

2012

# The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century By Grace Lee Boggs with Scott Kurashige

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## Recommended Citation

Nolet, Victor (2012) "The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century By Grace Lee Boggs with Scott Kurashige," *Journal of Educational Controversy*: Vol. 6 : No. 1 , Article 30.

Available at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/jec/vol6/iss1/30>

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## BOOK REVIEW

### *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century*

By Grace Lee Boggs with Scott Kurashige. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011. 201 pages. ISBN 978-0-520-26924-8

Reviewed by Victor Nolet, Western Washington University

During her 96 plus years on the planet, Boggs has been an active participant in the most profound social movements of the twentieth century. After earning her Ph.D. in Philosophy from Bryn Mawr College in 1940, she embarked on a career as a social activist that has spanned 70 years. Her lived experiences as a Chinese American woman, philosopher, feminist, environmentalist, civil rights leader, community organizer, and wife to Black labor activist Jimmy Boggs have given her a unique perspective on what it means to be an activist in the twenty-first century. She truly has made her road by walking (Horton & Friere, 1990). Grace Lee Boggs' book, *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century* (2010), is both a retrospective look on her life as an activist-philosopher and a hopeful road map for a way forward in the twenty-first century. It is required reading for all who aspire to create a more livable, democratic and sustainable future for the planet.

For Boggs, as for much of America, 1967 was a watershed year. In June of 1967, Martin Luther King published his book *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (King, 1967a), in which he began to describe his vision for a post-Civil Rights Movement era. King presented the major tenets of that vision on 4 April 1967, in his historic address *Beyond Vietnam* (King, 1967b) at a meeting of the Clergy and Laity Concerned at the Riverside Church in New York City. This speech was particularly controversial at the time because it so passionately condemned the war in Vietnam. This was not the first time King had declared his opposition to the war in Vietnam—he had spoken out against the war often in the previous two years. Nor, in 1967, was King's a solitary voice in opposition to the war. A week later, on April 15, King spoke at an antiwar rally in Central Park that was attended by 400,000 people, and by July 1967, a Gallup poll showed that 52% of Americans were dissatisfied with the way President Johnson was handling the war, and 41% felt that the war was a mistake.

What was significant about *Beyond Vietnam* was not the fact of King's opposition to the war, but rather the way that King connected the issues of racism, militarism, and gross economic inequity created by what King described as "extreme materialism."<sup>[1]</sup> (1967a, p 186; 1967b). For King, these "giant triplets" were creating a society that devalued humans, but privileged profits and property. King was dismayed that, as the financial costs of the war in Vietnam grew, public investment in antipoverty programs shrank, and a disproportionate number of poor men were being killed or injured in the war. For King, the war in Vietnam was a "symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit" (1967/1986 p. 240). He called for a "revolution of values to accompany the scientific and freedom revolutions engulfing the earth" (1967/1986 p. 240)).

In 1967, King's giant triplets were in full roar in Detroit. For much of the twentieth century, manufacturing jobs in the auto industry had provided Black workers with living-wage jobs that had allowed them to move out of poverty and into the middle class. In the 1960's, the auto industry was becoming increasingly automated and computerized, and as corporate profits grew, Detroit experienced an economic boom. However, when the factories became more automated, assembly-line workers were laid off, and unemployment in Black neighborhoods in Detroit rose to nearly double that in the White suburbs. Young people became increasingly frustrated by the loss of jobs, the loss of opportunity, and the loss of dignity.

In late July, when Detroit police raided an after-hours club in a poor Black neighborhood, that frustration boiled over. Thousands of people, predominantly young, took to the streets and began looting and burning. On the evening of July 23, Governor George Romney called in the Michigan National Guard. The next day, the National Guard troops were joined by 4700 U.S. Army Paratroopers. Eventually, over 17,000 police and military personnel were dispatched to Detroit to put down what was widely characterized as a *race riot*. However, Grace Lee Boggs and her Detroit neighbors did not call this event a riot; they called it a *rebellion*—an uprising against an occupying army of militarized police, institutionalized racism and the callous indifference of corporate wealth.

When violence came to her city, Boggs began to think more deeply about the ideas of revolution and rebellion. During much of her life as an activist, Boggs viewed herself as a Marxist theorist and often worked to bring about systemic top-down changes. However, following the Detroit rebellion, she turned her attention more directly to King's work. King was dissatisfied with the extent to which capitalism creates an *I-oriented* society that results in gross inequities between rich

and poor. At the same time, he felt that Marxist communism subjugates individual needs for the state. When King called for a radical revolution of values, he had in mind a post capitalist, post communist transformation of the human spirit and it is clear that this idea has informed Boggs' work for the past 45 years. For Boggs, the next American revolution is not a revolution at all, in the traditional sense, but rather a process of transformation. It is political, social, economic, local and personal. She believes that a radical revolution of values has not yet happened, but is imminently plausible. Her book, the *Next American Revolution*, is a thoughtful and intelligent description of the rationale and the strategies for helping that transformation along.

Boggs is that rare scholar who is able to transform philosophical theory into daily practice. Her early thinking was influenced by Hegel, Marx, Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and in later years, the historian Immanuel Wallerstein. These philosophical roots are evident in her discussion of the dialect tensions she observed as she and her activist colleagues attempted to translate Marx's 19<sup>th</sup> century ideas into twentieth century activism. Yet, because she has spent her life as an activist, her work is timely to the moment. Her assertion that "we are the leaders we've been looking for" (p. 159) could be the rallying cry for the Occupy Movement that has blossomed at the end of 2011. She is keenly aware of the power of local empowerment and celebrates the many ways that Detroit has embraced such ideas as community and school gardens, locally driven economic development projects, and human-scale neighborhoods. She sees these projects as evidence that a transformation of values is not only possible but already underway. At the same time, Boggs understands that local only happens in the context of global. For her, globalization and climate change are justice and equity issues as relevant and urgent today as civil rights and worker rights were a half a century ago. Seeing those connections and acting locally to bring about deep social change is for Boggs, precisely what the next American revolution entails.

Grace Lee Boggs sees a vacant lot as the opportunity for cultural revolution and believes that the best way to combat the giant triplets is local self-reliance. She reminds us that we can nurture a new spirit of service, sacrifice, patriotism, and responsibility by resolving to "pitch in and work harder and look after not only ourselves but also each other" (p. 165). She recommends that the first step to local empowerment is local discussion "with our families, neighbors, coworkers, classmates, church members, Bible study groups, book clubs, garden clubs, bowling clubs, or any gathering at which we find ourselves" (p. 166).

Clearly, for Boggs, the next American revolution will not be carried out in rarified ivory-tower seminars or in the board rooms of philanthropic foundations funded by the billionaire elite. Rather it is a transformation that will take place in the streets and homes and public-school classrooms and the work place and will address real problems that people face every day where they live and work. It will not be led by charismatic men, but will be carried out by women, youth, people of color, migrants and elders. In fact, the next American revolution is not even American. It is, as Boggs sees it, a global transformation of values—connected, interconnected, informed by creativity, passion, and imagination.

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## Notes

[1] King referred to the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism in both his 4 April 1967 speech at the Riverside Church and in *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community* published later that year. However, in his speech, he used the term *extreme materialism*. He wrote the book in February so the April speech probably represents later thinking.

One hears in his spoken words, the passion King apparently felt about this idea so one might infer that the term *extreme materialism* better captures his intended meaning.