Introduction:
A People's History, A People's Pedagogy

THE LAST TIME HOWARD ZINN CAME TO speak in Portland, Ore., where I've taught high school history since 1978, hundreds of people packed the auditorium to hear him. Those unable to find seats stood throughout the hall; others sat on the floor or crowded onto the stage. Hundreds more were turned away, unable to squeeze in. A colleague at my high school said, only half in jest, that it was one of the saddest days of his life, not being able to get in to hear Howard Zinn.

Something unusual is going on when a historian draws crowds like a rock star.

Unusual, but not surprising. Zinn's *people's* history is passionate, probing, and partisan. Zinn begins from the premise that the lives of ordinary people matter—that history ought to focus on those who too often receive only token attention (workers, women, people of color), and also on how people's actions, individually and collectively, shaped our society. And it's a people's history in that it's a perspective on the past that is usable today, that can instruct and inspire and caution as we try to make the world a better place.

Contrast Zinn's approach with a traditional textbook history. As anyone who has ever cracked a history textbook can affirm, they're boring. The prose reads like words and ideas have first been run through a blender. Passionless, story-poor, the books feign Objectivity. There is a lot of "us," and "we," and "our," as if the texts are trying to dissolve

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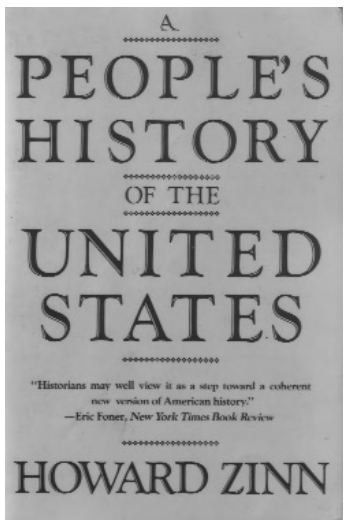
race, class, and gender realities into the melting pot of "the nation." Indeed, the books have titles like *The Rise of the American Nation*, embracing a curricular manifest destiny where all history led gloriously (or by about page 700, tediously) to Us.

Zinn's writing presents no such illusions. In fact, the title of his autobiography (and the film distributed by the Zinn Education Project) insists: *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train.* Societies are dynamic, conflict-ridden, with power played out in every aspect of life. Historians cannot remain outside or "above" these struggles, Zinn argues. None of us can. Our lives, our occupations, our consumer choices—and, yes, how we tell history—all take sides, and help move the world in one direction or another.



"Anyone reading history should understand from the start that there is no such thing as impartial history," Zinn writes in a book of essays, *Declarations of Independence.* "All written history is partial in two senses. It is partial in that it is only a tiny part of what really happened. That is a limitation that can never be overcome. And it is partial in that it inevitably takes sides, by what it includes or omits, what it emphasizes or deemphasizes. It may do this openly or deceptively, consciously or subconsciously."

The textbooks most of us have read as students or have been assigned to teach throughout our careers do not acknowledge their biases. As Zinn suggests, the authors may even be unaware of them. The most recent history textbook I was assigned in Portland, *American Odyssey* (Glencoe) describes the U.S. War with Mexico in two bland paragraphs, out of its 1,010 pages (see p. 49). It never mentions widespread U.S. opposition to the war at the time. It was during this war that Henry David Thoreau went to jail and coined the term "civil disobedience," in defense of his refusal to pay taxes to support U.S. aggression against Mexico. Today, as the United States wages two wars in foreign lands and engages in military actions in many more, isn't a textbook biased when it fails to alert students to the long antiwar and anti-imperialist traditions in our country's history? And with so much conversation about "protecting our borders," isn't it biased not to explore where those borders came from in the first place?

In the first chapter of *A People's History of the United States,* Zinn notes how so much history-telling concentrates on those at the top—the presidents and diplomats, the generals and industrialists. It's a winner's history, and implicitly tells students: Pay attention to the victors and disregard the rest. Zinn flips the script, as the kids say. He writes that, "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 the 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 blacks in Harlem, the postwar American empire as seen by peons in Latin America."

This from-the-grassroots, people's history is grounded in Zinn's own experiences: "Before I became a professional historian, I had grown up in the dirt and dankness of New York tenements, had been knocked unconscious by a policeman while holding a banner in a demonstration, had worked for three years in a shipyard, and had participated in the violence of war."

