

# The “Bad History” of Howard Zinn and the Brainwashing of America

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although Howard Zinn denied membership in the Communist Party when he was questioned by FBI agents in 1953 and 1954, he continued to work on behalf of the Communists through his teaching and writing. In both activities he played the role of subversive. As a history professor, he targeted young and vulnerable populations. As a scholar, he wrote revisionist histories that should appall anyone with a respect for the truth. But Zinn cleverly distanced himself from the truth, proclaiming, in a fashion that has become common for academics, “Objectivity is impossible, and it is undesirable.” In his teaching duties at both Spelman College in Atlanta and at Boston University, Zinn was better known for implementing his activist view of education, of bringing his classes to the protests of his choosing that involved not only civil rights but anti-American causes. In this way, he attempted to pass himself off as a hero to the downtrodden proletariat of America.

Howard Zinn does not directly reveal the Marxism that informs his version of “history” in his bestselling *A People’s History of the United States* and its many spin-off products. Throughout his life he claimed to be a spokesman for the overlooked “people” of the United States who had not been given voice in other accounts of U.S. history. He claimed to merely correct the bias of traditional histories.

But his corrections contain distortions, gaps, and outright lies about events in American history. Further, he is especially careful to convince his reader that only *he* has the correct version. He conspiratorially refers to “the Establishment” and “the System” as he condemns every aspect of the United States. Most appalling is that such a message is given in explicit terms to middle-school children in the “Young People’s” version.

A look at Zinn’s writing for his peers in the New Left reveals a more candid admission about his goals. The 1969 essay originally titled “Marxism and the New Left” but reprinted with the new title, “The New Radicalism,” in the 2009 collection, *The Zinn Reader*, draws on a deep well of familiarity with the works of Karl Marx. He proposes that the New Left, the “loose amalgam of civil rights activists, Black Power advocates, ghetto organizers, student rebels, Vietnam protestors” institute “a revolution” in pockets in “traditional cities, universities, corporations.” It would be a nonviolent revolution, though, employing “political guerilla tactics” that would demonstrate “what people should do, how people should live.” Zinn’s *History* offers a perfect “guerilla tactic” for the classroom. Zinn even admits that teachers should slip in photocopies of pages in order to bypass “the establishment”—parents and school administrators.

Zinn in this 1969 article also reveals a goal similar to the one handed down from the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International in 1928: to target the most widely oppressed group in the United States, black Americans. The Communists famously exploited the case of the Scottsboro boys in 1930s Depression America. Black intellectuals, like Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, saw through the exploitation of blacks by Communists and wrote about their experiences. But Zinn—six years after he was fired from a black women’s college in 1963 for insubordination to a black president—writes, “Marx envisioned the industrial proletariat as the revolutionary agent because it was in need, exploited and brought together in the factory. The Negro is in need, exploited and brought together in the ghetto.” Zinn saw “Negroes,” and students pushed toward “the mouth of the cannon,” as “agents of change.”

Zinn was invited back to Spelman as commencement speaker in 2005, where he received an honorary doctorate and paid tribute to protégée Marxist Alice Walker. This is even though he admitted in writing that he viewed students, like his at Spelman, as prime recruits in “direct action” campaigns towards a new Marxist order. The fact that such acts have been overlooked attests to the great hoodwinking job that Zinn—and his comrades in the New Left—did. By targeting young, ignorant, and/or vulnerable groups, they have managed to revise history to convince them that they are their champions. The New Leftists, like Zinn, have thereby revised their own histories. An admittedly objective look at the evidence, though, would reveal that Zinn’s efforts had more to do with implementing a Marxist revolution than with any concern for “the people.”

## INTRODUCTION: A HISTORY THAT NO SELF-RESPECTING MARXIST WOULD CONSIDER

When Eugene Genovese was asked to review Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* when it was first published in 1980, he did what any serious, self-respecting Marxist historian would do: he refused. Genovese knew Zinn as a colleague and had admired his stand in the 1960s on integrating the Southern Historical Association, which had held meetings at hotels that practiced segregation. Genovese remembers Zinn's speech against this practice as logical and passionate.

But *A People's History* was not worth reviewing. Genovese's assessment of the book, as he told me recently: "incoherent left-wing sloganizing."<sup>1</sup>

Genovese, of course, famously repudiated Communism in the 1990s when he and his late wife Betsey Fox-Genovese converted to Catholicism. Yet, in conversations Genovese repeatedly acknowledges respect for leftist scholarship that demonstrates intellectual rigor and evidence-based support. Former students of pre-convert Genovese at the University of Rochester warmly recount that Genovese's Marxist views never interfered with his teaching and that he welcomed dissenting views from students.

But Howard Zinn represents a new breed of scholars, one who violates the standards of the profession, and as he does, raises the ire of those not only on the right, but on the left, as well.

For example, Georgetown University History Professor Michael Kazin, writing in the Spring 2004 issue of the journal *Dissent*, expressed his displeasure with Zinn's cynicism regarding the progress of leftist movements. Although the movie based on the book was originally to be produced by Fox "before Rupert Murdoch's minions backed out of the deal," as Kazin puts it, "Zinn's big book is quite unworthy of such fame and influence."<sup>2</sup> Kazin continues, "*A People's History* is bad history, albeit gilded with virtuous intentions." Zinn, he says, "reduces the past to a Manichean fable and makes no serious attempt to address the biggest question a leftist can ask about U.S. history: why have most Americans accepted the legitimacy of the capitalist republic in which they live?"<sup>3</sup>

Kazin attributes Zinn's failure to "a premise better suited to a conspiracy-monger's Web site than to a work of scholarship." The reformers, in Kazin's estimation, are lost in Zinn's vision of an America where 99 percent of the people are under the ruthless domination of the one percent who control the wealth. Kazin heralds other scholars, "most of whom lean leftward," who have since the 1960s illuminated the real progress of reformers in such areas as labor and civil rights. But Zinn, "like most propagandists. . . measures individuals according to his rigid standard of how they should have thought and acted." After going through a few key points in Zinn's book, Kazin concludes, "Pointing out what's wrong with Zinn's passionate tome is not difficult for anyone with a smattering of knowledge about the American past."<sup>4</sup>

Yet, this "bad history" continues to sell—with the latest estimates of sales exceeding two million copies. It was in the top one hundred sellers on Amazon on

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Genovese, Atlanta, Georgia, September 1, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Kazin, "Howard Zinn's Disappointing History of the United States," *Dissent* Spring 2004, reprinted in History News Network <http://hnn.us/articles/4370.html>. Accessed June 21, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

October 12, 2010, with its position rising in the category,<sup>5</sup> and number 32 in textbook sales on the same day with sales increasing in that category too.<sup>6</sup>

Kazin tries to explain the success of Zinn's "polemic disguised as history" in terms of the political situation in 2004 as he is writing this review, when Republicans controlled both houses and the executive branch. He claims that "the years since 1980 have not been good ones for the American left. Three Republicans and one centrist Democrat occupied the White House." As "consolation" for the failed "hope of state socialism" and "such unrelenting grimness" leftists turned to Zinn's tome: "Thus, a narrative about demonic elites becomes an apology for political failure."<sup>7</sup> Yet, as we shall see, Zinn's movie was produced, by Hollywood's leftist elite, and his influence in education expanded *after* the 2006 Congressional wins and then after the 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama. High school teachers and college professors assigning the book in their classrooms continue to pump up sales.

Now a company called Rethinking Schools has published a teachers guide, complete with suggested activities. This is part of a larger effort in conjunction with another non-profit, Teaching for Change, called "The Zinn Education Project." Matt Damon and other movie stars famously made the movie called *The People Speak!*, which premiered on the History Channel in December 2009. It is now for sale as a DVD and available as part of a \$150 community viewing kit (with postcards, stickers, and posters) for "nonprofit organizations, local chapters, community and faith-based organizations, grassroots and student groups."<sup>8</sup> The History Channel website offers a student study guide with suggested questions and activities.<sup>9</sup> Seven Stories publishes a version for middle school students, *A Young People's History of the United States*. The book published in the year Ronald Reagan was elected has thirty years later spawned an industry.

