

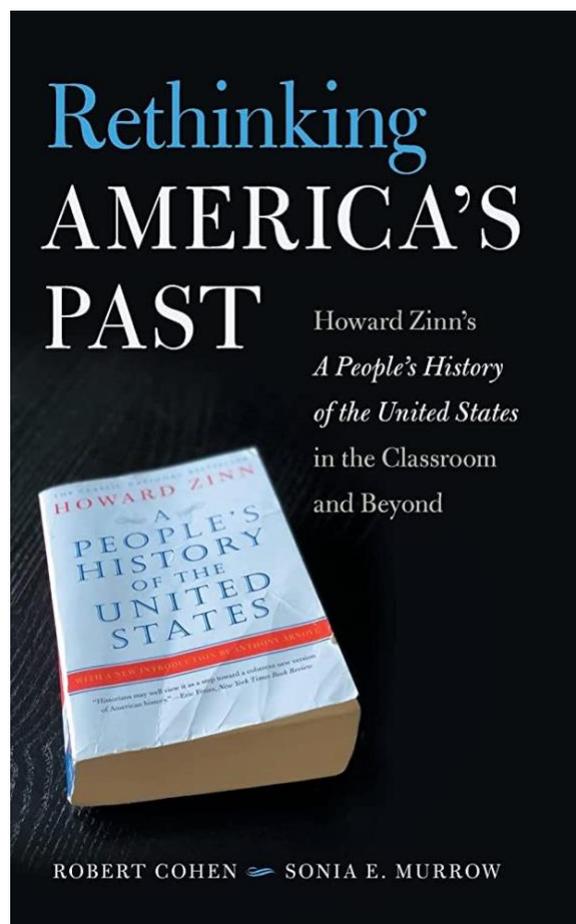
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Review

Rethinking America's Past: Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* in the Classroom and Beyond

by Barbara Winslow



ROBERT COHEN, AND SONIA MURROW. *RETHINKING AMERICA'S PAST: HOWARD ZINN'S A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES IN THE CLASSROOM AND BEYOND*. ATHENS: UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA PRESS, 2021

Robert Cohen, and Sonia Murrow. *Rethinking America's Past: Howard Zinn's A People's History of the United States in the Classroom and Beyond*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2021

Rethinking America's Past: Howard Zinn's A People's History of the United States in the Classroom and Beyond could not have come at a more decisive moment in US history. 2022 marked Zinn's one hundredth birthday. Organizations and institutes such as the Zinn Education Project and Rethinking Schools are celebrating his work. *Rethinking America's Past*, comes at a time when Zinn's *People's History*, in addition to the New York Times' Pulitzer Prize winning *1619 Project*, are coming under attack for being dangerous and subversive by the former US president, countless right-wing governors, federal and local congressional representatives, as well as extremist state and county boards of education. Teachers in the public, independent, even some charter and religious schools, as well as professors in the academy, are appalled and terrified at the almost D-Day like assaults on public education, teachers, teaching, reading, and thinking. These attacks are not only confined to book banning but also on the standard social studies and history curriculum in the schools. What is so astonishing, perplexing, troubling, and enraging is, given the attacks on Zinn and history education, so little attention has been paid to Cohen and Murrow's thoroughly researched, original, and accessible book, which demonstrates a deep knowledge of social studies education, US history, and US history education.

Cohen and Murrow are professors at New York University and Brooklyn College/CUNY respectively. Both are teacher educators, scholars, and activists committed to studying the practice of urban education and teaching social studies and history to urban students. (Disclaimer: Sonia Murrow was a colleague of mine in the Secondary Education Department in the School of Education at Brooklyn College, where she directs the Social Studies Education Program).

Rethinking America's Past is not a paean to Zinn, but rather an analysis behind the popularity and usefulness of Zinn's book, especially with secondary social studies and US history teachers. Cohen and Murrow review the historiography of history education before Zinn, reminding readers that not so long ago most history taught in classrooms and in the academy was about elite white men, the wars they fought, and the nations they (mis)led. For the most part, racial, class, gender, and ethnicity conflict did not exist in US history textbooks. It almost seems that the purpose of the social studies and history curriculum was to make the subject of history as boring and uninteresting as possible for teachers and students. There were, however, many teachers who wanted their students to love history and engage with the materials as well as students who were eager to find something exciting in their classrooms. The authors review the impact of Zinn's book on both secondary school teachers and teaching as well as his influence on academic historians.