But Zinn's approach to history is not simply a personal preference based on his own experiences. When we look at history from the standpoint of the workers and not just the owners, the soldiers and not just the generals, the invaded and not just the invaders, we can begin to see society more fully, more accurately. So often, history books describe a

flattened world of "U.S. interests" and generic Americans. As Zinn writes, "Nations are not communities and never have been. The history of any country, presented as the history of a family, conceals fierce conflicts of interest (sometimes exploding, most often repressed) between conquerors and conquered, masters and slaves, capitalists and workers, dominators and dominated in race and sex." Zinn recognizes that we live with the consequences of these fierce conflicts of interest today. Thus the more clearly we see the past, the more clearly we'll see the present—and be equipped to improve it.

None of this is to argue for a history that exaggerates the crimes of the powerful, inflates the heroism of "the people," or invents victories for social movements. But history-writing that begins with a belief in the possibility of a fundamentally egalitarian society will necessarily make alternative selections from our nation's past. Zinn's commitments and work in civil rights and peace movements have led him to propose that history be put to the service of working and teaching for a better world. History is about and for human beings.

A people's history can instruct and inspire and caution as we try to make the world a better place.

Commitment and justice, critique and hope. It seems to me that it's all of this that draws people—and especially teachers—to Howard Zinn's scholarship. I know that early in my career, this is what drew me to Zinn's work.

A People's Pedagogy

A people's history requires a people's pedagogy to match. The activities included in this booklet are not a chapter-by-chapter guide to Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. Instead, they feature teaching strategies that illustrate how a people's history can be brought to life in the classroom.

A fundamental problem with traditional history *and* with traditional history teaching is that it can appear that each event leads inexorably to the next: this happened then this happened then this happened, like dominoes lined up and falling. Social changes can seem almost inevitable. Laid out in neatly sequenced chapters, textbooks present social reality as if it were unfolding rather than being created by people. As Zinn writes in his autobiography: "Everything in history once it has happened looks as if it had to happen exactly that way. We can't imagine any other. But I am convinced of the uncertainty of history, of the possibility of surprise, of the importance of human action in changing what looks unchangeable."

Zinn proposes history as a series of choices and turning points—junctures at which ordinary people interpreted social conditions and took actions that made a difference. This is a powerful and hopeful insight that can not only help our students think about the present, but can empower them to act on it. What we think and how we act can make the world a better place. For teachers, our challenge is how to bring this insight alive in our classrooms—not just *telling* students this, but *showing* them. Role plays are one teaching strategy that can bring history-making to life in the classroom. Role plays ask students to attempt to imagine themselves in the circumstances of other individuals throughout history and to consider the choices that actual groups faced.

For example, because of the enormity of slavery, it may appear to students that its abolition was foreordained. But this misses the significance of the social movement that sought to end slavery, its difficult choices, and the breadth of resistance, beginning especially with the enslaved themselves, that ultimately brought slavery down. I ask my students how many of them—were they transported to, say, 1850, with their current awareness intact—would have opposed slavery. Of course, they all raise their hands. Then I ask, "What would you have done about it?" Not so many hands raised. In a role play, I ask all my students to portray members of the American Anti-Slavery Society, a key abolitionist organization. In role, they confront

dilemmas that anti-slavery organizers also encountered: Would they have maintained a singular focus on slavery in the South or would they have spent their energies also opposing racism in the North? Would they have supported the Seneca Falls gathering by women's rights advocates, many of them abolitionists, or do they think this would have divided the movement? How would they have confronted the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act? Would they have supported John Brown with money and weapons? None of these are easy strategic questions and as students debate these they can more easily recognize that, in fact, people *do* make history. Choices are made in circumstances not of their making, but nonetheless how people analyze and decide to act within those circumstances influences the course of events.

The Bread and Roses Strike role play, included in this guide, is structured similarly, and puts students in the position of Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) organizers in Lawrence, Mass., in 1912, who attempt to unite over 20,000 immigrant workers, speaking dozens of languages, for wage increases and better conditions—for "bread." But they also seek "roses." It's a strike about dignity. Ultimately, organizers hope to "win" workers' commitment to a more democratic society and non-exploitative economic system. Here, too, students experience classroom doses of the actual historical participants' confusion, frustration, but also solidarity. And, here too, there was no inevitability about the outcome, as students readily grasp from the difficulty of the choices they confront in their role as IWW organizers. Role plays like this one and on the Abolition movement are components of a pedagogy that does not merely *tell* students that people make history, but seeks to let them live that insight in the classroom.

