



Howard Zinn: A Life on the Left

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Howard Zinn was perhaps the best-known and most widely celebrated popular interpreter of American history in the twentieth century, renowned as a bestselling author, a political activist, a lecturer, and one of America's most recognizable and admired progressive voices.

His rich, complicated, and fascinating life placed Zinn at the heart of the signal events of modern American history—from the battlefields of World War II to the McCarthy era, the civil rights and the antiwar movements, and beyond. A bombardier who later renounced war, a son of working-class parents who earned a doctorate at Columbia, a white professor who taught at the historically black Spelman College in Atlanta, a committed scholar who will be forever remembered as a devoted “people’s historian”—Howard Zinn blazed a bold, iconoclastic path through the turbulent second half of the twentieth century.

For the millions who were moved by Zinn’s personal example of political engagement and by his inspiring “bottom up” history, here is an authoritative biography of this towering figure—by Martin Duberman, recipient of the American Historical Association’s 2007 Lifetime Achievement Award. Given exclusive access to the previously closed Zinn archives, Duberman’s impeccably researched biography is illustrated with never-before-published photos from the Zinn family collection. *Howard Zinn: A Life on the Left* is a major publishing event that brings to life one of the most inspiring figures of our time.

Howard Zinn: A Life on the Left Details

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From Reader Review Howard Zinn: A Life on the Left for online ebook

Caesar Warrington says

Howard Zinn: A Life on the Left reads more like an hagiography than an actual biography. There was much to admire about Howard Zinn and his work, but Duberman's adulatory writing is overbearing.

Russell Bittner says

I plucked this book immediately off the shelf at my local branch of the Brooklyn Public Library when I saw the name 'Howard Zinn' on the cover. I'm glad I did. The name of Howard Zinn is one known exceedingly well—and respected every bit as much—by anyone who's been fortunate enough to read his *magnum opus*, *A People's History of the United States*.

It may have been a happy coincidence that the work I'd just previously read and reviewed was Franz Kafka's *The Castle*. This, because Martin Duberman's meticulous description of Howard Zinn's experience with certain administrative authorities during his tenure at Spelman College, in Atlanta, and again at Boston University, is quite possibly the best real-life illustration of what Kafka fictitiously portrayed in his novel.

Is there one thing my reading of *Howard Zinn: a Life on the Left* has further reinforced in my understanding of human nature? Yes: that the question of "nature versus nurture" will probably never be resolved. Howard Zinn's quest and zest for life were a function of both. He was born into poverty—and consequently dedicated his life to the downtrodden. At the same time, he had the genes to rise mountains above most of his contemporaries—and to become a beacon to us all, even decades after his death.

This world would be a much better place if people like Howard Zinn—and, more recently, Albert Gore and Bernie Sanders—were allowed to give it direction. Instead, we settle for mediocrity ... perhaps because mediocrity is what we know and feel most comfortable with.

Martin Duberman talks at length about *A People's History of the United States* —as well he should! But if there's one paragraph in the book that perhaps best summarizes his respect for the work, it may well be this one on p. 235: "(d)espite its mix of strengths and shortcomings, overall *A People's History* has marked and encouraged a profound shift away from the tone of triumphalism that before 1980 was the defining feature of most full-scale works on U. S. history. By gathering up much of the inaccessible scholarship produced by the new generation of radical historians in the 1960s and 1970s, Howard produced an alternative version of our past that proved an impressive counterweight to the downpour of patriotic misinformation that had dominated people's understanding—and still afflicts it through the media."

And what does Duberman have to say about Howard Zinn, the man? Perhaps these two excerpts from his *Coda*, beginning on p. 315, will serve to illustrate his characterization of Zinn: "Howard had been a person

of considerable modesty, neither devious nor manipulative, an “innocent” in the sense of always thinking the best of people. He had scant drive for personal power and few if any self-serving motives behind the political stances he took. Never self-centered, he could be, which is quite different, self-absorbed—so involved, say, in a given public issue or event that he tuned out those around him, especially their needs. But he was basically kind and generous, in person deeply engaging, more interested in persuasion than in confrontation—though with the Silbers (N. B.: John Silber, President of Boston University) of the world quite capable of determined resistance. When an interviewer asked Daniel Ellsberg who his own heroes were, he had no hesitation in answering, “First, Howard Zinn.” Noam Chomsky sounded a similar note: “He was devoted, selflessly, to the empowerment” of those who had little. As a teacher, Howard was all but unanimously beloved and revered by his students—even, as a person, by some of the conservative detractors who would unexpectedly appear in his classes. He cared about them, and they knew it.”

And for the second excerpt (on p. 318), we have this in the final two sentences of the book: “(w)hat will most certainly come down to future generations is Howard’s humanity, his exemplary concern for the plight of others, a concern free of condescension or self-importance. Howard always stayed in character—and that character remained centered on a capacious solidarity with the least fortunate.”

