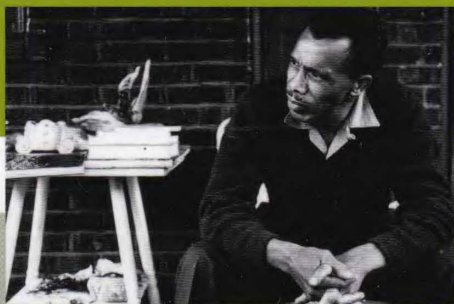


PAGES FROM A BLACK RADICAL'S NOTEBOOK

A James Boggs Reader



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With an Afterword by Grace Lee Boggs

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The City Is the Black Man's Land

Population experts predict that by 1970 Afro-Americans will constitute the majority in fifty of the nation's largest cities. In Washington, D.C., and Newark, New Jersey, Afro-Americans are already a majority. In Detroit, Baltimore, Cleveland, and St. Louis they are one-third or more of the population and in a number of others—Chicago, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Oakland—they constitute well over one-fourth. There are more Afro-Americans in New York City than in the entire state of Mississippi. Even where they are not yet a majority, as in Detroit, their schoolchildren are now well over 50 percent of the school population.

In accordance with the general philosophy of majority rule and the specific American tradition of ethnic groupings (Irish, Polish, Italian) migrating en masse to the big cities and then taking over the leadership of municipal government, black Americans are next in line. Each previous ethnic grouping achieved first-class citizenship chiefly because its leaders became the cities' leaders, but racism is so deeply imbedded in the American psyche from top to bottom, and from right to left, that it cannot even entertain the idea of black political power in the cities. The white power structure, which includes organized labor, resorts to every conceivable strategy to keep itself in power and the black man out: urban renewal or Negro removal; reorganization of local government on a metropolitan area basis; population (birth) control. Meanwhile, since their "taxation without representation" is so flagrant, safe Negroes are appointed to administrative posts or handpicked to run for elective office. In Hitler-occupied Europe such safe members of the native population were called collaborators or Quislings.

All these schemes may indefinitely delay or even permanently exclude the black majority from taking over the reins of city government. There is no automatic guarantee that justice will prevail. But those who invent or support such schemes must also reckon with the inevitable consequences: that the accumulated problems of the inner city will become increasingly insoluble and that the city itself will remain the dangerous society, a breeding place of seemingly senseless violence by increasing numbers of black youth, rendered socially unnecessary by the technological revolution of automation and cybernation, policed by a growing occupation army that has been mobilized and empowered to resort to any means considered necessary to safeguard the interests of the absentee landlords, merchants, politicians, and administrators, to whom the city belongs by law but who do not belong in the city and who themselves are afraid to walk its streets.

America has already become the dangerous society. The nation's major cities are becoming police states. There are only two roads open to it: *either* wholesale extermination of the black population through mass massacres or forced mass migrations onto reservations as with the Indians (white America is apparently not yet ready for this, although the slaughter of thirty-two blacks in Watts by the armed forces of the state demonstrates that this alternative is far from remote); *or* self-government of the major cities by the black majority mobilized behind leaders and organizations of its own creation and prepared to reorganize the structure of city government and city life from top to bottom.

This is the dilemma northern liberals have been evading since May 1963, when the Birmingham city masses (Birmingham is over 40 percent black) took the center of the stage away from Dr. Martin Luther King and precipitated a long hot summer of demonstrations, followed by a long hot summer of uprisings in Harlem, Philadelphia, Rochester, New York, and New Jersey in 1964. The McCone Commission has warned that the 1965 revolt in Watts may be only a curtain-raiser to future violence in the nation's ghettos unless the public adopts a "revolutionary attitude" toward racial problems in America; and Vice-President Humphrey proclaims that the "biggest battle we're fighting today is not in South Vietnam; the toughest battle is in our cities." But the war is not only *in* America's cities; it is *for* these cities. It is a civil war between black power and white power whose first major battle was fought last August in Southern California between eighteen thousand soldiers and the black people of Watts.

