

REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

Howard Zinn, The People's Historian

Donald Wright

Martin Duberman, *Howard Zinn: A Life on the Left* (New York: The New Press, 2012)

Timothy McCarthy, ed., *The Indispensable Zinn: The Essential Writings of the "People's Historian"* (New York: The New Press, 2012)

Stephen Bird, Adam Silver, and Joshua C. Yesnowitz, eds., *Agitation with a Smile: Howard Zinn's Legacies and the Future of Activism* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2013)

WHEN HOWARD ZINN DIED ON 27 JANUARY 2010, I immediately began reading on-line obituaries and tributes to the people's historian whose radical example had inspired countless men and women to stand up, to march, to resist, and, if necessary, to go to jail. That afternoon, I went to the library where I checked out as many Howard Zinn books as I could carry. For the next couple of weeks, I read about the Civil Rights Movement, the labour movement, the wars against Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, the brutality of American imperialism, and the madness of neoliberalism. What struck me was the clarity of his vision and the clarity of his writing. As an activist, he knew right from wrong and, as a writer, he knew what he wanted to say and how he wanted to say it. He was never an academic poser and his writing was neither burdened by impenetrable theory nor cluttered with incomprehensible jargon. In a 1966 article published in the *New York Times*, he rejected the role of the disinterested scholar, instead defining himself as a historian-citizen. "In a world hungry for solutions, we ought to welcome the emergence of the historian as an activist-scholar, who thrusts himself and his works into the crazy mechanism of history, on behalf of values in which he deeply believes. This makes him a citizen in the ancient Athenian sense of the word."¹

1. Howard Zinn, "Historian as Citizen," in Howard Zinn ed., *The Zinn Reader: Writings on*

Donald Wright, "Howard Zinn, The People's Historian," *Labour/Le Travail*, 73 (Spring 2014), 265–277.

A few weeks later I received an e-mail from howardzinn.org announcing a public memorial service at Boston University where Zinn had taught from 1964 until his retirement in 1988, often under less than ideal circumstances. It's a theme Martin Duberman develops to considerable effect in *Howard Zinn: A Life on the Left*. BU's president, the conservative, vindictive, and dictatorial John Silber, loathed his most popular professor, once describing him as the "enemy of truth."² Although Zinn had an international reputation both as a scholar and as an activist, and although students could be seen lining up outside his door, down the hallway, and into the stairwell, Silber routinely denied him pay raises and even assigned him smaller classrooms to limit his enrolments. He once accused him of attempting to set fire to the president's office, a charge for which he was forced to apologize. Zinn's crime wasn't his defence of untenured faculty or striking clerical workers; it wasn't his courage or the example he set for the larger BU community; and it certainly wasn't arson. It was what he represented: to conservatives, the sixties was a period of moral disorder when the United States went off the rails and Silber – who supported the wars against Indochina and later the counterinsurgency campaigns against Central America – intended to put America back on the rails one radical professor at a time.

On the long drive to Boston, my kids wanted to know why they were being dragged to a memorial service for some guy we didn't even know. Because, I said, Howard Zinn changed the world. Well, if he changed the world, how come you're always complaining about it? Good question, I said. Because change comes slowly, I guess. But it does come. Of course, it doesn't come from the top. It comes from the bottom; it comes from men, women, and even children who say enough is enough, who say we're not putting up with this crap anymore. Daddy said a swear word, Frances shouted. Crap isn't a swear word, Harriet responded. Regardless, I said, if Howard Zinn knew anything, he knew that nothing worth having comes without some kind of fight. In the rear view mirror, I could see their eyes roll.

Billed as a celebration and held in BU's magnificent Marsh Chapel – the same chapel that a young Martin Luther King had worshipped in as a doctoral student in the early 1950s – the memorial service featured fourteen speakers, including Frances Fox Piven and Noam Chomsky. Piven remembered a friend and colleague whose impish smile, vast reserves of energy, and genuine humility allowed her and others to hold the line more than once, while Chomsky recalled getting to know Zinn through the Civil Rights Movement and the antiwar movement, how they endured police brutality for exercising their democratic rights, and how their early meetings grew into a friendship that lasted nearly half a century. But it was a BU student named Ross Caputi who reminded us why we were there. A veteran of the Iraq War where he fought in

Disobedience and Democracy, 2nd edition (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2009), 543.

