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Commentary

A Historian For Everyday People

Laura Dean, 02.01.10, 03:50 PM EST

Howard Zinn's legacy.



Howard Zinn, historian, author and lifelong activist, spent his life writing about and remembering the lives of ordinary people. After his death this past Wednesday we begin to go about remembering him.

A native Brooklynite, Zinn attended New York City public schools and worked in shipyards until he joined the Army Air Force during World War II. He entered college on the GI Bill as a 27-year-old freshman and went on to receive his Ph.D. from Columbia University.

Often denounced as a radical, though he himself happily embraced the term, Zinn was the first to acknowledge that his biography informed much of his work. Zinn wrote histories from the point of view of ordinary people--the fugitive slaves, labor radicals--those so often spoken about, spoken for or ignored altogether. In so doing he gave us a new kind of history, one we often now take for granted. For Zinn, history was a cacophonous symphony of voices, too often drowned out by the dominant narratives of the rich and powerful.

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An activist-academic, Zinn didn't quite sit comfortably in either realm. In 1956 he joined the history department at Spelman College, a historically all-black women's college in Atlanta but was eventually dismissed for encouraging Spelman's young women to picket and engage in other "unladylike" activities. Later, as a professor at Boston University, Zinn got into many public spats with John Silber, then-president of the school, for becoming too involved in protests.

Zinn came by his antiwar ideas the hard way. As a bombardier in the U.S. Army he participated in one of the first uses of napalm when it was dropped over a French town called Royan. He later went back and interviewed survivors from that incident, many of them French civilians. For the next 60 years Zinn spoke out against wars all over the world. As head of the history department at Spelman College, he participated in freedom rides and aligned himself with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He later titled his autobiography *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*.

As a historian he has been accused of throwing the baby out with the bathwater in rejecting all prevailing historical narratives. In a later work, entitled *The Politics of History*, Zinn decried the historian's role as a neutral documentarian of human events.

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Zinn's methods were lambasted by some historians who accused him of sacrificing historical detail and nuance to an ideology that painted all elites as villains and privileged the voices of the oppressed. Nevertheless, in the face of vociferous criticism, Zinn entered the canon of American historical teaching and is one of the most widely read historians of his time.

Zinn was not political and rarely practical. But his voice and ideas expanded the realm of what was considered possible and stretched the definition of words like pragmatic and politically feasible.

Zinn continued to add to his most widely read book, *A People's History of the United States*, first published in 1980, through the beginning of the Bush Administration and would probably have kept on adding. Zinn spoke out against the Iraq war as vehemently he had spoken out for civil rights in the 1960s. He told stories from history to give us strength in the present, to show that there has always been dissent in moments of moral darkness. It is those stories that will come to our aid now that he is no longer here and will give us the courage to speak out.

For all the dismissive charges of radicalism, Zinn never turned away from the project of perfecting the American experiment. A beloved teacher and storyteller, he taught a very American kind of history in the classroom and through the pages of his books. In a country of misfits and minorities who came to the U.S. seeking a little corner of religious or political freedom, as well as those displaced by the settlers, here was a man who finally gave them voice.

In the first pages of *A People's History* Zinn tells us, "I am supposing, or perhaps, hoping that our future may be found in the past's fugitive moments of compassion rather than in its solid centuries of warfare." Humble, joyous and often very funny, Zinn took hope and inspiration from his students and friends all his life.

Howard Zinn meant a great deal to many people. His many illustrious friends, among them Alice Walker, Marian Wright Edelman and Noam Chomsky, have all been called upon to discuss the loss of their colleague, mentor and friend. But I suspect that in classrooms and homes all across America, his passing is being mourned and marked by what can only be called *A People's History of Howard Zinn*.

Laura Dean is a freelance writer based in Washington, D.C.

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