This is the published version:

Atherton, Cassandra 2010, "If you don't want to take risks, then you have to be silent": an interview with Howard Zinn, *Writing on the edge: a journal about writing and teaching writing*, vol. 20, no. 2, Spring, pp. 86-94.

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I was sad to read that Howard Zinn died in January. After reading A People’s History of the United States in my first year of studying history at university, I was devoted to him and to reading his books. He loved working people; he gave them a voice. I have always loved the story of the way in which fate intervened in Zinn’s life. Perhaps he would have lived out his years as a shipbuilder if not for his role as a bombardier in World War II. He went to college under the GI Bill, studying history at New York University and then undertaking an MA and PhD at Columbia. But it is clear that his experiences in the war led him to be a staunch participant in the anti-war movement.

Zinn worked at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia in 1956. It was a black women’s college and it was here that he taught, among others, Alice Walker. When he encouraged the women at this college to be active politically, rather than focusing on becoming “ladies,” he was fired for insubordination. Zinn then moved to Boston University in 1964 where he worked as a professor of political science until he retired in 1988.

It was snowing on the day I went to Zinn’s house. He ushered me in and we sat in a tastefully decorated living room full of beautiful ornaments. The first things I noticed about Zinn were how slim and fit he was and how his eyes smiled when I asked him a question. There was a real mischievousness about him, a glint in his eye, a total animation of his face when he told a story. He could have been an actor; it was not surprising that he became a playwright as his understanding of the way in which theatre can elicit an emotional response to a series of events or a particular historical period was far-reaching. I loved how quick he was to laugh and how he made me feel comfortable in his home. No wonder his students loved him; he had a wonderful way of listening intently and responding graciously to everything he was asked. Zinn loved his life. He loved teaching. He loved writing. He loved devoting himself to a political campaign. He loved being invited to give speeches all over the world. So Zinn was doing what he loved when he died, prior to giving a speech at The Santa Monica Museum of Art, aptly titled, “The People Speak.” I feel honoured to have interviewed him and to have heard him speak.
WOE: What do you think are the responsibilities of the public intellectual?

ZINN: To respect what you do, and in order to respect you have to feel that you are doing more than being an ordinary, traditional academic. I think you have a responsibility to yourself to live the most fruitful life that you can, a life that will make you feel that you are doing something for society and not something just to satisfy your own personal ambition. A responsibility to society is a responsibility that not only intellectuals should have – it is a responsibility that every human being should have. The difference is that intellectuals have a special position in society that enables them to do things that many people are not in a position to do—people whose jobs occupy their lives, people whose lives are fraught with all sorts of problems, who don’t have the time, the tools, the wherewithal to make a contribution. The intellectual has certain qualities, special tools and education, time, the possibility of reaching numbers of people, which an ordinary person cannot do. The intellectual has the capacity to fulfil that responsibility to society and a special duty to do so because the intellectual lives a privileged life. [Gestures to the opulence around him.] The intellectual is lucky. The intellectual may complain, (they often do), but the intellectual lives a life of relative ease compared to the rest of the world—and I’m not even talking about the third world, I am talking about people in an advanced industrial prosperous country like the United States. But most people in the United States are not in a position to enjoy life in the way that an intellectual can because of the demands made of them just for survival. So I think the intellectual has a special responsibility to use his/her special qualities, special time, special position to do something for the world.

WOE: As a public intellectual you may come up against people who heartily disagree with you and your ideas. Is that difficult?

ZINN: That is the risk you must take. If you don’t want to take risks, then you have to be silent. As soon as you speak up or express a point of view, you are taking a risk that there will be people who disagree with you. And in fact there is something positive about that because it means that you are throwing out into a contentious world, a world in which people have different points of view. You are adding your point of view to one side of the argument. You are playing a part in the ongoing debate instead of standing inside and withdrawing from it. If you are an intellectual who speaks out, then you must accept it, enjoy it, even relish it, make the most of it. And in fact you sharpen your own intellectual tools and your own political ideas by listening to the opposition. So the opposing viewpoints are not simply things that you must be on guard against and figure out how you can defeat. The
oppositional arguments are things that the intellectual must listen to and then may be forced to reconsider his or her position or to modify that position. So there is a usefulness to this opposition. Intellectuals who don’t want any opposition should stay out of the public arena.

