

LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

ANGELA DAVIS: A REVOLUTIONARY ROADMAP FOR BUILDING A BETTER FUTURE

LAURA FLANDERS: A few weeks back, we invited our viewers and listeners to share their burning questions for today's guest. From the many questions we received, a clear theme emerged. People, at least in our audience, are feeling frazzled, distracted, slightly panicked, torn with so many urgent crises, tugging at our hearts from war to climate, to discontent, extremism, and violence. People want to know how to set priorities and do the right thing, especially as that relates to building a better world and to an election that seems both problematic and quite possibly, the most important of our time. Angela Davis, it seems to me, is indeed the perfect person to answer that question. Professor Emerita of History of Consciousness and Feminist Studies at the [University of California Santa Cruz](#), in her writing, lecturing, and many decades of activism, she has developed a unique ability to pull competing struggles into a single story, a story of systems and power. As we here launch a new season of this show with a new name that hints at the collective nature of this very project, it is my great honor to invite Angela Davis to help us kick off the conversation. Davis celebrated 80 years on this planet this January. If anyone can ground us thoughtfully in this complex moment with all of its challenges and its potential, which is really our potential, she can. Angela Davis' most recent books include "[Abolition. Feminism. Now.](#)" written with Gina Dent, Erica Meiners, and Beth Richie. And an essay collection, the first volume in a series titled "[Abolition: Politics, Practices, Promises.](#)" It's just out from Haymarket. She is a super synthesizer, not to mention survivor, and I am very glad to welcome Angela Davis to the show. Welcome.

ANGELA DAVIS: It's wonderful to see you, Laura.

LAURA FLANDERS: You too, Angela. And I have to just start as I've taken to starting every conversation with just a kind of grounding question of what's uppermost of your mind and your heart these days as we begin this talk?

ANGELA DAVIS: Of course, given that I've been doing work around Palestine virtually all my life, what is happening in Gaza at this moment, tears at my heart. I think I would also say though, I'm very excited to see support for Palestine emerging in places. One would've never sought to seek that support before. All over the country, people are rising up. They're demonstrating every time I give a talk and mention Palestine, people come up to me and thank me for mentioning a subject which oftentimes, is subject to censorship. Even self-censorship in their communities.

LAURA FLANDERS: It is very different from even 10 years ago when one would mention Palestine on a program or you in a talk. The reaction was very distinct from today. Then it was

very much the kind of shutdown. Today, it's an engagement. What do you think is contributing, apart from the horror, to the differences you're seeing today, both here and internationally, globally?

ANGELA DAVIS: As someone who has always attempted to ground my ideas and my perspectives in collective activist work, I would say that the ongoing solidarity work, the work that I've participated in for decades is finally beginning to show its results. You know, oftentimes, when we do this work around any issue related to liberation, we never know really whether we will be able to witness the consequences of this work. And we don't do it for that reason. We do it for posterity. We do it in order to guarantee that there will be new generations attempting to build a better world. But I should say as someone who, as you pointed out, just marked my 80th year on this earth, I'm so thankful that I've lived long enough to witness some of the results of the collective work that has been done by so many people all around the world.

LAURA FLANDERS: It's as if there was something waiting to burst into action that perhaps wasn't so visible. And nowhere it seems to me are you more acutely aware of that sort of undertow than in the Black feminist movement. I think of [June Jordan](#), whom we both knew and loved, and how she wrote in the '80s about being born Black and becoming Palestinian.

ANGELA DAVIS: Yeah, I always have this on my desk. I always have this on my desk.

LAURA FLANDERS: I have it back here somewhere. Yeah, I mean, she paid a real price for that, it seems to me. But a conversation has grown to fruition almost. Would you say that? Where are you seeing it and how?

ANGELA DAVIS: Oh, absolutely. The very first request that I received to speak out on the horrendous situation in Gaza came from a radical Black feminist group. And I have encountered so many people, so many young women, so many young Black women who, you know, talk about the fact that their heart right now is in Gaza, is in Palestine. And, you know, I always think about June during those moments. And I always wish that she were here to be able to witness the results of the work that she pioneered more than anyone else. Yeah, ["I was born a Black woman, but now, I am become Palestinian."](#)

LAURA FLANDERS: I share that wish that she was here to see this and to speak and talk at this moment. Because you never could have guessed what June would say, and you couldn't predict what she'd be saying now. You are writing in this book of essays a lot about your evolution, and while you don't go back into your real youth, it did make me think about how many years you've lived through and how much you've lived through. And I wondered as I think too about, I try to think myself, imagine myself into life in Gaza today. When you were growing up in

Birmingham, there were explosions. Do you remember that? Do you think about that as you think about those kids, especially in Gaza today?

