

The Reading Group, Singapore
Memoriam Lecture

Howard Zinn (1922-2010)

Scholar-Activist in Dissenting, Advocating and Teaching

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“Intellectuals are in position to expose the lies of governments, to analyse actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions. In the Western world, at least, they have the power that comes from political liberty, from access to information and freedom of expression. For a privileged minority, Western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities, and the training to seek truth lying behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology and class interest, through which the events of current history are presented to us. The responsibilities of intellectuals, then, are much deeper...”

Noam Chomsky

INTRODUCTION

What Chomsky wrote in his seminal essay entitled “The Responsibility of Intellectuals” can also be said to have been undertaken excellently by Howard Zinn, one of the leading American public intellectuals who emerged in the post-war era. Chomsky later adds, “If it is the responsibility of the intellectual to insist upon the truth, it is also his duty to see events in their historical perspective.” Again, this is excellently exemplified in Zinn’s accomplished endeavours as a scholar and activist inasmuch as he is a respected revisionist radical historian.¹

Howard Zinn hailed from a working class background and a humble Jewish family. His early days were spent working in the shipyard and engaging with trade unions. Later on, he became a bombardier in the military air force, and eventually pursued his college education until he obtained his PhD from University of Columbia. His first teaching career started at Spellman College for black women in Atlanta. Eventually, he rose to the position of Professor Emeritus of History at Boston University.

¹ Please read, A.A.M. van der Linden, *A revolt against liberalism: American radical historians, 1959-1976*. (Amsterdam; Atlanta : Dodopi, 1996)

Zinn was a scholar-activist who actively engaged in lecture presentations, radio interviews, essays, and film-making, and had inspired millions across America and all around the world. Notably, he was a radical revisionist historian par excellence, though he had penned a few plays with diligent sociopolitical messages.² Indeed, Zinn's contributions to American revisionist history are well acknowledged by many of his peers and rivals alike. Some would like to see him as the radical New Left historian, while some highly regard him as one of the leading public intellectual alongside Noam Chomsky, Cornel West and few others.

However, to many other sterile academic historians, efforts by Zinn are simply polemicist in nature. They regard the concern on the present as an aberration of the true task of a historian.³ Zinn and his circles definitely depart from such shallow idea. In fact, Lynd Staughton once noted: "historian need not be embarrassed if he concerns himself more with the present and future than with the past."⁴ Certainly, Zinn never feel timid about that.

His critical scholarly output is a challenge against the dominant historians who busied themselves with chronicling of events and men of the past. Foremost, he confronted the scientific historian who cherished the idea of detachment from politics, and therefore the need to be 'objective' and neutral, not so much on stinging theoretical attack but by presenting another approach of doing history. In fact, his well known axiom of the "moving train", points to the problem of neutrality which many confused with objectivity. In regards to objectivity in historical scholarship, he saw it as "neither possible nor desirable", adding that:

"It's not possible because all history is subjective; all history represents a point of view. History is always a selection from an infinite number of facts, and everybody makes the selection differently, based on their values and what they think is important. Since it's not possible to be objective, you should be honest about that."⁵

As history involves presenting one's point of views, interpretations and judgments, the question of who is guilty, must be quickly concurred by the question of what is our

² Howard Zinn, *Three Plays: The Political Theater of Howard Zinn*. (Beacon Press, 2010)

³ Arthur Schlesinger Jr. exemplified a detached objective history, dismissing alternative historical views like Zinn as sentimental and merely polemical. He said "History is not a redeemer, promising to solve all human problems in time; nor is man capable of transcending the limitation of his being. Man generally is entangled in insoluble problems; history is a constant tragedy in which we are all involved, whose keynote is anxiety and frustration, not progress and fulfillment." Cited in Howard Schonberger, "Purposes and Ends in History: Presentism and the New Left," *The History Teacher*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (May, 1974), p. 452

⁴ Staughton Lynd, "Historical Past and Existential Present" in Theodore Roszak (ed.) *The dissenting academy*. (New York , Pantheon Books, 1968), p. 107

⁵ *Howard Zinn on Democratic Education*. (Boulder: Paradigm Publication, 2005), p. 198

responsibility now. ⁶ Zinn is sober when he calls “blame in history be based on the future and not the past”⁷ since what had been done cannot be undone.

Generally, there are three main areas in Zinn’s writings that warrant our attention and interest: (a) affirmation of the people’s history, (b) speaking truth to power, and (c) education for action.

