



Book Review: *Freedom is a Constant Struggle:*

Ferguson, Palestine and the Foundations of a Movement. Angela Y. Davis

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Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine and the Foundations of a Movement. Angela Y. Davis, Chicago: Haymarket Books (2016) Edited by Frank Barat. 158pp £14.99 ISBN 978-1-60846-564-4

Barbed-wire and walls delineating national frontiers; ‘supermax’ prisons; structural racism and its sharp expression in police violence; armed teachers; the prohibition of demonstrations under ‘anti-terrorist’ measures; the increase of security-focused discourses and practices, and our tolerance of them; all are fundamental features of our current times. Few authors, however, still dare to challenge the problem at its base: the existence of prisons and their role in the repressive network forged by global security corporations. In *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*, Angela Davis offers us an incisive analysis, going beyond the usual superficial criticism, of this global network. Even more importantly perhaps, her powerful abolitionist and feminist arguments push us to think about how, across the world, activists can weave webs of resistance and imagine different futures.

During the 1970s and up until the middle of the 1980s, several authors worked on the possibilities of abolition and the alternatives that could replace prisons (Davis and Rodriguez, 2000; Mathiesen, 2008). This discourse gradually faded away, to the extent that nowadays, it is barely present in the mainstream academic sphere, let alone governmental institutions. On the ground however, a great number of activist organisations work on the subject. They provide the support for Davis’s thesis on the possibility of change. In a sense, Davis acts as a bridge between academic critical theory and activism, between the history of the 1970s liberation struggle in the United States and organisations fighting against the prison industrial complex today (Davis, 1995). This allows her to develop a unique and powerful discourse, based on abolitionist *and* feminist ideas, that is sprinkled with fragments of stories from the 1970s Black liberation movement while being extremely relevant to understanding and acting in our current world.

In *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, Frank Barat, editor and human rights activist, compiled interviews, newspaper articles and speeches given by Angela Davis at universities and gatherings. This structure makes her style appear direct and effective; it calls on the attention of the reader throughout the transcribed versions of the speeches. It reinforces the feeling that the text aims to stimulate on-the-ground action, to foster and encourage debates within activist organisations. At the same time, this approach has a weakness, as the failure to edit some speeches results in the repetition of some content. Whilst these

repetitions are completely acceptable in speeches delivered in various places, sometimes even in different countries, they could, in the book version, have been edited to leave space for other interesting examples and descriptions.

When editing *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, Barat and Davis wished to answer several questions, which can be summed up in these three interrogations: 'How do we respond collectively to the militarization of our societies? What role can Black feminism play in this process? What does being a prison abolitionist mean in concrete terms today?' (p. xiii) The arguments developed to answer these questions draw from different registers, providing methodological – at an academic as well as activist level – conceptual and historical information to the reader.

A crucial concept that Davis clarifies in several of her speeches is that of 'intersectionality'. Far from the tortuous academic debates on intersectionality, Davis goes back to the historical origins of the word, coined within the context of radical movements activism. She reminds the reader that: 'Initially, intersectionality was about bodies and experiences' (p. 19). By presenting concrete examples of organisations and frameworks where categories such as race, class, gender, sexuality, nation and ability are entangled, she reasserts the effectiveness of this concept when seen from a practical perspective. Transgender, Gender Variant, Intersex Justice Project (TGIJP), an organisation based in California and working with transgender prisoners and former prisoners, is a perfect illustration of the usefulness of intersectionality.

More interesting however is Davis's insistence that in this field, normative categories constitute a pitfall that must be avoided at all costs. As she judiciously points out, the idea is not so much to focus on the 'intersectionality of identities' but rather on the 'intersectionality of struggles' (p. 144). And this perhaps constitutes the most powerful argument of the book. Davis asserts the need to disturb established categories and asks academic and activist circles to let go of the tendency to work on predictable and reassuring terrains, to leave space for surprise and unconventional entanglements of realities. To illustrate why seemingly universal categories like 'women' must be reshaped, she takes the example of the Third World Conference on Women that took place in Nairobi in 1985. There, a group of Black women activists realized that the category 'women' was too exclusive for Black women just to be assimilated within it. They had to challenge and reshape the whole category. While philosophers like Judith Butler (2003) have now elaborated comprehensive theories on the destabilization of categories, Davis provides a powerful on-the-ground analysis of this requirement, contending that it is fundamental to any feminist and

abolitionist movement. From a prison struggle perspective, she demonstrates how intersected realities that could seem marginal – such as psychiatric incarceration (Harcourt, 2011) or black women’s imprisonment (Sudbury, 2005) – can actually tell us more about the functioning of prison and its possible abolition than usual, more comfortable categories would.

