

Remembering Zinn: Confessions of a Radical Historian
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“That [Zinn] was considered radical says way more about this society than it does about him.”¹

In the mid-1990s, at the University of Texas, I and my fellow-traveling graduate students organized a Radical History Reading Group. As scholarship, ‘radical history’ implied two things for us: a critical rendering of the past from a left perspective, and a scholarship that examines history ‘from the roots,’ not only recovering the silenced perspectives of ordinary people but foregrounding their grassroots and progressive movements that challenged entrenched systems of power and injustice. Our reading group was a modest attempt to engage with what we considered to be cutting-edge scholarship, to share and discuss our own research papers, and to then retreat to the hole-in-the-wall bars along Austin’s Guadalupe Street. Our own interests as radical historians ranged widely: Cuban slave rebels, the American Indian Movement, Argentine anarchists, southern abolitionists, bandits in the US-Mexican borderlands. But we all embraced the idea that past should be analyzed and narrated from the perspective of the oppressed, and of those who struggled on behalf of the underdogs. So upon receiving funding from our history department to host our first guest speaker we instinctively invited Howard Zinn, a self-confessed radical, a historian, a Radical Historian like us.

Professor Zinn accepted our offer. It was 1995. The first revised edition of *A People’s History of the United States* was newly released. His sweeping 600-page survey of US history had already sold more than one million copies and Zinn was arguably America’s best-known historian, despite the dismissive if not caustic response the book elicited from historians. In Zinn’s narrative the protagonists of history are “blacks, Indians, women, and working people of all kinds...ordinary people trying to make a better world, or just trying to survive.”² *A People’s History* turned the dominant narrative on its head. ‘Great men of history’ like Columbus, Andrew Jackson and Teddy Roosevelt are demonized as slave-owning, Indian-killing, land-grabbing imperialists, while Chief Black Hawk, Emma Goldman, and W.E.B DuBois emerge as virtuous American heroes. Zinn himself called it “a biased account.” But “I am not troubled by that,” he writes in the conclusion, “because the mountain of history books under which we all stand leans so heavily in the other direction - so tremblingly respectful of state and statesmen and so disrespectful, by inattention, to people’s movements - that we need some counterforce to avoid being crushed into submission.”³

As teaching assistants in US history courses, Zinn’s text offered us provocative selections from which to draw as we challenged the conservative vision of American history taught in Texas high schools. But as historians-in-training, we understood that *A People’s History* was less cutting-edge revisionism than a product of its time. As his bibliography makes evident, Zinn spent little time poring through documents in the archives, reading microfilm, or conducting oral history interviews. Rather, like all such historical surveys, he synthesizes the research findings of others - in this case the outpouring of social history research published in the 1970s, a decade when readers made a best-seller of Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian*

¹ Bob Herbert, “A Radical Treasure,” *The New York Times*, Jan. 29, 2010.

² Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995), 583.

³ *Ibid.*, 570.

History of the American West. At that moment, a market for radical history existed and *A People's History* met the demand. That Zinn published his polemical account of US history in 1980 is telling. Immersing ourselves in the history of Europe or Latin America, we learned that what Americans considered 'radical' history was by then commonplace elsewhere. In Britain, for example, Marxist labor historians like E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm were respected public intellectuals. In Mexican history texts, Indian rebels, agrarian radicals, and union militants have been leading protagonists since the early 20th century. Today, thanks in some certain part to Zinn's success, all history texts integrate previously unsung workers, immigrants, dissenters, or reformers into their narratives.

I recall two things of our meeting with Professor Zinn. One was the warm smile and good humor he maintained throughout a quite passionate and polemic debate on our profession. The other was the very keen and genuine interest he took while hearing of our own graduate research projects. Months after our encounter, I headed south to Mexico to launch the dissertation research that became my first book.⁴ In my proposal, I promised to uncover the silenced history of northern Mexico's industrial workers, recovering their lost voices and demonstrating how they, and not the region's powerful industrialists, were the makers of history. One advisor warned me against romanticizing the 'common man' like some real-life Barton Fink. I indeed discovered archival evidence of grassroots resistance, from sit-down strikes in the mills to farmers' protests against the environmental destruction wrought by US-owned smelters. Some of these heroic struggles produced enduring change. But I also learned how and why such blue-collar activism met its limits, even in revolutionary Mexico. Worker-activists operated in a legal and political context not of their own making. They confronted Mexican corporate titans and American multinationals whose lawyers walked the corridors of power. They therefore learned the arts of negotiation and compromise. Some were labeled 'sellouts' - not unlike the AFL-CIO bosses whom Zinn takes to task - but they delivered the goods to rank-and-file workers. More importantly, many ordinary working people resisted unions, pledged loyalty to their employers, and joined conservative political movements. Not unlike workers in parts of the USA, their perspectives were shaped not by class but regional identities, religious beliefs, or anti-communism. They made history not by confronting but by allying with the elite.

