



The Real Stain on Angela Davis' Legacy Is Her Support for Tyranny

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With the resurgence of Communism on the progressive left, it is perhaps fitting that America's most famous Communist, Angela Davis, should be having a moment in the spotlight.

Earlier this month, the news that the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, Alabama's venerable civil rights history museum, was rescinding a planned award to Davis due to questions raised about her record caused an uproar and an outpouring of support for the 74-year-old activist/academic. The Birmingham City Council unanimously approved a resolution "recognizing the life work of Angela Davis"; Mayor Randall Woodfin has voiced his dismay, and the BCRI itself, while not walking back its decision, has apologized for making the move too hastily and not responding to protests soon enough. Davis will be honored at an alternative event in Birmingham in February; meanwhile, on Wednesday, she speaks at a Martin Luther King Day event at the University of New England. There is little doubt that losing the BCRI award has been a win for the woman who was once the toast of Moscow, Havana and East Berlin.

According to reports in the media, the cancellation of the Fred L. Shuttlesworth Human Rights Award to Davis was due to objections from two local Jewish groups concerned about Davis's anti-Israel stance—which includes not just advocacy for the boycott/divestment/sanctions (BDS) campaign, but support for terrorists Rasmia Odeh and Marwan Barghouti, both of whom have been convicted of murdering Israeli civilians. (It is worth noting that criteria for the award include "embody[ing] a philosophy of non-violence and reconciliation.") But apparently, the BCRI board's decision was also influenced by a statement issued by Gen. Charles C. Krulak, former president of Birmingham-Southern College, who mentioned Davis's past Communist Party membership and her support for Communist regimes.

In the first days of the controversy, I wrote about it for the Jewish Daily Forward (which tilts strongly to the left and also published two critical piecemeal Jewish organizations to task for "tearing down" black leaders). While I believe Davis's advocacy on Palestinian issues goes far beyond support for human rights, the real issue for me was her history of support for violent radicalism in the United States and for totalitarianism abroad.

A Communist true believer, Davis became a Soviet propaganda icon as an American "political prisoner" in 1970, when she was charged with murder for her alleged role in a deadly courthouse attack intended to free three members of the Black Panthers. (At the time, I was in elementary

school in Moscow; like other Soviet schoolchildren, our class was required to sign postcards of support for Davis.) After her acquittal, she made a triumphant tour of Communist countries, received honors and prizes, and pointedly refused to speak up for Eastern-bloc political prisoners, even those who were Communist reformers. She did not leave the slavishly pro-Soviet Communist Party USA until 1991 when the USSR was about to collapse. I made what I thought was a rather obvious point: a woman who spent years as an ally of Communist regimes and never once raised her voice against those regimes' human rights abuses is a rather poor candidate for a human rights award.

The response from Twitter's hammer-and-sickle brigades was predictable and easily dismissed. But there were also objections from some black commentators who felt that Davis was being unfairly judged. One of them, veteran journalist Isaac J. Bailey, with whom I had an exchange on Twitter after my Forward piece, wrote a column for The Root, the African-American online magazine, arguing that the attacks on Davis show a racial double standard. Iconic black figures, Bailey writes, have to meet "white purity tests" in order to be recognized, and their flaws are allowed to outweigh everything they have done for the black community; on the other hand, "white American icons" such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson are revered even though they participated in the evil of slavery. Bailey suggests that white Americans "would cry foul if black people said that the public statues and monuments and memorials built to honor white men who raped, robbed, and murdered black people and Native Americans should be torn down because their sins far outweigh the good they did." Likewise, he says, the black community alone should decide whether Davis deserves to be honored.

But this is an argument both depressing and puzzling. Depressing, because it's the epitome of racial balkanization, suggesting that American heroes do not belong to all Americans but are segregated by race. Puzzling, because it ignores the fact that African-Americans *have* had a voice—a necessary voice—in the debate about how to deal with commemorations of a morally compromised past. The recent debate about Confederate monuments, which I believe should be taken down, has certainly involved the black community. Yale University's recent decision to rename Calhoun College, named after 19th Century pro-slavery politician John C. Calhoun, was also strongly influenced by pressure from black student activists. At Princeton, a similar push to remove the name of Woodrow Wilson (once the university's president) from school buildings because of his segregationist views did not succeed, but did lead to an effort to deal honestly with Wilson's complicated legacy. No person of even minimal decency would deny that black Americans have a stake in such issues.

