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ANGELA Y. DAVIS

Angela Y. Davis (1944-) is a radical feminist, Communist, and revolutionary voice within progressive organizations such as the Black Panthers. Angela Davis, currently distinguished professor emeritus at the University of California, Santa Cruz, is a remarkable intellectual, although she has never just reserved her ideas for academics and students. She is an activist first and foremost. What good are revolutionary ideas if we do not actively try to implement them?

Davis began her career as an activist with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. However, she left the group to join the Black Panther Party. She was involved in both organizations' west coast chapters. However, Davis was disconcerted with these organizations' conservative approaches to gender and sexual politics. Since her days as a student, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels always influenced Davis and in 1968 she formally joined the Communist Party. Davis sat on the Communist Party's Central Committee for twenty-three years. In fact, her active membership caused Ronald Reagan, amongst others, to attempt to have her removed from her position at the University of California. However, this did not stop Davis. In fact, she ran for vice president twice, in 1980 and 1984 on the Communist ticket.

Davis is famous for being on the FBI's ten most wanted list. (This is certainly far from the most important fact about her accomplishments or legacy.) She found herself on the list after she became heavily involved in the Soledad Brothers case. The Soledad Brothers refers to the case of George Jackson, Fleeta Drumgo, and John Clutchette, who were activists like Davis, in the prisoners' rights movement. In 1970 they were spuriously charged with the murder of a prison guard (after years of agitation they were ultimately acquitted). Davis, who was now actively engaged in the prisoners' rights movement and specifically in the Soledad Brothers case, was being harassed. She received frequent death threats and as a result sought out a personal security team comprised of other activists. Davis legally purchased much of the weaponry utilized by her security team. At the same time, Jonathan Jackson, brother of George Jackson and now friend and security personnel to Angela Davis, committed a now infamous crime.

Jackson desired to make a grandiose statement about the atrocities in the prison system; so, he stormed into a California court armed and took a judge, district attorney, and a few members of a jury hostage. Also removed from the court were three prisoners

on trial. Jackson and his accomplices attempted to bring them to their getaway van in the court parking lot and were fired upon by San Quentin prison guards. The gunfire left the judge, Jackson, and two of the prisoners dead. The kidnapped district attorney, jurors, and the other prisoner were seriously wounded. Although Davis played no actual role in the events, because she had purchased the guns utilized in the massacre she was named as an accomplice. For two months, Davis went underground and this is when she found herself on the FBI's infamous list. By October 1970 she had been captured and then spent sixteen months in jail before she was even released on bail.

Davis was ultimately charged with kidnapping and conspiracy. Progressives who took up her cause, such as the National United Committee to Free Angela Davis, along with her defense lawyers argued that Davis was not being charged for these actual crimes but she was being charged for being an effective radical leader. Davis, who actively aided her lawyers in her own defense, utilized her own deplorable experiences to expose the atrocities within the prison system. With the support of the Congressional Black Caucus and countless activists in February of 1972, she was finally granted bail and on June 4, 1972 she was acquitted of all charges. Throughout her life she has continued to work for justice. Davis was one of the founders of the Critical Resistance, a group devoted to abrogating the prison industrial complex; she has worked as an executive board member of the Women of Color Resource Center. She has worked for Justice Now, an organization devoted to providing legal assistance to incarcerated women and another organization similar to Justice Now called Sisters Inside. Whatever disagreements individuals may have over her ideological trajectory or strategies, one cannot deny that Davis has devoted her life to the struggle for human rights.

Overview of Ideas

Angela Davis was a revolutionary who fought ardently for Black liberation, an end to exploitation of all workers and other marginalized groups, particularly women. As a Black Power activist, she firmly articulated the need for revolutionary means to end oppression. Democratic reform was impossible. Democracy and capitalism are two mutually exclusive entities. Democracy does not and cannot exist under capitalism. Moreover, capitalism was the primary source of oppression in the United States. Therefore, as Marxists argue, you cannot resolve society's most deleterious quagmires such as crime, poverty, racism, and sexism without annihilating them at their roots—capitalism.