The "polemic disguised as history" may owe its success to the success of the New Left—the movement that advanced Communist or socialist goals while disavowing any formal ties to the Communist party. Recently released FBI files<sup>10</sup> indicate Zinn's membership in the Communist party from at least 1948-1953. Zinn denied membership when he was interviewed by the FBI in 1953 and 1954, but as a member of the New Left, Zinn participated in and led activities on behalf of Communist causes. Genovese claims that Zinn made the transition from Old Left to the New Left quite easily, unlike many of his colleagues. Many of the New Leftists were the red-diaper babies of parents who, in military like fashion, had reported to CPUSA. As accounts by former Communists show, adherents formed a disciplined group that never questioned orders or ideas coming from headquarters in Russia.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.amazon.com/gp/bestsellers/books/53/ref=pd\\_ts\\_pg\\_5?ie=UTF8&pg=5](http://www.amazon.com/gp/bestsellers/books/53/ref=pd_ts_pg_5?ie=UTF8&pg=5), accessed October 12, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.amazon.com/gp/bestsellers/books/465600/ref=pd\\_ts\\_pg\\_2?ie=UTF8&pg=2](http://www.amazon.com/gp/bestsellers/books/465600/ref=pd_ts_pg_2?ie=UTF8&pg=2)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Kazin.

<sup>8</sup> <http://shop.thepeoplespeak.com/products/community-screening-kit>

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.history.com/images/media/pdf/the\\_people\\_speak\\_studyguide.pdf](http://www.history.com/images/media/pdf/the_people_speak_studyguide.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> The file was released on July 30, 2010, in response to a Freedom of Information Act request by Cliff Kincaid, America's Survival, Inc. It is linked at [www.usasurvival.org](http://www.usasurvival.org).

The New Left bristled at the restrictions of the Communist Party. While informally adopting the precepts of communism, they rejected the militaristic discipline. Calling themselves communists “with a small c,” they transferred the loose ethos to scholarship. As they gained power in the academy they changed the standards and redefined scholarship. Objectivity was rejected as a vestige of the old Western imperialistic standard. Activism was integrated into classroom lessons. The “teach-in” was invented and was adopted as the model for the classroom. Today, the New Leftists and their intellectual descendents are the power brokers and the gatekeepers in the academy.

## II. REINVENTING THE WHEEL

Even when they abhor their politics, the public by large accepts these individuals with advanced degrees as legitimate scholars. Thus, the fight seems to be ever against ideology, with the leftist professors clinging to “academic freedom” as a shield against criticism of acts of academic incompetence or indecency. But these are not leftist scholars in the tradition of the pre-converted Eugene Genovese. They have done something much more radical than put a left-wing spin onto their scholarship or assume Kazin’s goals of recording advances of leftist reformers.

Zinn provokes outrage in those who value history. A critique of the errors of Zinn’s *History* would fill several volumes. Daniel Flynn demolished it by pointing out several key historical lies. He called the book “little more than a libel against his country.”<sup>11</sup> This is true. Zinn’s polemic, based on conspiracy theories, as more than one reviewer has concluded, does not deserve scholarly scrutiny. His starting point, upon which the rest of his “history” is based, however, exposes the source of his animus. All subsequent events are interpreted neatly, like cards placed upon one another. But like the house built this way, the historical edifice falls once the foundation’s weaknesses are exposed.

Zinn’s interpretations of historical events are informed by a thesis that misrepresents the beginnings of our form of government. As he attempts to prove his faulty thesis, Zinn selectively presents events and interprets them through his distorting lens. This is conspiracy theory, to be sure. But the uneducated reader can be fooled by Zinn’s technique that further, and cleverly, disavows any loyalty to objectivity, and thus preempts criticism.

Both the liberal Michael Kazin and the conservative David Horowitz attack Zinn’s distortions of fact as he sails through the history of the U.S. Kazin expresses outrage at the short shrift Zinn gives to accomplishments by the left. To his credit, Kazin wants to maintain evidence-based standards in his field—even if his motivations are not entirely altruistic. Kazin complains that Zinn shirks the thought of Eugene V. Debs, W.E.B. Du Bois, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Stokely Carmichael, and Helen Keller. Although Zinn provides “hundreds of quotes from slaves and Populists, anonymous wage-earners” and excerpts from Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Richard Wright, “the richness of these lines doesn’t mitigate the poverty of his interpretations. Rage at injustice does not explain why that injustice occurs.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, in dispensing with traditional historical tools, Zinn harms the agenda of the left.

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<sup>11</sup> Daniel Flynn, “Howard Zinn’s Biased History, June 6, 2003. <http://hnn.us/articles/1493.html>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. Kazin.

Kazin takes Zinn to task for shortchanging what are seen as two key victories for the left: the labor and the civil rights movements. While Zinn acknowledges that “During the Great Depression, wage earners across the industrial Midwest staged heroic sit-down strikes that demonstrated their ability to shut down the economy,” Kazin complains that he faults them for allowing “CIO unions and the New Deal state to smother their discontent within long-term contracts and bureaucratic procedures.” Similarly, Zinn blames civil rights activists for only toppling Jim Crow and not the capitalist system.<sup>13</sup>

While Kazin accuses Zinn of cynically shortchanging the activists who attempted to reform an unjust capitalist system, Horowitz accuses Zinn of loathing the foundations of the country itself.

In *101 Dangerous Professors*, Horowitz sums up the worth of Zinn’s book. The “perspective that informs” the book is “a pedestrian Marxism encapsulated in the idea that nation states are merely a fiction, and only economic classes are ‘real’ social actors.”<sup>14</sup> Zinn’s statement, “Objectivity is impossible,” is a typical ploy of the postmodern academic to deflect criticism. Horowitz interprets the second part of the sentence, “and it is undesirable,” correctly as an excuse for Zinn to “make [his] selection on the basis of what you think will advance the causes of humanity”—in his case socialism and Communism.<sup>15</sup> Of course, socialism and Communism are never put forth directly but are repeatedly implied to be the alternatives to an American system that is oppressive and murderous. Maoist China, in Zinn’s estimation, becomes “the closest thing, in the long history of that ancient country, to a people’s government.”<sup>16</sup>

As Horowitz recounts, in Zinn’s assessment, the U.S. never does anything good. Zinn’s estimation of “antebellum America as a uniquely cruel slaveholding society whose goal was subjugating man for profit” is never redeemed by a war that freed the slaves. In Zinn’s estimation, “It [was] money and profit, not the movement against slavery that was uppermost in the priorities of the men who ran the country.”<sup>17</sup>

But Zinn’s assessment of the American Civil War arises from the way he views the U.S., and her foundations. After the now famous long litany against Columbus and the “genocide” of the Indians, Zinn launches into an attack on the foundations of our government, calling the Revolution a “myth,” “that it was on behalf of a united people.”<sup>18</sup> He then, absurdly, goes on to state, “The Declaration [of Independence], like Locke’s *Second Treatise*, talked about government and political rights, but ignored the existing inequalities in property.” Zinn ends the paragraph with the question that immediately follows: “And how could people truly have equal rights, with stark differences in wealth?”<sup>19</sup>

What then follows is a reference to Locke’s own wealth, an attempt to discredit his ideas through personal innuendo.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> David Horowitz. *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2007). 359.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 361.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 362.

<sup>18</sup> Howard Zinn. *A People’s History of the United States: 1492-Present*. (New York: Harper Collins, 200). 70.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 73.



One can understand a reviewer's frustration: where to begin answering such a naïve question? Where to begin with the multitude of facts left out?

