



## The Lit Review Podcast

## English Transcript

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**Guest/Topic:** Angela Davis on *Capital* by Karl Marx

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**Page May:**

You're listening to the Lit Review podcast. I'm Page and I'm joined by my amazing co-host, Monica Trinidad! How's your day going, Monica?

**Monica Trinidad:**

Hey Page and everybody out there listening, I'm doing well, thank you for asking, extremely well knowing what episode we're about to drop and share with everybody, so yeah, I'm just really excited!

**Page May:**

Yes, I am so excited to say this sentence: In this episode, we sat down with none other than Angela! Davis! Ahhh! Wooo! Yes! Oh my gosh! Can you feel how happy I am? This is amazing. [laughs]

**Monica Trinidad:**

I wish everyone could see your face right now. Your smile—it's so huge!

**Page May:**

Yeah it's ginormous, and I have that weird vein in my head, I'm so happy right now. So [laughs] that happened, it really did, it took us literally years to make this happen but we were really fortunate to be able to Zoom in with none other than Professor Angela Davis, and I know we need an introduction even though hopefully folks are, this isn't a surprise, folks know about it, or maybe you're here just to listen to this interview with her, and if this is your first time here, welcome.

But in this episode, I actually do a longer bio when we're sitting down and talking with her, and so for now I'm just going to briefly say, in case you aren't familiar with Angela, that she is a retired professor, a lifelong freedom fighter, an author, and an intellectual, a former political prisoner, and her work, her ideas, her writings, her thinking, her struggle has been a pillar of the modern abolitionist movements that a lot of us are engaged in, and she is still a part of those movements, I don't want to say that she's only in the past, she's very present and very active. And I also want to lift up, I think it's important cause a lot of folks don't know this, she was never a member of the Black Panther Party. She was a member of the Community Party. Which is a big part of why we wanted her on here today, to talk about this book by Karl Marx, which is *Capital*. Now, Monica, I'm going to turn it over to you first because I have a lot of feelings, but how are you feeling about this episode?

**Monica Trinidad:**

Thanks Page, yeah! I'm feeling good. Yes, the book Angela Davis is talking about with us today is indeed *Capital*, or *Das Kapital* in its original German language, it's A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1, The Process of Production of Capital, which is, you know, written by philosopher and sociologist Karl Marx in 1867. So this book is at over a thousand pages long, it's extremely dense and full of jargon that I'm still trying to fully grasp and understand, yet Angela considers it a must-read for organizers. So we had to talk about it! I really loved getting to witness how hyped Angela was to talk about this book. You know, she talks about how her parents were both teachers, she read this book in college, in grad school, she read it in German, while she was studying abroad. And she's taught it multiple times, and still picks it up every now and then and finds something new to engage with that she hadn't noticed before. So she just really loves this book and she says in the episode that "as long as capitalism continues to exist, reading Marx will be really helpful to us." So if you're an anti-capitalist, or you're part of the labor movement, or you've just always wanted to read *Capital* by Karl Marx, but you were extremely intimidated by it like I was, then this conversation is definitely for you.

We definitely don't cover everything that's in this 1st volume otherwise this episode would have been several hours long, but Angela does a really good job at providing super real and tangible and current examples of the terms and theories that Marx is explaining to help us better understand this volume.

But! Don't expect a summary of the book in this episode. For our regular listeners who are used to that, you know we always try and ask our guests to summarize the book for us, which is no small feat for many of the books that our guests talk about, but for this book in particular, Angela was just like no, there's no way this book is summarizable, it's just not gonna happen. So there's that, sorry, not quite the spark notes for the movement for this episode. But! It's definitely full of helpful context that I'm still carrying with me today.

And then one more thing Page before I pass it back to you—One of my favorite parts of this episode is when Angela really gets into the quote-unquote “trick” that is at the core of exploitation within this capitalist system, and she shares this distinction that we often fail to make between labor and labor power, where the worker is told that they are being paid for their labor, but they’re actually only being paid for their capacity to work, for their labor power. And so it just unraveled so many threads for me, you know, one, affirming why I hate capitalism so much and how it needs to go. But also just really breaking it down to the foundational pieces of what capitalism actually is. So, I could go on forever, what about you Page? I know you’ve been wanting to talk about this book with Angela for a long time.

**Page May:**

Yeah I mean this was one of two main texts that I always wanted to have talked about on this show, the other being *Black Reconstruction*. One of the reasons is because I only have read some of this book, and it was back when I was I think 19 years old, and it was assigned to me for college, and I struggled through it, I didn’t understand most of it, but what I did was really important for me and it really helped me make sense of the world and my experiences in it, and very much shaped my introductions to sort of radical politics and movement. And then I came to Chicago and since then my experiences of Marx and Marxists, specifically, have been like, the white cis bros of the world, yeah those dudes, and I just don’t have patience or time or interest in. Yeah and so that, I haven’t really revisited it since then and the things that I did learn from that book I refer to and think about often. Very, very often, and are very much a part of how I understand what we are trying to do and what has happened. And so it's very important to me, I want to understand this book. But it is a very difficult text, and anyone who tells you otherwise, they’re lying to you.

And so anyways, I also wanted to specifically talk about this book with Angela Davis because...she's very important to me, that's a whole other conversation, but she’s like – yeah, I really, really, really have learned a lot from and look up to and have all of the like “oh my god” – she's that person for me, forever and always. And so to get to be walked through this book and think about this book in the context of movement from Angela, who is someone whose ideas and values and politics and praxis I really respect, was very helpful.

