

*The publisher gratefully acknowledges the generous support
of the African American Studies Endowment Fund of the
University of California Press Foundation.*

The Next American Revolution

*Sustainable Activism
for the Twenty-First Century
Updated and Expanded Edition*

Grace Lee Boggs

With Scott Kurashige

Foreword by Danny Glover

New Afterword with Immanuel Wallerstein



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

Berkeley Los Angeles London

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University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

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First paperback printing 2012

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Boggs, Grace Lee.

The next American revolution : sustainable activism for the twenty-first century / Grace Lee Boggs with Scott Kurashige ; foreword by Danny Glover.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-520-27259-0 (paper : alk. paper)

1. Social action—United States—History—21st century. 2. Social movements—United States—History—21st century. 3. Sustainable development—United States—History—21st century. I. Kurashige, Scott. II. Title.

HN65.B634 2011

303.48'4097309051—dc22

2010039659

Manufactured in the United States of America

20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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To Jimmy Boggs, who thought and acted dialectically

CHAPTER TWO

Revolution as a New Beginning

We are at a pivotal time in our country's history. The power structure is obviously unable to resolve the triple crises of global wars, global economic turmoil, and global warming. Millions are losing their jobs and homes. Workers feel they can no longer maintain the "American standard of living" that defined the "middle class." Barack Obama's "Yes, we can" call for change energized millions of young people, independents, and those fed up with Bush and the war. Now new sources of anger are being directed at Obama.

What we urgently need are impassioned discussions everywhere, in groups small and large, where people from all walks of life are not only talking but also listening to one another. That is the best way to begin creating an understanding of the next American Revolution, which I believe is not only the key to global survival but also the most important step we can take in this period to build a new, more human, more socially and ecologically responsible, and more secure nation that all of us,

whatever our race, ethnicity, gender, faith, or national origin, will be proud to call our own.

What do we mean by revolution? It is hard to struggle for something that you have not yet tried to define and name. There is a popular sense of the term that we use to refer to everything from prominent historical events to dramatic sociocultural changes to the latest marketing trends. Newspaper columnists speak of the sexual revolution, the Internet revolution, and so on. Students are required to study the American Revolution and the industrial revolution.

Meanwhile, leftists, and many people who are not leftists, have tended to hold onto the concept of revolution created in the early twentieth century that involves the seizure of state power by a party representing the working class or "the oppressed masses." Those leftists who pride themselves on being "revolutionary" have usually sought to distinguish themselves from liberals and social democrats who are "reformists" and lack the will or chutzpah necessary to seize state power and bring about wholesale societal changes.

That is why those of us who are serious about transforming our society—socially, culturally, and politically—need to clarify what we mean by "revolution." We especially need to explain how and why the ideas of most leftists about revolution have become narrow, static, and even counterrevolutionary.

The historian I have found to be most insightful about the rethinking of radical strategies mandated by the movements of the 1960s is Immanuel Wallerstein, author of *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*. In my copy of the book I have kept the review that was published on the front page of the Sunday *New York Times* book review section more than thirty years ago.¹

The movements of the 1960s, writes Wallerstein in *After Liberalism*, published in 1995, culminated in what he calls “the world revolution of 1968.” Since that world revolution, he says, six premises that were accepted as axiomatic by revolutionaries since the French Revolution have become questionable:

- The two-step strategy (first take state power, then transform society) is no longer self-evidently correct.
- We can no longer assume that political activity is most effective if channeled through one party.
- The labor-capital conflict is not the only fundamental conflict in capitalism; there are also contradictions revolving around gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality.
- Democracy is not a bourgeois concept but a profoundly revolutionary, anticapitalist idea.
- An increase in productivity is not an essential goal of socialism. We need to address capitalism’s ecological and human consequences, including consumerism and the commodification of everything.
- We need to reassess our faith in science and reconsider the complex relationships between determinism and free will and between order and chaos.²

Next, in his little 1998 book, *Utopistics: Or, Historical Choices of the Twenty-First Century*, Wallerstein explains how 1968 dethroned both the Leninists and the Social Democrats, the two antisystemic movements that had emerged from and prevailed since the French Revolution. After 1968 people the world over, including in Africa and Asia, no longer believed in the ability of state structures to improve the commonweal. This “resulted in a kind of widespread and amorphous antistatism, of a kind totally

unknown in the long period between 1789 and 1968. It was debilitating and aroused fear as well as uncertainty.”³

The next year, in *The End of the World as We Know It: Social Science for the Twenty-First Century*, Wallerstein assured us that uncertainty rather than certainty about the future provides the basis for hope.⁴ In 2001 I had a warm discussion with Wallerstein at Binghamton University. Since then we have been on each other’s mailing list. When I turned ninety in 2005, he e-mailed me that he was coming to Detroit for my hundredth birthday. To my delight, he instead came to Detroit in 2010 to celebrate my ninety-fifth birthday and to engage in a spirited conversation on the meaning of revolution at the United States Social Forum. Bloggers and online activists made audio and video recordings of our conversation, which can be found all over the Web.

