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L2: Semester 1 / 2020-2021

Course: Colonial History of America

1. Theoretical background of the study of (US) History

Objectives

After this first lecture, students should:

- ✓ be able to give a short definition of History in general and American colonial history in particular
- ✓ be familiar with the methodological tools related to the 'US colonial history' course
- ✓ be able to make a distinction between history and historiography

Introduction

This first lecture briefly explains the core principles of American history. We will give some definitions related to history in general and American history in particular. The lectures of this present course will introduce a variety of concepts, frameworks and topics associated with US history as it started with the settling of Native Americans in North America and the subsequent colonization of Europeans. But now, we will give a short definition to history and historiography (writing history). We will also delimit our topics of the history of colonial America.

1. Overview of history and its importance

The word "history" notes the *Online Etymology Dictionary* comes from the Ancient Greek *historia*, meaning "a learning or knowing by inquiry; an account of one's inquiries." Therefore, history is the study of past events and the ability of judging them and assessing them. Historians take a critical look at past events and place them in context through the use of a variety of historical sources such as written documents, oral accounts, and art objects.

But one may ask the following: why should our students study history? History is a very important branch of human sciences as it helps us understand the changes that occurred in the world and how the contemporary society we live in came to be. Consequently, history increases our understanding of our national identity in Algeria. Also studying the past helps us frame our present and project ourselves in the future. For instance if we take a look at the history of communism in USSR, we know that this economic

system has proven to be contradictory and difficult to apply in modern societies. So thanks to history, decision makers and politicians are aware of the inadequacies of communism as a political and economic system since they saw its devastating effects on the Soviet Union when it collapsed in the beginning of the 1990's.

2. Of US colonial history and historiography

Our module: 'Colonial History of America' will focus on the foundation of the USA from its origins until the creation of the Plymouth Colony in 1620. It means that we will take a look at maps, famous persons and explorers, key dates, timelines, and several other debates about the framing of an American identity which led to the creation of the United States of America as we know it and see it today.

When studying the colonial history of the USA we will rely on three methodological tools that will help us throughout our course:

1. A timeline with key dates that shows the chronological order in which events happened;
2. Maps that illustrate the explorations and the settling of the colonies;
3. Definitions of key concepts and famous people.

In addition to these tools, we will engage in scientific discussions about the history of colonial America by assessing past events and decisions that had several effects on USA of today. This will be done by relying on historiography. This term means "the writing of history."

Historiography is the study of the methods of historians in developing history as an academic discipline. The historiography of colonial America covers how historians studied this topic using particular sources, techniques, and theoretical approaches. For instances scholars discuss historiography by topic such as historiography of the UK, that of World War Two, that of Muslim conquests, and that of China and different approaches such as Marxist history, social history, and progressive history.

3. A US colonial history from below

The 'Colonial History of America' course will follow an approach of historiography that can be labeled as: history from below, also called a people's history. The US history from below is a type of historical narrative which focuses on the ordinary people. It attempts to account for historical events from the perspective of common people rather than leaders. History from below in colonial America emphasizes

on the marginal groups such as the disenfranchised, the oppressed, the poor, Native Americans, women, and African slaves. Scholars of this type of historiography are leftists and have a Marxist model in mind. History from below in the USA was popularized by the American historian Howard Zinn (1922-2010) who wrote his famous book *A People's History of the United States* in 1980. Zinn presented a different side of US history from the more traditional history that glorifies White Americans and US nationalism. Zinn criticized the elite rulers in the USA who exploit the majority of the US citizens who live at the bottom of the social ladder. These people are at the bottom struggling in the dirt. In his book, Zinn offers a "US history from below" which stresses on the daily life of ordinary people rather than glorifying explorers, presidents, generals, and officials. We share Zinn's scholar views on the issue of US history and we think we should always focus on deconstructing the daily lives of ordinary people as far as US colonial history is concerned. History, we think, is not just about the achievements of explorers, generals and presidents; it is also about analyzing the fights and struggles of the silent majority.

Conclusion

This introductory lecture has given us a general overview of history and historiography. It becomes clear that studying US colonial history is very important for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. We will study the history of America from its discovery by Native Americans until the foundation of Plymouth Plantation in 1620. Delimiting our topics is very important since we cannot cover the whole history of America. The foundation of America and the birth of this nation will be dealt with next year (L3).

We know now that we will study the US colonial history by taking a critical look at the ordinary people; those who are rarely mentioned in books about American history. Howard Zinn's views will be very helpful to our discussions as his historiography gives importance to the common people (slaves, Africans, women, poor people). It means that we will describe maps, key events, timelines, and famous explorers, and we will also try to read between the lines and examine the daily life of ordinary people during the colonization of America.