2. Martin Duberman, *Howard Zinn: A Life on the Left* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 263.

the Second Battle of Fallujah, Caputi returned home lonely, scared, and confused. If the United States is right, he asked himself, then how come we did what we did to the people of Fallujah? How come we killed hundreds of civilians and displaced hundreds of thousands more? He felt like a terrorist and to cope he turned to alcohol and drugs. Then something made him pick up a copy of Zinn's best-known book. *A People's History of the United States* "changed my life," he said. "I learned that in every American war the many have suffered for the profit of the few, and that in every American war there were others who felt like I did." Suddenly, Caputi knew that he wasn't crazy. Howard Zinn, he said, "saved my life."³

Caputi's experience in the Iraq War was Zinn's experience in the Second World War as a second lieutenant in the US Air Force when, in the war's dying days, he dropped jellied gasoline on Royan, a French resort town where several thousand German soldiers were holed up. As one bombardier in a large mission in an even larger air force, Zinn didn't question his participation in the destruction of the city or the deaths of some 1000 civilians. But within a year, he had come to a different conclusion. The war hadn't been just because there is no such thing as a just war. According to Duberman, the attack on Royan was a defining moment in the making of Zinn the antiwar activist. It was this Zinn that Noam Chomsky singled out in his remarks, calling *Vietnam: The Logic of Withdrawal* his friend's most important book. Zinn's 1967 argument for America's unilateral withdrawal from a country it had no right to be in was, Chomsky added, ignored by Washington but its moral clarity is as relevant now as it was then.

Leaving Marsh Chapel, I resolved to read *A People's History of the United States* from beginning to end. As a professional historian, I recognized its many faults, especially its tendency to reduce the past to a simple morality tale between the good guys and the bad guys. But as someone who understands that it's the powerful who get to define reality, I was mesmerized by its systematic and relentless presentation of an alternative, or people's reality, one that accounts for and validates their historical experience. If history, Zinn wrote, is "to anticipate a possible future without denying the past, it should, I believe, emphasize new possibilities by disclosing those hidden episodes of the past when, even if in brief flashes, people showed their ability to resist, to join together, occasionally to win."⁴

As a birthday present, my kids gave me *The Zinn Reader*, a 700-plus page collection of essays spanning his career. I won't pretend that I read every essay, but I read enough to know that I was in the presence of a rare and gifted polemicist. My Zinn obsession – and it was an obsession – eventually subsided, although it never went away and the reader stayed on my bedside table

3. Ross Caputi, Remarks given at A Celebration of the Life of Howard Zinn, 27 March 2010. Copy in author's possession.

4. Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 11.

as a reminder of a life lived with purpose and conviction. When I agreed to write this review, it was joined by a new anthology and a collection of essays on Zinn's political thought and political activism. I suspect that *The Indispensable Zinn* and *Agitation with a Smile* will be joined by other anthologies and other collections because, as Timothy McCarthy writes in his introductory essay, "Love him or hate him, more than any other scholar of his generation he was undeniably the people's historian."⁵

Born on 24 August 1922 in Brooklyn, New York, Howard Zinn was the second son of Eastern European Jewish immigrants who worked day and night to put a roof over their head and food on the table. Although the Zinns never faced the indignity of eviction, their furniture piled on the sidewalk and their clothes in a heap, they knew the meaning of poverty. Zinn would later write that his family's apartment was "such a shithouse" that he never invited a single friend over until he was fourteen.⁶ Still, there were small luxuries: a second-hand radio, an occasional pair of new shoes, and a twenty-volume set of Charles Dickens for the princely sum of ten cents a volume. A young Zinn devoured them, delighting in Dickens' inimitable style and admiring his compassion for the poor. Soon he was reading everything that he could lay his hands on in an obvious attempt to make sense of the world. Upton Sinclair, John Steinbeck, Jack London, and Dalton Trumbo, for example, introduced him to notions of justice, dignity, war, and peace. After his service in the Second World War, Zinn attended NYU and Columbia University where he completed a doctoral dissertation on the congressional career of Fiorello LaGuardia, "an outspoken champion of social justice."⁷ Because of his political activities – he belonged to the American Labor Party, he attended a meeting of the American Peace Mobilization, and his name appeared on the letterhead of the Brooklyn Citizens' Committee for the Right of Bank Workers to Organize – Zinn attracted the attention of the FBI when it opened a file on him in 1949. Four years later, he was interviewed by two agents. Describing himself as a liberal, Zinn denied being a member of the Communist Party, although he admitted that "some people would consider him to be a 'leftist.'"⁸

