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Ambre Ivol, *Du pacifisme en Amérique. Howard Zinn et la gauche, de la seconde guerre mondiale au Vietnam*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2017

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The study of social and political movements in the United States has been a flourishing activity among historians and social scientists, for decades now. The major contemporary wave of movements – those of the 1960s and early 70s, which changed U.S. society in many ways irreversibly and challenged its imperial role – was itself the key impetus that has inspired generations of researchers, from that time on, to broaden and deepen their understanding of mobilizations. Anyone discovering this field of study today and seeking to make a contribution to it has a remarkable body of literature to draw on for inspiration, much of which meets the highest academic standards and some of which has durably enriched the practice of historical and sociological studies¹. It is no less true that the choice of such research objects by their authors often represents much more than an academic choice. Those who work, for example, on the history of the U.S. left or on social movements associated with the left, often tend to do so because they identify, at least to some degree, with the individual and collective actors they have chosen to study and with the causes and ideals these actors have devoted their lives to defending.

Ambre Ivol's *Du pacifisme en Amérique. Howard Zinn et la gauche, de la Seconde Guerre mondiale au Vietnam* is drawn in great part from a larger body of research she carried out for her doctoral dissertation, defended in 2009, about the life and political times of Howard Zinn (1922-2010)². As she states clearly (in the bibliography, p. 273), she knew Zinn, had privileged access to his archives for several years and even took part in a project to index them. It is not unreasonable to assume that she felt a strong affinity with the subject of her study, but far from implying a “lack of objectivity”, her sustained contact with Zinn and her determination to make sense of his thought and action over more than half a century, have contributed to making her study of Zinn a pioneering work in the history of the U.S. left.

Howard Zinn is no doubt best known internationally as the author of *A People's History of the United States* (first edition 1980), but that book, and all his other books, would have been inconceivable outside the context of his life as an activist. Within the U.S., he is probably best known, aside from his writings, for his role in the Civil Rights Movement, in the movement against the Vietnam War, and in efforts to bring these two major movements together. These moments all receive due attention in the book but they are examined in a framework centering on Zinn's evolution, over a period of several decades, toward pacifism. Compared to well-known figures of pacifism such as Abraham Johannes Muste (1896-1967), David Dellinger (1915-2004) and, somewhat later and in a different mode, Noam Chomsky (1928-), Zinn was a rather atypical pacifist. When others had firmly established philosophical and political positions on the question of war and the state, Zinn's path was “longer and more tortuous” (p. 233). It thus becomes an excellent vehicle for retracing the history of a broad swath of the U.S. left over several decades.

Indeed, *Du pacifisme en Amérique*, like the doctoral dissertation that preceded it, is not just a political and intellectual biography of Howard Zinn; it is also an ambitious exploration of a large number of movements and organizations, including several lesser-known ones, over a span of several decades of U.S. history. There is also a noteworthy incursion into French and European World War II

¹ Each researcher has his or her own list of “classics”. At the top of my own would go the works of Doug McAdam, who has successfully combined the skills of the historian and the sociologist to produce a series of important books such as *Freedom Summer* (Oxford, Oxford UP, 1988); *Political Processes and the Development of Black Insurgency (1930-1970)* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982); and, with Karina Kloos, *Deeply Divided: Racial Politics and Social Movements in Postwar America* (Oxford, Oxford UP, 2014).

² *Relectures de générations intellectuelles aux Etats-Unis: la vie et l'œuvre de Howard Zinn*, defended at the Université de Paris 3 (Sorbonne Nouvelle) in 2009.

history, since Zinn's mission as a pilot there – and in particular his experience of dropping bombs over the city of Royan in 1945 – proved in the long run to be an important stage in his movement, much later on, toward the condemnation of war in general.

The structure of the book is challenging to the reader who is, however, amply rewarded for the effort. The progression from chapter to chapter is broadly but not strictly chronological, because in each chapter there are returns to the earlier activities of given individuals or groups as well as jumps ahead into more recent periods. The result is one of the most complete political mappings-out of the space of the left and its relation to antiwar and antiracist politics, from the 1940s to recent times.

The broadly chronological movement of the book takes the reader from the immediate pre-World War II period when Zinn first encounters left activism, up to the last years of the war in Vietnam and slightly beyond, in five chapters covering periods of no more than a decade. The first three of these can be characterized together as the most difficult times for social movements and the left in the 20th century. What is remarkable in this portion of the book, in particular chapter 3 (“*Survivance contestataire (1945-56)*”, p. 113-143), is that even in these Cold War times of isolation and dispersion for the left, there remained on the public scene, or in the margins and regrouped into smaller collectives, a host of individuals and small groups who resisted Cold War ideological conformity, refusing to choose between U.S. militarism and a very authoritarian version of “socialism”, be it as Trotskyist critics of the Soviet “degenerated workers’ state”, as anarchists or as pacifists who rejected all militarism whatever its source.

