Agit-Prof

Howard Zinn's influential mutilations of American history.

By David Greenberg

IN THE 1980S, IN THE FACULTY-FILLED suburbs west of Boston, the historian Howard Zinn was something of a folk hero. The *Boston Globe*, where Zinn published a column, ran stories of his battles with the dictatorial John Silber, the president of Boston University, who cracked down on unions, censored student protests, and denied pay raises to enemies such as Zinn. When it was learned that the National Labor Relations Board had reinstated service workers who had been fired for striking, or that the courts upheld a student's right to hang a "divest" banner from his window, a wave of satisfaction would surge from Cambridge to Brookline to Newton to Wellesley. As Silber's chief nemesis, Zinn—handsome in profile, gentle in manner—made for a winning poster boy for anyone who reviled Silber's high-handed rule.

As a faculty brat in those years, I was doubly enamored of Zinn after a classmate gave me *A People's History of the United States*, his now-famous victims'-eye panorama of the American experience. In my adolescent rebelliousness, I thrilled to Zinn's deflation of what he presented as the myths of standard-issue history. Do you know that the Declaration of Independence charged King George with fomenting slave rebellions and

Howard Zinn: A Life on the Left By Martin Duberman | New Press, 365 pp., $26.95

attacks from "merciless Indian Savages"? That James Polk started a war with Mexico as a pretext for annexing California? That Eugene Debs was jailed for calling World War I a war of conquest and plunder? Perhaps you do, if you are moderately well-read in American history. And if you are very well-read, you also know that these statements themselves are problematic simplifications. But like most sixteen-year-olds, I didn't know any of this. Mischievously–subversively–*A People's History* whispered that everything I had learned in school was a sugar-coated fairy tale, if not a deliberate lie. Now I knew.

What I didn't realize what that the orthodox version of the American past that Howard Zinn spent his life debunking was by the 1980s no longer quite as hegemonic as Zinn made out. Even my high school history teacher marked Columbus Day by explaining that the celebrated "discoverer" of America had plundered Hispaniola for its gold and that, in acts of barbarism that would later be classified as genocide, Columbus's men had butchered the native Arawaks, slicing off limbs for sport and turning their scrotums into change-purses. (This last detail stuck vividly in the teenage mind.) That Mr. MacDougall was conversant with radical scholarship such as Zinn's suggests that much had changed from the days when Zinn himself had imbibed uncritical schoolbook accounts of the American story. True, in the popular books and public ceremonies of the 1980s, you could still find a whitewashed tale of the nation's past, as you can today; and many cities around the country shielded their charges from such heresies. But as far as historians were concerned, the sacred cows that Howard Zinn was purporting to gore had already been slaughtered many times. As Jon Wiener noted in the *Journal of American History*, "during the early seventies ... of all the changes in the profession, the institutionalization of radical history was the most remarkable."

It is no secret that the radical historians of the 1960s–and more basically, the infusion of that decade's fiercely questioning spirit into intellectual life–transformed historical inquiry. Almost half a century has now passed since a new tide of work upended interpretations of subjects from the Civil War to the Cold War and legitimized whole fields of research, notably Afro-American history and women's history. In short order, these new fields and frameworks became central to the discipline. This mainstreaming of radical history owes more to the flow of deep currents of academic thought than it does to the person of Howard Zinn. But Zinn deserves a share of responsibility. As Martin Duberman notes in his interesting but flawed biography of Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* has long been a publishing sensation, having sold more than two million copies in thirty-plus years, and its transgressive vapors still beguile young minds. To be sure, when they get to college, many of these students continue to read books, including works of history. And some of them come to realize that Zinn's famous book is–for reasons that Duberman admirably makes clear–a pretty lousy piece of work.