**WOE:** You said that universities aren’t the only place for public intellectuals, but can you discuss the benefits and problems with being allied to a university and being a public intellectual?

**ZINN:** The benefit of being attached to a university is that you have an immediate listening audience. You have students, young people, the upcoming generation, a very important generation, people who you are in contact with whom you get to know, who presumably respect your opinions, who will listen to the suggestions you make about what they read. So this is an enormous advantage as opposed to an intellectual who lives a kind of cloistered life and must struggle to go out and reach people. So you are in the university, you have this special audience right at hand, and then of course a certain amount of economic security that a freelance intellectual has great difficulty coming by. It is very hard to be an intellectual not attached to a university because how are you going to make a living? If you are a writer or a poet, you are in a market driven society that doesn’t cherish poets and writers. And so the university gives you that time, freedom and economic security.

On the other hand, the university can hamper you. It can hamper you by the constraints that the academic world places on an intellectual who has very strong political opinions. Generally universities—and by this I mean university administrations, which include not only top administrators, trustees, regents, the president, deans but also include the chair of your department and colleagues in your department—may try to limit what you do in public and limit what you do politically. Very often the traditional members of a university community, the administrators, but also faculty are made nervous by contact with the political conflicts that swirl all around the university. So that is a handicap that the intellectual in the university has to guard against and be prepared to resist.

**WOE:** How do you juggle the demands of teaching and administration with research and writing? Are they in any way reciprocal?

**ZINN:** It helps if you can in some way link what you do in the classroom with what you do outside. It is easier for somebody who teaches politics, history, sociology. It’s harder for someone who teaches physics or organic chemistry, although with a little ingenuity, they can do it. Certainly teachers of literature very devilishly choose pieces of literature that reflect their values, and I know a piece of literature I would choose
if I were teaching literature. And in fact I have used pieces of literature in my courses because I thought they were so useful.

So I think that your time is limited, that university teaching puts great demands on your time. But that is if you are a conscientious teacher. If you are not, then university is a wonderful place to goof off! But if you are a conscientious teacher, you are working at your teaching all the time, and so it does limit the amount of time you have for outside political activity. The great advantage of having one foot in each sphere is that each can augment and enrich the other. Your scholarly work, your academic work, can be very useful, help a great deal in dealing with problems of a political movement that you are attached to. Political movements need facts, they need research, they need analysis. Well, here you are, you are in a position to do that and to do work which will serve you in both spheres. There is an advantage to your political activity by being in the classroom, and there is an advantage to your teaching by being out in the world because you can bring into the classroom the experiences that an ivory tower dweller will not have. And not only that; Your teaching will have much more meaning to the students if they know that it comes out of life experience that is not just based on books. So trying to be in both spheres creates difficulties, but it is also very valuable when this kind of cross fertilization takes place.

WOE: Can you tell me a bit about your style of teaching?

ZINN: I use film, documentary film, sometimes even feature films to great advantage in the classroom. When I was teaching about Vietnam I used this film *Hearts and Minds*; it is very powerful. I used a film called *Attica*, which is about the Attica prison uprising in the United States in 1971 that was suppressed brutally by the governor of New York State. I used a Marlon Brando movie called *Burn*, probably the least known of all Brando movies, which was not publicised because it was a revolutionary movie. It was about a slave revolt in a Portuguese colony in the nineteenth century, an anti-imperialist movie. It is the one Marlon Brando movie that was hidden from sight. It was even withdrawn from circulation for a number of years. I used a number of movies in my class because they can accomplish things that I could not. For example, what could be said about the Vietnam War by that movie, not only the amount of information, but what it captures of the emotional intensity, is something I could not convey in the same effective way. I would very often play recordings of Malcolm X to my class and scare the hell out of them—all of these white people, you see. But it could give them a sense of the rage in black people that I could not give them myself. I have never used slides. When I speak now (since I stopped teaching I have been doing a lot of speaking), they always ask me if I want any of
the new visual technologies, slides. I say, “No.” I don’t think I would know how to use them and I prefer not to. I tried in my classes to have as much interchange with students as possible and to give them as much time as possible as they need to respond to me. I tried to create an atmosphere in which students felt free to disagree with me, didn’t have to worry about getting bad grades.

