In 1994, Beacon Press published the memoir of Howard Zinn, the professor and radical political activist who is best known as the author of *A People’s History of the United States* (1980). After Zinn summarily rejected *Original Zinn* as the title, the editors and the author settled on *You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Train: A Personal History of Our Time*. The volume focused on Zinn’s role in the Civil Rights Movement while he was a professor of history at Spelman College in Atlanta from 1956 to 1963 and on his opposition to the war in Vietnam. Zinn had little to say, however, about his personal relationships or his inner life. Repetitious and predictable, the memoir came and went.

In *Howard Zinn: A Life on the Left*, Martin Duberman (who is Distinguished Professor of History Emeritus at the CUNY Graduate Center, where he founded the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies, and biographer of James Russell Lowell, Charles Francis Adams, Paul Robeson, and Lincoln Kirstein) had hoped to lift the veil on his subject’s temperament and character, sexual relationships, married life, parenting, and friendships. He discovered, however, that Zinn had had little interest in exploring any possible connection between his own experiences and his radical views—and had removed virtually all references to his personal life from the archive he gave to the Tamiment Library at New York University.

Duberman faced an additional challenge. Despite his radicalism, Duberman notes, Zinn “wasn’t much of an ideologue” (p. 158). To be sure, he endorsed the Marxist ideas of class struggle and redistributing wealth according to need. But he was attracted as well to the anti-authoritarianism of anarchists and acknowledged on occasion that capitalism had “developed the economy in an enormously impressive way,” increasing “geometrically the number of goods available.” Duberman concludes that Zinn “in fact, wasn’t much interested in political theory, nor did he pretend to have a creative, original contribution to make in that regard” (p. 158).

In this biography, then, Duberman emphasizes—and celebrates—Zinn’s political engagement and the “much needed role” (p. 158) he played in...
popularizing the ideas of others, including history “from the bottom up” and skepticism about “objective” accounts of the past. Although he is by no means uncritical of Zinn, Duberman makes clear that biographer and subject “held common convictions on a wide range of public issues” (p. xi). He weighs in on those issues early and often, inserting them even at the risk of displacing Zinn from center stage.

A superb stylist and masterful storyteller, Duberman is at his best recreating the climate and the context of desegregation struggles in the 1950s and ’60s. At Spelman, he tells us, Zinn was faculty adviser to the Social Science Club, which made integrating Atlanta its top priority (much to the consternation of President Albert Manley, who blamed Zinn for stirring the girls up and got rid of him in 1963). Students often met at the Zinn apartment to discuss strategy, forcing young Myla and Jeff Zinn to do their homework in their bedrooms. In 1961, Zinn’s students targeted the largest department store in the city, Rich’s. Howard and Roz Zinn bought coffee and sandwiches at the counter, then moved to a table where they were joined by some black students. Instead of calling the police, Rich’s managers turned off the lights. “In the semi-darkness,” (p. 40) Duberman writes, the students chatted amiably with their professor and his wife until closing time. That fall, Rich’s ended its policy of segregation and nearly two hundred Atlanta restaurants followed suit.

Two years later, they tried the same approach, with less success, at Leb’s delicatessen. When Howard, two whites, and one black seated themselves at a table, the manager came over, indicated that he had his own ideas about segregation but would be fired if he acted on them, and offered to “wrap up some beautiful pastrami sandwiches for them to take out.” Whispering “Wish I could do more,” a black busboy brought them four glasses of water. As they contemplated their next move, the quartet was accosted by Charlie Leb and two plainclothes police officers. Leb grabbed the glasses, shouting “These are mine.” Howard shot back, “That’s the Passover spirit!” (p. 72) and the cops escorted the protestors out the door. In a subsequent conversation, Zinn told Leb, who owned four restaurants in Atlanta, that if he didn’t integrate he would face increasingly disruptive sit-ins.

At Spelman, Duberman demonstrates, Zinn “found it impossible to tell the full truth while at the same time keeping his tone entirely neutral” (p. 79). Seeking to overturn Manley’s summary dismissal of him, for example, he sent a 35-page summary of his career at Spelman to the Board of Trustees. Zinn’s detached tone disappeared by page two, when he accused Manley “of acting like a colonial administrator in a country burning with nationalistic fervor.” It was, Duberman notes, “the most damning analogy he could have chosen” (p. 80). For good measure, Zinn attacked Manley for a demeaning, infantilizing attitude toward students, dictatorial dealings with faculty, and bypassing democratic channels of governance. He gratuitously blasted Spelman, which
prided itself on its Christian devotion, for “an air of piety, ceremonial occasions, and compulsory chapel attendance” that amounted to little more than “pompous and empty ritual” (p. 83). Although Zinn might have expressed sympathy for Manley as “a product of different times,” struggling to walk a tightrope between the prevailing practice of segregation and the growing militancy of young blacks, Duberman indicates that Zinn chose instead to use rhetoric “tantamount to yanking the tail of an already enraged bull” by comparing Manley’s authoritarianism to that of white supremacists (p. 83). Not surprisingly, the only response to Zinn’s manifesto was a letter explaining that a college “need not give reasons when it decided not to renew the contract of a teacher” (p. 84).

