

WHAT IS COINTELPRO?

Curricular Directions for *COINTELPRO 101*—a film by The Freedom Archives

There are of course many ways to initiate and guide discussion using the film COINTELPRO 101. This curricular collection is seen as a series of highly flexible suggestions for more “formal” settings, such as a high school classroom or college seminar. You will want to adapt our suggestions depending on the grade level and knowledge base of your students. Many of the suggestions could also be used as a basis for group discussions and educational activities at a community center or after a showing in a variety of non-classroom settings.

We suggest a number of options, such as examining each major section of the film in greater depth, and we also provide some more general ideas for using the film as a whole to deepen understanding of this recent history and its lessons. But you know your class or audience best. Mix and match and add your own lessons and approaches. You’ll want to have a more specific focus, if, for example, you are showing the film as part of a response to a particular case or campaign. As the film discusses, there are many political prisoners as a result of COINTELPRO frame-ups who are still imprisoned in many states, and there are various current organizing efforts, some of which are touched on in the film, for example, diverse environmental justice, anti-war, and community empowerment movements.

We have placed a concise resource list relating to COINTELPRO on the Freedom Archives website (www.freedomarchives.org/Cointel_Resources.html). You may want to look over some of these resources to refresh your own knowledge and/or select a few short readings for students.

We recommend that you watch the film yourself first to decide how you want to use and introduce it. Depending on the level and experience of your class, and how much of recent US history, especially the civil rights and related social movements, they have already studied, you may want to discuss those times, explain who the main people who talk in the film are, what the FBI is, etc. You could note that much of what they are about to see and hear is not in standard history or social studies textbooks, or is only mentioned in a few sentences, so this film uncovers a secret part of recent history that has had a big impact on all of us today, but that not very many people know very much about. For some high school classes you may want to add that in college a course that first introduces a big subject often has the number “101” after it, like Biology 101.

Before students watch the film, you may want to suggest that they quickly jot down questions they have as they are watching, terms or things they didn’t understand, things that surprised them, and anything they may want to ask or talk about afterward.

We hope you find these suggestions helpful. But they are only suggestions! It would great to hear about your educational approaches. If you’ve written down or recorded any class sessions or some of your ideas, please let us know and send them to the Freedom Archives, so we can learn from them and, if it’s OK with you, share them with others. You can get in touch with us through the website or by phone at 415 863-9977.

Part 1: GENERAL REACTIONS

Your class has just watched the entire film COINTELPRO 101. Depending on their age, background, and knowledge about “the 1960s” their reactions may differ. Give them a chance to express their thoughts, feelings, and questions throughout and keep the discussion as interactive as possible.

Reactions to the Film

1. As soon as possible after the viewing of the film, elicit initial comments from the class. If some of the comments or discussion raise issues that students want to know more about, or lead to questions they have, make sure to list some of these as the discussion continues. Encourage discussion, asking questions to encourage participation. If needed, ask questions about what surprised them, what affected them most, what they weren't sure about, if they had doubts about things that were said, anything they'd like to find out more about, etc.
2. There have been a lot of images and stereotypes in mass culture about what's called the 1960s, and your students no doubt have some their own. Ask how they would describe the 1960s. Take all kinds of thoughts and ideas—visual images, music and other cultural aspects, maybe just a few words they associate with what they know of those times, any actual experiences they've heard about, or other ideas about what those times were like.

You may want to explain at some point in the discussion that the term “60s” is just an inaccurate shorthand label for that period of intense social change—for example, the civil rights movement of those times took on new impetus just after World War II, spread widely throughout the South by the mid-fifties, with national impact expressed, for example, in protests against widespread lynching, against the frame-up of the Scottsboro Boys, sorrow and anger at the murder of Emmett Till, and the 1954 Supreme Court decision against segregation. So, in that sense, the 60s really began in the 1950s. Some scholars would mark the “end” of the 1960s with the end of the Vietnam War in the mid-1970s. But are “the 1960s” really over yet? That might be a good question for later on in class discussions!

3. Ask what big ideas about this time period the film sets forth. Help students summarize from the thoughts they come up with. Make sure that two main ideas get across, described below. Depending on your students, you may want to note these very briefly or discuss in more detail.

