

Howard Zinn

The Future of

History

## Reflections on History

October 25, 1989

DB What about the notion of history as a commodity, something that can be bought and sold. Do you accept that?

I once wrote an essay called "History as Private Enterprise." What I meant was that I thought so much history was written without a social conscience behind it. Or if there was a social conscience somewhere in the historian, it was put aside for the writing of history, because writing history was done as a professional duty. It was done to get something published, to get a job at a university, to get tenure, to get a promotion, to build up one's prestige. It was printed by publishers in books that would sell and make a profit. The profit motive has so distorted our whole economic and social system by making profit the key to what is produced and therefore leaving important things unproduced while producing stupid things, and leaving some people rich and some people poor. That same profit system had extended to that world of academic institutions, which as an innocent young student I thought was a world separated from the world of commerce and business. But the world of the university, of publishing, of history, of scholarship is not at all separated from the profit-seeking world. The historian doesn't think of it consciously this way. But there is the fact of economic security that operates in every profession. The professional writer and historian is perhaps conscious, perhaps semi-conscious, or perhaps has already absorbed into the bloodstream a thinking about economic security and therefore about playing it safe. You don't have to conspire to have bad history, inadequate history, history from the top down. All you have to do is play it safe, and that's the rule. I guess it's the American rule, generally, for professionals. Play it safe. And so historians, most of them, play it safe. And the textbook publishers help in that. The textbook publishers want to play it safe. They don't want to say anything which might raise an eyebrow anywhere. The same is true of heads of departments and administrators at colleges and universities. So we get a lot of safe history.

DB *Who are the custodians of history in terms of gender, class, race, and ideology?*

They are mostly guys, mostly well off, mostly white. Sometimes this is talked about as the history of rich, white men. There's a history which is done by rich white men. Not that historians are rich. But the people who publish the textbooks are, the people who control the media, the people who decide what historians to invite on the networks at special moments when they want to call on a historian. The people who dominate the big media networks are rich. Not only are those who control our information rich, white and male, but they then ask that history concentrate on those who are rich, white and male. That is why the point of view of black people has not been a very important one in the telling of our history. The point of view of women certainly has not been. The point of view of working people is something that has not been given its due in the histories that we have mostly been given in our culture.

Jesse Lemisch, a dissident historian, calls them the "great white fathers" of history. I guess that's generally true. I don't want to be too harsh with these guardians, because it's not a matter of single individuals. It's a sort of general atmosphere that pervades the historical profession which is dominated by that word: "safety." And then there are others like Staughton Lynd, for instance, who is a remarkable historian. He taught with me. I don't say he's a remarkable historian just because he taught with me. We were colleagues at Spelman College in Atlanta. A wonderful person. His parents were distinguished academics, Helen and Robert Lynd who wrote *Middletown*. He came up in this rarefied academic setting, but he was a radical from the time he was, like, two.

After he left Spelman College he went to Yale. He was a prize-winning scholar. But then in 1965, we had just started bombing, at least officially, Vietnam. He flew to Hanoi. Came back and suddenly he was *persona non grata* at Yale. Didn't get tenure. Left Yale. Tried to get another job. You'd think somebody who'd taught at Yale is not going to have trouble getting another job. He couldn't get another teaching job anywhere in the country. This was past the period of McCarthyism. They always make this mistake. They think McCarthyism occupied a finite period in American history. McCarthyism is a permanent fact of American life. I can tell you

exactly how it works about safety. At one point when Lynd was having trouble getting a job I said to a colleague of mine who was a big shot in the history department at Boston University, I hear you're looking for somebody to teach American history. He said, Yeah. I said, How about Staughton Lynd. He said, Staughton Lynd? I said, You know him? He said, I was on his doctoral committee at Columbia. I said, What do you think of him? He said, Brilliant. I said, Well, how about it? He said, Oh, we could never do that. I said, Why? He said, Well, of course, I'd like him. But then he would never be approved. And that's the way it works. It's like, I would love to have black people on my block, but my neighbors wouldn't like it.

DB *Let's talk a bit about historical engineering, since you are a historian.*

And since I'm an engineer.

DB *You may have some engineering inclinations. Certainly there's been a lot of engineering around the U.S. wars in Indochina. I think the way I'm phrasing the question is already tipping off something I want to get in there, and that is, it's always referred to as the Vietnam War, whereas Laos and Cambodia were sideshows and never discussed. What kind of engineering have you seen evolve in the last twenty or twenty-five years around Indochina?*

A lot of it is not engineering but, what's the word they use when they raze cities? What do you do when you raze history?

