

Interview with Abbie Hoffman (1988)

1988

Contents

The counter-culture 3
CIA on Campus 4
Charity vs. Solidarity 5

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLRBCxuaohw>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TG4nya0WJvs>

The counter-culture

Abbie: And I mean you, you you get more. You get more control both as individuals as students in terms of their choices, and collectively as students as a whole. You determine what your education is. The only good education, the only true education is subversive. It's rebellious. It's it's the only way you're going to learn anything otherwise. Just, you know, just watch Wheel of Fortune and and new sports and weather, Bing Bing, Bing, Bing, Bing. That's it. I mean wave at the flag, sing the old songs and be prepared to bear the hippies in town. I mean, that's it. Otherwise, if you want to learn well, how it really works, you've got to rebel. You've got to be a little subversive. That's how things change. And that's how you learn. Something. I don't know more than that.

Interviewer: OK, maybe just a personal question, in what way and have you changed in 20 years?

Abbie: I know a joke I can tell you a joke about. I have many jokes about students, young people, at a Grateful Dead concert down in Philly last summer. And wow, 90,000 people there and everything, you know, and kids come up to me because they recognize me. I got them on TV fighting the Philadelphia Electric Company all the time, chaining myself to fences, yelling and screaming at their offices. And they say, Abby, are we doing it right? They said, well, what do you mean it? They said, well, you know what, we freaking? They want to know if they were freaking out right. And so of course I said sure, you're freaking out. OK, then I start to think about it and if the tie dye T-shirt costs more than \$15, you are not freaking out right (laughs).

Interviewer: All right, OK, I think we got it covered here.

Abbie: Today, the impact of The Beatles is very good. The effect of the counterculture on the movements of the 60s is underplayed in almost every single book written on the 60s. Because the books are intellectual and academic, and we were challenging that whole concept of thinking. So therefore they didn't understand us in the 60s and they don't when it comes time in the 80s to analyze us. So I mentioned the two sources that do.

Interviewer: You said a little bit more about that because you think it's difficult, it's it's a false dichotomy to separate the counter culture from the political activist. But there was a separation.

Abbie: No, there wasn't. There were people. There were two strains of thinking, but there's never been successful social change on the national international level without a change in the culture.

In the 30's the working class struggles and the unions wouldn't have gone very far if they didn't have their working class dress language, newspapers, songs, ballads. Etcetera. I mean they they had a culture, but it's the the struggle, the class struggle in the 30s.

We didn't have class cause we had affluence in the 60s. So we had to count to culture that fit the break. With the culture of the 50s, right, it's extremely important. You need that kind of culture, the kind of bohemian.

I mean, we wouldn't have the 60s if the beat poets hadn't struck a blow for freedom against the Tony Bennetts. The Doris Days, the John Waynes, the Nixons, the Eisenhowers, etcetera, etcetera. If they hadn't been the choice.

Of course, they opened the choice for whites to be able to see black rhythm and Blues, and that was forbidden for us. Once we saw that law low, then of course we could understand the battle in the South because we had some contact.

We knew South Africa was worse, but we didn't know where South Africa was. We might have known there was a Vietnam War, but we had rumors, but we didn't know where Vietnam was. I mean, you have to make contact at some level, culture was extremely important then, what the counter culture

will look like, the counterculture for the next generation? Is it difficult to say? It's up to you. It's not up to me.

Interviewer: Alright.

Abbie: But if you're not going to have sex and drugs, you're rock'n'roll better be damn good, I'll tell you. Or else it'll be class issues, or else it's depression. I can't tell you which is going to be more important, war or the condition of the economy around which to ultimately organize. I don't know the future, but each of those gives birth to different kinds of countercultures.

Neither one is yuppie, I'll tell you it's gotta be anti-yuppie either way. It's got to be anti-yuppie. You can't do this in a porch with a Rolex watch and a \$1500 suit. That's bullshit.

Interviewer: OK.

