

CRITICAL USES OF HISTORY: A MEMORY OF HOWARD ZINN AND VIDEO JOURNALISM

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In the following article I reflect on a few of the lessons provided by the late historian Howard Zinn, both his close reading of history, but even more so his critical insight *that history is made, not only received*. Zinn used history much like a muckraking journalist would: he wrote history not only *through* the eyes of common people, but *for* the eyes of common people. Perhaps because of this aim, his writing still feels vibrant and inspires rethinking my own work as an ongoing student of history and as a freelance journalist. Zinn pointed out that all of us could contribute to meaning making through our personal narratives and human condition. Our lives are at risk if we do not know where we come from, and this knowledge is often lost to a naturalized *official* history. Official history is worse still when it is used to frustrate social progress and maintain oppression, or, as is often the case, the status quo. We must recover the meaning of our collective history, and we do so through the eyes of teachers, poets, writers, and freedom fighters everywhere.

Critical Uses of History: Just the facts?

The “objectivity” of history has been debated for some time (Novick 1988). Much of what “counts” as history is written; it is a historiography (Braudel 1980). Largely unacknowledged, however, is that while much of what is transmitted as “official knowledge” (Apple 1988, 2003) makes its way into history textbooks, what is accepted as *official knowledge* is often passed along through an oral tradition, and, in a post-industrial society, through media (Hermann and Chomsky 1988) and increasingly through entertainment (Postman 1988; McCarthy and Crichlow 1993). More often than not, an “official” history emerges, largely produced by and for the “winners.” This history becomes, not only what enters into an historical record, but

part of the collective lexicon and popular imagination. In an age of “common core standards,” this obviously impacts the public school curriculum, and should be of significant concern for curriculum study.

Furthermore, history as told from an expert viewpoint summarily recounts one war after another, with the great battles and the great men who direct the fighting placed at center stage. Fernand Braudel (1980), the preeminent historian of Capitalism and the Mediterranean world during the Renaissance, teaches us to examine the everyday life of merchants in their shops, of the seamstresses at their wheels, of craftsmen in their sheds, and of common folk milling about their wares in an age of mercantilism. Zinn strives to do much the same with an edge toward reporting on the resistance of common peoples to the wars that unjust political, social, and economic systems spread.

In my own educational foundations courses, our teacher candidates consider history given the themes of gender, race, and the dual nature of the public education system, which has rewarded some well, and has also been often used to narrow the choices of some others. Further still, my own teacher candidates are asked to recover their own understandings of education by using a critical memory of their own experiences, through narratives, journaling, and interviews. Yet the problem with teaching history, to educators like myself let alone curricularists, remains large. How can we relate our personal histories or “her” stories with epochal major events in history? We should insert ourselves into the struggle. But Zinn notes that, of the everyday details, we forget too much:

I would argue it has something to do with the loss of history, something to do with what Studs Turkel called National Amnesia. Either the forgetting of history or the learning of bad history. The learning of history that you do get . . . Columbus was a hero, Teddy Roosevelt was a hero, Andrew Jackson was a hero . . . all of these guys who were presidents, and generals and industrialists, they’re the people who made America great, and America has always done great things in the world (Zinn 2006).

Zinn thus aims to encourage the recovering of the collective memory. Taking a different tack, he reinserts the everyday lives, the resistance to the status quo or the social order so carefully preserved by elite interests in their rendering of history as an objective recounting

of facts, dates, and military leaders. Zinn does this naturally, providing names, dates, and places of common people, as would a folksinger or storyteller. Zinn's contribution then is to suggest that the great masses of people (Native American, slaves, indentured poor) are often at odds with elite interests (lumber barons, elected officials, industrialists), or stated another way, the history of great individuals (Columbus, Jefferson, Reagan) that often marginalizes or masks the struggles of the social movements (the resistance of the Anishanabee, for example) to survive.

A Close Reading of Zinn

Howard Zinn is well renowned as a social historian for challenging the story of the traditional Western canon: Columbus discovered America, the West was won by the pioneers, and the U.S. armed forces always prevail in the war(s) of liberation. Yet Zinn's very success is derivative not only of his critical reading of history as an historian, but of his own lived experiences as a bombardier during World War II. It was the relationship between those wartime experiences and his meaning making of that time that made Zinn special.