Such hints equating material inequities with injustice abound in Zinn's history. Zinn banks on the fact that schools produce graduates with only "a smattering of knowledge about the American past" at best—and almost no understanding about the foundations and intellectual history of our government.

Other questions come up in regards to the rationale of our system of government. Zinn, in what has now become standard practice, indicts the founders for leaving out of the idea of all men being "created equal" black men, property-less men, and women. Then he preempts the reply that such exclusions have since been corrected by claiming that

The problem of democracy in the post-Revolutionary society was not, however, Constitutional limitations on voting. It lay deeper, beyond the Constitution, in the division of society into rich and poor. For if some people had great wealth and great influence; if they had the land, the money, the newspapers, the church, the educational system—how could voting, however broad, cut into such power? There was still another problem: wasn't it the nature of representative government, even when most broadly based, to be conservative, to prevent tumultuous change?<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, this sets up the basis for the rest of Zinn's critique through over 700 tedious pages. All of Zinn's analyses of succeeding events and developments follow from the flawed premise and the unwillingness to acknowledge the fact that his question had already been answered by the founders.

Differences arise also from Zinn's goals. Zinn is after "tumultuous change." He seeks to overthrow the government rather than reform it. And he will display this view in his academic activities, especially when it comes to the civil rights movement. The need for "tumultuous" change will inform like-minded radicals who will keep raising the bar even as laws are passed and changes are instituted. It's the "system," (also known by the term "the Establishment") that is the problem, as Zinn says repeatedly--and somewhat quaintly—in the pages of his *History*. Revolution is the goal.

As Horowitz concludes, a "pedestrian Marxism" does inform Zinn's analysis, for Zinn says about the Constitution, "When economic interest is seen behind the political clauses of the Constitution, then the document becomes not simply the work of wise men trying to establish a decent and orderly society, but the work of certain groups trying to maintain their privileges, while giving just enough rights and liberties to enough of the people to ensure popular support."<sup>21</sup>

Two pages later, in this "history," Zinn repeats,

The Constitution, then, illustrates the complexity of the American system: that it serves the interests of a wealthy elite, but also does enough for small property owners, for middle-income mechanics and farmers. . . . The slightly prosperous people who make up this base of support are buffers

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>21</sup> Horowitz. 97.

against the blacks, the Indians, the very poor whites. They enable the elite to keep control with a minimum of coercion, a maximum of law—all made palatable by the fanfare of patriotism and unity.<sup>22</sup>

One need look at only one of the once most discussed works of the founders, Federalist Paper 10, to glean the lies and omissions of Zinn. Federalist 10, of course, anticipates and addresses arguments for such communist forms of government. The founders were fully aware of the temptations and dangers of communist forms of government that have been around since at least antiquity. They knew their history. Madison in Federalist 10 warns against the “pure democracy” advocated by Zinn and also by the signers of the SDS’s 1962 Port Huron Statement as they agitated for a “participatory democracy.” A “pure democracy,” writes Madison, “can admit of no cure for the mischiefs of faction. A common passion or interest will, in almost every case, be felt by a majority of the whole.” In a pure democracy there is nothing to check the “inducements to sacrifice the weaker party or an obnoxious individual.” Such warnings about the “tyranny of the majority” were common and should be acknowledged by any historian. Drawing on history, Madison notes that

such democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention, have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths. Theoretic politicians, who have patronized this species of government, have erroneously supposed that by reducing mankind to a perfect equality in their political rights, they would, at the same time, be perfectly equalized and assimilated in their possessions, their opinions, and their passions.

While the founders’ writings, like the Federalist Papers, are replete with references and allusions to the chaos of the democracies of Athens, the historian Zinn makes no such acknowledgement. Instead, he presents his alternatives as original, as if Thucydides never existed. Zinn never acknowledges his intellectual forebears, not even the ones with whom he sympathizes.

But unlike Zinn, we will not deny that such works as the *Federalist Papers* ever existed or deny that they were informed by a profound understanding of history. In arguing for the federal constitution Madison explains that a federal government would better allow for a number of factions that would keep check on each other, thereby preventing a dangerous majority:

A religious sect may degenerate into a political faction in a part of the Confederacy; but the variety of sects dispersed over the entire face of it must secure the national councils against any danger from that source. A rage for paper money, for an abolition of debts, for an equal division of property, or for any other improper or wicked project, will be less apt to pervade the whole body of the Union than a particular member of it.

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<sup>22</sup> Zinn. 99.

Madison, long before Marx's works would be widely discussed, anticipates such a "wicked project" as an "equal division of property." He also warns against the mob justice that emerges from direct democracies. Zinn, on the other hand, *celebrates* mob justice by other names, like "direct action." He, like other "historians" who have come to dominate the classroom, simply ignores failed efforts, beginning in antiquity, to form communistic societies and governments. "Historians" like Zinn present themselves as bold and innovative. But they can convince students only if they deny them exposure to the founders and the vast learning that informs their writings.

Furthermore, Zinn cites only like-minded Marxist historians, Charles Beard, Eric and Philip Foner, Herbert Aptheker, and I.F. Stone, without saying they are Marxists, and in the case of Aptheker, members of the Communist party. Indeed, it has been proven that Stone worked as a KGB agent in the 1930s.<sup>23</sup> The deeds of unidentified communists are presented as antidotes to the cruelties and injustices of a capitalist class. Through Zinn's lens every injustice and act of racism emerges not from simple human cruelty and frailty, but a class system based on capitalist exploitation. So, the cure-all for every social ill, for every act of injustice, comes from an ending of the class system based on capitalist exploitation.

## THE HISTORY OF THE SCOTTSBORO CASE AS PRELUDE

As we have seen, Genovese expressed admiration for Zinn's efforts to integrate the Southern Historical Association. In fairness, we should applaud such efforts. But Zinn, like many of the leftists who hijacked the civil rights movement in the 1960s, uses the movement to promote his larger radical agenda. In this way, Zinn follows on the line of the Communists, who, seeing a weakness in the American system of segregation, used it as a recruiting tool among black Americans. The directives for using black Americans came from the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International in 1928.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps most egregious is the exploitation of the 1931 Scottsboro case, when Communists were willing to sabotage the case of the nine defendants charged with raping two white women in order to drag out the case for recruiting efforts. The exploitation of racism and black Americans is a task Zinn continues. Like the Communists, he piggybacks on civil rights causes to promote his larger communist agenda.

Acknowledging the common criticism of the Communists' role in the Scottsboro case, Zinn writes, "The communist party was known to pay special attention to the problem of race equality. When the Scottsboro case unfolded . . . it was the Communist party that had become associated with the defense of these young black men . . . .

"The party was accused by liberals and the NAACP of exploiting the issue for its own purposes, and there was a half-truth in it, but black people were realistic about the difficulty of having white allies who were pure in motive."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr, Alexander Vasiliev. *Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). 146-155.

<sup>24</sup> Wilson Record. *Race and Radicalism: The NAACP and the Communist Party in Conflict*. (Ithaca, Cornell: University Press, 1964). 52.

<sup>25</sup> Zinn. 448.

