

Howard Zinn: A Man Who Swam Upstream

By Gerry Wagner



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A lover of computers since his college days at Bucknell, Gerry Wagner served as a captain in the U. S. Army in the Computer Operations Division of the Supply and Maintenance Agency in Zweibrücken, Germany.

After the service, he started in the Ground Support Department with Naval Air Engineering Center back in Philadelphia, using the Center's IBM 360 computers to do Automatic Test Equipment Configuration Management, but that invisible attraction pulled Gerry to the Computer Department where he started working in 1978. He held several jobs therein during the ensuing years.

Wagner retired in June of 2007 and prepared to move back to Pennsylvania to be closer to his oldest daughter's family and his earlier roots.

He is active in his local Ham Radio club (he tries to find someone new each day to chat with on his amateur radio), the National Active and Retired Federal Employees Association, the Mount Joy American Legion, the local Lions Club, and the Community Bible Church of nearby Marietta.

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I am one of the many people who first became acquainted with Howard Zinn through *You Can't be Neutral on a Moving Train*, the 2004 documentary directed by Deb Ellis and Dennis Mueller and narrated by Matt Damon. Indeed, I did not see it until a few months after Mr. Zinn's death in January of 2010. He was and still is a man who arouses passions; most of Zinn's fellow American citizens took exception with his ideas, but to some he is a beacon of enlightenment. I myself sometimes get rather impassioned and defensive in my presentation of Zinn's perspective, though I am not saying I share all his progressive and leftist views. But my challenge to you, the reader, is to lend them a fair hearing.

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Howard (let's just call him by his first name since Prof. Zinn seems too formal for a man as down to earth as he was) was born in 1922 in Brooklyn, New

York to working class Jewish parents. He was the youngest of four sons. As the tallest member of his class, he was active in sports; he was also a good student. His mother, the intellectual of the family, supported his scholastic endeavors, but reportedly there were no books or magazines in the Zinn house in his early childhood. Recognizing Howard's propensity for reading, his parents redeemed coupons to get volumes of the works of Dickens for ten cents, one at a time. Howard consumed them and anything else he could find.

After graduation from Thomas Jefferson High School, Howard labored for three years in the Brooklyn Shipyard, near his home. His work exposed him to the unions that tried to help their workers, and he took an early interest in the lives and situations of others.

World War II was raging in Europe, and Howard's youthful enthusiasm caused him to enlist in the Air Force. He became a bombardier on flights over Germany and France, a role he later was sorry about. To his dying day, he recalled his role in one of the final bombing raids of the war (when the victory was assured) on the little town of Royan in western France, where napalm was used for the first time in the conflict. This raid resulted in the death of about a thousand villagers and a handful of Germans who were hunkered down there waiting for the final bell of the war. Howard got the full picture of his actions later when his evolving conscience caused him to do research of what was happening 10,000 feet below after he pressed the bomb release button. A visit to Royan years

later confirmed his fears from actual accounts of witnesses—the lucky few who survived.

When Howard returned to the US after the war, he took advantage of Uncle Sam's offer of grateful appreciation for his sacrifice by using the GI Bill. He went to NYU, where he obtained his undergraduate degree, and then on to Columbia to obtain a masters and doctorate in political science, with a minor in history. His dissertation, *La Guardia in Congress*, portrayed Fiorello LaGuardia as an exemplar of the conscience of the twenties in his fight for the rights of the people.

Howard met and married his wife Rosalyn early in his college years. They lived in rat-infested apartments in the New York area as they started their family (there were two children, Jeff and Myla). He always affectionately called his wife and life long partner Ros, and she served as his best critic and as editor of his books, which included three plays as well as countless scholarly works. She preceded him in death in 2008.

In 1956, Howard moved his family to Atlanta to take a position at Spelman College, the famous African-American women's college, serving as a professor and head of its History Department. He soon became one of the favorite professors; his lectures easily filled, even the non-required courses. His students included Alice Walker, the author of *The Color Purple*, and Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund.

It was at Spelman that his activism really began. He supported his students' quest for basic rights and was found right along side of them on the picket lines and at sit-ins. He served as an adviser to SNCC, the Students Non-violent Coordinating Committee. Such activities landed him on the wrong side of the Spelman

administrators; in 1964, after classes had ended and all students were gone, he was dismissed for insubordination.