Zinn would always begin and end his presentation with opposition to war and to those who, as history reaffirms time and time again, successfully enlist others to prosecute it for them: "the leaders of the country are able to cajole, entice the people into war by scaring them" (Zinn 2006). Because of his *unconditional* opposition to war, Zinn became recognized outside of the history field. He emboldened social education activists by acknowledging fully the stories of resistance to war, and in rendering accessible and heartening the social justice struggles of the people fighting for the voices silenced by war to be heard, he changed the field itself. He did so not only as a top rank historian but also effectively so through the style of a muckraking reporter. Zinn *used* history as a living testament to depict war as a tragic and rather meaningless "solution" to vexing social problems.

Beginning with the story of the "discovery" of America, every student in the U.S. is taught about the landing of the Pilgrims and the first Thanksgiving. History provides useful material for powerful politicians, and notes the "shining city on the hill" referenced by President John F. Kennedy and later President Ronald Reagan as a foundation for explaining America's unique standing in the world. Lost in this story, the grand metanarrative—the founding of the New World,

the American experience and what some would refer to as *American exceptionalism*—is what Howard Zinn would argue is another story. Zinn cites a letter from an original American, Powhatan, in an attempt to portray how the commonly known historical event—the devout religious followers of the new testament landing on Plymouth Rock, sharing the first Thanksgiving meal between the Pilgrims and their hosts, followed by the establishment of colonies in the New World—was understood through the eyes of native peoples. Powhatan speaks for the original inhabitants when he says:

I have seen two generations of my people die . . . I know the difference between peace and war better than any man in my country. I am now grown old, and must die soon (Zinn 2003, 8).

The personal narrative of the persons buried beneath the tales of colonization, the heroes and heroism, the weary foot soldier, the defiant, freed slave, or the landless campesino: these stories, Zinn felt, must be told. For many of the numerous “others” “liberated” through “benevolent” U.S. wars of intervention, history matters. Zinn reminds us that history is best understood as a struggle where native peoples, women, liberation theologians, and the poor must struggle mightily against the grand metanarrative of war, heroism, and “all’s well that ends well.” It is in this contribution that Howard Zinn as a social activist leaves his most enduring legacy. Zinn will always be remembered for contributing to the powerful idea that the people may have a different understanding and experience of events than do the great individuals to whom history is often spoken of and/or about. To that end, Zinn was keen on promoting others to actively read and learn from the multiple voices within any given history.

Reading History: Voices of a People’s History of the United States

On a summer day, 2005, in Chicago, *Voices of a People’s History of the United States* was performed by a number of social activists for the first time during the International Socialist Organization convention. *Voices* was a performance from a collection of readings derived from the book of the same name, edited by Howard Zinn and Anthony Arnove (2004). The collection of readings started with a poem honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and took off with stories ranging from the Naval Bombing at Vieques, Puerto Rico, to a rendition of

Sojourner Truth's "*Ar'n't I A Woman*," and writings from Mumia Abu Jamal. These readings, the use of the spoken word, included a number of vital, young activists from around the country, breathing life into the narratives of organizers of the garment industry. For example, the words of Harriet Hanson Robinson (1898) at one of the first strikes over poor conditions of cotton workers, were spoken by one of the activists:

At the time the Lowell cotton mills were started, the factory girl was the lowest among women. In England and in France particularly, great injustice had been done to her real character. She was represented as subjected to influences that could not fail to destroy her purity and self-respect. In the eyes of her overseers she was but a brute, a slave to be beaten, pinched and pushed about . . .

. . . one of the girls stood on the pump and gave vent to her companions in a neat speech declaring that it was their duty to resist all attempts at cutting down the wages (Robinson 1898).

On hearing expanded histories such as these, I started to rethink my own coming to terms with education and the role of history and considered anew the inspiring stories of authors such as Zinn.