So if you’re coming at this from a place of maybe you’ve been assigned it in a class, maybe you’re just struggling through it on your own, and you just want that review of the, helping yourself to understand these terms of commodities, surplus value, abstract value, exploitation... I think it is really helpful in those ways. I will say, I have more questions than when we started. It doesn't necessarily – this book cannot be summarized.

And also, there was this question that I was really insistent on asking because I expected her to say one thing on Black Capitalism and then she said the opposite and I was so thrown! I’m still

like “Whhaaaat!” – so that’s a teaser! Wait ‘til you get to that part. See how you feel, what you think. There’s a lot that I could say, I think it was really rich, and I think it’s very important as well, but I’m just going to highlight one specific quote that actually is pulling a little bit from the beginning of the interview and then the end, but I think they go together really neatly. And so Angela was saying that the book *Capital* was “designed to encourage people to raise questions about an economic system that was still relatively young at the time but was considered to be permanent. It was considered to be the only way to guarantee economic progress. One of the major contributions of Marx and Engels’ analysis of capitalism is that it is a product of history, it’s not a system that is permanent. If capitalism came into history through being history, then it could also be replaced by something else through history.” And I share that quote because I think it represents that, yes, this is a nerdy, academic, jargon-y conversation, absolutely, and I love it, but I know I am that person, but it’s also very practical. It’s also rooted in its commitment to movement building and I think really charged with hope. And so I hope you enjoy this conversation as much as we did. Here’s Episode 60, Marx’s *Capital* with Angela, ah, I’m so nervous and excited, Angela freaking Davis.

*[INTRO STARTS]*

*[Sound of book pages turning, soft instrumental music]*

**Monica:** You're listening to the Lit Review Podcast.

**Page:** We're your hosts, Page May and Monica Trinidad.

*[Musical hip hop beat playing in background from “Chicago” by David Ellis]*

**Mariame Kaba voiceover:** *"I think it's essential for people to learn together in order to be able to understand what we're up against."*

**Protesters Chanting:** *"CPD, shut it down! New Jim Crow, shut it down!" [chanting] "I said No Cop Academy, 95 mil for community!"*

**Page voiceover:** *"We must disrupt, we must disobey, we must agitate, we must escalate, we must break, we must create, we must abolish, we must transform -"*

**Young person voiceover:** *"I remember, she was shot by my house -"*

**Mariame voiceover:** *"In sharing our ideas, we're stronger."*

*[Music Lyrics] “Welcome to Chicago, this is home for most. This is the home of the wealthy, making cameos. This is the house of the heartless, the home of the cold. Man, my dog gets more*

*acknowledgement than homeless folks. This is a house, a generation filled in Audy homes...”*  
*[Music Fades]*

**Page May:**

Y'all, we are here today with the one and only Dr. Angela Davis. Thank you so much for joining us. How are you today?

**Angela Davis:**

I'm doing fine. How are you?

**Page May:**

I'm well. I'm very excited. Not going to lie, I'm a little bit nervous. But we have been dreaming of this conversation about this book with you specifically, for years at this point and have so many questions and it is a very, very large book. We want to dive right in. Before we do that, I'm going to do my best at giving you a proper introduction. Angela Davis, for folks who don't know, radical queer Black woman. She's a scholar, writer, activist, organizer, educator, and a former political prisoner, founding member of Critical Resistance. A long time former member of the Communist Party, a political philosopher, a feminist, inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame, and also the 100 most influential people in 2020 by Time Magazine.

**Page May:**

What else? I remember learning of you and how you were fired from your professor, your teaching position, for your membership in the Communist Party. Then in 1970, were internationally known and placed on the FBI's top 10 most wanted list and were incarcerated for, I believe over a year, facing three counts of the death penalty, all of which you were eventually acquitted of. I've come to know you through your work as an author of more than 10 books and hearing you speak here in Chicago. But also, I know you have spoken all around the world and have inspired so many organizers and activists and artists across the globe, who are part of our larger movements to end violence in the PIC and Western imperialism, the world over here. I know, I believe you're still a current professor at the University of California, and we are just so lucky and grateful that you've chosen to take some time today to talk to us about this very large and rather intimidating book. Monica, I'm going to turn it over to you.

**Angela Davis:**

I'm actually a retired professor.

**Page May:**

Congratulations.

**Monica Trinidad:**

Congratulations.

**Angela Davis:**

At the UC Santa Cruz. But, I'm still teaching.

**Angela Davis:**

I'm teaching this spring at UCLA. I still teach, but I'm professor emerita at UC Santa Cruz.

**Page May:**

Got it.

**Monica Trinidad:**

Brilliant. Got it. We start every episode asking our guests, who are all either community organizers, or radical authors, or activists, to share a little bit about who they are, what they do and why they do what they do. But, there's no doubt that those listening already know a lot about who you are and what you do. So the real question we want to get at here is, why do you do what you do and what really moves you to do what you do on a daily basis? Also feel free to add anything that we also might have missed in your introduction.

**Angela Davis:**

Well, I think your introduction was pretty thorough. Thank you. Why do I do what I do? I love thinking and learning and teaching. I should point out that both my parents were teachers. I think I inherited that desire for knowledge from them. Ever since I can remember, I've been interested in transformative ideas and radical activism. One of the great gifts of growing up under conditions of legalized segregation in the South, was that I learned early on that the world needed to be changed from the time I was, perhaps three or four years old. Almost everything I've done over the course of my almost eight decades on this earth, has been related to thinking about examining, discovering, helping to forge with other strategies to bring about radical change in the world. I think I'll end there. Of course, we can spend the entire podcast talking about that, but I'm going to try to be succinct, a quality I don't necessarily have, but I will try.

