Dispatch from the Howard Zinn Book Fair

By Carl Mirra
San Francisco City College, Mission Campus, December 4, 2016
Report on the panel: "The making of a historian: Howard Zinn and the experience of war"

Some 1,800 people attended the heartening and stimulating Howard Zinn Book Fair. The following dispatch is a very small slice of a day that brought together radical publishers, teachers, scholars, and activists young and old. One of the event organizers, James Tracy, stopped by to say a word before the panel started. He explained that the reason the event is called the Howard Zinn Book Fair is because Zinn represented the quest for a unified left. One purpose of the day, Tracy earnestly noted, was to encourage unification of "all of us who have love in our hearts but don't always act on it toward each other." Whether it was organizing shipfitters on the shop floor at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in the early 1940s; or desegregating libraries with Spelman College students in the early 1960s; or his trips to Hanoi to release prisoners of war in the 1960s, Zinn was always on call and on the front lines, as Chomsky put it, a unifying force for so many of us on the left.

The panel opened with Ambre Ivol's presentation about Zinn's "deeply scarring" experience as a bombardier in World War II. Ivol worked directly with Zinn from 2003 to 2009, and is now an associate professor of American Civilization at the University of Nantes, France. She explained Zinn's role in an April 1945 aerial assault that unleashed napalm on the French coastal town of Royan. Several years ago, Ivol invited Zinn to speak on the subject in France. Following his remarks, an elderly gentleman handed Zinn a bottle of wine and letter that expressed his gratitude for Howard's essay on Royan that was published in *The Politics of History*. It turns out that this man offering the wine also had recollections of Royan. Zinn's recollection was from the sky; this man remembered being on the ground, and seeing the destruction first-hand. Despite the different vantage points, the two agreed that the bombing was unnecessary and "insane." It occurred three weeks before the end of the war when, to paraphrase Zinn, everyone knew the war in Europe would soon end.

Ivol contrasted Zinn with the wine-offering Royan resident to illustrate that Zinn did not fully realize the devastation he contributed to at the time of the bombing. Zinn came "very slowly" to the realization that he mindlessly participated in setting a town on fire and killing civilians. For Zinn, Ivol explained, the war had remained abstract for a long period of time.

However, the horrors of the Vietnam War, particularly the U.S.'s use of napalm, had deeply disturbed Zinn. It led him back to Royan, according to Ivol. The antiwar movement was very much focused on the inhumanity of dropping Napalm, such as the Dow Chemical protests across the country. The sheer inhumanity of the Vietnam War triggered Zinn to investigate his own dropping Napalm on citizens.

Two trips abroad in the 1960s also helped Zinn to comprehend the effect of bombings from the "the other side," from those on the ground who could not escape the onslaught. The first was to Japan, where he delivered a lecture in Hiroshima. Zinn, of course, was an experienced, seasoned public speaker; but when faced with Hiroshima survivors, he was unable to finish a planned speech. He choked up and could not speak as he described it. The second trip was to Hanoi in 1968 with Father Berrigan in which the two radicals aided in the release of three American prisoners of war. While on the ground in Hanoi, Zinn was now on the receiving end of U.S. bombs. The last time he felt that type of fear, Zinn wrote in his autobiography, was when he was a WWII bombardier.

It makes sense that during this period of introspection that Zinn traveled to Royan in April 1966 to investigate his bombardment of that town twenty-one years earlier. This trip uncovered that Royan was bombed twice; there was also a shelling in January 1945. While Zinn was not part of the January attack, he did unsuccessfully attempt to track down a fellow Columbia University grad, John Deignan, a bombardier who participated in that bombing operation. Deignan too expressed regret about the air strikes. He organized an effort to help with the postwar rebuilding of Royan. While there is no evidence that Deignan adopted pacifist views like Zinn, the Royan incident suggests that soldiers involved in bombings can offer a special vantage point for studying war.

To support her contention that Zinn did not easily come to terms with his part in the bombings Ivol pointed to the unusual placement of his Royan essay in *The Politics of History* (1970). It is "buried" in the text, and appears as the second part on an essay on the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. One controversy about the piece was that Zinn described Royan as the first use of Napalm in European theater. Robert Neer's *Napalm: An American Biography*, Ivol clarified, shows that the reality is even worse: it was used in Sicily in August 1943, and at Normandy in August 1994 among other places. Ivol noted that nonetheless Zinn's work helped to open the possibility of exploring the use of Napalm in World War II.