When he received his first academic appointment in 1956 at Spelman College, a Black women's college in Atlanta, Zinn couldn't have known that he was about to enter one of the greatest movements in American history. In

5. Timothy Patrick McCarthy, ed., *The Indispensable Zinn: The Essential Writings of the "People's Historian"* (New York: The New Press, 2012), xxv.

6. Duberman, *Howard Zinn*, 4.

7. Duberman, *Howard Zinn*, 25.

8. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Security Information Program, New York Division, Subject Howard Zinn, 25 November 1953. In 2010, the FBI made available its file on Zinn at <http://www.fbi.gov/>.

his words, the Civil Rights Movement shook the United States “to its bones,” transforming everyone who passed through it.

To be with them, walking a picket line in the rain in Hattiesberg, Mississippi, or sleeping on a cot in a cramped “office” in Greenville, Mississippi; to watch them walk out of the stone jailhouse in Albany, Georgia; to see them jabbed by electric prod poles and flung into paddy wagons in Selma, Alabama, or link arms and sing at the close of a church meeting in the Delta – is to feel the presence of greatness.⁹

One of his former students, the novelist Alice Walker, remembers him as the first white person she had ever sat next to *and* as someone who wasn't really white, who wasn't “heavy, oppressive, threatening, and almost invariably insensitive to the feelings of a person of color.”¹⁰ Believing that it was a force for creative change, he even sympathized with the Black Power movement when most whites retreated in either terrified confusion or sullen resentment. Although his students adored him, Spelman's administration took a dim view of his support for civil rights and dismissed him for insubordination in 1963, a charge he never denied.

A year later, Zinn landed in BU's Department of Government at another portentous moment in American history: the escalation of the war against Indochina. Seeing through the official lies, deceptions, and half-truths, Zinn opposed the war through “rallies, teach-ins, demonstrations, [and] articles.”¹¹ In fact, he became an early leader of the antiwar movement while his FBI file grew larger, eventually reaching 423 pages. When North Vietnam agreed to release three captured American pilots to representatives of that movement, Zinn and another activist made the long, complicated, circuitous trip to Hanoi to receive them in early 1968. On his return to Boston, he was denounced by his dean for missing twelve days of class time. But Zinn simply shrugged. The guy didn't have a small bone in his body. Besides, he had asked a colleague to cover his classes.

Representing twenty years of thinking about American history, the 1980 publication of *A People's History of the United States* secured Zinn's fame. Still in print, it has received cameo appearances in *Good Will Hunting*, *The Sopranos*, and *The Simpsons*. A few weeks ago, my daughter and I were watching *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Dog Days* when we noticed that Frank Heffley, the main character's father and a history buff, was reading it. Translated into twelve languages, *A People's History* has sold something like two million copies, becoming in the process its own brand and inspiring several spin-offs, including *A Young People's History of the United States*, *Voices of a People's History*, an abridged teaching edition, a graphic comic adaptation, a documentary film,

9. Howard Zinn, “The New Abolitionists,” in McCarthy, ed., *The Indispensable Zinn*, 32.

10. Alice Walker, “Afterword,” in McCarthy, ed., *The Indispensable Zinn*, 371.

11. Howard Zinn, “A Yellow Rubber Chicken: Battles at Boston University,” in McCarthy, ed., *The Indispensable Zinn*, 160.