Critical lessons of resistance and social activism

Zinn's work is particularly informative in bringing to light workers' struggles like the Lowell factory girls, immigrant exploitation, and the challenge of otherwise marginalized persons in society to take control over their own lives. The words of Emma Goldman, a staunch critic of the U.S. wars of imperialism, provides a powerful statement made on behalf of people not only fighting the wars but searching for meaning over time when the battle is over:

How our hearts burned with indignation against the atrocious Spaniards! . . . But when the smoke was over, the dead buried, and the cost of that war came back to the people in an increase in the price of commodities and rent—that is, when we sobered up from our patriotic spree—it suddenly dawned on us that the cause of the Spanish-American war was the price of sugar . . .

that the lives, blood, and money of the American people were used to protect the interests of the American capitalists (Zinn 2003, 321).

In citing Goldman, Zinn was bringing forth a face of resistance to American “exceptionalism” perhaps for the very first time for many students. Even for students of history, it was amazing to learn of the widespread protest and resistance to war, none of which found its way into my childhood textbooks. Zinn describes how the capitalist system was taken to task by great writers of the day, not obscurantists, but iconic figures like Mark Twain, Upton Sinclair, and Jack London. These voices, the “muckrakers,” merely wrote what they saw and experienced. Several, like London, came to the conclusion that it was the capitalist system which mismanaged people into serfdom and misery. Such writers were for many students like myself at the doorstep; Zinn merely opened the door.

But Zinn’s history would not end with the poetic and just indignation of the Emma Goldmans and Jack Londons of the world. While Zinn wrote these passages, he also described the social arrangements of the early twentieth century relating to the specific conditions in which Goldman and other radicals of her day and from where her radicalism would generate. Zinn would reflect then on the late 1960s and 1970s where students and young adults would live in intentional arrangements for the purposes of saving money and exploring collective action.

Years later, I moved into a similar type of cooperative housing arrangement, named after the firebrand Emma Goldman. This particular home was started by a small number of committed social activists whose aim was explicitly to live together and share in the jobs, the communal meals, and the political projects, in effect to support one another. I was a Ph.D. candidate, a graduate student finishing a dissertation concerning the telecommunications deregulation scam. Others were involved in electoral politics, environmentalism, women’s rights, abolition of the death penalty, defending family farms, and other projects. Again it was Zinn and other scholar/activists who acknowledged cooperatives as supportive, rational, and creative spaces for coexistence, not merely as a fringe movement apart from the nuclear family norm.

Critical Memory

As an academic, I have struggled with balancing the roles of

scholar and activist my entire adult life. To my way of thinking there are those who can pull the trick off seamlessly; in my own work, it has always been equal part struggle, and equal part sorrow, as the aim in work as in life has been to make a living and aspire to be the best one can. In the field of curriculum and instruction, I am constantly reminded of the struggle between education and ignorance, especially as this struggle plays itself out in the politics of the United States. Much of the ignorance of how the United States functions as an entity is quite misunderstood by those very folks to whom some of the most egregious acts are aimed, and who should otherwise be taking up the fight to set things right.

Social education is education that provides student the tools and the means to be able to envision a greater good being served by understanding the nature and use of power. Power is often misunderstood as an expression of one individual. However, the works of Edward Herman, Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, and others suggest that power is expressed largely beyond view, through the powerful interests of special financial interest groups and a compliant media (Herman and Chomsky 1988). These financial groups, not a great conspiracy, hold meetings both inside of and outside of the public view, but use money in an often-seamless fashion to get what they want from the body politic and transmit it via a media echo chamber.

But power can go the other way. Individuals forming groups can exert their own lives and experiences in a manner to get out a different message, raise up the common good, and empower local actors and communities so as to reach a greater understanding of what it means to be human. Chomsky is synonymous with Zinn in the sense that he has argued for unmasking the power of elites and exposing what are the operational principles under which power expresses itself. In his classic work *Manufacturing Consent* (Herman and Chomsky 1988), Chomsky critiques the mainstream media as it operates to create consent from the populace by reporting what is news and shielding the public from what is not news, “legitimizing” what is news for public consumption (Bourdieu 2007). Thus many years later, media critics and reformers would speak to the issue of “framing” of what is important by powerful political groups. As my career developed, I would go on to document through video, with my colleague(s), how reframing the media provides leverage for social and political activists (Gamson 2006).

