



BUILDING BRIDGES THROUGH BOOKS

a project of Human Rights Pen Pals

Guide to reading, discussions and answering questions

- We read with a sense of purpose. Building bridges is our goal.
 - We promote critical thinking and oppose rote memorization.
 - We encourage taking notes and writing down material not understood.
 - Use a dictionary and don't skip over words you don't 100% understand.
 - We encourage individuals to take the initiative to read related subject material to improve understanding.
 - Ask questions: curiosity is the key to learning.
 - Read questions prior to reading the chapter. This approach will help you focus on the major themes.
 - Answer questions in a language that everyone can understand.
 - Don't preach from the mountain top. We are guided by the educational principle "Each One, Teach One"
 - Decide which questions you want to answer. You are not obligated to answer every single question.
 - When writing out your response, please be sure to indicate which chapter and question number you are answering (i.e., chapter 1, #2). You do not need to re-write the question.
-

Discussion Questions

"A People's History of the United States" by Howard Zinn

Chapter 1. Columbus, the Indians, and Human Progress

1. How would you define history?
2. What economic forces drove the colonial expansion into the Americas? Who benefitted from the expansion, and who were its main victims?
3. Zinn asks if "all this bloodshed and deceit— from Columbus to Cortes, Pizarro and the Puritans" was necessary "for the human race to progress from savagery to civilization." What do you think? How would you define "progress," "savagery," and "civilization" as historical terms?
4. In your view what were the motives that lead to the genocide of Indians? What was its justification?
5. After reading the first chapter, can you think of any examples of how today's realities/events/ideologies reflect the past?

Chapter 2. Drawing the Color Line

1. How much did you know about resistance and rebellion of enslaved African Americans before reading these two chapters? Why do you think these voices are typically missing from our textbooks?

2. What is the “color line”? How does Howard Zinn describe the way this color line was drawn in early America? Do you think the drawing of this line was intentional or unintentional?
3. What do you believe are the short- and long-term repercussions of the deliberate steps that were taken to destroy the family structure of enslaved African Americans?
4. What justifications, besides economic, are there for enslaving fellow human beings?
5. Why was solidarity amongst the slaves and servants, both black and white, punished?

Chapter 3. Persons of Mean and Vile Condition

1. How does Howard Zinn describe the development of “a white middle class” servitude and rebellion? Do you agree with his statement that the middle class would provide a “solid buffer” for the elite? Why, or why not? Do you think this was a deliberate action by the elite? Why, or why not?
2. What was the relationship between the development of commerce and capitalism, the enclosure of common land, and the production of a class of vagrant poor in 15th and 16th century England? How did the law respond to this new class of poor, homeless people? Can we use incarceration rates as a marker to chart economic developments throughout history? (compare to U.S. from 1970--2000).
3. Zinn writes “The mechanism of control was formidable. Strangers had to show passports or certificates to prove they were free men” (p. 46). Zinn is referring to the late 1600s in the American colonies, What similarities do you see in our current political climate to what was happening during the late 1600s?
4. What was more divisive, racism or classism?

Other questions:

Would you like to share anything else?

Would you want to be mailed two copies of the discussion questions in the future?