

Angela Davis, "Race, Class, and Gender in the Reagan-Bush Era"

Introduction: Roberta Hamilton

Good evening to all of you and welcome to the 1988-89 Dunning Trust Lecture. My

speaker tonight is only the third woman of color to give the lecture, indeed the first black woman. This indicates that the gender and racial hierarchies in this society are reflected and consolidated within the university, and that the more recent invitations to women, and to men and women of color, reflect their own struggles for emancipation.

The study of history makes clear that those in power seldom move to include ever more people in their charmed circle. Rather, those without power and privilege struggle collectively for inclusion and for transformation of their society. When individual women or people of color by dint of exceptional talent, hard work and fortuitous circumstance do make it into the universi

struggle for those ends, but also -- and this is important -- that the struggle is indeed worth undertaking.

Angela Davis, the person, therefore, continues to be a symbol of hope. The invitation to her to speak tonight means that the Dunning Trust Committee has fulfilled its mandate for this year.

Please join me in welcoming to Queen's University and Kingston, Canada, a courageous and brilliant woman of our times, teacher at San Francisco State University and the San Francisco Art Institute, Professor Angela Davis.

Angela Davis:

Thank you, thank you very much, Roberta Hamilton, for the very moving introduction, and I would like to thank the Dunning Trust Committee for having invited me to deliver the 1988-1989 Dunning Trust Lecture. I know that there are those in this community who are not very happy about this, and that I have heard that people are referring to the controversy stirred up by my visit here. However, I think that it is The Whig-Standard (is that the name of the newspaper?) which is responsible for stirring up that controversy and I should say, before I begin, that it's been a long time since I have experienced, since I have been the target of an attack which is so factually unfounded, which is so full of falsehoods and which is so utterly vitriolic. It reminds me of an article in a newspaper in the Mid- West shortly after I was acquitted; the author of the article made the statement that I had killed three judges, and that I belonged in prison as a result.

In any event, I am not going to dignify the editorial with a detailed refutation of its argument, but if, during the question and answer period, you would like to pose any questions

But during that period, as black people we stood alone in celebrating our history. There were few white people outside of the progressive community who were even aware of the

the decade of the '80s. As a matter of fact, the Civil Rights Commission was responsible for, and has been responsible for, attempting to dismantle affirmative action programs from one end of the country to the other.

Jackson. Even Michael Dukakis, unfortunately, failed to generate any kind of excitement around

I would argue, as a matter of fact, that there is far more consciousness on a popular level of the need to eradicate racism today, in the latter 1980s, than in the '70s or the '60s or the '50s. There is a much more sophisticated understanding of the need to eradicate sexism in the latter 1980s. There is a greater understanding of the plight of working people, of the plight of the poor, the homeless. And as a matter of fact, I would suggest that we have achieved majorities in many areas, progressive majorities. There is an anti-racist majority in the United States today; you would never know it if you look at those who have been in control of the government during the last period. There is an anti-sexist majority. There is an anti-nuclear majority. And it's quite interesting: there was a survey done in California in an area called Orange County, which traditionally has been considered to be one of the most conservative, indeed one of the most reactionary sections of the State of California -- that was one of Reagan's strongholds when he was the governor of the state. Just recently, a survey indicated that Mikhail Gorbachev is much more popular than George Bush in Orange County.

And, as a matter of fact, a survey was recently commissioned by the NAACP, carried out by Lew Harris Poll, and that survey indicated that far more white people than ever before are aware of the need to eliminate racism; and would count themselves among those who are determined to eradicate racism.

Now: at the same time, of course, there have been some of the most explosive, some of the most violent manifestations of racism and sexism and anti-working class attitudes in the recent period. Now that seems to be rather contradictory. On the one hand it seems that increasing numbers of white people are expressing their solidarity with the quest to bring an end to racism, for example, but at the same time we find that throughout the country acts of racism are becoming increasingly apparent and increasingly explosive and violent.

states, or the statutes in the cities, they do not allow for the designation of a specific crime as being racist. So that if it is not reported in one way or another, we never really are able to document the extent to which these crimes are actually taking place. And I mention this because I know that you've had some real serious problems in this community and throughout this country as well. Unfortunately, you seem to be very much bound to our fate, and as I read about some of the incidents that have been happening on the campus here, I was reminded of what has been happening on the campuses of the colleges and universities all across the United States over the last years. From assaults, physical assaults on black students, to cross burnings, to racist, anti-semitic, homophobic graffiti, to threats.

Now why, you are probably asking, is it possible to argue that we are making progress in the realm of ideas with respect to the effort to end racism? How can that be argued and at the same time we acknowledge the factual evidence that racism is on the rise? Well, it appears to be contradictory, but, if one examines the sources of this racism which is on the rise, I think it becomes apparent that the two phenomena can indeed exist side by side. If we are experiencing this outburst of racist violence, if indeed it appears that Pandora's box has been opened, it is because we have for the last eight years been governed by an administration which has issued invitations to all of those who would like to manifest their racism to come out in the open.

The Reagan administration has, for example, dismantled the Civil Rights Commission, as I was pointing out. The Reagan administration has consistently assaulted the main strategy for the achievement of equality that emerged out of the civil rights period -- and that is affirmative action. And we are reaping the very bitter fruits of that assault on affirmative action because not very long ago the Supreme Court ruled indeed that the city of Richmond's, Richmond Virginia's, affirmative action program, or what they called minority set aside program, is unconstitutional.