Historically, revolutionary and often illegal means have been required to overturn injustice. The history of slavery tells us that in order to escape the ghastly fetters of slavery individuals had to utilize illegal measures to escape. Brave men and women had to craft ingenious strategies, often illegal, to circumvent racist laws such as the Black Codes. Unfortunately, again, democratic reform does not always work and alternative means must be sought. According to Davis, the valiant individuals who fight against repressive policy and institutions, when caught, are not criminals; they are political prisoners. The individuals who ran the Underground Railroad, although engaged in

ostensibly criminal activity were political prisoners. Martin Luther King Jr., Bobby Seale, Huey P. Newton, Angela Davis, and all other leaders in this volume incarcerated for fighting for justice were all political prisoners.

Nixon's and J. Edgar Hoover's pronouncements lead one to believe that they would readily accept... fascist legal theory. Anyone who seeks to overthrow oppressive institutions, whether or not he has engaged in an overt illegal act, is *a priori* a criminal who must be buried away in one of America's dungeons.

When arrested while engaged in protest, you were solely being arrested for "political boldness" not the actual crime for which you were charged. "The political act is defined as criminal in order to discredit radical or revolutionary movements." As the Black Power movement grew the more the fascist state would utilize imprisonment as a tool to thwart the gains of the movement. This is what facilitated the increase in government "frame-ups" of key leaders.

Davis has become one of the most outspoken critics of the prison system in the United States. The prison industrial complex has become a tool for the suppression of dissent and a mechanism to produce wealth for the capitalist class. The state chooses to incarcerate its poor, the large majority of whom are people of color, who commit crimes most often as a last resort in the face of poverty. This class, the lumpenproletariat, for classical Marxists is a futile class of criminals and vagrants. However, Angela Davis, like her comrades in the BPP, saw them as a viable revolutionary class. Part of her solution to resolving the problems impacting Black people was to mobilize this group of people.

Davis foreshadowed that the mass incarceration of people of color would continue to worsen. Racism plagued the entire justice system. However, there is no incentive for the state to remedy this calamity. More and more Blacks, Chicanos, and Puerto Ricans were finding themselves incarcerated. They, too, were becoming political prisoners. As victims of the exploitative capitalist marketplace, they found themselves impoverished, often incarcerated as a result, and then utilized as slave labor in penitentiaries. For example, prisoners will make as low as forty cents per hour. The state too, sees the revolutionary potential of this class and therefore utilizes the penal system and the prison industrial complex as a means by which to suppress their revolutionary potential. Part of the impending revolution required an end to "the prison system in its present form." The current prison system does not even attempt to rehabilitate the citizens who enter its gates. It is merely a punishment industry. We have witnessed the corporatization of the punishment industry. Prison labor is being outsourced; private companies are able to utilize prison labor. Davis continues to fight for the human rights of prisoners. She actively fights for the end of the prison industrial complex and issues that stem from it such as felony disenfranchisement, where convicted felons in many states permanently lose their right to vote. In addition, women are one of the fastest growing prison populations in the United States. As a result, she has also spoken out against the sexual abuse of women in prison. In addition to her commitment to the Black Liberation movement and prisoners' rights movement, Davis also struggled for the rights of women.

Angela Davis was an outspoken critic of the women's movement. However, unlike Elio Kennedy, her criticisms were not just of issues related to platform and strategy. Davis indicted the women's movement and its leaders for their neglect of both race and class. Black women were marginalized from second wave feminism. The White leadership of the women's movement thought that the "triple oppression" faced by women of color was not relevant to their lives. Women of color, particularly Black women, endured a matrix of oppression condition by their membership in a marginalized racial, gender, and class group. The dominant women's movement was bourgeois and allowed their social position and the privilege that came from it to blind them to the harsh realities facing many other women. Even when the movement fought for issues ostensibly impacting all women, it ignored race and class. For example, in the case of abortion rights, the movement ignored issues of forced sterilization that impacted poor women and women of color. Davis's goal was to demonstrate that the women's movement needed to be more attentive to issues related to both class and race. Moreover, addressing these issues would also benefit White middle class women.