One of the “organic” intellectuals who would openly criticize the mainstream media using history like Zinn, and became quite influential on my own work, is Robert McChesney. McChesney conducted a

history of the broadcasting industry where he pointed out that the commercial broadcasters knocked out the public broadcasters in the very beginning through collusion with the government and the founding of the FCC Radio Broadcast Act of 1934. But McChesney also noted that a small movement had emerged that fought back and made the case through hearings and legal efforts that only a non-profit, community oriented media would serve the interests of the public well. Commercial media, these free speech groups argued, was inimical to democracy. Later, in this vein, McChesney would speak out against the information superhighway act or Telecommunications Deregulation Act 496 of 1996, pointing out that the telecommunications democracy and the Internet, much to the dismay of those who advocated for this new medium, would be taken over by the commercial interests. He helped to push a grass roots movement to empower public access television and community radio interests (McChesney 1993).

My own work, via public access television, a video documentary, and a book *Classrooms without Walls*, dovetailed with the research of McChesney. The book's focus was in studying and reporting on the emergence of the so-called telecommunications deregulation legislation in Wisconsin and much of the Midwest during the 1990's. My work exposed the telecommunications deregulation as largely a corporate giveaway to the telecommunications corporations like Ameritech. But I also wanted to see whether the claims, the quid pro quo for Ameritech to be given such lavish reward, would measure up in the classroom. Ameritech, it was understood at the time, had made the case that the legislation which would dramatically relax regulation and oversight of the budding telecommunications industry (of which Ameritech was a major partner, offering telephone, cable, and internet services) would benefit teachers and students. This was to be done, they argued, because they would wire the schools to the information superhighway (Price 2010).

For years during this period, I would effectively use video to document, conduct interviews, and bring attention to these matters. Telecommunications deregulation was not an easy subject to broach. Still, through public access television shows, I with others attempted to break down the information so that citizens could engage in this complicated debate over just what matters concerning information, access to it, and at what cost. In this sense I was modeling some of what Zinn set out to do, which is report the facts, name names and places, and try to communicate a thread through this work in order to make meaning

for curriculum and instruction. But Zinn (and I suspect other alternative or community media producers like myself and colleagues) have endeavored to go further; we have aimed to provide insight or provoke a reaction from others in order that action itself can be motivated. In other words, I have used video, much as Zinn and others have used the written and spoken word, to rally for a just cause.

Social education requires a social medium. In my case, video was that end, while for Zinn, it was written text and the spoken word. In my recollection, the nineties were a constant struggle, with video the tool of choice to advance protests, first against the Operation Desert Storm, then against the various free trade deals (NAFTA, GATT, the FTAA) and summits which would preface the economic malaise in the 21st century (Price and Hamilton 2001). Zinn brought many of my generation out of the Reagan years into the era of “neoliberalism.” While he was speaking of the end of the Reagan administration, with the nuclear disarmament campaign, the protests over the incursion into Central America as evidenced by the covert wars in El Salvador and Nicaragua, he would preface the beginning of the move into the Persian Gulf with the Bush(s) and Clinton administrations.

Memory and history revised

I was attending college in a Midwestern public school and, not unlike other undergraduate students of the time, experiencing disconnect between what I thought I knew and what I was learning. Much of my learning took place outside of the formal institution. Despite a decent education during my adolescent years, my understanding of American history and politics was woefully inadequate for providing the necessary background in order to relate to the cascading current events of the day. The period of time was well into the Reagan era; foreign policy debacles and the intrigue of several covert wars typified my coming of age. My college roommate, Joseph, was steeped in social activism, especially as it related to the brutal policy of *containment* in Central America, sponsored by the Reagan administration. In one instance, he would participate with several other Central American students to protest a speech on campus by the then Vice President and former CIA director George Herbert Walker Bush.