There are some important history lessons that students will thus not learn from *A People's History*. Take Zinn's assessment of workers and organized labor. By his account, the heroic sit-down strikers of the 1930s saw their unions hijacked during the Cold War by labor bureaucrats more intent on controlling workers than confronting employers. What though becomes of the agency of rank-and-file workers who organized those strikes? Did they not acquiesce to a style of business unionism that allowed them to purchase homes and send their kids to college? What of the millions of workers, in Appalachia or Alabama, who actively resisted organized labor to begin with? We need to better understand how corporate and political elites deployed discourses of race, regionalism, religion, and anti-communism not to dupe southern workers but to mobilize them against outside forces.⁵ In other words, Zinn's history does not explain (or even acknowledge) why 'everyday people' may join conservative causes or

⁴ Michael Snodgrass, *Deference and Defiance in Monterrey: Workers, Paternalism, and Revolution in Mexico, 1890-1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁵ Joe B. Atkins, *Covering the Bosses: Labor and the Southern Press* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 2008); John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1980)

support state policies that stand in direct contradiction to the radical visions of his favored historical protagonists. Critics note that Zinn's main historical actors are not really 'the people' but "a politically conscious fraction of them" - the ones who organized and supported radical but not conservative or reactionary causes.⁶ Explaining why people acquiescence to the status quo helps us better understand the challenges faced by (and limits to) progressive movements. To achieve this, historians have over that past few decades taken up Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony. They returned to writing history from the top down, one that demonstrates elite capacities to defend privilege and hierarchy through education, religion, media, and popular culture.⁷ More recent scholarship traces the historic origins of grassroots movements of the right, the ones intent on unraveling the New Deal and Great Society reforms celebrated by Zinn.⁸ Understanding the roots of popular conservatism helps us better explain why some of the 'people' migrated from union struggles and antiwar protests to the Tea Party movement, and how *A Patriot's History of the United States* - a right-wing, anti-Zinn counter-narrative - became a recent best-seller.

I learned of Howard Zinn's passing while listening to National Public Radio. Among those interviewed in a brief remembrance were Noam Chomsky and the "conservative pundit" David Horowitz, who once labeled Zinn as one of 'the most dangerous academics in America.' Zinn, one suspects, would have taken pride in the designation. The danger built not on his irreverent treatment of Columbus or Lincoln, but the remarkably sustained popularity of *A People's History*. After all, how many historians get notably referenced on both "The Sopranos" and "The Simpsons"? How many history books remain on best-seller lists thirty years after their publication? There have now been nearly 2 million copies of *A People's History* sold, an extraordinary number for any history text. More importantly, many of those were assigned to high school and college students, leading Horowitz to fear that Zinn's "fringe mentality...did certainly alter the consciousness of millions of young people."⁹

Upon revisiting *A People's History* twenty years after my first read, I am reminded just why its appeal remains so powerful and enduring. Zinn's straightforward prose and gripping narratives contrast mightily with typical history textbooks. Rather than offer a comprehensive account of every political, social, or economic development in American history, Zinn chronicles the more shameful moments and heroic struggles about which most Americans remain unfamiliar. *A People's History* dedicates not a few paragraphs, but entire chapters to such episodes as Indian Removal and resistance, the wars in Mexico and Vietnam, virtual wars against Gilded Age unions, and the history of American socialism, a chapter that features Indiana's own Eugene Debs.¹⁰ As a history professor, I have discovered that such episodes are at best vaguely

⁶ Michael Kazin, "Howard Zinn's History Lessons," *Dissent*, Spring 2004. Accessed on Nov. 17, 2010, <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/?article=385>.

⁷ T.J. Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," *American Historical Review* 90: 3 (June 1995), 567-93.

⁸ Jefferson Cowie, "'Nixon's Class Struggle: Romancing the New-Right Worker, 1969-1973,'" *Labor History* 43 (Summer 2002): 257-283; Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Holt, 2004).

⁹ Allison Keys, "Howard Zinn Remembered," National Public Radio, Jan. 28, 2010. Transcript accessed Dec. 3, 2010,

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=123081519>

¹⁰ By contrast, a leading 984-page college text dedicates six pages to Indian

familiar. But when learned they enthrall students at our urban university in the Midwest. Zinn's narrative is further enriched by his ample use of extended quotes from his chosen protagonists of history: union leaders, peace activists, rebel farmers, dissident soldiers. Of course, Zinn heard the barbs and charges thrown by his conservative critics. He responded that his allegedly 'anti-American' take on the so-called Founders and presidents was anything but that; it was inherently American in its focus on the inspiring struggles of those who dared to dissent. That is why, he remarked late in his life, "my history, therefore, describes the inspiring struggle of those who have fought slavery and racism...led strikes for the rights of working people...and who have protested war and militarism." His lesson to readers was straightforward and profound: to understand the dangers inherent to seeking out elite saviors to solve a nation's ills: "I prefer that readers of history...learn that we cannot depend on established authority to keep us out of war and to create economic justice, but rather that solving these problems depends on us, the citizenry, and on the great social movements we have created."¹¹ What's so radical about that?

removal/resistance, three to the Mexican War, and two to the socialists. Mary Beth Norton et al., *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States*, 8th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 256-62, 369-73, 583-4, 596. Moreover, Zinn's tome remains remarkably affordable at roughly twenty percent the cost of a standard college history textbook. In fact, it is available for all to read online at no cost at all: <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/ziinapeoplehistory.html>

¹¹ Zinn, Letter to the Editor: "Making History," *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, July 1, 2007.