

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

EMERGENT STRATEGIES FOR ABOLITION: ANDREA J. RITCHIE'S TOOLKIT FOR ACTIVISTS

LAURA FLANDERS: During the George Floyd protests of 2020, many people called for the defunding of traditional police. That didn't happen for the most part, but almost three years on, some police departments are shrinking anyway, some tasks are being handed over to civilians. And as we go into this conversation, police officers are on trial, charged in relation to civilian deaths in three separate states. So what has changed and what hasn't? In her latest book, today's guest encourages would-be reformers and abolitionists to look at things up close. In 2020, a huge wave rose behind a national rallying cry for change. That wave broke and crashed, it's fair to say. But in the tumult that followed, the work didn't stop. Did it necessarily take the form of mass action, legislation, elections and power shift? Not quite, but something emerged, is emerging still. And emergent strategies, as she calls them, are like post-industrial economies. They look different, feel different, and call on different sorts of attention and behaviors from us. And that is what Andrea J. Ritchie writes about. Her book, titled, "Practicing New Worlds, Abolition and Emergent Strategies", draws on decades of experience as a litigator, researcher, and organizer. It comes out at the end of October from AK Press as part of their Emergent Strategy Series. Andrea is a repeat guest on this program along with Alexis Pauline Gumbs who wrote the foreword. And adrienne maree brown who wrote the intro and whose 2017 book, "Emergent Strategy", kind of sparked off this line of thought. Ritchie's previous books include, "Invisible Mo More, Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color", and "No More Police", co-authored with Mariame Kaba. She's the co-founder of Interrupting Criminalization and the In Our Names Network. And it all makes me very happy to welcome Andrea Ritchie back to The Laura Flanders Show. Welcome Andrea, and congratulations on another great book.

ANDREA J. RITCHIE: Thank you so much, Laura. It's so exciting to get to speak with you for the first one in 2011 and to be here almost 10 years later. Actually, more than 10 years later. Speaking about the fourth, and I think last one.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, we'll find out more about that. But I will say what I knew about you from a decade ago and have watched since is you're pretty, kind of hard bitten tough as nails, you know, systems person. I have heard you talk about cases and courts and litigation and fighting for all that kind of stuff, so to see you now with a book about emergent strategies that in a way, well, provides a different kind of lens on that approach, was kind of interesting. Where did this book come from? Who did you write it for and why?

ANDREA J. RITCHIE: From some realizations about how impactful and effective policymaking litigation legislation is and what role they do and don't play in bringing us closer to

the world that I've been longing for and dreaming of my whole life. One without policing, punishment, surveillance, and most of all violence in all its forms, including the violence of the state experienced by communities that I'm part of and care deeply about. And where it came from was history perspectives and ideas about emergent strategies that are summarized in adrienne maree brown's 2017 book and come from a long legacy, many disciplines, philosophical, scientific, organizational development, and deeply rooted in the legacy of Grace Lee Boggs and Jimmy Boggs and organizing in Detroit. And their shift from thinking about traditional two-step solutions - 'We seize the state, we transform the state' to serve the people in the ways that we dream of to actually their departure from that to understand that that's not how change happens. Change happens by acting as though the future that you are dreaming of is present now. And then practicing that with people who share your vision and values and then bringing more and more people into the conversation.

LAURA FLANDERS: So, lawsuits don't bother with them?

ANDREA J. RITCHIE: I didn't say that. I think that they're just not the centerpiece and nor is legislation or policymaking, the center, the primary strategy, the number one goal. And I talk a lot in the book about how, and I wrote the book for people who were brought into a conversation about abolition at a national scale, at a mainstream scale, and we're brought into it through budget fights and policy organizing around various pieces of legislation or trying to change police policies and practices in 2020. And I wrote it for them to sort of help fast forward them through some of the lessons I've learned in my life about how those are necessary, but far from sufficient. Those are a very small part of the work and transformation that needs to happen in order to build a world free from violence of all kinds. And so, I wrote the book for all of us to look to the kinds of organizing that brings us closer to abolitionist futures that happens underground. That is the bottom of the iceberg. The policy and legislative change is the tip of the iceberg, but what is it the bottom of the iceberg that's really going to shift the systems towards the world that we want?

LAURA FLANDERS: So interesting, it reminds me of Gar Alperovitz, the economist who talks about the prehistory of economic change and how we don't always know that we are living in the pre-history of dramatic transformation. And you have a moment of that in the book where you describe, I think it's January, 2020, going to Miami for a meeting of abolitionist organizers, people trying to create a world system, or at least a US system that doesn't rely on incarceration or police. You didn't have any idea what was happening at that moment or what was about to happen, right?

