

**HOWARD ZINN AND THE STRUGGLE FOR THE  
MICROPHONE: HISTORY, OBJECTIVITY, AND  
CITIZENSHIP**

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If all Americans, in all the thousands of assemblies that take place through the year, insist on keeping out of politics because neither war nor racial persecution nor poisonous vapors coming through the library window, affect them as historians, chiropodists, clerks, or carpenters -- then "pluralist" democracy is a facade for oligarchical control.

(Zinn 1970a)

Every year, historians in the United States attend the American Historical Association (AHA), a conference that has met annually since 1884.<sup>1</sup> The AHA draws scholars from all specializations, and it is the primary organization through which the profession is represented. In 1969, the conference met at the Sheraton Park Hotel in Washington, D.C.

When members arrived in the U.S. capital, it was clear that dissent was in the air. Sentiments focused on reforming the organization, long dominated by men from elite universities. Prominent among the reformers were feminists who founded the Coordinating Committee on Women in the Historical Profession (Carroll 1994, 79). The AHA program included sessions devoted to contemporary political issues, including "Laos and Vietnam," "Radical Intellectuals and the Institution of Power," among others (Radosh 1970, 109). A panel entitled "What is Radical History?" consisted of seven members of the Radical Historians' Caucus, including Staughton Lynd, Jesse Lemisch, and Howard Zinn. From this group came some of the most memorable events in the history of the profession.

At the business meeting on the evening of 28 December, the radicals sought to take control of the organization (Mirra 2010). They nominated Staughton Lynd for president. Lynd was an activist who

had recently been denied tenure at Yale (O'Brien 2002, 67-68). It was the first contested election in the AHA's history (Bailinson 1969, 24). And, while he lost his bid to R.R. Palmer, Lynd's nomination speech set the tone for the rest of the meeting. A debate over AHA constitutional amendments followed the election, and then the minutes read:

Mr. Fairbank now moved that the assembly adjourn in 10 minutes. After brief discussion this motion was replaced by Mr. Zinn's motion to recess until the following evening at 9:30. A motion to adjourn immediately was thereupon put to voice vote and defeated. (AHA 1970)

The minutes demonstrate the dangers of trusting narratives -- even (or especially) those proffered as neutral accounts. They do not document the moment entirely, nor do they capture the participants' experiences of it. On the central event, the records are silent. What actually happened speaks to the issues of power, neutrality, and knowledge that were central themes in Zinn's career.

In those moments, Zinn, representing the Radical Historians' Caucus, sought to present a resolution to the members of the AHA. If the business meeting came to an end before he did it, he would not be heard. So, he grabbed a microphone and attempted to introduce it before the meeting's close. It denounced the twin evils of "the physical and cultural destruction of the Vietnamese people" and the "Black community at home" (AHA 1970). Linking events to the profession, the resolution continued:

These murderous policies and the repression which enforces them are increasingly restricting our freedom as historians, have turned even our classrooms and gradebooks into channels of conscription and death, have affected the life of our campuses, and have deeply disturbed relations between teachers and students of history. Even more important than the damage they have done to our profession, they are undermining the possibility of self-determination and democracy in the American and world society whose history we study.

We cannot stand by in silence. To do so is to condone the abuses to which history has been subjected in the service of power, to condone a kind of intellectual pacification program.

To say nothing at this point in our own history is to express our indifference to what is happening around us. The business of this convention is history. We must renew our commitment to one of the great historic tasks of independent historians in time of crisis: We must expose to critical analysis and public attack the disastrous direction in which our government is taking us. (AHA 1970)

Before he had a chance to speak, John K. Fairbank intervened by wresting the microphone out of Zinn's hands. The episode became known as the "Struggle for the Mike" (Fairbank 1970).

Fairbank's justifications for his actions, as well as critiques of the resolution, focused on a single issue. He summed up the opposition neatly: "they opposed 'politicization' of our professional association . . . 'Politicization' is no joke. It can cut both ways. If we today could use AHA to support a worthy nonprofessional cause, others tomorrow could manipulate it for an evil cause" (Fairbank 1970). Zinn's response was just as succinct: "Evil does not operate by legal precedent, but by power" (Zinn 1970a). Power can be direct, but it can also be dispersed. When historians give up their freedom to act as citizens in the name of "neutrality," they have already been coerced into obedience.