If, as I did, you have a deep appreciation of Howard Zinn’s work on *A People’s History of the United States*, perhaps Martin Duberman’s *Howard Zinn: A Life on the Left* belongs on that same high shelf as a companion text.

RRB

09/07/2016

Brooklyn, NY

Ralph says

Since Zinn had all his private papers destroyed, the book seems thin on substance, but it's worth a read to learn more about one of our best historians and a leading figure in the radical movement of the Sixties and beyond.

Barbara says

I am giving this book 5 stars although I am not sure I will reread it (my usual criteria). However, it was a thoroughly engaging read by a gifted historian. Duberman was somewhat limited in writing this biography as Zinn was careful to conceal personal details of his life and even destroyed records of such. Zinn's deep love for humanity shines through the pages. The book is being heavy on the details of the events of the day at each stage of Zinn's life, but this was a plus. Duberman captures the essence of very complex times - the struggles within the Civil Rights movement between SNCC and the old vanguard, the invasion of Iraq, the ruthlessness of John Silber, the reactionary (and corrupt) president of Boston University, etc. He details Zinn's writings, and Zinn's process in detail, such as how *The People's History* came to be written and

became an international phenomenon. Duberman does not hedge his critiques of Zinn's writing, and the inconsistencies in Zinn's thought. I felt he was very even handed and responsible in this respect. The sections of the book on the Civil Rights movement were perhaps the most moving. Duberman distills the complexity of the long US involvement in Vietnam and Southeast Asia in a way that made so many pieces of the puzzle of that time fall into place for me. He made me proud that I have consistently refused to donate 1 cent to Boston University where I earned a Masters and Doctorate, because of my opposition to Silber. Now, thanks to this book, I have further facts of the financial shenanigans Silber got up to while there, and justify never donating after seeing how much the university squandered on Silber, and how little they paid faculty and staff for many years. I never got a cent of scholarship money from them, even in their program for supervising teachers of their students. I will continue to give to my undergraduate institution Carnegie Mellon which was generous to me and provided me - an above average but not brilliant student - with a stellar education. This book is more than a biography. It is the portrayal of the era that Howard Zinn exemplified. He was a staunch leftist, but never a follower of any specific party or group. He was consistent to the end of his life in his beliefs. Duberman points out that Zinn often did not have answers or solutions. He was also shortsighted in his failure to see beyond the politics of Black and White, and labor. Zinn only briefly mentioned the Gay movement in later revisions of A People's History, and failed to recognize the various feminist movements, except in passing. He never seemed to get beyond Black and White racial issues, never broadening to Latino, Native American, Asian American and more. Zinn was imperfect, but Duberman shows us that he was one heck of a human being.

Kristi says

For such a public figure, Zinn went to great lengths to protect his private life including destroying personal correspondence and documents. The author delves sensitively into family history and offers a rich, detailed presentation of Zinn's involvement in the civil rights movement, the impact he's had on contemporary activism, and his long career as a scholar and academic.

Joan says

I had read Zinn's book, A People's History, so I wanted to find out a bit more about him. I do appreciate this book, there is lots of information in it. However, I did not like the author editorializing, commenting on the issues. This is more than a biography. It is also the author's opinions on the issues involved. In my mind, that has no place in a true biography, hence, only three stars.

Karrie says

Nice overview of Howard's Life.

Louise says

I have not read "The People's History" nor followed Howard Zinn's career, but have been curious about him. Biographer Martin Duberman covers Zinn's political activity, his writing and his professorial career. He is

gives perspective on his writings, their impact and their limitations.

As a WWII pilot Zinn dropped bombs that killed civilians and did nothing for the anti-fascist cause. Later as a civil rights activist he saw people murdered by the federal government's inaction when it should have been enforcing their constitutionally guaranteed rights. He noted the 1961 prosecution of victims of police abuse in voter registration drives while US soldiers were dying for "democracy" in Vietnam. These events occurred under presidents who were more liberal than their electoral opponents. These experiences left an impression on him as a relatively young man and informed his views of the relationship of the government and to its people.

Duberman shows how in both Zinn's teaching positions (Spelman College and Boston University) he is a bad fit with the respective administrations. Zinn's activism in Atlanta and elsewhere in the south is widely known, but he also took stands on many not many campus issues. Spelman's President Albert Manley was acculturated to walking the fine line and the policies he upheld were those designed to prepare students for more of the same. He was not interested in making changes. In the clash, Zinn lost his job. At Boston University its famous authoritarian President John Silber and its most famous radical professor sparred over free speech and labor issues. John Silber's heavy handed and self-dealing record is best shown on pp. 264-265 where Zinn's New York Times article rebuts Silber's attacks on Zinn. Notably Silber's attacks continue after Zinn's retirement.

The strength of this biography, besides the assembly of a timeline of Zinn's life, is the informed interpretation of his works. Duberman shows the impact of the "People's History" as changing the way we look at history. He also shows its weakness as the slight attention he gave to women and gays which is a major hole in works about "the people".