A revolution involves the conquest of state power by oppressed strata of the population. It begins to loom upon the horizon when the oppressed—viewing the authority of those in power as alien, arbitrary, and/or exclusive—begin to challenge this authority. But these challenges may result only in social reform and not in the conquest of power unless there is a fundamental problem involved that can be solved only by the political power of the oppressed.

It is because labor is becoming more and more socially unnecessary in the United States and another form of socially necessary activity must be put in its place that a revolution is the only solution. And it is because Afro-Americans are the ones who have been made most expendable by the technological revolution that the revolution must be a black revolution.

If the black liberation movement had erupted in the 1930s in the period when industry was in urgent need of unskilled and semiskilled labor, it is barely possible (although unlikely in view of the profound racism of the American working class and the accepted American pattern of mobility up the economic and social ladder on the backs of others) that Afro-Americans might have been integrated into the industrial structure on an equal basis. But the stark truth of the matter is that today, after centuries of systematic segregation and discrimination and only enough education to fit them for the

most menial tasks abandoned or considered beneath their dignity by whites, the great majority of black Americans now concentrated in the cities cannot be integrated into the advanced industrial structure of America except on the most minimal token basis. Instead, what expanding employment there has been for Afro-Americans has been in the fields of education and social and public service (teaching, hospitals, sanitation, transportation, public health, recreation, social welfare). It is precisely these areas that are the responsibility of city government, and it is also precisely these areas of activity that are socially most necessary in the cyber-cultural era. But because the American racist tradition demands the emasculation of blacks not only on the economic and sexual but also on the political level, the perspective of black self-government in the cities cannot be posed openly and frankly as a profession and perspective toward which black youth should aspire and for which they should begin preparing themselves from childhood. Instead, at every juncture, even when concessions are being made, white America makes clear that the power to make concessions remains in white hands. The result is increasing hopelessness and desperation on the part of black youth, evidenced in the rising rate of school dropouts, dope addiction, and indiscriminate violence. Born into the age of abundance and technological miracles, these youths have little respect for their parents who continue to slave for “the man” and none for the social workers, teachers, and officials who harangue them about educating themselves for antediluvian jobs.

The fundamental problem of the transformation of human activity in advanced America is as deeply rooted as the problem of land reform in countries that have been kept in a state of underdevelopment by colonialism. Like the colored peoples of the underdeveloped (i.e., super-exploited) countries, Afro-Americans have been kept in a state of underemployment, doing tasks that are already technologically outmoded. But where 75 to 80 percent of the population in a country like China or Vietnam lives in the countryside, a comparable proportion of Afro-Americans now lives in the city side. And whereas countries like China or Vietnam still have to make the industrial revolution (i.e., mechanize agriculture and industry), North America has already completed this revolution and is on the eve of the cyber-cultural revolution. Socially necessary activity for the majority in an underdeveloped country is essentially industrial labor; education for the majority is vocational education. The peasantry has to be educated to the need to abandon outmoded farming methods, prepare itself for technological change, and meanwhile be mobilized to work to provide the necessary capital for modern machinery. It can be educated and mobilized for this gigantic change only through its own government. In an advanced country like the United States, on the other hand, the black population, concentrated in the cities, has to be educated and mobilized to abandon outmoded methods of labor and prepare itself for the socially necessary activities of political and community organization, social services, education, and other

