HOWARD ZINN AND THE SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS ACADEMIC

JOHN R. MCKIVIGAN

Most people probably remember Howard Zinn (1922-2010) for his enormously popular *People's History of the United States: 1492-Present* (1999), which became both a perennial best-seller and a frequently assigned "alternative" textbook in college and high school history courses. An even younger generation perhaps first encountered Zinn via his *Voices of A People's History of the United States,* edited with Anthony Arnove (2004). The subject of many dramatic readings and a teleplay, *Voices* is a compendium of many of the speeches, articles, essays, poetry, and song lyrics that Zinn had used to enliven the *People's History.* In recent decades many people also came to know Zinn for his outspoken advocacy on a wide range of progressive causes, including civil rights, free speech, workers' rights, education reform, and opposition to U.S. imperialism.

My own first encounter with Howard Zinn's special combination of scholarship and activism occurred several decades earlier, while I attended graduate school in the 1970s to study U.S. history. The first time I probably read Zinn was in a short essay, entitled "Abolitionists, Freedom Riders and the Tactics of Agitation," in Martin Duberman's *The Antislavery Vanguard: New Essays on the Abolitionists* (1965). This essay guided me to Zinn's *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Zinn 1964), one of his first monographs. In his essay Zinn attempted to stress the parallels between the early nineteenth century reformers who challenged not just slavery but the pervasive racial prejudice of their society and the recruits to the post World War II civil rights movement. For several generations before the 1960s, it was common among historians to question the psychological soundness of white abolitionists, male and female, who promoted the socially subversive doctrine of racial equality (Harrold 2001). Zinn noted that previous scholars had "scolded the abolitionists for their immoderation, berated

them for their emotionalism, denounced them for bringing on the Civil War, or psychoanalyzed them as emotional deviates in need of recognition" (1965, 417). Using the example of the white men and women from all socioeconomic backgrounds then engaged in the struggle for civil rights in the mid-1960s, Zinn unflinchingly defended the mental health as well as moral courage of such abolitionists as William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and Lucretia Mott. Zinn even turned the argument around and observed: "It is tempting to join the psychological game and try to understand what it is about the lives of academic scholars which keeps them at arm's length from the moral fervor of one of history's most magnificent crusades" (1965, 417).

In his book on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, whose chapter at Atlanta's Spelman College he had advised until being fired for encouraging student activism (Bigelow 2010), Zinn reversed the direction of his analysis and examined the long history of agitation against racism that the young people in the civil rights movement had bravely embraced. The early chapters of that relatively short book described the leading role of college students, black and white, in organizing sit-ins and freedom rides to challenge the entrenched segregation of the South (Zinn 1964). Several other chapters in *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* were devoted to the famous "Freedom Summer" in Mississippi. It described the civil rights activists who risked, and occasionally lost, their lives while attempting to reverse a half-century of discriminatory voter registration practices that had driven blacks out of the state's political process (Zinn 1964, 62-122). Zinn's account then followed the civil rights movement in its battles against the "massive resistance" of the white establishment in other southern states, which also employed violence to try to thwart the peaceful protestors. Candidly, Zinn's book also noted growing disputes over tactics within civil rights ranks, as well as the movement's growing disenchantment with white "liberal" government leaders like Lyndon Johnson who still attempted to balance the interests of the protestors and their "Dixiecrat" opponents (Zinn 1964, 245-75).

Zinn's book shunned the traditional stricture of "scholarly objectivity" and applauded the social reform movement in which the author was an active participant. Historians prior to Zinn applauded themselves on the lack of "relevance" of their subject to contemporary political disputes (Tosh 2006). As a youthful reader at the time, I liked Zinn's observation that in civil rights: "For the first time in our history a major social movement, shaking the nation to its bones, is being led

by youngsters" (Zinn 1964, 1). I also appreciated Zinn's impassioned indictment of the entrenched political system: "We have learned something these past few years about the inadequacy of our regular political structure to bring about desirable social change in a situation of urgency" (Zinn 1964, 218). Zinn's book offered readers a clear remedy: "this is for people to retain always, and to use constantly, the power of demonstration—or what SNCC calls 'direct action to bring the demands of aggrieved people before the leaders of government, with a minimum of turmoil and a maximum of insistence" (Zinn 1964, 219).

Zinn's scholarly insights opened my eyes to the radical dimensions of both the original abolitionists' and the modern SNCC members' challenge to the U.S.'s pervasive racism. When I wrote my own first book on the pre-Civil war antislavery movement inside the nation's churches, Zinn inspired me to see beyond the then accepted scholarship and view those mostly young abolitionists, white and black, male and female, as the radicals of their era. Most of them sought not simply to reform the practices of the major denominations, but rather to replace them with radically transformed institutions that recognized the equality of all peoples. I concluded that it was the abolitionists' failure to overcome the resistance to their radical demands upon religious as well as other institutions that had necessitated the Civil Rights Movement of the next century (McKivigan 1984).