The book needs more on Zinn's personal life. While Zinn burned his personal records, there are living sources. For instance, the notes refer to interviews with his brothers, but there is nothing of their adult life or how they felt about the issues supported by their famous brother. Did Zinn go to Spelman to be involved in the civil rights movement or did activism stem from his experiences there? Why such extensive correspondence with Frances Fox Piven? Was she the woman Zinn spoke to his daughter about?

The narrative is reader friendly. This book recommended for those interested in Howard Zinn.

Jennifer Talarico says

More a history book than a personal account of Howard Zinn's life.

Michael says

This book was a well-written historical survey of Howard Zinn's life. Because Zinn was very guarded about his personal life, even going as far as destroying documents relating to personal issues before his death, the book is drier and somewhat duller than your average biography. But it seems Duberman does the best he can with limited material, and his perspective is not overly fawning, as he points out some holes in Zinn's philosophy and concerns. So I thought it was an interesting read primarily because I was interested in Zinn's activism, and the lack of anything dramatic or juicy didn't bother me.

Carl says

Truly wonderful book about the historian Howard Zinn. Duberman writes with flair and accuracy in describing a man with faults who has so much hope for us. Zinn works his whole life for the people, in his writings, his protests, his thoughts, his actions, and in the end his best is beyond what many could ever hoped for. I've been reading Howard Zinn for years and still learned some new things about him in this biography, and that is all one could hope for in a book. Read this book if you're a Zinn fan, or just curious, and you won't be disappointed.

Rebecca says

Some favorites:

p7 "Thomas Jefferson High School wasn't much of an experience for me educationally."

p9 After participating in a nonviolent protest in 1939 regarding the gap between poverty and wealth in the US: "I was no longer a liberal, a believer in the self-correcting character of American democracy. I was a radical, believing that something fundamental was wrong in this country . . . something rotten at the root."

p22 It dawned on him that perhaps professional historical writing wasn't as "objective" as he'd been led to believe.

p39-40 At Spelman, 1961, Howard and Roz enter Rich's Department Store, buy coffee and sandwiches, sit at a table, are joined by two black students. . . . By fall 1961, Rich's ended its policy of segregation.

p39 Marian Wright (Edelman) was photographed sitting calmly in a cell reading C.S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*.

p39 Jane Stembridge mentioned.

p56 Bernice Johnson (Reagon) in a leadership role as a student at Spelman.

p105 description of Freedom Summer 1964 and Freedom School radical pedagogy - via Paolo Freire, Myles Horton of the Highlander school in Tennessee.

p140 Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas booklet: *Concerning Dissent and Civil Disobedience*; Howard Zinn's response: *Disobedience and Democracy*.

p148 Mixing in humor to lighten his moral intensity: "President McKinley waited for the word of God to enter the Philippines, now we are waiting for the word of God to get out. This can be very worrisome what with the present talk about God being dead."

p160 Let the economists work out a plan for free food, instead of advising the Federal Reserve Board on interest rates.

p164 "Our silence in the face of war, racism, and other social evils is not freedom for us; it is freedom for the political leaders of the country to have their way and count on our inaction. Silence is political."

165-170 re writing history

p173 If we want peace, we will have to struggle for it. IF we want justice, we will have to demand it. If we want democracy, we will have to build it.

p176 In 1969, upon learning of Daniel Ellsberg's defection to the anti-war ranks: "The gross evil of our time is not the direct product of a few bad men; it comes off a very long, very complex assembly line, in which all of us are given little jobs to do."

p204 Howard advised that we shed some traditional mythology: namely, that those in power deserve to be there.

p244 CISPES involvement

p280 Not to believe in the possibility of dramatic change is to forget that things have changed, not enough, of course, but . . .

p297-298 opposition to war on Iraq 2002

p309 The People Speak documentary 2008 (DVD 2010)

Steph says

Howard Zinn is much better portrayed, in my opinion, by Howard Zinn himself. That being said, this book is very honest in its approach and evidence towards the man it details. It has a good mix of historical context and Howard's reaction to these events. It relies on a large foundation of research and materials. And even though Howard worked hard to keep his family life private, the book does what it can to expound on the life he lived outside of political involvement. All around a great read with some notable and poignant lines.

Charles Stephen says

Duberman, iconic gay historian, writes a biography of Howard Zinn, iconic radical historian and educator. This book should be five stars, but "it is what it is," as they say. Personally, I was fascinated by Zinn's early career in Atlanta at Spelman College in the 1960s. Zinn's activism in Georgia made an interesting comparison to Albert Foley's at Spring Hill College in Mobile, where Foley was arguably the most visible white proponent of desegregation and chair of the Alabama Advisory Committee to the United States Civil Rights Commission. Whereas, Zinn was perceived as radical his entire life, Foley was a moderate who became more conservative as he aged. Zinn always managed to shake things up--in a good way.

I've never read any of Zinn's books, but I think Duberman was trying to match his narrative style to Zinn's famous People's History of the United States. I was disappointed and found the book difficult to finish. I've read several of Duberman's other books that I didn't have to slog through.
