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Interview with Bernardine Dohrn

Bernardine Dohrn

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**LOUISE PETTUS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Interview #244
DOHRN, Bernardine**

DOHRN, Bernardine

Children's rights advocate, feminist, radical organizer, former SDS member

Interviewed: undated

Interviewer: Ron Chepesiuk

Index by: Alyssa Jones

Length: 1 hour, 33 minutes, 40 seconds

Abstract: In her interview with Ron Chepesiuk, Bernardine Dohrn detailed her part in the 60s anti-war movement. She covered such topics as the Gulf War, the feminist movement and gender rights, the Weather Underground, former SDS members, Kent State, and other movement events. Dohrn also discussed her involvement in dealing with poverty and children's rights as a lawyer. Dohrn's focuses before and after the Vietnam War was the failure of family court and the United States' inability to deal with impoverished families and children. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

Keywords: Weathermen/Weather Underground, family court, Juvenile Court System, Bill Ayers, children's rights, radicalism, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), feminism, gender equality, Vietnam War, Women Against War, Gulf War, UNICEF, poverty, United Nations, death penalty (for minors), Martin Luther King, Jr., Jane Adams, William Kunstler, Charles Garry, Naomi Jaffe, Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, Kent State, Kathy Boudin

Interview Session (undated): Digital File

Time Keywords

00:00:00 *Start of Interview*/Interviewer's Introduction

00:00:07 *Question:* Let's start with Children and Family Center and the Cook County Juvenile Court System. *Answer:* It was a big leap forward for human rights for children, but it failed.

00:01:05 *Question:* It's now the worst in the country. How did it get to that? *Answer:* Children and family law is looked down upon because it doesn't involve money. At the time, it was just starting to be taught in law schools. It had become a geographically isolated court. The problems with poor families have grown, but the funding hasn't grown with the problems in order to fix them.

- 00:02:43 *Question:* Is that one of the legacies of the Reagan-Bush era? *Answer:* Yes.
- 00:02:57 *Question:* Isn't that ironic since they're always talking about family values? *Answer:* Yes, perfectly ironic. What they really meant were "some families", mostly upper-middle class, especially. Children, especially children of color have been left behind.
- 00:04:16 *Question:* One of the criticisms that the conservatives make is that this is the legacy of the sixties. The permissiveness of the sixties led to this situation. *Answer:* Families are always being redefined and the idea of the perfect nuclear family before the sixties is ludicrous. It's a legacy of all the decades before. Other countries support families to a greater extent than the U.S. does.
- 00:05:53 *Question:* You think governments should play a bigger role in alleviating the social problems afflicting children. *Answer:* Yes, but BD thought that everyone should do their part-the government, the private sector, families/parents, etc. Not welfare, but everyone needs healthcare, and jobs, and hope for the future. BD called it "social obligation" and not government support. BD realized that her sixties self would laugh at her present self as she spoke of families.
- 00:07:28 *Question:* The family that Reagan always talked about doesn't really exist. *Answer:* No, it wasn't even Reagan's family. Dohrn said that she and Bill Ayers did have that perfect nuclear family (in terms of setup). Children need families, but Americans need to be more realistic about the definition of families.
- 00:08:12 *Question:* "You can't work for the welfare of the children without working for the welfare of the family." Do you have any possible solutions? *Answer:* BD did have solutions and thought that it was possible to fix the social problems of families. People of the 80s were overwhelmed by the social problems of the day, but BD thought that it was very possible to solve the problems after traveling to other countries and courts. People just need to feel that they have a voice and that someone is listening to them.
- 00:11:06 *Question:* That like Charles Dickens with all the children walking around the courthouse. Problems have solutions, but today people just want to give up. *Answer:* It seemed like it to BD. People pretend and try to disconnect themselves from everyone else in the computer age, despite being connected through the computers.
- 00:12:09 *Question:* Are you optimistic about Clinton being in office? *Answer:* BD thought it was a relief to be rid of Reagan and Bush, but didn't know how much one man could change. BD hoped that the hope that Kennedy gave for social change would happen with Clinton and continue on. Social movements pushed Kennedy and BD hoped there would be social movements to push Clinton along.