One of the most exciting chapters, "In High School Classroom," provides a case study of how *A People's History*

has been used in the classroom. The Tamiment Library in New York City contains the Zinn archive which contains thousands of teacher and student letters and their emails describing how Zinn's book is used in classrooms. One extraordinary teacher, Bill Patterson, who taught in two conservative, white middle-class Oregon suburbs, decided to challenge his students' assumptions, or rather lack of knowledge, about US history. He paired Zinn's *People's History* along with the assigned textbook to provide a contrast to the standard historical narrative. Far from indoctrinating students as the right-wing claims, students were thrilled to know that historians disagreed, debated, and argued. They couldn't believe that they could critique and criticize historians, including their own teachers. They began to understand that historical knowledge did not mean memorization of presidential dates and wars. Rather they could make determinations, based upon reading original documents, informed by their own personal experiences, to understand the contested and complicated nature of history and that there was no absolute truth in history.

Reading Chapter Four, "Dear Mr. Zinn," was an eye-opener. Although Cohen and Murray reference Bill Patterson's students' letters to Zinn in an earlier chapter, reading the students' letters documents the life-changing experience Patterson's students had reading Zinn. Rebecca Mayer writes,

The Sacco and Vanzetti affair was one of those that sticks out in my memory. Not only was the story new to me, but the concept that someone could be convicted of a crime that they may not have committed. I realize that for an 18-year-old to just be discovering this is naïve, but remember, I grew up in suburban, middle class ... Oregon" (100-101).

Mayer credits Patterson and Zinn with her becoming a public librarian.

Cohen and Murrow also showcase those students who disagreed or were angry with Zinn; some even questioned his patriotism. Amanda, a junior in one of Patterson's classes, wrote that Zinn's chapter on Christopher Columbus and the Indians "made me mad. To me Christopher Columbus is a hero I strongly disagree with every section in your book." She then criticizes other aspects of *A People's History*, questioning and critiquing chapters on the Japanese internment and the Philippine-American and Vietnam wars. Despite her negative assessment of the book, she ends up complimenting Zinn: "you aren't a 'sheep' ... that follows the average crowd" (103-104). To my amazement, I wonder how many academic historians today would spend as much time replying to a high school student's letter as did Zinn who replied at length to Amanda's queries thanking and encouraging her.

The letters Cohen and Murrow showcase could also serve as a teaching guide. Teachers could assign students to write letters about something they learned in class or some issue that interests them to other teachers, historians, elected representatives, family members, or other public persons. Such an exercise might not only help them with their writing skills but also with assessing source materials and constructing historical arguments. The letters that

Cohen and Murrow reprint cover the gamut from praise to outright hostility. But they demonstrate that the students were thoroughly engaged in Zinn's arguments, and most, even the most hostile, were appreciative that they were able to see other points of view.

An important chapter, "Retrospective and Reviews," details how Zinn has been evaluated by academic historians. Of course, he has been reviled by the right – politicians, pundits as well as tenured professors – most notably Oscar Handlin's review in the *American Scholar* ("Arawaks," Autumn, 1980). Liberal and left-wing historians have also criticized the book, often for his treatment of Indigenous struggles; race, in particular slavery; and women. Eric Foner, Pulitzer prize-winning historian who praised Zinn's book as a "necessary corrective" expressed the most common criticism of Zinn (one in which I share): Zinn offered "an over simplified narrative of the battle between forces of light and darkness," as well as a tendency to portray underrepresented people as either "rebels" or "victims," ignoring those who led "less dramatic but more typical lives" (186-187). Recognizing the importance of Foner's and other sympathetic historians' critiques, Cohen and Murrow push back explaining the reasoning behind Zinn's emphasis on Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal policies or his refusal to include electoral politics, in particular the two-party system. These, Zinn believed, elevated elections and politicians away from the narrative he wished to emphasize: the struggle for social justice and equality.