MARTIN DUBERMAN IS HIMSELF A veteran of the 1960s generation, an admired and pathbreaking historian who began his career writing on Charles Francis Adams and James Russell Lowell and went on to pioneer the study of gay history. He knew Zinn and shared his politics, yet he narrates Zinn's life fairly and dispassionately. And also, alas, diffidently: there is a conspicuous refusal throughout the book to comment on Zinn's more outrageous or obtuse political positions. Duberman quotes Zinn at the time of Robert Kennedy's murder saying that the American people's collective anguish constituted "one of the great acts of hypocrisy in world history.... If we were to tell the truth, we would say that murderers are wearing mourning clothes today.... Is murder only the killing of important men by unimportant men? Is it not also the killing of unimportant men by important men? Are not governments the greatest murderers of all?" Duberman does not remark upon, or even register, the perversity of this reaction.

Also troubling, Duberman descends into needlessly snide or polemical asides, to the detriment of the credibility he elsewhere takes pains to uphold. This is how he summarizes a conversation between Nixon and Kissinger about bombing Cambodia: "In other words, Let's git us a little mass murder." Elsewhere, sympathizing with Zinn's dim view of the justice system, Duberman writes: "Presidential pardons are reserved for the likes of Richard Nixon and his vice president Spiro Agnew." The offhand sarcasm here is compounded by a factual error–Agnew was never pardoned–which, unfortunately, is not an isolated one. Duberman awards Daniel Patrick Moynihan the title of senator while he is still in the Nixon White House, and Lyndon Johnson, never known as a religious zealot, is morphed into Ann Coulter, discordantly described by Duberman as endorsing "the country's mission to spread Christianity and 'democracy.'" Duberman's account of Zinn's life is free from snark, but it suffers from the opposite vice: an overly familiar tone creeps into his prose, particularly when he comes to Zinn's personal relations. He takes up the touchy subject of Zinn's extramarital affairs, which is fair enough, but when he reports that Zinn's wife learned of these liaisons, Duberman dilates at length on whether "they initially and explicitly committed to sexual monogamy." This is not what one picks up a biography of Howard Zinn to know.

Duberman draws judiciously from interviews, a passel of letters, and Zinn's own memoirs to reconstruct his subject's early life. Born in 1922, the son of immigrants from Russia and Ukraine, Zinn grew up in a hardscrabble, working-class Brooklyn household. Zinn's father Eddie sold fruit from a pushcart and, during the Depression, dug ditches and cleaned windows. When Eddie ordered a complete set of Dickens's works from an ad in the *New York Post*, Howard devoured every volume. By his late teens, his reading had veered into politics, especially Marxism. Duberman suggests that unlike some friends, Zinn refrained from joining the Communist Party, which at the time of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939 was losing its allure. On this point Duberman contradicts, among others, August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, who write in *Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915-1980* that Zinn was "an active party member for almost a decade." Whatever the truth, Zinn's lifelong leftism was forged in those years.

For many young men World War II was a clarifying event, curing them of the isolationism or pacifism that had been in vogue after World War I. Zinn traveled the opposite route. Having joined the air force in 1943, he emerged from his wartime service scarred by America's remorseless use of its military. In the war's last weeks, Zinn later recalled, his squadron was ordered to use a horrific new weapon, called napalm, on a French resort town–solely, he believed, to test its potency. He concluded that in "modern warfare, being massive, indiscriminate killing of people is a means so horrendous

that no end can justify it ... to retaliate against violence with more violence [is] to multiply the cruelties which you set out to stop." After reading John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, Zinn decided that the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan was an indefensible atrocity. While not endorsing a moral equivalence between fascism and liberalism, Zinn found the flaws of the latter, not the former, gnawing at him—an unusual position, to say the least, in the time of the Holocaust.

After college on the G.I. Bill at what is now New York University, Zinn enrolled at Columbia to pursue a Ph.D. in history, continuing his political activities around New York City. He wrote a creditable dissertation, on Fiorello La Guardia, which is still occasionally cited by scholars and which would constitute Zinn's only sustained engagement with archival documents. The well-received manuscript earned Zinn an offer from Albert Manley, the president of Spelman College, the black women's college in Atlanta, to chair the school's history and social sciences department. So in 1956, Zinn, his wife, and their two young children packed up their Chevrolet and headed South. At Spelman, the fledgling civil rights movement was attracting the middle-class black college students who would become its vanguard. Zinn's apartment provided a gathering place for the young activists.