ANDREA J. RITCHIE: I think we definitely had an idea of what was happening in terms of the trajectory of abolitionist organizing to that moment. We did a timeline, we mapped it out. We mapped out the relationships, the networks, the webs that we had built, and the concepts that we

had clarified and developed and the organizing that needed to happen and realized, a thought at that time, we have a very long way to go. We have, you know, many steps to take. And then suddenly six months later found ourselves in the middle of something that we had never dreamed would happen in our lifetime, which was a national conversation about policing and the purposes that actually serves and what we actually need in order to create a society free from violence. And I talk in the book about how that's a product of emergent strategies, I think, but particularly, what you were just talking about, the pre-work of the previous 20 years that we mapped out is what made that possible. It didn't just emerge out of nowhere. And it helps us understand, that as you said, when the wave recedes, that we still need to be engaged in that pre-work in a very different way. And that's what emergent strategies helps to point us to.

LAURA FLANDERS: So, what is an emergent strategy?

ANDREA J. RITCHIE: It comes from many traditions, many philosophies, certainly to my mind and many others including Mariame Kaba, and adrienne maree brown, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs. It's Black feminist politics and practice in action. It's creating communities rooted on relationship and care that multiply and expand into communities that can shift larger systems and ways of thinking. And it's a way of approaching a world that interrupts violence in all its forms and creates new possibilities that we can't imagine yet.

LAURA FLANDERS: You draw a lot as adrienne maree brown does too, on the sort of natural world, and you've mentioned it, how the natural world responds to change, threats, possibilities, opportunities, in ways that aren't as linear as we are trained to think. Do you want to give us some of those examples? You've got mushrooms and ferns and all sorts of natural things in this book.

ANDREA J. RITCHIE: Well, I think what's important to remember is we are part of the natural world. We are not separate from the natural world. So change doesn't happen for humans that much differently than it does in the natural world. Just that we can put more intention on it and we can put more complexity into it. But we talk about, for instance, how ants, you know, engage in a very simple set of interactions with each other, playing specific roles. They don't necessarily have an understanding of how the whole colony works, but they do know that under certain conditions they do certain things that ensure the survival and thriving of their colony. And those actions together coalesce into something that according to scientists, is one of the most impactful species on the planet, is able to shift environments around them, is able to shift entire ecosystems through their behaviors. And so, we're not saying we're ants. I'm not saying we're starlings, I'm not saying we're mushrooms, but I'm saying that, and certainly adrienne and other emergent strategists are saying that there's a lot to learn from that. And that we have to stop separating ourselves from the natural world and thinking that the ways that we change our society are somehow different from the way change happens in every other realm of existence.

LAURA FLANDERS: You go to some extent though, to some lengths though, to say it's not about just sitting back and watching the mushrooms grow. We have to play a role.

ANDREA J. RITCHIE: Exactly, and I... That's the other audience that I wrote this book for, is with people who are really taken by, inspired by, and intrigued by the ideas summarized in the 2017 book "Emergent Strategy", which came out at a time when, the sort of failures of policy and legislation and doing politics and organizing as usual, were particularly apparent. I mean, 45 had just been elected. The policies that I had fought for for better, you know, safety for LGBT people and interactions with police that I talked about in "Queer Justice" in our first interaction. I got great stuff on paper, I won great lawsuits. And on January 20th, 2017, much of that disappeared in the presence of the new administration, not only at the federal level, but across the country. And many of the things that we thought we had, sort of addressed, or mitigated, or somehow reduced the harm of on paper, only escalated and have only been escalating since then. And so, many people turned to "Emergent Strategy", the book, and we're really inspired being like, oh, look, there's other places we can look, there's other ways to be hopeful, there's other ways change happens and I'm going to lean into those. And then that means we need to take action. That that is about organizing. It's not just being like, wow, look at the starlings, they're flocking. Like, that is miraculous. And you know, as Walidah Imarisha says in the interview that I did for the book with her, "It's hunting season." So, we need to be clear about what we can learn from the starlings, about how to survive hunting season, how to transform the conditions that are creating hunting season and how to build a world that is entirely different. And so, there's lessons, but it's not just kind of sit back and wait and see what happens. Like, we need to take action, we need to shape that future. And emergent strategies just give us some additional ideas about how we might do that.

LAURA FLANDERS: The book is accompanied, the texts are accompanied by fascinating prompts, great prompts for people to think about. And one of those relates to an experience that you had at the Allied Media Projects conference.