- 00:13:34 *Question:* Are you talking about movements in the sixties. *Answer:* Yes.
- 00:13:44 *Question:* Did you see any evidence that this was starting to take shape? *Answer:* BD said she didn't know and couldn't tell.
- 00:13:50 *Question:* Bobby Seale says something is coming, but it will be different from the sixties. *Answer:* Of course it will be different. The level of discontent of Black children is very high and the result is unpredictable.
- 00:15:06 *Question:* But it hadn't coalesced. That's the way it happened in the sixties, as well. *Answer:* BD found it interesting that there was popular government and civilian opposition against the Gulf War. There was a great deal of unrest among young people. BD said it was reminiscent of Vietnam because of a lack of cause for war.
- 00:16:43 *Question:* It took twelve years for the war, but over here it was over. *Answer:* BD went back to comment on the potential for mass movements and everyone learning their lessons from the sixties, so the movements would be different.
- 00:17:11 *Question:* Some people say that the children of the war need a movement in order to make any progress. *Answer:* BD thought it was a great idea, but didn't know if it was possible. BD and RC discuss the United Nations convention on children's rights. At the time, the U.S. had not signed the treaty, one of the few countries that had not signed it. BD had hopes that Clinton would send it to Congress. UNICEF was mentioned.
- 00:21:23 *Question:* The United States bears a lot of responsibility for the international children's situation. *Answer:* The United States controls some 60% of the world's wealth, but only 6% of the population and only care for itself because of its superpower status. BD thought that the only way for the U.S. to control that much of the wealth was through exploitation.
- 00:22:43 *Question:* The critique you held in the sixties still holds true? *Answer:* Yes. The U.S. still benefits from the rest of the world, which created a distorted economy and culture at home. The U.S. is a war economy and it is difficult to change that.
- 00:23:21 *Question:* I live in South Carolina and 20% of the state budget was going to the bases. It's like poison. *Answer:* Clinton argued that one has to switch it to a productive economy. What is a productive economy and how to retrain people to work that way? BD said that it will be difficult to change people to be productive rather than exploitative. What will be the next industry? BD hit on the technology industry and how it may be the next industry, which frightened her and RC.

- 00:26:00 *Question:* You were encouraged by the National Commission on Children with Rockefeller. *Answer:* BD thought the National Commission said that the families were to blame and that religion is the answer, but got to the point about 1 in 4 or 5 of every child born in the U.S. was born into poverty.
- 00:26:39 *Question:* When people thinking of children in crisis they think of Somalia. Why aren't people more interested in the problem here at home? *Answer:* The U.N. calls for standards of healthcare, educational rights, and the evolution of the death penalty for children that the United States does not have. The U.S. is very behind when dealing with children. BD asks if we have demonized teenagers of the U.S..
- 00:27:47 *Question:* How do you explain that-the United States' inability to learn from other countries? *Answer:* BD said that it was a very nutty situation. Illinois passed a law that if a newborn is found to have drugs in their system, then it is an automatic case of neglect and the courts may take custody of the child. Every hospital makes the decision to test for drugs and alcohol. BD questioned whether or not the use of drugs made a parent unfit, where is the evidence if it does?
- 00:30:55 *Question:* Don't you feel powerless? You see these things every day that don't make sense. *Answer:* BD said that the children are terrific and there are often individual success stories. BD said that giving a voice to the children who aren't listened to kept her going.
- 00:32:28 *Question:* Maybe with a change in government-away from the Reagan-Bush era will help? *Answer:* BD said that the renewed interest in families was good. Accountability is the key. Big systems should be held accountable, but people of the 1990s were afraid to hold them accountable.
- 00:33:40 *Question:* It's just starting to be asked. Don't you think you can learn from the environment movement? The issue of the 90s is the environment. Perhaps children's rights will be the movement of the 21st century. *Answer:* BD agreed that the children's rights movement was still in its infancy, it was just barely forming. BD believed that people wanted meaning to their lives.
- 00:35:51 *Question:* That's one of the legacies of the 60s, for the people that went through it and were activists. *Answer:* BD agreed and said that people and world could be better. Believed that everyone should have a higher standard for each other.
- 00:36:35 *Question:* Do you still consider yourself a radical? *Answer:* Yes. BD said she saw the world in radical terms and fit the stereotype. BD was proud to be a radical.
- 00:37:21 *Question:* We're talking about children, but you came from a good background that gave you a lot of confidence. *Answer:* BD agreed, said that her parents were from