The fight for racial equality consumed his time at Spelman, and he became an adviser to the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, formed during the lunch counter sit-ins of 1960. Zinn poured his heart into this historic and righteous undertaking, bringing him into contact with the movement's leaders. He would remain loyal to the SNCC even after its controversial ouster in 1966 of its chairman John Lewis in favor of Stokely Carmichael, to the dismay of Martin Luther King, Jr., Bayard Rustin, and other national movement leaders. Zinn's activism led to his second book, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, charitably described by Duberman as "an on-the-spot work of reportage"—personal observation might be a better term—"rather than a comprehensive scholarly account."

Also appearing in 1964 was *The Southern Mystique*, a collection of Zinn's writings on civil rights (mostly published previously), which promised to herald his arrival as an intellectual force. It was reviewed by C. Vann Woodward, Ralph Ellison, and Lillian Smith, but none found much to admire in it beyond Zinn's agreeable prose and nature. They called his arguments shallow and mystifyingly detached from any discussion of the South's unique historical experience. But if Zinn's stature as a thinker failed to rise in these years, Duberman writes, his profile as an activist did, as his "flair for the theatrical" and his "genius at engaging an audience" won him speaking invitations and requests from leftist causes.

Although Zinn ran afoul of various nasty Southern martinets in the civil rights years, his worst antagonist turned out to be Spelman's own president, Albert Manley. The university's first black leader, Manley was "strict and autocratic," Duberman writes; "forced to walk a tightrope between a limited endowment and white racist power," he frowned on his students' activism and Zinn's encouragement of it. In 1963, Manley fired Zinn, ostensibly on scholarly grounds. Zinn mistakenly believed that he had tenure—how such an extraordinary confusion came to pass is not fully explained—and asked the American Association of University Professors for help. In the negotiations, Manley threatened to publicize an old incident in which local police found Zinn and a Spelman student alone in his car at night at the end of a cul-de-sac. Zinn insisted that nothing sexual had occurred, but he still did not want his wife, who was prone to depression, to find out. What really happened? Duberman says there is no way to know. Manley refused to yield, and the AAUP dropped the case. Zinn secured an offer from the government department of Boston University, and the family returned north.

AS ZINN WAS THROWING HIMSELF into the SNCC, many of his peers in the historical profession were throwing themselves into scholarship. Some were hard at work overturning the central assumptions of their fields, challenging what John Higham had labeled the "consensus" history of their predecessors—so called because this older generation had tended to discern patterns of ideological agreement in the American past more than the persistence of class struggle. In truth, while consensus historians did stress the relative placidity of America's experience compared to Europe's, they were not the Cold War cheerleaders that their successors caricatured. Some of them—C. Vann Woodward, Kenneth Stampp, John Hope Franklin, and even those favorite New Left whipping boys Richard Hofstadter and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.—produced work that was in its own way powerfully revisionist, in some cases paving the way for the radicals who followed. Still, it was the young generation of the 1960s that broke open the limits of what constituted legitimate and respected history.

The shifts that the radical historians of the 1960s triggered were diverse enough to defy encapsulation. A strict taxonomy might demarcate differences between the self-consciously Marxist work of an early wave, whose members included current or former Communists, Trotskyists, and Schachtmanites, and that of a younger cohort who listed toward anarchism and the counterculture. It might also distinguish between the earlier work of figures such as James Weinstein and Christopher Lasch, which focused on politics with a strong anti-liberal bent, and the "new social history" of the early 1970s, which tended to avoid or downplay politics except in the loosest sense, preferring investigations into social mobility, family life, or other topics that fell under the rubric of "history from the bottom up." Radical history had other distinguishing traits, too, including an anti-Cold War framework that looked cynically at American motives abroad and—too often—benignly on the Soviet Union's; and, at a methodological level, a disdain for the hoary conceit of objectivity, with some radicals maintaining that research should be unapologetically yoked to the political agenda of the New Left.