Another piece of a "people's pedagogy" is that it should engage students in explicitly critiquing traditional approaches to history—including their own textbooks. In one article included here, I describe how I introduce my classes to the problematic notion of Columbus's "discovery of America": I steal a student's purse (see p. 15). I do everything I can to get students to agree with me that "Nomika's" purse is in fact my purse: I demonstrate that I control it; I take items out and claim them (Nomika has been alerted in advance, but other students don't know that), and I insist that it is my purse. When I lose this argument with the class, I offer to "recast the act of purse acquisition," and tell students that I didn't steal Nomika's purse, I *discovered* it. Now it's mine, right? Students readily see the shoddiness of the claim. "So," I ask them, "if I didn't discover Nomika's purse, then why do some people say that Columbus discovered America? What are some other terms that we could use to describe his actions?" He stole America; he took it; he ripped it off; he invaded it. In a five- or ten-minute simulation, students can begin to see what Howard Zinn argues throughout his work: that how we frame the past invariably takes sides. And when we use terms like "discovery"—or even the seemingly more neutral "encounter"—our language sides with the ones who came out on top.

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Because the combination of a people's history with a people's pedagogy may bump up against students' prior notions of what ought to happen in a history class, it's helpful to engage students in comparisons that call into question traditional approaches. For example, one activity included here is "The U.S.-Mexican War Tea Party (p. 29)," pegged to Chapter 8 of *A People's History of the United States*, "We Take Nothing By Conquest, Thank God." This was the war that resulted in Mexico ceding about half its country to the United States, including California, Arizona, New Mexico,

and Texas. In the "tea party" role play, students assume the personas of 21 individuals, all of whom had some connection to the U.S. war with Mexico (1846-1848): the abolitionist Frederick Douglass opposed the war because he saw it as an attempt to add more slave territory to the United States; Jefferson Davis, of Mississippi, too, saw this as an issue of slavery—expanding his "freedom" to take his slaves wherever he wanted; María Josefa Martínez, of Santa Fe, New Mexico, feared losing her land and rights, that were protected more under Mexican law than under U.S. law; Sergeant John Riley, originally of Ireland, deserted the U.S. Army, where he and other immigrants received wretched treatment, and joined the Mexicans to form the Saint Patrick's Battalion; Col. Ethan Allan Hitchcock of the U.S. Army saw the war as an attempt to steal huge swaths of Mexico, and wrote that "My heart is not in this war," but as a military officer was pledged to carry out his orders; and the Apache leader, Cochise, condemns both the U.S. and Mexico as thieves, fighting amongst themselves for land that doesn't belong to either of them. Portraying these and 15 others, students meet one another to find individuals who support the war, oppose the war, stand to lose or gain from the war, and who have opinions on why the war was fought.

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The activity, which takes about a class period, exposes students to a much more diverse range of perspectives on the war than they'd find in any textbook. But I don't want students to take my word for that; I want to "argue" for this kind of historical and pedagogical approach by allowing them to compare it to their own textbook: Glencoe's *American Odyssey*, mentioned earlier. Whereas in the tea party, students encountered over 20 different perspectives on the war—Mexican, U.S., men, women, pro-war, anti-war, pro-slavery, abolitionist, wealthy, poor, white, black, Native American, soldier, civilian—their book includes three perspectives: white Southerners, Northerners, and Mexico (as in: "Mexico was outraged …").

I ask students to read their textbook's "War with Mexico" section and to reflect in writing on the adequacy of the book's treatment, what's left out, and whether or not they think it makes any difference that this is all some students will learn about the war with Mexico. After the tea party and reading Zinn's chapter, students offer a rich critique of their textbook. Not only do students readily note the missing perspectives, they also spot things that are less obvious. As Katie said in our discussion, "We're not asked to think about whether or not the war is right." Another student noted how the passage desensitizes readers to the meaning of war: "It doesn't even look at it as a war—it's a situation." In fact, despite the section's title, "War with Mexico," the first paragraph ends with May 1846 and the second paragraph begins with February 2, 1848, entirely skipping the war itself. Another student underlined how the book says that the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo "gave the United States vast new regions …": "'Gave.' This makes it sound all legal."

