

The Story of Us on History channel—an attempt to revive the myths of American capitalism

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The awkwardly named History (the US cable television network previously known as the History Channel) recently presented a 12-hour series entitled “America: The Story of Us.” The ambitious project spanned the history of the United States from the first European settlements of North America until the present day.

This huge subject has of course been treated in thousands of volumes, both scholarly and popular, and on television as well. Covering the entire 400-year period demands a serious examination of the colonial era, the American Revolution and its immediate aftermath, the westward expansion of the US and the bloody Civil War that was fought to determine its future, the rise of industry and the Gilded Age, the emergence of the working class, the impact of the Great Depression and the explosive growth of the labor movement, American participation in two world wars and the enormous battles for democratic rights and social equality.

Anyone expecting a serious look at or even an introductory examination of any of these aspects of American history from the History series was sorely disappointed. They should not have been surprised, however, since this network, owned by the Hearst Corporation, Disney and General Electric, has earned a reputation for superficiality and sensationalism.

History, first launched 15 years ago, is sometimes known as “The Mystery Channel” or “The Pseudo-History Channel,” according to online encyclopedia Wikipedia. Last year it premiered “Nostradamus Effect,” in which it gave serious treatment to various apocalyptic prophecies.

With this in mind, a brief look at “The Story of Us” is worthwhile perhaps not for any insights the program itself offers, but more for what it shows about how history is presented today by the US corporate-entertainment-media complex and the ruling elite of which it is an integral part.

“The Story of Us” relies heavily on dramatization and re-creation of scenes from US history, including battles in the Revolutionary War and Civil War. These are overwhelmingly ineffective, stilted and lame. They are designed not to illuminate the great struggles and the ideas that animated them, but rather to focus on action in the style of a Hollywood blockbuster.

The argument goes that it is necessary to simplify events, to reduce them to computer-generated graphics and sound bites from various celebrities, in order to gain an audience. This is a fraud. Programming that can both entertain and educate a mass audience

is eminently possible, but the creators of this series are interested in something else. The dumbing down of history exemplified by “The Story of Us” has a definite social and political purpose.

The United States emerged from a great revolution that owed much to the Enlightenment and in turn had a great impact on the subsequent French Revolution and later struggles up to the present day. “The Story of Us” presents it, in contrast, as simply the result of some uniquely American characteristics that came out of nowhere. “We are pioneers and trailblazers. We fight for freedom. We transform our dreams into the truth. Our struggles will become a nation.” This is the mantra that is repeated at the beginning of each episode, and it is designed to obscure the real history of the United States while fostering a chauvinistic mythology.

Banalities such as “the document that will change the world” (referring to the Declaration of Independence) and a battle “that will change the course of history” (the 1770 Boston Massacre) are repeated endlessly without the slightest further elaboration. Most significantly, the programs rely overwhelmingly for their “talking heads” not on historians who have actually studied the subject, but on political, military and business figures.

Historians like Gordon Wood, Bernard Bailyn, James McPherson or Eric Foner do not appear on these programs. Instead we get Michael Bloomberg and his predecessor as New York Mayor, Rudy Giuliani; Republican bigwig Newt Gingrich; NBC news anchor Brian Williams; generals David Petraeus and Colin Powell; fashion and lifestyle mogul Martha Stewart; actor Michael Douglas; and billionaire know-nothing Donald Trump, among others.

There is an obvious effort, through the interviews with Powell and Petraeus, to associate the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with the struggles that gave birth to the US. Of course the opposite is the case. It is difficult to see the on-screen portrayal of the Bostonians’ struggle against the British occupiers and not think of the current US occupations. Equally telling is the depiction of the inhuman conditions endured by American prisoners of war held on British prison ships in New York Harbor in the late 1770s, which calls to mind Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo and Bagram, the symbols of torture carried out by today’s American occupiers.