Two other roommates, Leo and Mario, were from El Salvador and would provide first-hand accounts of fairly illicit U.S. activity in their country, even descriptions of U.S. military personnel operating out of

Ilopango airbase as military “advisors” and of covert operations shipping weapons from that same airbase.¹ When an airplane pilot from Marinette, Wisconsin² crashed in Nicaragua, speculation developed around just what was happening in Central America with implications of cover-ups, arms-for-hostages, and even drug running operations coming out of the White House. In conversations together, we roommates would reflect on the devastating current events and the greater historical meaning behind the politics of *counterinsurgency*, or what was otherwise known as the Reagan Doctrine.

Adding to the discourse was my best friend’s father, John, a self-proclaimed world traveler, who took the opportunity to “call me out” for my admittedly un-informed views. If memory serves, my views were derivative, largely so, from a lack of real world knowledge, and a perhaps too-willing-acceptance of the *Time* magazine rationale, a type of reporting apologizing for U.S. mistakes, and surrounding itself with the aim of supporting the supposedly benevolent aims of U.S. foreign policy abroad. That news that *Time* and other mainstream outlets offered was also quite oblivious to the aims of the Reagan administration to increase surveillance of domestic protests at home.

My first encounter with Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*, further inspired ongoing discussion with Leo, Mario, Joe and his father John. At the same time, a steady stream of television news broadcasts on the *low intensity conflict* (the euphemism for war in Central America) emerged. Simultaneously, I was learning of a shameful past record, the historical accounts of U.S. interventionism in that region of the world, as related through a few excellent college courses and our continuing roommate discussions.

The real learning came from the realization that the only news that would provide other than glowing portrayals of American spirit and fortitude in supporting these wars was the alternative media. Public access television offered counterpoints to the *Time* magazine/mainstream media spin, while left-liberal periodicals such as *The Progressive* featured reporters such as Robert Parry (1997), who wrote on drugs, guns, and the Contras, and alternative voices like Noam Chomsky provided an antidote to the public pabulum of freedom fighters (our side) and insurgents (the bad guys). It is nostalgic, perhaps, to look back at this time, but for many like myself who had a strong grounding in history per se yet were mis-educated in foreign policy, these alternative media news outlets played a vital role, putting forth a counterpoint to the *Time* magazine rendition of reality.

Some professors provided a critical role in providing that counterpoint. One journalism professor, for example, broke the story to our class of the Iran-Contra weapons-for-hostages. Beyond the information provided through alternative media, emerging student activists like myself needed other role models. Zinn was that model, providing the intellectual and scholarly support to the alternative media(s), recounting for the record the numerous invasions by U.S. marines in Haiti, the Philippines, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba, to name a few of the “*benign* interventions” (author’s italics). Zinn’s work helped myself and others to *reframe* the fuzzy media picture emerging of an El Salvadorian “insurgency” and, on the flip side, the Nicaraguan “Freedom Fighters.” Without such powerful narrative as Zinn would provide, these countries and the U.S. involvement there might have otherwise been, for myself and other students I imagine, on the other side of the world.

El Salvador

My own coming of age, trying to document these times and bring attention to the “unreported dissent” had a few allusions to the moments that Zinn reports. First, my travel with college housemates to El Salvador opened my eyes to the problems there, where a so-called democracy whose government was propped up by the largesse of the Reagan administration would routinely execute its own people in order to set an example of what could happen to dissenters.

On one remarkable occasion, friends and I were in a local restaurant. During that moment, while many of the patrons were largely enjoying their *pescado* and *arroz y frijoles*, another scene was playing out in the streets down the block. Shots rang out and in clear sight was a man limping away from a scene, still carrying a rifle of some sort. Not having ever witnessed a battle scene, let alone a violent episode of this nature, I was mesmerized, wondering what had just occurred. The man with the gun leaned against a tree, one of his legs clearly bloody and useless, now waiting for . . . what? The answer came shortly; as my best friend’s father looked on, a black limousine streaked into view and turned around the corner; two men in suits rushed out, seemingly helped the man with the gun, and the motley crew shuffled into the waiting car, rushing away. John quipped, “that was a death squad.” My struggles with understanding this event were aided in hindsight, having read the Chomsky book, Charles Clementine’s story of working as a

doctor while embedded with the guerillas, and from the knowledge of my friends, Leo among them, who was a Salvadorian and had initially invited us on this trip.