and a people's history series published by The New Press. At the same time, *A People's History of the United States* has generated countless denunciations, including *A Patriot's History of the United States: From Columbus's Great Discovery to the War on Terror*, which has earned positive recommendations from Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck, the latter dismissing Zinn as a communist. According to its authors, American history is neither "a tale of racism, sexism, and bigotry" nor "the story of the conquest and rape of a continent." It is the story of men of good character, of men like George Washington who "was set in office by God Himself." "The United States was, and is, a fountain of hope and a beacon of liberty" and its people "have never relented in their quest for peace and justice." The only thing that can be said for Zinn's book is that "it honestly represents its Marxist biases in the title!"¹²

Of course, that wasn't enough for Mitch Daniels, then the governor of Indiana and now the president of Purdue University. "This terrible anti-American academic has finally passed away," he wrote less than two weeks after Zinn's death. Describing *A People's History* as a "truly execrable, anti-factual piece of disinformation," he sought assurances that it was not "in use anywhere in Indiana." If it is in use, he asked, "how do we get rid of it before more young people are force-fed a totally false version of our history?"¹³ Daniels' e-mail is actually a tremendous compliment to Zinn, revealing his uncanny capacity to get under the skin of America's political elite.

For his part, Duberman clearly admires *A People's History* for turning American history upside down, for dismantling the myth of national unity, and for telling the stories of people like Frances Wright, the early feminist and utopian socialist whose Fourth of July speech in 1829 didn't invoke the greatness of America but wondered instead if new technologies were not, in fact, "making people appendages to machines." Determined to show that even the smallest acts of defiance are part of history, *A People's History* also includes Harriet Hanson, an eleven-year old girl who joined 1500 other girls in an 1836 strike in Lowell, Massachusetts, and an unnamed black private who "refused to board a troop plane to Vietnam, although he faced eleven years of hard labor."¹⁴

However, Duberman also concedes that *A People's History* "lacks nuance" and that, for example, its treatment of the Constitution and of Abraham Lincoln are problematic. Following Charles Beard, Zinn emphasized the economic

12. Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen, *A Patriot's History of the United States: From Columbus's Great Discovery to the War on Terror* (New York: Penguin, 2004), xi, 824, 825, xi. Larry Schweikart stated his belief that God had intervened to choose Washington in an interview with Rush Limbaugh. *The Limbaugh Letter*, March 2005.

13. Scott Jaschik, "The Governor's Bad List," *Inside Higher Ed*, 17 July 2013. <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/07/17/e-mails-reveal-mitch-daniels-governor-tried-ban-howard-zinn-book>.

14. Zinn, *A People's History*, 221, 493.

interests of America's Founding Fathers. But as Duberman notes, the protection of property rights "wasn't the sum and substance of the Constitution's design." Likewise, Zinn's "one-dimensional" portrait of Lincoln omitted a far more complex man whose impressive "capacity for growth" brought him to the Emancipation Proclamation and the belief "that natural rights belonged to all human beings."¹⁵

If Duberman is willing to forgive Zinn's economic determinism and his one-sided treatment of the sixteenth president, he is less willing to forgive his tendency to privilege class and race over gender and sexual orientation and his concomitant failure to study the gay liberation movement. Zinn, he writes, "couldn't get himself to care much about whether a man should be punished for having sex with another man, or whether a transgendered woman was psychologically better off with or without surgery." Later, he "rarely mentioned the topic of AIDS."¹⁶ As an early queer historian and as the founder and first executive director of CUNY's Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies, Duberman is passionate in his defence of lesbian and gay history and he is right to point to gaps in Zinn's political thought and praxis. But does he need to make this point on at least eight separate occasions, including on the very first page?¹⁷

Zinn later acknowledged his omission. "I suppose," he said, "it was my own sexual orientation that accounted for my minimal treatment of gay and lesbian rights."¹⁸ Even a young Duberman couldn't discern the initial meaning and significance of gay liberation and gay pride. "I could identify with every cause gay liberationists were now championing – except gay liberation," he wrote in *Cures: A Gay Man's Odyssey*. "I could applaud the New Left analysis of American life as exclusionary and oppressive – but could not broaden that analysis to encompass the oppression of a sexual minority." Watching the June 1970 Gay Pride parade from the sidewalk, he dismissed it as so many "cripples on yet another march to a faith healing shrine."¹⁹ Later, of course, Duberman would change his mind. But if he missed the significance of the gay liberation movement in the late 1960s and into 1971, Zinn can be forgiven for missing it in the late 1970s when he began writing *A People's History*.