The essential message of “The Story of Us” is that America represents the triumph of the idea of entrepreneurship and private wealth. Hence the presence of Bloomberg, Trump and others who

are supposed to personify these goals. There is no room in this story for collective struggle and social equality. "Some will win. Some will lose," we are told. The Revolutionary War was won, it is suggested, because of great generals and clever tactics alone. The major grievance of the colonists was simply a general unwillingness to pay taxes. The right wing anti-tax nostrums, along with the right to bear arms, are presented as at the heart of the revolution, while Jefferson's role in writing the Declaration of Independence is ignored and great revolutionary pamphleteer Thomas Paine is barely mentioned. The struggle for the American Constitution is likewise ignored.

Of course the American Revolution was a bourgeois revolution. Its triumph reflected the progressive role that capitalism could play on the North American continent more than two centuries ago. The same must be said about the victory of the Union forces in the Civil War, which made possible the enormous expansion of US capitalism in the post-Civil War period. During this period, the progressive character of American capitalism found expression in the ideas that are presented in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and Bill of Rights, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments to the US Constitution.

Today, however, capitalism has long since exhausted its progressive role. It can no longer develop the productive forces of society, but instead must condemn the masses of workers to misery both at home and abroad. The country that was born in struggle against foreign occupation is today the hated foreign occupier of Iraq and Afghanistan, half a world away.

"The Story of Us" is not interested in or capable of explaining this actual historical development. Instead it presents history as some sort of God-given revealed truth.

America as the symbol of the unrestrained profit motive finds almost laughable expression in the way that Bank of America, a major sponsor of the series, works its advertising into the programs themselves. As one watches a discussion of early 19th Century America and the approach of the War of 1812 with Britain, two historians come on screen and within a minute one realizes that they are in fact explaining how the ancestors of what is today one of the largest banking institutions in the US played the decisive role in financing the war. Thus the history of the US is the history of its banks!

This crude fusing of advertising and "history" is not merely a commercial for the bank. At a time when the vast majority of the American people are enraged by the role of the banks in fueling the real estate bubble and precipitating the economic collapse that began in 2008, it represents a somewhat desperate effort to improve the image of "private enterprise."

In later episodes of the series, the same tendentious approach is used consistently. There is an almost total absence of the role of the industrial working class. Workers are presented primarily in racial, ethnic or gender contexts. There is a section on the famous Triangle Shirtwaist Factor fire in New York City in 1911, for instance, which resulted in the deaths of over 100 young immigrant women workers, but the impetus this tragedy gave to the growth of the labor movement is barely mentioned, and then only in relation to workplace safety. There is no mention of the rise of the unions, let alone the socialist movement in America,

and the crucial role of socialists in the struggles of the first three decades of the 20th Century.

In the episode on the Great Depression much time is given to the construction of the Hoover Dam. The chief engineer, who drove the work force to the breaking point, is described in admiring terms. By contrast, the formation of the CIO and the world-shaking sit-down strikes do not rate a mention.

One of the very few historians who does put in an appearance in this series for a few quick sound bites is Harvard's Henry Louis Gates. And perhaps most significantly, the whole 12-hour series is introduced, as if to provide an official seal of approval, by the current president of the United States.

One critic, who was quite unimpressed with the programs, wrote that he suspected that Barack Obama, "a constitutional scholar in his own right, hasn't seen the program."

That is of course not the point. Obama has lent the prestige of his office, such as it is, to this endeavor, and that is also no surprise. If "The Story of Us" presents a narrative that could be called history according to George W. Bush, on this as on every other essential issue the Obama administration continues in the same path as its predecessors because it represents the interests of American capitalism.

One of the programs' commentators, Jeannette Walls, who is primarily known as a gossip columnist, sums up the message with the following words: "Look, something's going to knock you down.... You can't sit around feeling sorry for yourself. You certainly can't look back and reminisce about the good old times. You've just got to keep on going forward and reinvent things...that is what is going to get us through the crises we're facing now."

The problem is not in the system, in other words, but in ourselves. American ingenuity will save the day and along the way help the plutocrats defend their wealth against the international working class and their capitalist rivals abroad. "Suck it up, get to work, and stop complaining."

DVDs of these programs are being distributed free of charge, along with detailed lesson plans, to schools across the country.



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