CIA on Campus

Abbie: A couple. You know, maybe Texas A&M, but that was it. I mean, the word driven off now it's a big issue on campus one you know. I can understand why it is because it's the war in Central America, in the flesh. Students don't have the draft to go against, but the CIA is there and it's concrete. It's something they can do immediately locally that's going to affect global decision making in foreign policy. It brings up a lot of contradictions. About what the university education is supposed to be about. Oh. So and open democracy versus covert actions and covert recruiting programs and mostly CIA war on Central America, CIA War on Africa. It's analogous to the Vietnam War. The 60s were not begun with the Vietnam War. It was a battle against apartheid in the South, legal segregation, civil rights movement. After four or five years, it became pretty obvious it was going to win that battle. Therefore, Congress moved to pass civil rights and Voting Rights Act. When they did that, when they institutionalized the battle in the streets, the street battle then had to shift its tactics to de facto segregation. Racism in the north, economic issues. And from then on there were there were no easy victories that got very muddled in everything. But simultaneously at that point, because we were there, we were building a movement. We were ready to defy authority, to go against the grain, etcetera. We were learning how to be good. Organize. People would say, well, This is why Vietnam. It had been going 11 years, but secretly covertly with mercenaries under the control of the CIA, etcetera, etcetera. And then it shifted. And in the same sense in the mid 80s after the terrific success of the divestment. Movement pressure from below, getting so many universities to pull out billions of dollars. You could see that at some point it was going to have to shift its tail its focus to now focus on US relations to frontline black African states to racism here at home, rising racial terrorism. This is going to be a little bit more difficult than the obvious evil of apartheid in South Africa. So people were going to look for another issue that was going to be able to reach large numbers of people. There's a lot out there. Star Wars research attitudes towards gays, especially with aids around sexual harassment on campus, control of campus newspapers. I just spoke in Kentucky last week, Western Kentucky 5000 students without complaining about the administration's taking over the students rights to run their yearbook the way they wanted to. There are at least about 20 or 40 schools that, well, that's the big issue. Or you go to Vanderbilt in Minnesota, it's style, what's research, and they're organized to figure out what style. This research is and what's basic science and they're they're working on those issues, Wesley and the sexual harassment, I mean, all these.

You can go around the campus, Boulder, Co. It's a CIA recruiting. You see how I just kicked the CIA off the campus. But I'd say top right now is CIA recruiting and CIA getting teachers on campus. Posing as professors, all that brings up because of Iran and muck and everything it brings up the way the whole countries and the whole foreign policy is run. And so that's how they're entering in into it.

Interviewer: How effective were were those demonstrations and and occupations and so on?

Abbie: And trials, don't forget them, at trial at Northampton with the necessity defense, been repeated several times. Well, about 75 schools have now kicked the CIA off. It's raised a debate on

many others about whether it's a right or a privilege. I believe it's a privilege I don't like to see the universities as the extension of the business community anyway, I would rather not see any corporations on campus. I would like to see where they put up signs they will meet you in the holiday and if they're not in, that's fine.

But the university should be a place for higher learning. I mean that's, you know, more and more, even right and left wing intellectuals agree on this, that the universities are not teaching. I mean, they're not teaching history. They're not teaching analysis. They're not teaching why things work the way they do. They're only teaching mechanics, mechanical skills. So that produces a generation. That's very. Stuck and stuck in terms of the past, the future in terms of each other with no global consciousness. That's very sad, and even the schmuck like Alan Bloom in the closing of the American mind would agree with me.

I mean, we have 60 million functional illiterates in America. How the hell do we get to that? We're the richest country in the world. We've got 60 million people. I can't read a war dead. They can't read the prescription on a on a on a medicine bottle. It can't, can't. Can't get their drivers like a 60 million out of what, 250 million people? What the hell? And not number one in literacy, that's for sure.

Charity vs. Solidarity

The Jonathan Cosell, that's his, that's he's a Great American and his current book is about the homeless people in America. Yeah, young through the manipulation of the media. And the nonsense like new age consciousness. It's better because of the ability of the great actor in chief, an emotion called caring has been transformed into an emotion called concern, so people are concerned about world hunger, the tropical rainforest and the homeless. Now, what concern about the homeless leads you to do is to stand in line in some Hollywood extravaganza or buy the album, see and say, well, I'm concerned about. Homeless people. There's no analysis caring about homeless people demands analysis. A person is homeless because they used to have a home. See, while someone cooked them out of the home, some greedy landlord, someone who wanted to possess their farm, some bank. That's how they got there. But with the concern added to the homeless, always been there and there always will be. So to believe your guilt, to be concerned, which only helps you. It doesn't help the others. It's just another way of being selfish. To really care, you have to have some analysis about economics, about how the homeless got there, and that could guarantee you it wasn't as they shut up the mental ward at hospitals in New York City. So we got 3 million homeless in America. It's because people had homes and developers came in and crushed their homes, greedy landlords. Took them over, or the banks foreclosed on their fans? That's a that's an analysis. That's the beginning of caring. Never mind how we get to the solution. Is there how?