(a) Affirmation of the People’s History

Zinn was exposed to a progressive historiography tradition that emerged in America, which affirms the need to study history in order for us to understand the present realities in all its dimensions and complexities. Progressive historians in American historical studies like Charles Beard, James Harvey Robinson and Carl Becker are some luminary examples who call for linking history to the *present* realities, that is, the need to confront the contemporary problems of our time.⁸ The present or the affirmation of *presentism*, in the words of Becker, means “the imperative command that knowledge shall serve a purpose and learning be applied to the solution of the problems of human life.”⁹

As a historian, Zinn rejects “history as private enterprise.” Instead they should write and discourse first as a citizen, rather than fixated to their academic craft. To his fellow historians, he appealed:

“we ought to welcome the emergence of the historian—if this is really what we are doing – 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 more than a scholar; it makes him a citizen...”¹⁰

Zinn presents various critical and fresh historical reflections which are inspiring inasmuch as they are instructive as our guide to dealing with history. For instance, he wrote:

“...the past tends to infect our thinking about the future, weighing down our disposition to act. Man is wounded by his history, and we then assume he must be transfixed by it. History can work another way, however. If the present seems an irrevocable fact of nature, the past is a most usable as a way of suggesting possibilities we would never otherwise consider; it can both warn and inspire. By probing the past we can counter myths which affect the way we act today. We can see that it is possible for an entire nation to be brainwashed; for an “advanced, educated” people to commit genocide; for a “progressive, democratic” nation to

⁶ *Howard Zinn on History*, p. 207

⁷ *The Zinn Reader*, p. 513

⁸ Please read, Robert Allen Skotheim, *American Intellectual Histories and Historians*. (Princeton University Press, 1966)

⁹ Cited in Howard Schonberger, “Purposes and Ends in History: Presentism and the New Left,” *The History Teacher*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (May, 1974), p. 450

¹⁰ *Howard Zinn On History*, p. 203

maintain slavery; for apparently powerless subordinates to defeat their rulers; for economic planning to be unaccompanied by restrictions on freedom; for oppressed to turn into oppressors; for ‘socialism’ to be tyrannical; for a whole people to be led to war like sheep; for men to make incredible sacrifices on behalf of a cause.”¹¹

In his book *A People’s History of the United States*, he documents, with conscience and courage, the naivety of understanding history as a single, monolithic and official narrative deemed as the “truth” or “fact”. Zinn objected to the so-called “pure and scientific” history:

“My viewpoint, in telling the history of the United States, is different: that we must not accept the memory of states as our own. Nations are not communities and never have been. The history of any country, presented as the history of a family, conceals fierce conflicts of interest (sometimes exploding, most often repressed) between conquerors and conquered, masters and slaves, capitalists and workers, dominators and dominated in race and sex. And in such a world of conflict, a world of victims and executioners, it is the job of thinking people, as Albert Camus suggested, not to be on the side of the executioners. Thus, in that inevitable taking of sides which comes from selection and emphasis in history, I prefer to try to tell the story of the discovery of America from the viewpoint of the Arawaks, of the Constitution from the standpoint of slaves....”¹²

One very important persistent assertion made by Zinn is the fact that by studying and understanding history, it should lead us not just to comprehend the past, but enabling us to envision or predict *what it will be* as well as *what can be*.

“If the present seems an irrevocable fact of nature, the past is most usable as a way of suggesting possibilities we would never otherwise consider; it can both warn and inspire. By probing the past we can counter myths which affect the way we act today.”¹³

More cogently, he said:

“Bounded in our imagination, tyrannized by the past, we do not realize there is a universe of tricks still to be played. The past, in other words, suggests what can be, not what must be.”¹⁴

History is a discovery of the past inasmuch as it unravels also the possibilities of the future: “If history is to be creative, to anticipate a possible future without denying the past, it should, I believe, emphasize new possibilities by disclosing those hidden episodes of the past...”¹⁵ This in turn demands a *critical sense of history* which according to Zinn, is crucial in our determination to be freed from the fetters of inhibitive thought, which in his words: “history has the power to undertake the job of demystification.” Historical consciousness means to be aware of historical conditioning of ideas, events and other social, political and economic phenomenon.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 203-4

¹² Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2003), p. 10

¹³ Howard Zinn, *The Zinn Reader*, p. 510

¹⁴ Ibid., p.511

¹⁵ Howard Zinn, *The Twentieth Century: A People’s History* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1984), p. xi.