DB *Obliteration.*

Sort of leaving it out. You look at the newest textbooks and you see two paragraphs on Vietnam. What's going on here? It's the central event of our generation in the U.S. Where is it? So that's one thing that goes on. The other thing that goes on is, when they talk about it in the popular press especially, the tone is, Well, we didn't do it right. It's a tactical question. We could have won. Part of it is there are a lot of books out now by military specialists about how we might have won. We didn't do enough. As I've often commented, we only dropped seven million tons of bombs on 35 million people. We didn't do enough. The other is, there's a sort of subtle thing that's happened

DB *Your father was a waiter for many years. He'd work a bar mitzvah and then there'd be no work.*

He did a lot of Jewish weddings. In fact, when I was about seven-teen he introduced me to it. On New Year's Eve they would be short and the waiters would be able to bring their sons in. They called them "juniors." It was an AFL craft union. Everything was hereditary: the leadership of the union, the jobs, etc. I really hated being a waiter, and I felt for my father. They used to call him "Charlie Chaplin" because he walked like Chaplin. His feet were flat. They said it was the result of all those years of being a waiter. I don't know if that's true or not, but that was the story. He worked very hard. He, and a lot of others like him, was a great fan of Roosevelt during the New Deal. People were still getting married, but they weren't paying waiters. My father worked a variety of jobs, as a window cleaner, a pushcart peddler and a ditch digger with the WPA. My mother had been a factory worker before she was married. When she got married she began having kids, and it was my father's job to support the family.

DB *Was there any kind of intellectual life at home, books, magazines?*

There were no books or magazines. The very first book I read I picked up on the street. Ten pages were ripped out, but it didn't matter to me because it was my first book. I was already reading, and this was *Tarzan and the Jewels of Opar*. I'll always remember that. No books at home. However, my parents knew that I liked books and liked to read, and then the *New York Post* came out with this gift, that if you clipped these coupons and sent in twenty five cents, they would send you a volume of Dickens. So my parents sent away for the whole set of Dickens, the collected works, twenty volumes. I read every single one. Dickens was my first author. Some of them I didn't understand, like *The Pickwick Papers*. Sometimes I got the humor and sometimes I didn't. I went through them in order. I thought if the *New York Post* sent you the books in order, somehow they must have a reason for it. So first it was *David Copperfield*, then *Oliver Twist*, then *Dombey and Son*, then *Bleak House*. When I was thirteen my parents bought me a typewriter. They didn't know about typewriters or books, but they knew I was interested in reading and writing. They paid five dollars for a remade Underwood No. 5, which I had for a very long time.

DB *Looking at the politics of history, you're fond of quoting Orwell's dictum "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past."*

Orwell is one of my favorite writers. When I came across that I knew I had to use it. We writers are real thieves. We see something good and use it, and then if we're nice we say where we got it. Sometimes we don't. What the Orwell quote means to me is a very important observation that if you can control history, what people know about it, if you can decide what's in people's history and what's left out, you can order their thinking. You can order their values. You can in effect organize their brains by controlling their knowledge. The people who can do that, who can control the past, are the people who control the present. The people who would dominate the media, who publish the textbooks, who decide in our culture what are the dominant ideas, what gets told and what doesn't.

DB *You've said that objectivity and scholarship in the media and elsewhere is not only "harmful and misleading, it's not desirable."*

I've said two things about it. One, that it's not possible. Two, it's not desirable. It's not possible because all history is a selection out of an infinite number of facts. As soon as you begin to select, you select according to what you think is important. Therefore it is already not objective. It's already biased in the direction of whatever you, as the selector of this information, think people should know. So it's really not possible. Of course, some people claim to be objective. The worst thing is to claim to be objective. Of course you can't be. Historians should say what their values are, what they care about, what their background is, and let you know what is important to them so that young people and everybody who reads history are warned in advance that they should never count on any one source, but should go to many sources. So it's not possible to be objective, and it's not desirable if it were possible. We should have history that does reflect points of view and values, in other words, history that is not objective. We should have history that enhances human values, humane values, values of brotherhood, sisterhood, peace, justice and equality. The closest I can get to it is the values enunciated in the Declaration of Independence. Equality, the right of all people to have life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Those are values that historians should

actively promulgate in writing history. In doing that they needn't distort or omit important things. But it does mean if they have those values in mind, that they will emphasize those things in history which will bring up a new generation of people who read history books and who will care about treating other people equally, about doing away with war, about justice in every form.

**DB** *How do you filter those biases?*

As I've said, yes, I have my biases, my leanings. So if I'm writing or speaking about Columbus, I will try not to hide or omit the fact that Columbus did a remarkable thing in crossing the ocean and venturing out into uncharted waters. It took physical courage and navigational skill. It was a remarkable event. I have to say that so that I don't omit what people see as the positive side of Columbus. But then I have to go on to say the other things about Columbus which are much more important than his navigational skill or that he was a religious man. That is how he treated the human beings that he found in this hemisphere. The enslavement, the torture, the murder, the dehumanization of these people. That is the important thing.

There's an interesting way in which you can frame a sentence which will show what you emphasize and which will have two very different results. Here's what I mean. Take Columbus as an example. You can frame it, and this was the way the Harvard historian Samuel Eliot Morison in effect framed it in his biography of Columbus: Columbus committed genocide, but he was a wonderful sailor. He did a remarkable and extraordinary thing in finding these islands in the Western Hemisphere. Where's the emphasis there? He committed genocide, but...He's a good sailor. I say, He was a good sailor, but he treated people with the most horrible cruelty. Those are two different ways of saying the same facts. Depending on which side of the comma you're on, you show your bias. I believe that it's good for us to put our biases in the direction of a humane view of history.