ANGELA DAVIS: Well, you know, the sound of dynamite exploding is actually one of my earliest memories. It's an aural memory, and I think about it all the time. And, you know, I also think about the fact that in Birmingham, Jewish people were the very first white people to support the struggle against racism, the struggle to desegregate what was the most segregated city in the entire country. And I've tried to sort of hold those memories together so that they're not about conflict. And as a matter of fact, I'm so excited that here in the US and in other parts of the world, it's actually Jewish people, young Jewish people who are in the forefront of the struggle against Zionism. So yeah, those memories are still foremost in my mind. And thank you for reminding me.

LAURA FLANDERS: It sometimes has begun to feel to me as if we have an impermeable state. More people in protest and action than I've ever seen, and yet, we still at this moment of this recording, the most powerful people in this country still stand firm against even ceasefire. So do you see that things that way? And if you do, how do you think about this moment and perhaps this election? We're constantly being directed to think about the election as if it was the only thing to think about in this moment. And yet, it surely cuts off a lot of conversation about other things.

ANGELA DAVIS: I feel very torn. I feel very sad about this election. I feel that for so many years, we've talked about elections and I think we were correct as actually not being about who should lead the country, but rather being about what candidate would most likely help to broaden the terrain of struggle. So that masses of people, people who are willing to put their lives on the line, their ideas. This is how change happens in this country, when vast numbers of people come together and defend a vision of the future that they would like to see. This is how change happens. It doesn't happen because we elect a particular person to office.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, that gets to your book. I mean, one of the essays in here is the essay ["Prison: A Sign of US Democracy?"](#) In which you write that our incarceration system, our prison system is the quintessential democratic institution. What do you mean by that? What's that connection?

ANGELA DAVIS: The institution of the prison has always served as a way to remind us who is and is not free. I am "free," quote unquote, because I am not in prison. It's a kind of, you know, negative affirmation of the status of freedom. But it also reminds us that the democracy that have been told to support is a capitalist democracy. It is a democracy that is not so much about the people who inhabit a particular space, controlling collectively their own destiny, it is about, you know, who has property, who has affluence, who has influence. And as a matter of fact, the

prison as an institution emerges precisely at the same moment as the American Revolution, US democracy. And that democracy, that democracy of rights of only affected a small minority of people. We all tend to assume that democracy is about you know, all of the people collectively controlling the destiny of the country. But it was really only about white men. It was only about white affluent men. They were the only ones who were able to vote. And that indeed is about a democracy of the minority, which, you know, ought to be a contradiction in terms. So I think it's really important to look at the institution of the prison in the way in which it serves as the proof of rights or no rights. And this is the way in which it serves as a kind of, you know, negative evidence of who is free and who is not. The nature of the punishment is supposed to be precisely the divestment of rights. And it is only possible within the context of a society that has accorded those rights. So in that sense, the prison is a deeply democratic institution in a kind of ironic way.

LAURA FLANDERS: You also write that the prison enables us as a people and as a state to avoid engaging with the problems, the real problems that we face. And clearly, we are really failing to engage at this moment. And as prison has grown, welfare provision, social provision has declined, it's been written about. Do you think we're at a turning point? I mean, is this version of democracy, capitalist democracy, as you describe it, ready for a redo? Are we ready? And what might that look like? What might the democracy that we need look like, do you think?

ANGELA DAVIS: Well, I think that over the last period, we've seen evidence that increasing numbers of people are deeply dissatisfied with the kind of "democracy," quote unquote, that we supposedly inhabit. What we experienced in the midst of this terrible pandemic, when more people went out into the streets and stood up and demonstrated, when more white people than ever before in the history of this country said no to racism, was revolutionary. When people went out into the streets and demonstrated, we had no idea how the [COVID virus](#) was transmitted. And so, if you think about it, they made themselves part of this collective upsurge, uprising at the possible expense of their own lives. So I don't think we should ever forget that.

LAURA FLANDERS: The other thing that happened in that time, it seems to me, it was a lateral movement of people in the streets looking after each other, not of course relying on police or anyone else to look after each other. There was a sense that people were stepping into a role in their lives in relation to other people that they'd been kinda leaving to, you know, they'd been leaving to government or to private services or to, for hire of one kind or another. And so when people say this election is a repeat of the last one, I think it can't possibly be. But can it?