What Zinn does not mention is that the NAACP and other groups, with black and white members, were increasingly frustrated by the sabotaging of their efforts on behalf of the Scottsboro boys. William Nolan describes the Communists' publicity campaign in the pages of their newspaper the *Daily Worker*, through pamphlets circulated by the communist legal group ILD with the penny seal bearing the slogan "Free the Scottsboro Boys," and in Communist-led meetings, parades, marches on Washington and on the Supreme Court. The Comintern proclaimed a "World Scottsboro Day," and Russian workers demonstrated on behalf of the defendants. The mother of one of the accused was taken on a European tour, and "Vassar, Smith, Barnard, and Wellesley society girls were gotten to appear in parades for the defense of these 'victims of capitalism.'" Within the space of five years, *The New York Times* carried about three hundred articles on this case, in which attention was called to the demonstrations held for the Scottsboro boys in Europe, South America, Asia, and Africa."<sup>26</sup>

In contrast to Zinn's tepid admission of a "half-truth," Nolan recounts that the communists "repeatedly attacked the 'Negro misleaders' in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Negro Bar Association, the Negro Business Men's League, and other organizations."<sup>27</sup> Wilson Record writes that between 1931 and 1935, the Communist press "heaped invective" on the NAACP for foregoing revolutionary methods on behalf of the Scottsboro boys. In 1935, however, the legal arm of the Communists, the ILD, was willing to make overtures to the NAACP—not because the organization felt a cooperative effort would free the defendants, but because of "a beginning of a shift in the Communist Party line from dual, separatist, revolutionary action to nondirect, nonviolent 'united front' endeavors in concert with moderate and leftist movements, and the fact that the law of diminishing political and propaganda returns had set in for that particular case."<sup>28</sup>

The coming war took away the Communists' attention, as they switched rapidly from isolationist peace-lovers to hawkish fighters against fascism as Germany invaded the USSR. Paul Kengor quotes NAACP acting secretary Roy Wilkins who was "still seething over how the Communists had hijacked the Scottsboro case." Wilkins wrote, "They abandoned the fight for Negro rights on the ground that such a campaign would 'interfere with the war effort'" and concluded bitterly, "During the war years the disciples of the extreme Left [Communists] sounded very much like the worst of the Negro-hating southerners."<sup>29</sup>

Zinn, however, foregoes such details and goes right to his next sentence: "The other half of the truth was that black Communists in the South had earned the admiration of blacks by their organizing work against enormous obstacles."<sup>30</sup> Zinn then refers to Angelo Herndon. This Atlanta Communist party organizer is applauded by Zinn for organizing "block committees of unemployment councils in 1932 which got rent relief for needy people." He claims they organized a demonstration of a thousand, 600 of which were white, who convinced the city to vote \$6,000 in relief to the jobless. Zinn

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<sup>26</sup> William A. Nolan. *Communism versus the Negro*. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1951). 78-79.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>28</sup> Record, 65-66.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Kengor. *Dupes: How America's Adversaries Have Manipulated Progressives for a Century*. (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books). 158-159.

<sup>30</sup> Zinn, 447.

notes that Herndon then “was arrested, held incommunicado, and charged with violating a Georgia statute against insurrection.”<sup>31</sup> He quotes Herndon from an unidentified source bemoaning the injustice.

Herndon spent five years in prison until the Supreme Court ruled the Georgia statute unconstitutional. Zinn concludes his account of Herndon with “It was men like him who represented to the Establishment, a dangerous militancy among blacks, made more dangerous when linked with the communist party.”<sup>32</sup>

William A. Nolan tells us more about Herndon and the Communist party: “During the thirties, the communists conducted one other large-scale legal defense of a Negro—this time for one of their own comrades by the name of Angelo Herndon.”<sup>33</sup> Nolan recounts Herndon’s protest and the fact that the International Labor Defense won its appeal of the sentence before the Supreme Court. The demonstrations to “Free Angelo Herndon,” Nolan concludes, “did not catch the imagination of Negroes in any way comparable to the initial successes of the Scottsboro campaign, very likely for the reason that Negroes had had almost two full years of experience with communist tactics in the Scottsboro case.”<sup>34</sup>

Herndon appears to have been somewhat of a dupe, for, reportedly, when he arrived in Harlem to lead a demonstration, the secretary who met him at Pennsylvania Station complained that he was not darker-skinned in order to be “more useful to the party line among lower-class Negroes.” Herndon also admitted that his use of the communist slogan of self-determination [the black separatist state promoted by the communists] “exacerbated his trouble with the police and led to a speedy conviction.”<sup>35</sup>

To Zinn, the exploited/duped Herndon serves as a foil against “the Establishment.” It would be the “dangerous militancy” that Zinn and others would draw attention to as they used the civil rights cause as part of their strategy towards their larger goal of the overthrow of the American capitalist system. Communists like Zinn hid behind the cover of “black militancy.”

Communists, whether with capital or lower-case c’s, attributed black militancy to a simple awakening of racial grievances and an assertion of long-repressed human dignity. They did not acknowledge their own role in agitation, organization, and financial support. Nor have they acknowledged how such “black militancy” advanced their goals that reached far beyond the needs of a discriminated group—and, indeed, often *harmed* the group on whose behalf they claimed to be working.

## RESHAPING HUMANITY FOR UTOPIA

The role of Communism is not acknowledged either in the solution that Zinn presents in a late chapter titled “The Coming Revolt of the Guards.” Zinn offers an alternative of cooperation and sharing that spring from Marx—but again without attribution. After presenting more than 600 relentless pages of the alleged injustices and cruelties of the U.S., Zinn offers,

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Zinn, 448.

<sup>33</sup> Nolan, 84.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

The society's levers of powers would have to be taken away from those whose drives have led to the present state—the giant corporations, the military, and their political collaborators. We would need—by a coordinated effort of local groups all over the country—to reconstruct the economy for both efficiency and justice, producing in a cooperative way what people need most. We would start on our neighborhoods, our cities, our workplaces. Work of some kind would be needed by everyone, including people now kept out of the work force—children, old people, 'handicapped' people. Society could use the enormous energy now idle, the skills and talents now unused.<sup>36</sup>

Presumably the old and handicapped, and children, would be able to find the meaningful work that they can't find under our capitalist system.

The vision Zinn has is identical to Marx's, although of course he never admits it in these pages:

Everyone could share the routine but necessary jobs for a few hours a day, and leave most of the time free for enjoyment, creativity, labors of love, and yet produce enough for an equal and ample distribution of goods. Certain basic things would be abundant enough to be taken out of the money system and be available—free—to everyone: food, housing, health care, education, transportation.<sup>37</sup>

With most graduates of our high schools, and even colleges, knowing communism only by its association with "McCarthyism" or the "red scare"—or, in my experience at a state university in Georgia, never having heard the word—such utopian sentiments will come off sounding original and credible.

Zinn does seemingly anticipate some details that need to be worked out, so then posits, "The great problem would be to work out a way of accomplishing this without a centralized bureaucracy, using not the incentives of prison and punishment, but those incentives of cooperation which spring from natural human desires."<sup>38</sup> Once again, the founders' warnings about our un-angelic natures (Federalist 51) and the evidence from history about "human desires" are completely ignored.

Zinn acknowledges that some communist regimes got it wrong. So he anticipates that "Decisions would be made by small groups of people in their workplaces, their neighborhoods—a network of cooperatives, in communication with one another, a neighborly socialism avoiding the class hierarchies of capitalism and the harsh dictatorships that have taken the name 'socialist.'"<sup>39</sup> In other words, the "harsh dictatorships" were not *really* socialist, but just took the name. We are simply to trust that Howard Zinn, by saying the word, will make people shed their propensities for sin. We will all become magically "cooperative."

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<sup>36</sup> Zinn, 639.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

Zinn continues describing the utopian scene as people are magically transformed:

People in time, in friendly communities, might create a new, diversified, nonviolent culture, in which all forms of personal and group expression would be possible. Men and women, black and white, old and young, could then cherish their differences as positive attributes, not as reasons for domination. New values of cooperation and freedom might then show up in the relations of people, the upbringing of children.<sup>40</sup>

What Zinn is presenting here is nothing less than a reshaping of human nature, of implementing “new values.” This is simply an extension of Karl Marx’s project, taken from Rousseau, to perfect human nature. But history has shown that when human nature does not conform to such egotists’ visions, dissenters, who cling to their farms and religion, are dispensed—as the death toll of over 100 million from communist regimes has demonstrated. But Zinn and other revisionists use more insidious means, one also used in communist regimes, and that is to revise history and use the educational system to reshape citizens. They leave out salient facts and work to excise them from the classroom. Without the benefit of an alternative viewpoint, children, as young as eleven (in classrooms that have adopted Zinn’s *A Young People’s History of the United States*), are presented history through Zinn’s distorted lens. And without historical context, Zinn’s calls for “cooperation,” “communication,” and “freedom,” echo the lessons children are now receiving in social and emotional learning sessions, anti-“hate” missives, and constructivist pedagogy.<sup>41</sup>

It seems that college students believe Zinn too. At a 2009 forum at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Zinn claimed that the concept of socialism, as he sees it, is falsely tied to the Soviet Union. He wants to bring it back “to where it was at at the turn of the [last] century . . . before the Soviet Union gave socialism a bad name.”<sup>42</sup> He cites the names Eugene Debs, Clarence Darrow, Mother Jones, and Emma Goldman. He also conveniently does not mention that these figures were not able to implement their plans, thanks to the foresight of the founders, so that one cannot tell if the outcome would have been the different from that in the Soviet Union.