**DB** *I know you were present at the 1892 celebration of the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus' voyage...*

Of course, I try to be at all these important events. I tried to be there in 1492 but I didn't make it.

**DB** *In terms of 1992, were you surprised at the level of protest, indignation and general criticism of Columbus?*

I was delightfully surprised. I did expect more protest this year than there ever has been, because I knew, just from going around the country speaking and from reactions to my book [*A People's History of the United States*], which has sold a couple of hundred thousand copies. It starts off with Columbus. So anybody who has read it I hope is going to have a different view of him. I knew that there has been more literature in the last few years. Hans Koenig's wonderful book, which appeared before mine, *Columbus' Enterprise*. I was aware that Native American groups around the country were planning protests. So I knew that things would happen, but I really wasn't prepared for the number of things that have happened and the extent of protest that there has been. It has been very satisfying. What's interesting about it, much as people like me and you rail against the media, they don't have total control. It is possible for us, and this is very heartwarming and encouraging, even though we don't control the major media, by sheer word of mouth, a little radio broadcast, community newspapers, speaking here and there, Noam Chomsky speaking seventeen times a day in a hundred cities, to actually change the culture in a very important way. And it does happen. For example, the *New York Times* reported that this year the Columbus quincennial is marked by protests. In Denver they called off a parade because of the expected protest. This has happened in a number of other places. Berkeley changed Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples Day.

**DB** *So there is in this doom and gloom atmosphere that the left loves to wash itself in at times glimpses of light?*

I am encouraged by what I see. Not just about Columbus, but that as soon as you give people information that they didn't have before, they are ready to accept it. When I went around the country speaking, I was worried that when I started describing the atrocities that Columbus committed, that people in the audience would start yelling and shouting and throwing things at me, threatening my life. That hasn't happened at all. Maybe the worst that happened is that one Italian-American said to me in a low voice, plaintively, "What are Italians going to do? Who are we going to celebrate?" I said, "Joe

population have gone down fifteen percent. So to me it is very important in teaching to prepare young people to look at statistics and look at these grantfalloon, these overall statements about the economy and the country with great skepticism.

**DB** *Could you read that section from Hard Times?*

Sissy Jupe is describing this to Gradgrind's daughter, who's also a little skeptical of her father, and who has befriended Sissy Jupe, this working-class girl. She's describing to her the class that she was in, Gradgrind's.

"And he said, In this nation there are fifty millions of money. Isn't this a prosperous nation, and aren't you in a thriving state? I said I didn't know. I thought I couldn't know whether it was a prosperous nation or not or whether I was in a thriving state or not unless I knew who had got the money and whether any of it was mine." Louisa, Gradgrind's daughter, herself gets involved in a conflict with her father over his tendency to put everything in general and statistical terms and to lose sight of the human consequences of these statistics. He's pushing Louisa into a marriage with somebody properly named Bounderby. Dickens loves those names. This is horrifying to her. She says, "Father, I've often thought, life is very short." Gradgrind says, "Still, the average duration of human life has proved to have increased of late years. The calculations of various life assurance offices have established that fact." Louisa says, "I speak of my own life, Father." Dickens to me was always a wonderful source of insight into reality.

**DB** *Speaking about education and your years as a teacher, what were the qualities you were looking for in your students?*

Maybe you should put it this way: What were the qualities I was hoping would develop in my students? I suppose the most important single thing I wanted to develop in my students was a determination to look into things on their own, to not accept authority, including my own authority, to challenge me. I challenged them constantly to challenge me in class, to go and look up the things that I was talking about and bring in countervailing views. I insisted that all issues were controversial, that they couldn't believe books, that the fact that something was in a book or newspaper didn't give it the certainty of truth. They had to check up on things and investigate things for

themselves because our sources of information are skewed in the direction favored by those people who control the media, the book publishing industry, who for that matter control the educational system. So that was one of the most important things I wanted my students to learn. Maybe another thing I wanted them to learn was that education does not come simply through classrooms, books, degrees, teaching, that they could learn most about the world by getting outside the classroom and encountering what was happening to real people in the world outside. That's why instead of giving exams to my students, testing them, as if testing is more important than learning, I would say, Look, your job for the semester—this was in a course I gave called "Law and Justice in America" and in which I had 400 students signed up every year—is to go out into the community and to find a group that you would like to work with, a group that is interested in something you are interested in. Work with that group, a group that is in some way connected with issues of law and justice. Just work with that group. I'm not going to tell you what group. If you want to join the Young Republicans and see what they're like, OK. Of course, not too many of my students did. Some of them joined Amnesty International. Some of them worked with Mobilization for Survival, or with groups that were raising bail for prisoners. Or they formed their own groups. Some of my students formed a group that investigated the legal problems of veterans who were the victims of Agent Orange in the Vietnam War defoliation campaign. Other students produced a handbook for tenants to protect them against landlords. So the idea was for the students to learn about law and justice by encountering real life problems.

**DB** *Do you miss teaching and the students?*

I miss the classroom and the encounter with students and getting to know them. But I'm not completely divorced from that situation, because now that I'm not teaching in a formal way I do go around the country and speak to groups of young people and community people, so I have the opportunity to have an interchange, to do a kind of teaching. A week ago I spoke to Philips Exeter Academy, which is a prep school in New Hampshire. There were a thousand students, a captive audience, as high school students very often are when they are assembled in the morning and told, You must come. I don't mind

with an independent frame of mind who is willing to work hard in the archives and the libraries can produce great history.