Wallerstein’s work has particularly resonated with me because I have come to similar conclusions as a result of my movement experiences. After I came to Detroit fifty-seven years ago and became involved in and committed to real and ongoing community struggles, I began to understand why so many leftist ideas of revolution have nothing to do with the actual process by which real human beings, confronted with real and seemingly intractable problems, make decisions and exercise their capacities to create new ways of living. Their choices become a new beginning in the continuing evolution of human beings toward becoming more creative, conscious, self-critical, and politically and socially responsible.

By contrast, many leftists cling to a nineteenth-century ideology that forecasts the future. Then they view everything that happens as a sort of validation of what they think. That was very much the way most of us in the radical movements thought for much of the twentieth century.

I began my movement activism in the early 1940s when, in the wake of the Great Depression and the sit-down strikes waged by millions of factory and office workers all over the country, the writings of public intellectuals and academicians began to reflect the influence of Karl Marx's ideas of class and class struggle.⁵

Having been born female and Chinese American, I had known from early on that changes were needed in our society, but not until I left the university in 1940 with a PhD in philosophy did it occur to me that I might be involved in making those changes. At that point, confronted with the need to make a living, I realized how unlikely it was that I would ever do so as a university professor. In those days, before the movements of the sixties, even department stores would come right out and say "we don't hire Orientals."

Luckily for me, my personal crisis coincided with the beginning of World War II and the emergence of the March on Washington movement, led by A. Philip Randolph, demanding jobs for blacks in the defense plants. A precursor of the modern civil rights movement, this mass campaign pushed FDR to issue Executive Order 8802, which created the Fair Employment Practices Committee and outlawed discrimination in factories receiving contracts from the government for war-related production. As a result, tens of thousands of blacks who had toiled under the oppressive conditions of the Jim Crow South migrated to Detroit and cities throughout the Midwest, Northeast, and West Coast for a chance to work in the factory jobs that opened up during the war.

I became involved with this movement and was so inspired by its success that I decided that what I wanted to do with the rest of my life was become a movement activist in the black community. Toward that goal I joined the Workers Party, which

through the South Side Tenants Organization had brought me into contact with the black community.

The Workers Party was a Trotskyist organization, but I never considered myself a Trotskyite. By the time I came on the political scene in 1940 at the beginning of World War II, the controversy over why the Russian Revolution in 1917 had not lived up to its promise was no longer at the center of world politics. I have learned over the years that *when* you become a radical usually decides your politics.

During the 1920s and 1930s, in the wake of the Russian Revolution, radicals all over the world split into rival camps, reflecting the split between Trotsky and Stalin that had occurred in the Soviet Union following Lenin's death. After Stalin rose to power, he pushed forward with aggressive industrialization and modernization plans while using repressive measures to curtail his political opposition. While the Soviet Union under Stalin became a leading force of revolutionary and socialist parties internationally, his political foes and other critics struggled to understand why a revolution made in the name of proletarian rule had led to Stalin's gulags. Huge ideological and physical battles were waged between Stalinists and Trotskyists, each convinced that they had the truth.

I was fortunate that, mostly by accident, I wound up with the anti-Stalinists, to which the Trotskyites belonged. (Because they were generally in the minority—and thus on the receiving end of Stalin's repression and censorship—the anti-Stalinists upheld more democratic standards of debate and practice that tempered Stalinist notions of dictatorship and centralized authority.) But, whether Stalinist or anti-Stalinist, radicals in the United States and the world—remember this is well before the age of the Internet or even television—were unable to analyze the events

in Russia as anything more than abstractions. As a result, those whose politics were formed in that period tended to be students or intellectuals deeply invested in their “line struggles” (i.e., fierce battles over political positions) with their leftist adversaries.

By contrast, after nearly twenty years in classrooms, I came to the movement on the wave of growing black militancy at the beginning of World War II and joined the Workers Party because I was primarily interested in getting my feet wet in practical activities. Even though I was leaving the academy behind, I still viewed myself as an intellectual who, having studied Hegel (the German philosopher of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries), was acutely aware of the power of ideas to be both liberating and limiting.

From Hegel I had gained an appreciation of how we as human beings have evolved over many thousands of years, struggling for Freedom (or what we today call “self-determination”). Constantly striving to overcome the contradictions or negatives that inevitably arise in the course of struggle, constantly challenged to break free from views that were at one time liberating but had become fetters because reality had changed, we are required to create new ideas that make more concrete and more universal our concept of what it means to be free. These notions lie at the core of a Hegelian method of dialectical thinking.