The women's movement needed to reconcile itself with the labor movement. Women have been by far impacted the most by conservative welfare reform, union-busting, layoffs, and other labor issues. What has been coined the "feminization of poverty," the increasing likelihood that women will live in poverty, is not just a labor issue; it is a woman's issue. In addition, while dismissed by the women's movement as a racial issue, affirmative action also benefits women. In fact, Davis's pleas eventually caught on. White middle class women have benefited from affirmative action by far the most since its inception under the Lyndon Baines Johnson administration's Great Society.

Davis argued that the demands of the women's movement needed to stretch far beyond the much-needed battle for abortion rights and reproductive freedoms. She proposed the introduction of accessible day care. She was an advocate of reform within American educational institutions. Public schools should fight against racism within their structure and curriculum. For example, bilingual public education was mandatory. If these types of programs were implemented then women on the bottom of the social strata would benefit. When women on the bottom benefit it simultaneously makes advances for the women above them in the social hierarchy.

Davis's prescriptions for the women's movement were a reflection of her larger concerns about the extreme exploitation and dire poverty caused by capitalism. Davis argued that even the first wave women's movement for suffrage missed this point as well. The middle class White women fighting for the right to vote were often baffled by the working class women of all races who thought the suffrage movement was futile, if they did not have money to buy bread. This is the same point Davis made about the modern women's movement. The empowerment of women hinged upon a struggle that sought to tackle labor issues, homophobia, conservative immigration reform, ageism, and discrimination against differently-abled people. Davis accurately argued in the 1980s that a third wave of the women's movement was brewing. It was this third wave that would need to take up this multifaceted platform in order for future progress and empowerment to be realized. In the spirit of Pan-Africanism, this new movement must align itself with the struggles of oppressed women globally. Finally,

this new movement must adhere to socialist principles. These principles must include recognizing the need for free accessible healthcare for all, free education from kindergarten to postgraduate level, and housing reform such as what we currently see in Cuba. In Cuba, housing will never cost a family or individual more than 10 percent of their income. According to Davis, without addressing these fundamental bread-and-butter issues we will not achieve progress.

Future progress depends upon a set of very specific political strategies. First, Davis argues that future movements must be intergenerational and young and old activists must learn to work proactively side by side. Crucially, older activists must learn to allow younger people to take the helm and lead them. In addition, as noted previously, progressive activists must build bridges across racial and ethnic lines. Identity politics has thwarted the progress of the modern left in the United States. For example, Davis points out that modern issues such as immigrants' rights and campaigns against prisons have the ability to effectively achieve this goal. Finally, Davis argues for the importance of a cultural dimension in political activism. Modern political movements and organizations should utilize modern media and cultural forms to achieve their goals, organize and recruit members. After all, picket signs and newsletters are not the only way to disseminate a message. Music, art, poetry, etc. are all important strategies in protest and need to be utilized more frequently and effectively. Angela Davis continues to be a strong voice in progressive politics in the United States.

Political Prisoners, Prisons, and Black Liberation, 1971

Despite a long history of exalted appeals to man's inherent right of resistance, there has seldom been agreement on how to relate *in practice* to unjust, immoral laws and the oppressive social order from which they emanate. The conservative, who does not dispute the validity of revolutions deeply buried in history, invokes visions of impending anarchy in order to legitimize his demand for absolute obedience. Law and order, with the major emphasis on order, is his watchword. The liberal articulates his sensitivity to certain of society's intolerable details, but will almost never prescribe methods of resistance which exceed the limits of legality—redress through electoral channels is the liberal's panacea.