Richmond, Virginia. Richmond, Virginia, was the cradle of the Confederacy. This is really ironic that, finally, Richmond, Virginia, developed some kind of affirmative action program in order to guarantee that the construction business that the city gives out would go at least partially to companies owned by people of color. The Supreme Court ruled that this is unconstitutional. So this means that such programs, such affirmative action programs in 32 states and 160 cities may now be challenged.

So is it any wonder that skinheads are physically assaulting black women? Or is it any

predominantly white institutions because of financial or other non-academic reasons. And again,

simply don't exist. We are not important. It doesn't matter if more black people fall into poverty. It doesn't matter if approximately half of all black children now are poor. It doesn't matter if our children are continually pushed into traps which lead them to prison, or to drug abuse.

And speaking of drugs -- speaking of drugs, the record of Reagan and Bush during the last eight years is absolutely dismal. Utterly dismal. Nancy Reagan, of course, has been travelling all over the country for years saying, "Just say no." "Just say no." But of course she wasn't referring to saying "no" to those who are really responsible for the drug problem. What about the Contras in Nicaragua, who very clearly do fundraising using the drug traffic? What about counter-revolutionaries in other parts of the world? And what about the police? And what about those who consistently refuse to create the institutions that are necessary to provide opportunities to our young people which will steer them away from the drug culture?

Believe me, it is frightening. It is horrifying. And I don't know whether you here in Canada have seen anything as horrifying as what exists in our communities today, where young kids 10 and 11 years old are selling and taking crack. Where children are arrested, children are arrested and the police find \$25,000 on them. And no one can tell me that this is our problem. Everything is our problem.

In Bush's inaugural address he referred to those who are on welfare as "welfare addicts." "Welfare addicts." Well, of course, he was perhaps a little better than Reagan who referred to people on welfare as "welfare queens." But the message of both labels was that those who are

be unemployed. They're called "discouraged workers." And they are not counted in the statistic of the unemployed. So we have many, many thousands of people who are actually unemployed but are not counted by the government.

45.6 per cent of all black children under the age of 18 are officially living under the poverty level. And what has been clear about the economic patterns of the Reagan years is that the rich have gotten richer and the poor have gotten poorer. The poorest 20 per cent of the

one another will mean that eventually women, regardless of their racial background, will be targeted.

And if one examines now the issue of reproductive rights -- I wonder if you have been following the extent to which the Reagan- Bush government has attempted to manipulate the thought patterns of the people in our country around this issue of abortion rights. Bush, of course, he's very confused. As a matter of fact it appeared during the election campaign that he was not even aware that there was a Supreme Court decision in 1973 which rendered abortion constitutional, because he argued that -- well, first he said that any woman who has an abortion is a criminal. And then, of course, his aides had to correct him -- speak to the press, pointing out that Bush really did not mean to imply that every woman who has had an abortion should be in jail. But of course we are witnessing at this very moment the most serious assault on the reproductive rights of women in our country. And I think it is very important to acknowledge the degree to which racism and class-inspired oppression is responsible fo

were arguing that it had little relevance to poor women and especially to women of color, because the other issues with respect to reproductive rights were not related to that campaign.

And indeed in 1973, when the Roe-v-Wade Decision was handed down, the Supreme Court ruled that a woman has the right to decide with her doctor whether or not she will have an abortion, and that decision will be governed by the constitutional right to privacy -- the constitutional right to privacy. The patient-doctor relationship was what was covered by this right to privacy. Now, how many women have doctors? Just think about it. How many women have doctors? There are a lot of women who don't have doctors. They go to clinics. The decision said nothing about a woman having the right to make the decision about ending a pregnancy that will create problems for her. And as a matter of fact, a couple of years after that decision a federal amendment withdrew all federal funds from abortions, so that poor women effectively lost the right to abortion. You see, that wasn't taken into consideration. The underlying class and racial implications of that decision were not even examined or discussed in 1973. So that four years later suddenly the Hyde Amendment is passed, and all over the country poor women effectively no longer have the right to abortion because if they can't pay for it they can't get one.

And what begins to happen at that time is that increasing numbers of poor women begin to be sterilized because the federal government still fully funds sterilization. And we find ourselves in that situation today, that the sterilizations have gone up, and of course every person has the right

We will continue our activism in the quest for nuclear disarmament because we must enter the 21st century nuclear-free. We must, if we wish to guarantee to our children and to their children that there will indeed be a future to enjoy. We must get rid of every last nuclear weapon by the year 1999. And I am convinced we can do this. I am very excited about this period. And I certainly hope that you feel that here in your country that there are signs that we will be able to walk together along this path of activism.

As a person who has been involved for many, many years -- I sometimes stand back in amazement when I think that I have been involved in the movement for 30 years, but I have. And of all the three-and-a-half decades that I have been an activist, I find this era to be the most exciting. The world situation has changed, and I think this is the era during which we will be able to establish the kind of organized mass movements that will allow us to achieve enduring victories in the quest to end race-based oppression, gender-based oppression, class-based oppression. And I must admit that I am convinced that we will eventually in my lifetime be able to restructure the social order in the United States, which is what we really need to do.

And so I leave you with this message: I hope that before too many more years have passed, we will be able to join hands as two partners in a global quest to rid the entire world of the very basis of these oppressions, and that is of monopoly capitalism. Thank you very much.