**Page May:**

I think every question we're about to ask you could be an entire hour. Yeah, so that'll be the theme. I'm curious, can you tell us what led you to read this book Marx's *Capital*? Do you remember how old you were, where you were, why you read it, and then how has the book influenced your life since then?

**Angela Davis:**

Well, I have read *Capital* at various points in my life. But I guess I should begin by pointing out that when I was attending high school in New York, Elizabeth Irwin High School, associated with the little red schoolhouse. We actually read *The Communist Manifesto* in our history class. I'll never forget how enlightening it was to read this at the age of 15. I began to read *Capital* as a college student. I began to read it and then I spent a great deal of time studying it when I was a graduate student. That was when I read large sections of the book in the original German, when I studied in Frankfurt, Germany.

**Angela Davis:**

I should point out that I did not approach *Capital* in isolation from the other works. I'm very happy that because I was studying philosophy, I was also concerned with reading the writings of the young Marx, the philosopher Marx. For example, *The German Ideology* and then the 1844 economic and philosophical manuscripts. That text was especially important to me, because you're able to see how Marx later employed a philosophical framework to develop critiques of political economy.

**Angela Davis:**

Excuse me. Perhaps I should say here a few words about my mentor, Herbert Marcuse, who actually helped to kindle my interest in the philosophical tradition of German idealism, which later led to my studying in Germany. Marcuse wrote one of the first essays about the 1844 manuscripts and the 1844 manuscripts were not discovered and published until 1932. Marcuse then wrote a paper that was called *The Foundation of Historical Materialism*. I'll never forget that he wrote about the fact that he had been seeking to figure out how to create a philosophical foundation for the critique of political economy that one sees later. With the discovery of the 1844 economic and philosophical manuscripts, he realized that Marx himself had done that work. He argued that philosophy was not something that Marx engaged with as a young scholar, and then later moved on to study the economy, to study political economy, or rather critiques of political economy.

**Angela Davis:**

He pointed out that that philosophical foundation was everywhere in his work, at all stages of his work. Also, he pointed out that there is a difference between philosophical and practical and revolutionary approaches. The Capitalist system has to be overthrown as a result of the economic and political struggles of the working class, of the proletariat. But he argued that economics and politics have become the basis of the theory of revolution, as a result of a very particular philosophical interpretation of human existence and humanity. Yeah, I read *Capital*, as I said, at various moments of my life. I have taught the text also at various times and I continue to learn from it. Every time I pick it up again, I see something that did not necessarily strike me the first time I engaged with it.

**Monica Trinidad:**

Yeah. From what I know about Karl Marx, is that he wrote *Capital*, one directed towards a working class audience, with the hope that by explaining their conditions and how their ascribed social positions got them where they are, and, in addition to describing the strengths and the weaknesses of the Capitalist system, that the working class would then organize and overthrow the system. But, we also know that Marx took extremely long to write this book, these volumes, as he dealt with poor health and financial hardships, and also just being pulled into political activity, which we all know happens to us when we're called to the streets and called to respond to crises in our communities. But, can you say a little bit more about the material and the political content in which Marx wrote *Capital*? What was going on around him while he was writing this book?

**Angela Davis:**

Yeah, and let's not forget that this was a collaborative undertaking, and that Engels also participated in the process of writing. But the first volume was the only volume of *Capital* published during Marx's lifetime. Engels published the second and third volume, and then there's actually a fourth volume, which consists-

**Monica Trinidad:**

What? I didn't know there was a fourth volume.

**Page May:**

Weren't there supposed to be eight?

**Angela Davis:**

Yeah, there is a fourth volume and that fourth volume is a three volume tone, and it is called Theories of Surplus Value. Marx himself intended it to be the fourth volume of *Capital*. But of course, it was not published until much later. The first volume was published in 1867 and then Marx died in 1883. He was only 65 when he died. Engels published volume two in 1885 and volume three in 1894. The fourth volume that was actually put together by Carl [Kowski 00:18:28] was published later.

**Angela Davis:**

But I guess it's important to point out that there was a political context and that context was created by the revolutions of 1848 in Europe. We should remember also that 1848 is the year when *The Communist Manifesto* was published, and that there were Communist parties or Communists what they call Communist Working Men's Associations. We have to be attentive of



the nature of the language and the ways in which the consciousness of gender have not yet emerged during that period.

**Angela Davis:**

But *Capital* was, yes, I think you're absolutely right. *Capital* was designed to encourage people to raise questions about an economic system that was still relatively young at that time, but was considered to be permanent. It was considered to be the only way to guarantee economic progress. There's a story that impressed me so much when I was a young activist, and that is that the father of a very good friend of mine now, whose name was Franklin Alexander. He is now deceased, but he was an activist, well in the Communist party, but also in [inaudible 00:20:06] and a number of other organizations. His father, of whom we all called Alex, was also a member of the Communist Party. When he joined the Communist Party, he did not know how to read. He learned how to read by reading *Capital*. That is how he became literate, because he thought that it was his responsibility as a worker to understand the functioning of the Capitalist system.

**Angela Davis (00:20:42):**

That's quite a remarkable story. And of course, there are amazing stories about reading circles around *Capital* all over the world. I think people should still engage in *Capital* in that human way. In that way of helping to enlighten ourselves about the conditions that surround our existence, even though of course, capitalism has developed a great deal since then. Marx could never have probably imagined the ways in which global capitalism functions today. Nevertheless, the basic theory of the system and the exploitation at the core of the system, is explained in *Capital* in a much better way than anywhere else.

