

## **Lives by the Left: Biography and Materialist History**

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Archie Potts, *Zilliacus: A Life for Peace and Socialism* (London: The Merlin Press, 2002).

Cy Gonick, *A Very Red Life: The Story of Bill Walsh* (St. John's: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 2001).

Davis D. Joyce, *Howard Zinn: A Radical American Vision* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003).

Biography has long held a privileged place in history; the first written histories were *biographies of rulers and dynasties*. Nineteenth-century scholars upheld the value of biography above all other varieties of history: Thomas Carlyle wrote “History is the essence of innumerable biographies,” and Benjamin Disraeli advised “Read no history: nothing but biography, for that is life without theory.”<sup>1</sup> However, by the 1970s, traditional historiography was being satirized as little more than accounts of “dead white guys”. Nonetheless, biography remains a powerful – and very popular – approach to history.

How, then, should materialist historians deal with the problem of biography? Should they reject it outright, confident that individuals cannot overcome the forces of class and capitalism? A more palatable option might be to use biography to illustrate the structural limits on a person's life, regardless of class or condition. One imagines, however, that two or three examples of this model would suffice to prove a very depressing point. There are more constructive approaches to biography for historians of the left. A scholar might choose biography to celebrate the model life of a revolutionary or to damn the selfishness of a bourgeois industrialist. Such a biography might inspire readers to action or to further investigation into a materialist critique of capital. This approach possibly would advance “the revolution” but it would not further the cause of history significantly.

Those on the left who believe that materialism is analytically dynamic should consider biography an invaluable tool for examining the nature of *power*: how individuals can influence economic, social, and political forces and how those forces limit the choices of individuals. We can look at a person's life – especially one that is well documented – as a case study in power. Robert Caro's monumental studies of Robert Moses and Lyndon Johnson are excellent

examples of this approach.<sup>2</sup> Caro told Kurt Vonnegut:

I realized that I wanted to do something very different with biography than what I felt biographies had been doing before. I came to see that I wasn't interested in simply writing the life story of the man, Robert Moses, or of the man, Lyndon Johnson. I came to see that I wasn't really interested in writing a biography to tell the story of a famous man. I realized that what I wanted to do was to use biography as a means of illuminating the times and the great forces that shape the times – particularly political power.<sup>3</sup>

Exploring an individual's success or failure in the use of or resistance to power – and failure is probably more instructive than success – is particularly appropriate to historians of the left. Rather than assuming that power structures exist *ab initio*, Caro offers insights into Moses' and Johnson's manipulation of bureaucratic structures to control political processes. In *Master of the Senate*, for example, Caro devotes hundreds of pages to an examination of Senate procedure. This background information is essential as Johnson used the rules of the Senate to rise from junior Senator to majority leader in six years; as President he managed to pass the 1960s federal Civil Rights legislation through a chamber traditionally devoted to states' rights. Caro's subjects thus become tools for studying the uses and limits of political power in a representative democracy.

This essay considers three biographies of “radicals”, broadly defined. The biographers – Archie Potts, Cy Gonick, and Davis Joyce – differ greatly in their aims and abilities. They use different methodologies and sources, though each faced obstacles in research.<sup>4</sup> The subjects – Konni Zilliacus, Bill Walsh, and Howard Zinn – functioned as radicals in different places, times, and fields though each worked with the Soviet Union's existence providing a real alternative to liberal capitalism. Zilliacus was a minor British diplomat, Labour MP, and pioneer of the peace and nuclear disarmament movements. Walsh visited the Soviet Union in the 1930s before becoming a longstanding member of the Communist Party of Canada and a skilled labour organizer. Zinn taught History and Political Science at Spelman College and Boston University and earned fame by writing popular “radical” histories, most notably *A People's History of the United States*.<sup>5</sup> Each biography is something of a celebration, but none reach the excess of hagiography.

Zilliacus was born in Japan in 1894 to a Finnish father and American mother and was educated in British private schools. His fluency in English, Finnish, French, German, Italian, Swedish, and Russian proved invaluable in the Great War, and he was seconded from RAF training to accompany a British mission to the former Russian Empire in January 1918. Zilliacus came to oppose Allied intervention in the Civil War; by the time he returned to Britain

in December 1919, his reports to the Foreign Office were countering the Whites' propaganda that supported a British presence. Already, "Zilly" had developed his enduring philosophy of co-existence and cooperation. His internationalism guided him through 18 years of service at the League of Nations in Geneva and 19 as a frequently dissident Labour MP during the Cold War.