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Howard next moved north to take a job in the Political Science Department of Boston University. He served there for twenty-four years until his retirement in 1988; as at Spelman, he was one of the most loved, respected, and popular professors on campus. His civil rights stance continued, as did his belief in the folly of all wars. A hands-on type of visionary, Howard was arrested several times and even billy-clubbed. During the Vietnam war, he accompanied the Berrigan brothers to North Vietnam to earn the release of three captured US airmen. This action, along with many others, earned him a position on Hoover's FBI's watch list.

Unsurprisingly, he was never invited to an award ceremony at the White House. His ideas were the thorn in the flesh of every president, I suppose,

some of whom likely thought he was a nut, others of whom may have seen him as a real threat. However, his peers in literary circles gave him many awards throughout his life. But Howard's deep convictions were not lived out for any recognition—his main drive was always to motivate others to get involved and he was always ready to demonstrate his recommendations. In the last class he taught at Boston University, it is said, he let his students out early because he wanted to join an in-progress picket line in the area.

After retirement in 1988, Howard remained as active as before. He was a sought-after speaker in any venue that promoted human rights and the non-violent resolution of problems. In fact, he was at such a function on the west coast when he died of a heart attack in January 2010. True to his life of unceasing involvement in the world around him, his death occurred in the hotel's swimming pool, not in his room during the night. At 87, he left us the way he lived with us: in action.

* * *

Howard's unique personality matched his message. He had many critics, quite a few of whom were harsh and aggressive, calling him every less-than-flattering name in their repertoire. In none of the interviews and writings I have seen, however, did he respond in kind. Sure, he enthusiastically promoted his ideas, but never personally attacked his detractors in the process. He always knew how to throw a modicum of humor, the great lubricant of human interaction, into the fray. He always remained positive and confident but never expected instant change. His natural, unstudied delivery, sometimes a bit hesitating, came across not as that of some self-pronounced expert or god, but as a mere human like those in his audience. The wealth of information kept readily available in his mind and the ease of his manner made him a hypnotically convincing presenter of his point of

view. He wrote and spoke for the common man—to be understood, not to impress.

Howard's best-known book is *A People's History of the United States*. It came out in 1980 in an edition of only 5000 copies. To date it has sold over two million copies, ending up on the reading list of many high school and most college history departments. Its premise is a new one: looking at history from the little person's point of view as opposed to those of the generals or political leaders. Howard believed that everyone in history has something to contribute, not just the George Washingtons crossing their Delawares. Looked at more closely from this new angle, many of our national heroes, like Christopher Columbus and Teddy Roosevelt, take on a new, less favorable aura. Howard's critics object that his book of over 600 pages misses a lot of major historical events. He might have retorted—though, as I mentioned, name-calling was not his style—“So does yours, and by the way, you got some things wrong in your version.” A sequel, *The People Speak*, takes a more in-depth look at some of the former book's personages.

All in all, Howard wrote some forty books as well as a myriad of shorter pieces—articles, essays, forewords to other authors' books. He continued to write until his death. His three plays, *Daughter of Venus*, *Marx in Soho*, and *Emma*, have been performed many times. His autobiographical memoirs bear the same name as the documentary movie that gave me my first look at Howard, *You Can't be Neutral on a Moving Train*, which is available as a streaming video on Netflix or as a DVD. A film version of another of his books, *The People Speak*, recently aired on the History Channel with such performers as Matt Damon, Josh Brolin, Kerry Washington, Viggo Mortensen, Danny Glover, Marisa Tomei, Bruce Springsteen, and John Legend reading excerpts from the book.

* * *

Howard's preferred type of government was democratic socialism; from anarchism he took a continual distrust of the government and what it tells its people, and from libertarianism the idea that we need to use our freedoms to speak out and be heard. Like Gandhi, he espoused the non-violent approach that may take some time but will likely be more effective than the traditional political process; as he famously said, “If the gods had intended for people to vote, they would have given us candidates.” Although Howard might have appreciated more choice on the electoral scene in America, he felt the establishment of a third party run is a waste of energy. Better to activate the electorate to speak out for their interests.

