MONTHLY REVIEW
AN INDEPENDENT SOCIALIST MAGAZINE

REVIEW

Identity Politics and Left Activism

by Immanuel Wallerstein

Topics: Inequality , Movements , Political Economy , Race ~ *Places:* Americas , United States

Grace Lee Boggs, with Scott Kurashige, *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 256 pages, $20.95, paperback.

IMMANUEL WALLERSTEIN is Senior Research Scholar at Yale University. He is the author of *The Modern World-System* (4 vols.; new edition, 2011).

The biggest internal debate absorbing the world left for at least the last seventy-five years has been whether identity is a left concept and therefore a left concern. In 1950, most activists on the left would have said no. Today a majority would say yes, indeed. But the debate remains fierce.

Grace Lee Boggs's life has been both a prime example of evolution on this issue,

and a prime exponent of the legitimacy of making identity central to what she calls in the subtitle of this book "sustainable activism for the twenty-first century." Today in 2013, Grace is in her late nineties, and is a living legend of left activist politics.

I have now read this book twice—once to write a blurb for it and once to do this review. And some parts of it I had read previously in article form. The more I read Grace's writings, the more I appreciate her invigorating wisdom. Danny Glover in his Foreword to this book puts it very well. He notes the composition of the very large crowd assembled in Detroit in 2009 to celebrate her ninety-fourth birthday. "That rainbow of all ethnicities and all ages is what this struggle is about. That's what Grace Boggs has been about all her life" (x).

Grace Lee was the first in her assimilated Asian-American family to go to college. She took a PhD in philosophy and was immersed in Hegelian dialectics. Witnessing the realities of the world and of the multiple discriminations against Asian-Americans, she became a Marxist and active in the so-called Johnson-Forest Tendency of the Workers Party, led by C.L.R. James. She explains what attracted her to this particular group: "unlike most radicals in that period, they emphasized the significance of the 'Negro' struggle in the making of an American Revolution" (59).

She found this way of discovering Marx and discussing the great revolutions of the past empowering because it focused "not so much on the oppression suffered by people at the bottom of the society but on how they organized themselves and in the process advanced the whole society" (59). The group read early Marx texts carefully and felt that being a Marxist was not merely focusing on property relationships but also "on the spiritual as well as the physical misery of capitalism" (60).

After ten years of involvement with this group, she felt that it was still too "stuck in the ideas they had derived mainly from the Russian Revolution" (64). So she moved to Detroit and soon married Jimmy Boggs. She had chosen to move there in the early 1950s because, as a Marxist, she "wanted to be part of a revolution in which the workers in the auto factories would take the struggles of the 1930s to a higher level by struggling for workers' control of production in the plant" (106). Helped by Jimmy Boggs, she soon realized that her ideas had come from books

and had little relation to reality, a reality of fleeing industries and fleeing Whites from Detroit. She and Jimmy became organizers of the Black Power movement in Detroit.

On July 20, 1967, an aggressive and intrusive police raid provoked a rebellion of young Black Detroiters. It was brutally suppressed but it led to the election in 1973 of a Black mayor, Coleman A. Young. He had been a left-wing union activist, and did end the racism in the city administration. But he could do nothing about the industrial decline of Detroit. Eventually, Young proposed the development of casino gambling as a new source of city income. When the Boggs duo successfully led a protest and defeated the proposal in a referendum, Young challenged them to offer an alternative. They realized that they were actually faced with a great opportunity. “In its dying, Detroit could also be the birthplace of a new kind of city” (110).

Building a new kind of city has been the Sisyphean task of Grace Lee Boggs ever since. Grace tells us of her gradual discovery of a long series of analysts who were more radical than she had realized. They include Gandhi, the later Martin Luther King, Jr., the later Malcolm X, John Dewey, and Paulo Freire. This is not the usual list one associates with someone who claims to be a Marxist. Indeed, this list is precisely what has led other varieties of Marxists to insist that she is nothing but a middle-class reformist. So, if we are to understand her argument, we must look more closely at why she turns our attention to these figures.

Her views are anchored in the immediate realities of the poorest segments of the population in Detroit—what they need, what they have been doing, what they could do to survive, to improve their lives, and to contribute to “the next American revolution”—the title of her book.

When she discusses Gandhi, she does not point to his espousal of *satyagraha* as most persons do. Rather, she talks of his opposition to the objective of unlimited growth. She says Gandhi warned that our societies “would eventually become so gigantic and complex that human beings would be reduced to masses, dependent on experts, serving machines instead of being served by them.... They would end up being enslaved by the temptations of material wealth and luxuries, a form of bondage...even more cruel than physical enslavement” (88–89).

Furthermore, Boggs says that Gandhi argued that the struggle for independence "should not be mainly a struggle for state power. It should revolve around going to people at the grassroots, helping them to transform their inner and outer lives in order to create self-reliant local communities" (89).