In the heat of our pursuit for fundamental human rights, Black people have been continually cautioned to be patient. We are advised that as long as we remain faithful to the *existing* democratic order, the glorious moment will eventually arrive when we will come into our own as full-fledged human beings.

But having been taught by bitter experience, we know that there is a glaring incongruity between democracy and the capitalist economy which is the source of our ills. Regardless of all rhetoric to the contrary, the people are not the ultimate matrix of the laws and the system which govern them—certainly not Black people and other nationally oppressed people, but not even the mass of whites. The people do not exercise decisive control over the determining factors of their lives.

Official assertions that meaningful dissent is always welcome, provided it falls within the boundaries of legality, are frequently a smokescreen obscuring the invitation to

acquiesce in oppression. Slavery may have been unrighteous, the constitutional provision for the enslavement of Blacks may have been unjust, but conditions were not to be considered so unbearable (especially since they were profitable to a small circle) as to justify escape and other acts proscribed by law. This was the import of the fugitive slave laws.

Needless to say, the history of the United States has been marred from its inception by an enormous quantity of unjust laws, far too many expressly bolstering the oppression of Black people. Particularized reflections of existing social inequities, these laws have repeatedly borne witness to the exploitative and racist core of the society itself. For Blacks, Chicanos, for all nationally oppressed people, the problem of opposing unjust laws and the social conditions which nourish their growth, has always had immediate practical implications. Our very survival has frequently been a direct function of our skill in forging effective channels of resistance. In resisting, we have sometimes been compelled to openly violate those laws which directly or indirectly buttress our oppression. But even when containing our resistance within the orbit of legality, we have been labelled criminals and have been methodically persecuted by a racist legal apparatus.

Under the ruthless conditions of slavery, the Underground Railroad provided the framework for extra-legal anti-slavery activity pursued by vast numbers of people, both Black and white. Its functioning was in flagrant violation of the fugitive slave laws; those who were apprehended were subjected to severe penalties. Of the innumerable recorded attempts to rescue fugitive slaves from the clutches of slave-catchers, one of the most striking is the case of Anthony Burns, a slave from Virginia, captured in Boston in 1853. A team of his supporters in attempting to rescue him by force during the course of his trial, engaged the police in a fierce courtroom battle. During the gun fight a prominent abolitionist, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, was wounded. Although the rescuers were unsuccessful in their efforts, the impact of this incident "... did more to crystallize Northern sentiment against slavery than any other except the exploit of John Brown, and this was the last time a fugitive slave was taken from Boston. It took 22 companies of state militia, four platoons of marines, a battalion of United States artillerymen, and the city's police force ... to ensure the performance of this shameful act, the cost of which, to the Federal government alone, came to forty thousand dollars."¹

Throughout the era of slavery, Blacks as well as progressive whites recurrently discovered that their commitment to the anti-slavery cause frequently entailed the overt violation of the laws of the land. Even as slavery faded away into a more subtle yet equally pernicious apparatus to dominate Black people, 'illegal' resistance was still on the agenda. After the Civil War, the Black Codes, successors to the old slave codes, legalized convict labor, prohibited social intercourse between Blacks and whites, gave white employers an excessive degree of control over the private lives of Black workers, and generally codified racism and terror. Naturally, numerous individual as well as collective acts of resistance prevailed. On many occasions, Blacks formed armed teams to protect themselves from white terrorists who were, in turn, protected by law enforcement agencies, if not actually identical with them.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, the mass movement headed by Marcus Garvey, proclaimed in its Declaration of Rights that Black people should not hesitate to disobey all discriminatory laws. Moreover, the Declaration announced, they should utilize all means available to them, legal or illegal, to defend themselves from legalized terror as well as Ku Klux Klan violence. During the era of intense activity around civil rights issues, systematic disobedience of oppressive laws was a primary tactic. The sit-ins were organized transgressions of racist legislation.