Zinn shared many of these tenets. He relentlessly criticized American policy and seems to have stayed silent about the Soviet Union. He wrote of his commitment to "value-laden historiography" and declared that historical research should be carried out to serve present-day political ends. Yet for all these affinities, Zinn remained aloof from the intellectual ferment of the seminar rooms, journal offices, and conferences where radical history was being born. At Wisconsin, where William Appleman Williams's jaundiced view of America's global role was most influential, the start-up journal *Studies on the Left* published work by Eugene Genovese, Ronald Radosh, Lloyd Gardner, Gabriel Kolko, and Staughton Lynd—the last a close friend of Zinn's at Spelman in the early '60s—but never Zinn. Nor did Zinn ever write for a journal of later vintage, the *Radical History Review*. Nor,

according to Duberman, did he "participate in the necessary but time-consuming efforts that others ... devotedly put into establishing the Radical Historians Caucus of the American Historical Association" or other professional ventures.

Zinn expressed his radicalism through activism–first on the Vietnam War (he sympathized with the NLF) and then on a host of successor issues, on and off campus. That activism, more than his writing, came to constitute his public identity. In 1971, Boston University hired a new president whose authoritarian tendencies made Spelman's Manley look like Mister Rogers. John Silber, swaggering in from Texas, had a vendetta against the left, especially professors who politicized their research. But Silber's ostensible concern for academic freedom was belied by his tyrannical style. Heedless of due process, intolerant of dissent, Silber imposed his will on the faculty and students, generating only more unrest. And Zinn became Silber's archenemy, subject to capricious punishments and unwarranted invective. Duberman reports that when Zinn received an offer to teach in Paris and secured Herbert Marcuse to teach in his stead, Silber vetoed what should have been a routine leave of absence. Silber also denied Zinn promotions and raises for years. In 1982, with help from the AAUP, he won an appeal to gain his long-withheld back pay.

That Zinn deserved sympathy for his victimization by Silber, however, does not mean that his own ideas or pursuits were admirable. And Duberman, though averse to scrutinizing Zinn's political views, is quite prepared to take on his callow notions about higher education. At B.U., Zinn regularly and cavalierly denounced prevailing academic standards, arguing that the university should teach "relevant" subjects and forego what he described as the "endless academic discussion" of "trivial or esoteric inquiry" that goes "nowhere into the real world." Duberman doesn't buy it. Relevance is an uncertain guide to those embarked on a long, tortuous path of scholarship. And the question of which topics are "trivial or esoteric," Duberman notes, is hardly self-evident. The academic gatekeepers of the early 1960s would surely have deemed much of the "endless academic discussion" taken up by the New Left historians–was the class consciousness of workers forged on or off the shop floor?–to be inconsequential or arcane; yet to those who could glean what was at stake in the debate, the questions were significant. Zinn never seems to have grasped that scholarship differs from more perishable forms of writing precisely in that it begins in a freedom to explore topics that may appear remote from today's pressing concerns but that can still change our understanding of the world.

DUBERMAN IS EXCEEDINGLY GRACIOUS toward Zinn, praising his warm heart, his honorable intentions, his noble commitments. One could almost miss the damning portrait of Zinn's thinking that ultimately emerges. But damning it is: just as his thoughts on scholarship appear jejune, so Zinn himself–his measure taken in full–comes across as a lazy, conventional theorist, with an undeveloped political philosophy. Zinn's Marxism, for example, was muddled: "He never considered himself an ideologue," Duberman writes. "Howard found the Marxian idea of redistributing society's wealth according to need a congenial one, but he also felt considerable attraction to the anarchists' anti-authoritarian stance. He was even willing to acknowledge now and then that capitalism had 'developed the economy in an enormously impressive way,' increasing 'geometrically the number of goods available'–though failing to distribute them justly." In the end, Duberman concludes, "Howard, in fact, wasn't much interested in political theory, nor did he pretend to have a creative, original contribution to make in that regard." Duberman is kind to spare Zinn the burden of working out his own "creative, original" philosophy, but the shortcoming cannot be so easily excused, given Zinn's ambitions, any more than we can excuse Zinn's trite calls for politically useful history. Duberman makes it easy to see why Zinn earned Silber's contempt.

