

HOWARD ZINN: HISTORIAN/TEACHER AS CITIZEN

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Few scholars have achieved the level of recognition and respect among the wider public as Howard Zinn. This should not come as a surprise, given the 'unconventional' ways that Zinn embodied and enacted his scholarship. He often took his teaching and writing into those seemingly restricted spaces of popular protest, converting words into protagonist deeds. The title of this essay is a modification of one of Zinn's own, "Historian as Citizen," which was published in the Sunday book review section of the *New York Times*, September 25, 1966 (Zinn 1996). In it, Zinn reflected on his two lives, "as historian, as activist," that began when he assumed a professorship in 1956 at Spelman, the historically Black women's college located in the South. In those years Zinn joined the women in "the Movement," the culmination of a hundred-year long struggle to put an end to racial segregation and discrimination in all places of work, leisure, and study. In defiance of the rules and rituals that accompany academic training, Zinn left his classroom and went to the street, uniting with his students through the emotional acts of protest and transforming those dead letters that had inspired him as an historian into living history.

Zinn did not examine dealings from the past as simply *interesting events* to scour and scavenge for the purpose of scholarly advancement. On the contrary, past events were commentaries on the larger questions of inequality, exploitation, imperialism, violence, civil (dis)obedience and militarism, in the ever-changing present. Edmund Burke once wrote, "Those who don't know history are destined to repeat it" and for Zinn, the tragic and brutal era of slavery, segregation, and nuclear warfare did not deserve repeating. Writing about such events and demonstrating their relationship to the times was one way to intervene in the making of history. It is easy, then, to imagine Zinn on the streets during the '60s or blockading the roads used to transport draftees at a

Boston Army Base in the '70s, given that he was a man who did not separate the academic from the public realm. We can also imagine Zinn in protest recalling the words of those activists, abolitionists, and even victims of his own bombing in World War II, who had upon him a lasting impact.

"[William Lloyd] Garrison said in 1833, 'How, then, ought I to feel and speak and write, in view of a system which is red with innocent blood drawn from the bodies of millions of my countrymen by the scourge of brutal drivers....My soul should be, as it is, on fire.'" (Zinn 2009, 121)

Surely the destruction of Royan, on January 5, 1945, was an error and a crime: but what put the finishing touches on this folly was the final air raid on the ruins, on the buildings partially damaged, and on other remarkably spared on the periphery, with that infernal cargo of incendiary bombs. Thus was accomplished a deadly work of obvious uselessness, and thus was revealed to the world the powerful destructiveness of napalm. (Zinn 2009, 288)

Oftentimes we do not think of the ways that our academic scholarship shapes us as people. As the university and the classroom become engrossed in the chains of capitalist logic with their attendant managerialism and one-size-fits-all rubrics for evaluating academic accomplishments, we may very well lose sight of the university or classroom as a space committed to the advancement of the public good. Perhaps for these reasons, I found the extent to which Zinn's 'object' of study informed him as both a citizen and scholar so compelling. I felt an inward change after reading Zinn, the historian as activist. And because of this, I think of him as a teacher. History teaches us, but teachers change us.

Zinn's teachers were the men, women and children we read about in his essays: the Brooklyn tenement residents, shipyard workers, his mother and father, and the unnamed persons who he had come to know through a personal encounter, photo, or an archive, hidden under heaps of paper to which no one else had given much attention. Looking at the past and re-examining the present from the "point of view of those who have been left out of the benefits of so-called civilizations" (Zinn 2009, 532) was Zinn's gift to history and teaching. By opening other people's eyes to the "other's" history, experience, and struggle, Zinn generated the pedagogical conditions needed for people to make meaning from

the brutal and harsh truths he depicted. The image of napalm-induced burnt flesh, a tearing protester, or a jubilant organizer enthralled in the readings of Marx and Engels, jars the mind and senses, thus becoming a learning experience for the reader. In Zinn, we see how the grand theories and meta-narratives of social life – whether we have in mind Marx’s precise and condemning account of capitalism, or Bakunin’s theory of collective anarchism – gain their explanatory potential in how people receive, enact, challenge and extend such philosophic contributions. Furthermore, we learn from Zinn’s insistence that peoples’ everyday actions and reflections provide clarity and direction as we confront the struggles of today. The “new history” that Zinn detailed in his writings stemmed from the words and actions of those “below.” He did not rely on the intellectuals who preceded him to develop his historical thought; rather, he brought our attention to the people who are often ignored and silenced in historical accounts. Zinn’s writing was meant to unsettle and inspire. In his words, “It is good that we are getting more history from below. We have believed too long in our own helplessness, and the new history tells us how, sometimes, movements of people who don’t seem to have much power can shake the rich and the powerful” (2009, 575).

