Radical Visions, Possible Worlds

A panel discussion with Grace Lee Boggs and Immanuel Wallerstein
Moderated by Scott Kurashige

Grace Lee Boggs
Born in 1915 to Chinese immigrants, Boggs received her Ph.D. in Philosophy in 1940 and spent the next seven decades of her life as a movement activist, mostly in Detroit. Four of those decades were spent in partnership with James Boggs, an African American auto worker and organizer, developing theories of Black Power and a new American revolution. At the age of 95, Boggs remains an active member of the Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership founded in the 1990s by friends of Grace and Jimmy, and in Detroit, City of Hope. Her forthcoming is entitled The Next American Revolution: Radical Wisdom from a Movement Elder (co-authored with Scott Kurashige).

Immanuel Wallerstein
One of the most influential thinkers and writers of our time, Wallerstein is a senior research scholar at Yale University. He is renowned worldwide for his groundbreaking multivolume study of the modern world system, which is an interpretation of the global history of capitalism. Countless scholars have modeled their entire careers on Wallerstein’s world systems analysis. A prolific and widely translated writer, his book Utopistics; Historical Choices of the Twenty-first Century grapples with many of the same themes presented in this discussion.

Scott Kurashige: We’re going to start with our panelists giving us their sense of how they see the world today and the core concepts we need—to make sense of the challenges we confront.

Grace Lee Boggs: I had the great privilege of coming to Detroit in 1953. And I have lived through Detroit becoming the national and international symbol of the miracles of industrialization, to becoming a national and international symbol of the devastation of industrialization. Today, you see here a symbol of a new kind of society. A society where the gulf between the industrial and the [agrarian] epoch are being resolved. Not because anyone thought it would be desirable, but because living at the expense of the earth, living at the expense of other people, has brought us to the edge of disaster. And it’s that time on the clock of the universe where we face an evolution to a higher humanity, or the devastation and extinction of all life on earth.
Immanuel Wallerstein: The way I approach this is to say that everybody lives in historical systems and historical systems do not go on forever. We’re living in one that we call capitalism, or the capitalist world economy, or the modern world system. It came into existence about 500 years ago. But systems don’t go on forever. They move slowly away from equilibrium until they get too far away. That’s where the modern world system is today. [It] has entered into its structural crisis. It’s not coming to an end just because lots of people are oppressed and don’t like it. That’s been true for a very long time. What’s new is that the system doesn’t provide the possibilities in its own terms to work, [i.e.] an endless accumulation of capital.

In a structural crisis, the alternatives are not only for those who are oppressed but also for the people who oppress us. They, too, see that the system is coming to an end. They, too, have to worry about what comes next. And that’s the long-term struggle that we’re in today. It’s a struggle in which there are two fundamental sides—not about preserving the present system, but about what will replace it.

When a system gets so far from equilibrium that it just doesn’t work anymore; when there’s nothing that can push it back to equilibrium; that’s when the so-called “free will factor” comes in and every little action on our part helps to determine the end—the end that we don’t know. That’s important to underline. We don’t know who’s going to win the struggle of the next 20 to 50 years to replace the present system. But it will depend on us. Because who wins is a matter of the addition of everybody’s effort, at every moment, in every part of the world. And the other side, they got a lot going for them. They got money, guns, intelligence, and power. They are not going to give up easily. But it doesn’t mean that they can’t be beaten.

That’s where we are. In the middle of a big struggle about how to replace the present awful system in which we live, with one that’s better. That’s why we say another world is possible. I underline the word possible. It’s possible, it’s not certain.

Bogg: That’s really important... to understand the difference between possible and necessary. When I became a radical many years ago, I wanted certainty. I wanted necessity. And I embraced Marxism for that reason. I’m not an anti-Marxist, but we need to look at ourselves and understand that what we’re talking about is uncertainty. Revolution is a new beginning. It’s not to prove that our analysis was correct.

Immanuel says in The End of the World As We Know It, “In uncertainty there is hope.” That is such a fundamental concept to understand... the difference between the possible and the necessary. To know that there is much more hope, much more need for making choices in the possible rather than in the necessary. The feudal system came to an end because they could no longer cope with their reality. It’s what’s happening in the Gulf and in the White House and with the shareholders of BP. One thing people [should] get out of this conversation is [that] there is a way in which history, philosophy, [and] theory help you understand reality and what should be done with it.

Kurashige: What is specific about capitalism that we need to understand if we are to make sense of what the system represents and how we must transcend it?

Wallerstein: Capitalism is a system that is based on the idea that there should be an endless accumulation of capital. You accumulate capital, in order to accumulate capital, in order to accumulate capital. You’re on this treadmill. And it depends on something called growth. Growth per se is not a plus or a minus. The capitalist system has the consequence of exploitation, hierarchy, and polarization. There has been an enormous polarization over the last 500 years, particularly in the last 50. It’s incredible, the degree of polarization—the gap between the less than one percent, the 20 percent who do reasonably well, and the 80 percent who don’t do reasonably well in the world.