WHAT LIBERATED ZINN FROM SILBER'S fist was the publication of *A People's History of the United States* in 1980. The book sold well and garnered an American Book Award

White Ashes

by Liam Hysjulien

My dentist tells me about his dying white ash trees growing near the power lines.

The blight that pulls apart
the roots, telling us we aren't getting any younger.

The tooth, he says, has its own widening rings;
each line not age but episodes. All tied

together with veins at our center.

I'm always apologizing as tiny utensils

spread my mouth open.

Apologizing for all my shortcomings.

For time wasted.
And the tiny lies he must now be discovering.

My dentist says, I'll give them another summer,
those trees I planted, that I dug out

and trenched when I was twenty years younger.

When my children weren't yet children. When my wife and I
listened to the wind howl through our sea

of cypresses, and like teeth,

one fell, and like teeth, another—snapped and broken down the middle.

As we talk, I taste blood, bone, and metal.

nomination. In the years after its publication, it consistently found new readers, especially after Matt Damon—who as a boy lived next door to Zinn—plugged it in the film *Good Will Hunting*. Damon later turned the book into a History Channel series, and in time it also launched a raft of spin-offs. By Zinn's final years—he died in 2010—the franchise was earning him some $200,000 annually.

A People's History caught the imagination of the public, or a portion of it, for several reasons. Foremost was its uncomplicated and ideologically attractive message, enlivened by Zinn's palpable passion and customarily lucid prose. An easily drinkable blend of the radical history that was now ripe on the vine, the book gave readers the American experience as seen by the losers and the victims. Or as Zinn memorably put it: "the discovery of America from the viewpoint of the Arawaks, of the Constitution from the standpoint of the slaves, of Andrew Jackson as seen by the Cherokees, of the Civil War as seen by the New York Irish ... the Gilded Age as seen by southern farmers, the First World War as seen by socialists, the Second World War as seen by pacifists, the New Deal as seen by blacks in Harlem, the postwar American empire as seen by peons in Latin America." In casting himself in solidarity with grassroots movements of protest, Zinn found a winning formula: how could you not root for Zinn and his rag-tag cast of plucky underdogs against the slaveholders, robber barons, imperialists, and protectors of privilege?

Zinn justified his overt display of sympathy with a stark methodological declaration. He abjured any pretense of having written a comprehensive or balanced account. Having long ago disavowed objectivity, having dismissed even the hope of unpoliticized scholarship, Zinn stated plainly that he meant to take sides. Since "selection, simplification, [and] emphasis" were "inevitable," what mattered was only which selections, simplifications, and emphases the historian chose. And while the canons of academic culture might hold that those choices, those acts of historical interpretation, were "technical problems of excellence," Zinn said that they constituted "tools for contending social classes, races, nations." Thus, even more than its sympathies for the proper set of good guys, *A People's History* enchanted readers with its knowing iconoclasm. The Constitution, the Civil War, the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima—all were self-serving acts, Zinn said, perpetrated by those in power to maintain power. In the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate era, this stance was alluring. To ascribe noble or even mixed motives to the powerful was to fall into a retrograde naïveté; but to share Zinn's blanket contempt for society's elites conferred a hip, superior cynicism. Moreover, it wasn't just the particulars of American history that Zinn's book claimed to expose: it was the enterprise of scholarly history itself. In reducing previous scholars' interpretive arguments to "tools for contending social classes, races, nations," Zinn was in effect saying that Big-Time History—with its formidable air of authority, its footnotes and archival documentation, its vetting by communities of expert scholars—had really just served to shore up the power of established elites and put down stirrings of protest.