What is missing from Cohen's and Murrow's chapter on the critiques of Zinn, and one I wish had been included, is an analysis of Sam Wineberg's excoriation of *A People's History*. Wineberg, the Margaret Jacks Professor of Education at Stanford University, Director of the Stanford History Education Group, wrote an eight-page review denouncing the book as "dogmatic" and "dangerous." Then in September 2018 he wrote in an essay, "Howard Zinn's Anti-Textbook": "Teachers and students love a People's History of the United States, but it's as limited and close-minded as the textbook it replaces" *Slate* (16 September 2018). Wineberg argues that Zinn's book is basically no different from established US history texts. Zinn "speaks with thunderous certainty," and his "power of persuasion extinguishes students' ability to think and speaks directly to their hearts." Ultimately, writes Wineberg, the book is dangerous because "many teachers view *A People's History* as an anti-textbook, a corrective to the narratives of progress dispensed by the state." Teachers and historians at the Zinn Education Project (zinnedproject.org) disputed Wineberg's claims, the most important being that Wineberg did not even mention how teachers use the Zinn materials in their lesson plans and classroom materials or students' reactions to the Zinn book. They add that Wineberg assumes that teachers and students are passive victims of Zinn's extraordinary charisma. Murrow and Cohen's chapter would be stronger if they weighed in on the Wineberg/Zinn debate. After all, they both acknowledge that Wineberg is one of the most influential scholars for those who study historical cognition, and his critiques cannot be easily dismissed. Much of Wineberg's concerns are addressed in chapters three and

four, the ones dealing with Patterson's classroom teaching and the letters to "Mr. Zinn," but not by Cohen and Murrow.

Rethinking ends with Zinn and popular culture. Historians who watch movies were probably amazed by the memorable scene in the Academy Award winning movie, *Good Will Hunting*, when its protagonist Will Hunting, played by Matt Damon, challenged his therapist, played by Robin Williams, "If you want to read a real history book read Howard Zinn's *People's History of the United States*. It will fucking knock you off your ass." And if you were a fan of the Sopranos, you couldn't help but be fascinated by the confrontation between mafia boss Tony Soprano and his son Al, who was reading Zinn's chapter on Christopher Columbus. Al believes the story must be true because "it's in my history book." Tony responds, "so you finally read a book and it's bullshit," and "in this household Christopher Columbus is a hero. End of story" (239).

Murrow and Cohen attribute Zinn's cultural popularity to Zinn's understanding of the importance of mass media and the appeal of the performing arts. After all, Zinn was a playwright: "Emma" (1975) about the anarchist Emma Goldman, "Daughter of Venus" (1985) about nuclear disarmament, and "Marx in Soho" (1999), and made a number of television and audio recordings. He was, as his critics and admirers would agree, an extraordinarily charismatic public speaker. He enlightened audiences with his knowledge as well with his wicked sense of humor. He was less interested in academics than in ordinary people, the same people his books lauded. His many admirers included prize-winning writers Kurt Vonnegut, Studs Terkel, and John Sayles; former students; the novelist Alice Walker; and children's rights activist Marian Wright Edelman. Performing artists Damon, Chris Moore, and Anthony Arnone directed a documentary, *The People Speak*, inspired, and narrated by Zinn. Cohen and Murrow explain why these public figures were drawn to Zinn's work, and why they were excited and honored to be involved in the Zinn project. In 2017 *The People Speak* came to a sold out, wildly enthusiastic audience at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. There were large contingents of Brooklyn high school and college students in attendance. Staceyann Chin, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Deva Mahal, Aasif Mandvi, Frances McDormand, Peter Sarsgaard, Stew and Heidi Rodewald, David Strathairn, and Marisa Tomei read aloud the words, speeches, and poems of dissenters and dreamers. *The People Speak* continues to be performed at high schools, colleges, and other public accessible venues. Zinn never wavered from his belief that the words of hitherto little known or completely unknown radicals would inspire future generations.

Rethinking America's Past does not necessarily need to be read by teachers who work with the Zinn Education Project. Although they should. They already know Zinn's value, although I am sure they would find the material in *Rethinking* very reassuring in this very difficult time for history teachers. They might find new arguments to rebut the anti-education activists who wish to force feed students with the boring-great-white-men-who-made-America-the-greatest history. Teachers who harbor misconceptions and disagreements about Zinn's *People's History* might change their mind or be open to some other points of view after

reading *Rethinking*. My hope is that more academic historians read this important book. Too many look down upon secondary school social studies and history teachers. After reading *Rethinking*, they would have a better understanding of the importance of history education in the schools and the central roles that history teachers play in preparing their students for a better understanding of history. Some academics might even be surprised at Zinn's level of scholarship as well as his partnership with leading historians. Finally, some might want to work with teachers and get involved in history education in their schools and communities.

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