

## **An Interview with Howard Zinn**

*Introduced and Interviewed by Michael Pozo*

Howard Zinn is an acclaimed and well-respected historian. He is also a political activist and has been one of this country's leading social critics for over forty years. Zinn views knowledge of one's history as crucial to anyone wishing to make positive social change. In his studies, Zinn's approach challenges the traditional notion that only the great and powerful make history. Instead, Zinn has called for the study of history, especially that of the U.S., from the point of view of the disenfranchised, the conquered, the ignored and those who have struggled for social reform in anonymity.

Born in Brooklyn, Zinn came from a blue-collar background. He was a World War Two bombardier but soon became disillusioned with war. He later received his Ph.D. from Columbia University. Zinn taught at Spelman College, an African-American college for women, in Atlanta during the 1950's. While at Spelman, he began his activism for civil rights by participating in sit-ins and picket lines. He also joined Noam Chomsky in protest during the Vietnam War. He later taught at Boston University. To this day he continues to lecture-travel.

Howard Zinn has used writing for a specific purpose. As he has said in past interviews, "I've tried to join my writing with social issues". His *A People's History of the United States* has been used in high school and college classrooms around the country. In this growing acceptance there is the evidence for at least a willingness to not only re-examine but also remember the importance of the past. The retelling of our history, no matter how unrecognizable it first strikes us, is hope for our future.

Howard Zinn's books include, among others:

### **A People's History of the United States: 1492 to the Present**

*You Can't be Neutral on a Moving Train: A Personal History of Our Times*

*The Howard Zinn Reader*

*On War and Other Means and Ends*

*Marx in Soho: A Play on History*

*The Politics of History*

*Howard Zinn on History*

*Declarations of Independence: Cross-Examining American Ideology*

### **LaGuardia in Congress**

*Failure to Quit: Reflections of an Optimistic Historian*

*The Future of History: Interviews with David Barsamian*

**A Few Words with Howard Zinn**

**MP:** Your field of study is History. What motivates your particular stance on the way History is taught to students?

**HZ:** What motivates me is the desire to bring up a whole new generation of active citizens who believe in peace and social justice and will work for it.

**MP:** How is your approach to History conducive for positive social change?

**HZ:** I hope it gives people the History of previous social movements to show how they can bring about change, to show that it is possible, to give people faith that if they participate, if they do even small actions, that might have an effect, if not today, tomorrow or next year.

**MP:** Indeed, much of your work has emphasized that students be wary of relying too much on texts that claim to be objective and historically accurate. What could you say about campuses where the audience of students is much more diverse yet still taught in a similar manner, which is loyal to the old stand-bys?

**HZ:** Diverse audiences can be just as misled as homogenous audiences.

**MP:** Concerning the United States and the World, you have said that the motivation of U.S. foreign policy is a more “sophisticated” form of Imperialism, mainly, economics. Furthermore, in an interview you say long before Cuba 1898 we were also involved in the annihilation and displacement of the American Indians. Given our long history, is U.S. foreign policy, today, capable of reform?

**HZ:** It is only capable of reform if there develops in the country a great movement demanding reform—which probably will happen only when the present policies prove so disastrous that citizens will insist on change.

**MP:** Do you feel much of the anger and resentment against the U.S. government, coming from the “Third World” is capable of having any effect on U.S. reactionary politics?

**HZ:** Only, as I said above, when U.S. policy becomes obviously ineffectual, even dangerous to ourselves.

**MP:** In your lecture/travels within the U.S., what have been some of the reactions from women and students of color to your work and ideas?

**HZ:** I've had good reactions because I always emphasize the historic role of people of color in organizing and protesting to achieve justice.

**MP:** With your work and others like Noam Chomsky readily available on-line do you think this will help to expose more students to a more complex but unpopular version of History?

**HZ:** On-line information is very useful in by-passing the orthodox means of communication, which shut out dissident ideas.

**MP:** In a recent graduate course we discussed the influence of corporations on higher education. Our own university, being among the many involved with corporations who employ the use of overseas sweatshops, is no exception. Yet there are other examples, such as the way corporate influences affect the curriculum and subsequently the types of students produced. How can we, students from smaller schools and colleges, avoid losing

varied dialogues in our departments? And for ourselves, how can we find ways to maintain the voices of dissidents from fading out to the onslaught of concision and rhetoric?

**HZ:** Introduce anti-corporate critiques into class discussions and extracurricular activities. Bring literature into classes and into the cafeteria, which will convey information that students don't normally get.