DB *Those archives and libraries are undergoing a radical transformation, as you know. History and cyberspace. Years ago you stumbled upon a file cabinet in New York with LaGuardia's archives and that led to your dissertation and first book. How will electronic communication change the archives of the future? For example, do you see the collected e-mail of some famous figure?*

I think of my collected e-mail, which is already huge. I suppose, I don't like to think of the books and manuscripts being displaced. I still would rather go through the actual crumbling newspapers of the past than look at microfilm. And yet, I think we should make use of whatever modern devices there are that can be helpful. I see the electronic collection of information as being a supplement to the traditional sources, not replacing them.

DB *Do you see any discernible political implications of e-mail and cyberspace?*

I see two different kinds of implications. One is making more information available to more people through the use of the Web. On the other hand, there's also the possibility, as there has been with the other media, of control. It remains to be seen whether the democratic aspect will outweigh the controlling aspect.

DB *Turning to your writing style, which is fluid, fluent, straightforward and direct. I'm wondering to what extent you've been influenced by literature, novels for example. You've mentioned The Death of Ivan Illich, by Leo Tolstoy and James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. We've talked about Dickens and Orwell and others.*

I guess I've always been aware that fiction can often represent history more accurately than non-fiction. As I mentioned in a previous interview, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* can represent the Depression more realistically than a dry set of statistics about how many people were unemployed and how many people were hungry during the 1930s. I've always been aware of that because it has always seemed to me that the representation of reality is not simply a matter

of telling about a past event on a flat surface, but that by going beneath that surface and by exploring something in detail and by making it more vivid, by writing about it in a literary way, you are bringing that event to life much more importantly than by a simple prosaic description. So I've always been interested in literature for that reason. When I read Upton Sinclair's novel about the Sacco and Vanzetti case, Boston, I had read other things about the case, but I thought, This brings those events into our imagination, into our vision, much more powerfully than any non-fiction account could do, and without doing an injustice to the facts.

DB *How would you feel about inventing facts, So-and-so turned to So-and-so and said this? These are pure fabrications.*

That's something else. When Steinbeck writes about the Depression, you know he's inventing characters, but at the same time you know that these characters are going through real events which may in their details not be exact replicas of actual events, but which suggest very powerfully what those actual events are. I think to invent a dialogue, for instance, is probably going too far, unless you're writing a novel. Sometimes dialogue is invented in historical accounts, pretending to know what Jefferson said to Adams. You don't have to pretend. You can actually quote Jefferson's letters to Adams. So I think you have to be careful. The most important thing is honesty. The reader should know whether he or she is reading fact or something imaginatively constructed.

DB *You had something in mind in a lecture when you mentioned Tolstoy's Death of Ivan Illich and Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. What was that?*

I think what I had in mind was that young people, especially when thinking about their whole future lying ahead of them, should try to imagine what Ivan Illich went through when at the end of his life, Tolstoy is giving young people an opportunity to see forty or fifty years ahead and ask, How will I think back upon my life forty or fifty years from now. For them to see that Ivan Illich, this successful man, this man who did everything right, looks back at his life and says, This is not the kind of life I wanted to lead, is something very instructive for young people, who are being captivated, being pressured on all

# You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train

February 3 and 5, 1997

DB *I want to first of all track down something that I think seems to be somewhat improbable. That is, I heard that you actually studied with the great historian from 450 BC, Herodotus.*

Herodotus studied with me. Just a small correction.

✶ DB *One of the things that is characteristic about your work is your connection with art and poetry and films. Not a lot of historians or academics integrate culture into their work. Why do you do that?*

I think that art and politics enhance one another. Art is inevitably political—I know that's a big discussion—because it has an effect on the world and it comes out of the world as it is. I think for anybody who's interested in political and social issues, art plays a very special role in enhancing statements that otherwise would be prosaic and dull, in lending passion to something, to facts that need something more than simple statements. Movements have always been given enormous stimulus and inspiration by art and artists. The trade union movement has been helped enormously by music, by labor union songs. The civil rights movement, there's no way of escaping the power, sitting in a church in Selma, of a Selma freedom chorus in building up the courage of black people in Dallas County, knowing that the next day they were going to face state troopers and the sheriff, and the power of song just swept people into a kind of recognition that they could do what they thought they couldn't do.

DB *You were first alerted to the Ludlow Massacre in Colorado by a song by Woody Guthrie.*

That's right. Interestingly enough, I had studied history, undergraduate, graduate school, Ph.D. at Columbia, and nowhere in any of my history books, in none of my classes, did anyone ever mention the

Colorado coal strike of 1913-1914, or the Ludlow Massacre, an important point in that strike. Then I heard a song by Woody Guthrie called "The Ludlow Massacre," very haunting and powerful. It led me to begin to look into it and read about it outside of the classroom. It led me to the New York Public Library and five huge volumes of Congressional testimony about this amazing incident that took place in southern Colorado in 1913-1914.