**WOE:** One of the things you have said is that to be a good teacher you have to share your political views, you have to be honest about your beliefs. How important is it to share what you believe in with your class?

**ZINN:** Very often the reason given for not sharing your opinion is that it can be intimidating to the students, and sure that is a possibility and therefore you have to make it clear that while you are expressing your opinions very strongly, you understand that yours may not be right, that students have their own opinions, that there are conflicting views. One of the ways of doing this is by never punishing anybody with a bad grade because of their opinions. Word gets around about teachers who are punishing that way and teachers who are tolerant that way. One reason it is important to share your views with students is not only that you are trying to influence students, but because you are trying to influence the way they think—not command what they think, but at least introduce them to ideas that they may not have. This says something to the student about not withholding your ideas, no matter what profession you are in. These students are not all going to be teachers. Some of them will be in the business world, and so on and so forth. But you are saying to them, “Look, whatever walk of life you are in, you should not be constrained by the barriers that are set up by the idea that as a professional you should keep your political opinions to yourself.” I saw a doctor last week for a medical exam. I hadn’t even introduced myself, but he recognised my name. He said to me, “Didn’t you give a talk at a high school and there was some controversy about it?” And I said, “Yeah!” He said, “I’m not political, but Bush and Chaney, they have to go!”

**WOE:** You were placed on a list of America’s most dangerous public intellectuals by Horowitz. Are you dangerous?

**ZINN:** I was honoured to be on the list. Dangerous? I hope so. I wish I were dangerous. I guess anybody with dissident ideas is slightly dangerous, and none of us is that dangerous. Our hope is that if you put one million slightly dangerous people together that it will create enormous danger.

**WOE:** You have a wonderful writing style, a great fluency. What do you think about postmodernist writing style?
ZINN: It is a problem. I am very impatient with mystification, with pretentious language and a pretty closed circle of people who are the only ones who understand what is being said. One of the important aspects of being a public intellectual is that the public must know what you are saying, must be able to understand what you are saying. This is true in a classroom where you can’t try to impress students. Certainly with writing, the academic world hones people’s natural writing ability. It seems the higher up you go, the worse the language gets. A PhD student will write in this manner, and why is that? The student has gotten the message that if you really want to be considered an important academic and a real scholar, you must use this kind of language. Of course to me that is an anathema. Clear, concise communication is the most important thing.

WOE: With the inequalities in education, do working class students have a chance to be a part of the intelligentsia or academia?

ZINN: There is more pressure on working class students. They come from poor families, and they are barely making their way through the academic world. There is great pressure on them to get jobs and income, and so it is harder for them. On the other hand, if they do decide that they must somehow enter the fray, with all these difficulties, they are in a better position to educate the people. Because they are class conscious and can infuse that class consciousness into others. There is a kind of solidity to their background that makes what they say about the world more credible. Somebody told me a few years ago that they were writing a book researching people who teach at universities, academics, that come from working class background. That is an interesting thing to do.

WOE: If you come from a working class background and get into the university, can you still be a spokesperson for the working classes?

ZINN: It is a little more difficult than if you came into the classroom still wearing the miner’s helmet, your hands greasy, “I have just come out of the mines, kids, let me talk to you!” And here you are a college professor wearing a suit. But I think it is possible. It is harder, but it is possible to hold on to your background. It depends on you as a person. Many people in the academic world come from working class backgrounds and put it behind them, want to put it behind them. But on the other hand, if you come from such a background and you are not renouncing it and you want to maintain that connection, then it is in you and you can impart to the students that even though now you are middle class, your parents were working class, maybe even you were working class until you were eighteen-years-old. But I think it is possible to impart to your students that feeling of being part of the working class that you once had.
WOE: Are public intellectuals reduced to only ever commenting on current public policy with little chance to effect its change?

