

On Global Capital, Feminisation of the Workforce, US and racism, Trump, Prison-industrial Complex, and the tasks of the Global Left

Saturday 24 December 2016, by [BHATIA Sidharth](#), [DAVIS Angela](#) (Date first published: 15 December 2016).

The Global Left Will Fail Unless it Understands the Feminisation of the Workforce. Global capital hurts people of colour the most, says the celebrated activist.

Angela Davis is a public intellectual extraordinaire. She has been an academic, an activist, a scholar and an author. Richard Nixon called her a 'terrorist' and California Governor Ronald Regan asked that she be barred from teaching at UCLA. In the heady, politically charged 1960s and '70s, Davis, with her trademark Afro, was a name to reckon with, admired and reviled in equal measure. She was a radical and a leader of the Communist Party of the US and was closely linked with the Black Panthers.

Davis was prosecuted for conspiracy involving the armed takeover of a courtroom in California in 1970 in which four people were killed and she was jailed for 16 months during which a worldwide campaign was launched demanding justice for her. She was eventually released on bail and eventually acquitted of all charges.

Celebrated in film, art and song [1], Davis has been actively involved in campaigning against racism and what she calls the 'prison-industrial complex' [2]. In Mumbai to speak at the annual Anuradha Ghandy memorial lecture, she spoke to The Wire about left movements, global capitalism and the Trump victory.

SIDHARTH BHATIA - From the Black Panther movement of the 1960s to now, how do you view the progress of race relations in the US?

Angela Davis - It is important not to ignore the progress that has been made. In many ways things are better, largely due to the struggles that radical and progressive movements, anti-racist movements have waged. But at the same time, racism has not fundamentally changed. This has to do with the extent to which racism is embedded in the structures of US society. While the emphasis has largely been on individual and attitudinal expressions of racism, the institutional forms of racism remain untouched. Many people are under the impression that because we witness so much police violence today, that this is a new phenomena, but in fact it is a phenomena that has been with us since the era of slavery.

The Black Panther party was founded precisely on the assumption that it was important to challenge police violence on black communities. While the impact of the Black Panthers was profound, particularly with respect to an awareness of the role that the police and prisons play in the maintenance of racism in the US, those structures have not fundamentally changed.

Why has that happened?

In some cases they have worsened, precisely because of the emergence of global capitalism which has the impact of worsening life for people of colour and the poor [3] as a result of the de-industrialisation process, the movement of corporations from the US to parts of the world where labour is not organised, where labour can be purchased far more cheaply. This leaves the people who rely on the manufacturing sector for jobs at a loss and often they resort to the underground economies, which make them vulnerable to the police and the prisons. That is an example how historical conditions have been exacerbated because of the development of capitalism and neo-liberal ideologies.

Did nothing change substantively even during the eight-year Obama presidency at all?

I think it is important not to underestimate the significance of the election of Obama. But I am speaking not so much about the accomplishment of the individual, but of the movements that were responsible for achieving what seemed to be impossible. So that if one shifts the perspective from the individual who was the first black president to occupy the highest office in the US to the movements that enabled a person like him to be elected, one sees not only the hope to elect such a president, who is still the president of the capitalist United States of America, but a hope for a very different kind of future. And it seems to me, that precisely because these hopes could not be fulfilled by the presidency, those movements have grown and expanded. I like to think of movements producing historical change, rather than the individual.

How has the US left and the global left responded to these changes in the global economy?

The left, as we have known it, as important as it has been, cannot remain the same force until it adequately counters these developments. Therefore it is important for the left to recognise that the constitution of the global working classes is very different now. In many ways the left is still dealing with this notion of the working classes as male, or white male, as in the case of the US. I think feminism, radical feminism, radical anti-racist and anti-capitalist feminism helps us to do the reconceptualisation that is necessary in order to produce a left that is more in line with the vast changes that have occurred in the era of global capitalism, recognising the feminisation of the working class, the structural shifts in the global economy, of the fact that some industries are largely populated by women, industries that rely on reproductive labour, of care industries, domestic service, health care, etc. It seems to me that in many ways, unions around the world are not willing to recognise those changes. To organise the unorganised, at this moment, is to organise women.

There is an argument, often heard, that class is more important than race. Here in India, the left has focused more on class than caste, for example.

If one looks at the previous election campaign in the US, Bernie Sanders sent out a powerful message, an anti-capitalist message. At the same time, he did not necessarily speak to those who would be part of what feminists call the intersections. Racism is not just a function of class. One cannot assume that to abolish capitalism is to also abolish racism. One has to give up these reductionist analyses and develop more complicated analyses that acknowledge the intermeshing, the overlaying and the intersectionality of these issues.

Worldwide, hard right, ultra nationalistic forces are on the rise. Does that go with neo-liberal capitalism and globalised capitalism?