Upon its publication, *A People's History* won some kind words from critics praising its author's effort to transmit the new academic arguments of the 1960s and 1970s to wider audiences. But on the whole the reviews were not kind. The cultural historian Michael Kammen called the book a "scissors-and-paste-pot job" and deemed the book's "bottom up" history to be "as unsatisfactory as 'elitist' history." He pointed out that it was not too much to expect a book of 600 pages to include America's "grandeur as well as tragedy, magnanimity as well as muddle, honor as well as shame." In the *New York Times*, Eric Foner, something of a radical historian himself, explained why Zinn's bugaboo of "balance" was a red herring: historians are obliged to explore the viewpoints of elite actors, however unattractive, not to parcel out sympathy in proper proportions, but to show, in a faithful account of the past, the interconnectedness of the rulers and ruled, and of all strata of society, and how one group's experiences influence another's. But Zinn reduced historical analysis to political opinion. He assessed a work of history by its author's partisan loyalties, not its arguments about causation, influence, motivation, significance, experience, or other problems he deemed "technical" in nature.

Despite his soft spot for Zinn personally, Duberman doesn't flinch from rehearsing these and other flaws. "Sometimes *A People's History* lacks nuance," he writes (ever so gently), "with the world divided into oppressors and oppressed, villains or heroes." Not only did this division devolve quickly into Manichaeism; it also trivialized Zinn's own heroes by depicting their labors as ineffectual. "The history of the U.S.," Duberman notes, "is treated as mainly the story of relentless exploitation and deceit." Even the civil rights movement is regarded in *A People's History* as little more than a brief surge of activism that ended in burned-out ghettos, persistent inequality, continued racial conflict, and white indifference.

Yet when it comes to Zinn's demand for history to be judged for its political utility, Duberman is finally too indulgent. He can never bring himself to say that the fatal flaw of Zinn's historical work is the shallowness, indeed the fallaciousness, of his critique of scholarly detachment. Zinn rests satisfied with what strikes him as the scandalous revelation that claims of objectivity often mask ideological predilections. Imagine! And on the basis of this sophomoric insight, he renounces the ideals of objectivity and empirical responsibility, and makes the dubious leap to the notion that a historian need only lay his ideological cards on the table and tell whatever history he chooses. He aligns himself with the famous line from the British historian James Anthony Froude, who asked rhetorically if history "was like a child's box

The fatal flaw of Zinn's historical work is the shallowness of his critique of scholarly detachment.

of letters, with which we can spell any word we please. We have only to pick out such letters as we want, arrange them as we like, and say nothing about those which do not suit our purpose." Froude made this observation in the middle of the nineteenth century.

MARTIN DUBERMAN, THEN, SHOWS himself to be a more subtle and probing historian than Howard Zinn. He navigates artfully between sympathy and criticism, recognizing complexity where Zinn prefers simplicity. But in the end Zinn matters to us not because of his own scholarly contributions, which were meager, but as an expression of the radical history of the 1960s. Unfortunately, Duberman is not particularly clear-eyed about–or much given to examine–the merits of radical history itself, of which Zinn was only a small part. Perhaps hemmed in by his own political leanings, Duberman mostly avoids the larger set of questions.

The tenet of radical history that has aged least well is its subordination of analytical problems to political sympathies. The New Left historians were hardly the first cohort of scholars to enlist history in the service of a political crusade or a social agenda. The idea was put forward, in different form, by the Progressive historians of Charles Beard's time, notably James Harvey Robinson, and many subsequent schools and individuals later embraced it, including some of the Cold War anti-Communists against whom the New Left historians were rebelling. Conversely, many scholarly-minded radical historians grasped the foolishness, even the danger, of allowing present-day politics to shape one's readings of past events. It was Christopher Lasch who decried "the worst features of progressive historiography reappear[ing] under the auspices of the new left: drastic simplification of issues; ... reading present concerns back into the past; strident partisanship." Quoting Zinn's directive for historians to decide "from a particular ethical base what is the action-need of the moment and to concentrate on that aspect of the truth-complex which fulfills that need," Lasch growled: "In the face of such critics, the consensus historians need no defense."