DB *You wrote a poem in your teens about your Uncle Phil. It's in your autobiography, You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train, in the chapter entitled "Growing Up Class-Conscious."*

It's very nice of you, David, to talk about me as writing poetry. That was a real act of arrogance to include a poem of mine in my memoir, the only poem I ever wrote. But we'll pretend it's part of an enormous number of unpublished poems which some day the world will find. I started that chapter with it because I thought that the poem—whether it really is poetry or not—says something very concisely about the circumstances in which I grew up.

DB *Why don't you read it?*

You know this is my first poetry reading? I've always envied those people who did poetry readings; I always wished I had a poem to read. Then when I wrote this, I never thought anybody would ask me to read a poem, but I will.

Go see your Uncle Phil  
And say hello.

Who would walk a mile today  
To say hello,  
The city freezing in the snow?

Phil had a news stand  
Under the black El.  
He sat on a wooden box  
In the cold and in the heat.  
And three small rooms across the street.

Today the wooden box was gone,  
On top the stand Uncle Phil was curled.  
A skeleton inside an Army coat.  
He smiled and gave me a stick of gum  
With stiffened fingers, red and numb.

Go see your Uncle Phil today  
My mother said again in June  
I walked the mile to say hello  
With the city smelling almost sweet  
Brand new sneakers on my feet.

The stand was nailed and boarded tight  
And quiet in the sun.  
Uncle Phil lay cold, asleep,  
Under the black El, in a wooden box  
In three small rooms across the street.

My Uncle Phil was a World War I veteran, and that's why he was able to get a newsstand. It was affirmative action. Veterans got certain things. As a veteran, he could have the right to run a newsstand, on which he made his pennies and dollars. When our family was in dire straits, Uncle Phil, as little as he had, would always come through with a little bit of cash, a little bit of help, just when we were desperate. So he held a special place in my heart.

DB *It's interesting as well, Noam Chomsky had an uncle who ran a newsstand in New York who had a big influence on him in terms of his political development.*

It wasn't Uncle Phil, was it?

DB *Let's talk a bit more about the intersection of art and politics. The era of the blacklist and the naming names of alleged communists is again in the news. Elia Kazan, a major figure in American culture in the post-World War II era, was just denied a lifetime achievement award from the American Film Institute because he named names.*



Kazan was a very, very talented director. I think it should be possible to separate out, for certain purposes and certain reasons, what people do in their art and what people do in their politics. On certain levels they can be separated. On other levels they cannot be separated. So if Elia Kazan directs a fine movie, I don't think we should refuse to see it because Elia Kazan was an informer before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). But if he's going to get some recognition, some special kind of recognition and honor, and that implies something more than a specific work of art that he is connected with, then it seems to me his whole being, his whole life becomes relevant. I would not give a medal to Leni Riefenstahl for producing even the most technically magnificent films for the Nazis. And while I wouldn't put Elia Kazan in jail for being an informer, and I wouldn't even put him on a blacklist for being an informer, even though his informing led to other people being on blacklists, special little luxuries like awards and medals are another matter. I think to deny those is a way of making a statement about informing. Every one of these awards is a statement. To give him an award in spite of what he did is to say, his giving names to HUAC wasn't very important. But to deny him an award and make the news is to say to people, No, it is a very serious thing that he did, and should be taken note of.

DB *Lillian Hellman, the playwright, called that period "scoundrel time." It wasn't quite black and white, all the good guys on one side, the people who didn't cooperate, and all the bad guys on the other side.*

That's true. There were different kinds of people who cooperated, and cooperated to different degrees. I think cooperation to the point of giving the names of other people and therefore making them subject to punishment in order to save yourself, I think that was a particularly outrageous thing to do. On the other hand, you could feel compassion for people, not admiration, only compassion, who didn't have the courage to stand up to the Committee. I remember that scene of Larry Parks, who became famous for playing Al Jolson—come to think of it, on his knees—getting on his knees, in effect, before HUAC and pleading with them not to force him, not to insist that he give names. Ultimately he did. He knew he was doing something terrible. It might warrant compassion, but it's not admirable.

DB *There's the case of Lee J. Cobb, a well-known actor. He played the benighted Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. He also was the union mobster in Elia Kazan's On the Waterfront. He had quite an interesting experience in that gray area.*

He did inform when he spoke to the Committee. In talking to Victor Navasky for his book *Naming Names*, a remarkable book, he knew that he had done something really evil, and he acknowledged it and pointed to the fact that his being so frail still doesn't justify what he did. I had different feelings about the film *On the Waterfront* than other people on the left did. True, Kazan made a film which justified informing because Marlon Brando was a longshoreman who informed on the corrupt union officials and the corrupt bosses. The tie between the corrupt union officials and the big boys, was seen, unfortunately, only briefly in the film, just a quick shot of the rich fat cats behind the labor bosses. The labor bosses are the central evil in the film. It would have been better if it had been more of a clear partnership between the two. But I liked that film because I don't think you can take an absolute stand on any issue in which you have a reply which covers every instance. Like, under no conditions should anybody inform on anybody for any reason. We wanted people to inform on Nazis. We want people to inform on racists, on who murdered those three civil rights workers in Mississippi. So obviously each situation has to be considered differently. Marlon Brando represents the working man who faces a labor mob that kills his brother and that exploits the workers. He informs on them. That didn't strike me as a terrible thing, unless you want to make a blanket condemnation of all informing for all time. The only thing about it that I would take exception to is that he's informing on them to a government committee, which of course should not be trusted with any bit of information and cannot be counted on to do the right thing.