All these historical instances involving the overt violation of the laws of the land converge around an unmistakable common denominator. At stake has been the collective welfare and survival of a people. There is a distinct and qualitative difference between one breaking a law for one's own individual self-interest and violating it in the interests of a class or a people whose oppression is expressed either directly or indirectly through that particular law. The former might be called a criminal (though in many instances he is a victim), but the latter, as a reformist or revolutionary, is interested in universal social change. Captured, he or she is a political prisoner.

The political prisoner's words or deeds have in one form or another embodied political protests against the established order and have consequently brought him into acute conflict with the state. In light of the political content of his act, the 'crime' (which may or may not have been committed) assumes a minor importance. In this country, however, where the special category of political prisoners is not officially acknowledged, the political prisoner inevitably stands trial for a specific criminal offense, not for a political act. Often the so-called crime does not even have a nominal existence. As in the 1914 murder frame-up of the IWW organizer, Joe Hill, it is a blatant fabrication, a mere excuse for silencing a militant crusader against oppression. In all instances however, the political prisoner has violated the unwritten law which prohibits disturbances and upheavals in the status quo of exploitation and racism. This unwritten law has been contested by actually and explicitly breaking a law or by utilizing constitutionally protected channels to educate, agitate and organize the masses to resist.

A deep-seated ambivalence has always characterized the official response to the political prisoner. Charged and tried for a criminal act, his guilt is always political in nature. This ambivalence is perhaps best captured by Judge Webster Thayer's comment upon sentencing Bartolomeo Vanzetti to 15 years for an attempted payroll robbery: "This man, although he may not have actually committed the crime attributed to him, is nevertheless morally culpable, because he is the enemy of our existing institutions."² (The very same judge incidentally, sentenced Sacco and Vanzetti to death for a robbery and murder of which they were manifestly innocent.) It is not surprising that Nazi Germany's foremost constitutional lawyer, Carl Schmitt, advanced a theory which generalized this *a priori* culpability. A thief, for example, was not necessarily one who has committed an overt act of theft, but rather one whose character renders him a thief (*wer nach seinem wesen ein Dieb ist*). Nixon's and J. Edgar Hoover's pronouncements lead one to believe that they would readily accept Schmitt's fascist legal theory. Anyone who seeks to overthrow oppressive institutions, whether or not he has engaged in an overt illegal act, is *a priori* a criminal who must be buried alive in one of America's dungeons.

Even in all Martin Luther King's numerous arrests, he was not so much charged with the nominal crimes of trespassing, disturbance of the peace, etc., but rather with being an enemy of Southern society, an inveterate foe of racism. When Robert Williams was accused of a kidnapping, this charge never managed to conceal his real offense—the advocacy of Black people's incontestable right to bear arms in their own defense.

The offense of Black people's political prisoner is his political boldness, his persistent challenging—legally or extra-legally—of fundamental social wrongs fostered and reinforced by the state. He has opposed unjust laws and exploitative, racist social conditions in general, with the ultimate aim of transforming these laws and this society into an order harmonious with the material and spiritual needs and interests of the vast majority of its members.

Nat Turner and John Brown were political prisoners in their time. The acts for which they were charged and subsequently hanged, were the practical extensions of their profound commitment to the abolition of slavery. They fearlessly bore the responsibility for their actions. The significance of their executions and the accompanying widespread repression did not lie so much in the fact that they were being punished for specific crimes, nor even in the effort to use their punishment as an implicit threat to deter others from similar *armed* acts of resistance. These executions and the surrounding repression of slaves, were intended to terrorize the anti-slavery movement in general; to discourage and diminish both legal and illegal forms of abolitionist activity. As usual, the effect of repression was miscalculated and in both instances, anti-slavery activity was accelerated and intensified as a result.

