

**Review: Angela Davis****Chris Cutrone**

On the frigid winter evening of Thursday, January 24, Angela Davis, a former Communist Party activist associated in the 1960s-70s with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panther Party, and current Professor in the History of Consciousness program at the University of California at Santa Cruz, gave the annual George E. Kent lecture (in honor of the first black American tenured professor) at the University of Chicago Rockefeller Chapel, to an overflow audience from the campus and surrounding community. The title of Davis's talk was "How Does Change Happen?," and, with the looming February 5 Super Tuesday primary elections to determine Democratic Party candidacy for President of the United States, Davis took as her point of departure the current contest between the first effective candidacies by a woman and a black American, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Davis also noted, with wry irony, that the current Republican presidency of George W. Bush is by far the most "diverse" administration in U.S. history.

But Davis stated that such apparent present overcoming of historical social limitations of race and gender was "not the victory for which we have struggled." This observation of the disparity between social-political struggles and their outcomes formed a central, strong theme of Davis's talk. Davis elaborated this further through discussion of how "collective demands are transformed into individual benefits." In Davis's estimation, individual women and black and Latino Americans such as Clinton, Obama, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and Supreme Court Justices Sandra Day O'Connor and Clarence

Thomas and others have benefited from historically more collective struggles against racial and ethnic discrimination and restrictive gender roles, without greater social justice or equality or collective empowerment being achieved.

Thus Davis came to discuss the question that she said has been presented to her on many occasions by her students of whether the struggles of the 1960s had been "in vain." While Davis acknowledged that it could certainly appear to be so, she said that she did not wish to "believe" that this was indeed the case. So Davis raised the question of in what ways the 1960s New Left had succeeded, and how it had failed to achieve its goals.

In addressing such issues, Davis placed the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s-60s in greater historical context, pointing to the "cross-racial" struggles of the preceding 1920s-30s Left, for example the organizing of sharecroppers in Alabama by the Communist Party, which Davis said had laid the groundwork for the subsequent Civil Rights movement. This was the strongest point in Davis's talk. However, perhaps the weakest point came when Davis tried to show such continuity of background in her further historical narrative, after the 1960s, in which she contended that the Black Panther Party's free breakfast community programs for black schoolchildren had led to the implementation of U.S. federal government Head Start programs. Similarly, Davis's defense of affirmative action programs since the 1960s did not serve her intention of showing how demands for structural change and collective empowerment had been diverted into more depoliticized individual benefits, for affirmative action had never been an anti-poverty measure and had always been geared specifically to meet "middle class" demands against institutional discrimination.

This contrast in Davis's characterization of different historical moments of movements against anti-black racism in America, in the 1920s-30s and the 1960s-70s, up to the present, posed the issue of how adequately social-political struggles for improving the social conditions of black Americans and reforming American society can be understood as having been against "racism" -- though of course such struggles involved confronting legal segregation and other historical forms of institutionalized racism. In her talk, Davis used the category of "race" unproblematically to reference an irreducible reality of "difference" that she took everyone to already recognize. Davis oscillated between conflicting prognoses of the present, whether anti-black racism has been ameliorated or worsened since the 1960s. The category of "race" works ambivalently in discussing two obvious changes since the 1960s: that legal and institutional racism as well as common racist attitudes have been overcome or diminished while social conditions for most black Americans have worsened. But this only begs the question, which should be at the core of trying to think about how political and social change can and does happen, of the very adequacy or lack of such categories as "race" and "racism" to address the problems facing black Americans and their greater social context today.

In the context of the global economic downturn since 1973, in which the average per capita purchasing power of American workers to meet their needs has decreased by as much as 30 percent while incomes have been massively distributed upwards to a small elite, the possibilities for the simultaneous if paradoxical outcome of overcoming legal and institutional racism while conditions for most black Americans have worsened, could be understood better in terms of changes in capitalism that have involved satisfying, even if in limited ways, historical

demands for change in American society such as an end to "racial" (and gender) discrimination. In America, black "race" has coded for poverty and hence realities of socioeconomic "class," and anti-black racism has functioned to rationalize or at least naturalize poverty in the U.S., masking fundamental structural problems of American society, but this might function differently today than in the past, especially in light of the much-deplored separation of the concerns of the black "middle class" from the greater lot of black Americans since the 1960s. In her talk, Davis missed an opportunity to challenge and educate her audience in favor of calibrating her comments to what she seemed to perceive to be her audience's conceptions of social-political problems. But such conceptions are in fact the effects of ideas like Davis's that bear the undigested legacy of failed politics on the Left since the 1960s. As Adolph Reed pointed out in an article on the Hurricane Katrina disaster, "The Real Divide" (*The Progressive*, November, 2005), "As a political strategy, exposing racism is wrongheaded and at best an utter waste of time," a distraction from addressing the necessary socioeconomic and political problems facing black Americans.

Davis's talk lacked a sense of how capitalism as a specific problem and context for social politics subordinates and molds issues like racism historically. But the questions Davis raised in her talk nevertheless pointed in directions of how such an understanding of capitalism might help overcome the apparent paradoxes of changes in the problem of racism since the 1960s.

In the 1960s, Davis had studied with members of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, in Frankfurt, Germany with Theodor Adorno and subsequently in San Diego with Herbert Marcuse. Adorno had discouraged Davis from leaving her studies to participate in

student activism while Marcuse had encouraged this.<sup>1</sup> But we might say retrospectively today that had Davis heeded Adorno's advice instead and given herself the opportunity for a more thorough critical investigation of the role of changes in capitalism in how historical changes such as the transformation and amelioration of anti-black racism could be understood more adequately and hence politically effectively, then Angela Davis, along with other radical intellectuals like her, could have contributed to better thinking and politics that might have helped us avoid the present situation in which one is left with the unsatisfying choice between proclaiming the historical end of racism and trying to address present social-political problems with antiquated and inadequate categories like "race."

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<sup>1</sup> Angela Y. Davis, "Marcuse's Legacies" (1998), in John Abromeit and W. Mark Cobb, eds., *Herbert Marcuse: a critical reader* (Routledge, 2004), 46-47.