**Page May:**

I was introduced to reading this in college. I remember, I mean, it was really transformative to my way of thinking. It was also extremely difficult and all of my professors just said, "You just have to get through it." So I'm very impressed that someone learned to read by this book. We start off with a big question that I think is maybe impossible, because of how long these volumes are. But can you summarize, what is this series of books about? How would you summarize Marx and Engles' *Capital*?

**Angela Davis:**

You can't summarize *Capital*. Let me put it that way. It's really not the text that lends itself to summary. But, I guess I would say that *Capital* helps us to understand the nature of our worlds. What surrounds us, that which we absolutely take for granted. The world of commodities. Capitalism itself is all about commodity relations. If we don't realize that, we're still a part of those relations. Volume one addresses the contradictions in the capitalist mode of production. I mean, it's so interesting because it begins with the sentence of which evokes the wealth of

societies and the capitalist mode of production, which presents itself as an immense accumulation of commodities.

**Angela Davis:**

Therefore, Marx argues that we have to begin our investigation of capitalism by looking at the commodity. What is the analysis of the commodity? What is the nature of the commodity? Perhaps we can, well, I'll say something about that later. But, because you've asked me to do the impossible, that is to say, summarize the text. I'll say that volume one helps us to understand all of the contradictions in the capitalist mode of production. Then volume two focuses on the circulation of capital and buying and selling commodities, including this very bizarre commodity, which is called labor power, which I'm sure we'll get to later. Then volume three helps us to begin to understand surplus value and how profit is created. I think I pointed out that there's a fourth volume, that's called *Theories of Surplus Value*. Let me just leave it at that.

**Angela Davis:**

Many people are reluctant to begin reading *Capital* because they think it's just all about political economy. If you're not an economist, or somewhat interested in political economy, it must be rather boring. But let's remember that it is a critique. This notion of critique comes out of the tradition of German idealism. Kant for example, wrote three critiques, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, and *The Critique of Judgment*. [inaudible 00:26:30] wrote critique. This is the philosophical tradition Marx was schooled in. He was interested, not so much in describing political economy, but engaging in a critique of the existing theories of political economy. In order to develop this critique, he draws upon history and literature and philosophy, so that *Capital* really is an interdisciplinary text. I think that's so important for people today who are interested in interdisciplinary fields, who study feminist studies, or Black studies, or cultural studies, or critical prison studies, that Marx's *Capital* is one of the first great interdisciplinary works.

**Angela Davis:**

That is what I love about it. I love the fact that it is impossible to imagine without the literature that he writes, without the philosophical context, without attention to history. My favorite part of the text comes early on. As a matter of fact, it's in chapter one of volume one, and section four of chapter one of volume one, and it's called the Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof. I think that even if people can't commit to reading the entire volume, that this chapter would be really insightful, because he begins to point to the ways in which ideology affects our capacity to understand the world. At a time when we are in this country, are asking ourselves, how is it that so many people fail to recognize the dangers of white supremacy? When so many people, not only entertain racist ideas, but assume that that is the way everyone is supposed to think. Reading Marx can help to shed light on that.

**Angela Davis:**

He says that a commodity is a mysterious thing, because in the commodity, you see the social character of human labor, but it appears as an objective character. The ways which he encourages us to understand that what we assume are objects that are valuable only in relation to what they cost, by urging us to think about the fact that these are products of human labor. And that, as a matter of fact, they help to define human relations. When I'm sitting here at this computer talking to you, I should think of the computer not as something that costs \$1,000 or whatever, but rather as something that was produced by other human beings. It mediates my relation to the other people, the women, the men, the non-binary people who engage in the labor that helped to produce this object, which allows me to communicate with you.

**Angela Davis:**

He's encouraging us to think more deeply about the meaning of our relations with people. Today, we can say all over the planet and not to fall prey to a fetishistic relationship with things that can only be measured in this fetishistic framework, in relation to the exchange value, or in relation to what they cost. I'll stop there.

**Monica Trinidad:**

Angela, I'm really glad that I got a minor in philosophy, because I think I understood the Kant reference. I'm like good that, that minor in philosophy came in handy right now. I really want to get even more to the root of capitalism. How did capitalism get created in the first place?

**Angela Davis:**

Well, capitalism is a socioeconomic order that historically evolved from previous economic systems. One of the major contributions of Marx and Engels' analysis of capitalism, is that it is a product of history. It's not a system that is permanent. If capitalism came into being historically, if capitalism came into being through history, then it could also be replaced by something else through history. It could also exit history. Marx argues that capitalism evolved from previous economic systems, feudalism, for example, which preceded capitalism. But, we can talk to greater length about that. Slavery, of course. I don't think it's helpful to think of this as a linear development, because there are still places on this earth that are very much influenced by feudal relations, and of course slavery still exists.

**Angela Davis:**

But, historically capitalism was the economic system that was favored by the bourgeoisie, and the bourgeoisie created revolutions in Europe and the Americas. The French Revolution, of course in 1789, and the American Revolution some years earlier, 13 years earlier in 1776. We usually think of these revolutions as ushering in political systems of democracy. But they were

also representing the bourgeoisie's economic interests and in an economic system that would allow them to control the processes of economic production. The members of the bourgeoisie, they wanted freedom. They wanted equality. They wanted justice. But they were talking about the middle classes, the bourgeoisie. They were not talking about poor people and the working classes. They were contesting the aristocracy. They were contesting the political rule of the aristocracy and they wanted equality for themselves.