All heroes have feet of clay and Zinn is no exception. In addition to labour rights, civil rights, and prisoners' rights, his passions included other women. On one occasion, he fell in love and considered leaving his wife, the equally talented and equally committed Roslyn Zinn. His daughter described it as "a huge betrayal." Although he told his wife and ended the affair, he continued

15. Duberman, *Howard Zinn*, 228, 231, 232.

16. Duberman, *Howard Zinn*, 198, 257.

17. Duberman, *Howard Zinn*, xi, 184, 197, 198, 216, 228, 240, 257.

18. Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* 2nd ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 687.

19. Martin Duberman, *Cures: A Gay Man's Odyssey* (New York: Plume, 1991): 162, 163.

to have “flings, making sure that Roz didn’t find out about them.” Duberman doesn’t censure Zinn, but he offers silly pseudo explanations, including the theory that “many men cannot risk monogamy,” preferring instead “to separate sex and love because to combine the two puts them in danger of heightened vulnerability.”²⁰ Oh brother. Following Occam’s razor, the simplest explanation is usually the best explanation: sexual liberation was everywhere and Zinn almost certainly felt a sense of male entitlement.

Piecing together Zinn’s private life wasn’t easy because he “destroyed nearly everything in his own archives that might have revealed his feelings and his relationships.” Indeed, Duberman worried that his book would be an extended presentation of “a candidate for sainthood rather than a fallible human being.”²¹ But through interviews and privately held correspondence, he was able to uncover something of the private Zinn, although not in as much detail as he would have liked.

What compels a man to burn his papers? An instinct for privacy. Embarrassment. Modesty. All of the above. No doubt Zinn wanted to protect the people closest to him, but he honestly believed that the movement wasn’t about him, it was about others. “If there was to be any biography, [he] obviously wanted it to be about political, not private, matters.”²² In her remarks at the memorial service, Frances Fox Piven made a similar point, emphasizing her friend’s humility. “He never saw himself as a martyr,” she said. “And trust me, I’ve seen a lot of martyrs on the left.”²³

Timothy Patrick McCarthy encountered Zinn’s legendary humility and generosity in 1999 when he sent an e-mail, “totally out of the blue, asking if he’d be willing to have lunch.”²⁴ That initial lunch grew into a friendship and that friendship led to *The Indispensable Zinn: The Essential Writings of the “People’s Historian,”* a beautifully produced anthology that includes selections from Zinn’s best-known and much-loved books, from *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, *Vietnam: The Logic of Withdrawal*, and, of course, *A People’s History*. McCarthy also included what he calls interludes, a series of interviews between Howard Zinn and David Barsamian, creator of the syndicated radio program, *Alternative Radio*. Here we can catch the sound of Zinn’s voice, its unique combination of humour and argument, passion and conviction, and, above all, its empathy for the men and women who struggle to pay the rent, to put their lives back together after the trauma of war, or simply to make it through another day when the cards are stacked against them, when every

20. Duberman, *Howard Zinn*, 188, 189, 190.

21. Duberman, *Howard Zinn*, xii.

22. Duberman, *Howard Zinn*, xii.

23. Frances Fox Piven, Remarks given at A Celebration of the Life of Howard Zinn, 27 March 2010. Quoted with the permission of Professor Piven.

24. McCarthy, ed., *The Indispensable Zinn*, xxvii.

economic and social indicator points to persistent and growing inequalities between those who have and those don't. Remarkably, Zinn kept the faith. "We shouldn't be discouraged," he said in a 1996 interview. "We should be encouraged by historical examples of social change, by how surprising changes take place suddenly, when you least expect it, not because of a miracle from on high, but because people have labored patiently for a long time."²⁵

