

Howard Zinn: “History as a Political Act”: 100 Years of U.S. Empire 1898-1998 and Radical Hopes for the Future¹

Raymond Lotta: Howard, it’s very exciting to be speaking with you, and I want to thank you for taking part in this interview.

Howard Zinn: Well, I’m glad to do it.

RL: You’ve written books that have influenced so many students, activists, and intellectuals. So I thought we might start by finding out about how you became a historian and how you see your role as a historian.

HZ: I got into history not to be a historian, not to be a scholar, not to be an academic, not to write scholarly articles for scholarly journals, not to go to academic conferences to deliver papers to bored fellow historians. I got into history because I was already an activist at the age of 18.

I was working in a shipyard. I was organizing young shipyard workers. And I was introduced to radical ideas. I was reading Marx, I was reading Upton Sinclair, I was reading Jack London, I was reading *The Grapes of Wrath*. So I was a politically aware young man working in the shipyard. I was there for three years. Then I enlisted in the Air Force. I was a bombardier in the United States Air Force, and came out and worked at various jobs. All of these influences: I came from a working class family...my upbringing--I have a chapter in my memoir called “Growing Up Class Conscious,” and I guess, yes, I grew up class conscious, a phrase not too often used in the United States...my class consciousness...my experience in the war [World War 2], my complicated reactions to the war, the so-called “best war,” “the good war”...living in a working class neighborhood with my wife, raising two kids, having a tough time...going to school under the GI Bill while working in a warehouse...being a member of a number of different unions from time to time, interested in the labor movement, reading the history of labor struggles.

So when I began to study history and began to think about being a teacher and writing history, I already understood that I was not going to be a neutral teacher. I was not going to simply be a scholar.

RL: You had definite ideas about the kind of historian you wanted to be.

HZ: I wanted my writing of history and my teaching of history to be a part of social struggle. I wanted to be a part of history and not just a recorder and teacher of history. So that kind of attitude towards history, history itself as a political act, has always informed my writing and my teaching. From the very first moment I stepped into a classroom, I knew that I was not going to be one of those teachers that at the end of the semester, at

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the end of the year, the students wanted to know where does this teacher stand. They were going to know where I stood from the very beginning! That's been my attitude all the way through, and still is.

RL: How do you see breaking down the boundaries between your work as an intellectual in the university and what is happening in the larger society?

HZ: I see it two-fold. One: bringing the world into the classroom, and bringing current issues into the classroom. Whatever course I was teaching--whether it was political theory or constitutional law--there was always going back-and-forth between what was in the textbook, what was in history, what was in the past, and what was happening in the world today at the time I was teaching. So the classroom itself was for me a meeting ground of the outside world and the world of the university.

At the same time, I thought that wasn't enough. I couldn't confine my life to the academy. I had to be involved in the world outside. Because if I wasn't involved in the world outside, I would be delivering a message to my students, and the message to my students would be [laughing]: it's great to talk about all these things in the classroom, it's a wonderful thing, but you don't have to do anything about it. I wanted my actions to convey to my students what was important in life.

So during my first teaching job, Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, where I taught for seven years in the years of the civil rights movement, I soon became involved in the movement. And I saw my role as a teacher to teach by my activity outside the classroom as well as by what I was saying in the classroom.

RL: *A People's History of the United States* is probably your best-known work. So many people who read the book have had their eyes opened, not only by the conclusions you reach but by your whole approach to history. Could you spell out what you mean by "people's history"?

HZ: I guess what I mean by a "people's history" is basically two things. First, the content of history, which is different from traditional history in that I am telling of the lives of the people who are generally ignored by traditional history. For instance, the so-called great "economic miracle" of the United States between the Civil War and World War 1, when the United States becomes an enormously powerful industrial nation--that's presented traditionally as a great and wonderful triumphal experience.

But left out of these traditional histories--it was very clear to me as I was studying both as an undergraduate and graduate student--was the experience of working people. Who were the people who worked for Rockefeller's refineries? Who were the people who worked on the transcontinental railroad? Who were the Chinese immigrants and Irish immigrants who died while working on the railroads. The girls in the textile mills of New England -- going to work in the mills at the age of 12, dying at the age of 25--they were absent. I wanted to bring in these people.

The other thing is simply a point of view, simply to look at history with a different point of view, not just a different point of view in the academic sense, but very specifically to look at the events of American history from the point of view of people who have not had a voice, people who have been oppressed, and people whose struggles have not been noticed.

So I decided I wanted to tell the story of Columbus from the standpoint of the Indians that he encountered.

RL: Which is not the standard account.