ANDREA J. RITCHIE: The Allied Media Conference is where so many of these ideas that we're developing around Detroit, organizing through a period of organized abandonment, through the thinking and practice of Grace Lee Boggs, Jimmy Boggs, and many people who were in conversation and community with them, took root and were practiced and experimented with and grew in the annual convergence that the Allied Media Conference and also in the community that came up around it. And so, adrienne was central to that community. That's where we met, that's where I was introduced to these ideas. And it was always so interesting because I would come to the Allied Media Conference and be like, let's talk about policy. Let me do a workshop on what policy changes we need to do to stop police violence against Black women and women of color. And you know, my beloved comrades at the Allied Media Conference

would say, no, that workshop is not what we're about here. What we're about here is thinking about how we shape the world differently through how we communicate with each other, how we interact with each other, how we play with each other, how we're on the dance floor with each other. And just really thinking about creative ways of sparking imagination and practice of the worlds that we want. Not continually returning to the systems that are creating the world that we're in. And so, I came in 2007 and never stopped coming back because it kept reorienting me to what abolitionist organizing really is about and needs to be about.

LAURA FLANDERS: Where do you see this work happening now?

ANDREA J. RITCHIE: Everywhere, and I think one of the things I'm talking about in the book is that emergent strategies are really about our everyday interactions, that you can in fact engage the change and be part of changing the system through your interactions, through your networks, through your relationships as they currently exist and as you build and grow them. And so I see so many people who are influenced by the Allied Media Conference who have spread, like, you know, they have a program called AMP Seeds and who have spread like seeds and who are engaging in this work everywhere. So I talk about a Queer The Land project in Seattle where queer and trans folks are building safer communities and spaces for themselves who came to the Allied Media Conference, were inspired by the ideas there and took them to Seattle to practice them there. So many more people, either brought ideas that are in the book and abolitionist organizing that reflects emergent strategies to the conference, and so many people took it away. So I see it literally happening everywhere.

LAURA FLANDERS: Talking about everywhere, it takes me to the world. And I remember doing a piece in Greece after the economic meltdown and the creation of all these, sort of spontaneous anarchic square organizing efforts. Many years have passed since then, but I think a lot about what people said at the time, which was, yes, they had electoral change, but what they were really about was being change, was about kind of-

ANDREA J. RITCHIE: Exactly.

LAURA FLANDERS: electoral power, but more being power, creating a different kind of power. You are seeing this internationally also. And what language are they using? Are they using that language of not building power, but being power?

ANDREA J. RITCHIE: I think the other audience that I wrote this book for are people in the US who need to look beyond US borders. And I think many of us who came up in the eighties and nineties were very much part of transnational movements. Whether they were Anti-Apartheid Movement, Central, South America solidarity movements, global anti-colonial solidarity movements. And understand that there's many lessons to be learned from global

organizing of many kinds. And similar to what Grace Lee Boggs, sort of made a shift from seizing a state to transforming ourselves through the kinds of communities that we're building, so have people globally, right? And I think that not just in Greece, but in Argentina, in Brazil, in Chile, in Mexico, in various stages and and places of struggle, people have understood that yes we need to move against the carceral state. We need to move against the colonial state. We need to move against the neoliberal state, but we also need to become the people who can create the different world that we want. And that requires some practice and transformation in ourselves and of our relationships, our social relationships, our economic relationships, our political relationships, and our forms of governance. And so, there's so many lessons from that, from all over the world of people who have been practicing that. And we wanted to bring those and understand them through this lens of emergent strategies to the US.

LAURA FLANDERS: And people on the progressive side of the spectrum need to know that the Right are using emergent strategies, you say. How so, this was some of it kind of new to me.

ANDREA J. RITCHIE: We've been seeing the tip of the iceberg. We see the judicial nominations, we see the legislation, we see the policy changes in the schools, et cetera. And we think that's where the fight is. And that is where the fight is. But that has been building for 30, 40 years through the bottom of the iceberg, through relationship-based organizing, through people sitting with each other and praying with each other when they grieve the loss of a family member, or of a farm, or of a business. And people sitting with each other and having conversations in diners, in truck stops and faith-based communities across the country about the vision of the world that they want and who the cause of the problems that they're experiencing is. And that is those kinds of relationships and decentralized organizing that is responsive to conditions and moving with an intention towards white supremacy and authoritarianism and a return to hardcore capitalism, or continuation or expansion of hardcore capitalism is happening not just through legislatures, not just in courts, not just in policymaking spaces, but in relationship in community. And so, if we don't attend to how that's happening in decentralized ways, in adaptive ways and in ways that are intent on shaping systems through relationships and communities, then we don't, we're not fighting the whole fight. We're fighting at the top of the iceberg and we're missing the bottom part. And that's where the organizing and that is described a little bit more in the book is focused.