In my last year of graduate work I had also been drawn to the American pragmatists George Herbert Mead and John Dewey, who helped me to unthink the sharp separation between the True and the Good that was entrenched in Western thought and to recognize that individuals can develop to their human potential only through their involvement in community.⁶

That is why inside the Workers Party I was immediately attracted to the Johnson-Forest Tendency led by C. L. R. James,

the West Indian historian (best known for his book *The Black Jacobins*, on the Haitian Revolution), and Raya Dunayevskaya, a Russian-born self-educated intellectual who had once been Trotsky’s secretary.⁷ The “Johnsonites,” as they were known, appealed to me in the first place because, unlike most radicals in that period, they emphasized the significance of the independent “Negro” struggle in the making of an American Revolution. They were also avid students of Hegel. So their Marxism and Leninism were very different from that of most who called themselves Marxist-Leninists. Instead of being economist and determinist, their Marxism was humanist. Instead of focusing on Lenin’s strategies for the seizure of power, they emphasized his profoundly democratic vision that “every cook can govern.” Challenging the view held by most radicals that they were building the vanguard party needed to lead the masses to play some historically prescribed role, they celebrated and encouraged the self-activity and self-organization of workers and marginalized people, seeing them as the force to bring about real social change.

Discovering Marxism as a Johnsonite was as empowering and liberating as my discovery of Hegel—or his Enlightenment predecessor, Kant—had been in the university. Together we spent hours studying and discussing each of the great revolutions of the past, focusing not so much on the oppression suffered by people at the bottom of the society but on how they organized themselves and in the process advanced the whole society. The important thing for us was to see the oppressed not mainly as victims or objects but as creative subjects. To reinforce this view, we went back to the early Marx, the young man who in 1843 at the age of twenty-four and as a student of Hegel had written the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, emphasizing the human essence of the workers and their alienation in capitalist society.⁸

Through our immersion in the writings of the early Marx, we developed a very different view of capitalism and socialism from that accepted by traditional Marxists. Being a Marxist for us meant focusing not on property relationships but on the spiritual as well as the physical misery of capitalism. Capitalism, we argued, reduces the workers to a fragment, robbing them of their natural and acquired powers. It alienates them from their species and communal essence. Socialism, by contrast, means the reappropriation by the oppressed of their human and social essence.

Hence, in our view, Marx's materialism was not the materialism of consumerism. It was the materialism of rooting ideas in real life and practice, going beyond talk and ideas alone. For example, Marx criticized Hegel for grappling only with theoretical labor and neglecting practical, life-sustaining labor. And he criticized the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach for rooting ideas too much in Nature and not enough in practice and in politics. When you read Marx (or Jesus) this way, you come to see that real wealth is not material wealth and real poverty is not just the lack of food, shelter, and clothing. Real poverty is the belief that the purpose of life is acquiring wealth and owning things. Real wealth is not the possession of property but the recognition that our deepest need, as human beings, is to keep developing our natural and acquired powers and to relate to other human beings.

In the 1940s there was very little appreciation or understanding of this side of Marx. Every Marxist-Leninist owned and referred to the *Communist Manifesto*, just as the Black Panthers and young people in the 1960s carried around Mao's *Red Book*. By contrast, as a Johnsonite, I appreciated the *Manifesto* as a historical work rather than a timeless road map. My favorite passage in the *Communist Manifesto* comes at the end of that fantastic paragraph that begins with "the bourgeoisie cannot exist without

constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production" and ends with "All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind."⁹

This focus on the human and spiritual contradictions that arise from revolutionizing technology is very different than the stage theory of history, from feudalism to capitalism to communism, which most radicals back then took from the *Manifesto*. It is very different from the kind of writing that most people associate with Marx.

I often remind people that Marx was born in 1818, one year before *Moby Dick* author Herman Melville, and that he wrote the *Manifesto* when he was twenty-nine. I became a radical when I was twenty-five. When you are twenty-five or twenty-nine, especially if you are an intellectual, you see your world and make leaps in ideas in a particular way. In the unions that were then being formed, Marx saw a new kind of community being created and expanded that perception into the great vision of *communism* that inspired millions of people all around the world. Over the years I have found it helpful to remember Marx's age and where he was coming from when he was writing the *Manifesto*. He had recently come from years of studying Hegel and was imbued with Hegel's tremendous sense of historical sweep, the vision of the universal becoming constantly more concrete, and the concrete constantly becoming more universal. It is a wonderful way of thinking, but it also tends to get to the absolute like a shot out of a pistol, as Hegel put it, without "the suffering, the patience, and the labour of the negative."¹⁰

Marx was writing in the British Museum; he was not experiencing all the contradictions that emerge in reality. I remember falling in love with what Marx said about the Paris Commune

being “the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labor.”¹¹ It opened up my mind. But since then I have recognized that the Paris Commune emerged more than a hundred years ago in a war between the French and the Germans. It is not impossible that something like the Paris Commune will emerge out of the Iraq War, but to think that it will assume the same form in the twenty-first century is a kind of thinking that we should rid ourselves of. It involves taking a model that happened in historical reality many years ago and gauging perspectives for the future on that model when reality is always changing.