ZINN: The effect that you have on government policy will always be indirect. You try to make what you say, write and teach as directly connected with present policy as possible. You may be teaching eighteenth century literature and there is a gap or chasm between teaching and policy. This piece of literature is laden with social significance, but it is a far cry from immediate public policy. You face this tricky dilemma. You don’t want to politicize everything in a very crass way and therefore not pay sufficient attention to that particular period / event / literature, not distort its essence by insisting that it must have some immediate connection to what is going on today. At the same time there are times where you can leave it to the students—and you should leave it to them—to make the connections themselves. We don’t have to make the connection. If they are reading Thomas Hardy and something is obviously being said about marriage and the freedom of individuals, you don’t have to spell it out in relation to what is happening today. It should be evident. So you very often can leave it to students to make that connect with present policy.

Anything that public intellectuals do is only going to have an indirect effect. It is very rare that you get the opportunity to do something directly. The things that you do outside the classroom will have more direct impact outside of the classroom, like sitting in the senator’s office and demanding the senator vote a certain way in a certain bill. What you are doing in a classroom is creating a mindset for the student that might lead that student tomorrow to go and sit in the senator’s office.

WOE: I want to come back to fiction. How important is fiction in capturing a particular moment in history?

ZINN: As you probably know, I have used fiction in my classes, I have used it precisely because I thought that a novel or a play or poem can bring an idea or history home to a student more vividly, with an intensity that you rarely find in non-fiction. Therefore, you can take an idea presented in non-fiction and when compared to the same idea presented in fiction, it will have far less emotional impact. I have used the example of the lecture on the 1930s in the United States and explained how terrible it was with people lined up in the streets for food baskets and so on and so forth. Or you could have them read *The Grapes of Wrath* and they will viscerally understand what it was like to live in such hard times.

WOE: You have written a play. I am fascinated that you write analytically and creatively. Do you find one harder than the other?
**ZINN:** Creative writing is more difficult. Think of Henry James and Kurt Vonnegut, who had hard times writing plays. I’m telling you all of this to explain why it’s harder to write a play. It is harder to write a play. I can write a non-fiction book in a year, it takes me years to put all the elements together for a play. It requires more imagination. I mean, how much imagination do you need to write a regular history book? Writing a play is harder but more rewarding.

**WOE:** Do you enjoy seeing your play performed?

**ZINN:** I don’t like to admit how much I enjoy seeing my play on stage. But of course I do. It’s exciting. It is as if a writer sat himself down in front of someone who was reading his book and watched the reader’s facial expressions and took pleasure out of them. It is fun to see your work on stage. The great thing that I discovered about writing for theatre is that you now are part of a collective enterprise. As a writer you are isolated, but as a playwright your play is immediately taken over by a director and stage designer and a cast—the actors—and you become an ensemble and little affinity group of people. And it is a great feeling. In the theatre people hug one another. The members of my department don’t hug one another.

**WOE:** Which writers do you admire, both fiction and non-fiction?

**ZINN:** Dickens, Tolstoy and in the United States, Steinbeck and Upton Sinclair and Sinclair Lewis, Melville, and for non-fiction Bertrand Russell for his clarity of language. Philosophers are very often so mystical, and Bertrand Russell and John Dewey were two philosophers who wrote with clarity. William James did too. Noam Chomsky, who doesn’t always write simply, although in his interviews where there is no opportunity for footnotes, he is much more approachable. I mentioned of course that Vonnegut is one of my favourite novelists and Heller and *Catch 22*. Arthur Miller as a playwright is always a model for me.

**WOE:** What are you next commitments and engagements?

**ZINN:** I speak at political rallies and academic institutions and community groups. I am involved with a producer who is making a television documentary of my *People’s History*. So I am working on that. We are doing some shooting in Boston and assembling our cast. I was in touch with two people today—Viggo Mortensen. He is going to be one of the leads. The other one didn’t come through, but that was Sean Penn. Movie people and actors and actresses; that’s fun!

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