When Davis speaks about the concrete implications of prison abolitionism, she tackles a wide range of issues. The first step towards abolitionism, she argues, is to develop strategies to change the social and economic conditions – as well as the structural racism of the state – that push someone towards imprisonment. Making public the economic benefits brought by prisons and immigrant detention centres to private security corporations constitutes another step. In *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, Davis also stresses a more profound, fundamental change that needs to be operated for society to move towards decarceration. We have internalized the notion ‘of a place to put bad people’ to such an extent that it prevents us from imagining other ways of dealing with violence and structural inequality. She asks the reader to look at the social origins of violence, at the violence reinforced by the prison institution’s own brutality and at the larger economic framework explaining the latest evolutions in prison privatization. We need to learn from the heritage of the 1970s, when after events like the Attica Prison Revolt, alternatives to imprisonment were discussed in the public sphere. Books such as *Freedom is a Constant Struggle* are the perfect way for these debates to occur once again.

By subtitled the book *Ferguson, Palestine, and the foundations of a movement*, Davis proves her resolute commitment to the interconnection of struggles across the globe. According to her, any struggle against the prison industrial complex needs to take into account its international strategies and respond to them by developing global relationships between local movements. Throughout the book, G4S repeatedly appears as the perfect symbol of the private security global corporation. It is the ‘third-largest private corporation in the world’ and the ‘largest private employer on the continent of Africa’ (p. 5). It can be found in Palestinian prisons, private South African prisons, the US-Mexico border, American schools and immigrant deportations, and in many other places. The existence of such companies shows that the parallel between South African post-apartheid imprisonment, Palestinian occupation and United States police violence is not merely conceptual. These historical configurations are directly linked through corporations like G4S. It constitutes an additional reason for the establishment of what Davis names ‘transnational solidarities’ (p. 131). Davis speaks about the movements born after the police killing of Trayvon

Martin and Michael Brown in the US, after the killing of Jimmy Mubenga while he was being deported by G4S from the UK to Angola, or the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) campaigns for Palestine, which have drawn so much from the historical anti-apartheid boycott. She outlines the already existing connections between the movements and urges us to forge further links between similar struggles, 'to create windows and doors' for people to join different solidarity movements (p. 21).

The only slight criticism that can be formulated bears on the lack of an in-depth explanation on Angela Davis's 'Marxist-inflected feminist insight – that perhaps reveals some influence of Foucault' (p. 106). She provides an extremely interesting analysis of the link between the personal and the political when considering the sphere of punishment, stating for instance that 'we replicate the structures of retributive justice oftentimes in our own emotional responses' (p. 106). While the entanglement of feminism and abolitionism is well illustrated, the combination of Marxist and Foucauldian theories deserve more than a one-line commentary. The very nature of the book, with its collected speeches, explains however why certain crucial topics are not investigated. Luckily, more information on the concepts used by Davis can be found in her other numerous writings, like *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (Davis, 2003).

All in all, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle* explains some key ideas in such an accessible way that it is the kind of book one wants to bring to reading groups and activist organisations, add to the reading lists of students and translate into many languages to reinforce its global impact. The book clarifies the concrete implications of prison abolitionism and the way feminism can be used as a methodology, as 'a guide to strategies for struggle' (p. 27). Simultaneously, it positions itself against the official historical discourse developed in the United States, a discourse focusing on individual historical actors, 'civil rights' struggles and a supposedly triumphing democracy. Davis sheds light on those silenced by this history, such as the Black women domestic workers who were the first to boycott segregated buses in the 1950s. She warns us about the risk of seeing the history of the Black freedom movement reduced to a 'civil rights movement' that has already obtained what it wanted within the unchanged framework of the United States' liberal democracy.

Davis takes a firm stand on global resistance, analysing transfers, influences and alliances between different local movements, encouraging the opening up of new discursive fields. By studying different national experiences of struggles, the idea is to expand our vision. Once we have realised the different forms the intersected realities of freedom movements can take, we will be able to imagine

new futures. For indeed, as Davis points out, 'Our histories never unfold in isolation' (p. 135).

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