Instead, Zinn told this gathering that “you have to go beyond capitalism”; “capitalism has failed”: “let’s have a kinder, gentler society. Let’s share things. Let’s have an economic system that produces things not because they’re profitable for some corporation, but produces things that people need.”<sup>43</sup> Such vague calls to higher natures are difficult to counter, especially when one does not have the knowledge to combat them.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Mary Grabar, “Indoctrination without Apology: Social Studies Teachers Share Strategies on How to Mold Students” and “Changing Consciousness: Conflict Resolution, Emotional Intelligence, and Peace Studies for a One-World Government,” [www.usasurvival.org](http://www.usasurvival.org) and [www.marygrabar.com](http://www.marygrabar.com).

<sup>42</sup> David Zirin, “Dave Zirin Talks to Howard Zinn: You Have to Go Beyond Capitalism.” *International Socialist Review* 66 (July-August 2009). Accessed October 12, 2010.

<http://www.isreview.org/issues/66/int-ZinnZirin.shtml>

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

### III. FOR KIDS: THE RADICAL HISTORIAN AS SUPER-HERO

Zinn's strategy is to present his distorted view of history as something original. As he deliberately sidesteps an overt alliance with Marxism, he is able to present his vision as new. His form of intellectual anarchy paves the way for a political anarchy.

But anarchists know that an absolute anarchy cannot exist for long. They know that eventually a leader will fill the vacuum. As they agitate for anarchy, they have in the back of their minds potential leaders—usually themselves or someone of their own party. This is true of Weatherman co-founder Bill Ayers, who, on the one hand, claims to only want to overthrow an evil system so the people can rule themselves, but on the other hand admits to fantasizing amidst the mayhem and rioting he has helped create about the “red army” marching in.<sup>44</sup> Ayers found his domain of rule in the comfortable kingdom of the academy, where he was propped up and supported by the comrades in power. Ayers felt his influence in carrying out Marx's project of reshaping humanity by indoctrinating future teachers as a “Distinguished Professor” of Education at the public University of Illinois at Chicago.

Similarly, Zinn found his fiefdom among the young, college students ripe for radicalization. High school teachers have been “supplementing” textbooks with Zinn's *History*. He extended his influence to even younger students, those in middle school, through his *A Young People's History of the United States*.

According to the copyright page, the copyright is held by Howard Zinn and was renewed by him in 2009. Adapted by Rebecca Stefoff, *A Young People's History* presents the U.S. through a more obviously Marxist lens. The message comes out starkly in the simplified language.

Zinn exploits his young audience's tender feelings and naivety. Communists usually gain footholds among illiterate, uneducated, and emotionally vulnerable populations. In undeveloped countries such populations form the illiterate peasant class. In the U.S. such populations are found in the classrooms—especially in the public schools of impoverished areas.

Zinn, in a very clever move, appeals to his young readers' vanity and the natural desire to rebel against adults. In the Introduction he writes conspiratorially, “I wonder why some people think it is all right for adults to hear such a radical, critical point of view, but not teenagers or sub-teenagers? Do they think that young people are not able to deal with such matters? It seems to me it is wrong to treat young readers as if they are not mature enough to look at their nation's policies honestly.”<sup>45</sup> Here he is using flattery to train the young subversive.

After the confidential message intended to, in Soviet style, set the student against traditional authority figures, including parents, students get the adult version pared down, beginning with the “genocide” of the Indians by Columbus. The message

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<sup>44</sup> Mary Grabar, “The Extreme Make-Over of William Ayers: How a Communist Terrorist Became a ‘Distinguished’ Professor of Education” and “Did Bill Ayers Get His Teaching Job ‘the Chicago Way’?” [www.usasurvival.org](http://www.usasurvival.org) and [www.marygrabar.com](http://www.marygrabar.com)

<sup>45</sup> Howard Zinn, *A Young People's History of the United States*, adapted by Rebecca Stefoff (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2009), x.



is spelled out: “This was the start of the history of Europeans in the Americas. It was a history of conquest, slavery, and death.”<sup>46</sup>

It seems that Zinn can’t resist positioning himself again quickly within the context of the allegedly misleading histories given to students heretofore: “But for a long time, the history books given to children in the United States told a different story—a tale of heroic adventure, not bloodshed.”<sup>47</sup> He will be the one to clear the historical record and speak for the little guy.

He positions himself in relation to an earlier historian, Samuel Eliot Morison, who published *Christopher Columbus, Mariner* in 1954. Morison too claimed that Columbus and the Europeans who came after him “caused the ‘complete genocide’ of the Indians.” But Zinn faults Morison for mentioning this truth only quickly, “making genocide seem like a small part of the story.” “A historian,” says Zinn, “must pick and choose among facts” and decide “which ones to place at the center of the story.” “Writing history is always a matter of taking sides,” Zinn proclaims to his childish readers.<sup>48</sup>

Zinn presents himself as being on the right side as he marches through selected events in American history. An illustrative chapter on the Mexican-American War concludes tidily with a reference to W.E.B. Du Bois, who is identified as simply “a black man who came to teach at Atlanta University, [and] saw the betrayal of the African Americans as part of something bigger that was happening in the United States.” Du Bois then becomes the mouthpiece for Zinn’s theories:

He said that poor whites and blacks were both being exploited, or used, by politicians and big business. Because whites could vote, they didn’t think they were exploited. Du Bois said, though, that the ‘dictatorship of vast capital’ limited the power of their votes. He was talking about the economic system called capitalism, in which private individuals or companies, rather than the state, own the farms and factories, set prices and compete with each other in the marketplace, and accumulate wealth.<sup>49</sup>

Note that the word Marxism or communism is not used. W.E.B. Du Bois is identified simply as a “black man” and a university teacher. Notice how exploitation and race are tied up with capitalism, with an alternative simply implied by one of the oppressed class, a “black man.”

Then in a manipulative move now common under the pretense of “critical thinking,” Steffoff/Zinn leaves the students with questions at the end of the chapter: “Was Du Bois right? Did the growth of American capitalism mean that whites as well as blacks were in some sense becoming slaves?”<sup>50</sup> Notice how the tie between capitalism and exploitation is now elevated to capitalism and slavery.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

The middle school student will likely have only a cursory understanding of the American Civil War as she then begins reading the next chapter, “The Other Civil War.” Yet, the introductory note makes the message quite clear about this “other civil war”: It was “a struggle between the classes.” Furthermore, a distrust for other authorities is nurtured by the next sentence: “This struggle is often left out of textbooks. Instead, textbooks can make it seem as though the history of the time was a clash between the Republican and Democratic political parties, even though both parties represented the classes that held most of the power in the country.”<sup>51</sup>

The eleven-year-old, not only is being fed a lie about an important historical fact, but is being confided to with the idea that the powers that be—a conspiracy of adult educators (an “establishment”)—has been keeping the truth from her. No distinction is made between the political parties as they are defined today and in mid-nineteenth century. The hapless preteen is likely to be inspired to feel loathing, distrust, and apathy. She adopts Zinn’s world view: it’s all been a bunch of lies, she may say to herself at that tender age. Why bother? Why respect such a corrupt country?

