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Howard Zinn, Philosopher

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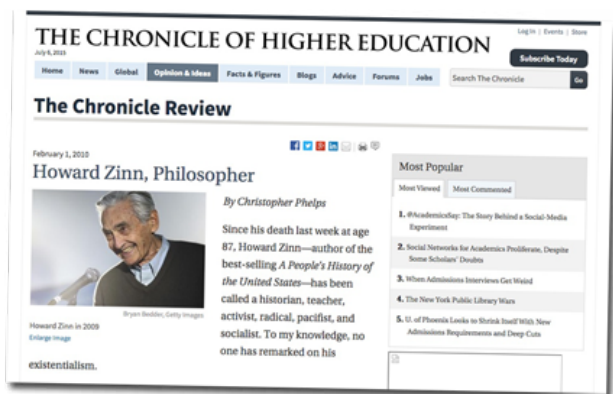
Since his death last week at age 87, Howard Zinn—author of the best-selling *A People's History of the United States*—has been called a historian, teacher, activist, radical, pacifist, and socialist. To my knowledge, no one has remarked on his existentialism.

Perhaps that is because experience, not ideas, seemed to explain the evolution of Zinn's thought. Although he called Charles Dickens, Langston Hughes, and Upton Sinclair early influences, Zinn played down his bookishness, preferring to tell the story of his consciousness in more concrete ways: growing up poor in New York City, the blow to his head from a policeman at a Popular Front demonstration in Times Square during the 1930s, three years spent at a Brooklyn shipyard, his World War II bombardier service and subsequent disillusionment with war, and his civil-rights activity while at the historically black Spelman College from 1956 to 1963 (which ended in his preemptory dismissal).

"Existentialism" might seem an overly fancy term, given Zinn's unpretentious style. Anyone among those who packed the house to hear him speak on college campuses in recent decades was likely to be charmed by his self-deprecating sense of humor, which owed something to the *Yiddishkeit* of his parents' world. Plainspoken, wry, Zinn would impishly undermine his own status as "expert" while cleverly poking holes in official illogic. (Daniel Ellsberg reports that in 1971, after civil disobedience against the Vietnam War, Zinn quipped: "Thousands of us were arrested for disturbing the peace. But there is no peace. We were really arrested because we were disturbing the war.")

No one ever thought of Zinn as a philosopher. Many critics complained over the years that he was not really a historian, but the usual alternative category was polemicist. As early as 1964, the newspaperman Claude Sitton wrote that Zinn's elegant refutation of the white South's claim that it was impervious to change, *The Southern Mystique* (1964), showed him to have "all the impartiality of a political pamphleteer on election eve." Zinn was the sole white person—and one of two adults, the other being the activist Ella Baker—invited to join the executive committee of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. *Vietnam: The Logic of Withdrawal* (1967) was an early argument for ending intervention in Vietnam. Along with Jesse Lemisch and Staughton Lynd, Zinn typified the combination of New Left radicalism and "history from below," giving voice to those previously ignored.

That approach to the historical craft and calling was, at root, existentialist. Zinn said so himself in an essay on the "Historian as Citizen," in 1966. The source of the greatest leaps forward were those who acted "as if," he wrote. "The four Negro youngsters in Greensboro who in 1960 walked into Woolworth's acted as if they would be served; Garrison and Phillips, against all apparent common sense, acted as if they would arouse a cold nation against slavery; England in 1940 acted as if it could repel a German invasion; Castro and his tiny group in the hills behaved as if they could take over Cuba." To act as if change is possible in the face of decidedly unfavorable odds was to engage in what Zinn called "the Existentialist call for Freedom, for Action, for the exercise of Responsibility by man."



As if: That was why Zinn held that scholars must set aside scholasticism, antiquarianism, and the shallow pretense of neutrality. ("We publish while others perish," he once wrote.)

As if: That was the foundation for Zinn's view that history is often made by forces outside the corridors of power: American Indians, rebellious slaves, fiery abolitionists, hell-raising suffragists, immigrant strikers, civil-liberties agitators, and war resisters—who acted as if they could alter the world, and often did.

It is not hard to see why *A People's History* has been so popular. It combines passion with simplicity. It is roguishly irreverent toward national legends, causing one hero after another—Columbus, the Founding Fathers, Abraham Lincoln—to fall to earth when measured by our avowed national ideals of liberty, equality, and democracy. Zinn's book is admired by people who don't typically like history, and it has resonated in popular culture. "That book will knock you on your ass," Matt Damon's character in *Good Will Hunting* (1997) tells his therapist, played by Robin Williams.

Liberal and radical critics of Zinn's historical writing have their own "as ifs": as if a middlebrow popularization like *A People's History* could capture the complexity of the American past; as if a narrative that ignores central aspects of society, like Christianity and conservatism, could really explain the country; as if a "Manichean fable" (Michael Kazin) of heroes and villains serves readers well; as if history from the bottom up were not "as limited in its own way as history from the top down" (Eric Foner, who also called *A People's History* a step toward a coherent new version of history); as if "a historical account emphasizing how radicals, reformers, and workers have fought heroically to wring concessions from politicians and bosses" will suffice if it ignores the system's enduring power, especially "ideology as a mechanism of class rule" (Aileen S. Kraditor).

Professional historians have often viewed Zinn's work with exasperation or condescension, and Zinn was no innocent in the dynamic. I stood against the wall for a Zinn talk at the University of Oregon around the time of the 1992 Columbus Quincentenary. Listening to Zinn, one would have thought historians still considered Samuel Eliot Morison's 1955 book on Columbus to be definitive. The crowd lapped it up, but Zinn knew better. He missed a chance to explain how the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s have transformed the writing and teaching of history, how his *People's History* did not spring out of thin air but was an effort to synthesize a widely shared shift in historical sensibilities. Zinn's historical theorizing, conflating objectivity with neutrality and position with bias, was no better.

The critics would be churlish, however, not to acknowledge the moving example Zinn set in the civil-rights and Vietnam moments, and they would be remiss not to note the value of *A People's History*, along with its limitations. Zinn told tales well, stories that, while familiar to historians, often remained unknown to wider publics. He challenged national pieties and encouraged critical reflection about received wisdom. He understood that America's various radicalisms, far from being "un-American," have propelled the nation toward more humane and democratic arrangements. And he sold two-million copies of a work of history in a culture that is increasingly unwilling to read and, consequently, unable to imagine its past very well.

Ordinary people can make history, Howard Zinn held. He urged others to use the past to find inspiration to dispel resignation, deference, and demoralization. The past means nothing, he averred, if severed from present and future.

We all owe a debt to Howard Zinn. We can repay it by acting as if.

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- See more at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20150706104721/http://chronicle.com/article/Howard-Zinn-Philosopher/63833/#sthash.rMxCsQYq.dpuf>