

**IN MEMORIAM: HOWARD ZINN**  
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When I first came up with the idea of writing a book about the life and writings of Howard Zinn, I knew that writing a study of a living person could be problematic, and that at the very least I would need his cooperation, including interview time, access to papers, e-mail contact, and more. So I wrote Zinn, told him what I had in mind, and asked if he would cooperate. "Of course I'll cooperate," he replied, "otherwise, I'll appear in your book not merely as a radical but as a surly one." One thing few have called Howard Zinn is "surly." To the contrary, I am reminded of the comment of a secretary who had worked with Zinn at Boston University who informed me when I was doing research that "Everybody likes him!" Not everyone *agreed* with him, obviously, with his stand on issues or his approach to history, but most would agree that he was an incredibly nice guy.

I have argued that Zinn held consistently to a "radical American vision." It was radical in the sense that it sought to bring about fundamental change in the political, economic, and social orders, to get to their roots. It was deeply American because it was grounded firmly in the ideals on which the United States was founded, the ideals of the Declaration of Independence, such ideals as life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness and equality and self-determination that are so self-evident and inherent that no government has the right to take them away. And it was a vision because, obviously, living up to those ideals is an on-going struggle, not yet a reality but a hope. Zinn realized that visions do not become reality through mere hope, that much work is required. He did his share!

Howard Zinn was born into a poor Jewish immigrant family in New York City in 1922. Indeed, poverty helped to shape his consciousness: He entitled one chapter in *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train: A Personal History of Our Times* "Growing up Class-Conscious." He worked in the shipyards as a teenager, had friends who were Communists, and though he never joined the party himself, once participated with some of them in a demonstration at Times Square, which wound up serving as one in a series of radicalizing experiences. Although the demonstration was orderly and nonviolent, the police cracked down, and Zinn was one of the demonstrators who took a blow to the head. He came to, he recalled, with a painful lump on the side of his head, but "More important, there was a very painful thought in my head ... The state and its police were not neutral referees in a society of contending interests. They were on the side of the rich and powerful."

Still Zinn volunteered for military service in World War II, being, as he put it, "imbued with anti-fascism." He served as a bombardier in the Army Air Corps. But, as Oklahoma blues artist Watermelon Slim sang in his recent song, "Blues for Howard," "He dropped bombs in my daddy's war, Come to wonder what he dropped

them for." Indeed, by the end of the war, Zinn had changed his mind enough about the viability of war as a legitimate method of solving problems in the modern world that he filed away his discharge papers and awards in a folder labeled "Never Again." Increasingly over the years, though he stopped just short of calling himself a pacifist, anti-war activism was a central element of his life and writings.

Zinn earned his Ph.D. at Columbia University in 1958. His dissertation, on the Congressional career of Fiorello LaGuardia, became his first book the next year under the title *LaGuardia in Congress*, and won an award from the American Historical Association. Not surprisingly, Zinn found much to admire in this "leading spirit and master organizer of the progressive bloc in the House of Representatives." Already in 1956, Zinn had accepted his first teaching position—at Spelman College, a school for African American women in Atlanta, Georgia. While there, he had another of those radicalizing experiences. Driving off campus on a cold winter night, he stopped to give a ride to one of his students. They reached their destination, but were still sitting in the car talking when "powerful headlights swept through the car," and two white police officers ordered Zinn and his student out of the car and into the back seat of theirs. "If you're arresting us," asked Zinn, "what's the charge?" The response: "You sittin' in a car with a nigger gal an' wantin' to know what's the charge?" The charge, by the way, was "disorderly conduct."

This incident was one of several turning-point experiences for Zinn's deepening involvement in the civil rights movement. As so often was the case with him, his writing reflected and grew out of his experiences, for in 1964 both *The Southern Mystique* and *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* were published. Comparing the young black and white students of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee to abolitionists was itself interesting (and reasonable), but *The Southern Mystique* was even more interesting, among other reasons because it challenged the dominant idea of "southern exceptionalism." Zinn argued instead that the South was "the *essence* of the nation," and contained "in concentrated and dangerous form, a set of characteristics which mark the country as a whole." Those characteristics? "It [the South] is racist, violent, hypocritically pious, xenophobic, false in its elevation of women, nationalistic, conservative, and it harbors extreme poverty in the midst of ostentatious wealth." Zinn was always willing to speak the truth, even when it was painful.

By the time those two books saw print, Zinn had already left Spelman (fired for "insubordination") and accepted a position in the political science department at Boston University, a position he would hold until his retirement in 1988. At BU, the Vietnam War increasingly occupied his time, and, again showing the close relationship between his life and his writing, he published a book in 1967 entitled, revealingly, *Vietnam: The Logic of Withdrawal*. On a personal note: That was the first Howard Zinn book I read, as a young assistant professor of history at the University of Tulsa, and it helped me to gel the doubts I was already having about Vietnam and to become involved in the anti-war movement myself.