DB *Another work that appeared, a Broadway play, right about the time of On the Waterfront, was Arthur Miller's The Crucible. It has now been made into a film. It depicts the hysteria that engulfed Salem, Massachusetts in the seventeenth century.*

I saw *The Crucible* on stage, on Broadway. I also saw the French film version of it, which has been lost to history, and then read it. I always admired what Arthur Miller did. I have no doubt that he wrote

The *Crucible* out of his own experience and out of the experience of the nation. Arthur Miller was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee. He was an honorable person in refusing to do what other people had done, what Kazan had done, what Cobb had done, those people with whom he had been associated in the production of *Death of a Salesman*. I have no doubt that *The Crucible* is meant to say something not just about the witches of the seventeenth century, but about any kind of hysterical hunt for scapegoats in our time. Communists in the 1950s, and then by extension to welfare mothers today, to illegal immigrants, to anybody who becomes the object of hatred. So I think that was a wonderful work of art that Miller produced for us.

DB *The character of Willy Loman in Death of a Salesman seems to be a kind of metaphor for the political economy, capitalism.*

What's interesting is that the interpretation of *Death of a Salesman* varied from person to person. There were people who did not get the anti-capitalist message from it. I remember Arthur Miller once saying that he got a huge amount of correspondence from people who had seen or read the play. He got one letter from a man who said, I agree totally with the point that you are trying to make in this play: New England is a bad territory for salesmen. But I think that letter was an exception. I think the larger message of *Death of a Salesman* is still tremendously important. Namely, a society where profit decides what happens to human beings is the essence of capitalism. Capitalism is a system that's driven by the motive of corporate profit and business profit. Profit comes first. Human beings come next. That's what happened in *Death of a Salesman*. He did it so powerfully.

DB *And it's the real-life experience today of literally millions of Americans who have worked in some cases decades at particular offices or banks or factories and they're just discarded. Thanks, good night, Charlie.*

Willy Loman was "downsized," in contemporary terminology. That's why *Death of a Salesman* has had such universal and lasting impact, because it represents the insecurity of people under the capitalist system, the constant insecurity which attaches not just to working people and not just to the "underclass," as we call them, the people who are on the margins, but the middle class. We've seen how much

economic insecurity there is today for people who are professionals, who have presumably well-paying jobs, and yet their jobs can end in a moment if their corporation decides to merge with another corporation, or to go overseas, or decides it simply doesn't need them any more.

DB *Growing up in New York in the 1930s, were you aware of what was going on in Europe, particularly in Spain with the Spanish Civil War? Were you following those things at that time?*

I was just beginning to. In 1936, when the Spanish Civil War started, I was fourteen years old. You might say the Spanish Civil War spanned my years of fourteen to seventeen. It was just the time when I was beginning to become politically aware, beginning to read books on politics, on fascism in Europe. The way the Spanish Civil War came to me was that we were playing street football. There was no such thing as a football field. We were playing tackle on the asphalt. No gear. But kids are crazy that way, or desperate. There was a guy, Jerry Weinberg, who played with us all the time, very short, very fast. Suddenly he was no longer there, he wasn't playing with us. Weeks passed. I asked, Where is Jerry Weinberg? They said, He's gone off to fight in Spain. It impressed me that he would give up our street football to fight in Spain. I read and heard more about all these young Americans who were willing to risk their lives for a cause that was taking place 3,000 miles away, that they so deeply believed in.

DB *The conventional history of the Spanish Civil War is, Had the West stood up to Franco and his allies Hitler and Mussolini, World War II would never have happened. What do you think of that?*

I don't know. I'm not sure. Could Hitler have been deterred at some early point from going into Czechoslovakia, into Austria? Perhaps. But when you go back and try to rewrite history, you're faced not with one alternative, but an endless number of permutations and combinations. There's no way really of saying what might have happened under those circumstances. But I certainly think it's fair to note that Hitler was aided in his surge towards power by the West, and of course aided at another point later by the Soviet Union. So that everybody, you might say, collaborated. All the presumably antifascist powers collaborated in allowing Hitler to rise to power.

in Wellfleet on Cape Cod. So my whole family was involved in theater except me. But I was interested in theater. My wife and I, when we lived in New York, although we didn't have much money, went to see plays by Arthur Miller. We saw the first Broadway productions of *Death of a Salesman* and Tennessee Williams' *Streetcar Named Desire*. We saw Marlon Brando and Jessica Tandy, sitting in the cheapest seats possible, way up, but loving the theater.

So when the war ended I had an opportunity and more free time, and I decided I would write a play. Emma Goldman and anarchism became my theme. My son, who was at that time acting in New York, was the first director of the first production of the play in New York.