Zinn’s ability to recuperate and rewrite history from the standpoint of those who were both afflicted by and resistant to various forms of domination (either in terms of colonization, segregation, or capitalist exploitation) exposes the irrationality of teaching history from the viewpoint of those “above.” There is nothing rational about unnecessary death and destruction in the service of Ego or profit; the sanctity of human life is what Zinn communicated in the new history. Through Zinn, we learn about the past, not as a set of discrete events or experiences, but as reflective of a wider social order impregnated in human consciousness and actions.

While there are many lessons to be had from Zinn’s work and legacy, it was his focus on making history transformative that should inspire us as educators and cultural workers. He wrote with courage and unabashedly declared his moral conviction in his writing and in the classroom. From Zinn, we recognize that there is no greater democratic duty than to participate in the making of democracy. This means rejecting concepts at face value without rigorously interrogating their practice. When we apply a similar critique to history and social studies, then questions about whose history is being told and for what purpose become of central concern. The question remains whether educators

can and will make the content of Zinn's prose relevant to students. Will educators assume a moral and ethical position with the oppressed in the teaching of history? Will they join their students in protest? Will educators challenge their administrators, school supervisors, and superintendents when their activity and speech is restricted because they fail to act on behalf of dominant interests? Will educators make teaching relevant and learning transformative?

Zinn taught us that history should not reproduce our intentional ignorance of the experiences of others, or of the consequences of our own actions. The teaching of history should compel us to articulate a distinction between knowing and thinking (following the insights of Argentine philosopher Rodolfo Kusch). When we read and write history from the standpoint of the popular classes and by those afflicted by various forms of violence and injustice (state, territorial, military, economic, etc.), then we begin to bridge the gap between what is known and how we come to think about transforming that *known reality* (Kusch, 2008). The ways in which the dominant narratives of conquest and civilization have been documented in school textbooks configure how we and our students come to identify our social existence. Unless we have access to other readings of history from the standpoint of those whose voices and lives have been "erased" from text, then we remain bound to only one known reality. When we have the opportunity to see ourselves in the writing of history from below, to draw comparisons and parallels to how the domination of one peoples is still evident in the exploitation of others, then we have an opportunity to "think" about said reality. To think is different than to know, by virtue of the action that accompanies thinking. Thinking demands that we make decisions, take action, and pursue the formation of knowledge based on our understanding of the motives that have written the past, and the imperatives that are needed to write about a socially just future. Such action is reflected in Zinn's pleas for a radical change in social consciousness. In his words, "There was a moment in our lives (or a month, or a year) when certain facts appeared before us, startled us, and then caused us to question beliefs that were strongly fixed in our consciousness – embedded there by years of family prejudices, orthodox schooling, imbibing of newspapers, radio, and television" (2009, 694). Zinn's writing and activism changed minds, one at a time.

Discussing Howard Zinn's legacy in a journal dedicated to social studies is both appropriate and necessary. We have entered an unprecedented time in history when the most reactionary segments of the

U.S. population have attained political power in the legislative arm of government, and when the decades-long occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan have proceeded apace, grossly unchallenged by a majority of the population in the United States. The youth of today have grown up in a society marked by military combat and increasing ideological polarization. We live in a society of extremes, not only in terms of wealth and poverty, but also in terms of populism, nationalism, and a growing ethnocentrism found in new legislative mandates and proposals that hint towards a narrowing conception of, U.S. citizenship and a widening sphere of social exclusion. We can only imagine how Zinn would respond to the 2010 election of various members of Congress from the insurrectionist Tea Party movement, who shamelessly disavow civil rights as threats to, rather than triumphs of, U.S. democracy. We might also consider how he would react to the ignoble efforts of Governor Jan Brewer and her reactionary state legislature in Arizona, who have outlawed the teaching of ethnic studies in schools. And what would he say to the Texas State Board of Education, who has proposed rewriting the social studies curriculum in their textbooks, to represent only one (pro-capitalist, pro-war, pro-patriarchy, and pro-white) version of history? Zinn would say something. He would put it in print, and he would act upon his words. This is the legacy that he leaves us, and hopefully it, too, will call us to action.

References

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