

Who Makes History?

BY BILL BIGELOW AND NORM DIAMOND

The way the past is presented — or not presented — affects how people think of their own capabilities. Here, using a Bertolt Brecht poem, students begin to consider the active, creative role that workers have played in the past and their potential strength in the future.

Goals / Objectives

1. Students will be able to understand better the choices that historians make in writing history.
2. Students will develop an appreciation for the role of ordinary people behind great historical events.

Materials Needed

- Student Handout: “A Worker Reads History.”

Time Required

- One class period.

Procedure: Day One

1. Have students number one through 10 on a paper.
2. Tell students to write a list of the 10 “most famous” people in U.S. history.
3. After they have finished, ask a few students to share their lists. As someone suggests a name, have them say briefly why they selected that person.
4. Have all the students look over their lists. Ask them if they can make any generalizations about what the people they named have in common — e.g., are they mostly men? Are

there many presidents, athletes, explorers, or movie stars on the lists?

5. Discuss with students the type of accomplishment that made each of the people on the lists famous.
 - » In general, what kinds of things make people famous in U.S. history?
 - » Are there other people who should get recognition for participating in the same events as the “famous people”?
 - » Are there other categories of people in history who have done important things but who have not received as much credit as the “famous” people?
6. Distribute Student Handout: “A Worker Reads History” by Bertolt Brecht. Read the poem aloud with the class.
7. Initiate a class discussion on the following questions:
 - » Who does the poet feel gets most of the credit in the history books?
 - » Who else does he think are the important people in history? What makes them important?
 - » Do you agree?
 - » Why doesn’t history normally focus on workers and “common” people?
 - » How many working people did you include on your list?

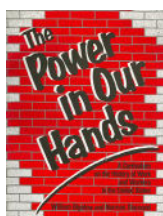
8. Tell students that they are going to write a poem modeled after Brecht’s search for the other unheralded people in history. Ask them to list a number of things in their daily lives in which the people who do or did the work are “hidden.” For example, a baseball, a television program, a piece of fruit, or a record album each represents a great deal of human labor, which we don’t usually see. Or students might think of jobs with which they are familiar — bakeries, janitorial or secretarial

work, food preparation — that are removed from the ultimate consumers.

After students complete their lists, have them write a poem using the themes in Brecht’s “A Worker Reads History.” As a prompt, you might suggest they begin with a question as Brecht does — for example, “Who made this soccer ball?” “Who brought these strawberries to our table?” “Whose hands touched this computer?”

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This is one of the 16 lessons available from *The Power in Our Hands: A Curriculum on the History of Work and Workers in the United States*, a teaching guide by Bill Bigelow and Norm Diamond. Published by Monthly Review Press in 1988. Reprinted here with permission of Monthly Review Press, and the authors.

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A Worker Reads History

By Bertolt Brecht

Who built the seven towers of Thebes?
The books are filled with names of kings.
Was it kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?
And Babylon, so many times destroyed,
Who built the city up each time? In which of Lima's houses,
That city glittering with gold, lived those who built it?
In the evening when the Chinese wall was finished
Where did the masons go? Imperial Rome
Is full of arcs of triumph. Who reared them up? Over whom
Did the Caesars triumph? Byzantium lives in song,
Were all her dwellings palaces? And even in Atlantis of the legend
The night the sea rushed in,
The drowning men still bellowed for their slaves.

Young Alexander plundered India.
He alone?
Caesar beat the Gauls.
Was there not even a cook in his army?
Philip of Spain wept as his fleet
Was sunk and destroyed. Were there no other tears?
Frederick the Great triumphed in the Seven Years War. Who
Triumphed with him?

Each page a victory,
At whose expense the victory ball?
Every 10 years a great man,
Who paid the piper?

So many particulars.
So many questions.

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