Potts presents Zilliacus' internationalism as an inherent aspect of his upbringing. He was drawn initially to Labour's post-1918 foreign policy – "no" to intervention in Russia and "yes" to the League – and during the 1930s and 40s became a committed advocate of the social welfare state, believing a more balanced distribution of wealth would foster lasting peace. His linguistic skills and the connections he made in Geneva allowed Zilliacus remarkable access inside the Soviet Bloc. He was accused several times of being a communist and a Soviet agent<sup>6</sup> even while being pilloried by the Soviets for his pro-Tito stance.<sup>7</sup> Zilliacus, however, remained a free agent; he was expelled from the Labour Party in 1949 for criticizing its pro-American foreign policy and its foreign minister, Ernest Bevin. In his most important work – the cultivation of non-aligned peace and nuclear disarmament movements<sup>8</sup> – Zilliacus formed alliances across national and party boundaries, often risking the censure of his party and the end of his political career.

Bill Walsh was born Moishe Wolofksy in 1910 to Montreal's most prominent Jewish newspaper publisher, Herschel Wolofsky. Walsh left Montreal in 1929 to escape his father's control and in 1931 hopped a freighter to Europe with Moe Kosawatsky, later known as Dick Steele. Walsh and Steele found work in Minsk and Moscow and embraced the utopian enthusiasm of the first Five Year Plan. In 1933 Herschel, detouring from a Canadian trade mission to Poland, made his way to Moscow and demanded that his son return home; Walsh did so reluctantly when the Comintern asked him to work on his father's paper to get the Party's message out. By 1935, Walsh forgot about the paper and moved to Toronto where he worked as a union organizer and formal member of the Communist Party of Canada (CPC). Walsh threw himself into organizing and generally accepted the Party's position on purges and the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact. The CPC's neutrality campaign on Armistice Day in 1939 made it the focus of police raids and arrests; Walsh was forced underground until his arrest on New Year's Day in 1941. He went to jail for nine months and then to an internment camp with other CPC members until October 1942. After his wife's sudden death, he joined the Canadian Army and fought in northwest Europe for the last nine months of the war.

Walsh finally questioned CPC leader Tim Buck about inconsistencies in the party line in 1947, and received a sharp rebuke from Stanley Ryerson. In 1956, Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin's crimes – the next year Buck admitted that the CPC had erred in quashing debate within the party – and the Soviets invaded Hungary. Walsh focused on the CPC's efforts for the working

class rather than the crimes and hypocrisy of its leadership, and remained a member until he was expelled in 1967 for criticizing another union leader. By now, Walsh had built a career as a freelance labour consultant and arbitration representative. In 1969, Walsh joined the New Democratic Party (NDP) and its Waffle group, an intra-party caucus of socialists and economic nationalists that included Mel Watkins, James Laxer, and Cy Gonick. His formal political activity ended in 1972 when the Waffle was expelled from the NDP.

Howard Zinn was born in 1922 to an immigrant Jewish family in New York. Zinn's service as a bombardier in the Second World War instilled in him a certainty that war was incapable of achieving constructive results and that it contradicted the supposed advances of the modern liberal state. As he completed his PhD at Columbia – with a study of Fiorello LaGuardia's congressional career – Zinn took a position at Spelman, a black women's college in Atlanta, which put him in the midst of the Civil Rights movement and contributed to his activism as a scholar. He also met radical historian Staughton Lynd at Spelman, and later formed a close friendship with Noam Chomsky.

Zinn produced little scholarly history, but he did write a string of books very important to radical movements in the United States. He published *The Southern Mystique*<sup>9</sup> and *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*<sup>10</sup> on the Civil Rights movement; his *Vietnam: The Logic of Withdrawal*<sup>11</sup> was an early and important articulation of principles for the anti-war movement, and in *Disobedience and Democracy: Nine Fallacies on Law and Order* Zinn mounted a powerful defence of “the deliberate violation of law for a vital social purpose,” just as anti-war demonstrations were becoming ubiquitous.<sup>12</sup> Zinn's most influential book is probably his *People's History*, which has sold over one million copies (Joyce, 245).<sup>13</sup> It helped to popularize social history and provided a powerful critique of American imperialism for those who were resisting the status quo.