**Angela Davis:**

But, it's so important to point out that this did not include workers. This did not include people who had been enslaved. This is why in the U.S. we have a Constitution, a so-called Democratic Constitution that asserts that all men are equal. We observe the gender bias already, but it's important to point out that they weren't even talking about all men, because of course they weren't talking about enslaved men. But they weren't even talking about poor men. They weren't even talking about men without property. So, that this universalism is a class bias universalism. Yeah, Capitalism is a product. I think it's so important to recognize that it emerges with this particular form of democracy. It's a product, it's related to and is a product of the bourgeoisie's desire for economic and political power.

**Page May:**

Power, as I understand it, is a relationship, right? I think that's something that you've been speaking to and bringing up is that Marx and people who study capitalism are showing that it's not this static thing. It's not money and the free market and the stock market. That it's actually an order of relations. It seems like it's drawn or defined through commodities. These are things, I'm saying them, and I'm grasping at trying to understand what this all means. But, it seems to me that there's this point of, it was so that the bourgeoisie could have power and maintain that power. It wasn't centering poor people, but it required that there exists poor people, or slaves, if I'm hearing this right. It seems that exploitation is built into the system. It is a part of its design. That, again, it's not a static thing, but it is a process of inequality and power over. Is that true? How is capitalism inherently exploitative? Yeah, does that question, hopefully it made sense.

**Angela Davis:**

Yeah, it does. It's so interesting that many people consider the notion of exploitation as a moral category, as a category of judgment. You might argue that *Capital* examines the nature of exploitation that can be quantified and examined within a rational framework. So that the rate of exploitation is what is one of the most important elements of *Capital* that built into the very system of capitalism, is a necessary need for exploitation. Exploitation generates profit. Profit is at the center of capitalism. Without exploitation, there can be no profit. Much of what we read about in *Capital* helps us to understand, not only the nature of that exploitation, but the hidden

character of it. The fact that it is assumed simply to be the normal operational quality of capitalism and that nothing is wrong with it. That is not as a matter of fact, it is not exploitation.

**Angela Davis:**

Capitalism pivots around the production of profit. Profit is only possible when the capitalist or the owner of capital, is able to hire workers who can produce, not only the value of their own labor. I'm not using technically accurate terms here, because I should be saying labor time instead of labor. But they can also produce more. They can produce surplus value. As it turns out, the owners of capital precisely because they have resources from the get at the very outset, they're able to buy labor power for much less than what it costs to reproduce that labor power.

**Angela Davis:**

This is actually the formula of exploitation. This is the nature of exploitation, that secret aspect of the contract between the worker and the capitalist. The worker is told that she is selling her labor to the capitalist and the capitalist agrees to buy that labor, say for, well, we are talking about \$15 an hour now, the minimum wage, for \$15 an hour. But in actuality, the worker produces, say twice the value in the course of the hour. The worker produces the equivalent of \$30 in that hour. The \$15 that remains that is not a part of the cost of reproducing labor power, that is to say, "You know what? I need a house. I need food. I need so forth and so on, in order to be able to get up and come back to work the next day."

**Angela Davis:**

That's really only, the capital is only prepared to pay me for what it cost me to stay alive and to come back to work. Anything beyond that is surplus value. But, it is also about that is the source of profit. That is why exploitation is measurable. It's a central aspect of the critique of Capitalist political economy.

**Monica Trinidad:**

Yeah, you have this quote from 2017 that I wrote down explaining how the capitalist system works, where you say, "The workers get paid enough to keep themselves alive in order to go to work." I thought that that was a very succinct way of explaining how this system works.

**Angela Davis:**

Thank you.

**Monica Trinidad:**

You mentioned, you brought up surplus value and I just have a really quick question, is that the same as abstract labor or is that different?

**Angela Davis:**

Well, surplus value is really complicated. But, as I told you, there's an entire three volume, fourth volume that addresses surplus value.

Surplus value is possible because of the value of labor time. As Marx pointed out in that section on the fetishism of commodities, the commodity is a bizarre thing, and especially the commodity that the worker sells and that commodity is called labor time. It's not so much concrete labor, because that concrete labor produces use value. It would have to take into consideration all things that go into the whole process of work. But Marx asks, "Well, what about labor can be rendered abstract? What can be calculated?" That element is time, labor time. What do you call the socially necessary average labor time that is necessary to produce a commodity, becomes the exchange value of that commodity.

**Angela Davis:**

If, for example, it costs me, I don't know, \$500 a week. I'm just pulling that out to keep myself alive and to have a place to live, to buy my food. There was also a gender element there, because it was assumed that the worker was male and calculated into the value of the worker's labor time, was the family. Then of course, there's a whole realm that doesn't make it into *Capital*. This is why feminists have been critical of the way in which *Capital* is written, because it excludes reproductive labor. It excludes all of the work that happens outside of the Capitalist system, per se, that makes it possible for workers to go to work. That, of course, is the realm that we usually think of as relegated to women.

**Angela Davis:**

But abstract labor, which can be calculated in terms of time, is what is susceptible to becoming a commodity. Because a commodity, the value of a commodity, is measured in the process of exchange. What is the exchange value of something to do with labor? That would be labor time, labor power, that would be labor power. That can be calculated in terms of the time it takes to reproduce this labor power. Instead of labor as being a commodity, we say the capacity to labor is a commodity, the capacity to work. That is the meaning of labor power. Labor power can be understood within the context of the commodity, by virtue of the amount of time it takes to guarantee the reproduction of this capacity to work.