The oversimplified presentation of historical facts through a distorted lens throughout chapters should make any serious historian or educator outraged. To wit:

Chapter Three: “Who Were the Colonists?” focuses on minor rebellions, like Bacon’s Rebellion: “Traditional histories of the colonies make it seem that the colonists were united in the struggle against England, their outside enemy”—but Zinn informs students that conflicts existed between “slave and free, servant and master, tenant and landlord, poor and rich.”<sup>52</sup> And, lest the sixth-grader admire the words of the Declaration of Independence, Zinn reminds him that these are just the “tool” of the “ruling class.” The “language of liberty and equality . . . could unite just enough whites to fight a revolution against England—without ending slavery and inequality.”<sup>53</sup>

Chapter Four, “Tyranny Is Tyranny,” focuses on the founding. It begins, “Around 1776, some important people in the British colonies of North America made a discovery. They found that by creating a nation and a symbol called the United States, they could take over land, wealth, and political power from other people who had been ruling the colonies for Great Britain.” After the genocide of peace-loving Indians, the United States is founded by greedy, power-hungry “important people.” Furthermore, in Zinn’s estimation, the same qualities continue to inform the country, for “The Founding Fathers created a new system of national control that has worked very well for more than two hundred years.”<sup>54</sup>

Chapters on outrages, motivated by Western capitalist greed, against Indians and women follow. The interpretation of the Mexican-American War seems to come from the literature of the separatist group, La Raza. On the Civil War, “The United States government had fought the slave states not to end slavery but to keep control of the enormous territory, resources, and market of the South.”<sup>55</sup> The “other civil war”—the war between the classes—follows as a chapter. Then comes a chapter on “Robber

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 54-55.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 149.

Barons and Rebels,” where Charles Beard, Edward Bellamy, and Eugene Debs offer an alternative to the murderous greed running the country.

In the next chapter, “The American Empire,” Zinn claims the Spanish-American War, like all wars, “grew naturally from two sources, capitalism and nationalism.”<sup>56</sup> In “Class Struggle” Upton Sinclair, the Wobblies, Eugene Debs, and Helen Keller, all identified as socialists, are the good guys, whose deeds intersperse large photos of protests and dead bodies of the victims of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire.

The U.S. entered World War I really because it was good for business—with the sinking of the *Lusitania* serving as a mere pretext.<sup>57</sup> During the “Roaring Twenties” “most of the wealth was in the hands of a few people at the top of society’s pyramid.”<sup>58</sup> Despite Franklin Roosevelt’s attempts to “reorganize capitalism”<sup>59</sup> with the New Deal, “The rich still controlled the nation’s wealth, as well as its laws, courts, police, newspapers, churches, and colleges. . . . but the system that had brought the Great Depression remained in place.”<sup>60</sup>

In the discussion of the Second World War nothing is said about the pact between Hitler and Stalin. Instead, Zinn practices moral equivalence between the U.S. and Nazi Germany: “German planes had dropped bombs on cities in the Netherlands and England,” but “the German bombings were very small compared with British and American bombings of German cities.” Racism in America equals genocide in Germany, for while “Hitler claimed that the white German race . . . was superior to others,”<sup>61</sup> “Blacks in the United States knew the reality of racial prejudice, and sometimes racial violence, in everyday life”<sup>62</sup> The United States, in fact, “came close to the brutal, racist oppression” of the Nazis “in the way it treated the Japanese Americans.” One unnamed congressman even said he was for putting them in “concentration camps.” One of the most misrepresented events of U.S. history, and one often used to exploit children’s emotions, the bombing of Japan, concludes in a chapter with questions, such as “Why would the United States not take the small step of allowing Japan to keep its emperor if that would have ended the war without the use of atomic weapons?” Zinn then postulates that too much money had been invested in the bomb. The U.S. did not want the Soviet Union to take over Japan because she wanted to control Japan. Alas, although we can never know the “real reason for dropping the atomic bombs on Japan, at least the war was over. Or was it?”<sup>63</sup>

The litany continues. We had the “war at home,” when innocents like the Rosenbergs were executed, when “any communism-related revolutionary movement in Europe or Asia was made to look as if the Soviets were taking over more of the world,”<sup>64</sup> when a “hunt for Reds” was undertaken by “the nation’s established powers of government and business to weaken the Left.”<sup>65</sup> The chapter titled “Black Revolt and

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 260-261.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 263-265,

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 271.

Civil Rights” repeats the spin on events of the Scottsboro case and Angelo Herndon in even simpler terms. Martin Luther King, Jr., turned his attention to larger problems like poverty but was then persecuted by the FBI. His assassination brought “new urban violence” because racism is deeply ingrained in our national character: “African Americans saw that violence and injustice against them continued. Attacks on blacks were endlessly repeated in the history of the United States, coming out of a deep well of racism in the national mind.”<sup>66</sup> The “national mind” is never identified but the litany continues: “But there was something more—now the FBI and police were targeting militant black organizers, such as the Black Panthers.” What is then implied through a question is that the government was afraid that “black people would turn their attention from issues such as voting to something more dangerous, such as the question of wealth and poverty.”<sup>67</sup> They were also afraid that blacks and whites would unite in this struggle (supporting Zinn’s thesis that class warfare underlay racism). Because of continuing economic inequities, “racial tension grew.”<sup>68</sup>

Chapter Eighteen, “Vietnam,” opens with “‘Dear Mom and Dad,’ an American soldier [unidentified] wrote home from Vietnam. ‘Today we went on a mission and I am not proud of myself, my friends, or my country.’” What comes next is another one of those leading “critical thinking” questions: “What kind of war would make a soldier feel that way?” The comment then follows, “It was a war that made many Americans angry and ashamed of their country.”<sup>69</sup>

Other “movements” are recounted: women’s, Indians’, and students’. There is the Watergate scandal. Under Jimmy Carter’s presidency economic inequities continued. Ronald Reagan was mean and stingy with the poor, while the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dismantling of the Berlin Wall are due to the “overwhelming demand from the people.”<sup>70</sup> President Clinton was “no different from other people in power, whether Democrats or Republicans.”<sup>71</sup>

The heyday of protests was over by the late 1970s, so the “resistance” then and into the early 1990s “was different. Activists struggled uphill against uncaring political leaders.”<sup>72</sup> “Social issues,” the arms race, and the First Gulf War become the focus of protests. Significantly, the book winds up with a reference to Columbus, with a discussion of the quincentennial highlighted by a quotation from a girl named Rebecca who had learned her Zinn-inspired lesson well: “Of course, the writers of the books probably think it’s harmless enough—what does it matter who discovered America, really. . . . But the thought that I have been lied to all my life about this, and who knows what else, really makes me angry.” Zinn presents this girl’s induced bitterness as something laudable: “Some people refused to give up the vision of a more equal, more human society. If there was hope for the future of America, it lay with them.”<sup>73</sup>

The chapter titled “The ‘War on Terrorism’” throws doubts on the legitimacy of President Bush’s term by devoting an inordinate amount of space to the 2000 election.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 294.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 294.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 297.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 356.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 379.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 361-362.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 374.

The response to 9/11 was entirely unjustified. The invasion of Afghanistan led to civilian deaths, and “Critics of the bombing felt that terrorism was rooted in deep complaints” like the stationing of troops in Saudi Arabia, the trade embargo on Iraq, and U.S. support of “Israel in its occupation of land claimed by Palestinian Muslims.”<sup>74</sup> Cindy Sheehan is used as authority for criticism on the war in Iraq, illegal immigrants emerge as a noteworthy victim group of the period, and Hurricane Katrina showed how the “enormous wealth” that went into “war and the building of empire”<sup>75</sup> cause suffering.