The core message of Zinn's essay on Royan is that soldiers who are in the position to cause the most destruction are not in charge of making decisions. They only execute orders. The hierarchical and bureaucratic nature of the military contributes to atrocities. Therefore Zinn urged soldiers, and all of us, to engage in civil disobedience, or as Zinn ended the Royan piece, it is crucial to act "against the abstractions of duty and obedience."

Indeed, the WWII bombardier would later describe himself as a "veteran against war." During the tumultuous times of the Vietnam War, he threw himself into the protest movement, from street demonstrations to aiding draft resisters. But Luke Stewart's presentation stressed that Zinn's writings were also a form of activism. Stewart, who co-edited, *Let Them Stay: U.S. War Resisters in Canada, 2004*-2016, focused on Zinn's *Vietnam: The Logic of Withdrawal*, published March 1967. Stewart observed that "we are at a book fair, so I don't have to tell you

about the importance of books." Zinn's far-reaching impact and extensive involvement in the antiwar movements can overshadow the impact of a single book. Stewart, however, insisted that *Logic* was an important "activist tool."

Logic sold more than 50,000 copies. Zinn's perspective in *Logic* was informed by a variety of experiences, including his Civil Rights work and trip to Japan. But Stewart emphasized that Zinn wrote "from a point of view" that "had been shaped by his World War II experiences." The book debunked American exceptionalism, the Cold War domino theory, the claim that the U.S. was protecting South Vietnam from Northern aggression as well as justifications that the U.S. should remain in Vietnam to maintain its credibility. It was the first significant publication that called for the immediate withdrawal of the U.S. from Vietnam.

Of special importance to the panel's theme of Zinn as a veteran turned antiwar activist was the U.S. massive bombing of Vietnam. Stewart rattled off what were some staggering statistics. The

U.S. military dropped more bombs on Vietnam than during World War II. In the "Great War," 1.5 million tons were dropped in the European theater, and 500,000 tons in the Pacific. In Vietnam, the U.S. unleashed 8 billion tons of bombs for the entire war. As one General put it, "a stupefying number of bombs" were dropped. Or as Zinn felt, Vietnam reaches the lowest point of American morality.

Stewart then highlighted Zinn's influence on GI resistance. He placed *Logic* in the historical context of the burgeoning soldier revolt. In June 1966, the Fort Hood Three were the first active duty GIs to publicly refuse to go to Vietnam; In May 1967 Dr. Howard Levy refused to teach Green Berets medical skills as they would advance the war effort. In February 1966, immediately before Zinn's book appeared, Donald Duncan, a former U.S. Special Forces officer, published a scathing essay, "The Whole Thing Was a Lie!" in *Ramparts* magazine.

Stewart selected the case of Captain David Noyd as one example among many of Zinn specific impact on dissenting soldiers. Noyd, an Air Force pilot who was sentenced to one year in prison for his refusal to teach pilots, reached out to Zinn. "You have written a beautiful book on the war," the eleven-year Air Force pilot wrote, and "I find it so inspiring because I share your perspective." Another reason to view Zinn's book as a movement tool was that it was used in several protest actions while raising awareness about the necessity of withdrawal. Consider that more than 300 copies were sent to the White House between May and September 1967.

People on the left and public opinion would eventually arrive at Zinn's position on withdrawal. In short, "books are important and can inspire people in miraculous ways," Stewart insisted.

Carl Mirra, a professor of Social Studies Education at Adelphi University, spoke next on "Zinn as a Model for Hope and Resistance," placing Howard within this GI/veteran dissenting tradition. Mirra, a former marine resister who is completing a biography of Zinn with his mentor

Staughton Lynd, noted that there is a renewed sense of urgency on the left with Trump's Electoral College victory. It is difficult to discuss Zinn, Mirra asserted, without addressing the current crisis.

