

■ Angela Davis at the Women's March on Washington

Date: January 21, 2017

Author: Angela Davis

Genre: speech

Summary Overview

Controversial, world-renowned scholar and activist Angela Davis delivered this speech on September 21, 2017 during the Women's March on Washington. This event, organized in response and opposition to the incoming presidential administration of Donald J. Trump, was accompanied by marches around the United States as well as protests around the world and was the largest political demonstration in the nation's capital city since the protests of the Vietnam War era.

There are a number of important concepts and ideas in Davis's speech that give us some insight into the concerns of progressive activists in the second decade of the twenty-first century. One of the most important concepts is that of the "intersectional" aspects of feminism. Both Davis and the organizers of the march recognized that the structural aspects of American society, politics, economics and culture that placed women at a disadvantage also had similar effects on racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, people with disabilities, immigrants, and others in the United States. Thus, Davis's speech not only addresses issues of gender equality but homophobia and transphobia, economic inequality, environmental justice—particularly access to safe water—and other issues that "intersect" with feminist concerns.

In this speech, Angela Davis also calls for continued resistance throughout the coming years of the Trump administration, emphasizing that opposition to the proposed policies of the Trump White House (and the ideological and cultural factors that had contributed to his election) should not end with this post-inauguration event.

Defining Moment

The 2016 U.S. Presidential election between Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump was remarkably divisive. With heated rhetoric, Trump targeted immigrants (particularly Muslims and immigrants from Mexico) and promised severe restrictions on immigration. Numerous Trump comments surfaced that many considered to be degrading to women. While some were alienated by Trump's words, other Americans saw his forthrightness as a welcome response to what they considered to be a growing atmosphere of "political correctness." Donald Trump's vice presidential running mate, Indiana gov-



Angela Davis in 2014. Photo by Columbia GSAPP, via Wikimedia Commons.

ernor Mike Pence, had supported legislation in Indiana that his critics charged limited women's access to reproductive health care as well as signing into law the 2015 Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which opponents asserted opened the door to discrimination against members of the LGBTQ+ community being protected as a "religious liberty." Trump's rhetoric and Pence's gubernatorial record proved troubling to civil rights advocates.

Following Trump's election, a number of activists organized nationwide protests and marches to take place on January 21, 2017, following Trump's inauguration. While the main march occurred in Washington, D.C., similar demonstrations were organized not only throughout the United States but around the world. The organizers, in their "Mission & Vision" statement, characterized the circumstances which inspired the protest as resulting from "the rhetoric of the past election cycle" which "insulted, demonized, and threatened many of us—immigrants of all statuses, Muslims and those of diverse religious faiths, people who identify as LGBTQIA, Native people, Black and Brown people, people with disabilities, survivors of sexual assault—and our communities are hurting and scared." While having as a starting point the concerns about women's rights under the new administration, the communities and causes addressed by the march broadened beyond gender, with the group's "Unity Principles" citing the following issues:

- Ending violence
- Reproductive rights
- LGBTQIA [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Transsexual, Queer, Intersex, Asexual] rights
- Worker's rights
- Civil rights
- Disability rights
- Immigrant rights
- Environmental justice

This broadened vision of concerns and causes illustrates the notion of, as Angela Davis says in her speech, of a feminism that is "inclusive and intersectional" and provides a window into the wide community of progressive activism in the twenty-first century.

Author Biography

Angela Y. Davis was born on January 26, 1944 in Alabama. As a child in Birmingham, Davis got involved in civil rights issues, taking part in anti-segregation marches. Her mother was involved in an organization called the Southern Negro Youth Congress, which was a civil rights organization that, from its inception in 1937, was suspected of some connection with the Communist Party. During the 1940s and 1950s, in fact, the organization was under surveillance by the FBI. In a 1989 interview, Davis recalled how she became acquainted with the Communist Party as a child through friends of her parents. This connection would continue when Davis was in high school. She earned a place in a program that provided for African American students from the south to attend school in the north. Davis attended school in Greenwich Village, New York City and became involved in a Communist-affiliated student organization called Advance.