forms of establishing human relations between man and man. As in the case of the underdeveloped countries, this can be achieved only under its own political leadership. Hence the futility of the War on Poverty program, which is essentially a program to keep the poor out of the *political* arena where the controlling decisions are made and to train them for industrial tasks that are fast becoming as obsolete in advanced North America as farming with a stick already is in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Marcus Garvey and Elijah Muhammad, the only two leaders who ever built mass organizations among urban blacks, both recognized the need for self-government if the Afro-American was ever to become a whole man. Both of them seemed to understand intuitively Aristotle's dictum that "man is a political animal." Garvey created a political apparatus and proposed a "Back to Africa" program, which to many seemed fantastic. It was difficult for him to do otherwise in the period after World War I when Negroes were making their first mass migration to the big cities from the agricultural hinterland but had not yet reached sufficient numbers or development for him to envisage their political leadership of the cities. Muhammad's strength has also been in northern cities. His most pronounced achievement, the rehabilitation of black men and women, was based on his philosophy that the so-called Negro would inevitably rule his own land and his creation of an organizational framework (the Nation of Islam) that approximates the structure of government, including leaders, followers, taxation, discipline, and enforcement agencies. Muhammad's weakness was his failure to recognize the significance of technological development in an advanced country; hence his concentration on landownership and small businesses. Also, as so often happens with those who build a powerful organization, he became preoccupied with the protection of the organization from destruction by a determined enemy. As a result, when the northern movement erupted in 1963, he did not take the offensive which, consciously or unconsciously, large numbers of non-Muslim blacks (the so-called 80 percent Muslims) had been hoping he would take. It was this failure to take the offensive that led to Malcolm X's split from the organization. That such a split was inevitable was already portended in Malcolm's now famous speech to the Northern Negro Grassroots Leadership Conference in Detroit on November 10, 1963, in which he analyzed the black revolution as requiring a conquest of power in the tradition of the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution. Malcolm was assassinated before he could organize a cadre based on his advanced political ideas, but in one of his last speeches he made very clear his conviction that "Harlem is ours! All the Harlems are ours!"

It was in 1965 that black militants began to discuss Black Power seriously. Before 1965 the movement had been so dominated by the concept of integration, or the belief that the "revolution" would be accomplished if American Negroes could win equal opportunities to get jobs, housing, and education, that even black militants who were profoundly opposed to the American way of life devoted a major part of their time

and energies to the civil rights struggle. What, up until 1965, few black militants had grappled with is the fact that *jobs* and *positions* are what *boys* ask to be *given*, but *power* is something that *men* have to take and the taking of power requires the development of a revolutionary organization, a revolutionary program for the reorganization of society, and a revolutionary strategy for the conquest of power.

As early as August 1963, at the March on Washington, the idea of Black Power had been anticipated in John Lewis's speech threatening to create some source of power and in the announcement of the formation of a Freedom Now Party by William Worthy. In 1964 the Freedom Now Party won a place on the ballot in the state of Michigan and conducted a statewide campaign, running candidates for every statewide office and stressing the need for independent black political action. The party did not win many votes, but it contributed to establishing the idea of independent black political power inside the northern freedom movement. In early 1965 a Federation for Independent Political Action was created in New York by militant black leaders from all over the country who went back into their communities to link the idea of black power with the concrete struggles. On May 1, 1965, a national Organization for Black Power was formed in Detroit.

The first task the Organization for Black Power set itself was to establish a scientific basis for the perspective of black political power in the historical development of the United States. Thus, the following statement was adopted at the founding conference.

At this juncture in history the system itself cannot, will not, resolve the problems that have been created by centuries of exploitation of black people. It remains for the Negro struggle not only to change the system but to arrive at the kind of social system fitting to our time and in relation to the development of this country.

That Negroes constitute this revolutionary social force, imbued with these issues and grievances that go to the heart of the system, is not by accident but a result of the way in which America developed. The Negroes today play the role that the agricultural workers played in bringing about social reform in agriculture and the role that the workers played in the 1930s in bringing about social reform in industry.

Today the Negro masses in the city are outside of the political, economic, and social structure, but they constitute a large force inside the city and are particularly concentrated in the black ghettos.

