

**Reviewer: Brian Martin**

**Carl Boggs**

*Social Movements and Political Power: Emerging  
Forms of Radicalism in the West*

The rise of politically oriented social movements since the 1960s is seen by many as one of the greatest hopes for creating a better society. The feminist movement, the environmental movement, the peace movement, and several others are thriving and continuing to pose challenges to the powers that be. But there is a problem. What about the dominant power structures, including capitalism and the state? They are keys to the perpetuation of patriarchy, environmental degradation, and militarism. How can social movements challenge and transform these structures? Not enough attention has been given to this problem. The usual approach is to seek reform within the structures, usually by using pressure-group tactics. Liberal feminists seek equality for women within existing occupational hierarchies, not an end to the hierarchies themselves. Mainstream environmentalists seek controls on pollution, not a change in industrial civilization. Much of the peace movement seeks reductions in arms spending and a lessening of international tensions, not an end to the capacity for state violence.

The conventional left approach is to capture state power and to use it to transform power relations. This includes the Leninist approach of using the power of the state to smash capitalist ownership, and the social democratic approach of being elected to power and gradually implementing change. The trouble in both cases is that centralized power is increased. No group yet that has captured state power has used that power to dissolve itself. Is there some other approach, which uses the grassroots energy of social movements and yet aims to both enter and transform dominant power structures? And if so, what strategy leads forward?

This is the context for Carl Boggs' insightful book *Social Movements and Political Power*. Boggs comes from a background in Marxist theory and practice, but he is dissatisfied with the old formulas. He realizes the limitations of traditional Marxist analysis which reduces diverse issues to one-dimensional class politics. He is open to the profusion of thought

and action associated with the nonlabor social movements. He wants to see what can be achieved when these movements are linked to strategies involving attempts to use state power.

The core of the book is a penetrating analysis of three possible roads to change: the socialist parties in France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain; the populist movement in the United States; and the Greens in West Germany. Boggs is sympathetic but critical. To cut a long story short, he concludes that the Eurosocialists and the United States new populism have failed. In both cases they have adapted to the requirements of getting elected and of exercising power. The result is that radical goals have been jettisoned and the movements which helped them to power have been disempowered. It's a familiar story, but nevertheless a salutary one for those with continuing hopes for electoral politics.

Boggs is more optimistic about the German Greens, though he recognizes that they have many obstacles ahead. His assessment in each case is based on an analysis of the global political and economic scene, including the strong pressures against departures from orthodox economic policy and from the Western military alliance.

If you are a Marxist intellectual who is unfamiliar with the ways in which the social movements are pushing beyond Marxist theory and practice, this book is superb. It is rigorously argued, extremely well referenced, and politically astute. Boggs grounds his analysis in Marxian concepts in order to start to go beyond them. He is extremely well read in Marxian left theorists and journals. If you are too, this is a book for you.

Unfortunately, others may not find the book quite so useful. To begin, it is pretty heavy going in spite of the case studies on which it is founded. Here is a typical passage:

*De-alienation occurs through rebellion against externally imposed social forms (class, patriarchal, bureaucratic, racist), against the Hobbesian character of everyday life where violence, aggression, and egotism triumph over the communitarian virtues of reciprocity, trust, and warmth. As part of an insurgent collective identity, therefore, efforts to overturn alienation in its broadest manifestations necessarily mean an enlargement of psychological options and human possibilities. (p.52)*

The book is basically an academic treatise written for intellectuals (no doubt including students and other academics). Fortunately, its subject matter, perceptiveness, and social commitment lift it far above the usual run of academic treatises. Another problem is that Boggs, although he has moved far beyond the boundaries of conventional Marxism, is still restricted by his grounding in it. He treats the "new social movements"

as forms of "post-Marxist radicalism." Before the 1960s, Marxism was supposedly the central challenge to dominant power structures ("capitalist hegemony").

This, of course, is debatable. Various social movements have been around for many decades: feminism, the civil rights movement, the peace movement, . . . not to mention anarchism. Perhaps for left-wing radicals who saw the capture of state power as the way to fundamentally transform society, Marxism was the preferred doctrine. But this begs the question. Is capture of state power necessary or desirable? Or is it necessary to *avoid* capturing state power?

Boggs dismisses strategies which avoid electoral politics and which attempt to withdraw power from the state, for example, through workers' control. He ignores strategies which aim to create structures which do not rely on parties, elections, and state bureaucracies. "The reality is that a radical-democratic insurgency cannot be given practical substance without the leverage made possible by control over state institutions (however remolded)" (p.xi). This is an article of faith for Boggs: he does not refute alternatives, since he doesn't discuss them.

Actually, for those who want a critique of the road to change based on elections, Boggs is excellent. I plan to cite him in this way. He shows well the way in which social movements lose power and politicians and bureaucrats gain it. Anarchists can legitimately point out that they have been saying this for well over a century.

Although Boggs is extremely well read, he has not gone far enough beyond the Marxist literature. He does refer to work by prominent writers such as Murray Bookchin and Rudolf Bahro. But he mainly comments on the "new social movements" through the medium of Marxian categories and studies. He has not really addressed the bulk of non-Marxist thought and writings. As a result, his analysis often suffers.

For example, on the issue of nonviolence, Boggs offers an intelligent discussion of the views of German Greens. But because he has looked only to a few writers such as Gene Sharp, he has missed important points. One key argument for nonviolence is that means tend to become ends. That could be seen as the message of Boggs' whole analysis of the use of electoral politics, but he misses its relevance here.

Boggs says, "The Greens alone recognize the centrality of direct action as a means of channeling personal and social struggles into new forms of political empowerment" (p.248). What about all those nonviolent action trainers who have worked with the Movement for a New Society in the United States?

While anarchists may object that Boggs dismisses strategies that avoid using state power, his focus is salutary in raising the issue of how to address state power. Boggs' book highlights a gap in the anarchist literature. What is needed is an analysis of strategy for social movements in relation to state and corporate power, grounded in a range of critiques (anarchism, feminism, pacifism, . . . and, yes, Marxism). In addition, it should be accessible to a wide audience. That's asking a lot. Is it too much?

*Social Movements and Political Power: Emerging Forms of Radicalism in the West* by Carl Boggs. 304 pp. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986. \$29.95 cloth.