Zinn's 1970 book *The Politics of History* is a crucial one for understanding his approach to history. Notice the title—traditionally, historians were trained to consider history totally objective, “just the facts.” Since we must be brief, let's segue directly into Zinn's *magnum opus*, *A People's History of the United States*, published originally in 1980 and selling over the thirty years since some two million copies. This is perhaps the crucial paragraph:

In that inevitable taking of sides which comes from selection and emphasis in history, I prefer to try to tell the story of the discovery of America from the viewpoint of the Arawaks, of the Constitution from the standpoint of the slaves, of Andrew Jackson as seen by the Cherokees, of the Civil War as seen by the New York Irish, of the Mexican war as seen by the deserting soldiers of Scott's army, of the rise of industrialism as seen by the young women in the Lowell textile mills, of the Spanish-American war as seen by the Cubans, the conquest of the Philippines as seen by black soldiers on Luzon, the Gilded Age as seen by southern farmers, the First World War as seen by socialists, the Second World War as seen by pacifists, the New Deal as seen by peons in Latin America. And so on, to the limited extent that any one person, however he or she strains, can “see” history from the standpoint of others.

Powerful stuff. Radical stuff. Taking sides is inevitable. Zinn chooses to side not with the insiders (presidents, kings, queens, generals, the rich and powerful, the few), as so much history traditionally has done (but without being honest enough to say so, or perhaps not even realizing it), but with the outsiders (the minorities, the poor, working people, women, dissenters and protestors, the many). That's what “people's history” means, and why it's sometimes called “history from the bottom up.” Many would agree that this approach, as practiced by Zinn and others coming out of the 1960s and its movements (civil rights, anti-Vietnam war, women's, environmental), had a profound impact on the way history is done, including textbooks, which tend to be more balanced and inclusive now.

There's not space even to mention all of Zinn's books. But we would be remiss if we did not note his work with Noam Chomsky on *The Pentagon Papers*, and such works as *Disobedience and Democracy: Nine Fallacies on Law and Order*, *Declarations of Independence: Cross-Examining American Ideology*, and *Failure to Quit: Reflections of an Optimistic Historian*. Notice Zinn's gift at creative and revealing titles. Notice also, in the last one, the important word “optimism.” Optimism was one of Howard Zinn's central characteristics—and he took a lot of heat for it. “I can understand pessimism,” he wrote, “but I don't believe in it.” Looking back at our history, he saw many examples of people getting organized and making good things happen, and therefore he believed people might be able to make more good things happen. His was not a blind, shallow optimism. “I *am* hopeful,” he once said. “But

hope rests on doing something. If you're not doing anything to change things, you have no right to be hopeful." Howard Zinn had a right to be hopeful!

We should mention briefly a couple of other books. Zinn wrote lots of essays over the years, for *The Progressive* and other publications. Many of those were brought together in *The Zinn Reader*, meaningfully subtitled *Writings on Disobedience and Democracy*. And my favorite of his numerous books after his retirement: *A Power Governments Cannot Suppress*. Howard Zinn believed that is what "We, the People" have.

Since his death, less than two weeks ago as I write this, much has been said about Zinn's life and work, and, not surprisingly, some of it has been quite critical. To me, the worst example of that, strangely enough, was on National Public Radio, specifically the program "All Things Considered." Far-right activist David Horowitz said, "There is absolutely nothing in Howard Zinn's intellectual output that is worthy of any kind of respect." Wrong! But Horowitz continued, "Zinn represents a fringe mentality which has unfortunately seduced millions of people at this point in time. So he did certainly alter the consciousness of millions of younger people for the worse." To the contrary, it seems clear to me that Howard Zinn loved this country, in particular the ideals it was founded upon, and did more than his share to help it live up to those ideals. It might be said that his approach to history, especially in his *People's History*, was to focus on the on-going struggle to live up to those ideals.

Of the many positive comments, two strike me as especially accurate, insightful, and helpful in understanding Zinn's life and work. First, Bob Herbert, writing in the *New York Times*: "I always wondered why Howard Zinn was considered a radical," said Herbert. "He was an unbelievably decent man who felt obliged to challenge injustice and unfairness wherever he found it. What was so radical about believing that workers should get a fair shake on the job, that corporations have too much power over our lives and much too much influence with the government, that wars are so murderously destructive that alternatives to warfare should be found, that blacks and other racial and ethnic minorities should have the same rights as whites, that the interests of powerful political leaders and corporate elites are not the same as those of ordinary people who are struggling from week to week to make ends meet?" Herbert's conclusion: "That he was considered radical says way more about this society than it does about him."

And finally, James Carroll, writing in the *Boston Globe*, showed a deep understanding of Zinn's life and work using the headline "Zinn's life was a testament to possibility":

The most striking fact of his life story, what set him apart from every other left-wing prophet of the movement heyday, is that his voice continued to be heard, generation in and generation out. Wherever he went, young people—high school students, as well as college—flocked to his lectures and lined up to greet him. I saw it in the late 1960s and I saw

it a couple of months ago. Why was that? The young recognized two rare gifts in Zinn. He could share the wisdom of his long work as a professional historian, and as one who'd actually put his convictions into action—but without in any way condescending. Zinn genuinely believed that young people have a special capacity for ethical insight, and he addressed it.

Secondly, even as he blistered the hypocrisies of conventional thought, they always heard from him a profound message of hope. Unlike many radicals, he was no mere denouncer. He so believed in America that he believed it could transcend itself. He lifted up alternative futures, and insisted they were possible. Indeed, Zinn's life was a testament to possibility, as all who revere his memory know from their own experience.

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