Anthologists have a hard job: no matter how representative, their selections will not be someone else's selections, meaning my favourite essays didn't make the cut. "A Speech for LBJ" remains a brilliant and imaginative critique of American foreign policy and the war in Vietnam; "What War Looks Like" is an equally brilliant critique of the rush to war against Iraq from the perspective of all those "ordinary human beings who are not concerned with geopolitics and military strategy"; and "Against Discouragement" is a 2005 commencement address to Spelman students indicting the madness of nationalism and invoking the promise of hope. "Is not nationalism – that devotion to a flag, an anthem, a boundary so fierce it leads to murder – one of the greatest evils of our time, along with racism, along with religious hatred?" The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, he said, weren't about stopping terrorism any more than the invasion of Panama was about stopping the drug trade or the invasion of Vietnam was about bringing democracy. "Our aims were the aims of all the other empires in world history – more profit for corporations, more power for politicians." But as always, he cautioned against discouragement. "My hope is that your generation will demand that your children be brought up in a world without war."²⁶

However, I'm glad that McCarthy included *Marx in Soho: A Play on History*, the best known of Zinn's three plays. Throughout his long life, Zinn drew inspiration from artists of all shapes and sizes, from singers, musicians, poets, novelists, playwrights, actors, and actresses. His FBI file reveals that he attended Paul Robeson's 1949 concert in Peekskill, New York that precipitated an anti-communist, anti-black riot. (Afterwards, Zinn filed a claim of property damage against the state of New York because his car had been pelted with rocks by an angry mob while the police looked on.) Artists, he told David Barsamian, "play a very special role in relation to social change": "Social movements all through history have needed art in order to enhance what they do, in order to bring them together, to make them feel they are part of a vibrant movement." Meanwhile, artists drew inspiration from Zinn, notably Bruce Springsteen whose 1982 album, *Nebraska*, was partly inspired by the stories he had read in *A People's History*. Twenty-five years later he described "the enormous impact" it had on him. "It set me down in a place that I recognized

25. Howard Zinn, "How Social Change Happens," in McCarthy, ed., *The Indispensable Zinn*, 179.

26. Zinn, "What War Looks Like" in Zinn, ed., *The Zinn Reader*, 385. Zinn, "Against Discouragement," in Zinn, ed., *The Zinn Reader*, 732, 733.

and felt I had a claim to. It made me feel that I was a player in this moment in history, as we all are, and that this moment in history was mine, somehow, to do with whatever I could."²⁷

A one-man play, *Marx in Soho* sees Karl Marx return to Soho, New York, not Soho, London because of a "bureaucratic mix-up." Unphased, he is glad to be back and he is glad to have an audience. "You weren't put off," he says, "by all those idiots who said: 'Marx is dead!'" For the next hour, he talks about his life, his family, and his ideas, at one point, becoming frustrated by how little has changed, by how much poverty and misery there still is.

Has everyone become stupid? Don't they know the history of the free enterprise system? When government did nothing for the people and everything for the rich? When your government gave a hundred million acres of free land to the railroads, but looked away as Chinese and Irish immigrants worked twelve hours a day on those railroads, and died in the heat and the cold. And when workers rebelled and went on strike, the government sent armies to smash them into submission.

The questions imply their own answer: everyone has become stupid. "What kind of shit do they teach in schools these days?" Admitting that he "did not reckon with capitalism's ingeniousness in surviving" and that he "did not imagine that there would be drugs to keep the sick system alive," Marx points an angry finger at consumption, at all those "luxuries advertised in your magazines and on your screens."²⁸ Writing this review during the final weeks of Kate Middleton's pregnancy and the birth of His Royal Highness Prince George of Cambridge was a powerful reminder of the world's capacity to drown in its own trivia and of our passivity in an ancient but modernized system of social control. We no longer obey royalty. We consume it. Advertising is the new opium of the people; consumption is the hit; and consumer debt is the inevitable crash. Although he wrote *Marx in Soho* in 1999, Zinn could not have been surprised when, two years later, George Bush, Tony Blair, and Jean Chrétien urged us to go shopping in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. As consumer-citizens, our highest act of patriotism has become a trip to the mall.