As biographies, the books have varying merit. Joyce's is the least successful, rarely rising to the level of historiography.<sup>14</sup> He provides a descriptive account of a few of the more important events in Zinn's life but offers few reasons for his political and historical theories. Rather, this is an annotated bibliography: short descriptions of each of Zinn's books followed by a sampling of reviews. Zinn is placed vaguely within American historiography – he fits somewhere near the New Left, we are told (Joyce, 231) – but the origins and evolution of his ideas are left largely to the reader's imagination. Joyce is intellectually lazy where he disagrees with Zinn and fails to treat Zinn's attacks on space exploration and prisons seriously.<sup>15</sup> If these ideas of Zinn's are flawed, what does that suggest about the rest of his oeuvre? Joyce does attempt to assess Zinn's importance, mostly by citing positive reviews of his work.<sup>16</sup> More insight could be gained, however, if Joyce explored the reasons for Zinn's successes and failures. Would he have had as wide a readership if he had adhered more closely to academic conventions? Would he have had more influence on

academics if his work had maintained those standards? Which approach would have been more effective in accomplishing Zinn's goals? A discussion of the balance Zinn struck would help us to evaluate his choices more than anecdotal evidence. Lacking a rigorous historiographical discussion, Joyce cannot say with accuracy how much Zinn has changed the field of American history. Measuring this "power" – whether Zinn gave other academics the courage to challenge convention and activists the philosophical tools to challenge the political status quo – is admittedly difficult, but addressing the question is essential to gauging Zinn's success or failure.

Potts does better with Zilliacus, though here too, important stones are left unturned. Though perceptive and even inspirational, perhaps, Zilliacus was largely ineffective in his main goal: shaping Labour's foreign policy in the Cold War. Zilliacus wrote and spoke persuasively of the need for Britain to pull back from the American camp to ease Soviet feelings of isolation and confrontation; but though he sat with the government for nine years, he altered foreign policy not a whit under Clement Atlee or Harold Wilson. Instead, Zilliacus attacked Bevin in the House in March 1946 and kept up his public opposition even after he was expelled for three years in 1949. Several times Zilliacus appealed in vain to delegates at Labour's annual conferences in Blackpool. Potts attributes Zilliacus' failure there to the bloc voting of the trade unions in support of Bevin, the leading figure of unionism in interwar Britain (Potts, 106-09). Potts – and Zilliacus – presume(d) that bloc voting subverted *true* democracy, but this a liberal reading not entirely appropriate for a socialist politician or organized labour. "One person, one vote" makes a good civil rights platform, but it is rather disingenuous to object to solidarity simply because it does not produce results you agree with. Had Zilliacus learned how to work the party machinery, he may have been able to challenge Bevin and make Labour's foreign policy less "Tory".

Once again, measuring Zilliacus' intangible impact on the peace and nuclear disarmament movements is difficult but important. These movements became *inherently* anti-statist, as remarkable for their willingness to oppose their own nations as for their internationalism. It is possible that Zilliacus accomplished more by speaking out so loudly when it was "inappropriate" than he could have by working quietly within the Labour Party. Did Zilliacus help the postwar generation find its internationalism? Potts' study would have benefited from an attempt to answer this question.

Gonick comes closest to the Caro model. He discusses Walsh's organizational work for the CPC – though not in sufficient detail – and explains how an open communist was able to survive through the union purges of the 1940s and 50s to emerge as a respected organizer and leading labour consultant. He also examines how Walsh remained in the CPC for more than 30 years, though here Gonick may be limited by having a living subject. Walsh told Gonick that he

had been so busy with party and union work that he had not considered Stalin's crimes – either in the 1930s or after Khrushchev's speech – the Nazi-Soviet pact or any other violations of communist principle. Walsh probably believes this answer, but he was intelligent and had demonstrated resistance both to his father's authority and to the CPC's line when he believed union members stood to gain by a different path. Few rank and file members could long balance the CPC's constructive work for Canada's proletariat and its lockstep obedience to the twists and turns of Soviet interests. Gonick should have probed deeper in search of generalizations to draw from Walsh's experience.<sup>17</sup>

If we take Caro's work as a model for examining individuals and power we can reconnect biographies of the left to shape a richer narrative of social, political, and economic power. Examining a subject's strategy for using or resisting power helps us to better understand both the subject's life and the limits and reaches of these forces. Biographies that do not ask these complex and difficult questions are rather like trees falling in an uninhabited forest. Potts, Gonick, and Joyce legitimately concentrate on their subjects, but if they looked more closely at how their subjects functioned and whether they succeeded or failed, their books would add more significantly to the larger material history project.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Carlyle and Disraeli quoted in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1980), 131, 186.

