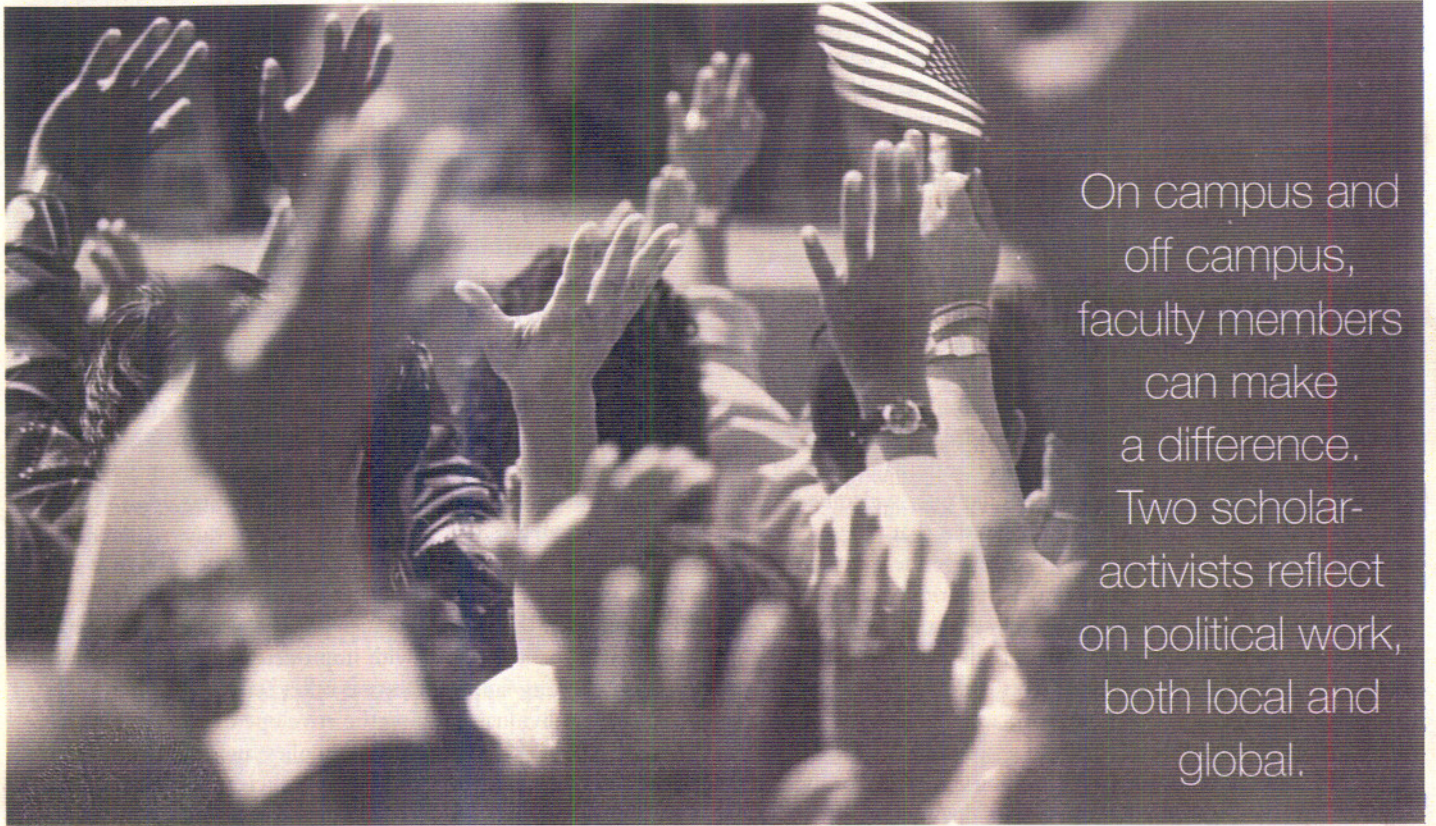


Faculty Activism



On campus and off campus, faculty members can make a difference. Two scholar-activists reflect on political work, both local and global.

The Ivory Tower and Scholar-Activism

BY DONALD EARL COLLINS

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At last year's meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in San Diego, I noticed that the conference included sessions on the role of the scholar-activist in education. I also noted how prominent the association's social justice arm had become in the eight years since I last attended. This trend, obviously a response to our post-September 11, 2001, times, is tangible in other fields and at other conferences as well, including the meetings of the American Studies Association and the Organization of American Historians—gatherings that I have attended more often and more recently than AERA. Yet all the discussions, plenaries, and presentations centered on groundbreaking scholarship and the development of a new generation of diverse scholars concerned about social justice left me looking for the door.

At AERA, I realized that although many university faculty members and graduate students talk the talk of scholar-activism, few of them walk the walk. In addition, we in aca-

deme give too much credit to our colleagues who, like babies, only crawl or cruise around the social justice coffee table. Few scholars aspire to walk the path of actual scholar-activists such as Manning Marable, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Howard Zinn.¹

And no, teaching social justice ideals to our students doesn't count. Some of us do in fact take our roles as university teachers seriously, using our beliefs and politics as a way to engage students in activism beyond learning, even at the risk of losing our jobs. Most of us at the postsecondary level seem to think, unfortunately, that teaching itself is an act of activism. But the truth is, many of us attempt to avoid teaching, because earning tenure and gaining a reputation in our field depends on our scholarship.

Scholar-Nerds

If we are serious about creating a new generation of scholar-activists, then we must understand why most scholars are not activists. What makes one a scholar-activist is the ability to take risks of the kind that would make colleagues, students, and family members question one's sanity. Activist teaching and scholarship involve reaching out to relate one's work as an academic—as teacher, intellectual, writer, or scholar—to the real world, to the lives of ordinary human beings.