**Angela Davis:**

I think that an important way of thinking about surplus value is the value beyond that, which is necessary to reproduce labor power. For example, as a worker, as I was saying before, if I work eight hours and I produce the value of say \$100, and it only cost me \$50 to reproduce my capacity to work, then there's a \$50 surplus value there. What it means is that I am producing

twice as much as what I actually receive. But because, and this is the trick. This is the trick that is at the core of exploitation within the capitalist system, and that generally remains unrecognized. That trick pivots around the distinction between labor and labor power. The worker is told that she is being paid for her labor, for her work, but actually she is only being paid for her capacity to work for her labor power. The difference between that is the surplus. Does that make sense?

**Monica Trinidad:**

Got it. That makes total sense.

**Page May:**

And the surplus is profit? But, profit is more than that?

**Angela Davi:**

Profit comes out of the ... Yeah the surplus value is the source of profit. This is precisely why capitalism is inherently exploitative. It has to pivot around a failure to acknowledge this distinction between labor power and labor. Because if the worker were being paid for her labor, she would get everything that she produces. How is it that the capitalist can claim something that somebody else actually produces?

**Page May:**

That's sort of my question right now is I think it's significant that when you started describing this book, you talked about how this emerges from a specific history, but yet just how is that possible and perpetual that we have this system where folks are having to go to work, to pay, to be able to live? It seems that there must be a system, or something built into the design that takes away people's ability to meet their own needs. That is also a part of capitalism. Does he talk about that? There must be this initial, I don't know if this is what primitive accumulation is, but there's always a moment where people are ... Your ability to subsist is taken away through colonialism, rent, taxes, slavery. That is as much capitalism as the stock market. Is that fair? What else can you say about that?

**Angela Davis:**

No, I think that's absolutely right. It's important to consider that capitalism wouldn't work if it were not for the fact that there are people who own nothing else, but their capacity to work, which means that they have to be deprived of everything else. There are historical examples of this. In England, for example, there were the enclosures where the enclosures of public land that everybody had access to, they could grow their food there. They could build their houses and so forth. But once those enclosures happen and interestingly, it was in order to provide grazing for sheep, so that wool could be produced, which was one of the first major capitalist commodities.

The people had to be robbed of everything, but their capacity to work. That is the only thing workers have left to sell.

**Angela Davis:**

Whereas, the capitalists, that is the only commodity that workers are in possession of, their own capacity to work. Then the capitalists have everything else, including the capital that they have acquired as a result of violence and colonialism and racism and slavery. Yeah, capitalism presumes that there is this moment of violence, this moment of theft. This absolute moment of acquiring that, which then distinguishes the capitalist from the worker who has been deprived of everything, but the capacity to work. I mean, it's interesting because Marx talks about the ways in which workers are free. They're free, not only in the sense that they're free to sell the only thing they own, which is their capacity to work, but they're free in the sense that they have been freed of the means of sustaining themselves. They're free in this negative sense, as well as free in the positive sense, of being able to sell their capacity to work.

**Page May:**

It seems that your capacity to labor is of course, racialized. It's affected by gender, ability where who is seen as being able to work in and what we can, the most that we can exploit of those. We've seen the difference between slavery and minimum wage. I'm transitioning a little bit, but we run into to a lot of folks in this work that talk about how we need to focus on building a unified class movement, and that we have to leave behind or set aside race and gender. But, I know you've written whole books about how those things go together. Can you speak a little bit about how a position of anti-capitalism means that we have to build around more than just class, but also include race and gender in our practice and our analysis?

**Angela Davis:**

You know, there's a tendency to assume that universal terms require sameness. Therefore, our ways of thinking about justice and freedom and equality are really marred by that assumption. That when we say that everyone is equal, we are assuming that they're the same. That sameness gets congealed in a racist context. I think it's really important to point out that early on, the very definition of the universality of humanness was racialized. And so, that only some people were considered to be covered by the category human. Therefore, all men are created equal. What was meant there was all affluent white men are created equal.

**Angela Davis:**

I think it helps us to understand why it is that the U.S. has proclaimed itself to be a democracy for so long, and at the same time, there was colonialism. At the same time, indigenous people were subject to genocide. At the same time, there was slavery of people of African descent. All of this is related to ideology. I think one of the real values of Marx and Engels' work, is its



insistence on examining the impact of ideology. How is it that we can engage in this thinking, of that so clearly excludes the vast numbers of people. But, we still say that we're talking about all people in the universe, all people on the earth. This is what I like to call the tyranny of the universal. I find Marx and Engels' work helpful, precisely because of the insistence on contradiction. Of course, Monica, if you are thinking about philosophy, you know about Hegel and the insistence on contradiction as one of the main motor forces of history. But, let me stop there.

**Monica Trinidad:**

You know, I'm thinking a lot about all of the conditions that, under capitalism, that Marx basically predicted in the book. He foresaw the globalization of Capitalism. He saw these, he calls imaginary appetites, for which he coined as a saying for buying things that we don't need, which we see all the time now. He also saw the crisis prone nature of capitalism, monopolies and so much more. What did Marx, in your opinion, miss in his analysis of Capital?

**Angela Davis:**

Well, of course he missed a lot of things. Yeah, I mean, we can't assume that someone who published a book in the 1860s would be capable of predicting more than a century of new developments. But at the same time, capitalism still exists. I'm asked often if I think reading Marx is helpful. I say that as long as capitalism continues to exist, reading Marx will be helpful to us. But, of course we can't expect it to be a Bible. We can't expect the text to shed light on absolutely every issue that we are interested in. I think that, for example, the work that also Luxemburg did in her book *Accumulation of Capital*, demonstrates how capitalism is so predatory, that it has to continually expand its operations in order to abuse cheap labor, in order to get new markets.