Self-evidently partisan, Duberman’s account of Zinn’s turbulent quarter-century as a professor of history at Boston University is informative and insightful as well. Endowed with “a stubborn streak that refused to yield to an act of injustice,” Duberman writes, Zinn was no match for President John Silber “in resourceful manipulation” (p. 218). Taught by temperament and his experience at Spelman to keep his distance, Zinn did not serve on university committees or take an active role in the faculty union. But he was irresistible—and the professor and the president “became instant antagonists” (p. 181). Incensed at Zinn’s highly visible antiwar activism, which included a trip to Hanoi, Silber grew angrier and angrier as Howard led the resistance to him on campus, serving as faculty adviser to an oppositional student newspaper, defending health-care workers who had been fired after they demanded wage increases, blasting control by the central administration over salaries, promotion, and tenure; and helping draft a faculty resolution, which passed by a vote of 457 to 215, asking the Board of Trustees to fire Silber.

Having secured the unequivocal support of the Board, the wily, imperious, and combative Silber found a multitude of ways to get even. BU turned down Zinn’s request for a leave of absence to teach for a semester at the University of Paris at Vincennes. An immensely popular teacher with an enrollment of 350 undergraduates, Zinn was not permitted to hire a grader and was told to limit the number of students allowed into his course. Most importantly, Duberman reveals, Silber saw to it that Zinn remained the lowest-paid full professor in the history department. The president sought to immunize himself from criticism by giving merit increases to Frances Fox Piven and other faculty critics of his administration. Acutely aware that Silber would be delighted to get rid of him, Zinn asked for two years’ salary in exchange for an agreement to retire in 1988, at age 66. It was, he recalled, “the fastest negotiation anyone had seen” (p. 260).

Duberman directs some tough love at Zinn’s publications. He gives Zinn substantial credit for including material left out of standard texts and for adding momentum to a shift away from “triumphalist” themes. He indicts him,
however, for assigning noble motives only to members of the working-class and minorities and for presenting negative, one-dimensional views of those in authority. Duberman points out, for example, that Zinn should have acknowledged that Abraham Lincoln was part of a small minority of Americans who believed that all human beings, regardless of race, had natural rights, and should have credited the sixteenth president’s substantial contributions to the abolition of slavery. Although Zinn hoped that his book would act as a guide to radical action, Duberman speculates that its tales of “high hopes dashed, labor unions crushed, reform movements thwarted, and industrial strikes defeated” might actually have had the unintended consequence of leading readers to conclude that opposition to the system, “miserable as it is,” is futile (p. 233).

Duberman frequently supplements his assessments of Zinn’s career and scholarship with his own views of political and social issues. Sometimes he intervenes on Zinn’s behalf. On the issue of dissent, he writes, Howard “might have responded” to the critique of Lyndon Johnson’s Assistant Secretary of State Charles Frankel (who resigned to protest the administration’s Vietnam War policy) “that he didn’t regard the principle of civil disobedience to mean that the law can be broken at all times, under all circumstances,” but rather that the law “should not be regarded as automatically inviolable” (p. 142). Taking off from Zinn’s observation in *The Southern Mystique* (1962) that race prejudice was alive and well in the North, Duberman asserts that, “to a significant extent it still is today” (p. 65), and introduces information about the median household incomes of blacks and whites in 2009, incarceration rates, residential segregation and the re-segregation of schools. Duberman scorns liberal gradualists who claimed that the 1964 Civil Rights Act “gave blacks all that they’d been asking for or needed” (p. 131) and “continue to argue that electoral politics is the best avenue to social change” (p. 66). He insists that, since 1965, “little more than tokenism has been achieved, with no fundamental change in school desegregation or voting rights” (p. 107).

This book, in fact, is filled with *obiter dicta*, only tangentially connected to Howard Zinn. Confessing ignorance about whether Howard and Roz Zinn made a commitment to sexual monogamy, Duberman cites studies indicating “that monogamy is neither natural nor easy,” but that people who choose an “open marriage” are no happier. “There are those” who decide to ignore their partner’s infidelities even if they are hurt by them, he adds, and others “who feel that emotional monogamy plus short-term sexual relationships can be a highly successful formula for maintaining a good lifelong relationship” (p. 189).

Duberman laments that Zinn “put next to nothing on the record” about Jimmy Carter’s “egregious abandonment” of efforts to achieve full employment, his deference to large corporations and his massive increases in “the already huge military budget” (p. 242). He blasts Ronald Reagan for not men-
tioning AIDS until five years into the epidemic and “then coldly” refusing to provide government assistance to the afflicted because “the degenerates had brought the scourge on themselves” (p. 257). He declares President Obama’s health-care plan “ill-considered” and calls for “the kind of guaranteed income idea which might finally tame the confounding poverty . . . that for far too long has inexcusably confined many Americans to a marginal existence” (p. 172). In noting that Zinn “would have loved” the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, he reads into the record “the radical and persuasive model of human nature as innately affiliative, egalitarian, sharing, and trusting” that has been recently introduced by anthropologists who are theorists of altruism (p. 256).

Duberman’s overall assessment of Howard Zinn as a person and a professional should command the attention of all historians. Zinn, he implies, was less an original thinker than an American original. Anything but self-centered, he suggests, Zinn could be self-absorbed, paying so much attention to a public issue or event that he seemed oblivious to the needs of those around him. Duberman turns a criticism—that Zinn was a popularizer and an agitator—into a badge of honor. To be sure, his published work was polemical, distorted and, at times, inaccurate. He did, however, help pave the way for textbook accounts that included the lives of ordinary people and those in dissent against the status quo. And he helped many academics see that they had a responsibility to act as public intellectuals and “as citizens, not simply as specialists” (p. 317). “These accomplishments alone,” Duberman concludes—more, I suspect, as an article of faith than as a prediction—“should be enough to secure Howard’s reputation” (p. 318).

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