On another outing, my friend Joe, his father, and I were in the midst of an upheaval in the city square. We were walking when buses pulled up emptying out a large number, perhaps fifty members, in a group of refugiados. A charismatic woman with bandana, who called for the group to be repatriated, led the group. Soon enough we were to learn this was a group removed from their land due to the civil war. In the moments that transpired, although a blur, a small battalion of police bedecked in bright blue uniforms, with helmets, and with bats pounding on plastic shields, formed a human chain around the group. As the group collapsed around the leader, the police weighed in and pushed the group into a ball in the center, where we were watching seemingly immobilized by this unexpected action. This moment, as much as any other, resonated with me because it felt like a moment of making a choice; should we stay and risk being run over with the rest of the group or worse? Or should we run, leaving the group behind to fend for themselves? My mind was spinning, but we held our ground with the police literally behind our shoulders, and expected violence to break out at any second. Before we could make any further decision, the rally broke up as soon as it started. The repatriados, perhaps sensing they had made their point and had nothing left to gain, left. They got on the bus and drove away and the police left us behind with barely a word. We also had little to say.

Upon returning from the El Salvador trip with my friends, I would never look at U.S. power or politics in the same way again. My thinking and feeling would change as I would embrace fully the idea of working for social justice in whatever form possible, whatever form it takes, and in any way I could make a difference. In the fall of 1988, I was accepted to and enrolled in a graduate school program where, continuing my interest in human rights and politics, I joined an Amnesty International group on campus; recounting my own story of being in El Salvador, I found my voice and soon became the president of the club. I would encounter a new sense of confidence and believed that my work in education would be strengthened by my work toward social justice. At one point during my first year of teaching, I befriended and was able to help another student from El Salvador by placing a call for him to the U.S. embassy so that he could find out about the welfare of his mother during a particularly heated moment during the civil war. I will never forget that

we were able to make contact, but I will also remember how blissfully ignorant my colleagues in the department were to the pain and suffering at that time inflicted largely by the U.S. government policy of "containment." El Salvador epitomized the contradiction between what I had once understood the United States to be from and the fables told me in my childhood. This would spur my interest in advocacy journalism.

Nicaragua

In February 1990, a progressive group of students, faculty and community members coordinated a trip to Nicaragua in order to observe the presidential elections taking place there. Our group aimed to serve as unofficial observers of the electoral process, and we were inspired by the idea of telling the "unofficial" story, much as Zinn advocated. But to my thinking what I learned on the trip was the power of the image and the spoken word for recounting the ordinary peoples' stories in a manner different than what could be expressed through official channels like government press releases or mainstream media cover stories.

The first time I was in possession of a video camera was in Nicaragua. En route with two colleagues to "cover" an opposition rally to the Sandinista government of the time, I had the opportunity to reflect upon the role and responsibility of a reporter. At first I was enthralled with the imagery and the buildings in the national square, adorned with flags spouting the emblem of the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO). Second, I was amazed at the outpouring of youth and the emotion of the persons gathered, cheering for Violetta Chamorro, daughter of the famous Chamorro father who had been the publisher of the Sandinista resistance newspaper, now (somewhat ironically to my way of thinking) making a run for the presidency held by the same Sandinista government that had been put into power with the media support of her father.

But I was most struck by the power the video camera gave me and perceived to have held once it was pointed in the direction of the people who filled the square. With my modest fluency in Espanol, I offered to one person the opportunity to do an interview, to which she accepted. A mother of adolescents, the senora immediately filled my plate with stories of the suffering of the youth who had to serve in the armed forces, conscripted to fight the U.S.-backed Contras; she then described the lack of decent shoes, food, and other deprivations which she blamed on the Sandinistas. Soon a small crowd entered the camera frame and I

was documenting my first interview with several Nicaraguan citizens. This event I captured in full with 18,000 people in attendance.