The red herring in the opposition's arguments, as Zinn recognized, was the claim of neutrality. And, in fact, Lemisch's paper for the 1969 AHA attempted to expose the Cold Warrior complicity of supposed "neutral" historians such as Daniel Boorstin, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Oscar Handlin (Lemisch 1969, 1975; Wiener 1989, 422-24; Radosh 1970). According to Zinn, the profession, and more specifically the university, "becomes a playpen in which the society invites its favored children to play, ultimately distracting them from serious engagement with society" (Zinn 1970b, 7). Most are sidetracked by baubles -- trivia, prestige, or promotion -- but all historians take a political stand, in their scholarship and in their classrooms (Zinn 1970b, 18). What they do not say in their articles, books, or classrooms is every bit as political as what they do say. As Zinn argued, "Silence is a political decision" (Zinn 1970a). "There is no question, then, of a 'disinterested' community of scholars, only a question about what kinds of interests the scholars will serve" (Zinn 1970b, 10).

While over 40 years have passed since the 1969 AHA meeting, historians still struggle with similar problems. The wars may be new and the grounds of the social struggles may have shifted, but scholars

still tend to remain safely swaddled in their intellectual demesnes. However, academia is not immune from the world beyond its halls. The economy has altered the foundations upon which their institutions rest, and political forces are seeking to remake them. The gains of social history, black history, women's history, queer history, and more can easily be undone. The autonomy of the intellectual pursuit is not an absolute. Education is an industry, and those with influence and money can reshape it -- a situation made easier by the silence and neutrality of historians.

Ideology in the guise of "objectivity" has become a clarion call for politically and religiously motivated interpretations and inaccurate theories. In the recent Texas social studies textbook standards revisions (see Whitson, this issue), the opinions of religious fundamentalists were more important than a century of research by a nation of history professors (Pierard and McDaniel 2010; Shorto 2010). In a decision that will influence a generation of students, attacks on "liberal bias" through calls for objectivity now mean that textbooks justify McCarthyism, obscure the fact that racism was the motivating cause for Japanese internment during WWII, and suggest that Thomas Aquinas is more significant to nineteenth-century revolutionary movements than Thomas Jefferson (Texas Freedom Network Insider 2010; McKinley 2010).

For an historian to speak out critically is to risk the charge of politicizing history -- of not being objective -- an accusation of professional failure. Notions of "objectivity" -- remaining true to the "facts" -- can cower, then make complicit, well-intentioned scholars. However, there is a difference between having facts and critically analyzing them. The argument of "objectivity" to silence scholarship and education is effective only when one confuses objective methodology with critical analysis. An objective methodology exposes and logically orders facts. Critical analysis, on the other hand, is the process of questioning these facts, while at the same time recognizing that no question is neutral. So, for example, if I ask the question described in the proposed Texas social studies textbook standards, "explain why a free enterprise system of economics developed in the new nation, including minimal government intrusion, taxation, and property rights'?" I have already made several arguments (Texas State Board of Education 2011, §113.20.b.14A). Implicit among them is the assertion that there was, in fact, "minimal government intrusion," and that this resulted in the economic expansion of the United States (Texas State Board

of Education 2011, §113.20.b.13B). Critical analysis requires that we probe questions such as these for their assumptions, biases, and blind spots. Through doing this, it becomes quite obvious that the question asks teachers and students to both ignore evidence and cherry pick examples to support the idea of "minimal government intrusion." As such, the massive federal and state infrastructures that supported the economic growth of the United States disappear from the story. It is the responsibility of scholars to challenge questions such as these -- to ask what ideologies, hierarchies, or institutions they serve.

Knowledge is not neutral. It brings responsibility and has consequences, especially in a democratic society. Professional expertise in history means that scholars have a duty to shape discourse and influence politics. They have a fundamental role to play in educating and working with the citizenry and in shaping and critiquing policy decisions -- not in spite of their professional roles, but because of them. This is, in part, what Howard Zinn meant when he spoke of "democratic education." His vision of education saw scholars and students first and foremost as engaged citizens, using their critical capacities to ask questions and challenge those who abused authority. As Zinn reminded his fellow professionals in 1970,

We can separate ourselves in theory as historians and citizens. But that is a one-way separation which has no return: when the world blows up, we cannot claim exemption as historians, not even if it happens during an A.H.A. convention. (Zinn 1970a)

<sup>1</sup> The AHA did not meet in 1918 or 1942. See David M. Darlington, "123 in 125: A Brief History of AHA Annual Meetings," *Perspectives in History*, March 2009, <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2009/0903/0903tim1.cfm>.

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