HZ: And I wanted to tell the story of the Mexican War not just from the standpoint of the American soldiers who didn't know what they were doing, where they were going--many of them immigrants, desperate for a little money and a little attention--not only to tell the story from the standpoint of the GI's, which I wanted to do with every war, but also to tell the story from the standpoint of the so-called enemy, to see the Mexican War from the standpoint of the Mexicans--how "nice" it is for them to have the United States take half their country as a result of the war and to commit atrocities in the course of it.

I wanted to tell the story of American history from the standpoint of women, Black people, Indians, of working people and of radicals and protesters.

As soon as I made that decision, it was clear this was going to be a different kind of history. And I have no doubt that the reason my book has reached so many people--to my surprise, actually, and certainly to the surprise of the publisher--is that people who read it were suddenly struck by the fact that I was telling American history from a very different viewpoint.

RL: This year people in many parts of the world, especially in Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Philippines, are holding conferences, anti-imperialist protest actions, and other kinds of events to mark the 100th anniversary of people's resistance to Spanish colonialism and resistance to U.S. domination that followed the Spanish-American War of 1898. But here in the United States, there's very little awareness and discussion of the Spanish-American War. Could you tell us about the significance of the Spanish-American War and what you think people should understand about it?

HZ: While it certainly wasn't the beginning of American imperialism--and sometimes in the textbooks they are willing to acknowledge that there was a brief period of American imperialism for a few years--the Spanish-American War was the culmination of imperialist expansion across the continent and forays into Latin America and into the Far East as well.

I think the significance of 1898 was that it was probably the most dramatic entrance onto the world scene of American military and economic power.

RL: And that would have enormous repercussions for the future.

HZ: The Spanish American War was an ushering in of what Henry Luce later referred to as the American Century, which really meant an American Century of American domination. The war itself in Cuba was such a precursor of so much that the United States later did in various parts of the world. It had so many of the same characteristics that later followed in other places. And by that I mean the pretense of liberating a part of the world from an oppressive nation and then replacing that oppressive nation with this oppressive nation--you know, getting the Spaniards out but at the same time making sure that no indigenous movement would then take control of Cuba.

And that has happened again and again. Presumably, the United States wanted to liberate the South Vietnamese from North Vietnamese assault and oppression, but of course the United States really wanted to control Vietnam for itself. In the Middle East, just to take a very recent example, the United States wanted to say that we were going into a war in 1991 against Iraq because we were so heart-stricken over the fate of Kuwait--when, actually, the purpose was not really to defend the freedom of the Kuwaitis but to make sure that American domination over this great oil area in the Middle East would be assured.

So in that sense, the Spanish-American War foreshadowed so much of what the United States was later to do.

Another example of this being a precursor of wars was that we measured the success of the Spanish-American War by the fact that we had so few American casualties. As they said, it was "a splendid little war"...not many American casualties. Of course, they didn't count the thousands of Americans who died as a result of poisoned beef supplied to the army by greedy corporations. And the question of the other side, how many people died on the other side, is totally ignored.

RL: The U.S. Secretary of State at the time used that phrase "splendid little war." You on the other hand describe the United States expedition in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War as an "ugly war of extermination."

HZ: Exactly. It's interesting what kids learn in history books. Because I remember very distinctly that the Spanish-American War was an important event in our history books. It was a glorious event. It was the heroic actions of Theodore Roosevelt riding up San Juan Hill with the Rough Riders. But virtually no attention is paid to the ensuing war in the Philippines, which was not a "splendid little war" at all.

It was a long war which lasted eight years and which involved atrocities committed by the United States Army against the Filipinos. There too it is a precursor in many ways of what happened later on. It was a precursor in the sense that there was an incident created in the Philippines, simply created by the presence of the U.S. Army, an incident which leads to warfare and to the destruction of a huge part of the Philippines, complete with massacres and atrocities.

The My Lai massacre [the mass murder of civilians in a Vietnamese village by U.S. troops] had its predecessor in the Philippines in 1906. The American army attacked a

group of 600 Moros in southern Philippines--men, women, and children living in very primitive conditions, who had no modern weapons. The American army attacked them with modern weapons, wiped out every last one of these 600 men, women, and children. And Theodore Roosevelt sent a telegram of congratulations to the commanding officer for this great military victory. Mark Twain at that time protested vehemently against this. The war in the Philippines was in many ways a premonition of the war in Vietnam, in the ugliness of that war.

RL: Maybe you could say some more about the dissent and opposition to the Spanish-American War in the United States, because not much is known about this either.