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He believed that no government is ever truly concerned about the situations of the majority of its citizens. They only do things for them when they are forced by the citizens to do so.

Their interest is with privilege and power. He therefore believed that civil disobedience has a true function in a working democracy. “Dissent,” he said, “is the highest form of patriotism.”

It is your responsibility and mine, he would say, to get involved and to, for example make Obama's “change” happen—“The power of the people on the top depends on the obedience of those on the bottom.” To expect the president to do it on his own initiative is naive. We cannot depend on saviors, and we must think for ourselves: “If those in charge of our society—politicians, corporate executives, and owners of press and television—can dominate our ideas, they will be secure in their power. They will not need soldiers patrolling the streets. We will control ourselves.” The democracy we now have is to the credit of the people and not the government.

He defined war as the indiscriminate killing of a large number of people for a dubious outcome – the armies no longer stand in rows in the open field where you can eliminate just them one by one. Call it collateral damage or unintended circumstance or friendly fire; it's the innocent that always get hurt and killed. “War itself is the enemy of the human race,” he said.

He believed there is no such thing as a just war. There always was and always will be a better way to solve conflicts than armed aggression. In a threatening situation you may have to *do* something but you never have to *do* war. “Most wars, after all, present themselves as humanitarian endeavors to help people,” he wrote, and he would not concede the legitimacy even of what he called the “Three Holy Wars”: the Revolutionary, the Civil, and the Second World War. He said we are addicted to war and these so-called “good” wars could and should have been avoided. “There is no flag large enough to cover the shame of killing innocent people,” he declared.

Wars are always accompanied by repression of civil liberties—"One certain effect of war is to diminish freedom of expression"—and by lies and deception to entice a country's youth to sign up to fight. He quoted Kipling's poetic epitaph for the dead of World War I: "If any question why we died, / Tell them, because our fathers lied."

Howard felt that armed aggression is a cop-out in trying to solve the world's problems. In most cases our enemies' main gripe is that we are simply bothering them with our overbearing presence everywhere in the world: "In the United States today, the Declaration of Independence hangs on schoolroom walls, but foreign policy follows Machiavelli." We need to close our bases and transition from a military super-power to a humanitarian super-power. No one will be angry at us for offering a helping hand. Countries that do not bother anyone do not have to worry about terrorism.

The war on terrorism, he argued, is an anachronism and that war itself is the worse kind of terrorism. "We need to decide that we will not go to war, whatever reason is conjured up by the politicians or the media," he said, "because war in our time is always indiscriminate, a war against innocents, a war against children." He debunked the notion that aggression is part of our human nature and that we must expect its use in the resolution of problems; he believed that real security cannot come from guns and weapons but by using our wealth for our people and the world's benefit.

Howard put down the myth of American Exceptionalism that promoted the idea that we have some Manifest Destiny. By exposing some of our atrocities in history, he tried to show that we are no better or worse than any other nation: "Americans have been taught that their nation is civilized and humane. But, too often,

U.S. actions have been uncivilized and inhumane." (This dimension of his work has particularly rankled the right. Conservative writers Larry Schweikart and Michael Patrick Allen aimed directly at Howard's *People's History* with their *Patriot's History of the United States*, but paid Howard the ironic compliment of giving their book a copycat cover design, perhaps hoping to snag some of his enormous readership.)

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Taxes are a class phenomenon. There would be enough money if we cut out the useless military budget and administered taxes fairly to all. Howard does not favor a system that accumulates large amounts of wealth at the top and then waits for handouts to build a library or support a college.

There is no more meaningful way to be involved in life than to be involved in a struggle.

I will judge my talk and paper a success if just a few of you get on your computers and do a little research on your own on Howard Zinn. To round out your knowledge of a man of whom you definitely need to know, you should hear him and his ideas in his own voice and see his image for yourself. Fortunately, a large trove of his presentations exists, especially on YouTube. Take an hour or two some evening and listen and watch Howard. You may not agree with what you hear, but you won't be disappointed that your mind has not been engaged.

Some Works by Howard Zinn

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