Nat Turner and John Brown can be viewed as examples of the political prisoner who has actually committed an act which is defined by the state as "criminal." They killed and were consequently tried for murder. But did they commit murder? This raises the question of whether American revolutionaries had *murdered* the British in their struggle for liberation. Nat Turner and his followers killed some 65 white people, yet shortly before the Revolt had begun, Nat is reputed to have said to the other rebelling slaves: "Remember that ours is not war for robbery nor to satisfy our passions, it is a *struggle for freedom*. Ours must be deeds not words."³

The very institutions which condemned Nat Turner and reduced his struggle for freedom to a simple criminal case of murder, owed their existence to the decision, made a half century earlier, to take up arms against the British oppressor.

The battle for the liquidation of slavery had no legitimate existence in the eyes of the government and therefore the special quality of deeds carried out in the interests of freedom was deliberately ignored. There were no political prisoners, there were only criminals, just as the movement out of which these deeds flowed was largely considered criminal.

Likewise, the significance of activities which are pursued in the interests of liberation today is minimized not so much because officials are unable to see the collective surge against oppression, but because they have consciously set out to subvert such movements. In the Spring of 1970, Los Angeles Panthers took up arms to defend themselves from an assault initiated by the local police force on their office and on their persons. They were charged with criminal assault. If one believed the official propaganda, they were bandits

and rogues who pathologically found pleasure in attacking policemen. It was not mentioned that their community activities—educational work, services such as free breakfast and free medical programs—which had legitimized them in the Black community, were the immediate reason for which the wrath of the police had fallen upon them. In defending themselves from the attack waged by some 600 policemen (there were only 11 Panthers in the office) they were not only defending their lives, but even more important their accomplishments in the Black community surrounding them and in the broader thrust for Black Liberation. Whenever Blacks in struggle have recourse to self-defense, particularly armed self-defense, it is twisted and distorted on official levels and ultimately rendered synonymous with criminal aggression. On the other hand, when policemen are clearly indulging in acts of criminal aggression, officially they are defending themselves through 'justifiable assault' or 'justifiable homicide'.

The ideological acrobatics characteristic of official attempts to explain away the existence of the political prisoner of do not end with the equation of the individual political act with the individual criminal act. The political act is defined as criminal in order to discredit radical and revolutionary movements. A political event is reduced to a criminal event in order to affirm the absolute invulnerability of the existing order. In a revealing contradiction, the court resisted the description of the New York Panther 21 trial as 'political,' yet the prosecutor entered as evidence of criminal intent, literature which represented, so he purported, the political ideology of the Black Panther Party.

The legal apparatus designates the Black liberation fighter a criminal, prompting Nixon, Agnew, Reagan *et al.* to proceed to mystify with their demagoguery millions of Americans whose senses have been dulled and whose critical powers have been eroded by the continual onslaught of racist ideology.

As the Black Liberation Movement and other progressive struggles increase in magnitude and intensity, the judicial system and its extension, the penal system, consequently become key weapons in the state's fight to preserve the existing conditions of class domination, therefore racism, poverty and war.... The prison is a key component of the state's coercive apparatus, the overriding function of which is to ensure social control. The etymology of the term 'penitentiary' furnishes a clue to the controlling idea behind the 'prison system' at its inception. The penitentiary was projected as the locale for doing penitence for an offense against society, the physical and spiritual purging of proclivities to challenge rules and regulations which command total obedience. While cloaking itself with the bourgeois aura of universality—imprisonment was supposed to cut across all class lines, as crimes were to be defined by the act, not the perpetrator—the prison has actually operated as an instrument of class domination, a means of prohibiting the have-nots from encroaching upon the haves.

The occurrence of crime is inevitable in a society in which wealth is unequally distributed, as one of the constant reminders that society's productive forces are being channeled in the wrong direction. The majority of criminal offenses bear a direct relationship to property. Contained in the very concept of property, crimes are profound but suppressed social needs which express themselves in anti-social modes of action. Spontaneously produced by a capitalist organization of society, this type of crime is at

once a protest against society and a desire to partake of its exploitative content. It challenges the symptoms of capitalism, but not its essence.