These two notions—that reality is constantly changing and that you must constantly be aware of the new and more challenging contradictions that drive change—lie at the core of dialectical thinking. In graduate school at Bryn Mawr, the philosophies of Kant and Hegel had given meaning to my personal life. But it was not until I became a Johnsonite, studying the revolutions of the past and trying to make an American Revolution in the present, that I began to understand the critical importance of dialectical thinking to movement activists and freedom fighters.

Hegel’s method of thinking dialectically did not just come out of his head. He began to think dialectically because he was trying to make sense of the contradictory developments in his reality. As a young man, he had hailed the French Revolution by dancing around the tree of liberty. Twenty years later Napoleon was in power. On the one hand, the revolution was obviously a great leap forward for Humankind because it overthrew the feudal aristocracy and brought the great masses of the French people into the public arena as active citizens making the social decisions that had previously been the prerogative of the upper classes. On the other hand, the French Revolution had also led

to the Napoleonic dictatorship; it had opened the road for the rapid development of capitalism, which robbed workers of their skills and reduced them to appendages of machines. As a result, a lot of people in intellectual circles began wondering whether the French Revolution had been worth making and some of them even began advocating a return to the good old feudal days. Hegel could have given up on Humanity or on the struggle for Freedom. Instead, he created a method of thinking, a philosophy, that encourages the freedom fighter to view the contradictions that emerge in the course of every struggle as a challenge to take Humanity to a higher plateau by creating a new ideal, a new, more concrete universal vision of Freedom.

That is why the study of Hegel was so important to Lenin in 1915 when the German Social Democrats supported their own government in World War I, abandoning the position of international solidarity of the working class on which the Second International had been founded. Their betrayal forced Lenin to recognize that capitalism had reached a new stage, the stage of imperialism and monopolies. As the Western industrial nations ravaged the world, workers in the West indirectly enjoyed the spoils of colonialism. The German Social Democrats and the Second International became a part of what Lenin called the labor aristocracy, more intent on maintaining the privileges of living in an imperialist nation than building the international socialist movement to challenge imperialism. He therefore concluded that there was a need to create a new revolutionary movement and a new International. Basing his ideas on the Soviet thought that had emerged in the Russian Revolution of 1905 and that incorporated a much higher stage of self-activity and self-organization than the unions, Lenin was able to create a new vision of *socialism* as a society in which “every cook can govern.”

I spent ten years in New York working closely with C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya, while also learning the nuts and bolts of radical organizing by doing the work of a party member. But I was delighted when the Johnsonites came to the conclusion in 1951 that both the Workers Party and the Socialist Workers Party (another Trotskyist group that the Johnsonites briefly aligned with) were too stuck in the ideas they had derived mainly from the Russian Revolution to recognize the new social forces for an American Revolution—blacks, women, rank-and-file workers, and youth—that had emerged out of the socializing experiences of World War II. So we decided to set out on our own to launch an independent newspaper called *Correspondence* that would be written and edited by representatives of these new social forces and published in Detroit.

That is why I moved to Detroit in 1953 and soon thereafter married Jimmy Boggs.

Living and working with Jimmy in the black community of Detroit I began to see the relationship between ideas and historical reality in a completely different light. C. L. R. and Raya were both powerful intellectuals, and I had learned a lot from working with them. But their ideas about workers had come more from books and from struggles with other radicals whose ideas about workers also came from books than out of real-life struggles. The Johnsonite mantra had been the famous paragraph in *Capital* where Marx celebrates “the revolt of the working-class, a class always increasing in numbers and disciplined, united, organised by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself.”¹² In other words, despite all our efforts to learn from people at the grassroots, we had still not completely broken with the view of “the masses” as an abstraction created by history rather than as the creators of new beginnings.