Throughout the rest of the week, we conducted interviews with locals in the town of Suptiaba, and in the much larger city of Leon. We were amazed to see that, despite the overwhelming size of the crowds, the Nicaraguan people we encountered were overwhelmingly voicing their support and intention to vote for UNO. The reasons became clear; the same arguments about deprivation and hardship that the woman in the square mentioned were the reasons they would vote for UNO. Despite even the fact that many also argued that Sandinistas would win, they merely wanted to send a message that all was not right with the revolution.

Upon return to Baton Rouge, where I picked up my doctoral studies, I was emotionally spent. The Sandinistas had lost the presidency and to some this meant the revolution was over; surely their work for better health care, education, and escape from under the thumb of U.S. imperialism would be overturned. Yet something about being back in the city, of being greeted by a young African-American while I sat on the steps of my friend's house gave me, the sense that therein lay the answer, to try to get along and appreciate the shared understandings of the human condition—always maintain faith in the ongoing struggle of making the world a better place.

Protesting 'Dr.' Ronald R. Reagan at LSU

It was the end of term, my first year of teaching complete. I had cut my teeth on Zinn's work, on curriculum theory and through experiences such as Nicaragua's tumultuous election. I had survived but also thrived because I learned skills in video production, and learned a disposition: a commitment to political struggle that would inform my growth as an academic and curricularist, and for that I reflected again on Zinn's work. Making connections, Zinn noted that small groups (like Mead once pointed out) could make a difference even in an ocean of conformity. That moment came to a head when it was announced that at the next Louisiana State University graduation, an honorary doctorate would be bestowed on none other than the former president of the United States, Ronald R. Reagan. Reagan, the same blight of a president as far as Central America would go, would be receiving accolades here in our backyard—it could not stand unanswered.

The same group that went to Nicaragua resolved to offer an alter-

native commencement ceremony during the formal one, providing an opportunity for those who wished to leave the commencement when Reagan spoke, a place to mingle. This modest proposal set off a whirlwind of events, with the chancellor and other heads of the university decrying our little group's plans. At some point, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) became involved, calling over the phone the student representative of the group and asking to speak with him directly and in person. Unbeknownst to the rest of our group, including the lawyer who would have advised otherwise, David agreed to the meeting.

The evening before the expected meeting, we all spoke together and planned a response to the FBI. David had agreed to meet the person on the other end of the phone line who had identified himself as a federal agent, and we all agreed it was not a good idea to let David meet with him or any other agent alone. That evening we took the advice of a journalist intern, and called up all the media networks.

The agents came the next day, as did I with video camera in tow. At exactly the same time as they had planned, a large, black sedan drove into the driveway of the small cooperative where the students lived. Two suits emerged from the car and I started the camera running, following on their coat tails. The suits went to the door and knocked on the door. David rather sheepishly opened the door to let them in, all the while with some twenty to thirty people sitting inside. The suits, FBI agents to our best understanding, let David know in no uncertain terms that their interest was to meet with him alone, and since he was not alone, they would take their leave.

The video kept running, and the suits answered to no one, merely got back in the car and drove away. The news that evening was simple, wondering what they were going to say to the students hosting the alternative commencement. My remembrance of this event was how a little knowledge can be a powerful thing, and I thanked Zinn and Chomsky for starting me on a long journey with video and scholarship.

Final Lessons from Zinn: Social Progress or Alien Nation?

Zinn's impact on our understanding of history is undeniable. His work is powerful and explains much of the problem of memory in contemporary society today, which allows for the rich and powerful to explain what history means, while the voices of the people are marginalized to the point of irrelevance. Recent history notes that the George W. Bush administration moved upon Iraq making the flimsy argument

of weapons-of-mass-destruction. This false statement was used to provide cover for launching an invasion and support a coup of once-ally, now-enemy Saddam Hussein. Prior to the invasion, and by many estimates, more than 1 million persons filled the streets of New York City attempting to stop the carnage. This amazing show of opposition to an undeclared war received little coverage as the newspapers, television, radio, and Internet news organizations fell into line supporting “our” troops and president.

