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# New Boss, Same as the Old Boss: Howard Zinn Traces Social Change

By BRIAN STELTER  
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In Howard Zinn's new documentary, "The People Speak," the actress [Marisa Tomei](#) is shown reading aloud an essay by a worker at a 19th-century textile mill in Lowell, Mass., who led other women to protest wage reductions and demand better working conditions.

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Marisa Tomei with the historian Howard Zinn in "The People Speak," to be shown on the History Channel on Sunday night.

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In the woman's description of oppression at the hands of a company, Mr. Zinn, the left-wing historian, hears both past and present tense. "She says the same thing of the 1830s that we hear today — that you are at the mercy of your employer," Mr. Zinn said in an interview.

So much of Mr. Zinn's career, reflected in his "People's History of the United States" book, has been about the struggle for social change. With "The People Speak," which has its premiere on the History Channel on Sunday (at 8 p.m., Eastern and Pacific times; 7, Central time), he is having a raft of celebrities recount that effort through the words of people who were there. "It's the people's point of view of history," said the actor [Josh Brolin](#), an executive producer of the film.

Onstage and on camera, [Benjamin Bratt](#) reads a farmer's grievances during Shays's Rebellion. [Matt Damon](#) reads from "The Grapes of Wrath." [Morgan Freeman](#) reads from "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro," a speech by Frederick Douglass.

"Once you get the actors reading these things, it really brings the history alive," Mr. Damon said in an interview last month, amid a college tour to promote the film.

Some of the readings, like Ms. Tomei's, are especially resonant now, given the perceptible anger in the country about banks and bailouts. "That's by design," Mr. Damon said. "What they were up against oftentimes are exactly the same things we're up against now."

One scene in the two-hour film tells the story of an organizer who encouraged tenants to protest evictions during [the Great Depression](#). Similarly, in the current economic downturn, "We've seen examples of people rebelling," Mr. Zinn, 87, said. "We've seen tenants rebelling against foreclosures. This is the kind of thing that happened in a much larger scale in the 1930s."

He added, "If this spreads — the idea of fighting foreclosures, the idea of workers going on strike — it's possible this can lead into a larger movement for economic justice."

The film most closely correlates with Mr. Zinn's "Voices of a People's History of the United States," a five-year-old compilation of primary-source material. The readings were selected from the book and recorded at sites across the country.

At the performances "there were a lot of readings that really struck a chord because of the way that people are feeling right now," Mr. Damon said.

Other contributors included [Viggo Mortensen](#), [Sean Penn](#) and [Kerry Washington](#). Between readings, [Bob Dylan](#), [Bruce Springsteen](#), [John Legend](#) and other artists performed historical songs.

The project appealed to the History Channel partly because "primary sources are a real driving force for us right now," said Nancy Dubuc, the channel's president and general manager.

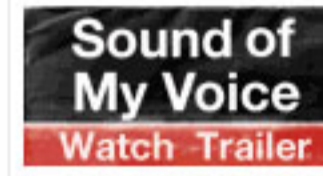
For History, "People Speak" is part of a big-event series strategy to increase viewership. In 2008 the channel's eyewitness recounting of the Sept. 11 attacks, "102 Minutes That Changed America," set ratings records for it. More recently, History showed the 10-hour "WWII in HD" on five consecutive nights and drew an average of 2.4 million viewers per night.

Next year History plans a 12-hour series called "America: The Story of Us," which is intended to "tell the entire history" of the country, Ms. Dubuc said.

"The People Speak" is more intimate. For the filmmakers it is about the fight for equality; Chris Moore, a producer, said the film embodies the phrase "democracy is not a spectator sport." The filmmakers are developing school curriculum materials for the film and releasing an extended version on DVD.

"I'm a big believer that history is not the story of millions, but that history is a million stories," Ms. Dubuc said. "This illustrates that better than anything we've ever done."

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