HZ: There was an anti-imperialist movement in the United States, although obviously it wasn't successful enough to stop the United States from doing what it was doing. The conservative leadership of the mainstream trade union movement supported the war. But on the other hand, there were labor unions and labor newspapers that protested against the war and said that working people would have to die in the war for the profit of the corporations. That was on the level of the working class that was protesting. Then, on a kind of intellectual level, there was the Anti-Imperialist League that had among its members people like William James and other American intellectuals who protested against U.S. activities in the Philippines.

RL: You've written about resistance in the U.S. military during the Spanish-American War.

HZ: There was some resistance in the military. There were soldiers who refused to fight. There were deserters in the Philippines. There were deserters who went over to the side of the rebels. There were Black soldiers in the Philippines who wrote back home to African-American newspapers in the United States saying how they were disgusted by the racism in the army and by the fact that they were having to fight against and kill colored people.

RL: There are people who look at the world today, and at the United States' role in the world, who say that you can't really describe the United States as an imperialist power, that the very notion of empire is dated. But you have said that America brought a new kind of empire-building onto the world stage. I was wondering if you could discuss what you think are some of the distinctive features of U.S. imperialism.

HZ: I think the reason people say this is something qualitatively different is that the United States has not created empire in the image of the British empire, in which there is direct control over colonies and outright possession of colonies. In fact, Cuba is probably a good example of it, because the United States did not make Cuba a colony officially--technically, Cuba remained free. But American corporations, the railroads, the Vanderbilts, United Fruit, banking interests went into Cuba and dominated the Cuban economy. And while the United States was not keeping Cuba as an outright colony, whenever the United States saw fit to intervene militarily in Cuba to

make sure that there was a government favorable to American economic interests, it did so again and again.

And I think that characteristic of not imitating the British style but following a new American style of keeping a kind of nominal independence for a government in the Third World but at the same time insuring economic control and maintaining the option of military intervention when that economic control was threatened--that became a common characteristic.

RL: Maybe you could give some other examples of that.

HZ: In the early part of the 20th century, after the Spanish-American War, that's exactly what the United States did again and again in the Caribbean, in Guatemala, in Honduras, in Nicaragua: overthrowing a government in Nicaragua when a liberal government threatened American domination; occupying Haiti and the Dominican Republic when it seemed that governments would arise which would not play ball with the United States--long occupations of those two countries.

And then of course, coming down to our time, that is, to the post-World War 2 period, I think of Chile. Nobody would refer to Chile as a colony of the United States. But the United States corporations--Anaconda Copper, ITT--they had very important financial interests in Chile. And when a kind of moderately left, moderately Marxist government came to power--they kept referring to it as a Marxist government, which it really wasn't, that is, Allende's government [elected in 1970] was more I would say like a left New Deal government--but it was a government that might threaten the interests of ITT and Anaconda Copper. First the United States worked hard to try to make sure that the elections in Chile did not go towards Allende. And they failed. The popular decision of the Chilean people went against that. Then the United States worked on their next option, which was a military coup.

Official American government documents that were brought forth to the Church Committee [in the U.S. Senate] in 1975 investigating the CIA showed very clearly what the role of Henry Kissinger and the American government were in establishing Pinochet in power [the Chilean general who led a fascist coup in 1973], therefore putting back corporate interests in Chile.

You see this pattern again and again in various parts of the world: the maintenance of economic interests and the maintaining in power, or the putting in power, of governments which, however tyrannical and dictatorial, would play ball with the United States interests.

The overthrow of the Arbenz government in 1954 in Guatemala is another example of that. The United Fruit Company very, very clearly worked with the American CIA to overthrow a democratically elected government which dared to expropriate the lands of United Fruit. And expropriation is not even the word, because they weren't going to do what a revolutionary government would really do, and that is take over United Fruit lands

without compensation--they were going to compensate the United Fruit Company. But that certainly was not acceptable, and so the CIA, the U.S. government, worked to overthrow it. And that's been the pattern in so many places of the world.

Along with this kind of new imperialism, this neocolonialism, comes a kind of cultural imperialism in which American media, American television, American press--and of course American products--appear all over the world and in many cases effectively destroy indigenous cultures in various parts of the world...bring so-called "civilization" to people who are "backwards," which means bringing corruption.

RL: Another way U.S. imperialism functions is through international or multilateral organizations like the United Nations and the World Bank, which conceal the actual imperialist interests of the U.S.