As for Martin Luther King, she talks of her "catching up with Martin" and recapturing his "Radical Revolutionary Spirit" (89). She says that King realized after the Watts uprising in 1965 how little his struggle for measures like the Voting Rights Act was relevant to "the powerlessness and uselessness that is the daily experience of black youth made expendable by technology" (91). It was more than just asserting Black Power. King now believed that the challenge was "to organize the strength and compelling power of poor people, White as well as Black, as workers, consumers, and voters, to make demands on the government for sweeping measures, such as a guaranteed annual income for everyone" (91).

King was calling for a radical revolution of values. He said in 1967 that the war in Vietnam was "but a symptom of a far deeper malady with the American spirit. We are on the wrong side of a world revolution because we refuse to give up the privileges and pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investments" (93–94).

Malcolm X was a second hero who went faster than his supporters. "Like Martin, like every true revolutionary, Malcolm was a work in progress" (83). She quotes his interview with Jan Carew a few weeks before his assassination: "I'm a Muslim and a revolutionary, and I'm learning more and more about political theories as the months go by.... If a mixture of nationalism and Marxism makes the Cubans fight the way they do and makes the Vietnamese stand up so resolutely to the might of America...then there must be something to it" (85).

Grace came to see that the schools were a critical agency through which the poor were being socialized but which they might transform into self-reliant agencies of their liberation. This is what brought her to the now largely forgotten, at least neglected, views of John Dewey. She quotes Dewey's insistence that education is "a process of living and not a preparation for future living" (144). Dewey was calling for constructive participation of the schools in the life of the community in ways that would liberate "our impulses to make, to do, to create, to produce whether in the form of utility or of art" (145).

The concern with the realities of education and the possibilities of a different kind of education in Detroit and everywhere else led the Boggs duo to Paulo Freire who, like them, saw the urban uprisings or rebellions as moments when the rebellious became conscious that their oppression was "rooted in objective conditions" and sought "to overcome the silence in which they have always existed" (147). However, for Freire as for the Boggs duo, this was not yet revolution because revolutions are made by people (as distinguished from masses) who have assumed "the role of subject in the precarious adventure of transforming and re-creating the world. They are not just denouncing but also announcing a new positive" (147).

Grace argues that one can apply Freire's revolutionary method of education to political organizing and struggle as well. "We must view revolution as an inherently educational process.... [Revolution] is about overcoming the 'dehumanization' that has been fostered by the commodification of everything under capitalism and building more democratic, just, and nourishing relations to people" (148–49).

The ultimate message of all this is that "we are the leaders we've been looking for" (159). And to do that, we must learn the importance of "combining activity with reflection" (164).

Her own reflection includes citing her favorite passage in the *Communist Manifesto*: "All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned." Most persons citing this passage stop there. But Grace completes it: "and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind" (61).

Grace has devoted her life to recreating Detroit. She says that the way to sum up what we are doing is to call "Detroit the Chiapas of North America. Despite the huge differences in local conditions, our Detroit–City of Hope campaign has more in common with the revolutionary struggles of the Zapatistas in Chiapas than with the Russian Revolution of 1917" (75).

In another decade, activists and analysts alike may have forgotten Grace Lee Boggs—a great pity, but quite normal. But the emphasis she has placed and exemplified of the self-reliant person, located in communities of self-reliance and hope, is not about to disappear. It is all around us. It is the positive side of the

structural crisis of the modern world-system in which capitalism is self-destructing. The face of this structural crisis in which we are living is a chaotic world order and a bifurcation in which the great political struggle is between those who would replace capitalism with a new, non-capitalist mode of terrible oppression and those who would create a new world-system that is relatively democratic and relatively egalitarian, but above all self-reliant.

If left activists read Grace Lee Boggs with an open mind, and a willingness to rethink traditional political strategies, we shall all do better in our common struggle for a better world.

‹ September 2013 (Volume 65, Number 4) Rethinking Is Not Demonizing ›

Also in this issue

Rethinking Is Not Demonizing, Yan Hairong

New books from MR Press

The Age of Monopoly Capital: Selected Correspondence of Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy, 1949-1964

A Redder Shade of Green: Intersections of Science and Socialism

The Politics of Immigration: Questions and Answers (Second Edition)

Creating an Ecological Society: Toward a Revolutionary Transformation

Harbors Rich in Ships: The Selected Revolutionary Writings of Miroslav Krleža, Radical Luminary of Modern World Literature

Union Power: The United Electrical Workers in Erie, Pennsylvania

Subjects

Ecology
History
ideology
Imperialism
Inequality
Marxism
Media
Movements
Political Economy

Monthly Review Foundation. Tel: 212-691-2555
134 W. 29th Street, Suite 706, New York, NY 10001