Jimmy was a breath of fresh air. He was an organic intellectual, someone whose ideas came not out of books but mainly from reflecting on the experiences of his own life and those of his “kind.” Born in Marion Junction, Alabama, a tiny country town with two stores on its main street, he had moved to Detroit after graduating from high school. Working on the line at Chrysler Jefferson (a huge plant on the Eastside of Detroit), he became a rank-and-file militant, absorbing from the left-wing forces in the United Auto Workers (which union leader Walter Reuther had not yet red-baited out of the union) the fundamental concepts of class, race, and socialism that helped him to see himself as a continuation of thousands of years of human struggle to be free and self-determining. After World War II he experienced the decimation of the workforce by automation. As a result, he was very conscious of the tremendous changes taking place in his reality *and* conscious of his own identity as a worker who had lived through three epochs of human struggle to extend our material powers: agriculture, industry, and automation. Because he had this dialectical sense of constantly changing reality and of himself as a historical person, he also had the audacity, the chutzpah, to recognize—as he did in his book *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook*—that Marx’s ideas, created in a period of material scarcity, could no longer guide us in our period of material abundance and that it was now up to him to do for our period what Marx had done for his.

When I began living in Detroit in 1953, Jimmy, a member of the United Auto Workers, was still mainly engaged with his fellow workers in struggles in the plant against automation and speed-ups (which workers in the plant called “man-o-mation”). But by the 1960s he had concluded that because unions were unable or unwilling to struggle with management over the

fundamental questions raised by Hi-Tech, the workplace was no longer the main site of struggle, and revolutionaries should focus instead on the profoundly new questions about how to live and make a living that were being asked by the "Outsiders" in the community, who in Detroit were mainly young black people. As he put it in *The American Revolution*, "Thus, at this point in American history when the labor movement is on the decline [because it can't solve the issues raised by Hi-Tech], the Negro movement is on the upsurge."¹³

During the 1950s I mainly listened and learned from being with Jimmy in the many meetings he held with workers from his plant and with people in the community. However, by the 1960s I felt I had been living in the black community long enough to play an active role in the Black Power movement that was emerging organically in a Detroit where blacks were becoming the majority. So while Jimmy wrote articles and made speeches challenging Black Power militants to face the questions of Hi-Tech, I was doing a lot of organizing in the Black Power movement. In the next chapter, I discuss this work in greater detail. What I want to note here is how the explosion of the Detroit Rebellion in July 1967 and the meteoric rise of the Black Panther Party in the late 1960s forced us to pause and rethink the Marxist-Leninist ideas about revolution that leftists had long accepted as self-evident.

In 1967 Jimmy and I had each been in the radical movement for more than twenty years, but we had never felt compelled to address head-on the questions of what is a revolution and how do you make it. Then, with rebellions breaking out all over and young blacks joining the Black Panther Party by the tens of thousands, we had to ask ourselves whether there is a fundamental distinction between a rebellion and a revolution. Out of that questioning, we concluded that although rebellion is a stage in

the development of revolution, it falls far short of revolution. As we wrote in *Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century*, rebellions are important because they represent the standing up of the oppressed. Rebellions break the threads that have been holding the system together. They shake up old values so that relations between individuals and groups within society are unlikely ever to be the same again. But rebels see themselves and call on others to see them mainly as victims. They do not see themselves as responsible for reorganizing society, which is what the revolutionary social forces must do in a revolutionary period. They are not prepared to create the foundation for a new society. Thus, while a rebellion usually begins with the belief on the part of the oppressed that they can change things from the way they are to the way they should be, they usually end by saying, "*They* ought to do this and *they* ought to do that." In other words, because rebellions do not go beyond protesting injustices, they increase the dependency rather than the self-determination of the oppressed.¹⁴

We also recognized that those who purport to be revolutionaries but deny or evade this lesson of history and continue to celebrate or encourage rebellions do so mainly because they view themselves as the leaders of angry and oppressed but essentially faceless masses. If or when they gain power, they may make some reforms, but they are powerless to make fundamental changes because they have not empowered the oppressed prior to taking power.

In the Black Panther Party and the rebellions of the 1960s, there was a lot of righteous anger because in the sixties we defined ourselves more by our oppression than by the power that we have within us to create new loving relationships. That is why, beginning in 1968, Jimmy and I felt that our main responsibility

as revolutionaries was to go beyond “protest politics,” beyond just increasing the anger and outrage of the oppressed, and concentrate instead on projecting and initiating struggles that involve people at the grassroots in assuming the responsibility for creating the new values, truths, infrastructures, and institutions that are necessary to build and govern a new society.

Now that the rebellions of the late sixties had broken the threads that have been holding the system together, we said, now that urban rebellions had become part of the U.S. political landscape, now that the constant revolutionizing of production had created everlasting uncertainty and compelled people in all layers of society to face with sober senses our conditions of life and our relations with our kind, now that capitalism had defiled all our human relationships by turning them into money relationships, revolutionaries urgently need to project new ideas and new forms of struggles. Activists transform and empower themselves when they struggle to change their reality by exploring, in theory and practice, the potentially revolutionary social forces of Work, Education, Community, Citizenship, Patriotism, Health, Justice, and Democracy.