ANGELA DAVIS: Well, I think we've even fundamentally changed, but there are those who don't want us to recognize the extent to which we have been changed. We have to continually remind ourselves that we're actually really powerful. If we would not have all of these efforts to change school curricula to prevent, you know, young people from getting a sense of the meaning

of Black history, to recognize Black history, not only as the history of Black people, but the history of the most important struggle for democracy in this country.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well talk more about that. I was just in Idaho and talked with people who said that they believe the state in effect, has no meaning for them anymore. It is unmovable, unresponsive. And that has both kind of clarifying aspects and frightening ones as people find other allegiances instead of that. How do you think about it? What do we need as an alternative? And how do you address this moment where it does feel as if we need to reinvent?

ANGELA DAVIS: There's a kind of similarity of the prison and the state in the ways in which they are perpetuated through ideology. In both instances, they are represented as permanent. Oftentimes, people think of both of these institutions as having always existed in the past, and therefore, they will always exist in the future. But in both instances, these institutions are products of history. The prison only came into being in the late 1700s, early 1800s. The state is a product of the bourgeois revolutions. It's a product of capitalism. And if we can't try to imagine other modes of human community, if we assume that the state will always be the most perfect mode of human community, then that means that we assume that all of the repressive apparatuses, which constitute the state, armies, prisons, police, will be the foremost in our communities. And so we're asking, I mean, abolitionists ask us to try to imagine new ways of coming together. That do not require violence, that do not require racism, that do not require patriarchy.

LAURA FLANDERS: How was your own thinking around abolition and incarceration and policing affected by your work and understanding around Palestine?

ANGELA DAVIS: Well, okay, first, I think since we are talking about evolution and democracy, I'll also evoke Du Bois here to go back and seek lessons from the history of the first abolitionist movement. When Du Bois pointed out that it was not so much a question of getting rid of the institution of slavery, although it was about that. But that in and of itself would not manage to root out the ways in which slavery had infected every aspect of US society. I think, you know, one of the reasons Black people have identified so deeply with Palestine is because in both instances, there have been protracted struggles, protracted struggles in both instances. It has been necessary to imagine beyond what appears to be possibility.

LAURA FLANDERS: I always ask our guests what they think the story will be that the future tells of this moment. We've been talking a little bit about that relationship between past, present, and future, but what do you think looking ahead will be the story the future tells of now?

ANGELA DAVIS: Well, I could only say that I hope the future unfolds in such a way as to be able to look back and grasp the contributions of vast numbers of people who aren't even

considered as history makers today. The real changes come when vast numbers of people, working class people, poor people come together and consolidate a vision of the future. I hope that it is a future that knows how to recognize how change happens.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, I thank you for your work and I thank you for your surviving, and I thank you for opening up so many systemic questions at a time when so much of our public discourse tends towards the, I don't know, the occlusion, the cutting things off, the narrowing and channeling. It has been enormously helpful to have your writings and your speakings opening that frame up. Angela Davis, thanks so much for spending this time with us. It's been a pleasure having you on the show.

ANGELA DAVIS: Thank you, Laura.

LAURA FLANDERS: June Jordan's poem, "[Moving Towards Home](#)" has been cited frequently over the years of this program, especially in the last few months. So I think it's only fair to give you a taste of it. In 1982, June wrote about what was just then happening in Beirut, Lebanon, where Palestinian refugees in refugee camps were being slaughtered by local militia with the backing of the Israeli government and implicit US support. In the poem, she writes about unspeakable events that she would prefer not to be speaking about because as she writes, "I do not wish to speak about unspeakable events. That must follow from those who dare to purify a people, those who dare to exterminate a people, those who dare to describe human beings as beasts with two legs, those who dare to mop up to tighten the noose, to step up the military pressure, from those who dare to close the universities, to abolish the press, to kill the elected representatives of the people who refuse to be purified." She doesn't want to speak about those things because as she says, "I need to speak about home. I need to speak about living room where the land is not bullied and beaten to a tombstone. I need to speak about living room." "Where," as she writes, "My children will grow without horror. I need to speak about living room where the men of my family, between the ages of six and 65, are not marched into a roundup that leads to the grave." She needs to talk about living room, she says, "Because I need to talk about home. I was born a Black woman and now I am become a Palestinian. Against the relentless laughter of evil, there is less and less living room. And where are my loved ones? It is time to make our way home." You can find June's full poem in the collected poems of June Jordan under the title "[Directed by Desire](#)," published by Copper Canyon Press. And you can find my full uncut conversation with Angela Davis, which is very rich through a subscription to our free podcast. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious. And for Laura Flanders & Friends, I'm Laura. Thanks for joining us.

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