“History has a special ability to reveal the ludicrousness of those beliefs which glue us all to the social frame of our fathers. It also can reinforce that frame with great power, and has done so most of the time.”¹⁶

He adds:

“We can recapture those few moments in the past which show the possibility of a better way of life than that which has dominated the earth thus far. To move men to act is not enough to enhance their sense of what is wrong, to show that the men in power are untrustworthy, to reveal that our very way of thinking is limited, distorted, corrupted. One must also show that something else is possible, that changes can take place. Otherwise, people retreat into privacy, cynicism, despair, or even collaboration with the mighty.”¹⁷

In *The Politics of History*, Zinn highlights how selective history education can be. While the power establishment in America obviously wants to cherish the illustrious accomplishment of Theodore Roosevelt and John D. Rockefeller, they are utterly silent when it comes to radicals like Eugene Debs or Upton Sinclair. Even when Americans read Thomas Jefferson, how many knew that this Founding Father had also written prejudicial views on the superiority of one group (whites) over the other (coloured). Or how many Americans can come to terms that the so called “discovery” of America by Columbus, which was also the beginning of the era of genocide of the indigenous Indians of America.

In other words, we should not only see who write our history, but also what have been omitted in history. Zinn wrote: “In rethinking our history, we are not just looking at the past, but at the present, and trying to look at it from the point of view of those who have been left out of the benefits of so-called civilization.”¹⁸ More importantly, history should give us a sense of hope or optimism that a better future is possible to be created, especially when historical documents do record episodes of resistance and resilience.

“But to think that history-writing must aim simply to recapitulate the failures that dominate the past is to make historians collaborators in an endless cycle of defeat. If history is to be creative, 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, I am supposing, or perhaps only hoping, that our future may be found in the past’s fugitive moments of compassion rather than its solid centuries of warfare.”¹⁹

For me, the most important highlight in Zinn’s many illustrious views on history, is the legitimacy and efficacy of the people’s history, of which my earlier paper on “*sejarah rakyat*” drew its inspiration from.²⁰ Zinn’s confidence in the efficacy and relevancy of the

¹⁶ Howard Zinn, *The Politics of History*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *Howard Zinn on History*, p 120

¹⁹ Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States*, pp.10-11

²⁰ Refer, Azhar Ibrahim, “Sejarah Rakyat: Pemberdayaan Melawan Cita Bencana” Paper presented in seminar for *Festival Melayu Ada*, in conjunction with Malay Arts Festival, Malay Heritage Centre, 3 May 2009.

people's history should be an inspiring motivation to nurture critical historical discourse amongst us. As he points out:

“It is good that we are getting more history from below. We have believed too long in our helplessness, and the new history tells us, how, sometimes. Movements of people who don't seem to have much power can shake the rich and the powerful.”²¹

(b) Speaking Truth to Power: Role of the Public Intellectual

As a public intellectual, Zinn is critical of “an obedient, acquiescent, passive citizenry,” which is to him “deadly to democracy”.²² Zinn's moral and intellectual courage is seen in his consistent and persistent condemnation of war and war-mongering that inflicts sufferings to millions of lives without solving anything. He was active in mass protests with Black activists against White racism, against war in Vietnam, and had traveled to North Vietnam with Father Daniel Berrigan to enquire about the Communist North and negotiated for the release of American soldiers.²³ Zinn's book, *The Logic of Withdrawal* was a turning point to galvanise American public opinion against American military incursion into Vietnam.²⁴

At the same time, he was persistent in playing his part for civil rights movement such as for the Black's rights and justice, and took part in many initiatives in solidarity with the Black people against racism and discrimination.²⁵ He was critical against the Gulf War, and later the American incursions into Iraq.²⁶ He was critical of the mainstream historical treatment on the American Indians, showing his moral-ethical stance and courage to speak up against mainstream myths and ideological distortions.²⁷

But one important point that he emphasised is the bottoms up approach, as demonstrated well in his many presentations all across America, rather than addressing his fellow American academic in specialised journals for the benefit of the few. His commitment for and with the people is now something extremely rare in the academic zeal of “publish or

²¹ *The Zinn Reader*, p. 542

²² Howard Zinn, *Declarations of Independence: Cross-Examining American Ideology*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), p. 5

²³ Read Daniel Berrigan, *Night flight to Hanoi: war diary with 11 poems*. (New York: Macmillan, 1968)

²⁴ Howard Zinn, *Vietnam: the logic of withdrawal*. (Boston: Beacon Press: 1967)

²⁵ *Race and ethnic conflict: contending views on prejudice, discrimination, and ethnviolence*. Edited by Fred L. Pincus, Howard J. Ehrlich. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994)