The city itself cannot resolve the problems of the ghetto and/or the problems of the city. The traditional historical process by which other ethnic groupings were assimilated into the economic and political structure has terminated with the arrival of the Negroes en masse (1) because of the traditional racism of this country that excludes Negroes from taking municipal power as other ethnic groupings have done and (2) because of the technological revolution that has now made the unskilled labor of the Negroes socially unnecessary. The civil rights move-

ment that originated in the South cannot address itself to the problems of the northern ghetto, which are based not upon legal (*de jure*) contradictions but upon systematic (*de facto*) contradictions. It remains therefore for the movement in the North to carry the struggle to the enemy in fact, i.e., toward the system rather than just *de jure* toward new legislation.

At this conference we arrived at the recognition that the prop, the force, that keeps the system going is the police, which is an occupation force of absentee landlords, merchants, politicians, and managers, located in the city, and particularly in the black ghetto, to contain us.

Negroes are the major source of the pay that goes to police, judges, mayors, common councilmen, and all city government employees, taxed through traffic tickets, assessments, etc. Yet in every major city Negroes have little or no representation in city government. WE PAY FOR THESE OFFICIALS. WE SHOULD RUN THEM.

The city is the base we must organize as the factories were organized in the 1930s. We must struggle to control, to govern the cities, as workers struggled to control and govern the factories of the 1930s.

To do this we must be clear that power means a program to come to power by all the means through which new social forces have come to power in the past.

1. We must organize a cadre who will function in the cities as the labor organizers of the 1930s functioned in and around the factories.
2. We must choose our own issues around which to mobilize the mass and immobilize the enemy.
3. We must prepare ourselves to be ready for what the masses themselves do spontaneously as they explode against the enemy—in most cases, the police—and be ready to take political power wherever possible.
4. We must find a way to finance our movement ourselves.

Since the founding conference, and particularly since the Watts revolt and the deepening crisis from the U.S. occupation of Vietnam, black revolutionaries all over the country have been working out the theory and practice of building a black revolutionary organization.

1. They are clarifying what black political power would mean in real terms, that is to say, the program that black government in the cities would institute. Thus, for example, black political power would institute a crash program to utilize the most advanced technology to free people from all forms of manual labor. It would also take immediate steps to transform the concept of welfare to one of human dignity or of well-faring and well-being. The idea of people faring well of the fruits of advanced

technology and the labors of past generations without the necessity to work for a living must become as normal as the idea of organized labor has become. There should be no illusion that this can be accomplished without expropriating those now owning and controlling our economy. It could not therefore be accomplished simply on a citywide basis, i.e., without defeating the national power structure. However, by establishing beachheads in one or more major cities, black revolutionary governments would be in the most strategic position to contend with and eventually defeat this national power structure.

In elaborating its program, the black revolutionary organization, conscious that the present Constitution was written nearly two centuries ago in an agricultural era when the states had the most rights because they had the most power, also aims to formulate a new Constitution that establishes a new relationship of government to people and to property, as well as new relationships between the national government, the states, and the cities, and new relationships between nation-states. Such a Constitution can be the basis for the call to a Constitution Convention and also serve to mobilize national and world support for the black government or governments in the cities where they establish beachheads and where they will have to defend themselves against the counterrevolutionary forces of the national power structure.

2. They are concentrating on the development of the paramilitary cadres ready to defend black militants and the black community from counterrevolutionary attacks. The power these cadres develop for defense of the community can in turn bring financial support from the community as well as sanctuary, when needed, in the community.

3. The most difficult and challenging task is the organizing of struggle around the concrete grievances of the masses, which will not only improve the welfare of the black community but also educate the masses out of their democratic illusions and make them conscious that every administrative and law-enforcing agency in this country is a white power. It is white power that decides whether to shoot to kill (as in Watts) or not to shoot at all (as in Oxford, Mississippi, against white mobs); to arrest or not to arrest; to break up picket lines or not break up picket lines; to investigate brutality and murder or to allow these to go uninvestigated; to decide who goes to what schools and who does not go; who has transportation and who doesn't; who has garbage collected and who doesn't; what streets are lighted and have good sidewalks and what streets have neither lights nor sidewalks; what neighborhoods are torn down for urban renewal and who and what are to go back into these neighborhoods. It is white power that decides which people are drafted into the army to fight and which countries this army is to fight at what moment. It is white power that has brought the United States to the point where it is counterrevolutionary to, and increasingly despised by, the majority of the world's peoples. All these powers are in the political arena, which is the key

arena that the black revolutionary movement must take over if there is to be serious black power.