**Angela Davis:**

She also wrote about the military machinery that was necessary in order to facilitate the globalization of capital. And of course also, Luxemburg published her book in 1913. She was really prescient in terms of where we are today. But of course, Marx and Engels also recognized the international character of capital, and this is why they argue that only an international movement would overturn capitalism. That's why internationalism is at the very core of resistance to capital, the international working class. The anthem of the working class is the Internationale. Workers of the world unite. As a matter of fact, that is how he concluded *The Communist Manifesto*.

**Angela Davis:**

But, I think that some of the things that that can be really, that continue to be insightful for me, and I'm going back to what he did write about, rather than what he didn't write about. But, the

struggle around the workday, the number of hours. I think it's important to point out that the struggle of working classes has been around the number of hours in the day people were expected to work. Somehow it's so bizarre that there was a struggle for a 15 hour day. There was a struggle for a 12 hour day. There was a struggle for a 10 hour day. Then there was a struggle for an eight hour day. Somehow we have become fixated on this eight hour day and no one is challenging of the fact that, that struggle should continue. Because according to Marx, this was well, it's a bit complicated. But, this was the major focus of the struggles of the working class. The struggle for leisure time. The struggle for time that I don't have to sell to the capitalists.

**Angela Davis:**

I'm actually going back a little bit, because I want to point out that in the earlier writings, Marx had believed that it was possible for everyone to have fulfilling work and that we would be able to express ourselves in an unalienated way through our work. That work, so to speak, would become art. That our relationship to work would be that of the artist relationship to what she, or he, or they produce. But then later he came to realize that there were certain forms of necessary labor that could never be fulfilling. I remember Herbert Marcuse used to talk about taking out the garbage or being a garbage person. That, that probably would never turn into a fulfilling vocation. Therefore, the shift was to demand more time within which I can try to engage in creative and fulfilling activities. That is the reason why the struggle around the number of hours one works in the day has been so central. But again, as I said before, we got stuck at eight hours. By now, we should be at four hours really.

**Monica Trinidad:**

And no hours. No work hours.

**Page May:**

Four day weeks, four hour days.

**Angela Davis:**

Yeah. But at least, I mean now in 2021, there should be a four hour work day.

**Monica Trinidad:**

Absolutely.

**Angela Davis:**

In France, they actually tried to begin to decrease the number of hours, or four day work week, as opposed to a five day work week. But, I think that's still important because it's about the struggle to create, to produce creativity and to produce ways in which people can fulfill

themselves. Now, yeah, so that he did write about. Imperialism, of course as I said, Rosa Luxemburg really centers imperialism as being at the very core of capitalism. I think it's important for us to recognize that in the 21st century, precisely because we have seen the de-industrialization of the economy and we've seen the rise of neoliberalism, and the dismantling of all of the agencies and institutions that are designed to help people. As a consequence, we have the rise of a prison industrial complex, which is more a product of global capitalism than of anything else. Global capitalism, global racial capitalism. This is a moment in the analysis when we really have to recognize the role that racism plays in the perpetuation of capitalism.

**Monica Trinidad:**

I often hear capitalism as just being referred to as amoral, not immoral, but just incapable, or lacking the capacity for morality. To me, that means that moral reforms, would ultimately fall short in ending the exploitation of capitalism. It makes me think of the phrase that's often said in our circles around how there's no ethical consumption under capitalism. But we were wondering if you could share your thoughts on this and why Black Capitalism, or Green Capitalism, might not work for us in our struggle against ending the exploitation of capitalism.

**Angela Davis:**

I mean, I think it's important because it also helps us to understand the racial capitalism and the people who would most benefit from this would be people of color. But, there are ways to engage reforms that actually help the revolutionary process, as opposed to serving as a break on the revolutionary process. I like to think about reformist reforms and non-reformist reforms, that help us to understand economic progress in a revolutionary context, but that also help us understand prison abolition and how we develop the strategies that will ultimately lead to the abolition of prisons. Not by saying no reforms are necessary, but by arguing that there are reforms that really help human beings. And that not only help human beings, but give us a sense of our power.

**Angela Davis:**

So that if we can achieve the \$20 minimum wage, then that emboldens us to move further. That helps us to explain the fact that the system itself needs to be dismantled. To me, this is a feminist element that actually benefits from Marx's notion of the importance of contradiction. That we don't simply look at a phenomenon that appears to be contradictory and get rid of the contradiction, so that it stands by itself. But rather, we use the contradictions in productive ways, in generative ways. And to me, it seems that that is one of the ways in which we can talk about minimum wage increases.

**Angela Davis:**

Black Capitalism is another question, because I think that what we generally think of as Black Capitalism is not capitalism, first of all. People are talking about the Tulsa riots and the Black Wall Street in Greenwood. Those were just Black businesses that were not engaged in the process of capitalist exploitation. I think it's really important for us to distinguish between the nature of capitalism, capitalist corporations, capitalist enterprises, and small businesses that every community needs in order to survive.

**Angela Davis:**

Then about buying green, I think you're right that it's not going to get rid of climate injustice. It's not going to get rid of the poisoning of the planet. But, it may help to draw individuals into the struggle, by pointing out that yes, one can stop consuming meat because of the ways in which it gets produced within the industrial capitalist, industrial process and because of the pain that it brings to animals and so forth and so on. One can engage in that moral action, but recognize at the same time that it is relatively meaningless if one does not also do the organizing work that is going to create the movements that will help us to bring about systemic change, revolutionary change.