In the final chapter, Zinn comes back to what he opened with, himself: “how I came to write this book.”<sup>76</sup> Zinn remains the redeemer of history: “I did not realize, when I first started to study history, how badly twisted the teaching and writing of history had become by ignoring nonwhite people.” And, “Other themes and issues were also overlooked in the standard, mainstream telling of history. The suffering of the poor did not get much attention. Wars were plentiful, but histories did not tell us much about the men and women and children on all sides who were killed or crippled when leaders made the decision to go to war.”<sup>77</sup> He explains that after reading other history books he wanted to write a different kind: “By that time, I knew that there is no such thing as a pure fact. Behind every fact that a teacher or writer presents to the world is a judgment.”<sup>78</sup>

After more than 400 pages of prose and photos, students have been presented many judgments by Zinn, indeed. These judgments present him as being on the side of the poor, oppressed, and overlooked. The other judgment, given what the student has just read, would come from the other side, the side of the rich oppressors. And as Zinn has told students, this side has already been presented in the traditional history books. The alternate accounts are not to be believed. His is. There is no recourse in a third way, either, for, remember, “there is no such thing as a pure fact.” The young student is left with only one choice: whose side are you on? The oppressed or the oppressor? Zinn’s side or the side of the traditional textbook writer or teacher?

This is Zinn’s intellectual anarchism at work, an anarchism that works best on the immature and untutored mind.

As if this weren’t bad enough, Rethinking Schools publishes a teachers guide *A People’s Guide for the Classroom*. The Preface explains how a former student of Zinn’s in the 1970s, after a “successful career in technology,” contacted the nonprofits, Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change, “each with over 20 years of experience in providing social justice resources and professional development for pre-K-12 classroom teachers and teacher educators” about “getting Howard Zinn’s work into the hands of as many teachers as possible.”<sup>79</sup> In 2009 the Zinn Project received support from the Caipirinha Foundation. Rethinking Schools collaborates with the Southern Poverty Law Center’s “Teaching Tolerance” initiative. Collaborators on the Zinn Project include such organizations as Association of Raza Educators and the New York Collective of Radical Educators. The Zinn Education Project website notes that 4,000 boxes were shipped

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 400-401,

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 419.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 421.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 422.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 421.

<sup>79</sup> Bill Bigelow, ed., *A People’s History for the Classroom* (Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools, 2008), v.

across the country, although it's difficult to get an estimate on how widely used Zinn's materials are in the classroom.

In the teacher's guide, editor and high school teacher Bill Bigelow gives teachers tips for hammering home Zinn's message. He encourages them to use role play, "as students attempt to imagine themselves in the circumstances of other individuals throughout history and to consider the choices that actual groups faced."<sup>80</sup> He offers a strategy he has used of asking students to read their textbook's "War with Mexico" section and to reflect in writing on the adequacy of the book's treatment." After reading Zinn's chapter, "students offer a rich critique of their textbook." What's appalling is that Bigelow claims such a regurgitation of Zinn's doctrine originates with the student and that it is superior to the traditional pedagogy, much maligned as "drill and kill"! Furthermore, Bigelow says this kind of activity "allows students to see how much richer and more accurate a 'people's history' is than the traditional approach." The "people's history," of course, is Zinn's history. But Bigelow presents such indoctrination as a "a people's pedagogy" that "offers students a different, more participatory, relationship to text."<sup>81</sup>

The articles in the guide offer activities for drumming in Zinn's lessons. One article on teaching about Columbus suggests group work for students and, again, a comparison to other textbooks. Representative student responses are given. Not surprisingly, one eleventh-grade student who is named only "Gina" wrote after her lesson, "We're being fed lies." "Rebecca's" testimony is repeated from the juvenile history.<sup>82</sup>

The suggested teaching activity, "The People vs. Columbus, et al.," is to put the "defendants" Columbus, Columbus's men, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, the Tainos—and something new in our judicial system—"the System of Empire" on trial.<sup>83</sup> (The Tainos tribe are listed as defendants because the charge is "While you are the victims of this crime, you are also guilty of committing it. You failed to fight back against the Spaniards.")<sup>84</sup>

Role-playing is encouraged in discussion about the War with Mexico. The chapter, "Unsung Heroes" is reprinted from Zinn's book, as is a chapter about teaching them from a book from the organization. A handout called "Racial and Gender Justice Hunt" with questions is offered on a page opposite one that carries a photo of Harvey Milk, with the caption, "Harvey Milk was the first openly gay elected official in the United States. Milk was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1977. He and Mayor George Moscone were murdered in 1978 by a conservative city supervisor, Dan White."<sup>85</sup>

The Lawrence Strike of 1912 is given many pages, which are then followed by "Rethinking the Teaching of the Vietnam War," in which Bigelow offers his own experience of showing the PBS presentation *Vietnam: A Television History*. His students find the film "a bit dry" so he pauses on "powerful" images: "Vietnamese men

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 60-61.

carrying white-clad Frenchmen on their backs, and French picture-postcards of the severed heads of Vietnamese resisters.” The film is lauded for presenting French colonialism “truthfully and starkly: ‘To transform Vietnam into a source of profit.’”<sup>86</sup>

Role-playing in groups is encouraged, with one of the group questions being, “Whether the United States should feel threatened by communism in Vietnam, or in the case of French leaders, France.”<sup>87</sup> In Zinn’s version of events, the North Vietnamese are resisters, the Communist liberators.

The civil rights era also employs a PBS film, *Eyes on the Prize*.

The last chapter’s title, “Whose ‘Terrorism’?,” gives away the attitude toward 9/11 and predictably begins by criticizing President George Bush—for not defining “terrorism” in his speech nine days after the attack. “Teachers need to engage our students in a deep critical reading of terms—such as ‘terrorism,’ ‘freedom,’ ‘patriotism,’ and ‘our way of life’—that evokes vivid images but can be used for ambiguous ends,” says this guide. Definitions here are considered good because they “call into question the ‘We’re good/They’re Bad’ dichotomies that have become even more pronounced on the political landscape.” The issue is given direction by questions to be posed regarding the definitions of terrorism that “prompt students to wrestle with the concept,” like “Israeli soldiers taunting and shooting children in Palestinian refugee camps, with the assistance of U.S. military aid” and “sanctions against Iraq that according to the U.N. reports killed as many as a half million children.” From this, “many students came to important insights. One student said, ‘Ever since they announced that we were going to have a war on terrorism I have wondered who or what a terrorist is. And . . . it’s suspicious that they still haven’t defined terrorism.’” Another student (who probably received an A for the project) said, “The U.S. government won’t define terrorism because they don’t want to be able to be considered terrorists.”<sup>88</sup>

But for this unit, a film was not suggested—though plenty of footage of terror-stricken office workers running from the tumbling Twin Towers or falling from them to their deaths exists.

Teachers and the rest of us, however, do have access to a film version of Zinn’s work, *The People Speak*, a “documentary” in the loosest sense, marketed to non-profits and student groups. A more accurate title would have been *Hollywood Stars Speak for the Little People (With a Lot of Feeling)*. Old photos intersperse dramatic readings by movie stars and rock stars of speeches, letters, and diaries—the primary source material of Zinn’s *Voices of a People’s History*. The grandfatherly Howard Zinn, who has a role as writer, director, and producer, also stars. He opens the film by explaining that, even in the case of President Franklin Roosevelt, the only way the government would be changed would be if it was forced to. He reminds the audience of the great work of Eugene Debs and of Cesar Chavez’s reminder that we have a permanent underclass. The “visionaries” whose works are read include Frederick Douglass, Susan B. Anthony, Langston Hughes, Chief Joseph, Muhammad Ali, and—Bob Dylan, who also appears as a performer. A bedraggled group of musicians sing a song to President George W. Bush with such profound lyrics as “You don’t know nothing about hard work” and “How do you sleep at night? How do you walk with your head held high?” Those who know

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 97-99.

something about hard work presumably include Marisa Tomei, Benjamin Bratt, and Sean Penn. They engage in the “hard work” of emotively reading the speeches, diaries, and letters of “everyday Americans.”