Martin Duberman likes aspects of *Marx in Soho*, but he finds the second half "sinking too often into polemics, turning in spots into political screed."²⁹ He's right, but like all good art, it also acts as a mirror. Reading the play took me back to Zinn's memorial service: in return for their co-operation in Marsh Chapel, my kids got a trip to the American Girl store, a pink palace of consumption for little girls and their dolls. For a small fortune, a doll can even get a makeover at the Doll Hair Salon. More than a palace of consumption, it is

27. Bruce Springsteen, Interview with Joe Levy, *Rolling Stone*, 15 November 2007. See also <http://www.peopleshistory.us/node/111>.

28. Howard Zinn, *Marx in Soho: A Play on History*, in McCarthy, *The Indispensable Zinn*, 348, 366–367.

29. Duberman, *Howard Zinn*, 283.

a factory for making consumers out of girls. But enough. "Let's not speak any more about capitalism," Marx tells the audience.

Let's just speak of using the incredible wealth of the earth for human beings. Give people what they need: food, medicine, clean air, pure water, trees and grass, pleasant homes to live in, some hours of work, more hours of leisure. Don't ask who deserves it. Every human being deserves it.

On that hopeful note, Marx gathers his belongings and starts to leave. But he turns, delivering a final message. "Do you resent my coming back and irritating you? Look at it this way. It is the second coming. Christ couldn't make it, so Marx came..."³⁰

Zinn's unshakeable optimism and his "decency of spirit" quietly animate *Agitation with a Smile: Howard Zinn's Legacies and the Future of Activism*, a collection of academic essays and poetry that seeks "a systematic reevaluation of his methods and theories." In their introductory chapter, editors Stephen Bird, Adam Silver, and Joshua Yesnowitz propose a framework for understanding a man they clearly admire, dividing his commitments into three "intentionally broad and overlapping" spheres: direct action, academia, and arts and culture.³¹ Within these spheres are five recurring themes: direct democracy, disobedience, the danger of neutrality, dual convictions, and disposition. By dual convictions, the editors mean tensions in Zinn's thought, for example, between his anarchist leanings and his appeal to the state to protect minority rights and deliver social goods. And by disposition, the editors mean his humour and his optimism, or his smile.

In the twelve essays that follow, Zinn's historical and political thought is placed in its larger intellectual contexts while his activism and his role as a public intellectual is assessed.

In "Legacies and Breakthroughs: The Long View on Zinnian History," Ambre Ivoll and Paul Buhle situate Zinn's scholarship in the tradition of radical historiography, from Charles and Mary Beard through W.E.B. Du Bois and C.L.R. James to William Appleman Williams and E.P. Thompson. With access to Zinn's annotated copy of *The Making the English Working Class*, Ivoll and Buhle note that he underlined the following insight: "Class is fluid, alive, *historical*, not a category." This approach to class animated *A People's History*, they argue: "far from reducing the 'people in struggle' to the lumpen proletariat, it points to the possibility of inclusive alliances in times of crisis."³²

The need for spontaneous, creative, and inclusive alliances between the labour, feminist, environmental, and antiwar movements is crucial if the world is going to save itself from itself, from a militarism gone berserk, an

30. Zinn, *Marx in Soho*, in McCarthy, ed., *The Indispensable Zinn*, 369.

31. Stephen Bird, Adam Silver, and Joshua C. Yesnowitz, eds., *Agitation with a Smile: Howard Zinn's Legacies and the Future of Activism* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2013), 7, xi, 2.

32. Ambre Ivoll and Paul Buhle, "Legacies and Breakthroughs: The Long View on Zinnian History," in Bird, Silver, and Yesnowitz, eds., *Agitation with a Smile*, 33.

economic order built by and for the 1%, and a political system that cannot, for the life of it, fairly re-distribute wealth. The sort of spontaneity and fluidity Zinn admired in the past characterizes the Occupy movement. Indeed, Irene Gendzier points to the intellectual and symbolic connections between Zinn and the Occupy movement, noting that Occupy Boston named its lecture series the Howard Zinn Memorial Lectures.