Davis's political activism would continue as a student at Brandeis University, leading to her being interviewed about her attendance at a Communist-organized youth festival. Graduating from Brandeis, Davis continued her schooling at the University of Frankfurt in Germany, and the University of California, San Diego where she earned a Master's degree, and Humboldt University in East Berlin, where she earned a doctorate in philosophy. She began teaching in the philosophy department of the University of California at Los Angeles in 1969, where she was known for her radical feminist activism and membership in the Communist Party USA. She was briefly removed from the position by the University's ruling board—at the suggestion of Governor Ronald Reagan—because of her Communist Party membership. While rehired, she was fired again in 1970 for speeches in which, among other things, she referred to the police as "pigs."

In August, 1970, a California court house hostage situation resulted in the deaths of a judge and three others. Davis was put on the FBI most-wanted fugitive list due to charges of aggravated kidnapping and first-degree murder for her role in the situation, alleged to be purchasing the guns used in the hostage

taking. Davis was apprehended in October of that year. After a highly publicized trial, Davis was acquitted in June, 1972. Throughout the decade she visited Cuba, the Soviet Union, and East Germany delivering

public speeches. During the 1980s and 1990s and into the twenty-first century, Davis continued her academic career teaching and writing at various institutions as well as her progressive political activism.



Historical Document

Angela Davis: Women's March on Washington

At a challenging moment in our history, let us remind ourselves that we the hundreds of thousands, the millions of women, trans-people, men and youth who are here at the Women's March, we represent the powerful forces of change that are determined to prevent the dying cultures of racism, hetero-patriarchy from rising again.

We recognize that we are collective agents of history and that history cannot be deleted like web pages. We know that we gather this afternoon on indigenous land and we follow the lead of the first peoples who despite massive genocidal violence have never relinquished the struggle for land, water, culture, their people. We especially salute today the Standing Rock Sioux.

The freedom struggles of black people that have shaped the very nature of this country's history cannot be deleted with the sweep of a hand. We cannot be made to forget that black lives do matter. This is a country anchored in slavery and colonialism, which means for better or for worse the very history of the United States is a history of immigration and enslavement. Spreading xenophobia, hurling accusations of murder and rape and building walls will not erase history.

No human being is illegal.

The struggle to save the planet, to stop climate change, to guarantee the accessibility of water from the lands of the Standing Rock Sioux, to Flint, Michigan, to the West Bank and Gaza. The struggle to save our flora and fauna, to save the air—this is ground zero of the struggle for social justice.

This is a women's march and this women's march represents the promise of feminism as against the pernicious powers of state violence. And inclusive and intersectional feminism that calls upon all of us to join the resistance to racism, to Islamophobia, to anti-Semitism, to misogyny, to capitalist exploitation.

Yes, we salute the fight for 15. We dedicate ourselves to collective resistance. Resistance to the billionaire mortgage profiteers and gentrifiers. Resistance to the health care privateers. Resistance to the attacks on Muslims and on immigrants. Resistance to attacks on disabled people. Resistance to state violence perpetrated by the police and through the prison industrial complex. Resistance to institutional and intimate gender violence, especially against trans women of color.

Women's rights are human rights all over the planet and that is why we say freedom and justice for Palestine. We celebrate the impending release of Chelsea Manning. And Oscar López Rivera. But we also say free Leonard Peltier. Free Mumia Abu-Jamal. Free Assata Shakur.

Over the next months and years we will be called upon to intensify our demands for social justice to become more militant in our defense of vulnerable populations. Those who still defend the supremacy of white male hetero-patriarchy had better watch out.

The next 1,459 days of the Trump administration will be 1,459 days of resistance: Resistance on the ground, resistance in the classrooms, resistance on the job, resistance in our art and in our music.

This is just the beginning and in the words of the inimitable Ella Baker, 'We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes.' Thank you.



Glossary

Ella Baker: African American civil rights activist who lived from 1903 to 1986

ground zero: a point of impact or origination

hetero-patriarchy: the dominance of maleness and heterosexuality in the socio-political hierarchy

misogyny: hatred, fear, and oppression of women

"the fight for 15": the movement to increase the federal minimum wage to \$15 per hour

Document Analysis

Davis begins her speech by highlighting the large number of participants at the march, which she numbers as “hundreds of thousands” and “millions.” The Washington Post estimated the number of Marchers in Washington as around half a million, but the number who participated around the United States as between 3.3 and 4.6 million. Davis points out the diverse group of “women, trans-people, men and youth” participating in the march and points to both the numbers and the make-up of the marchers as the force that will ensure the continued decline of “racism, hetero-patriarchy.”