The approach is emotional—and more accurately, emotionally exploitative. An interview reprinted in the teachers guide from another book published by the same organization, *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice*, presents Zinn’s advice to arouse students emotionally<sup>89</sup> and to emphasize the class roots of racism. He also answers the question, “How can a progressive teacher promote a radical perspective within a bureaucratic, conservative institution?” Because teachers can’t get the book “officially adopted,” “they have to photocopy parts of it themselves in order to pass it out to students; they have to worry about parents complaining, about what the head of the department or the principal or the school superintendant will say.”<sup>90</sup> Note, that in Zinn’s opinion, parents, department heads, principals, and school superintendants are seen as obstacles, people to be hoodwinked. The teacher is encouraged to be a subversive.

Zinn also encourages teachers to admit that the material is subjective but yet be “extremely tolerant of students who disagree with your views, or students who express racist or sexist ideas. I don’t mean tolerant in the sense of not challenging such ideas, but tolerant in the sense of treating them as human beings” (14). Admittedly, the teacher does not simply present students with the facts of history, but becomes an indoctrinator of social justice. Well, one is at least reassured that students who dissent to the admitted opinions of the teacher are still treated as “human beings.”

## ZINN’S REAL SCHOLARSHIP

While Zinn simply but repeatedly alludes to Communist ideas and selectively presents Communists and socialists as historical heroes, he is more overt in his other writing. In an essay for a 1969 collection titled *The New Left*, Zinn displays his familiarity with the writings of Karl Marx. He begins by proclaiming, “My intention in this paper is not to define the radicalism of the New Left but to redefine it. By a remarkable coincidence, that is, I believe, in the spirit of Marxism—to declare what something *is* by declaring what it should be.”<sup>91</sup> Zinn also notes that Marxism assumes that everything takes on a new meaning in each moment of time.

In this essay, Zinn draws on Herbert Marcuse, Mao Tse Tung, Simone de Beauvoir, but mostly Karl Marx. He refers to such less-known works by Marx as *The Holy Family* (coauthored with Engels), *Critique of the Gotha Program*, and *Civil War in France*.

Here, Zinn establishes the New Left’s relationship to Marxism, or Marxism as this New Leftist sees it:

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>91</sup> Howard Zinn. “Marxism and the New Left,” *The New Left*, ed. Priscilla Long (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1969), republished as “The New Radicalism” in *The Zinn Reader: Writings on Disobedience and Democracy* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2009): 673.



Marxism is not a fixed body of dogma, to be put into big black books or little red books, and memorized, but a set of specific propositions about the modern world which are both tough and tentative, plus a certain vague and yet exhilarating vision of the future, and, more fundamentally, an approach to life, to people, to ourselves, a certain way of thinking about thinking as well as about being. Most of all it is a way of thinking which is intended to promote action.<sup>92</sup>

Out of this nonsensical prose we can glean the New Left goal of imposing dogmas of subversion while implementing transformations that are more fundamental than those proposed by older Marxists: a new way of thinking. Here we have the “consciousness change” of the 1960s, the apologia for dispensing with common standards of evidence and morality. The methodology is very vague, yet it promotes “action.”

After this pseudo-academic proposition, Zinn then reveals his real goals in terms of “action.” The New Left, the “loose amalgam of civil rights activists, Black Power advocates, ghetto organizers, student rebels, Vietnam protestors”<sup>93</sup> should demonstrate “what people should do, how people should live.”<sup>94</sup> They should institute a “revolution” in pockets within “traditional cities, universities, corporations”; they should do it with “political guerilla tactics.”<sup>95</sup> The revolution takes on a different form than the one in Russia. (Perhaps a “guerilla tactic” Zinn had in mind was photocopying pages from his future *History* for the high school class.)

Such tactics are needed because of the economic circumstances in the U.S.--a large and content middle-class. Recruits, therefore, must be taken from another, dissatisfied class: “the Negroes.” Zinn writes, “Recent experience suggests that Negroes—and perhaps Negroes in the ghetto—may be the most powerful single force for social change in the United States.”<sup>96</sup> Here we come back to Zinn’s presentation of W.E.B. Du Bois as hero because he wanted “to be part of something bigger,” as Zinn told middle-school students. Here, Zinn unashamedly suggests recruiting from this oppressed group for the purpose of advancing revolutionary goals.

Zinn draws on Marx for this strategy: “Marx envisioned the industrial proletariat as the revolutionary agent because it was in need, exploited and brought together in the factory. The Negro is in need, exploited and brought together in the ghetto.” The other group Zinn mentions are students: “And since Berkeley and the teach-ins, there is some evidence that students—especially as they are pushed more and more toward the mouth of the cannon—may be another important agent of change.”<sup>97</sup> For Zinn, “Negroes” and students are good “agents of change.” They can be used to implement Marx’s goal of changing human nature by demonstrating “how people should live.”

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 674.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 684.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 685.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 684.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

Too many teachers today see their roles as molding students into “agents of change”—a term I heard used regularly at their conferences.<sup>98</sup> Teachers often use the kind of “critical thinking” exercises displayed in Zinn’s propagandistic books, rather than teach the facts—objectively. A survey conducted by the American Enterprise Institute revealed that only 36 percent of high school social studies teachers felt that it was absolutely essential that students know facts, such as events like Pearl Harbor and the location of the 50 states. Only 20 percent of high school social studies teachers felt that it was important to teach students facts when teaching about citizenship. Six in ten deemed it essential that students know about how the American political system functions—through understanding such things as the Founding and the separation of powers. Only 15 percent felt their students understood federalism by the time they graduated and only 11 percent felt they understood the precepts of the free market by that time.<sup>99</sup> It is no wonder students succumb to the rosy notion of “sharing” and “cooperation” as presented in Zinn’s propaganda.

But rather than being kicked out of the profession for abusing his position to promote propaganda, Zinn was hosted by the Zinn Education Project as keynote speaker at the 2008 annual convention of the National Council for the Social Studies, the largest professional organization of social studies teachers. The 2009 speaker was Eric Foner, one of the like-minded sources cited in Zinn’s book. In 2010, it will be President Obama’s sister, “peace educator” Maya Soetoro Ng.

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<sup>98</sup> See my earlier references to my reports on the NCSS conference and Conflict Resolution Education conference, accessed at [www.usa.survival.org](http://www.usa.survival.org) and [www.marygrabar.com](http://www.marygrabar.com)

<sup>99</sup> Gary Schmitt, Frederick M. Hess, et al, “High Schools, Civics, and Citizenship: What Social Studies Teachers Think and Do.” September 30, 2010. <http://www.aei.org/paper/100145>



**This sensational report by Mary Grabar on Hollywood’s favorite “historian” Howard Zinn, exposed as a secret member of the Moscow-controlled Communist Party USA, reveals that:**

- **Zinn’s efforts on behalf of Communist party goals was carried on not only in public protests and political activities, but in his writing and in the classroom.**
- **Zinn’s “history” is based on a conspiracy theory about “the System” and “the Establishment”—terms that appear repeatedly.**
- **Zinn’s “history” contains critical omissions, distortions, and outright lies.**
- **Zinn’s “history” misrepresents the ideals upon which the United States was founded.**
- **Zinn preempts criticism of his “history” by disavowing objectivity.**
- **Zinn engages in confidences with young readers and flatters them. Soviet style, he encourages them to reject other “traditional” authorities, like the traditional history books that other adults—including their parents—might want them to read.**
- **While Zinn cleverly conceals his Marxist objectives in his history intended for the classroom and the public, he reveals his real goals in his writing for colleagues.**
- **Zinn admits in writing that he viewed American blacks in the same way the Soviet Union did: as an exploited class prime for conversion to “agents of change.”**