Steven Bannon, who proudly stated he was a "platform" for [neo-Nazis], will sit in the White House. Eva Schloss, Anne Frank's step sister, believes Trump is "acting like another Hitler." Robert Paxton, perhaps the leading scholar of fascism studies, cautions against calling Trump a fascist, yet warns that he shows an "alarming willingness to use fascist themes and fascist styles."[1]

And in the summer 2016 when a Trump victory seemed doomed, it was Rush Limbaugh's assessment of the situation that reminds me how important Zinn is as a model of hope and resistance:

If you dig deep and find out how young people have been educated in this country, essentially [there's a] textbook written by a guy named Howard Zinn... 2-1/2 generations alive today having been raised having been taught what a rotten place this country is... This is what young people have been taught for two generations in grade school, junior high. Howard Zinn. Z-I-N-N. Look it up.[2]

Indeed, we can look to Zinn as a model for hope and resistance. For one thing, Zinn reminds us that radical socialism is not a fringe idea. Sanders ascendancy was another reminder, but the very popularity of *A People's History*, a book that challenged the grand narrative of capitalism, is another reminder that ordinary people do not simply embrace capitalism and are open to alternatives.

Zinn in fact wrote *A People's History* to inspire action. He also reminded readers of the history of activism among veterans and soldiers. Zinn, alongside General Smedley D. Butler, is arguably America's most powerful exemplar of military dissenters. I am "lucky to be alive," Zinn wrote, "because two of my closet Air Force" buddies perished in the war. "Deep in my psyche," Zinn revealed, "I owe them something." He was given the "gift of life" and vowed to use it for creating "that new world that was promised" with the end of World War II.[3]

Mirra believes that Zinn's GI/veteran resistance is expressive of what former Air Force psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton calls "survivor's wisdom." Lifton, who devoted much of his life to working with war veterans, explains that Zinn's "personal witness" was "unforgettable...I could never again be insensitive to the effects of aerial bombing on civilians."[4] Related to this is how Zinn embodies Lifton's concept of animating guilt among certain veterans. In brief, it is a soldier's acceptance of responsibility for committing or supporting acts of violence whereby social action alleviates the shame one may experience for participating in such acts.

Mirra cataloged numerous examples of Zinn analyzing U.S. assaults through the prism of shame and guilt. One example concerns his trip to Vietnam in 1968 where he found that he was now on the receiving end of U.S. bombs. The change in altitude, he was no longer encountering war from 30,000 feet, was "a new experience" that gave him "a taut feeling in my belly that I remembered from my World War II missions—fear." He thought: "I guess I *deserve* this."[5] Zinn candidly draws attention to guilt—he was feeling at fault, blameworthy, for having also dropped bombs. And while he believed that he deserved the anxiety of being subjected to an air assault, it was his more nourishing sense of guilt that allowed him to take action against those bombings. To be sure, Zinn's self-reflections are expressive of Lifton's scholarly studies regarding combat soldiers who transform their feelings of guilt into positive political engagement.

Critics may be tempted to dismiss all this, Mirra acknowledged, as arm chair psychology as more space is need to fully capture and document the role of animating guilt in Zinn's veteran activism. While imperfect and hardly the final answer on dealing with veteran and soldier's psychology, Lifton's theory intersects with the more recent "moral injury."

Audience questions dealt with why Zinn's life and work were useful for activism today and what can be done. As for what to do today, Zinn once spoke of finding where you stand on the assembly line of death. While few of us have rifles to jam like the GI resisters, we need to figure out how to use our skills or "our dependability, to break the chain of inequality and death." Demonstrations and big protests are important, but the system allows these "coffee breaks," Zinn quipped. What might be more sustaining are the ongoing actions with established local groups who actively resist illegitimate power. The various local and national "tactics, enhanced, multiplied," Zinn hoped, "could overcome the...system in the future."

NOTES

[1] Robert Paxton, "Is Fascism Back?," Project Syndicate, 7 January 2016. "He seems to have borrowed a number of fascist themes for his presidential campaign: xenophobia, racial prejudice, fear of national weakness and decline, aggressiveness in foreign policy, a readiness to suspend the rule of law to deal with supposed emergencies. His hectoring tone, mastery of crowds, and the skill with which he uses the latest communications technologies also are reminiscent of Mussolini and Hitler."

[2] Conor Friedersdorf, "How Rush Limbaugh Explains Donald Trump's Unpopularity," *The Atlantic,* 20 June 2016. Mirra wishes to thank Robby Cohen for alerting him to Limbaugh's statement.

[3] Howard Zinn, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*, pp. 11-12.

[4] Robert Jay Lifton, *Witness to an Extreme Century: A Memoir* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), p. 354.

[5] Zinn, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*, p. 131, emphasis on deserve is mine.