In the indigenous movements of the Americas, they talk a lot about buen vivir, to live well. To live well is not necessarily to endlessly consume. It is indeed to make some kind of rational arrangement with the world—of the possibilities of fulfilling one’s self individually and collectively. That requires restraint, as well as growth. That’s the kind of system that hopefully, we want to create.

You have to work out a strategy that combines a
very short run, immediate attempt to solve people’s needs. And a medium run strategy for transforming the system. I think of the very short run as one of minimizing the pain. It can be done in a thousand different ways. Some of it requires government action, some requires popular action. It doesn’t transform the world, but it meets people’s needs. There will be some new system emerging. At some point, it will crystallize.

**Boggs:** I want you—theoreticians or intellectuals or activists—to think about change very personally, in the way that people, for example, have changed in Detroit. In the 1970s and ’80s, all you could see were vacant lots. Abandoned houses. Rot. Blight.

Then, some African American women who had lived in the South saw these vacant lots as places where you could grow food to meet a basic need. And they didn’t see it only in terms of belly hunger. They saw urban kids growing up without a sense of process, without a sense of time. And they thought urban agriculture would be a means for cultural change in young people. That’s how the Urban Agricultural Movement developed—out of that reality and the very human needs of people.

**Wallerstein:** One of the fundamental aspects of capitalism as a system is the commodification of everything. You want to turn all activities into activities done for a profit, in order that there be growth in the capital accumulation. Actually, commodification hasn’t been all that easy for capitalism. Up to about 50 years ago, there were lots of things that weren’t commodified. Water, by and large, was not commodified. Hospitals weren’t commodified. In an earlier period universities weren’t commodified. This mad rush in the last 30 to 50 years to commodify more and more of these things [is an attempt] to find a last bit of growth.

One of the things we can do, even in the short run, is to try to de-commodify. In part, to stop this madness. But also to test the alternative possibilities of what will work in a more dec commodified world. We don’t really know how it all could work. We’ve got to experiment. That’s something we can do in the short run as part of the process of trying to make the transition from where we are now, into this other world, which is possible.

**Boggs:** This resistance to commodification is a human resistance. It’s not something that comes out of a book or a theory. All over the world, with the globalization of poverty, people are resisting the commodification of all our relationships. They are resisting the commodification of our environment, of our communities. That’s why you’re here. We are creating a new movement for re-humanization, for radical revolution values.

I don’t know how many of you have read Martin Luther King’s speech against the Vietnam War with the understanding that what he’s talking about is how we have been dehumanized by materialism. We have been dehumanized by consumerism. To understand the extent to which that has happened since World War II, you really need to talk about systems in the abstract and know how we become part of the systems.

The movement that we’re engaged in is not only a
transformation of institutions but a transformation of ourselves. When you think of the movements of the '60s, too often we think in terms of particular identities—Blacks or Latinos or Asian Americans or women. But they were all part of a search for a new human identity. And that's what we're engaged in. When you think that way, when you understand why movements are created, or new systems are created... that shapes what you do with your time. You have to understand it. It's not something you know just because you're born a human. You have to be able to think philosophically and historically. So many of you here are young people in universities trying to figure out what you should do with your mind. Does your mind have a role?

Kurashige: Grace, you’ve written a lot about how we have to seek revolution, not as a one-time event that solves everything, but a protracted process. And that everything we do is about creating the new relations that go into a social transformation. Could you speak more about what is most important about new concepts of revolution?

Boggs: Most people still have in their minds a hierarchical concept of revolution that came out of the insurrection of 1917. And they haven’t thought enough about what’s happened since: How those who capture the state become prisoners of the state. And we, as radicals, haven’t seriously discussed and internalized the changing concepts of revolution. How we are in a period where we must see ourselves not as capturing the state, but as developing the ideas that will replace the ideas of the system. Because the ruling class rules not only through force but through its cultural hegemony. So, as intellectuals we have a really serious challenge.

How do we create the new ideas? How do we create alternatives? How do we get beyond our oppositional thinking? And all the anger that is involved in oppositional thinking? How do we really understand that revolution is a new beginning? Not only in terms of our economic systems and how we make our living, but in how we think and become more human.

Each revolution is an advance in our concept of what it means to be human. Back in 1917, they couldn’t but think in a hierarchical way. In the White House, they can’t help thinking in a hierarchical way. They think that the way to solve the educational crisis is to have more testing. They are not able to think of a non-hierarchical way of doing education that will make us all full participants in creating and governing our world.

I think, if we come out of this U.S. Social Forum with one thing, it should be to feel enormously challenged. To become more theoretical, as well as more practical. More imaginative.

I did a translation of Marx’s Economic and Philosphic Manuscripts many, many years ago. And I was able to identify with this young man. I know the things that you want when you're young.

Marx wrote a marvelous passage in The Communist Manifesto, which I love and quote all the time: “Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones... All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man/woman is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.”

Scott Kurashige is an activist with several organizations in Detroit and a professor of U.S. history and ethnic studies at the University of Michigan. This panel discussion was edited by Renee Yeng Geesler of KPFA’s First Voice Media/Apex. Recording assistance Clif Ross.