Yes, especially racism – and forms of racism, discrimination, such as xenophobia, anti-immigrant sentiment, or in India, casteism. Unfortunately the left has always assumed that all you do is to focus on the working class and all these things will be taken care of. But right wing politicians are able to create scapegoats and shift popular understanding of the impact of global capitalism to these scapegoats-immigrants, Muslims, black people, Dalits. Think about the 2001 conference on racism in Durban, when India insisted that caste was an internal matter and therefore did not belong on global agendas on strategies to battle racism.

When one looks at the US when the Ferguson protests took place in the summer of 2014, before that, there was an overwhelming reluctance to talk about race and racism. The assumption was, once Barack Obama was elected, then we moved into a post-racial era. Now, in less than two years, race is at the very centre of popular political discourse in the US. It shows you how protesting, organising and engaging in mass struggle can cause shifts in a very short period of time.

The US has just had a landmark election with a shocking result. Hillary Clinton was widely expected to win. What in your opinion went wrong for her and the Democrats? Where is the US now headed?

Very few people predicted the election of Donald Trump. There was an overwhelming assumption that regardless of what people's political loyalties were, that Clinton was going to win. I think that even Trump thought Clinton was going to win (*laughs*). My sense, and I am joined by quite a number of radical activists on this, was that our role was precisely to prevent the election of Trump, because of the impact on future history. The Supreme Court, for example, the possibility that his administration may undo much of what happened under the Obama administration that was productive, such as the effort to guarantee that young immigrants, dreamers, have the possibility of becoming citizens, remaining in schools, other institutions. Or the health care system, even if it was not what it should have been.

Clinton was very much connected to Wall Street, and she rarely made any comments about the need for anti-capitalist approaches and only began to slightly revise her approach only after she saw the support that Bernie Sanders was getting. Some of the people who voted for Trump argued that they had been totally forgotten by the Democratic Party. That Clinton never once mentioned the working class. She talked about coal miners as if they were dispensable – “oh, yes, you have to get another job”. Then I recognised that the appeal should have been to working class people, to poor people, to people of colour, that is where the progressive future in that part of the world can be, the possibility of an alliance. Unfortunately that did not happen and Trump was able to point to Muslims, to immigrants, to people of colour as scapegoats. Those who had historically voted Democrats shifted and voted for Trump because he was saying that your predicament is the direct result of Muslims, immigrants and therefore by kicking them out of the country, by building a wall along the border your jobs will somehow magically available again.

Trump too is talking about jobs moving out of the US to India, China, Indonesia. Will he bring back those jobs?

I don't think he's going to bring back those jobs. He took an anti-globalisation stance, which many people responded to. But Trump himself has benefited immensely; all of his businesses are predicated on global capitalism. So while he might engage in some token efforts, as he did with respect to the jobs in Wisconsin, he is not going to reverse the impact of global capitalism. The way in which one should address these changes, is not to call for a return to a bygone era, not to talk

about how to make America great again but to talk about what is necessary given the current context and how it is possible to create global union organisations and unity so that capitalists in the US do not just move to another part of the world and find a cheaper labour force.

You have worked on prison reform and set up Critical Resistance in the 1980s [4]. It was started to focus on private prisons, the 'prison-industrial complex', but that has become even bigger and worse. It is predicated on more and more prisoners and therefore more and more profits.

Absolutely. And this is an instance where one can see how racism is so dramatically part of the structure. Take punishment – racism has always driven punishment in the US, from the era of slavery. In the 1980s, with the rise of globalisation and then de-industrialisation, the dismantling of social welfare, the rise of neo-liberalism, when there was an assumption that public goods should be transformed into structures that generated private profit, we saw the decline of corporations, in steel, autos etc. The first people to lose jobs were the last people who had been hired and those happened to be black people and people of colour.

When they couldn't continue building a life that they did earlier, they resorted to other means and this saw the rise of the underground economies, which were then accompanied by a call for law and order. At the same time, there was a rise in institutions, prisons, that catch those that became disposable. During the 1980s you saw an incredible soaring of prison populations, an increase in prison construction, the emergence of a private prison industry and the emergence of the corporatization of the punishment process.

We borrowed the term prison-industrial complex from scholar-activist Mike Davis who used it to primarily refer to the situation in California. We use the term to refer to a new confluence of punishment, corporations, the media, politicians; we see it as a set of relations, not so much as just building new prison complexes. The linkages are economic, political, media linkages which are all highly profitable. The US now has one quarter of the world's prison population and a majority of them are people of colour. We have now seen this model being exported to Europe, South America and Africa. This model is really a failure to address real social and economic problems, but now punishment itself has become profitable.

P.S.

* "The Global Left Will Fail Unless it Understands the Feminisation of the Workforce". The Wire. 15/12/2016 :

<https://thewire.in/87020/global-left-understanding-feminisation-of-workforce-angela-davis/>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yp9StQhWGdc>

[2] https://www.feministes-radicales.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Angela-Davis-Are_Prisons_Obsolete.pdf

[3] <http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/16188-recognizing-racism-in-the-era-of-neoliberalism>

[4] <http://criticalresistance.org>