²⁶ Read Howard Zinn, “One Iraqi's Story,” *Iraq under siege: the deadly impact of sanctions and war*. Edited by Anthony Arnone; with essays by Ali Abunimah [et al.]. (Cambridge, Mass. : South End Press, 2000)

²⁷ Howard Zinn, “Columbus, the Indians, and Human Progress,” in Chitra B. Divakarun (ed.) *Multitude: cross-cultural readings for writers*. (New York : McGraw-Hill, 1993)

perish". In fact, in the dominant history academic circles, his name is not well known. Foremost, he sees himself as a teacher than a researcher who is anxious to ensure tenureship and promotion. Zinn would insist of his role as a citizen first than a historian specialised in his profession.

Zinn was also a relentless critic of capitalism and American society. While not a former friend of the Soviet Union, he is among many who consider anti-Communism ("our bizarre preoccupation") worse than the Communist. "In a world where justice is maldistributed, there is no such thing as a 'neutral' or representative recapitulation of the facts." In *Guardian* (Oct. 2) Zinn was critical on the government bailing out of huge corporations, all done ironically despite the rhetorical insistence of free market economy. Instead, Zinn reminded that:

"Let's face a historical truth: we never have had a 'free market,' we have always had government intervention in the economy, and indeed that intervention has been welcomed by the captains of finance and industry. They had no quarrel with 'big government' when it served their needs."

Hence, the collusion of government and corporate sectors serve the interest of the powerful few. This can only be possible, according to Zinn if the scholar-activists are "bound by traditional notion of disinterestedness, objectivity, scientific procedure, rationality ...". Instead he calls for his fellow scholar-activists to:

"use our scholarly time and energy to sharpen the perceptions of the complacent by exposing those facts that any society tends to hide about itself; the facts about wealth and poverty, about tyranny in both communist and capitalist states, about lies told by politicians, the mass media, the church, popular leaders. We need to expose fallacious logic, spurious analogies, deceptive slogans, and those intoxicating symbols that drive people to murder ... We need to dig beneath the abstractions so our fellow citizens can make judgments on the particular realities beneath political rhetoric. We need to expose inconsistencies and double standards. In short, we need to become the critics of the culture, rather than its apologists and perpetrators."²⁸

(c) Education for Action

Being an academic and a relentless activist, Zinn is also being remembered as a dedicated teacher with a good sense of humour. When Zinn spoke about education, he was more interested with what he sees as democratic education and a humanising liberating force, especially in the midst of the contemporary euphoria for a globalised university to serve the big industries and businesses. His clarity on this point is affirmed when he wrote:

"The university should unashamedly declare that its interest is in eliminating war, poverty, race and national hatred, governmental restrictions on individual freedom, and in fostering a spirit of cooperation and concern in the generation growing up. It should not serve the interests of particular nations or parties or religions or political dogmas."²⁹

²⁸ *The Zinn Reader*, pp. 506-7

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 504

The latter is part of his conviction of the political education that every citizen should have, not only to know their rights, but also to make them realise how the interests of big corporations are intertwined with the American ruling establishment. This is well demonstrated in the American foreign policy, its military interventions all over the world and the recent war on terror.³⁰ While liberal and conservative thinkers worried about “excessive democracy,” (as uttered by Samuel Huntington) in university, Zinn tirelessly shows the opposite and that democracy must be at the heart of the university educational ideal and its operation, as it should be the impulse for the entire society.³¹ His reminder, written in 1980 is obviously relevant:

“Whether at universities or at other workplaces, whether in the United States or in other countries, we seem to face the same challenge. The corporations and the military, shaken and frightened by the rebellious movements of recent decades, are trying to reassert their undisputed power. We have responsibility not only to resist, but to build on the heritage of those [resistance] movement, and to move toward the ideal of egalitarianism, community, and self-determination—whether at work, in the family, or in the schools – which have been the historic unfulfilled promise of the word democracy.”³²

His conviction and fervor of education for consciousness and action made him easily associated with Donald Macedo’s circles in the critical pedagogy discourse. This is demonstrated when he echoed: “[E]ducation is not a technological problem, it is more a matter of human relationship and moral concern. Academic excellence, in a context of amorality, does not have much meaning.”³³ To Zinn, historical education is one way we can scrutinise the past and link it to the present. In fact, even after he got his PhD, Zinn pursued a more active research, and one of them is his research in exposing the criminality of Christopher Columbus.