Interviewer: Yeah. What is, is there an activist solution to that kind of problem is there?

Abbie: Absolutely, sure. We, well, first is to the analysis that I said. Secondly, you have to say it's a national disgrace. You have to raise it on the the list of priorities and values on the agenda for the kinds of problems we have to address. You know, you have to consider that 3 million. Homeless people in America jeopardizes our national security a hell of a lot more than a country like Nicaragua. So we have to address homeless people we have to address illiteracy. We, I mean, and we have the money to do it. We just don't have the will. We don't have the value systems. How are you doing? We. Well, we get representatives, we get some politicians, we get some bills that address the problem. We get some organizations that care for the home but don't care in the way that the Red Cross cares. They care in the way that Mitch Snyder and the Center for Creative Non Violence in Washington Care the Coalition for the homeless. They make the political points.

Interviewer: But I want to come back to the community stuff here. What? What is it? What is it? That maybe different from students in a community? What is it that makes people take that step across the line from passive to active to?

Abbie: But right here, there we go. Organized in two hours, sober Civic Association raised over \$5000 because we got the ugliest tower in the county. We want to preserve family and we want to preserve a town. That's more than 300 years old, so in this this month, they're well off. I'm discovering A new oppressed class, the rich (laughs), but they when when I pointed out to him right off is that we are not trained and we started to build that community wide organization to get legal talent. You get. Publicity people in to get community organizers in. I had to point out that none of us are trained in America to do this. We're only trained to act as individuals, not to act together as a community. So here is a lot easier because they're under the gun. They can see, you know, the the encroachment of. Ugly development on to one of the most beautiful towns in America, so. You know they have the self-interest.

It works the same with students. You do a false dichotomy and the student movement in the 60s, which was maybe the only authentic student movement in the US history after all the ball has been yuppie training camps where which young ladies and gentlemen go to become older. When you're young, ladies and gentlemen, that's it. You know, ivory towers where you close. Off from the rest of the world and you know you study odd and whatever it is you do in the university, but don't get involved out there. I mean that that's the traditionally we don't have the concept of the engaged student with the class. The world is the classroom, the way the rest of the world does is the. So the 60s were a break and part of that.

Lake was students realized that there weren't just students in the university. They were citizens in the community. Unity. That they were there four years, some late bloomers. 6 or 7, you know. But four years is a long time in a mobile society like America, where their parents are moving every two years. But now you're there for years. You are in a community. The university is a community and you are there. So if you are a citizen you have certain needs. You have certain rights and among those other right to participate in decision making, you're not a serf. You're not a slave. It is an ineq plantation. And quickly one good way for students is to get the freshman orientation book look at all the glossy pictures, and then after I've been at the university for a couple, you say, how do they? Match. Up or when they're called on to do term papers, do a term paper on the structure in the university. The role of the administration. The Board of trustees, the faculty, the Alumni Association, the Sports Department, the campus workers and then the students. See, that's an interesting term paper because you're going to analyze the community in which you live, and you're going to find out the power balances and the relations of all these. Do these groups in terms of decision making and I'll bet you of the five million term papers being written this year, they ain't none being written about this subject. Why? Cause the administration considers this death. They don't want you to analyze this kind of problem. And once you do, you see once you crack this microcosm. Once you see yourself as a citizen in this community. As in the 60s, you can fight for lowering the of the voting age for voting on campus for co-ed dorms, for elective courses for minority study programs, for faculty, for on campus speakers that the administration might think are too wild, for your own control of your campus newspapers, you can fight against tuition raises, which is going to become a tremendously important battle as class becomes more and more important over the next five years, you can fight for groups that want to relate to the community around ...

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Part 1 & Part 2.

This interview took place in Solebury, Bucks County, PA, within a year of Abby Hoffman's death. At that time he was involved in the "dump the pump" movement which sought to prevent the diversion of water from the Delaware River to cool the Limerick nuclear power plant. He talked about the future of community organizing. More about him and his activities in Bucks County.

mosesdoan.wordpress.com/tag/dump-the-pump/

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