

*Qualms of Academia: Zinn's Doctrine vs. Scholarly Orthodoxy*

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Authors Note (Fall 2024): While this essay confronts academic critiques of historian Howard Zinn's work, it is worth noting one of his more powerful, much more vehement denounciators; Donald Trump. While Trump has made critiques about Zinn in the past, it feels all the more pertinent to emphasize Zinn's lessons in light of a second presidential term. Trump has publicly referred to Zinn's work as a propaganda tract that makes students vulnerable to indoctrination (White House Conference of American History, 17 Dec 2020). Zinn's work is threatening because it does not conform to affirmations of American exceptionalism. Restrictions towards the teaching of another perspective harken toward McCarthy-era paranoia and will only result in disillusion. What people learn about their past influences how they will tackle the problems of today; one cannot confront such issues by deciding to ignore altering perspectives.

Major Department: History

*Jesus, if you want to read a real history book, read Howard Zinn's "People's History of the United States." That book will F\*\*\*\*in' knock you on your a\*\*.*

— Actor Matt Damon, *Good Will Hunting*, 1997

## **Introduction**

Historian Howard Zinn established his prominence in 1980 when he published the first edition of his most influential work, *A People's History of the United States*. Zinn established and popularized a different kind of perspective when approaching the narrative of US history. *A People's History* focuses on the lower and middle classes of American society throughout the evolution of the nation. Zinn's perspective and the conclusions he makes in *A People's History* can be and are often seen as “radical”. Nonetheless, Zinn's perspective has been important and influential in composing a corrective history of the United States.

*A People's History* has been elevated as a part of pop culture, referenced in both the movie *Good Will Hunting* and the hit TV drama *Sopranos*<sup>1</sup>. While *A People's History* was revered in parts of pop culture, some scholars see this broader cultural embracing of Zinn's perspective as damaging to the integrity of the historical discipline. Some scholars within academia see Zinn as too assertive with his prose and too cynical to approach history with appropriate nuance<sup>2</sup>. While some scholarly concerns are valid, Zinn's historiographical writing, *On History*, reveals the intentions of his perspective, his prose, his skepticism, and how it fits within his methodology. Through Zinn's analysis of topics like the role of academia and

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<sup>1</sup> “Christopher.” *Sopranos*, season 4; episode 3, HBO. Aired Sept 29, 2002; Gus Van Sant, et al. *GOOD WILL HUNTING*, USA, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Kazin, Michael. “Howard Zinn's History Lesson.” *Dissent*, Spring 2004. Paragraph, 24

objectivity in history, one gains a better understanding of Zinn's methodology and how it can be beneficial.

### **A Corrective Perspective**

Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* covers American history from Columbus' arrival in The New World, to the 2000 US election and the war on terror (added in later editions). As mentioned, *A People's History* gained popularity largely for the perspective Zinn focused on. Zinn asked, "Who were the people who worked for Rockefeller's refineries? Who were the people who worked on the transcontinental railroad?"<sup>3</sup>. Zinn's approach to telling the narrative of American history through the struggling and disadvantaged did not simply offer an intriguing perspective but established a profound corrective history.

A traditional narrative of American history generally includes perspectives on constitutional, political, intellectual, and economic trends from America's past. Yet what happens when all these factors and trends are documented by those who have established prominence and power within an unjust society? History can become malleable and skewed when written without nuance or proper refinement. The role of the oppressor and their actions in traditional American history is often conveyed with a lack of severity that manifests into misleading word choice and even factual omission. Thus narratives about America's struggling and disadvantaged are often historically underrepresented and susceptible to coercion. Zinn's perspective in *A People's History* is what puts the perhaps skewed traditional narrative of American history in check and under scrupulous supervision.

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<sup>3</sup> Lotta, Raymond. "History as a Political Act." *Howard Zinn*, Howard Zinn Organization, 17 Jan. 2022, [www.howardzinn.org/collection/history-as-a-political-act/](http://www.howardzinn.org/collection/history-as-a-political-act/).

Keeping in mind that traditional notions of American history were and still are pervasive today is precisely why Zinn's work is so valuable. In *A People's History*, A chapter that encapsulates Zinn's work well is "As Long as Grass Grows and Water Runs". The chapter focuses on American expansionism from 1790 to the mid-1800s, the actions of President Andrew Jackson, and the general tactics/policies that forced Natives from their homelands. When Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act in 1830, a missionary named Samuel Worcester objected to the Georgia state oath which denounced Natives from their land. Worcester eventually took his case to the Supreme Court in 1832. When the court found that the state of Georgia's laws violated a previous treaty with the Cherokee tribe, Jackson simply rejected the court's decision. "He (the Judge) ordered Worcester freed. Georgia ignored him, and President Jackson refused to enforce the court order"<sup>4</sup>. Zinn's choice to present Worcester's case and its outcome reveals much about the diversity of American opinion on Indian removal. Through these details, Zinn shows Jackson's aggressiveness toward the Supreme Court and the blatant abuse of power that makes one question the nation's integrity. This is just one of the many chapters in *A People's History* where Zinn pushes the individual to reevaluate and question how they understand the narrative of American history, ideally exposing contradictions to create a more accurate perception.