At a time when so many radicals in the United States were saying and thinking “I hate this lousy country” and looking all over the world for models of revolution—China, Southeast Asia, Africa, Latin America, even tiny countries such as Albania that were nothing like the United States—Jimmy and I also set out to understand in a deeper manner what was exceptional about U.S. history and therefore what would distinguish the next American Revolution from revolutions in other times and other countries. In struggling to understand the uniqueness of our history, our goal differed sharply from the nation’s mythology that hails the United States and its citizenry as uniquely free and democratic

and thus destined to remake the world in its own image. (This is the type of American exceptionalism that drove Bush and the neocons not only to invade Iraq but also to arrogantly and falsely believe that the Iraqi people and the rest of the world would hail them as liberators rather than occupiers.) But we knew that an endless rebellion against America would lead nowhere. So even as we actively opposed U.S. imperialism, we sought to build on the revolutionary beginnings of this country and the many struggles to build “a more perfect union” that have taken place over the past two hundred years. At the same time, by recognizing the counterrevolutionary tendencies and forces stemming from the pursuit of rapid economic growth that had been built in its founding, we were also able to recognize our need and responsibility to transform ourselves and our institutions.

In 1968 Jimmy and I started *Conversations in Maine* with our old friends and comrades Freddy and Lyman Paine to explore how a revolution in our time and in our country would differ from the many revolutions that had taken place around the world in the early to mid-twentieth century. Together, we brought vastly different life experiences to the table that also reflected the diversity of this country: Jimmy was a black autoworker born in the Jim Crow South; Lyman, a Harvard-educated Boston Brahmin; Freddy, a Jewish immigrant who got into activism as a young worker; and myself, an Asian American woman with a Ph.D. All of us had been Johnsonites, but C.L.R. James had disowned us in 1962 when we insisted that the shrinking of the working class by automation demanded that we revisit some of the foundational concepts of Marxism.

Our separation freed us to recognize unequivocally that we were coming to the end of the relatively short industrial epoch on which Marx’s epic analysis had been based. We could see

clearly that the United States was in the process of transitioning to a new mode of production based on new information technologies; that this transitioning was not only ending but also liberating us from the industrial epoch that had alienated us from the Earth and from each other; and therefore that its cultural and political ramifications are as far-reaching as those involved in the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture or from agriculture to industry.

Thus, as movement activists and theoreticians in the tumultuous year of 1968, we were also acutely conscious that in the wake of the civil rights movement—beginning with the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, the rise of ecological awareness, and the exploding anti-Vietnam War and women’s movements—new and more profound questions of our relationships with one another, with Nature, and with other countries were being raised with a centrality unthinkable in earlier revolutions.

As our conversations continued, we became increasingly convinced that our revolution in our country in the late twentieth century had to be radically different from the revolutions that had taken place in pre- or nonindustrialized countries such as Russia, Cuba, China, or Vietnam. Those revolutions had been made not only to correct injustices but also to achieve rapid economic growth. By contrast, as citizens of a nation that had achieved its rapid economic growth and prosperity at the expense of African Americans, Native Americans, other people of color, and peoples all over the world, our priority had to be in correcting the injustices and backwardness of our relationships with one another, with other countries, and with the Earth.

In other words, our revolution had to be for the purpose of accelerating our evolution to a higher plateau of Humanity. That’s why we called our philosophy “dialectical humanism”

as contrasted with the “dialectical materialism” of Marxist-Leninists. Six years later, nearly thirty years before 9/11, the practical implications of this somewhat abstract concept of an American Revolution were spelled out by Jimmy in the chapter titled “Dialectics and Revolution” in *Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century*:

The revolution to be made in the United States will be the first revolution in history to require the masses to make material sacrifices rather than to acquire more material things. We must give up many of the things which this country has enjoyed at the expense of damning over one-third of the world into a state of underdevelopment, ignorance, disease, and early death. . . . [Until then] this country will not be safe for the world and revolutionary warfare on an international scale against the United States will remain the wave of the present. . . . It is obviously going to take a tremendous transformation to prepare the people of the United States for these new social goals. But potential revolutionaries can only become true revolutionaries if they take the side of those who believe that humanity can be transformed.¹⁵

Thirty years ago when many young people were studying this book in small groups in the aftermath of the struggles of the sixties, I doubt that they paid much attention to this paragraph. But with the economic meltdown and global warming, and especially since 9/11, this projection demands our most serious discussion. We have obviously reached a turning point not only in the history of the human race but also in the history of Planet Earth. Scientists believe that the dinosaurs were extinguished by a meteor sixty-five million years ago, an external cause. If in this period we, and all living beings on our planet, are extinguished, it will not be by an external cause. It will be because of the extravagant, thoughtless ways that we have been getting and

spending and seeing little in Nature that is ours. Our challenge is to recognize our responsibility for the economic meltdown and the planetary emergency and transform our way of life accordingly. When we do, we will reach a new plateau in our continuing evolution as human beings.

