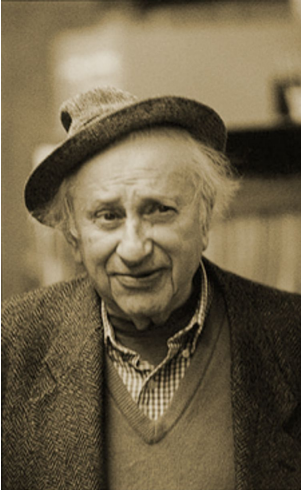


Studs Terkel, American writer and documentarian, dead at 96

Fred Mazelis
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Studs Terkel

Studs Terkel, the American writer, oral historian and radio host who died on October 31, was a major figure in cultural and social history whose life spanned nearly a century.

Terkel was perhaps best known for his many books of oral history, beginning with *Division Street: America* in 1967, and going on to *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (1970), *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (1972), *American Dreams: Lost and Found* (1980) and much more. He worked until the end of his life, completing a personal memoir in 2007 at the age of 95.

The oral histories, for which he conducted about 1,000 in-depth interviews over the course of decades, were a major element, but by no means Terkel's entire career. He was almost equally well known, certainly in his adopted home town of Chicago, as the host of a long-running radio interview program on WFMT. He began his association with the station in 1952 and continued it until 1997. For nearly 40 of those years he conducted daily interviews with such figures as musicians Leonard Bernstein, Louis Armstrong and Bob Dylan—authors Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, actors Marlon Brando and Zero Mostel, and countless others—a veritable roll call of the cultural and intellectual history of his time.

Terkel was enthusiastic, irrepressible and outspoken to the point of effusiveness. Anyone who heard him speak on his radio program or elsewhere was instantly struck by his outsized personality. Yet at the same time, he was most famous for his ability to listen, to draw out his interview subjects—especially “ordinary” people, not the rich and

famous for the most part, but those who reflected through their experiences the vicissitudes of 20th century America.

A man of the Left but a dedicated reformist, Terkel was the kind of populist radical who saw liberalism and the intervention of a beneficent government, as the salvation of the underdog. He was devoted to Franklin Roosevelt, wept when he died, and spent the rest of his life working for a return of the New Deal.

Studs Terkel was shaped by two fundamental elements: his immigrant roots, and the struggles of the 1930s. He was born in the Bronx in 1912, the youngest of three sons of Samuel and Anna Terkel, who had emigrated from Poland about ten years earlier. The family moved to Chicago in 1921, and Terkel became in some ways a quintessential Chicagoan for the rest of his long life.

Terkel's parents managed a rooming house. The young Studs often reminisced about the “wild political arguments” among the guests—from ex-Wobblies (Industrial Workers of the World) to company men—which introduced him to the world of politics and made a lasting impression.

In the early 1930s Terkel got a law degree at the University of Chicago, but he never showed any interest in the profession. In 1938 he joined the Federal Writers' Project—the New Deal program—and found work as a radio scriptwriter and an actor. It was during this period that he got the nickname that stuck and made him one of those figures for whom one name sufficed as a means of identification. His given name was Louis. A director distinguished between Terkel and another Louis in a local production by naming him Studs, after the title character in James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, which Terkel was then in the midst of reading.

Terkel hosted a radio show in Chicago beginning in 1945. A few years later he became the host of a local television variety show, “Studs' Place,” which was thrown off the air in 1952, a victim of blacklisting during the McCarthy period, when he refused to apologize for his associations, including the signing of various left-wing petitions.

He quickly found a new opportunity on WFMT, however, a local station that defied the blacklist. It was this new radio job that shaped the rest of Terkel's career and brought him fame and recognition. His show was widely syndicated, and a decade later, he was contacted by publisher Andre Schiffrin, with whom he began a lifelong

collaboration on his oral histories and memoirs.

Terkel's interviewing style was unique. Of course he used a tape recorder, but he characteristically put his subjects at ease, and made it clear that he wanted to hear and learn from their stories. Author and psychologist Robert Coles put it this way in describing Terkel's method: "The issue eventually becomes not the machine or even the matter of who is approached for conversation and information, but the person who comes armed with an enabling technology. Studs Terkel has done tape-recorded interviews for decades, but he has also uniquely brought to the individuals whose first-person narratives he seeks, a particular mind's intentions and aspirations, its resolve, its moral energy, its mix of emotional candor and soulfulness."