- lower-middle class Republicans that trusted the government. She described them as loving and understanding.
- 00:38:40 *Question:* They helped you learn how to make it in a man's world? *Answer:* BD said she didn't know about that. BD started talking about going to her high school reunion.
- 00:38:55 *Question:* How was that? *Answer:* BD said that it was wonderful.
- 00:39:06 *Question:* Were you nervous? *Answer:* Yes, extremely nervous. BD said that everyone was nervous and that it was very weird. BD told of the sleepover she had with an old group of friends that she hadn't seen for many years. She was fascinated by their opinions of her in high school.
- 00:40:11 *Question:* That was before the feminist movement. Women weren't aware that they were being discriminated against. *Answer:* Not at all. Women were expected to act the way they always had. Women's mothers often told them that even though they were expected to be married a few months out of college, they should get a teaching degree in case something happened to their husbands.
- 00:41:20 *Question:* When you went to Law School, was that unusual. *Answer:* Yes, along with BD, there were only six girls in the class.
- 00:41:26 *Question:* There was discrimination against you there. Did that radicalize you? *Answer:* There was discrimination, but BD thought she was already pretty radical, but she wasn't very conscious of the gender issue. The gender inequality was clear, but she didn't see it in the big social picture.
- 00:42:27 *Question:* When did you become politically minded? *Answer:* BD said that it was a gradual process and always is. Her friends reminded her that she'd written a paper on Algeria in high school. BD said she didn't get involved until after she graduated from college. She watched and agreed with the movement, but never took part in the rallies or protests.
- 00:45:01 *Question:* You were working to integrate the Chicago suburbs. 1966? *Answer:* BD's first summer out of law school was spent in New York working for Legal Services for the Poor. After that she worked for the Christian Leadership Conference.
- 00:45:31 *Question:* Do you ever wonder if we made any progress since the 60s? Are the suburbs integrated? *Answer:* BD said the answer was yes and no. Life was worse for some people, but some people's lives had improved. For a long period of time, kids growing up could think of themselves as something better.

- 00:46:41 *Question:* Black Power seems to be coming back. Have we not gotten far in race relations? *Answer:* BD said the younger people have the luxury of being angry. Race issues will always go on.
- 00:50:57 *Question:* When did you actually join the SDS? *Answer:* BD said that she joined the SDS the year after Martin Luther King, Jr. was in Chicago, in 1965-66. The end of that year, BD was at a meeting and met some SDS Community Organizing Project leaders. The leaders called her the next day and asked her to join, despite her no longer being a student. It was the year that the Vietnam War escalated and they wanted more people and more draft counselors.
- 00:53:14 *Question:* You had a leadership role. Was there much chauvinism? RC spoke to Jane Adams and she said that the chauvinism was very apparent. *Answer:* Adams was a feminist, who was a mentor to BD. BD wasn't as aware as JA, but grew to learn about it.
- 00:54:15 *Question:* Women did hold leadership positions, didn't they? *Answer:* No, there was only BD and JA. Other women worked and were leaders in the sense that they were local campus organizers and speakers, but the men took the big leadership roles, usually.
- 00:54:34 *Question:* How do you explain your rise? *Answer:* Out of law school, BD worked for the National Lawyers Guild and spent the years traveling around, organizing and giving speeches. BD said her rise just happened.
- 00:56:34 *Question:* Did some of the radical lawyers like Bill (William) Kunstler or Charles Garry have an influence on you? *Answer:* Yes, all of the civil rights lawyers had an influence on BD. BD used to speak to panels of lawyers about going to help community members that were in jail instead of looking for outside trials.
- 00:59:16 *Question:* Were you involved with the feminist movement? *Answer:* BD became involved in the feminist movement early in 1967 after an SDS meeting in Michigan. A group of women tried to give a presentation about women's issues, but were hooted down. Some of the women went back to NY and created a women's group. BD said that women's groups were forming around the country after the meeting. BD talked about an article she wrote with Naomi Jaffe criticizing a cover story in *Ramparts*. Their article was entitled "Two Tits and No Head" because the photograph was of a well-endowed woman from the shoulders down.
- 01:02:07 *Question:* What was the point of that? *Answer:* BD said images like that were common and the women's group was trying to analyze the impact of mass culture on women's lives.