The next American Revolution, at this stage in our history, is not principally about jobs or health insurance or making it possible for more people to realize the American Dream of upward mobility. It is about acknowledging that we Americans have enjoyed middle-class comforts at the expense of other peoples all over the world. It is about living the kind of lives that will not only slow down global warming but also end the galloping inequality both inside this country and between the Global North and the Global South. It is about creating a new American Dream whose goal is a higher Humanity instead of the higher standard of living dependent on Empire. It is about practicing a new, more active, global, and participatory concept of citizenship. It is about becoming the change we wish to see in the world.

The courage, commitment, and strategies required for this kind of revolution are very different from those required to storm the Winter Palace or the White House. Instead of viewing the U.S. people as masses to be mobilized in increasingly aggressive struggles for higher wages, better jobs, or guaranteed health care, we must have the courage to challenge ourselves to engage in activities that build a new and better world by improving the physical, psychological, political, and spiritual health of ourselves, our families, our communities, our cities, our world, and our planet.

This means that it is not enough to organize mobilizations that call on Congress and the president to end the wars in Iraq

and Afghanistan. We must also challenge the American people to examine why 9/11 happened and why so many people around the world understand, even though they do not support the terrorists, that they were driven to these acts by frustration and anger at the U.S. role in the world, such as supporting the Israeli occupation of Palestine and dictatorships in the Middle East and treating whole countries, the peoples of the world, and Nature only as resources enabling us to maintain our middle-class way of life.

We have to help the American people find the moral strength to recognize that—although no amount of money can compensate for the countless deaths and indescribable suffering that our criminal invasion and occupation have caused the Iraqi people—we, the American people, have a responsibility to make the material sacrifices that will enable them to begin rebuilding their infrastructure. We have to help the American people grow their souls enough to recognize that because we have been consuming 25 percent of the planet's fossil fuels even though we are less than 5 percent of the world's population, we are the ones who must take the first big steps to reduce greenhouse emissions. We are the ones who must begin to live more simply so that others can simply live.

Moreover, we urgently need to begin creating ways to live more frugally and more cooperatively NOW because with times getting harder, we can easily slip into scapegoating "the other" and goose-stepping behind a nationalist leader, as the good Germans did in the 1930s.

This vision of an American Revolution as Transformation is the one projected by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in his groundbreaking anti-Vietnam War speech on April 4, 1967. As Vincent Harding, Martin's close friend and colleague, has pointed out,

King was calling on us to redeem the soul of America. Speaking for the weak, the poor, the despairing, and the alienated, in our inner cities and in the rice paddies of Vietnam, he was urging us to become a more mature people by making a radical revolution not only against racism but also against materialism and militarism. He was challenging us to “rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter, but beautiful, struggle for a new world.”¹⁶

King was assassinated before he could devise concrete ways to move us toward this radical revolution of values. The question we need to struggle over is “why haven’t we who think of ourselves as American radicals picked up the torch?” Is it because a radical revolution of values against racism, materialism, and militarism is beyond our imagination, even though we are citizens of a nation with seven hundred military bases, whose unbridled consumerism imperils the planet?

In Detroit we are engaged in this long and beautiful struggle for a new world because we have learned through our own experience that just changing the color of those in political power was not enough to stem the devastation of our city resulting from deindustrialization. Our City of Hope campaign involves rebuilding, redefining, and respiriting Detroit from the ground up: growing food on abandoned lots, reinventing education to include children in community building, creating co-operatives to produce local goods for local needs, developing Peace Zones to transform our relationships with one another in our homes and on our streets, and replacing a punitive justice system with restorative justice programs to keep nonviolent offenders in our communities and out of multibillion-dollar prisons that not only mispend monies much needed for roads and schools but also turn minor offenders into hardened criminals.

It is a multigenerational campaign, involving the very old as well as the very young, and all the in-betweens, especially those born in the 1980s millennial generation whose aptitude with the new communications technology empowers them to be remarkably self-inventive and multitasking and to connect and reconnect 24/7 with individuals near and far.