(1) **Worldwide Context.** Both worldwide and in the US this period was marked by the rise of radical and revolutionary theories and activities aimed at achieving greater social justice and equality. After World War 2, movements for national independence surged throughout the “Third World,” (Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East). At the same time, nations then called socialist (such as the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, countries in Eastern Europe, and soon Cuba) had emerged from the war as having borne the brunt of and been primarily responsible for the defeat of fascism. The intertwined strands of national liberation and socialism were viewed by the US, now the most powerful Empire, as the greatest threat to their global supremacy. The war in Vietnam, where the US took over from French colonialism, and the rise of a Vietnamese liberation movement that would defeat the US, is a prime example. The antiwar movement, importantly including widespread resistance within the military itself, along with the rise of the civil rights movement inside the US, are often seen as the two primary elements of the many movements of the 1960s.

The existence of the Soviet Union, then the People's Republic of China, Korea and the Korean War, other socialist countries, the Cuban Revolution, etc. and of very small (but once more powerful) socialist and communist organizations inside the US is important in understanding this period. Inside the US, anti-Communism had been massively brainwashed into the generation of the 1950s, and was one of the main ideological weapons used by the FBI and US government against the civil rights and other social movements. J. Edgar Hoover, for example, had cut his teeth in the early part of his career during the Palmer Raids of 1919 against anarchists, socialists, and communists. This repression continued and deepened from that time on, with the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the Smith Act trials, the use of so-called un-American activities committees, and tactics such as "red-baiting" were still much in evidence during the period marked by COINTELPRO, with claims of communist influence on leaders and organizations often part of the government arsenal. Martin Luther King, Jr. is a prominent example, but there were countless others. In the film, the police officer trying to justify the reasons for the Chicago "Red Squad" is an example that could be used when discussing anti-Communism with students. The massive civil rights movement, with its Black high school and college student participation, and the important involvement of white students, was the initial impetus for the nationwide student movement of the sixties, but the political and cultural fight against 1950s Joe McCarthy era anti-Communism in general and the House Un-American Activities Committee in particular also helped spark the student movement. Soon, the antiwar movement would swell the ranks of the student movement, leading to the formation and growth of groups such as SDS and more traditional progressive organizations. Interestingly, one of the early milestones in SDS was its break with an anti-Communist parent organization, establishing its organizational independence by taking that stance.

(2) Civil Rights/Black Liberation and Other Movements. Inside the US, WW 2 Black veterans, sent around the world in a struggle against Hitlerian/fascist racism, came home to the segregated South and were among the fundamental movers within the early civil rights movement. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, with the Greensboro and many other student sit-ins, the Montgomery bus boycott, the Freedom Riders and Freedom Summer bringing white students south, and the spread of the civil rights movement to Northern cities, the civil rights movement had reached an unprecedented level of strength. Soon, this movement and the others developing in part due to its deepening power and influence, had grown to such an extent that some elements in the government foresaw that radical change and possibly even overthrow of the powers-that-be might take place, so the government, especially its police and so-called intelligence agencies, determined to destroy those movements and their leaders by illegal, unconstitutional means, up to and including assassination, bringing false charges against many activists (frame-ups), and other "counter-insurgency" strategies and tactics shown in the film. These movements, sparked by the rise of the civil rights movement, included the resurgence of the centuries-old struggles for Native American sovereignties, for Puerto Rican independence, and Chicano/Mexicano freedom. They also included growing student, youth, and socialist movements, involved in and inspired by the civil rights movement, influenced by the weakened but still extant left-wing organizations, dedicated to bringing more authentic, participatory democracy to US institutions, and growing into a mass movement of millions against the war in Vietnam.

4. Explain that it was against this historical backdrop that the repressive apparatus and illegal government activities described in the film took place. If needed, especially with younger students, ask the class how COINTELPRO got its name [as a shortening of Counter-Intelligence Program]. Again if needed, you could review other acronyms or shorthand terms used in the film (FBI, AIM, SNCC, RAM, SDS, Church Commission, etc.)

You may want to briefly discuss this usage of the word “intelligence.” What does it mean in this context? In this sense it does not mean “being smart,” it means gathering all kinds of information. For example the US Central Intelligence Agency, or CIA, was set up to gather information about what was going on in other countries all around the world. But despite the name, both the CIA and the FBI, as COINTELPRO and other actions at home and abroad amply demonstrate, were not confined to simply finding out information. They spread false information in order to repress social movements, and they also put into operation a massive number of actions, many illegal and unconstitutional, against groups and movements the US government considered “subversive,” or “radical.” The CIA has of course been directly implicated in the overthrow of democratically elected governments all around the world, as, for just a few examples, in Guatemala in 1954, Lebanon in 1958, Chile in 1973, as well as in numerous political assassinations, including Patrice Lumumba in the Congo in 1960 [shown in the visuals during the end of the film] and numerous failed attempts to murder Cuban leader Fidel Castro. The film provides some examples in Puerto Rico and the United States of similarly violent and illegal “intelligence” activities.