Honoring Washington and Jefferson is a much more complex matter, even aside from their foundational role in this country's history. Both men were opposed to slavery; while the extent of Jefferson's opposition and the hypocrisy of his personal life has been the subject of continuing and heated debate, it's a fact that he banned the transatlantic slave trade as President of the United States and earlier spearheaded the ban on slavery in the Northwest territories (now the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin).

Distance in time makes a difference as well. Many people who have no problem with celebrating, say, the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky despite his virulent anti-Semitism would be aghast (and rightly so) if a writer who had made far milder anti-Jewish statements were up for a prestigious literary award today. It's not that dead public figures' repugnant views should never be held against them, but the bar is much higher.

The statute of limitations does not apply only to white public figures in America. The great artist Paul Robeson (1898-1976) was not only a Communist with Soviet ties but an outright Stalin apologist. In a particularly infamous episode, he publicly denied the persecution of Soviet Jews during Stalin's "anti-cosmopolitan" campaign after a 1949 trip to Moscow—even though his friend Itzhak Feffer, a poet who was later executed, discreetly told him the truth during his visit and pleaded for help. Robeson's Communist sympathies cost him dearly in his lifetime, destroying his once-stellar career during the Cold War. Yet today, he has been recognized with many honors, from a U.S. Post Office stamp to a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame to several high schools and community or campus centers named after him (including the Paul Robeson Cultural Center at my own alma mater, New Jersey's Rutgers University, of which he was also an alumnus).

Should these honors be denied because of Robeson's terribly flawed politics? I don't believe so. For one, Robeson was a true giant of both black American culture and American culture, period. He was also a complicated and tragic figure, held hostage by his conviction that discrediting Communism would hurt the struggle for black empowerment in the United States at a time when racism was openly institutionalized in large parts of the country. Robeson's relationship with the Soviet regime illustrates his moral conflicts: Despite his public stance in the West, he tried to make a statement against anti-Semitism on his 1949 Soviet trip by speaking in tribute to Soviet Jews and singing a wartime resistance song in Yiddish during his nationally broadcast concert in Moscow. Later, he reportedly became persona non grata in the USSR after privately confronting Khrushchev about anti-Jewish discrimination.

The contrast to Davis, who reached adulthood in an America that offered vastly more opportunities for black political participation, is stark. There is no indication that she ever showed any concern about the human rights situation in the Soviet bloc—not only on behalf of "pro-capitalist" dissidents, but even on behalf of, say, the Russian feminists who were jailed or forced to emigrate after launching an underground publication challenging the Soviet propaganda myth of full gender equality in the USSR, or the gays brutally persecuted for their sexuality in the Soviet Union and Cuba. (In 1973, Soviet Georgian film director Sergei Parajanov was tried for "homosexual relations" and sentenced to five years in labor camps; several Western communists, including French writer Louis Aragon, interceded with the Kremlin and probably helped secure the director's early release. Davis, who had very real influence with the Soviet regime at the time, said nothing.) Nor has she shown any regret or remorse since.

It's also unclear just what it is that Davis accomplished for the black community. Despite being dubbed a "civil rights icon," her only involvement in the civil rights movement of the Martin Luther King era happened when she was a teenage high school student; she spent most of the early 1960s studying in Europe with radical mentors like Herbert Marcuse, then threw herself into work for the Communist Party long past the time when it played an actual role in the fight for black equality. She was also involved with the Black Panthers, a violent radical group whose primary victims were fellow African-Americans such as Sam Napier, the distribution manager of the party newspaper, killed with unspeakable brutality by a rival Panther faction, and 19-year-old Alex Rackley, tortured and murdered on mistaken suspicion of being an FBI informant. A 1969 speech Davis gave at a Black Panther rally in Oakland, California included words of solidarity for the "brothers and sisters in Connecticut"—the men and women awaiting trial for Rackley's horrific murder.