**Page May:**

You ended up answering a lot of the questions that I had next. And speaking specifically to Monica and I frame our work as abolitionist organizing. There's many tools for us to develop a strategy that recognize that abolition is not necessarily a blueprint that can just be built everywhere and, "Hey, we've abolished the thing, and now we're all free." But, it's rather a horizon, or a framework that helps guide our work forward. I'm hearing that, yeah, that is the work of anti-capitalism as well. I'm thinking of the critical resistance reformist reforms versus abolitionists reforms rubric that was created that's really useful.

**Page May:**

I think you've started to speak to some of the examples of what this movement might look like, and that when we are developing strategies and making decisions around campaigns, we want to think about how does this embolden our movements? How does this change the conditions to make future fights more possible, that aren't possible now? But is there a blueprint? Is there something that's specific? When I think of Marx, I think communism. I don't fully know what that means. I feel like I have a lot of mis-education around it. But it does feel different to me than abolition, where the folks that identify strongly with Marx, seem to have a very clear vision. I'm curious what you think about that, or have to say about, is there a blueprint? Is it communism? Does it have a name yet? Does that not matter? And adds enough that we have a North Star and contradictions to work within?

**Angela Davis:**

Well, I don't think there's a blueprint. Marx himself constantly pointed out that what he was trying to encourage was a critical relationship to existing economic, social, political realities that would help people rise up and engage in revolutionary struggle for a different order. Of course, the different order is described in broad strokes. It's non-exploitative. It's based on the fact that any society should engage in the process of satisfying the needs of its members. I think that we can look for inspiration. We can look at the Cuban Revolution for inspiration. We can recognize, for example, that in Cuba, there is this amazing healthcare system. And that nobody has to ever think about healthcare as a commodity. It's not something that has to be bought and sold. It's something that's available to people by virtue of the fact that they need it.

**Angela Davis:**

I think we can talk about healthcare. We can talk about the fact that it is horrendous that education has been so commoditized, that we only think of it in terms of loans and money and so forth. We want a society in which education is absolutely accessible and free and available to everyone. Where housing should not consume, generally at least half or more, of the wages that people make. I think we can say these kinds of things, and this is important for abolitionists. Because these are precisely the conditions that would help to create a world that no longer need prisons. Particularly, when one recognizes that what we call mass incarceration is a product of global capitalism. It's a product of all of the changes that have happened, as a result of shifts in capitalism.

**Angela Davis:**

We need a world that does not revolve around a profit for the few and the accumulation of the vast wealth of the planet into the hands of a very few people. Now, in terms of exactly how that would look, that's changing as we struggle. Because as we struggle, we become aware of other aspects of capitalist society that we have neglected. For example, the importance of standing in solidarity with disabled people and the struggles that the disabled movement has introduced us all to. The ideological struggles associated with the trans community. There is so much that we have learned in the last, say two decades. We can imagine that in the next two decades, there will be so much more that will help us to think about the world that we want to inhabit in the future. I think it is an ongoing process. As I quoted a freedom song in one of my books, "Freedom is indeed a constant struggle."

**Page May:**

I'm feeling very full and grateful. I'm going to hand it over to Monica to ask you our final closing question of your favorite passage. But before I do that, is there anything else that you wanted to say that you didn't have space for?

**Angela Davis:**

Oh, there's a lot.

**Page May:**

Part two, if you want to do it again?

**Angela Davis:**

We'll have to postpone that to another time.

**Page May:**

Okay. Yeah, take it away, Monica. Thank you though.

**Monica Trinidad:**

Yeah, we're always down for part two, part three, part four. Angela it has been such a pleasure to chat with you today about this critical text. I know I'm leaving this conversation feeling super hopeful, super energized, equipped with more knowledge and more questions, which is always a sign that I'm actually processing this information. I know we could have talked for hours about all of the concepts and theories in *Capital*, but we just really want to thank you for your time with us today. We close out each episode with our guests reading a quote, or a passage from the book. Do you have one to close us out with?

**Angela Davis:**

"The sphere of circulation or commodity exchange within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labor power goes on, is in fact, a veritable Eden of the innate rights of man. It is the exclusive realm of freedom, equality, property, and Bentham. I really love the irony here in this passage. "Freedom because both buyer and seller of a commodity, let us say of labor power, are determined only by their free will. They contract as free persons who are equal before the law. Their contract is the final result in which their joint will finds a common legal expression. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other as with a simple owner of commodities and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own and Bentham, because each looks only to his own advantage."

**Angela Davis:**

Of course, Jeremy Bentham is a reference here. "The only force bringing them together and putting them in relation with each other is the selfishness, the gain and the private interest of each. And precisely for that reason, either in accordance with the pre-established harmony of things or under the auspices of an omission providence, they will all work together to their mutual advantage for the common will and in the common interest."

**Angela Davis:**

Now, one more paragraph, because this allows you to understand the previous paragraph. "When we leave this fear of simple circulation or the exchange of commodities, which provides the 'free-trader vulgaris' with his views, his concepts, and the standard by which he judges the society of Capital and wage labor. A certain change takes place, or so it appears in the physiognomy of the dramatist persona. He who was previously the money owner, now strides out in front as a Capitalist. The possessor of labor power follows as his worker. The one smirks self importantly, and is intent on business. The other is timid and holds back, like someone who has brought his own hide to market, and now has nothing else to expect, but a tanning." That is the nature of exploitation.