It is extremely important that concrete struggles and marches, picket lines and demonstrations, be focused on the seats of power so that when spontaneous eruptions take place the masses will naturally form committees to take over these institutions rather than concentrate their energies on the places where consumer goods are distributed. Political campaigns to elect black militants to office play a useful role in educating the masses about the importance of political power and the role of government in today's world. They are also a means of creating area organizations. But it should be absolutely clear that no revolution was ever won through the parliamentary process and that as the threat to white power grows, even through the parliamentary process, it will resort to all the naked force at its disposal. At that point, the revolution becomes a total conflict of force against force.

4. The most immediate as well as profound issue affecting the whole black community and particularly black youth is the war in Vietnam. The black revolutionary organization will make it clear in theory and practice that the Vietcong and the Black Power movement in the United States are part of the same worldwide social revolution against the same enemy and that, as this enemy is being defeated abroad, its self-confidence and initiative to act and react are breaking down at home. This is the revolutionary task Malcolm was undertaking and the reason why he was assassinated. Like the black youth of Watts, the black revolutionary organization will make it clear that black youth have no business fighting in the Ku Klux Klan army that is slaughtering black people in Vietnam. Their job is to defend and better their lives and the lives of their women and children right here. Moreover, speaking from a power base in the big cities even before there is national revolutionary government, black city governments are the only ones that could seriously talk with the governments of the new nations without resorting to the power that comes out of the barrel of a gun, as the United States must do today.

One final word, particularly addressed to those Afro-Americans who have been brainwashed into accepting white America's characterization of the struggle for black political power as racist. The three forms of struggle in which modern man has engaged are the struggle between nations, the struggle between classes, and the struggle between races. Of these three struggles, the struggle of the colored races against the white race is the one that includes the progressive aspects of the first two and at the same time penetrates most deeply into the essence of the human race or world mankind. The class struggle for economic gains can be, has been, incorporated within the national struggle. Organized labor is among the strongest supporters of the Vietnam War. The struggle of the colored races cannot be blunted in such ways. It transcends the boundaries between nations because historically the colored peoples all over the

world constitute a black underclass that has been exploited by the white nations to the benefit of both rich and poor at home.*

In the struggle of the colored peoples of the world for the power to govern themselves, the meaning of man is at stake. Do people of some races exist to be exploited and manipulated by others? Or are all men equal regardless of race? White power was built on the basis of exploiting the colored races of the world for the benefit of the white races. At the heart of this exploitation was the conviction that people of color were not men but subhuman, not self-governing citizens but “natives.” White power not only exploited colored peoples economically; it sought systematically to destroy their culture and their personalities and anything else that would compel white people to face the fact that colored peoples were also men. When Western powers fought each other, they fought as men. But when they fought colored peoples, they killed them as natives and as slaves. That is what Western barbarism is doing in Vietnam today. Now the black revolution and the struggle for black power are emerging when all people are clamoring for manhood. Thereby they are destroying forever the idea on which white power has built itself: that some men (whites) are more equal or more capable of self-government (citizenship) than others (colored).

* Because Afro-Americans were the first people in this country to pose the perspective of revolutionary power to destroy racism, I have been using the word “black” as a *political* designation to refer not only to Afro-Americans but to people of color who are engaged in revolutionary struggle in the United States and all over the world. It should not be taken to mean the domination of Afro-Americans or the exclusion of other people of color from black revolutionary organizations.