The question of politicized scholarship was in fact deeply divisive not just between the "consensus" historians and the New Left historians, but also among the New Left historians themselves. Some of the young radicals, such as Lasch, Weinstein, and Genovese, insisted that the political or social influence of their scholarship would of necessity unfold slowly, incrementally, and through the sinuous, indirect paths of the culture. For all their leftist bona fides, these men agreed with their stodgy forebears that the intellectual had to hew to the highest standards of rigor; it was by the strength of their scholarship that they might revise entrenched beliefs that gave rise to the social conditions that, as a political matter, they decried. Genovese, most vociferously, flatly rejected the siren song of "relevant" history: he, too, hoped at the time for a socialist future, but he believed that it was best served by history that was true to the evidence, valid in its interpretations, and competent in its execution. This rift in the New Left between "scholars" and "activists" eventually led to the collapse of *Studies on the Left*, as well as to a donnybrook at the meeting of the American Historical Association in 1969, at which Jesse Lemisch, a leading activist, ran for association president on an insurgent plank, prompting the cantankerous Genovese–still very much a radical–to bellow from the floor that Lemisch and his allies were "totalitarians."

Lemisch's insurrection sputtered, but his and Zinn's position wormed its way into the thinking of generations of graduate students, and it is distressingly easy today to find tendentious scholarship that exhibits a Zinn-like habit of judging historical acts and actors by their contemporary utility. As much as radical history contributed invaluable new arguments and perspectives to historical scholarship, it has also left an unhappy legacy of confusing or commingling political and scholarly goals. At its most egregious, this confusion takes the form of polemical potboilers such as Zinn's or, worse, propagandistic screeds such as Peter Kuznick's and Oliver Stone's *The Untold History of the United States*. (Three decades after Zinn, five decades after William Appleman Williams, it takes chutzpah to claim that a conspiracy-laden tale about America's unremitting malice has somehow been "untold," but then one wouldn't expect Stone's history to be any more subtle than his movies.) Such cant will usually be called out by responsible historians, left, right, or center. More troubling is that "the pragmatic fallacy," as David Hackett Fischer called it, has insinuated itself into a good deal of historical literature even by respected and able historians, at a level deep enough to be nearly invisible. While excellent work is done by self-identified leftists, too much academic work today assumes such dubious premises as (to name but a few) the superiority of socialism to a mixed economy, the inherent malignancy of American intervention abroad, and the signal virtue of the left itself. Franklin Roosevelt's rescue of capitalism is routinely treated as a disappointment because he did not go all the way to socialism. Truman's suspicion of Stalin is treated as short-sightedness or war-mongering. Anti-Communism of even the most discerning sort is lumped in with McCarthyism as an expression of mass paranoia. Labor's mid-century decisions to work with management to secure good wages and benefits are seen as selling out. And too seldom is it acknowledged that throughout its history the left has operated from low motives as well as high ones, and has caused social harm as well as social improvement, and has destroyed as well as created.

Likewise, in the academic realm, left-wing radicalism has bequeathed a mixed and uneven legacy. At many times in our national experience, there have been radicals who have applied needed pressure to those in the seats of institutional power, forcing them to change unjust practices, reconsider self-serving conclusions, and honor unfulfilled principles. At such times, the radicals' work has been most salutary, bringing greater equality and justice to the political sphere, opening horizons in the intellectual world. But there have been times, too, when some radicals–political and intellectual–have embraced zealotry and maximalism, or betrayed their own ideals, and allowed their impatience with the imperfections of those in power to lead them into deluded or destructive movements. In writing as or about radicals, historians owe it to their readers to include the bad with the good, the ignoble with the noble–not in the service of "balance" but in the pursuit of intellectual honesty. The most regrettable aspect of Howard Zinn's full and lusty life is not that he chose to ignore this responsibility. It is that he never seemed aware of it in the first place. ●

David Greenberg is a professor of journalism and media studies and of history at Rutgers and the author of NIXON'S SHADOW: THE HISTORY OF AN IMAGE *(Norton), among other books.*