### **Inclusion or Disillusion**

Zinn creates an atmosphere of skepticism in his work that the reader is supposed to entertain rather than take as pure truth. Zinn knows the role of bias in history and encourages

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<sup>4</sup> Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present*. 8th Edition , HarperCollins, 2015, <https://files.libcom.org/files/A%20People%27s%20History%20of%20the%20Unite%20-%20Howard%20Zinn.pdf>.

deep questioning, even in the perceptions he teaches. However, a scholarly critique made towards one of the chapters in *A People's History* insinuates that Zinn generalizes very delicate topics without subtle distinctions or nuance. The chapter in question is “A People’s War?” which discusses common assumptions made about the ethicality of US involvement in World War Two. Zinn explores the pervasive concept of a “just war” and the misconceptions about national unity towards that war effort.

The critique in particular was made by scholar Sam Wineburg about how Zinn portrayed the sentiments of Black Americans and their attitude toward the war. Wineburg portrays Zinn as researching with a wish list and asking “yes-type” questions to affirm predisposed assumptions about the topics he writes<sup>5</sup>.

Sam Wineburg ridicules Zinn for his heavy use of anecdotes when discussing Black sentiments against the war. Wineburg claimed that Zinn generalized “nearly 13 million people by citing 3 anecdotes, while at the same time ignoring data about 2,427,495 eligible Black registrants”<sup>5</sup>. However, this portrayal of Zinn is slanderous, Wineburg claims that Zinn did not take into account the diversity of Black opinion on the war. To make this point, Wineburg uses a pro-war anecdote from Georgia State Valley President Horace Bond who believed in mobilizing Black Americans toward a “Just War”. One can agree that presenting diverse perspectives is important in preventing rash generalizations. Yet Zinn does include the detail of varying opinions, he merely states “There seemed to be widespread indifference, even hostility, on the part of the Negro community to the war despite the attempts of Negro newspapers and Negro leaders to mobilize black sentiment”<sup>6</sup>. Zinn is largely correct in making this assertion. Zinn

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<sup>5</sup> Wineburg, Sam. “Undue Certainty.” *American Federation of Teachers*, American Federation of Teachers, 15 Aug. 2023, [www.aft.org/ae/winter2012-2013/wineburg](http://www.aft.org/ae/winter2012-2013/wineburg).

<sup>6</sup> Zinn, Howard. Chapter 16, “A Peoples War” *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present*. 8th Edition, HarperCollins, 2015, <https://files.libcom.org/files/A%20People%27s%20History%20of%20the%20Unite%20-%20Howard%20Zinn.pdf>.

includes the efforts made to mobilize Black sentiment, while also acknowledging a very real discontent among Black Americans. Even if there was a broad sense of enthusiasm amongst Black Americans to enlist, they often would still be met by segregation and discrimination in the military, thus creating resentment towards the war effort.

Wineburg's claim that Zinn ignores the data of eligible Black registrants is also misconstruing. Wineburg insinuates that if Black attitudes against the war were as rampant as Zinn supposedly made it sound, then the amount of Black conscientious objectors would be higher and not disproportionate to known data<sup>5</sup>. Wineburg's assumption is dangerous, it ignores the Black experience and the consequences that Black Americans would have to confront in the context of conscientious objection. It is not implausible to suppose that Black Americans may have refrained from declaring conscientious objection in a nation where they are oppressed and still discriminated against by whites. There is a difference between a white person and a black person declaring conscientious objection during World War Two.

Additionally, Wineburg's critique ridicules Zinn's lack of sources on the topic of Black sentiments toward the war, as if the topic was a major part of conversation in a chapter with a much broader focus. In actuality, Zinn does not even write more than 6 paragraphs about Black sentiments in a chapter with roughly 37 pages. This makes one question whether Zinn's use of sources was really as scant for this chapter as Wineburg makes it out to be.