Davis then describes herself and the marchers as “agents of history” and that history cannot be erased or “deleted.” She invokes the indigenous, Native American possession of the land on which Washington, D.C. is located. Davis then draws a parallel between the centuries-long resistance of Native American groups to White American encroachment on land and resources and the goals and persistence of the marchers. Davis also takes this opportunity to recognize the efforts of the Standing Rock Sioux who had been protesting—both on the scene and through the court system—the construction of the Dakota Access oil pipeline as a danger to their religious sites as well as their drinking water supply.

In the third paragraph, Davis uses the rallying cry of the Black Lives Matter movement, which emerged in 2013 after George Zimmerman was acquitted in the death of Trayvon Martin, as a reminder that the United States has its roots in “slavery and colonialism” and explains that the history of the country “is a history of immigration and enslavement.” Building on this theme of immigration, she asserts that “Spreading xenophobia, hurling accusations of murder and rape and building walls will not erase history.” This is a reference to several comments and proposals from Donald Trump during the 2016 Presidential campaign, in which he alleged that immigrants—particularly from Mexico—were rapists and murders and his pledge to build “a wall” to prevent further illicit immigration. Her next statement, that human beings are not “illegal” is a broader condemnation of anti-immigration sentiment in the United States.

Davis then, again broadening the scope of the activism she sees represented by those marching and the causes for which they stand, addresses environmental concerns such as climate change but also narrower environmental concerns. She again mentions the Standing Rock protest, but also invokes the water crisis in Flint, Michigan where government mismanagement led to water contaminated with lead and other harmful substances. Her water concerns—which are also political issues—extend to issues of water access in Gaza and the West Bank, part of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the next paragraph, Davis discusses the “inclusive and intersectional” nature of the feminism represented at the march; a feminism that recognizes the connections between feminism and racism as well as other issues.

She goes on to address issues of economic equality, such as the drive to raise the federal minimum wage, opposition to corporate profiteering—including that going in the health care sector. Davis then adds to the abuses the marchers will resist, such as violent attacks on immigrants and the disabled. She also condemns the police and prison structures of the United States and promotes continued resistance to violence based on gender. She speaks to issues of gender and violence outside the United States, calling for “freedom and justice” for Palestine. She praises the release of Chelsea Manning (a transgender woman convicted by court-martial in 2013 of violating the Espionage Act, and Oscar López Rivera, the Puerto Rican independence activist convicted of seditious conspiracy in 1981. Davis urges the release of others in prison for controversial, politically-charged reasons such as American Indian Movement activist Leonard Peltier and African American activists Mumia Abu-Jamal and Assata Shakur.

Davis closes her speech by calling for an intensification of protest and foresees an increased militancy as well. She declares that the entirety of the Trump administration will be focused on resistance in all areas of American life, culture, and society.

Essential Themes

In her 2017 speech to the Women’s March on Washington, Angela Davis highlights the persistent and im-

portant theme that the march, as well as the resistance to the ideology and goals of the incoming Trump administration that the march symbolizes, is not a fight only by and for women. The march, rather, represents a wide array of progressive causes. This connection between feminism and other struggles, such as those against racism, economic inequality, homophobia or other is what Davis means when she discusses the feminism presented at the march as being “inclusive and intersectional.” As discussed in “Defining Moment,” above, the concerns of women in the face of the challenges presented by the Trump administration in areas such as reproductive rights, access to medical care, and economic equality, including the gender gap in pay, hiring, and benefits are central to the march organizers. Other issues of social justice, however, are also part of the unifying principles behind the march. Davis takes the opportunity bring the marchers’ (and the world’s) attention to a number of social justice issues that focused not only on gender but also on economic equality. Discussing causes like a \$15 minimum wage, concerns about urban gentrification, and “billionaire mortgage profiteers” is in keeping with Davis’s

long-standing concerns, reaching back to the 1960s and 1970s as well.

—Aaron John Gulyas, MA

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