One of the challenges of education that Zinn highlighted is the timidity or evasion to take moral stand since students and teachers are told to be ‘objective’ and that we cannot impose our values of today to those past events. He noted the kind of training in college characterised by indecisiveness which make the students and teachers unwilling to take a stand on a moral issue. As a teacher with moral conscience, Zinn departs from such relativism. Making a stand based on our moral conscience is imperative in education:

“I never simply present both sides and leave it at that. I take stand. If I’m dealing with Columbus, I say, there are these people who say that we shouldn’t judge Columbus by the standards of the twentieth century. But my view is that basic moral standards are not different for the twentieth century or the fifteenth century. I don’t simply lay history out on a platter and say, “I don’t care what you choose, there are both valid.” I let them know, “No, I care what you choose; I don’t think they’re both valid. But you don’t have to agree with

³⁰ Read, *Howard Zinn on Democratic Education*. (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2005)

³¹ His documentation of authoritarianism of the Boston University’s President, John Silber is a case in point.

³² *The Zinn Reader*, p. 553

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 565

me.” I want them to know that if people don’t take stand a stand, the world will remain unchanged, and who wants that?”³⁴

Zinn was very concerned on how history is being taught in high schools where the conventional approach to history is one of the ways of manufacturing mass deception. “Education has always inspired fear among those who want to keep the existing distributions of power and wealth as they are.” The textbook approach to history is distortive inasmuch as it is highly disruptive to the moral health of students, for many immoral acts made in the name of national security and integrity are actually oppression and aggression toward others. In assisting teachers to present alternative historical facts and perspectives, Zinn and his circle were proactive in disseminating teaching and study materials with greater accessibility to teachers and students. This can be accessed via www.zinnedproject.org.

CONCLUSION

Like many other progressive thinkers, the tenor of Zinn’s writing is characterised by both the persistency of ideological critiques and the consistency of affirming hope that something better can be unraveled. A critical mind warrants us to say the truth but this should never lead to cynicism, hopelessness, nor imprisoned with some kind of ideological determinism.³⁵ Zinn affirms this eloquently: “I can understand pessimism, but I don’t believe in it. It’s not simply a matter of faith, but of historical evidence. Not overwhelming evidence, just enough to give hope, because for hope we don’t need certainty, only possibility.” Indeed, cautious optimism marks Zinn’s thinking such that if we want a desirable and better future, it calls for our commitment to action, no matter how small the initiatives are. Zinn once said:

“It is very easy to feel helpless in our era. We need, I think, the Existentialist emphasis on our freedom. ... To stress our freedom . . . is not the result of ignorance that we do have a history, and we do have a present environment... Existentialism, knowing of these pressures on us, is also aware that there is a huge element of indeterminacy in the combat between us and the obstacles around us. We never know exactly the depth or the shallowness of the resistance to our actions. We never know exactly what effect our actions will have.”

In fact in the closing words of his autobiography, *You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Train*, Zinn wrote:

“To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness.”

³⁴ *Howard Zinn on Democratic Education*, pp. 192-3

³⁵ For instance, the kind of theory which the Left most needed, according to him is “a vision of what it is working toward-one based on transcendental human needs and not limited by the reality we are so far stuck with.” He continued: “There has been much talk about a Christian-Marxist dialogue, but if such a dialogue is to be useful perhaps it should begin with the idea that God is dead and Marx is dead, but Yossarian lives-which is only a way of saying: let’s not spend our time arguing whether God exists or what Marx really meant, because while we argue, the world moves, while we publish, others perish, and *the best use of our energy is to resist those who would send us-after so many missions of murder-on still one more.*”

“What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.”

“And if we do act, in however small a way, we don’t have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.”

Therefore, our encounter with Zinn’s many important ideas need to be an appreciative and discerning one. Our reading, thus reflection and appropriation, of works of importance falls normally into three categories. The first is the way of appropriation and domestication. Second is appropriation and vulgarisation. Third is appropriation and engagement. We think the third is the way to go, and Zinn’s many exemplary works can be a starting point.

Last but not least, let us from time to time revisit some of the important markers that Zinn has left for us to reflect and react. Zinn’s concern of history points to the need to real understanding of what we can *do* in the present. Discerning historical facts should blend with emotion and passion, especially if we want to appreciate history from the views of the marginalised and the forgotten. History teaches us the many possibilities of the human agency, not unlike what Frantz Fanon once said: “...the people are getting ready to begin to move forward again, to put an end to the static period begun by colonization, and to make history.” Zinn had demonstrated that admirably well. The task now is for us to accomplish the same in the context of our time and needs. We can and must plan ahead. []

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