### **Cynicism or Healthy Skepticism**

As mentioned, Zinn encourages and creates an atmosphere of skepticism within his writing that holds a very specific purpose and meaning within his methodology. At times,

however, Zinn's use of skepticism is misinterpreted by scholarly orthodoxy as encouraging harmful, divisive language that undermines the complexity of the narratives he teaches. Scholar Michael Kazin makes a similar critique of Zinn concerning his assertive prose and skeptical attitude in *A People's History*. Kazin's critique written for *Dissent Magazine* focuses on Zinn's approach to writing *A People's History*, stating "But Zinn cares only about winners and losers in a class conflict most Americans didn't even know they were fighting. Like most propagandists, he measures individuals according to his own rigid standard of how they should have thought and acted"<sup>7</sup>.

First and foremost, Kazin's argument that Zinn focuses too much on winners and losers is a weak one. Given that it is Zinn's goal to create an alternative perspective of American history, of course, he is going to highlight that the winners have written a large part of this history. Zinn's approach is not one of divisive cynicism but of pragmatism built on healthy skepticism and research. For example, during an interview, Zinn was asked whether he felt the US could use its military power for good, he responded.

"I'm very suspicious of American military power. I'm willing to grant that there may be situations where intervention on behalf of an oppressed people might be a useful thing when they have no other resources. But when the intervention is conducted by a government with the record of the United States and with what you know are the intentions of the United States, one must be very suspicious"<sup>3</sup>.

Zinn's response to the question shows that he doesn't merely base his perspectives on personal gripes between winners and losers, rather he bases his perspective on a variety of factors within historical trends.

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<sup>7</sup>Kazin, Michael, et al. "Howard Zinn's History Lessons." *Dissent Magazine*, *Dissent*, 25 Sept. 2023, [www.dissentmagazine.org/article/howard-zinns-history-lessons/](http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/howard-zinns-history-lessons/).

As well, Kazin ridicules Zinn for outlining how individuals should have thought and acted in historical narratives. While Kazin sees the outlining of such hypotheticals as unethical and unprofessional, Zinn employs this tactic with a very specific idea/purpose. Zinn wrote a short piece called “The Uses of Scholarship (1969)” and later included it in his book *On History*. The piece focuses on reexamining the position of academia and the scholar within a world in dire need of change, especially in light of the Vietnam War. Zinn states “We need to dig beneath the abstractions so our fellow citizens can make judgments on the particular realities between 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”<sup>8</sup>. Zinn’s hopeful and passionate perspective on the roles of the scholar aligns heavily with how he approaches his writing. Zinn is not fearful about the pervasiveness of academic orthodoxy within his position as a historian, he uses his passion to hypothesize ways of productive change.

### **Method to Zinn’s Madness**

Zinn’s work in *On History* is useful in reevaluating and even challenging the orthodoxy of academia. However, many of Zinn’s writings assembled for *On History* lean towards creating a broader perspective on how the historian should use their capabilities. Zinn explains in a chapter titled “Historian As Citizen (1966)” that if the historian acts upon values they deeply believe in, then “this makes of him more than a scholar, this makes him a citizen in the ancient Athenian sense of the word”<sup>9</sup>. Zinn hopes to convey that the historian's role is not restricted to academia and that it’s up to the individual's judgment to evaluate how one uses the capabilities of

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<sup>8</sup> Zinn, Howard. Chapter 5, “The Uses of Scholarship (1969)” *Howard Zinn On History*. Seven Stories Press, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Zinn, Howard. Chapter 3, “Historian as Citizen” (1966)” *Howard Zinn On History*. Seven Stories Press, 2011.

their profession. That said, Zinn offers a variety of guidelines in *On History* to tackle overwhelming questions, such as the objectivity debate.

Zinn's writing, "The Uses of Scholarship (1969)", in *On History* outlines 5 constrictive rules that Zinn sees as contributing to the "waste of knowledge". Rule one is the notion of disinterested scholarship, the idea that scholarly pursuits are only as effective as their needs within society. Zinn does not outwardly disagree with the notion of disinterested scholarship. However, Zinn does believe that a radical change in the interests of academia and the university must be reevaluated. Zinn states "The university should unashamedly declare that its interests is 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". At the time Zinn wrote this piece, he saw the university and academia as being guided by military and government interests rather than the transcendental values of education. Zinn sees the notion of neutrality as a main contributor to why the university is reluctant to declare such humane values.

The second rule that Zinn outlines in "The Uses of the Scholarship (1969)" is the notion of objectivity in academia. Zinn uses an analogy when explaining his perspective, comparing the scholar to a metalsmith. Zinn explains that just because a metalsmith has different preferences for the tools they use, does not mean that the quantitative measurements for their work are distorted. Zinn compares this to the scholar and how they approach their profession, stating "Our values should determine the questions we ask in scholarly inquiry, but not the answers". Zinn conveys clearly that values can be subjective, but the tools one uses to confront these values are more so objective.