An activity like this allows students to see how much richer and more accurate a "people's history" is than the traditional approach, as exemplified by their textbook. A people's history (and a people's pedagogy) doesn't silence the perspectives of the elites, it simply includes more voices in the conversation. And a people's pedagogy offers students a different, more participatory, relationship to text. The traditional curriculum treats students as word consumers: read this and answer the questions at the end of the chapter. A more critical approach encourages students to "talk back" to text, to read for the silences and the neglected perspectives, to ask why certain choices were made (for example, why the text included no mention of the large numbers of Mexico war opponents), and to imagine what a more adequate treatment would be. In this

respect, reading is a metaphor: when we ask students to evaluate text material for biases, implicitly we're inviting them to evaluate the larger society for biases. A people's pedagogy seeks to nurture active citizens, rather than consumers.

In his article, "Unsung Heroes," included in this teaching guide (p. 51), Howard Zinn acknowledges that once we begin to teach a fuller, more honest history, we also begin to surface the exploitation and brutality that has often been glossed over in the traditional history curriculum. Zinn writes: "A high school student recently confronted me: 'I read in your book *A People's History of the United States* about the massacres of Indians, the long history of racism, the persistence of poverty in the richest country in the world, the senseless wars. How can I keep from being thoroughly alienated and depressed?'"

This disillusion that we're confronted with is magnified because so much traditional history manipulates students to see the policies of the U.S. government as our policies. Of course, it's not just textbooks that lead us to identify with government and military actions. Here's Barbara Walters anchoring *ABC News* during the first Gulf War: "How does this change our strategy? This means we can't bomb; it means we have to be very careful about the areas we attack, if we do attack." (The media watchdog group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting calls this the "we we" phenomenon.) This is not a liberal-conservative thing; the most liberal commentators adopt this linguistic practice of conflating our interests with those of the elites.

No wonder then, that when students begin to see the reality behind corporate and government policies, they may take this personally and become discouraged or defensive. But a people's pedagogy, like a people's history, should not be one long story of brutality and exploitation. Several activities in this guide alert students to deep currents of justice and equality in U.S. history, and in diverse ways encourage students to try on the personas of people who worked to make this a more democratic society. A people's history and pedagogy ought to allow students to recognize that "we" were not necessarily the ones stealing land, dropping bombs, or breaking strikes. "We" were ending slavery, fighting for women's rights, organizing unions, marching against wars, and trying to create a society premised on the Golden Rule.

The article in this teaching guide that follows Zinn's "Unsung Heroes," "Teaching Unsung Heroes," also begins with a tea party that introduces students to over 30 individuals in U.S.

AP Images/Reed Saxon

United Farm Workers leader César Chávez addresses union supporters in Los Angeles in 1976.

history who worked for "racial and gender justice." Students portray some well-known activists like Rosa Parks and César Chávez, and some less well-known activists like Harvey Milk, Fred Korematsu, and Elaine Brown. Students-as-activists search out individuals who "spent time in jail for their activities or beliefs," "worked for women's rights, workers' rights, or for the rights of gays and lesbians," and "worked against slavery or other forms of racism." They find people who rejected violence on principle and others (like John Brown) who saw violence as the only way to stop a much greater violence. And from this initial tea party they choose individuals to research and write about imaginatively—in story, dialogue, or interior monologue. I include some examples from student papers in "Teaching Unsung Heroes."

One of the remarkable things about Howard Zinn's scholarship is his capacity to narrate stories that are often unbelievably horrific and yet never lose sight of the goodness that courses through human experience. Zinn's history is both more honest than traditional histories but also more hopeful.

In the wake of September 11th, Rethinking Schools editors searched for writing that could help us make sense out of what our society—and what the world—was going through. One passage that we turned to was the concluding paragraphs of Zinn's autobiography, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train.* It's about life, but it's also about what we need to strive for in our curricula:

"To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness.

"What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.

"And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live *now* as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory."

I see Howard Zinn's work as an invitation to us all to join our classrooms to that "infinite succession of presents"—to see our work with students not only in terms of teaching academic skills, but also in terms of building a just society. ■

Civil rights activists march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, Montgomery, Ala., March 9, 1965.