DB *Can you give a little more detail on Brecht? He's seen as the quintessential political dramatist.*

Brecht certainly was one of the influences in my development as a playwright, if I can assume that I developed as a playwright. Brecht is important to me. I saw a number of his plays. My wife Roslyn acted in the *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, which was done when the Loeb Theater in Cambridge first opened. She had a few small parts in it, along with Jane Alexander, who also had a few small parts in it. Jane Alexander went on to become a professional actress. My wife went on to become ultimately a painter and artist. We saw here in Cambridge a production of *A Man's a Man*, a powerful antiwar play by Brecht, and *The Good Woman of Setzuan* and a number of other plays. Brecht was a brilliant playwright. Then there was *Threepenny Opera*. Brecht's politics spoke to me and his theatrical imagination spoke to me. I don't think I've ever developed that much imagination, but then, how many people have? I content myself with that thought. So yes, you might say I became hooked on the theater.

When I got involved, I had a number of very happy learning experiences. When you become a theater person, it's very different from being an academic. You immediately become part of a group project. The academy, the university, is very isolating. Presumably you're a member of a department and presumably you have colleagues, but it never works that way. You really are alone. You're writing your things alone. It's not a collective enterprise. In the theater it immediately, inevitably becomes a collective enterprise as soon as your play is taken over by the director. The director becomes equal, in fact more than

equal, to you. As soon as the actors come in, the set designer and costumer and stage manager come into the picture, you have a little collective working on this project. Everybody is as eager to do this well as you are. So it was very heartwarming for me to suddenly find myself with a group of people who were all working together on this project. I had the special reward of working with my son. I couldn't say I was a traditional father who went fishing with his son, because my son was doing his music. He went with his group of rock musicians and I was doing my thing. He had left the house and was acting in New York. Suddenly here I was working together with him on this play. I remember people warning me, when I told them my son was going to direct the play, saying, That's not a good idea. Directors and writers are always at odds with one another. But it turned out to be a marvelous experience. We worked together beautifully. I must admit, he was the boss. It was a revelation to me. Here I was, working as an underling to my son. He said, Look, I need you to cut this out. I need you to write a few more lines here. But it was wonderful working with him, participating with him in the casting of the play.

Also, I learned a lot about the economics of the theater and about its desperate situation in a society based on profits. Sorry to get back to Marx and capitalism and the profit motive, but it pervades our entire culture. The commerce and the money element dictate what happens in the theater. It dictates that superficial plays will run on Broadway with huge budgets and be shown to huge numbers of people, and serious, important plays, because they are not going to be profitable, are not going to be funded. They're performed in small theaters and have short runs or they're never produced at all. Many of us have the experience that some of the best theater we've seen has been in small spaces by impecunious theater groups that don't have any money, where the actors do not get paid. To me people who work in the theater below the level of stars on Broadway are the most heroic people in our culture, along with poets and painters and writers and broadcasters of alternative radio, who struggle and struggle without much money to do something important in a culture. Actors and actresses rehearse for six weeks and go on stage every night for another six weeks and give their all, give their time, their heart, for nothing or for very little because they're in love with and believe in what they're doing. I have enormous admiration for these people.

DB *Returning to Brecht briefly, he always used to say that he was one step ahead of the Wehrmacht. He escaped from Germany and went to another country, the German army invaded. He finally ends up in the U.S. and is subjected to the political persecution that was going on here. He gave a remarkable, and I'll have to say it, theatrical performance at the House Un-American Activities Committee in, I believe, 1948.*

It was very funny. Brecht's testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee was a time when they were investigating Hollywood. People who want to read the full transcript of it can get Eric Bentley's book *Thirty Years of Treason*, which reproduces the transcripts of actors and actresses and writers and directors who appeared before the HUAC in 1947 and 1948. Here's Bertolt Brecht, who's command of English was not huge, but it was a lot better than the HUAC's grasp of German. His testimony before them was a classic bit of theater in itself. He baffled them. They didn't know what to do with him. The answers he gave were like conundrums which led them into labyrinths of confusion out of which they never came. They would say, Mr. Brecht, is it true that you wrote the following lines in your play *The Good Woman of Setzuan*? And he would say, No, I think you don't have it quite right. Did you read that in the German? You could see the nervous tremors that developed in the members of the committee sitting there. Somebody who watched or listened to that testimony before the HUAC said it was like a zoologist being cross-examined by apes. They would not allow Brecht to make the statement that he had prepared to be delivered to the committee, a perfect example of the belief of this committee in free speech. His statement was later released and exists in printed form. It was a remarkable statement in which he ends up saying, You're worried about communism and so on, but the world that we're living in now is a world full of deep problems. In a world like this, we must be open to all sorts of ideas. We must examine all sorts of approaches. Here was Brecht lecturing these purported defenders of democracy against totalitarianism, on what freedom and democracy really are.

DB *But he was no fool, as you suggest. He had a ticket in his pocket, and he left the U.S. the next day.*

Brecht was very good at making quick escapes. He was not going to be a martyr. There are people who believe in being martyrs. Brecht

had a very realistic view of the ruthlessness of the people whom he faced. He was not going to allow himself to be their victim. He immediately left.