Some Marxists in recent years have tended to banish 'criminals' and the lumpenproletariat as a whole from the arena of revolutionary struggle. Apart from the absence of any link binding the criminal to the means of production, underlying this exclusion has been the assumption that individuals who have recourse to anti-social acts are incapable of developing the discipline and collective orientation required by revolutionary struggle.

With the declassed character of lumpenproletarians in mind, Marx had stated that they are as capable of "the most heroic deeds and the most exalted sacrifices, as of the basest banditry and the dirtiest corruption."⁴ He emphasized the fact that the Provisional Government's Mobile Guards under the Paris Commune—some 24,000 troops—were largely formed out of young lumpenproletarians from 15 to 20 years of age. Too many Marxists have been inclined to overvalue the second part of Marx's observation—that the lumpenproletariat is capable of the basest banditry and the dirtiest corruption—while minimizing or indeed totally disregarding his first remark, applauding the lumpen for their heroic deeds and exalted sacrifices.

Especially today when so many Black, Chicano and Puerto Rican men and women are jobless as a consequence of the internal dynamic of the capitalist system, the role of the unemployed which includes the lumpenproletariat in revolutionary struggle must be given serious thought. Increased unemployment, particularly for the nationally oppressed, will continue to be an inevitable by-product of technological development. At least 30 per cent of Black youth are presently without jobs. In the context of class exploitation and national oppression it should be clear that numerous individuals are compelled to resort to criminal acts, not as a result of conscious choice—implying other alternatives—but because society has objectively reduced their possibilities of subsistence and survival to this level. This recognition should signal the urgent need to organize the unemployed and lumpenproletariat, as indeed the Black Panther Party as well as activists in prison have already begun to do.

In evaluating the susceptibility of the Black and Brown unemployed to organizing efforts, the peculiar historical features of the U.S., specifically racism and national oppression, must be taken into account. There already exists in the Black and Brown communities, the lumpenproletariat included, a long tradition of collective resistance to national oppression.

Moreover, in assessing the revolutionary potential of prisoners in America as a group, it should be borne in mind that not all prisoners have actually committed crimes. The built-in racism of the judicial system expresses itself, as Du Bois has suggested, the railroadings of countless innocent Blacks and other national minorities into the country's coercive institutions.

One must also appreciate the effects of disproportionate long prison terms on Black and Brown inmates. The typical criminal mentality sees imprisonment as a calculated risk for a particular criminal act. One's prison term is more or less rationally predictable. The function of racism in the judicial-penal complex is to shatter that predictability. The Black burglar, anticipating a 2 to 4 year term may end up doing 10 to 15 years, while the white burglar leaves after two years.

Within the contained, coercive universe of the prison, the captive is confronted with the realities of racism, not simply as individual acts dictated by attitudinal bias; rather he is compelled to come to grips with racism as an institutional phenomenon collectively experienced by the victims. The disproportionate representation of the Black and Brown communities, the manifest racism of parole boards, the intense brutality inherent in the relationship between prison guards and Black and Brown inmates—all this and more cause the prisoner to be confronted daily, hourly, with the concentrated, systematic existence of racism.

For the innocent prisoner, the process of radicalization should come easy; for the 'guilty' victim, the insight into the nature of racism as it manifests itself in the judicial-penal complex can lead to a questioning of his own past criminal activity and a re-evaluation of the methods he has used to survive in a racist and exploitative society. Needless to say, this process is not automatic, it does not occur spontaneously. The persistent educational work carried out by the prison's political activists plays a key role in developing the political potential of captive men and women.