5. At several points the film suggests that the US government was threatened by the “growing unity” of the movements for social justice. Clarify as needed, explaining that even though it is very important to recognize the independent, separate movements, there were also many alliances and growing cooperation between the movements and among the various strands within them. The influence of a number of leaders bridged across the different movements—some of whom, as the film shows, were assassinated or imprisoned, as well as others who had not reached that level of influence but had strong potential to do so. Slogans such as “the people united can never be defeated/*el pueblo unido jamas sera vencido*” reflect the drive toward the increasing power that can be achieved when movements are able to unite. There are of course many reasons why social movements fail to unify within themselves and/or to ally with others, but there is no question that one of the primary goals of the COINTELPRO program was to destroy that potential and that the illegal actions of the FBI, CIA, military intelligence, and other agencies had, as the film’s participants say, a profoundly destructive effect on the rising movements for social change and justice.

6. Decide on next steps. If you have a number of class sessions to continue using the film, you may want to begin in the order of the film, beginning with the Puerto Rican independence movement, then Native-American, Chicano-Mexicano, and African-American liberation movements, closing with a general summary of the entire progressive left, including the antiwar and student movements, and a discussion of what the film suggests about the new movements of today, the Patriot Act, and the relevance of what students have learned to their own lives. You could show portions of the film as you deepen discussion of each of these sections. You could also order the portions of the film in ways that reflect your other curricular goals. For example, you could start with the civil rights/Black liberation movement, and go from there.

For advanced high school classes and university history or sociology classes, the film can be one effective launching point for a wider and more complex discussion of the interactions involved in social oppression, the rise of social movements to overcome that oppression, and repression against those movements. The Black Panthers and white student radicals expressed this by quoting one of the sayings in the famous “Little Red Book” of Mao Tse-Tung—“Where there is oppression there is bound to be resistance against it” and in the slogan, “repression breeds resistance.”

7. Go on to the next parts of these curriculum suggestions, possibly beginning with research into the Puerto Rican independence movement and continuing from there. If your time is limited, we suggest that you look first into two curriculum pieces originally designed for use in the San Francisco 8 case, very relevant to the film, and high in student engagement. They are entitled “How Far Have We Come?” and “What Would You Do?”

Note: If you do not have time to educationally pursue the issues raised by the film in any greater depth than this initial discussion, we suggest a concluding discussion about its ongoing relevance as suggested by the closing section of the film. Among current issues are: how the Patriot Act and other “anti-terrorist” legislation has given government police agencies powers that were illegal during the time of COINTELPRO and are now used against the radical environmental and animal rights movements, the anti Iraq/Afghanistan war movement, and those charged in connection with the Republican National Convention, with searches of activist homes, and ongoing surveillance/infiltration of progressive organizations. You could also assign students an essay on the film, what they learned from it, and what it meant to them. In the course of your ongoing regular instruction, you could refer to the film or use appropriate sections of it. Please let us know your and your students’ reactions to COINTELPRO 101. Thanks!

How to convey the rising spirit of the times, the gigantic waves of social protest and cultural ferment now called “the 60s?” Teachers of recent history and social studies of course must face this issue. And yes, there are documentary films, sound recordings, books, and magazines that attempt to do this. Howard Zinn’s landmark *People’s History of the United States* and similar efforts also help convey the continuity between movements of the 1960s and those that came before. In the brief summaries of the period above, emphasis is placed on the civil rights/Black liberation and antiwar movements, and there is some footage and participant commentary in the film that seeks to convey the times—for COINTELPRO-type repression was aimed precisely at attempting to stop these rising social justice movements. There were many liberation and social justice movements worldwide and inside the US, reaching a peak in some respects in 1968–69, with the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, a wave of Black rebellions in the United States following the assassination of Martin Luther King, student occupations and massive protests in the US, France, Germany, and elsewhere, and much else. In addition there were the transformative cultural shifts and clashes, the communal anti-materialistic aspects of what became known as “youth culture” in the US, the folk, protest, and rock music, the “sexual revolution,” the resurgence of the women’s liberation movement, the birth of the gay liberation movement—all interwoven into these gigantic waves of social energy. At the same time, it’s important not to romanticize those times or their heroes and sheroes, to recognize, for example, political immaturities and organizational errors, tactical and strategic pitfalls, the limitations and lessons of that time. This film is one small contribution toward understanding some of those lessons, for future generations who will carry on the local and worldwide battles against racism and exploitation—for freedom, justice, and peace—now joined by urgent environmental crises. We welcome any examples you may have of ways you’ve found to convey the spirit of those times.