Coles, in his foreword to a 1997 anthology of Terkel's oral histories, places Terkel in an American tradition going back to Emerson and Whitman, and sharing something with Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair and James Agee.

Terkel never claimed to be an impartial observer. "I have tried for as much balance as possible," he wrote, "yet 'objectivity,' so often a reprise of the doctrine of the announced idea, of the official truth, has escaped me. My turf has been the arena of unofficial truth—of the non-celebrated one on the block—who is able to articulate the thoughts of his/her neighbors, inchoate, though deeply felt."

The interview subjects, in the oral histories, have included the wealthy and respectable—like the CEO of Beatrice Foods. More numerous have been people like C.P. Ellis, a former Ku Klux Klansman who repudiated his past; Florence Scala, a neighborhood activist; Mike Lefevre, a steelworker; and Carroll Narmeyer, a farmer.

Not all of the interviews are equally successful. Many of them, however, add to our knowledge by giving a voice to the voiceless, by showing how the masses of working people make history and showing how their contributions and opinions are nearly always ignored by the ruling establishment and its cultural and intellectual spokesmen.

Like some others who had fallen afoul of the McCarthyite witch-hunt, Studs Terkel lived long enough to be the recipient of numerous awards and honors. In 1985 he received the Pulitzer Prize. Among his other honors were the National Book Foundation Medal and a Peabody Award for excellence in journalism. A memorial meeting for Terkel, held in New York City on December 7, brought together a number of longtime friends, colleagues and admirers—such as radical historian Howard Zinn, journalist Jimmy Breslin, author Walter Mosley and writer and editor Victor Navasky.

There are also the right-wing observers and pundits who are enraged by Terkel's work. Navasky made reference at the December 7 meeting, to an article by Edward Rothstein in the *New York Times* last month, which he called an example of Terkel being "red-baited after his death." Rothstein had warned his readers that Terkel was really a Marxist, and that "he seemed to be a scrappy liberal in his choice of causes and concerns, but look more closely and it becomes less clear where his liberalism slips into radicalism."

Rothstein's genteel variety of McCarthyism is aimed at keeping today's liberals on notice that they must not "slip into radicalism." As

in the earlier witch-hunt, there are two related aims: demonizing Marxism and socialism is one, but there is also the goal of isolating that section of bourgeois public opinion that is not considered tough enough. Rothstein is not interested in arguing against Marxism, a task for which he is obviously ill-equipped. For right-wingers like the *Times* journalist, any sympathy for the downtrodden or marginalized is the equivalent of Marxist propagandizing. Their anger reflects a well-founded fear, especially today, that Marxism will find an audience among working people.

Terkel's political approach, in fact, had little in common with Marxism. The Marxist identifies with the struggles and articulates the aspirations of the working class, but also fights to raise political awareness to the level that is required to resolve the crisis of capitalism. Terkel clearly rejected this conception of struggle. He belonged to a definite strain of American radicalism, focusing on what he considered the goodness of ordinary people and the struggle of the underdog against greed and injustice. Studs Terkel always had sympathy for the oppressed, but never saw them as a revolutionary force whose aim should be to overthrow an outmoded social order.

Terkel's interviews sometimes gave us powerful portraits of class society and of those whose lives illuminated the great events that usually are ignored. The interviews also tended to be suffused by a populist-sindicalist simplification of the struggle. His attitude could be summed up in the title of the powerful miners' anthem of the 1930s, "Which Side Are You On." This is an inspiring song, but if its theme is accepted as the sum total of political acumen, the road has been opened to channeling the anger and protest of these workers into support for liberal big business politicians and wealthy men of "conscience."

This was Studs Terkel's approach. He ended his life looking forward excitedly to the election of Barack Obama as US president. The above mentioned memorial meeting was sponsored by the left-liberal *Nation* magazine, with which Terkel was long associated. A speaker declared, that Terkel would have said the president-elect "needs to be pushed to launch a new New Deal."

Studs Terkel's death coincides not only with the return of the Democrats to the White House and the election of the first African-American US president, but also with a 21st century economic crisis that is increasing looking like it has no precedent, not even to the Great Depression that shaped Terkel. The valuable and lively elements in Terkel's contributions to social and oral history need to be distinguished from the bankrupt political perspective of pleading for liberal reform.



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