<sup>2</sup> Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Knopf, 1974); *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power* (New York: Knopf, 1982); *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent* (New York: Knopf, 1990), and *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Master of the Senate* (New York: Knopf, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Caro and Kurt Vonnegut, "The Round Table: Fiction, Biography and the Use of Power," *Hampton Shorts*, 4 (1999).

<sup>4</sup> Shortly before his death, Zilliacus committed that greatest of historical crimes – destroying most of his personal papers, leaving his biographer to work from Zilliacus' published writings, secondary sources, and a smattering of his letters to other public figures. Walsh and Zinn were living and able to collaborate with Gonick and Joyce, respectively. While this allows useful insights on some matters, it also leaves the biographers open to the faults of memory and analytically constrained by a desire to avoid embarrassing their subjects/friends.

<sup>5</sup> Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> In 1946, George Orwell called Zilliacus an "underground communist" in *Partisan*

*Review*; Nikolai Tolstoy, in *Stalin's Secret War* (London: 1981), charged that Zilliacus had worked with Soviet intelligence during the Second World War (cited in Potts, 83, 205 n. 35, 206 n. 4). Potts accepts Zilliacus' denials and refutes Tolstoy's story of espionage.

<sup>7</sup> Zilliacus first visited Yugoslavia in 1947; he quickly learned Serbo-Croatian and vacationed there every year, often as a guest of Tito. He wrote on the Tito-Stalin break in 1950 and in 1952 published *Tito of Yugoslavia* (Potts, 114-20, 154-60).

<sup>8</sup> Zilliacus' *I Choose Peace* (London: Penguin Books, 1949) has been called the first revisionist history of the Cold War, citing Allied intervention and mutual ignorance as the root causes of post-1945 tensions. In 1958, he was an early and vocal supporter of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

<sup>9</sup> Zinn, *The Southern Mystique* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964).

<sup>10</sup> Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

<sup>11</sup> Zinn, *Vietnam: The Logic of Withdrawal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967). The book was developed from an article of the same title that Zinn wrote for *The Nation*; it sold more than 50,000 copies.

<sup>12</sup> Zinn, *Disobedience and Democracy: Nine Fallacies on Law and Order* (New York: Random House, 1968), cited in Joyce, 102-07. Zinn wrote the book to counter the pro-statist arguments made in Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas' *Concerning Dissent and Civil Disobedience* (New York: World Publishing Co., 1968).

<sup>13</sup> Matt Damon's character makes a glowing reference to *A People's History* in the film *Good Will Hunting*, though Joyce notes that Damon, who co-wrote the script, grew up in Zinn's neighbourhood in Boston (Joyce, 237-38).

<sup>14</sup> Joyce acknowledges that this is his concern, though he also sets out to provide a "life and times" context for Zinn's work (Joyce, 19).

<sup>15</sup> Zinn argued in *Postwar America: 1945-1971* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973) that space exploration constituted a ridiculous waste of resources when poverty and hunger were so prevalent. Joyce counters that the "spirit of adventure" is more important in the long run than adequately funding "admittedly crucial social programs in the short run". After several years of visiting prisoners and observing prison conditions, Zinn argued that the only solution was abolition of the institutions: Zinn, *Justice in Everyday Life: The Way it Really Works* (New York: William Morrow, 1974). Joyce dismisses this proposition as "something of a dilemma" (Joyce, 140-41, 145-47).

<sup>16</sup> Eric Foner, for example, predicted that *A People's History* would shape the next generation of historians (Joyce, 155).

<sup>17</sup> J. B. McLachlan, for example, resigned his CPC membership before his death in 1937, unable to accept the contradictions between the Party line and what he saw as the workers' interests. David Frank, *J. B. McLachlan: A Biography* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1999). On this point, see Bryan D. Palmer, "Renegades: J. L. Cohen, Bill Walsh, and the Tragedies of the Canadian Left," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 37, 1 (Spring 2002), 222-23.