HZ: I think the operations of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are a very good example of neo-imperialism. Because under the cover of international organizations, similar to using the United Nations as a cover for military action in Korea or in Iraq, these international organizations dominated by the United States act really to deplete the resources of Third World countries--by creating huge debts for them and forcing them to pay, in many cases like half of their national budget, to pay off the interest on these debts. And in return for the loans they demand that these governments cut down on whatever social services they are giving to their people.

You might say they are creating in these countries a kind of mirror image of what is happening in the United States, where under the pretense of just trying to balance the budget, they cut down on social services while maintaining money for the military. So the IMF and the World Bank play a very nefarious role in the world. I think that is certainly part of what I would call neocolonialism.

RL: And there's the whole global network of U.S. military bases and staging areas.

HZ: Oh, yes. Think of the number of military bases we have in Japan, the number of military bases in Korea. When the people of the Philippines protested against military bases there, the United States was forced to withdraw, not completely of course, and then it became even more important for the United States to maintain military bases in Korea and Japan. And here we are still maintaining a huge number of troops in Germany when there is no longer an East Germany and West Germany--refusing to give up our base in Cuba, the Guantanamo base.

So it's a very far-flung network of American military and economic power.

RL: There are some people who say that in today's conditions the United States can use its military power in a positive or humanitarian way--such as in countries like Haiti or Somalia, or in Bosnia. What do you say to people who have this view?

HZ: I'm very suspicious of American military power. I'm willing to grant that there may be situations where intervention on behalf of an oppressed people might be a useful thing when they have no other resources. But when the intervention is conducted by a government with the record of the United States and with what you know are the intentions of the United States, one must be very suspicious.

In fact in Somalia, we saw an example of that. What started out apparently as a "humanitarian" intervention very soon turned ugly and violent.

RL: We've talked quite a bit about the arrival of the U.S. empire on the world stage with the Spanish-American War. But here we are 100 years later, on the verge of the 21st century. Are you optimistic about the prospects for change and transformation in the world and in the United States itself?

HZ: I don't want to be foolishly optimistic. I want to be intelligently optimistic. I don't want to be foolishly optimistic in the sense that at some point in history--maybe that point still exists for some, where people on the left used to say--"world revolution is inevitable." I never liked the notion of inevitability, of determinism, because, to me, just to express that to other people puts some distance between you and them, because they look at the world around us and it's not easy to be optimistic in the face of this world. So I think there has to be some recognition of the enormous obstacles that are faced by any movement.

At the same time, I do believe that we have great possibilities before us, but it all depends on what we do. The reason I don't say progress, change, radical change are inevitable is because I believe whatever happens depends on our passivity or our optimism. But I think it is important to hold out the possibility of change and to hold out the vision of a different society, both in the world and in the United States. And to hold it out not just as romantic dream but as a real possibility. It's important to hold that out because I think that will energize us.

RL: You're speaking both as a historian and activist.

HZ: I think history can be useful in suggesting that people have often been in very, very terrible periods where nothing seemed to be happening--and then they were surprised. We've always had surprises take place. When these surprises take place, we wonder why. And the reason is that we didn't all look under the surface and we did not have faith in people.

I have a lot of faith in ordinary people, much as their understanding is obscured by the media and by the politicians. I think that the people have basic common sense, basic decency. And if we keep hammering away at the truth--I think there is nothing more revolutionary than to tell the truth--if we keep telling the truth and insisting on it, it will break through, and the people will respond.

We've seen this. I've seen it in this country. We've seen situations that seemed hopeless. "How are you going to organize Henry Ford? Never. Look at all the money he has, look at all his troops." "How are you going to change the situation in the South? It's impossible; they have all the money; they have the power; the federal government is on their side." It was done.

Or the antiwar movement: "How are we going to stop the war in Vietnam?" I remember that feeling that people expressed at the very beginning when we held an antiwar rally on the Boston Commons and a hundred people came. And you walk on a picket line and there are more cops surrounding the picket line than there are people on the picket line. But movements grow. Small movements become big movements if people persist. So I think change is possible, depending on what we do.

RL: You mentioned the importance of holding out a vision of a different kind of world. What would that vision be for you?

HZ: A vision of the world in which powerful corporations did not dominate the economy...in which economic enterprises were controlled by the people who worked in them...and in which the rights of workers and consumers were represented in the decision-making bodies. It would be a world in which we had a kind of grass-roots democracy that existed in the Paris Commune in 1871...constant participation...meetings of people all over, where people's political participation wasn't confined to voting every two years or every four years, to choosing between two miserable possibilities...a kind of grass-roots participation and decision-making at every possible level.