The third rule that Zinn analyzes is the concept of specialization and “sticking to your discipline”. Zinn believes that to tackle the overwhelming problems of today’s world, one must be able to cooperate and evaluate these problems through a variety of other disciplines. Another implication of this rule is that disciplines in academia are often separated by those who explore theory and those who deal with objective realism. Zinn states “But no one deals with both the *is* and the *ought*, if they did, they would have to deal with how to get from here to there, from the present reality to the poetic vision”. Zinn’s dedication to activism and today’s most pressing issues highlights the need for a broader, more dedicated effort amongst all fields to tackle these problems.

Zinn's fourth rule is the perception that being scientific requires neutrality. Here Zinn compares the way data is used by social scientists as opposed to that of the “hard” sciences, showing how it fuels societal perceptions of those fields. Zinn emphasizes that even though data taken in scientific fields is objective, what one sees depends on their position. Zinn expands on this thought, “while the probabilities may be higher for them (hard sciences) than in the social sciences, both fields are dealing with elusive data”. Zinn establishes his discontent with the notion that the social scientists are different, merely for the tools they use.

The fifth rule Zinn explores is the idea that emotionalism convolutes rationality. Zinn agrees that emotionalism holds the capability to distort, however, he also sees it as a way to enhance one's understanding. Zinn sees the use of emotionalism as a key factor in enabling individuals to dig deeper and broaden their understanding of situations that are truly emotional, such as war. Zinn states “War and violence, divested of their brutality by the prosaic quality of the printed page, become tolerable to the young”. Zinn illustrates emotionalism as an important tool in academia, while also conveying the harmful effects of when one lacks emotionalism.

Zinn's discussion of these rules encourages the individual or scholar in question to revise their common conceptions of academia and how they may be harmful. Zinn clarifies his meaning, "Am I urging Orwellian control of scholarly activities, not at all. I am, rather suggesting that scholars, on their own, reconsider the rules by which they have worked, and begin to turn their intellectual energies to the urgent problems of our time".<sup>8</sup>

### **Inspiring Future Change**

One of the values that Zinn emphasizes when expressing the previously discussed pressures of academia is the notion of a "free" university. As mentioned, Zinn has a large discontent with the impact of businesses, the military/government, and religion on the university. Zinn emphasizes his contention even further in a later chapter of *On History* titled "How Free is Higher Education (1991)". The chapter focuses on the societal reach of various institutions within academia and how it conflicts with the free exchange of ideas within the university. Zinn sees the aforementioned institutions as holding a negative influence within academia. Zinn is also aware that even everyday societal pressures, regardless of how small, lead the individual to a comfortable place within society, where they won't challenge coercive institutions, thus perpetuating harmful influences. Zinn captures the effect of this pressure well, stating "The student, in return for the economic security of a career and several years with some degree of free intellectual play, is expected upon graduation to become an obedient citizen, participating happily in the nation's limited pluralism". Zinn evaluates the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in

which various institutions influence the university at large, but also the individual student on a smaller scale<sup>10</sup>.

One of the critiques previously discussed was made by Michael Kazin, who disputes Zinn's practice of hypothesizing and prescribing alternate histories. Kazin sees Zinn's advisory on how history could and should have played out as detrimental to historical discipline.<sup>7</sup> However, Zinn is optimistic in terms of the impact such a practice can have on the student, but also on any individual who seeks to provoke change. Discussed during "The Uses of Scholarship (1969)" in *On History*, Zinn states "A bit of historical perspective, some recapitulation of the experience of social movements in other times, other places, while not wholly cheering, can at least suggest possibilities".<sup>8</sup> Zinn's methodology has a purpose, although it may not be obvious. Zinn is encouraging one to entertain the questions and issues that he was confronted with. Tackling such questions as the role of objectivity within and outside of academia is a first step towards creating a "free" university and limiting the "waste of knowledge"

## **Conclusion**

Zinn, however hopeful he may be, acknowledges that a radical change in academia will not gain traction in the form of a scholarly revolution. Rather a progressive change in academia will be a slow and complex process among individuals in and outside of the university who have to start asking similar questions to Zinn's. Only through intense self-reflection on one's environment and their own personal teachings, will the individual finally begin to tackle the problems within academic orthodoxy. Zinn's perspective is crucial in helping confront the

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<sup>10</sup>Zinn, Howard. Chapter 15, "How Free is Higher Education (1991)" *Howard Zinn On History*. Seven Stories Press, 2011.

problems of today's world, it employs a sense of hopeful unity toward solving the most pressing issues not just among historians, but for all who teach and who are still learning.

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