

Grace Lee Boggs: the life of an American r/evolutionary



New Politics shares this post, written in June 2015 to celebrate the 100th birthday of Grace Lee Boggs, who passed away Monday Oct 5, 2015. See a film about her:

<http://americanrevolutionaryfilm.com>

Many anti-capitalists, especially those based in Detroit, America, will today be celebrating the 100th birthday of Grace Lee Boggs, a remarkable Chinese American activist and socialist humanist philosopher. During the 1940s, in collaboration with C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya, Grace helped make an important contribution to Marxist theory before becoming a grassroots organiser for the powerful Civil Rights and Black Power movement in the United States alongside her partner James Boggs, an organic intellectual of the organised black working class in Detroit.

Grace was born Yuk Ping or Jade Peace, Americanised to Grace Chin Lee, on 27 June 1915 above her father's Chinese restaurant in downtown Providence, Rhode Island, one of seven children. After moving to New York when her father's business expanded in the 'Roaring Twenties', Grace experienced something of the widespread racism against Chinese Americans. Her intellect and talent for independent critical thinking saw her aged 16 decide to defy expectations and study philosophy at Barnard College, where she was one of only three students of colour. Amidst the Great Depression, Grace later recalled that 'what troubled me as an undergraduate major in philosophy was that my professors were an elite who saw themselves as "pure reason" in search of Truth – having nothing to do with the world'. Winning a scholarship, Grace completed a PhD at

Bryn Mawr College in 1940, on the American pragmatist philosopher George Herbert Mead, which was later published, though her emerging intellectual passion was for reading Hegel in the original German. For her, 'Hegel was like music', she later recalled.

With no hopes of securing anything but the most menial teaching post as a result of her colour and gender, Grace moved to Chicago, where she politically radicalised towards socialism and came across the Trotskyist Workers' Party agitating against poor housing conditions. In 1941, black Americans were also on the march, and there was a tremendous response to a call by black trade union leader A. Philip Randolph for a March on Washington which successfully forced President Roosevelt to end racist discrimination in the booming war-time defence industry. As she recalled, 'I was attracted to the black movement because Jim Crow in 1940 was so barbaric and because I viewed black struggle as the catalyst for revolutionising this country'. Grace had seen something of the power and potential of a mass movement from below for the first time, and 'decided that what I wanted to do with the rest of my life was to become a movement activist in the black community'. During the Second World War, Grace worked alongside mainly black women workers in a defence plant in Brooklyn, New York, was thrilled by the 'camaraderie' among her fellow workers, and helped organise black history classes in coffee breaks.

In 1941, through the Workers' Party, Grace had had the fortune to meet the black Trinidadian Marxist C.L.R. James, who stopped by Chicago on way back from organising sharecroppers in south east Missouri. 'When he found out I knew German and had studied Hegel, we sat down almost immediately on the red couch in my basement room and began comparing the texts of Marx's Capital and Hegel's [Science of] Logic. That was the beginning of our close collaboration of twenty years'. Grace learnt her Marxism through joining James's small current

within American Trotskyism, known as the Johnson-Forest Tendency (from the pseudonyms taken by its leaders, James – ‘J.R. Johnson’ – and Dunayevskaya – ‘Freddie Forest’). Under her own pseudonym ‘Ria Stone’ Grace soon emerged as a leading theorist of this group in her own right, and would later co-author several insightful and pioneering works of Marxist theory with James and Dunayevskaya, including *The Invading Socialist Society* and *State Capitalism and World Revolution*.

Grace was particularly convinced by James and Dunayevskaya’s Marxist analysis of the Soviet Union under Stalinist dictatorship as a form of state capitalism rather than any form of ‘socialism’. As she recalled in an interview in 2000, ‘regardless of whether the state or private capitalists owned the means of production, Soviet workers in the process of production were still being exploited, dehumanised, and deprived of their “natural and acquired powers” in the way described by Marx in *Capital*. I was attracted to the State Capitalist position on the Soviet Union because it seemed much more dialectical. It embodied much more the way of thinking of Hegel, whom I had studied, because it recognised that new contradictions could arise out of great struggles for liberation and that progress did not take place in a straight line. I was also rather attracted to it because it emphasised the humanity of the workers rather than property relationships.’