DB *One of the great cultural figures of the twentieth century is Charlie Chaplin. He, too, was investigated by the witch hunters in Washington. Was that politically driven? Wasn't Chaplin deported?*

He was not an American citizen, and they would not allow him to stay in this country. There's no question but that it was politically driven on the basis of the fact that he'd been a supporter of various progressive and left-wing causes and because of films that he made. Although they did not want to declare his films subversive, there's no question they were. *Modern Times* was a devastating critique of the capitalist industrial system. Of course they would not want to admit that his film *The Great Dictator* was a powerful anti-fascist film at a time when so many leaders of this government were so soft on fascism. His other comedies, his silent comedies, were permeated with class consciousness, with subtle and not-so-subtle critiques of police and a system which reduced people to poverty, the tramp, the immigrant. None of that would endear him to defenders of the American establishment.

DB *Chaplin's works were not simply dry polemics. They were enormously entertaining. They were funny.*

That's what makes him even more dangerous. The system can handle dogmatic, dry and boring critics of the system. But it's absolutely infuriating to them to see somebody who is a critic, who is on the left and whose films are being watched by hundreds of millions of people around the globe, who's funny, who's entertaining. In fact, there were times when the HUAC deliberately did not call certain people to the stand because these people were too popular. I have a friend, Cheyney Ryan. He was a student activist here in Boston. That's where I got to know him. Now for years he's been teaching philosophy at the University of Oregon. He's the son of Robert Ryan, the actor. He told me, and I don't think he'd mind me repeating this. If you do, Cheyney, forgive me. His father, who was a progressive person on the left who supported anti-fascist causes and who had a real consciousness about the American system, was not called before the

HUAC, as so many other people were, because he was a popular figure in the movies. He was a kind of John Wayne figure, a hero, a tough guy, one hundred percent American. Too many Americans identified with Robert Ryan in that heroic way. He was white Anglo-Saxon, handsome, heroic, didn't fit the stereotype of the subversive. You might say they preferred to call short Jewish writers to the stand to exemplify communism, which would make it easier for bigotry to become a factor in anti-communism.

**DB** *What do you think the U.S. government's role should be in the arts? For example, the U.S. gives \$98 million a year to the National Endowment for the Arts. It's fiercely debated. The budget comes under enormous scrutiny and discussion. What would be an ideal situation in terms of funding? Are you a purist one way or another?*

\$98 million for the arts. There are countries in Western Europe where the government gives one hundred times as much money, proportionately, as the U.S. does. Denmark, Holland, Germany, England, the Scandinavian countries subsidize the arts in a far more important way than the U.S. does. Yet this pitiful amount of money, less than the amount allocated for military bands, becomes the subject of debate on whether art should be subsidized when that art sometimes is outrageous, maybe politically or culturally, because it maybe involves nudity or lesbianism or in some way is offensive to those people who are still living in another century. By another century I don't mean the twenty-first century. I mean the fourteenth. In a decent society art would be subsidized because artists need to be paid, because writers and painters need to survive. But we live in a capitalist society driven by profit and where the profit system will make the decision that artists and poets and playwrights and actors cannot make a living. When the market determines that, then a reasonable, liberal, capitalist government will make up for the inadequacy of the so-called free market and subsidize artists the way that capitalist governments in Western Europe do. It's not socialism. It's a kind of humanitarian moment for capitalism when it does that.

I remember once on a flight from Capetown, South Africa to London, I met a German woman who got on in Frankfurt. It turned out she was an actress. What are you doing in London? I'm going on vacation. She told me that she gets a salary from the German

government. They don't ask her what she's going to play in, if she's going to be acting every week of the year. When there are plays, she acts in them. When there are no plays, she goes on vacation. But she is paid an annual salary, just as congressmen in this country are paid an annual salary, even though they spend a lot of time doing other things besides being in Congress. I see my son and other people in the theater struggling, devoting their life to the theater and struggling to survive economically because this so-called market system in all its beauties will not enable them to survive.

**DB** *When I was asking you about purity, there is one school that argues that if you accept government funding, you accept government restrictions, controls and constraints. What side do you come on in that?*

I'm not that kind of a purist, although there are many areas in which I'm a total purist, like insisting on the sophisticated audio equipment that you have when you record me. If the system impoverishes artists, and if we all are paying taxes to the government, with a good part of these taxes going for stupid things, like nuclear weapons, I think we have a right to demand that part of our taxes be used for the arts. Sure, when this happens there will be forces in the society which will then try to determine the content of these arts, but that's another fight that must be waged. So we have a double battle in the culture, one to get the government to subsidize the arts, and the second to make sure that the subsidization is not accompanied by political strings.

**DB** *The founding document for public broadcasting in the U.S., the Carnegie Commission Report, sought to have a mechanism to remove funding for public radio and TV from the appropriations loop. When the Public Broadcasting Act was pushed through by LBJ, it was the last of his Great Society pieces of legislation that was enacted, that mechanism was not included. There was no heat shield. Now, three decades later, we have a situation where public radio and TV are subjected to political attack by Congress, which controls the purse strings.*

It's interesting. It would be a wonderful thing to strive for to have the money that's given to the arts not subject to that kind of political pressure. The money that's given to the military is not subject to that kind of scrutiny. They don't have hearings where citizens can