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Black women

Angela Davis: Relevant as Ever After Thirty Years

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Angela Davis deserves a shoutout this Women's History Month, and every month. Active and influential in international freedom struggles for nearly six decades, her speeches and writings have valuable lessons to teach us about the major injustices that we face in this era of heightened racism, xenophobia, and reactionary violence.

Women, Culture, and Politics, a compilation of speeches shedding light on struggles that Black women face in a white supremacist, capitalist, imperialist world, was published (NY: Random House) in 1989. Yet Davis's words remain as relevant today as they were back then. They should be revisited by anyone interested in engaging in and learning more about global struggles for justice.

In light of Women's History Month, I recommend three key takeaways from the book that are as necessary today as they were 30 years ago.

1. The women's movement still needs to take seriously the concerns of poor and working class women of color.

We are living in an era of #MeToo, #TimesUp, #MuteRKelly, and other movements to bring to light the abuse that women face daily. Pussy hats and women's marches occur against a backdrop of the continued violence and devaluation that women face. Yet even within these movements, race and class biases mute the voices of women of color, including and especially Black women.

Angela Davis warned in 1989 that the women's movement was not as effective as it could be, because white middle-class women failed to focus on the needs of poor Black and Latinx women. And this is largely still the case. Issues that disproportionately have a negative impact on poor women of color, frequently marginalized in discourse on women's equality.

Davis's call to action in Women, Culture, and Politics needs to be central to the current women's movement:

"We must begin to create a revolutionary, multiracial women's movement that seriously addresses the main issues affecting poor and working-class women. In order to tap the potential for such a movement, we must further develop those sectors of the movement that are seriously addressing issues affecting poor and working-class women, such as jobs, pay equity, paid maternity leave, federally subsidized childcare. . . Women of all racial and class backgrounds will greatly benefit from such an approach."

It's not enough, she argues, for predominantly white middle class women's organizations to simply recruit more women of color, but rather "the particular concerns of women of color must be included in the agenda." (7)

Voices and struggles of women of color need to be central, not peripheral. A higher minimum wage, affordable housing, free healthcare, and ending mass incarceration, environmental racism and police violence are all issues that need to be taken seriously by women in the movement.

2. The United States is still taking away money from social programs while increasing its budget for organized violence.

Women, Culture, and Politics was published toward the beginning of what we now know as the neoliberal era, which entails the slashing of social welfare programs, privatization of public institutions, outsourcing of jobs, and accelerated, unregulated destruction of the environment in a concerted effort to consolidate and maximize the wealth of the wealthiest individuals on the planet.

Even in 1989, Davis already sees the detrimental impacts of the decimation of social programs and jobs traditionally held by African Americans on their communities — increased poverty and joblessness, food insecurity, lack of healthcare, and extreme health disparities. The increase of the defense budget at the expense of social programs has hurt poor and working class communities across the nation, with African Americans hit particularly hard.

On this topic, Davis warns: “The increasing militarization of the economy is perhaps the most prominent feature of the structural crisis of capitalism.” (86)

“In cities like Chicago, Black youngsters suffer from diseases of malnutrition that afflict children in the famine areas of Africa, yet school breakfast and lunch programs have been abolished to provide the weapons developers and manufacturers with an unending supply of money.” (71)

“Instead of providing poor people with adequate food stamps, the corporations that make up the military-industrial complex are awarded giant defense contracts.” (62)

Davis further highlights the ways that unending U.S. military interventions oppress people of color all over the world while domestically, poor and working-class people enlist in the military as a way to make a living or attend college for free, since many of the jobs that those populations traditionally held are now gone.

War-related violence is inflicted on people of color from the Middle East to the global South for the purpose of bolstering U.S. economic domination. Military surplus weapons go back into U.S. ghettos for police forces to inflict additional violence on poor communities of color.

As Davis contends, “we should be...exposing the connections between the threat to world peace posed by the Pentagon and the escalating domestic attacks on the lives of our people.” (70) A message as real as ever today!

3. Violence against women is still an issue that needs to be examined as a byproduct of violent social structures.

The Brett Kavanaugh confirmation and memory of the Clarence Thomas hearings, Harvey Weinstein’s and Bill Cosby’s convictions, the release of #SurvivingR.Kelly, and the calling out of various other high-profile men for sexual attacks have taken place alongside increased discussions about consent on college campuses and #MeToo marches.

As working-class women and women of color are still not receiving the attention as are more affluent white women on this problem, the movement against sexual violence could benefit from Davis’ assessment of the issue as the byproduct of a violent system that needs to be radically transformed. She points to the connections between racism, capitalism, imperialism, and the perpetuation of sexual violence against women.

Davis urges us to think about rape not as a result of an individual personality flaw or a natural characteristic of maleness, but as the consequence of a system based on violent domination. To this point, Davis questions: “Do men rape because they are men, or are they socialized by their own economic, social, and political oppression — as well

as by the overall level of social violence in the country in which they live “to inflict sexual violence on women?” (46)

She also points out the often overlooked reality that imperialism and war are inter-related with rape and violence against women “and the same violent social structures that embolden sexual assault in the United States lead to rampant sexual assault, both inside the military and toward civilian women in occupied areas abroad.

In situations of war and occupation, women’s bodies are used as targets or collateral damage. To further illuminate the connection between rape, fascism, racism and imperialism, Davis says that “Indeed, rape is frequently a component of the torture inflicted on women political prisoners by fascist governments and counterrevolutionary forces. In the history of our own country, the Ku Klux Klan and other racist groups have used rape as a weapon of political terror.” (46)

We live in the aftermath of a genocidal and slaveholding society that produced the rampant rape of Black enslaved women, and its post-slavery continuation when the majority of Black women were only allowed to be employed as domestic workers. The structure of an overtly racist and slaveholding society made this possible, and the current structures of an unequal and violent system continue to enable unfathomable levels of sexual violence against women.

Davis warns that relying on the carceral state will not fix the underlying problems that lead to rape, arguing that “sexual violence can never be completely eradicated until we have successfully effected a whole range of radical social transformations in our country.” (49)

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