When Dunayevskaya found a Russian translation of Marx’s 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* in New York Public Library, Grace translated three of Marx’s essays from the original German into English, and in 1947 these were published by the Johnson-Forest Tendency, their first ever publication in English. That year she also wrote an afterword to *The American Worker*, a detailed analysis of class struggle at the point of production written by a General Motors worker Phil Singer (under the pseudonym Paul Romano), which stressed the importance of Marx’s theory of alienation – developed in the

1844 Manuscripts – to understanding the dehumanisation which accompanies exploitation in the labour process.

In 1950, the Johnson-Forest Tendency broke with the official Trotskyist movement to form their own independent Marxist current, and in 1953, Grace moved to Detroit, where she soon married James Boggs, a member of the group and a militant black trade unionist at the local Chrysler-Jefferson car plant. On their honeymoon in Alabama, the couple had to sleep in their own car because Southern motels refused to accept mixed-race couples.

The post-war economic boom, the development of new technology in factory production ('automation'), the conservatism of the trade union bureaucracy and the lack of response from most white workers in America to the growing Civil Rights movement led James and Grace Boggs to declare in 1961 that the American working class was 'backward and bourgeoisified', and so for them hope now lay in revolutions in the Third World and marginalised outsiders such as young black people. As Grace would later put it in her autobiography *Living for Change*, they felt 'the labour movement had been superceded by the black movement'. This abandonment of the Marxist stress on the centrality of the working class as the agent of change in society and shift towards movementism led the Boggses to politically split with C.L.R. James in 1962. Grace's subsequent tireless and heroic work as a local anti-racist organiser in Detroit nonetheless won her the respect of not only iconic leading figures such as Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and Rosa Parks but also militants around the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit – and so confused the FBI that they thought she must be 'Afro-Chinese'.

The defeats of the liberation movements which had reached their height in the late 1960s by the 1970s and 1980s now led James and Grace Boggs to shift even further away from Marxism towards what they called 'dialectical humanism', which sought to 'advance beyond the idea that all radicals have held – that

in order to advance socialism, you must first smash capitalism. We have to advance towards the new society by projecting an entirely different way to live and by building new social ties'. In the face of the devastating de-industrialisation of Detroit, the one time jewel of American industrial capitalism, James and Grace Boggs now saw the fight as not primarily one to save jobs and defend public services but to try and 're-civilise our society' through fostering 'collective self-reliance', 'creating support networks to look out for each other and moving onto community gardens and greenhouses, community recycling projects, community repair shops, community day care networks, community mediation centers'. Shortly after the passing of James Boggs in 1993, the James and Grace Lee Boggs Centre to Nurture Community Leadership was founded in Detroit.

Overall, though Grace Lee Boggs has then long shifted away from the classical Marxist 'conception of the creative power of the proletariat in industry as a force for the social regeneration of society' that she did so much during the 1940s to develop and clarify at a time when Stalinism meant that for so many people 'socialism' had come to be seen merely as state ownership without any accompanying revolutionary democracy or workers' control, she has always remained an eloquent moral critic of capitalism. Moreover, her record of activism from the 1941 March on Washington against Jim Crow up to the Occupy movement in 2011 remains inspiring, and demands and deserves to be celebrated and honoured today. In the words of veteran American radical Dan Georgakas – co-author of the classic work on the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, Detroit: I do mind dying – Grace Lee Boggs is 'a long-time legendary figure in Detroit and in the black liberation movement' – and as that movement heroically erupts again to confront the systematic murderous racism of the US state and society under the banner #BlackLivesMatter – long may this legendary figure continue to inspire!

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