While Davis was active on the far-left fringes of black politics in the 1970s and 1980s, her most notable role at the time was being the vice-presidential candidate of the Communist Party, a Soviet-funded outfit supremely irrelevant to the interests of African-Americans. It is notable, too, that while some black American Communists such as Josephine Wyatt left the party in the 1980s after its leader Gus Hall pursued a deliberate course of de-emphasizing the “black national question,” Davis remained loyal.

Some of the accusations thrown at Davis are probably unfair. I don’t believe that, as some have suggested, she is an anti-Semite; it’s worth noting that in one of her statements in the wake of the BCRI controversy, she cautioned against blaming the award cancellation on the Jewish community, even adding that “it’s important . . . to be aware of the extent to which anti-Semitism can also be a force.” While her anti-Israel stance is quite extreme—she advocates a boycott of all things Israeli, not just goods produced in the settlements, and has referred to the “Israeli occupation of Palestine,” not just of Gaza and the West Bank, implying that the state of Israel itself is illegitimate—her animus is almost certainly against the liberal capitalist West, not against Jews as such.

I also don’t believe that the murder and kidnapping charges on which Davis was acquitted should be held against her. In my view, there is evidence that the all-white jury’s verdict was influenced by political sympathy (an assertion The Root’s Bailey finds scandalously absurd, even though one of the jurors gave Davis’s supporters in the courtroom a clenched-fist salute after the verdict and told the Los Angeles Times that he wanted to “show a unity of opinion for all oppressed people”). At the same time, the prosecutor admitted that the conspiracy case was less than ironclad, and if respecting the presumption of innocent should be a cornerstone of our justice system, then respecting a not-guilty verdict should be doubly so.

No one, as far as I know, is arguing for the banishment of Davis from public life, or for stripping her of her academic titles and pension. The question is whether she deserves to be honored as a fighter for human rights. Her defenders assert that she has championed “justice around the world”; but even if we were to grant this claim for her activism on the behalf of African-Americans and Palestinians, that leaves out a large chunk of the world where Davis unrepentantly stood with the oppressors. The woman who declares that “Palestine under Israeli occupation . . . is the largest open air prison” once made a pilgrimage to the Berlin Wall in support of the East Berlin regime that killed people trying to escape.

One could say that if African-Americans can object to honors for white supremacists, Americans who are survivors of Communist tyranny—in the Soviet Union, Cuba, Vietnam, East Germany—can object to honors for Communists. But I’d rather take the view that any member of the American public, regardless of race, color or origin, should be able to have an opinion on public honors for anyone.

Critics of double standards do have some valid points. I believe many anti-Communists have been insufficiently consistent when it comes to support for right-wing authoritarian regimes. Much as I admire the late Jeanne Kirkpatrick for her staunchly anti-Soviet position at the United Nations, and generally agree with her thesis that conservative authoritarian regimes are less repressive than revolutionary totalitarian ones, I believe this stance led her into a regrettable blindness toward some egregious abuses. It’s a question that deserves particular attention today, when we have a Republican President who shows open affection for authoritarian rulers.

During my Twitter exchanges about Davis's human rights award, I wondered what I would say if someone asked how the Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty given by the Cato Institute—with which I have a longstanding unpaid affiliation—squares with Friedman's brief association with Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet and his praise for Pinochet-era economic reform in Chile. I could say that Friedman never praised or endorsed the dictatorship (he condemned it as a “terrible political regime” in 1991) and merely offered Pinochet economic advice, just as he had to some Communist governments. I could also point out that he explicitly expressed the hope that economic reform would steer Chile toward liberalism. Still, we must at least recognize that, as Reason editor Brian Doherty wrote twelve years ago, “Friedman's decision to interact with officials of repressive governments creates uncomfortable tensions for his libertarian admirers.” Or, one might add, pro-liberty conservatives.

There is no such soul-searching on the pro-Davis left, which has never come to terms with its support for terrible totalitarian regimes. The accolades bestowed on Davis today add to that baggage.