In "Archivists of Optimism: Zinn and the Arts," Alix Olson picks up the theme of cooperation, collaboration, disobedience, and risk-taking in the arts. As a doctoral student, she is interested in political and feminist theory; as a spoken word artist she is interested in the transformative power of art; and as an activist-scholar she is determined to articulate through art and scholarship a deepened notion of radical citizenship. If her essay falls into rhetoric and cant, so what? I'll take her radical citizen over the consumer-citizen any day of the week. In addition to her essay, *Agitation with a Smile* includes her poem, "Dear Diary." Through a series of diary entries, it recounts a relationship to her country gone south, beginning with her excitement at the prospect of going to a parade but ending with the promise of her "staging a critical intervention" with "some friends of Zinn's."³³ (Parenthetically, Zinn admired Olson's art, describing her as "an ingenious poet, a brilliant performer, a funny person, and serious thinker."³⁴)

Taking Zinn as a moral example for G.I. resistance, Ross Caputi critiques the antiwar movement, a movement, he writes, that "blamed the government," "the corporate media," and even "the war itself." But for reasons of patriotism and political legitimacy "it did everything in its power not to blame the troops." As a result, the slogan "Honor the warrior, not the war," misrepresented "how soldiers actually conduct themselves in war" and made "solidarity with Iraqis difficult, if not impossible." Drawing on both his experience in Iraq and the theory of collective responsibility, Caputi delivers a blunt message. Even if "many veterans of the occupation" can truthfully say that they are "not responsible for war crimes in Iraq," they cannot say that "*we* are not responsible for war crimes": "If they aren't ashamed of their own individual actions, they should, at the very least, be ashamed of the US military's actions."³⁵

Caputi's opposition to the war and his statement that the second siege of Fallujah was "an example of terrorism" is drawing harsh criticism. As Executive Editor of the *Commentator*, a British website dedicated to the defence of the West against socialists, corporatists, high taxes, tyrants, dictators, and terrorists, Raheem Kassam describes Caputi as a "Chomsky fanatic" and dismisses as "dangerous nonsense" an opinion piece he wrote for the *Guardian*. Using a trick that Zinn deplored, Kassam asserts that Caputi ignores "strategic

33. Alix Olson, "Dear Diary," in Bird, Silver, and Yesnowitz, eds., *Agitation with a Smile*, 111.

34. Quotation at www.alixolson.com.

35. Ross Caputi, "Howard Zinn: A Moral Example for G.I. Resistance," in Bird, Silver, and Yesnowitz, eds., *Agitation with a Smile*, 128, 133.

realities” and “geopolitical imperatives.”³⁶ In other words, Caputi should stick to what he knows. Zinn believed in the exact opposite, stating that “we should lose our awe of the specialists and stop assuming the ‘expert’ knows his stuff.” Because a healthy democracy demands a healthy range of opinion, there is, he added, “a certain incompatibility between specialization and democracy.”³⁷ The only thing worse than the military-industrial complex is the military-intellectual complex that creates a specialized language designed to exclude popular participation, limit the range of permissible opinion, and legitimate brutality as national security, strategic realities, sorties, collateral damage, and coercive interrogation. But if Caputi has drawn strong criticism, he has drawn equally strong support from, well, Noam Chomsky for his Justice For Fallujah Project.³⁸

Agitation with a Smile is the first scholarly attempt to rescue “the man from the mythology,” to explicate Zinn’s ideas and assess his legacies.³⁹ That the essays still mythologize the man is understandable, perhaps even inevitable. He was a rare and remarkable human being whose courage inspired a generation, making Martin Duberman’s problem everyone’s problem: how does one write about Zinn without making the case for his sainthood?

36. Ross Caputi, “Howard Zinn: A Moral Example for G.I. Resistance,” in Bird, Silver, and Yesnowitz, eds., *Agitation with a Smile*, 135. Raheem Kassam, “The *Guardian* gives a platform to a ‘self-confessed terrorist’; using CiF to defend the killing of US troops,” *The Commentator*, 17 April 2012. Available at <http://www.thecommentator.com>.

37. Howard Zinn, “Hiroshima,” in McCarthy, ed., *The Indispensable Zinn*, 298.

38. On the Justice For Fallujah Project, see <http://thefallujahproject.org>.

39. Stephen Bird, Adam Silver, and Joshua C. Yesnowitz, “Agitation with a Smile: A Framework for Reassessing the Contributions of Howard Zinn,” in Bird, Silver, and Yesnowitz, eds., *Agitation with a Smile*, 2.