Those are not easy to achieve in very complicated, large-scale societies. But I think it is certainly possible to have infinitely more political democracy than we have today. And the object would be to really equalize the conditions of people in the world, to use the enormous wealth that exists in this world to feed people, to take care of their children. Everybody should be assured of fundamental things of life--everybody should be assured of a place to live, enough food, of care for their children, and everybody should be assured of health care without worrying about bills, or forms, or signatures.

And we need a breaking down of national barriers--a world without passports and visas, where people are free to move in the way corporations are now free to move across national boundaries. Obviously this is a vision hard to contemplate. But I think that unless you have such a vision, you are not in a position to evaluate what is going on day to day.

If you don't have a vision, for instance, of a world without national boundaries, you are not in a position to really evaluate very specific things, like should Congress pass this immigration law, or should we pass that immigration law, should we restrict immigration this much or immigration that much. But if you have that vision of the kind of world that you want, then it becomes clear what your attitude has to be towards immigration, which is people should be able to move: there shouldn't be such a thing as a foreigner, an alien, an immigrant.

I think to create conditions in which resources are equalized, and people have a kind of sense of living decently, is to really undercut racism and sexism and crime. It's not hard to understand the violent crime we have in the United States when you see the extremes of wealth and poverty in the United States. If you look at countries that have much much less crime, it's countries where there is a greater equalization of the wealth in the country. So I think it is important to have that kind of vision of a different world in order to help us know what to do day to day.

RL: You have been a role model for intellectuals, I mean as an engaged intellectual, as someone who has placed his scholarship in the service of the peoples' movements. What do you say to intellectuals about how they should be looking at their work?

HZ: To intellectuals, I would say something like this [laughing]. Isn't the academic world boring? Is this all there is to life--going to academic conferences, writing scholarly papers, writing for a small group of people who are in your field, in your profession? And at the end of such a life, aren't you in the position of Ivan Ilyich in Leo Tolstoy's* story *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*--where this very successful man on his deathbed thinks, "Why do I feel so bad?"

RL: So what is the responsibility of intellectuals?

HZ: The responsibility of intellectuals is to discard the notion of "objectivity" and the notion of "disinterested scholarship." With "disinterested scholarship" you're saying everyone else is interested except me. Become engaged. Another thing I would say is: you know you will be a better teacher, you will be a more interesting teacher if you connect your students with what is going on in the world and if your students see that you are connected with what is going on in the world.

RL: We've been talking about building anti-imperialist awareness and activity. How do you look at the young generation and how do you see the older generation connecting with it? It was interesting that the Matt Damon character in "Good Will Hunting" was quoting *A People's History of the United States*.

HZ: I have heard so much, as you have I am sure, about the apathy of the younger generation, the lack of social consciousness of the younger generation. I think very often part of this is a romanticization of our own generation, which almost assumes that there is something very special about the people of the '60s, almost genetic, that these young people don't have it. And I never believed that.

I taught students in the 1980s in the Reagan years when people were saying, "oh, this is a silent generation," and my students were not young radicals. I had lecture classes attended every semester by 400 students, who came from all over the university, who came with varying degrees of political consciousness, from a high degree down to close to zero. And it was very clear to me as we engaged in discussions in class that my

students were eager, when information was presented to them, to learn about what was going on in the world and that they cared about what was happening in the world.

I firmly believe that young people, always at all times, are open to engagement with the world: one, if they are given the information; two, if they are given the opportunity, if they are presented with a social movement, if there is something going on in the world which they can attach themselves to.

RL: I think that's very important.

HZ: Beneath the surface of youthful "ambition"--"need to graduate," "need to make a career"--beneath that surface, I believe there's always among young people a hunger to do something worthwhile and important.

And if you present young people something that is happening, that touches them...that people are being oppressed in this part of the world, that Black kids are dying at twice the rate of white kids, that people are without homes or living in terrible, terrible conditions... when you are presented with that and then also presented with possible alternatives...suggestions that there is a different way of living...that there could be a different kind of society...that the enormous wealth of the United States could be used to solve the problems of people rather than to be drained into the bank accounts of the one-percent super-rich of the country: when young people are presented with that, and [laughs] given the phone numbers of organizations that they can call up or the addresses of organizations that they can write to, I find that they respond.

RL: You're hopeful.

HZ: I am much more hopeful about the potential of young people in becoming socially conscious than a lot of people are. I find very often that people on the left have absorbed the pessimism of the people on the right. You find that people on the left on the one hand will say that the media dominates our information, while on the other they will actually accept what the media says about the lack of consciousness about young people in this country. If we don't believe that potential exists in young people, we are not going to do anything.

* Leo Tolstoy, author of *War and Peace*, wrote in Russia at the turn of the 20th century.