Prisoners—especially Blacks, Chicanos, and Puerto Ricans—are increasingly advancing the proposition that they are *political* prisoners. They contend that they are political prisoners in the sense that they are largely the victims of an oppressive politico-economic order, swiftly becoming conscious of the causes underlying their victimization. The Folsom Prisoners' Manifesto of Demands and Anti-Oppression Platform attests to a lucid understanding of the structures of oppression within the prison—structures which contradict even the avowed function of the penal institution: "The program we are submitted to, under the ridiculous title of rehabilitation, is relative to the ancient stupidity of pouring water on the drowning man, in as much as we are treated for our hostilities by our program administrators with their hostility as medication." The Manifesto also reflects an awareness that the severe social crisis taking place in this country, predicated in part on the ever-increasing mass consciousness of deepening social contradictions, is forcing the political function of the prisons to surface in all its brutality. Their contention that prisons are being transformed into the "fascist concentration camps of modern America," should not be taken lightly, although it would be erroneous as well as defeatist in a practical sense, to maintain that fascism has irremediably established itself.

The point is this, and this is the truth which is apparent in the Manifesto: The ruling circles of America are expanding and intensifying repressive measures designed to nip revolutionary movements in the bud as well as to curtail radical-democratic tendencies, to utilize an entire network of fascist tactics, including the monitoring of congressmen's telephone calls, a system of 'preventive fascism,' as Marcuse has termed it, in which the role of the judicial-penal systems looms large. The sharp edge of political repression, cutting through the heightened militancy of the masses, and bringing growing numbers of activists behind prison walls, must necessarily pour over into the contained world of the prison where it understandably acquires far more ruthless forms.

It is a relatively easy matter to persecute the captive whose life is already dominated by a network of authoritarian mechanisms. This is especially facilitated by the

indeterminate sentence policies of many states, for politically conscious prisoners will incur inordinately long sentences on their original conviction. According to Louis S. Nelson, warden of San Quentin Prison, "... if the prisons of California become known as 'schools for violent revolution,' the Adult Authority would be remiss in their duty not to keep the inmates longer" (*S.F. Chronicle*, May 2, 1971). Where this is deemed inadequate, authorities have recourse to the whole spectrum of brutal corporal punishment, including out and out murder. At San Quentin, Fred Billingslea was teargassed to death in February, 1970. W. L. Nolan, Alvin Miller, and Cleveland Edwards were assassinated by a prison guard in January, 1970 at Soledad Prison. Unusual and inexplicable suicides have occurred with incredible regularity in jails and prisons throughout the country.

It should be self-evident that the frame-up becomes a powerful weapon within the spectrum of prison repression, particularly because of the availability of informers, the broken prisoners who will do anything for a price. The Soledad Brothers and the Soledad 3 are leading examples of frame-up victims. Both cases involve militant activists who have been charged with killing Soledad prison guards. In both cases, widespread support has been kindled within the California prison system. They have served as occasions to link the immediate needs of the Black community with a forceful fight to break the fascist stronghold in the prisons and therefore to abolish the prison system in its present form.

The pivotal struggle which must be waged in the ranks of the working class is consequently the open, unreserved battle against entrenched racism. The white worker must become conscious of the threads which bind him to a James Johnson, Black auto worker, member of UAW, and a political prisoner presently facing charges for the killings of two foremen and a job setter.⁵ The merciless proliferation of the power of monopoly capital may ultimately push him inexorably down the very same path of desperation. No potential victim of the fascist terror should be without the knowledge that the greatest menace to racism and fascism is unity!

Facing our Common Foe: Women and the Struggle against Racism, 1984⁶

It is too frequently assumed that white people are obligated to recognize Black people's leadership only when Afro-American equality is at issue—or that Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Native Americans, and Asian-Pacific people are only qualified to speak on behalf of their own people and not on the conditions of society and humanity at large. It is imperative that those sectors of the women's movement that largely reflect the particular aspirations of their white middle-class constituencies challenge these erroneous assumptions. All too often—historically as well as at present—white leaders of the women's movement presume that when Black women raise our voices about the triple oppression we suffer, our message is at best of marginal relevance to their experiences. They have falsely presumed that women's issues can be articulated in isolation from issues associated with the Black movement and the labor movement. Their theories and practice have frequently implied that the purest and most direct challenge to sexism is one exorcised of elements related to racial and economic oppression—as if there were such a phenomenon as abstract womanhood abstractly suffering sexism and