

Grace Lee Boggs: Celebrated Civil Rights Activist

Grace Lee Boggs was a celebrated civil rights activist, author, philosopher, and feminist. She was a fearless champion of anti-racism and was a leader of several marxist and revolutionary Anti-Stalinists communist splinter groups. She believed that women needed to be treated and judged by the same standards as men. Her family operated a restaurant on Broadway in Manhattan called Chin Lee's. Eventually, her father opened a second establishment named Chin's. She went to Barnard College when she was 16 and became fascinated by the works of G.W.F. Hegel and Immanuel Kant. In 1940, she graduated from Bryn Mawr where she received a PhD in Philosophy. Boggs lived between Chicago and New York in her youth and then later moved to Detroit in the late 1940s.

Despite having a PhD, Boggs was unable to find employment in the United States due to anti-Asian sentiment. Eventually, she found work at the University of Chicago Philosophy Library, making \$10 a week, and lived in a basement apartment. Her experiences living in the squalid, rat-infested building led her to join her fellow tenants — most of whom were black — in protests for better living conditions. Through her new friends, she became involved in A. Philip Randolph's work organizing a march on Washington for jobs. When she saw the result — President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 banning discrimination in defense plants — she realized the power of the people.

While living in both Chicago and New York, she joined the Workers Party (WP), a Trotskyite political party that opposed the Soviet Union and which was committed to Socialist Revolution. Boggs joined the Workers' Party and became active in a group called the Johnson-Forest Tendency, led by C. L. R. James (Johnson) and Raya Dunayevskaya (Forest). Among other things, the group emphasized the important role that the liberation movements of oppressed people should play in revolutionary struggles.

By the early 1950s, she joined *Correspondence* (Correspondence Publishing Committee), a small and independent Marxist formation that was committed to revolutionary social change through worker centered movements. This is where she met her future husband James Boggs, who was a black autoworker, writer, and radical activist. They married in 1953 and moved to Detroit, Michigan, where they both became heavily involved with Detroit's civil rights struggles. The Boggs were dedicated to bring about the next American Revolution. Together they worked with several community organizations and eventually established the James and Grace Lee Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership. She and her husband believed that the working class had revolutionary potential and that ordinary Black Americans had the potential to transform US society through demands for political power and full freedom.

Boggs found inspiration in the way Martin Luther King Jr. responded to race violence in 1967. She subsequently adopted a policy of nonviolence. Boggs worked to foster peace and understanding in King's style. In 1970, Grace gave a lecture on the possibilities of Asian American revolutionary struggle to a gathering in New York City.

In 1992 a year before her husband died, she founded Detroit Summer, a multicultural intergenerational youth program and was the recipient of numerous awards. The Detroit Summer program sought to involve young people in redeveloping the city. Boggs, who went on to author five books, wrote a regular column for the *Michigan Citizen* for many years. Her husband, with whom she often wrote, died in 1993. Boggs' works included *Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century* (1974) and *Conversations in Maine: Exploring Our Nation's Future* (1978), both of which she co-authored, as well as *Living for Change: An Autobiography* (1998). Other works appeared in periodicals and academic journals. In 1998, she published *Living for Change: an Autobiography* — on the first page Grace writes: "Had I not been born female and Chinese American, I would not have realized from early on that fundamental changes were necessary in our society." While living in Detroit in her later years, she planted gardens on vacant lots and founded community organizations.

In 2004, about a decade after her husband's death, Boggs helped organize the Beloved Communities Project. Boggs wrote *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century* with Scott Kurashige in 2011 at the age of 95. Also in 2004, the documentary *American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs* chronicling the life of Boggs was released. Despite being in her nineties, Boggs appeared on numerous talk shows and programs in support of both works. The story of her life and activism continued to inspire new generations. Boggs died at her Detroit home on October 5, 2015. She was 100 years old.