

Readers Respond to Wineburg

In its Winter 2012–13 issue, *American Educator* published Sam Wineburg's article "Undue Certainty: Where Howard Zinn's *A People's History* Falls Short," and until now has not printed a formal response. We at the Zinn Education Project (www.zinnedproject.org) encourage you to read two articles *American Educator* chose not to publish: (1) "When Assessing Zinn, Listen to the Voices of Teachers and Students" (www.hnn.us/article/149974) by Robert Cohen, with insights from teachers and students, voices absent from Wineburg's article, and (2) "Bashing Howard Zinn: A Critical Look at One of the Critics" (www.bit.ly/1dYJp2W) by Alison Kysia, a careful comparison of Wineburg's representation of *A People's History* to the original text, revealing many distortions. Also, please see comments by AFT members on the AFT's Facebook page (<http://on.fb.me/1foOaoZ>) in response to the initial posting of Wineburg's article.

—DEBORAH MENKART AND BILL BIGELOW
Codirectors, Zinn Education Project
Washington, DC

I have great respect for Sam Wineburg, the author of "Undue Certainty," and I take his positions seriously. As someone who has taught *A People's History* for several years and been in touch with other educators who also use it, I think Wineburg may be missing a crucial piece of information. He presupposes that Zinn's work is taught in isolation from other texts, or that it is presented as historical narrative that students must digest.

When I use Zinn's work in my classroom, it serves two purposes: to expose students to an accessible form of social history and to give a perspective on history that is read in the context of other pieces of evidence and scholarship. In my class, students read *A People's History* not in isolation, nor as a straight narrative to digest, but as one interpretive voice that exposes them to the work of historians in two ways. First, they can see multiple perspectives on the same event. Then, they can draw their own conclusions from the evidence.

To throw out the textbook and simply substitute *A People's History* as "real history" without doing any kind of interpretive work around the text elicits no more historical/analytical thinking from students than simply reading a traditional textbook.

—JOSH HATALA
Emma Willard School
Troy, NY

I felt let down by Wineburg's article. A more constructive piece could urge teachers to highlight Zinn's first chapter,

which discusses the making of history, to use the classroom to promote inquiry throughout the book, and to add other writings to their lessons, such as primary sources, to teach students how to interpret history.

The article's most reasonable critique was of Zinn's "yes-no" historical questions, but *A People's History* operates as a counterhistory to many "yesses" that students have already been taught. In an accessible way, Zinn destabilizes those yesses so readers can question a dominant narrative. If the book just asked open-ended questions instead of presenting aspects of U.S. history that have previously been made invisible, it wouldn't be as influential.

—ADAM QUINN
Hampshire College
Amherst, MA

I actually agree with Wineburg's article. When I first read *A People's History*, I was shocked by how tentative and questionable Zinn's conclusions were. It's a decent book for another perspective, but it's in no way authoritative. I'm a dyed-in-the-wool liberal, but I just cannot recommend Zinn's work as a reliable secondary source for history.

—ANONYMOUS

I want to express my gratitude to Sam Wineburg for being brave enough to write "Undue Certainty." I teach fifth grade (including colonial American history) in the Los Angeles Unified School District. I depend on a lot of outside materials and



my own knowledge (a constant work in progress) to enliven the vapid textbooks, whose bones have been picked clean by the vacuum of political correctness.

I encourage my students to read about an event, marshal the facts, then try to help them answer their questions ranging from the practical to the abstract. To answer them satisfactorily, I need a broad range of content knowledge on a subject, knowledge that is sequential. I need to know facts about geography, agricultural trends, economics, politics, indigenous cultures, and the New World colonies. Many teachers are content to use textbooks spiced up with their remembrance of Zinn's breathless anecdotes, and I think this does a huge injustice to young minds, especially in a school such as mine, where the tedium of poverty often eclipses the will or the means to acquire additional educational resources.

I am thrilled that someone else, especially with such sterling credentials, has a similar take on the thrill of history.

—JANE DE HAVEN
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