

Roundup #9: The Prescient Analysis of Grace Lee and James Boggs

As news outlets continue to distract and confuse with their tireless coverage of Trump, Russia, and the elections, 'progressives' argue about how to revive the decaying corpse of the Democratic Party, and social media activism propagates a politics of the spectacle increasingly separated from any change in real material conditions, it is clear that political discourse bears little relation to the reality that we face. From within this generalized state of confusion, this week's Roundup, posted on what would have been the 102nd birthday of Revolutionary thinker and organizer Grace Lee Boggs, reminds us that it is imperative to recuperate the long-term, committed, evolving, intellectual analyses and organizational practices of our predecessors.

In their seminal 1974 book *Revolution and Evolution in the 20th Century*, Grace Lee and Jimmy Boggs posed the question, "What time is it on the clock of the world?" By inviting us to imagine all of human history laid out on a clock, they insisted that as the times change, that is, as our situation changes, so must our strategies of resistance - even the revolutionary ideas that had only just been born in the 20th century could not be taken for granted. As a Black autoworker in Detroit laboring under specter of automation, Jimmy Boggs foresaw, long before other analysts, the collapse of productive labor that would coincide with the rise of financialization. As such, their analysis presaged the crisis that we live today and pointed to the limitations of a politics that continued to imagine the disappearing industrial worker as the revolutionary subject.

The Boggs' work presented here, drawn from their many decades as political militants in Detroit, provides a snapshot of some of their key contributions to (re)thinking capitalism and revolutionary politics and demonstrates their deep commitment to evolving their political philosophy through what they called dialectical thinking. Grace and Jimmy remind us that the massive social change we seek - what they called Revolution - will not be handed to us by the State and will not be brought about by brief acts of rebellion, but rather requires the hard work of taking responsibility for rebuilding social relations that structure who we can be.

In the articles posted here Grace and Jimmy take on American exceptionalism, the trappings of the socialist imaginary, the question of education, the non-democratic nature of electoral politics, the distinction between rebellion and revolution, and the limits of identity politics, among other topics. We think you will find that their insights are as valid today as the day

they were written. — The Workshop for Intercommunal Study

James Boggs: *The American Revolution*

“Today...the struggle is much more difficult. What it requires is that people in every stratum of the population clash not only with the agents of the silent police state but with their own prejudices, their own outmoded ideas, their own fears which keep them from grappling with the new realities of our age. The American people must find a way to insist upon their own right and responsibility to make political decisions and to determine policy in all spheres of social existence —whether it is foreign policy, the work process, education, race relations, community life. The coming struggle is a political struggle to take political power out of the hands of the few and put it into the hands of the many. But in order to get this power into the hands of the many, it will be necessary for the many not only to fight the powerful few but to fight and clash among themselves as well.”

Grace Lee Boggs: *Introduction to Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century*

“...a rebellion usually lasts only a few days. After it ends, the rebels are elated. But they then begin to view themselves mainly as victims and expect those in power to assume responsibility for changing the system. By contrast, a revolution requires that a people go beyond struggling against oppressive institutions and beyond victim thinking. A revolution involves making an evolutionary/revolutionary leap towards becoming more socially responsible and more self-critical human beings. In order to transform the world, we must transform ourselves. Thus, unlike rebellions, which are here today and gone tomorrow, revolutions require a patient and protracted process that transforms and empowers us as individuals as we struggle to change the world around us. Going beyond rejections to projections, revolutions advance our continuing evolution as human beings because we are practicing new, more socially responsible and loving relationships to one another and to the earth.”

Grace Lee Boggs - *Education: The Great Obsession*

“American education, like American society, is based upon the philosophy of individualism. According to this philosophy, the ambitious individual of average or above-average ability from the lower and middle classes is constantly encouraged to climb up the social ladder out of his social class and community. To achieve this goal, like the black Englishman in colonial Africa, he must conduct himself in ways that meet the approval and social standards of those in power, that is to say, as much unlike those in his community and as much like those in the Establishment as possible. If he does this consistently to the satisfaction of those in power, who are always observing and grading his behavior, he is rewarded by promotion and advancement into the higher echelons of the system. This is what is known as “making

it on your own.” The more opportunistic you are, the better your chance of “making it.” ”

James Boggs: Think Dialectically, Not Biologically

“The eruption of the black movement exposed the historical connection between racism and capitalism in the U.S. and also made it clear that it is not possible to get rid of racism in this country without getting rid of American capitalism; any more than it was possible to carry on a struggle to reform the South without carrying on a struggle to change this entire nation. How is it possible to get rid of racism without getting rid of the method of thinking which has become ingrained in the American people as a result of the special historical development of this country, namely, that special groups should advance at the expense of others?”

James Boggs: Towards a New Concept of Citizenship

“What we must begin to do is what we find hardest to do – confront our own individualism and materialism, our own going along with the system which has made possible the strengthening and expansion of the system. When we are ready to do this, we will be ready to begin the struggle for the new theory and practice of citizenship which is so urgently needed in the United States today. Most Americans think citizenship is a question of where we are born, or of going to the polls to vote for politicians. Few of us realize that this nation was founded by a great revolution, which inaugurated an age of revolutions all over the world because it gave men and women a new concept of themselves as self-governing human beings, i.e. as citizens rather than subjects.”

Grace Lee Boggs: Naming the Enemy

“...we must now make a second American revolution to rid ourselves of the capitalist values and institutions which have brought us to this state of powerlessness or suffer the same mutilation, the same destruction of our families and our communities, the same loss of national independence as over the years we have visited upon other peoples and other nations.”

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