Zinn's *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* was one of the early products of the early 1960s "New Left" that sought to challenge an intellectual consensus driven rightward in the previous decade by the witch hunts of Senator Joseph McCarthy, the House Un-American Activities Committee, and many self-anointed anti-Communist guardians. First popularized by sociologist C. Wright Mills (1960), the American New Left sought to move away from the focus of an earlier generation of leftists on labor and economic issues and toward positions confronting the alienation and authoritarianism caused by both the modern communist and capitalist systems. The New Left had first gathered momentum in questioning the assumptions underpinning the Cold War and the nuclear arms race, but it was the civil rights movement that allowed a relatively small number of political radicals to enlist in the largest movement for social change in the nation's history (Gitlin 1993). Zinn portrayed the increasingly radicalized youth in SNCC as assuming the vanguard of that New Left:

> What really makes SNCC a threat to American liberal society is that quality which makes it a threat to all Establishments, whether capitalist, socialist, communist, or whatever: its rejection of authority; its fearlessness in the face of overwhelming power; its indifference to respectability. It constantly aims to create and recreate, out of the bodies of poor and powerless people, a new force, nonviolent but aggressive, honest and therefore unmanageable. It wants to demonstrate to the nation not what kind of 'system' people should believe in, but how people should live their lives. So its radicalism is not an ideology but a mood. Moods are harder to define. They are also harder to imprison. (1964, 274)

Zinn called on Americans to join the young SNCC militants in their effort to reexamine the direction they wanted for the United States: "we can take this opportunity to look hard, not only deep inside the race question, but beyond it, to other issues of justice and freedom" (1964, 241).

From these heady days of the mid-1960s, when a truly revolutionary transformation of the nation seemed not just possible but inevitable, Zinn went on be a trenchant analyst of U.S. foreign policy, a champion of working class Americans challenging the bureaucratic and reactionary leadership of the labor movement, and an uncompromising critic of Reaganism and the rightward lurch of both of the nation's mainstream political parties. These trends, as well as his indictment of racism and nativism, became central themes in his *People's History* and *Voices* as well as dozens of other books.

Howard Zinn set an example to progressive academics not to retreat into their scholarship. He demonstrated that the skills we have honed in our teaching and research can be applied to the serious problems that America has failed to correct in the half-century since SNCC and other New Leftists of the 1960s threw down the challenge to the "Establishment." Like many other historians of my generation, I have tried to emulate Zinn. I dedicated much of my career to editing and publishing the papers of Frederick Douglass, a runaway Maryland slave who became first an articulate abolitionist and then one of the pioneers of the civil rights movement (Blassingame and McKivigan 1999). I also wrote a biography of James Redpath, a Scottish immigrant to the U.S., whose writings championed not just abolition but women's rights and socialism as well (McKivigan 2008). In addition, I have

used my skills as a scholar on behalf of a variety of progressive causes: coauthoring a book on successful labor organizing tactics (Gilpin et al. 1995); participating in third-party, environmental, and antiwar politics; directing an annual "peace and justice summit" to bring campus and community activists together; and advising a chapter on my university campus of the revived Students for a Democratic Society, a key fixture of the original New Left.

Zinn's call in *SNCC: The New Abolitionists,* still holds true today:

> To recognize that there are other supreme human values, along with that of racial equality, which deserve attention. For *any* society...can be controlled by an elite of power, can ignore the most wretched poverty, can destroy the right of protest, can engage in the mass murder of war. (1964, 240)

As long as these failings remain prevalent in American society, it is necessary for educators to come out of our classrooms and down out of our ivory towers and join the fight for the better nation we all deserve.

References

Bigelow, Bill. 2010. "Losing Our Favorite Teacher." *Rethinking Schools,* 24, Spring.

Blassingame, John W., and John R. McKivigan.1999. *The Frederick Douglass Papers* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Gilpin, Todd, Daniel Letwin, Gary Isaac, and Jack McKivigan. 1995. *On Strike for Respect: The Clerical and Technical Workers' Strike at Yale University, 1984-85*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Gitlin, Todd. 1993. *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*. New York: Bantam Books.

Harrold, Stanley. 2001. *American Abolitionists*. Harlow Eng.: Pearson Education.

McKivigan, John R. 1984. *The War Against Proslavery Religion: Abolitionism and the Northern Churches, 1830-1865*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

McKivigan, John R. 2008. *Forgotten Firebrand: James Redpath and the Making of Nineteenth Century America*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Mills, C. Wright. 1960. "Letter to the New Left." *New Left Review* 1: 22.

Tosh, Josh. 2006. *The Pursuit of History,* 4th ed. Harlow, Eng.: Pearson Education.

Zinn, Howard. 1964. *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Zinn, Howard. 1965. "Abolitionists, Freedom-Riders, and the Tactics of Agitation," in *The Antislavery Vanguard: New Essays on the Abolitionists*, ed. Martin Duberman. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Zinn, Howard. 1999. *A People's History of the United States: 1492 to Present, Twentieth Anniversary Edition.* New York: Harper Collins.

Zinn, Howard, and Anthony Arnove. 2004. *Voices of a People's History of the United States*. New York: Seven Stories Press.