

Popular Historian—an Oxymoron?

By Kathy Emery

“What Zinn did was bring history writing out of the academy, and he undid much of the frankly biased and prejudiced views that came before it,” said Sean Wilentz, a professor of history at Princeton University. “But he’s a popularizer and his view of history is topsy-turvy, turning old villains into heroes, and after a while the glow gets unreal” Few historians succeeded in passing so completely through the academic membrane into popular culture.” Michael Powell, *New York Times Obituary*, January 29, 2010

“Professor Zinn writes with an enthusiasm rarely encountered in the leaden prose of academic history vivid descriptions of events that are usually ignored.” Eric Foner *New York Times Book Review of The People’s History of the United States*, 1980.

When I read Powell’s obituary of Howard Zinn, I was struck again by the contrast between the boring academy and the exciting popular culture. The professors of the academy seem to consider themselves defenders of a system threatened by popular culture. While Zinn can be praised by the academy for correcting errors in the established narrative of U.S. history, he committed an even graver error by demonstrating that the defenses of the academy are assailable. In police jargon, Zinn created a hole in the Blue Wall of Silence.

Few academics bring their understanding of the world to the world’s attention. They have little incentive to do so. They do not get tenure or, if they have tenure, they are harassed in an attempt to get them to resign. For example, Zinn had his teaching assistants taken away while simultaneously loaded down with hundreds of extra students to teach. Most academics, to keep their jobs or rise within the academic hierarchy, agree to accept the impermeability of the “academic membrane.” This ends up working both ways. Not only does the world remain ignorant and often suspicious of their insights, but the academicians wall themselves off in an “ivory tower.” They remain ignorant and suspicious of the needs and concerns of the rest of the population. This does not make for effective education when students and professors encounter one another in the classroom.

Current education reformers are focusing all their energies on getting secondary students to go to college. The argument to youth is that they can only get a good paying job if they get a college degree. This seems myopic to me. Do we want the next generation only to memorize the boring, out of touch, and often prejudiced academic subject matter? Isn’t this why we have our problems today? Shouldn’t we be listening to Zinn when he argued that our conception of schooling ought to be rethought *fundamentally* if we are ever going to have a just society? Zinn wrote,

“Can we, somehow, bring teachers and students together, not through the artificial sieve of certification and examination, but on the basis of their common commitment to an exciting social goal, Can we solve the old educational problem of how to teach children crucial values, while avoiding a blanket imposition of the teacher’s ideas? Can we forthrightly accept, as an educational goal, that we want better human beings in the rising generation than we had in the last, and that this requires a bold declaration that the educational process cherishes equality, justice, compassion, and a global community? Is it possible to create a hunger for those goals through the fiercest argument about whether or not they are indeed worthwhile? And can the schools have a running, no-ideas-barred exchange of views about alternative ways to those goals?.... Education can, and should be, dangerous to the existing social structure.” (Foreword, *Lessons from Freedom Summer*, Common Courage Press, 2008)