LAURA FLANDERS: When you describe in the book as you do coming up in the anti-apartheid movement, being active in the eighties against US intervention internationally, nuclear proliferation, I was in that same mix. And I watch you continue to be engaged and to evolve. There's an emergent Andrea, if you like, that's been willing and open to that emergence of some new thinking. And to me, that's profoundly moving as someone who also tries to stay engaged and is excited by what I'm seeing. There are moments in my own life when I say, yes,

but I had an attachment to that linear thinking. I do believe in metrics. I want to see more change in my lifetime. I don't completely believe in mushrooms.

ANDREA J. RITCHIE: Neither do I.

LAURA FLANDERS: If you know what I mean.

ANDREA J. RITCHIE: Yes.

LAURA FLANDERS: So talk about that push, pull, or are you practicing some kind of miraculous meditation technique that I just need to learn?

ANDREA J. RITCHIE: No, the entire book is about that push, pull. And it's a constant, sort of the fights that I have with myself. I just, I'm sharing publicly. The book doesn't have any answers. And what you'll see over time, you know, from the books I've written, I've been writing about what I know. I've been cataloging the problem. I've been describing it in great detail. I've been shining flashlights on parts of the problem we're not aware of. But it's really an invitation of people to come along with me on this journey. To try, as I said, try and fast forward you, to take you through a portal. So if you just came into abolitionist organizing in 2020, let's speed up the learning, so you don't have to spend 30 years making the mistakes I did, which includes believing that transformation is something that happens out there, which means that transformation is also that has to happen in here. Again, how do we become the people who can make the world that we long for? And we are of this world, so we really have to find ways to transform ourselves into people who can be of the next world, or can at least create the conditions where the next world can come into being. Now that doesn't mean you go only on a meditation retreat and turn entirely inward. It's an iterative and dynamic process. And that's what I had to learn. It's not just go to your retreat, go sailing sometimes, escape the world of organizing and then come back in and fight, that that is part of the fight. And actually it's an essential part of the fight, but it has to be undertaken in this politicized context. And so, I think it's definitely the most vulnerable book. It's definitely the most, here's some things I've been thinking about, here's some people I've been talking to, here's some things I've been learning, and here's some hopes for how we might not just keep reaching for the same tools, the same strategies, the same linear practices because they're not working. We're at an inflection point. We're at a turning point where there are multiple visions of the world that are being, you know, birthed or shoved into being. And for us to be able to effectively bring about the ones that we want, we need to be deploying every strategy available to us. And that means looking beyond the ones that we've been focused on.

LAURA FLANDERS: And a whole lot of listening. And I appreciate how many people you talk to for this book and you cite how many conversations it suggests are happening out there and

how much space, really. You leave for new ideas to come in. With all that in mind, I really encourage people to check out the book, "Practicing New Worlds, Abolition and Emergent Strategies", from our guest, Andrea J. Ritchie. And I ask you to close as I do most of these episodes by answering the question I've come to think a lot about, which is what do you think is the story the future will tell of this moment?

ANDREA J. RITCHIE: I think the message of this book is that, that is up to us. That is up to each and every one of us, not to some magical group of people who are going to envision a future that we can step into, not to some magical set of policies, or policy agenda, or laws, or elected officials, or judges. That is up to each and every one of us, in each and every interaction and in each and every relationship and community and network we build, and each and every dream we have, and each and every step we take to bring it into practice. And so, it really is up to us.

LAURA FLANDERS: Beautiful, Andrea J. Ritchie, thank you so much for being with us on the program.

ANDREA J. RITCHIE: Thanks so much for having me again. It's been a delight every single time to be in this conversation over time.

LAURA FLANDERS: Let's do it more.

ANDREA J. RITCHIE: Yes.

LAURA FLANDERS: It is not easy to change. As old people imagining our ways into a new world, the path isn't clear and it's difficult, but it does involve paying close attention, says our guest, Andrea Ritchie. And I agree. So in these grim times of war and climate catastrophe, I'm trying to practice to pay attention to small changes. And I see some. In the coverage of the Israel-Hamas war, for example, right now, I see more people holding both Jews, and Palestinians, Israelis, and people in Gaza, and the diaspora in their hearts at the same time. We can do it, we can hold both. And remember the victims of earthquakes in Afghanistan and wildfires in Argentina. It feels like overload because it's a lot, but maybe it's a breaking open of our hearts. Can we change? Can we be changed by the changes happening around us? Can we redefine change to notice it where it lives? I think we can, we're going to commit to it here on this program. And if you want to hear my full uncut conversation with Andrea Ritchie, who's a believer too, you can find it through a subscription to our free podcast. In the meantime, stay kind, stay curious. For The Laura Flanders Show, I'm Laura. Thanks for joining me.

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