On the other hand, Zinn documented that during the Vietnam War protests, marches, draft board disruptions, occupations, and the civil disobedience did disrupt the standard operating procedures of the federal government. This was acknowledged as much by presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon. Activism on the streets can make a difference. All of the scholarly work that is completed can go only so far as to push forward the wheels of social justice. Yet while “the arc of the moral universe is long, it bends toward social justice,” as Dr. King would describe.

Howard Zinn walked onto the Orpheum theatre stage in Madison, Wisconsin, on October 6, 2006, to a warm welcome. The event, hosted by the Sociology Department of the University of Wisconsin’s Haven’s Center, was videotaped by Karen Chin of On the Earth Productions, LLC, with assistance from Luciano of Brazen Video Productions. The program would reappear as a feature on *Democracy Now*, an “alternative” news program, hosted by reporter and producer Amy Goodman. The event provided an intimate insight into Zinn’s educational approach, his use of history, and his use of sociology and psychology to bring a context to history, or what might once have been referred to as historical revisionism.

It was Zinn’s personal approach—his wit and personal warmth—that made him so accessible, popular, and inviting over the years as a storyteller. Having spoken before in Madison during Operation Desert Storm in 1991, Zinn had at that time dispensed with the George H.W. Bush administration’s hyperbole, altruism, and fear used to justify the armed forces and intervention.

Zinn’s approach this time, in 2006, with the second Bush administration and Operation Iraqi Freedom, was to query the crowd using social psychology. With the following sobering statement, Zinn opened his lecture: “Do you get the feeling, sometime, that you are living in an occupied country?” Zinn embraced Madison as a friendly place, somewhere to visit as an alternative to leaving the country because of the “alien occupation.” The crowd already possessed its own skepticism of the run-up to the war(s), but Zinn’s choice of words, at once unusual and perhaps a little off putting, was apropos. Employing his dry wit

and sober realism, pointing out that the government will use the “we” interchangeably to define who was “alien,” Zinn cut to the chase: “No human being is alien, except for the people in Washington . . .”

Zinn elaborated, describing a sense of, during the ongoing campaign of the so-called War on Terrorism, a feeling of what sociologists and perhaps social psychologists would define as “anomie and alienation.” But Zinn was making the distinction between a people’s feeling of an imminent threat of another foreign power occupying one’s homeland, of being a prisoner within, and a social feeling of alienation from one’s own government and one’s own leaders. It was an effective ploy; he was quick to make the distinction between the people and the government, arguing that national security in the two wars represented “Bush and Cheney,” and served the interests, as he pointed out, not of the people but of “Halliburton and Exxon”:

They’ve taken over the country they’ve driven us into two disastrous wars, disastrous for our country and even more disastrous for the people of the Middle East. . . . They have sucked up the wealth of this country and given it to the rich, given it to the multinationals, given it to Halliburton. Given it to the makers of weapons, they’re ruining the environment and they’re holding on to 10,000 nuclear weapons . . . The question is how has this been allowed to happen? How have they gotten away with it? (Zinn 2006)

While he may be gone, the struggle for social justice, for which he was fully engaged, remains.

Howard Zinn still inspires me. Looking back on my own emergence as a student, scholar, teacher, and professor, I am constantly struggling to make sense of my education and my political activism as a freelance video journalist. Zinn is helpful to make sense of the work of educators like myself who also aspire to political activism. My memories of video journalism relayed throughout this article are more informed because of Zinn. Perhaps others, struggling with the same challenge, will develop critical historical hindsight, given Zinn’s lessons.

Zinn strove to use a journalistic style, reporting on the resistance to the wars that unjust political, social and economic systems spread. Were we as educators to do this today we would perhaps learn more about how each of us, as common people(s), can make a difference rather than to merely remember larger-than-life figures.

Notes

1. An airbase that was argued to be running guns for a drug operation, as reported by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Miami Herald*, and *Christic Institute*.

2. IN SUMMARY. 1986. "Nicaragua Downs Plane and Survivor Implicates C.I.A." *The New York Times*, October 12. Retrieved August 28, 2011.

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