Thanks to works like this one, it has become more and more commonplace among students of the 1960s movements to recognize that the 1950s were, after all, not the years of quiescence and conformity that they had long been reputed to be. Although Cold War ideology was in full force, as was repression against persons suspected of belonging to or sympathizing with communism, some activists and intellectuals proved, in the end, invulnerable to such pressure to conform, not just because of the strength of their convictions but also because they had a sufficiently complex analysis of the Cold War world to resist the Manichean trap of having to choose between U.S. imperialism, styled as democracy, and the Soviet bloc styled as totalitarianism.

Dedicated pacifists Dellinger and Muste were among the best known of these, along with sociology professor C. Wright Mills (1916-1962) and independent journalist I.F. Stone (1907-1989), but *Du pacifism en Amérique* brings into focus the role of many other less celebrated activists belonging to groups such as the Committee for Nonviolent Revolution, of which Dellinger was a founding member in 1946; the American Veterans’ Committee, founded in 1943; the World Citizens’ Movement, founded in 1948; the older War Resisters’ League, founded in 1923; the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), founded in 1942; the League for Nonviolent Civil Disobedience Against Military Segregation, founded in 1948 by African American labor leader A. Philip Randolph; and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), U.S. affiliate of the Trotskyist Fourth International. James Kutcher, an SWP member who had lost both legs in combat during the war, was fired in 1948 from his job with the Veterans’ Administration and deprived of his military pension for belonging to this “subversive organization” and became the center of a broad campaign of protest and solidarity at the height of the Cold War.

Despite these very hard times for the left, certain actors provided continuity, analysis and critical perspectives throughout the period and emerged from it in a position to play a guiding or counseling role for some branches of what was to become the New Left. Dellinger and Muste were clearly among the most important of these to emerge from the 1940s. Ambre Ivol’s generational perspective on movement actors, a method of analysis pursued systematically in the dissertation, leads her to question the idea of a sharp divide between “old” and “new” lefts. Zinn, too, was among those who had a foot in the “old” left but was generationally well-placed to serve as a bridge to younger activists of the 1960s.

The last full chapter of the book covers the period 1968-1975, referred to in the chapter title as a “state of emergency” for oppositional movements (chapter 5, “*Un Etat d’urgence contestataire*”, p. 191-242). In this period, the convergence of the Black Freedom Movement in its various guises with the movement against the war in Vietnam contributed to the strongest challenge to the U.S. political and social order seen in our lifetimes. Ambre Ivol shows how Zinn was at the heart of efforts to ensure that these two movements joined paths and combined their strengths rather than staying apart as more cautious activists such as Bayard Rustin (1912-1987) thought possible and necessary.

Among the most novel contributions of the book is the passage, toward the end of this chapter, featuring Zinn in a comparative profile with his friend and fellow activist in the Boston area, Noam Chomsky. The notable differences in social background and political trajectory between the two men help to explain Zinn's generally less theoretical and more voluntarist approach to politics and may as well account for the longer and more indirect process by which he arrived at pacifist positions. A turning point is reached in 2003 when Zinn visits France in the early months of the George W. Bush administration's war on Iraq. In a debate with the French antiwar public described as "skeptical" and having "little inclination to accept non-violence at any price" (p. 239), he formulates a critique of "wars of liberation" on the grounds that the means they employ may compromise "victory" by endangering the possibilities for democratic rule after the war. This position is confirmed in a talk entitled "Three Holy Wars", organized by the magazine *The Progressive* in November 2009, in one of Zinn's last public appearances (p. 240). Here, he questions the three wars in U.S. history that have been the most sacralized, at least by some: the War of Independence against the British, the Civil War and World War II. In all three instances he probes the inevitability of war as the only means of fighting intolerable oppression.

The work of numerous historians, sociologists and political scientists has by now provided scholars with an abundance of material for mapping out the movements and movement organizations of the second half of the 20th century³. *Du pacifism en Amérique* brings to this enterprise not just a wealth of material from the life of Howard Zinn and his contemporaries, but also a sense of political focus that brings clarity to what might otherwise appear as a disparate collection of people and movements. In her own words, Ambre Ivoll has sought to account for the ideas of the left in all their living complexity and heterogeneity (p. 33). This book, her first, meets this standard and holds out the promise of many more such contributions in the future.

³ Among the historians whose work Ambre Ivoll has drawn from are Maurice Isserman, Martin Duberman, Terry H. Anderson, Simon Hall, Paul and Mari Jo Buhle, Dan Georgakas, Peniel E. Joseph, Peter B. Levy, Robert Cohen, August Meier and Elliott Rudwick. To these could be added historians, political scientists or sociologists such as Manning Marable, Carlos Muñoz, David Garrow, Robin Kelley, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Van Gosse, Cedric Robinson, Harvard Sitkoff, Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin, Stanley Aronowitz, Laura Pulido, Michael Dawson and a host of others.

A propos de l'auteur

James Cohen est professeur d'études américaines à l'Université de Paris 3 Sorbonne Nouvelle et membre de CREW (EA 4399). Son dernier livre, *A la poursuite des « illégaux ». Politiques et mouvements anti-immigrés aux Etats-Unis*, est paru en 2012 aux éditions Le Croquant.

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