times overlooked altogether.

It was the death of my father (while under siege in Gaza) that finally compelled me to translate my yearning into a book. *My Father was a Freedom Fighter, Gaza's Untold Story* offered a version of Palestinian history was not told by an Israeli narrator – sympathetic or otherwise – and neither was it an elitist account, as often presented by Palestinian writers. The idea was to give a human face to all the statistics, maps and figures.

History cannot be classified by good vs. bad, heroes vs. villains, moderates vs. extremists. No matter how wicked, bloody or despicable, history also tends to follow rational patterns, predictable courses. By understanding the rationale behind historical dialectics, one can achieve more than a simple understanding of what took place in the past; it also becomes possible to chart fairly reasonable understanding of what lies ahead.

Perhaps one of the worse aspects of today's detached and alienating media is its production of history – and thus characterization of the present – as based on simple terminology. This gives the illusion of being informative, but actually manages to contribute very little to our understanding of the world at large.

Such oversimplifications are dangerous because they produce an erroneous understanding of the world, which in turn compels misguided actions.

For these reasons, it is incumbent upon us to try to discover alternative meanings and readings of history. To start, we could try offering historical perspectives which try to see the world from the viewpoint of the oppressed – the refugees, the fellahin who have been denied, amongst many rights, the right to tell their own story.

This view is not a sentimental one. Far from it. An elitist historical narrative is maybe the dominant one, but it is not always the elites who influence the course of history. History is also shaped by collective movements, actions and popular struggles. By denying this fact, one denies the ability of the collective to affect change. In the case of Palestinians, they are often presented as hapless multitudes, passive victims without a will of their own. This is of course a mistaken perception; the Palestinians' conflict with Israel has lasted this long only because of their unwillingness to accept injustice, and their refusal to submit to oppression. Israel's lethal weapons might have changed the landscape of Gaza and Palestine, but the will of Gazans and Palestinians are what have shaped the landscape of Palestine's history.

Touring with *My Father was a Freedom Fighter* in South Africa, in a recent visit, was a most intense experience. It was in this country that freedom fighters once rose to fight oppression, challenging and eventually defeating Apartheid. My father, the refugee of Gaza has suddenly been accepted unconditionally by a people of a land thousands of miles away. The notion of 'people's history' can be powerful because it extends beyond boundaries, and expands beyond ideologies and prejudices. In that narrative, Palestinians, South Africans, Native Americans and many others find themselves the sons and daughters of one collective history, one oppressive legacy, but also part of an active community of numerous freedom fighters, who dared to challenge and sometimes even change the face of history.

South Africa has; Palestine will.

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