Over the past two decades, people have been coming from all over the United States and the world to study what we are doing. I often sum it up by calling Detroit the Chiapas of North America. Despite the huge difference in local conditions, our Detroit—City of Hope campaign has more in common with the revolutionary struggles of the Zapatistas in Chiapas than with the Russian Revolution of 1917.¹⁷

People come from all over the world to learn from the Zapatista movement, initiated in 1994 by the Indigenous Peoples of Chiapas, because it is a movement based on thinking dialectically about War and Revolution. In the twentieth century, the Zapatistas explain, we lived through three world wars: World War I, World War II, and the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union. All three were wars between nation-states or allied powers for control of discrete territories around the globe. All three had identifiable fronts. All three took place before the onset of globalization and the establishment of corporate rule over the world.

Therefore, World War IV, the war in which the whole world is now engaged, is a new kind of war: an ongoing and total war, the war of the “Empire of Money” against Humanity. The Empire of Money seeks to impose the logic and practice of capital on everything, to turn every living being, the Earth, our communities, and all our human relationships into commodities to be bought and sold on the market. It seeks to destroy everything

that human beings have created: cultures, languages, memories, ideas, dreams, love, and respect for one another. It even destroys the material basis for the nation-state that Western societies created in the nineteenth century to protect us, if only marginally, from the forces of money.

Under these historically new conditions the meaning of revolution must also undergo a dialectical change. Fighting on the side of Humanity against the Empire of Money, we need to go beyond opposition, beyond rebellion, beyond resistance, beyond civic insurrection. We don't want to be like them. We don't want to become the "political class," to simply change presidents and switch governments.

We want and need to create the other alternative world that is now both possible and necessary. We want and need to exercise power, not take it.

The revolutionary organizing that the Zapatistas have been doing since 1994 flows from this new meaning of revolution. Their struggles are very local. They encourage communities to exercise power by developing their own projects to produce food and clothing and other supplies, solving their own problems of health and education, making their own decisions and in the process slowly but surely developing themselves. By recuperating traditional customs and practices for choosing governance democratically, resolving problems through dialogue and consensus, and rotating positions and responsibilities to prevent corruption, the Zapatistas have developed a new generation that has grown up with alternative, autonomous education and health programs and has begun to hold delegated positions in the autonomous municipalities.

We cannot use the Zapatista model as a blueprint for struggle in the United States because our history and our contempo-

rary conditions are qualitatively different. What the Zapatistas demonstrate, however, is the need for a paradigm shift in our thinking. This term was introduced by Thomas S. Kuhn in his 1962 classic, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. A paradigm shift, he said, is the totally new perspective needed at turning points in history when a prevailing concept fails to explain recurring phenomena. An example is the sixteenth-century recognition that the Earth is not the center of the universe, known as the Copernican Revolution.¹⁸

Our circular debates in the United States about our mounting social crises illustrate the need for such a paradigm shift. Millions of Americans, out of concern for their own families or for others less fortunate, are worried about our failing health and education systems. Thus, we have been locked in a titanic battle between the Left and the Right over the proper role of government and the redistribution of resources from the haves to the have-nots. This is a battle whose outcome carries significant implications for all Americans. The problem is that our debate is confined to narrow parameters. Too often we regard health care and education as commodities, and we remain complicit as our elected representatives reduce us to consumers. We forgo an opportunity to debate and discuss real solutions to the crises at hand. Instead of focusing directly on the issue of health *care*, our political discourse centers on health *insurance* programs that have more to do with feeding the already monstrous medical-industrial complex than with our physical, mental, and spiritual health.

Once we understand that our schools are in such crisis because they were created a hundred years ago in the industrial epoch to prepare children to become cogs in the economic machine, once we recognize that our challenge in the twenty-first century

is to engage our children from K–12 in problem-solving and community-building activities, children and young people will become participants in caring for their own health and that of their families and communities. By eating food they have grown for themselves instead of obesity- and diabetes-producing fast foods, by creating and sharing information from the Internet, and by organizing health festivals for the community, they will not only be caring for their own health but also helping to heal our communities.

Or, as I often put it, “We have the power within us to create the world anew.” We need to see that we can solve our health and education problems only by first creating a new concept of citizenship—one that will also cure our failing political system.

That is what the next American Revolution is about.

CHAPTER THREE

Let’s Talk about Malcolm and Martin

History is not the past. It is the stories we tell about the past. *How* we tell these stories—triumphantly or self-critically, metaphysically or dialectically—has a lot to do with whether we cut short or advance our evolution as human beings.

Historians of the black experience have a crucial role to play in helping blacks and everyone in this country develop a common understanding of the important role that the black struggle for human rights has played through the years not only to advance blacks but also to humanize this country. We need to revisit the movements of the sixties. But we cannot just celebrate the victories. We need to examine the new challenges and contradictions that emerged in the course of the struggle.

What lessons can we learn from these new contradictions? To know where we’re going as a new movement is emerging, we need to know where we’ve been. What did we accomplish by the civil rights and Black Power struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, and what new contradictions did we create for ourselves and for the country?