- 01:02:39 *Question:* Were the women in SDS thinking about forming a separate organization? *Answer:* BD said that there was talk about it, but SDS was falling apart by 1968-69 anyway.
- 01:03:25 *Question:* Jane Adams said that the camaraderie between the women in the movement cut across political boundaries. Do you agree with that? *Answer:* BD agreed with the statement and said that she and JA were a good example of that. After SDS fell apart, the women continued to have a growing sense of solidarity.
- 01:04:19 *Question:* Do you still consider yourself a feminist? *Answer:* Yes.
- 01:04:30 *Question:* You must have watched the Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill debacle. Do you think we've made any progress in the last twenty years? *Answer:* Yes, BD said what looked like a defeat was actually the breaking down of a door. BD called Anita Hill an unexpected hero. BD referred to it as a mass teach-in and that everyone could speak to each other.
- 01:06:26 *Question:* What struck me is that so many women believed Thomas. Why do you think that happened? *Answer:* BD said that there was a television insta-poll kind of reaction and that people last heard Thomas speak and automatically believed him. However, upon reflection, most people changed their minds and believed Hill. BD said that in the Black community the people felt betrayed because Hill exposed the Black community to the White world. The Black Church also shamed her. A discussion about the Black Church followed.
- 01:09:28 *Question:* You came to the conclusion that violence was the way to go? *Answer:* No, BD said that she never came to that conclusion, but that she found that militancy and the notion of direct action were appealing to her and the rest of the SDS. The government was violent, killing Black Panthers, killing the Vietnamese; the context of the movement was violent, so the movement may have become violent. BD thought that the movement was temperate and restrained compared to other countries' student movements.
- 01:12:40 *Question:* Have you looked at your file? *Answer:* Pieces of it. It is expensive to get all of the files, which BD said she never had. BD said that there was targeting and attempts at manipulation by the government to get the movement members to turn against each other.
- 01:14:10 *Question:* How did you decide to go underground? *Answer:* BD said that they decided to go underground for various reasons. They wanted to get away from the harassment, spending years in trials, and build a clandestine operation. They saw themselves as trying to intervene between the police and the Black movement. They used themselves as a distraction.

- 01:15:01 *Question:* Was that realistic, looking back on it? Or was it very naïve? *Answer:* BD said that it was both. It was a very realistic idea, but they were naïve in thinking that such a small group could do something so big. BD mentioned Kent State and the events there to show that there was more out there other than the SDS and the underground community.
- 01:16:56 *Question:* And you only did a couple of bombings? [in reference to the bombings done by other anti-war groups] *Answer:* Right, the SDS only did a few and they were only against property and meant to be symbolic. They were acts of armed propaganda.
- 01:18:09 *Question:* People were talking about a military coup? *Answer:* BD admitted to the SDS thinking there was going to be a coup, but that they were wrong. Nothing like that ever happened. BD expected Americans to turn their distrust into anger, not into cynicism, which she saw as a downside.
- 01:19:55 *Question:* Now anytime the U.S. thinks about doing something imperialistic, it is deterred by thoughts of Vietnam. *Answer:* BD said that Vietnam was still being fought over. She said that Bush said that the Gulf War was the final resting place of Vietnam. “The war to explain the war” was still going on. Quote from Bill Ayers via Bernardine Dohrn.
- 01:21:43 *Question:* Was SDS a failure? Is there a positive legacy to that? *Answer:* BD said that most people of the SDS stayed the course, doing work that has meaning and hadn’t become sell-outs.
- 01:22:59 *Question:* That’s the legacy of the 60s. All these movements. *Answer:* Absolutely. Millions of people involved in the opposition did that.
- 01:23:44 *Question:* You stayed free for 11 years. You must have had a lot of support. *Answer:* The SDS did have a lot of support from people who agreed and disagreed with them. Only the media and the government defense thought that the movement was violent.
- 01:25:31 *Question:* The political movement ended in 1976 because of the Vietnam War. What happened after that? Was the political aspect still important in terms of staying underground? *Answer:* The organization fell apart. Many turned themselves in, some continued to push the issues. BD did not turn herself in because she needed to reflect and had just had their first child. She liked being normal.
- 01:28:02 *Question:* Do you think you would have continued to stay underground if you hadn’t had children? *Answer:* No, BD disagreed with some of the political choices that

- others made. She felt like it was giving up.
- 01:28:56 *Question:* Others made other decisions. Like Kathy Boudin and David Gilbert. What did you think of that? *Answer:* BD and the others were devastated about their friends being arrested.
- 01:29:42 *Question:* How is she doing? *Answer:* BD said that KB was doing well.
- 01:29:49 *Question:* When will she be out? *Answer:* She has a sentence of 20 to life and it had only been 11 years at that point. KB received her master's in Literacy and teaching classes, and was working on AIDS issues while in prison. BD also discussed David Gilbert.
- 01:30:49 *Question:* Does he have a 20 to life sentence, too? *Answer:* No, his was 60 to life.
- 01:31:19 *Question:* There is a bond between members that will never be broken. *Answer:* BD agreed. They made lasting connections with people, even if they split roughly in the 60s.
- 01:31:59 *Question:* Do you ever get nostalgia? *Answer:* BD tried not to be because she didn't like living in the past.
- 01:32:17 *Question:* What about the future? *Answer:* BD said she wanted to do everything and hoped to still be a radical organizer. She wanted to travel, be a grandmother, and continue to fight for the issues.
- 01:32:47 *Question:* You can provide a lot of advice and experience. *Answer:* BD said she didn't need to get involved as a wise person; she just wanted to be part of the next movements.
- 01:33:40 *End of interview*