A scholar is a knowledge expert who toils in archives, laboratories, or other isolated spaces. Usually a scholar engages in an exhaustive exercise of knowledge gathering by digging deeply into a nuance of a specific subject, to the point where he or she may be one of a handful of experts on it. People outside of academia commonly see those who work in isolation to gather specialized, esoteric knowledge as *nerds*.

Although scholars in the biological and physical sciences often collaborate with fellow scientists rather than labor in isolation, it's not as if they work broadly across their fields in creating new knowledge. For the most part, academic scientists work with other scientists whose work is highly specialized. This characteristic of specialization is itself a form of isolation. Scholars in the social sciences and humanities spend much time and energy reviewing the work of their colleagues or theorizing about societal issues. Yet these critiques are again of others' highly specialized work and often have limited applicability outside of academe. Even scholarly theorizing has become specialized, from that on Marx to Nietzsche to Weber, and from postmodernism to post-post-structuralism. The intellectual drive to pursue a subject in extreme specificity, realizing that it will interest few outside of one's specialty, is nerdy, and nerdiness and activism do not go well together.

We should seriously consider this trait in academics when discussing the stark contrast between a typical scholar and actual scholar-activists. Both research topics that are first of interest to themselves, then to their immediate colleagues, then maybe to others in their larger field, and then *possibly* to a wider, educated mass of people. But unlike most scholar-activists, most scholars—even those whose work has social justice implications—lack the social skills and leadership capacity necessary for activism.

To understand how deeply ingrained scholarly specialization is, consider the two most basic assumptions in the academy. One is that our training and expertise in our subject matter enable us to approach our work objectively, as if we live in a vacuum. The other is our presumption that, over time, all of our scholarship, theories, and critiques will trickle down to policy makers, K-12 educators, and the rest of society. These suppositions give scholars the permission we need to approach an obscure topic with passion and justify a lack of involvement in worldly pursuits. Besides being arrogant, these assumptions ignore the antischolarly nature of the world outside of the academy, an attitude that long ago created a chasm that nonacademic intellectuals, journalists, and activists have filled.

The “publish or perish” system of tenure at most universities reinforces the deliberate isolation of most scholars by space and specialization. If a scholar on the tenure track in, say, a history department, taught undergraduate courses only from a social justice perspective or published articles in activist magazines like *ColorLines*, *Mother Jones*, and *The Nation*, he or she would probably have an activist following but would not earn tenure. Permanence as a faculty member is guaranteed only if scholars publish articles in refereed journals (often edited by other, older scholars who are among a handful of experts in their field) or publish books through a university or university-affiliated press. It is not worth it for even the most militant scholar to ignore the old nerds' network of publishing in academia in favor of a larger audience, especially those of us who have yet to earn tenure.

The expansion of contingent labor in higher education makes it risky for part-time, adjunct, and non-tenure-track faculty to do creative research, much less use it for social justice purposes. Many people in the professoriate can tell stories of colleagues whose department denied them tenure despite their credentials, unofficially because of their political activities or their controversial research with social justice implications. Or we might know of faculty members who faced opposition from colleagues because they took the “road less traveled” with their work or used their position at the university to address a wrong.

Write for the World

How many academics actually write for their colleagues *and* for the outside world on social justice issues? Noam Chomsky and the late Edward Said are among those that come to mind, along with younger scholars Robin D. G. Kelley, Tricia Rose, Todd Gitlin, and Patricia J. Williams. But there are precious few who are simultaneously activist writers and scholars at the university level.

It also makes sense to understand that scholars, while we have important jobs in a knowledge-based society, are not the only knowledge experts in our society. The term *intellectual* is not interchangeable with the term *scholar*. An intellectual is generally a creative or rational thinker, not necessarily a researcher or college professor. Intellectuals can easily be scholars, musicians, artists, preachers, or barbers. The axiom is that most intellectuals are not scholars, most scholars are not intellectuals, but some are both.

A number of wonderful activists fall into the category of intellectual both in and outside of the academy, including Michael Eric Dyson, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Lerone Bennett, Nikki Giovanni, Cornel West, Thomas Frank, Derrick Bell, Pablo Eisenberg, and Barbara Ehrenreich. To be sure, some of these

intellectual-activists are practicing scholars, but that is not what we know them for. In addition, some of these men and women are progressive activists *despite* their academic training, not because of it.

Many of those in the academy who are intellectuals or scholar-activists possess backgrounds that are unique to the ivory tower enterprise. Whether they are African American, Jewish, female, or working class, their upbringing may well have necessitated a different view of the university world than that typical among their more cloistered peers. Other writers have noted the influence of black civil rights struggles, the long-standing Jewish tradition of pursuing justice through scholarship, and white working-class union organizing as factors in the nurturing of intellectual-activists from these groups. Yet perhaps the largest factor for all is a sense of a world beyond the academy, one containing much injustice, and one that activists feel an ethical obligation to confront.

By fighting for more women faculty of color in elite university law schools or opening up a different dialogue on Israeli-Palestinian issues, intellectual-activists like Derrick Bell and Rashid Khalidi actually risk something more than a reputation in a field to achieve a social justice end. Unless we as scholars address how academe

rewards inward- rather than outward-looking work, we will continue to attract and produce scholars who cannot in any real sense be activists. And we will continue to overuse the term *scholar-activist*, rendering it meaningless even at our universities.

Note

1. The scholar- and intellectual-activists cited in this article include African American historian and political scientist Manning Marable; law professor and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw; American social historian Howard Zinn; linguistic theorist Noam Chomsky; the late comparative literature professor Edward Said; African American and popular culture historian Robin D. G. Kelley; African American cultural and political historian Tricia Rose; journalist and sociologist Todd Gitlin; law professor and MacArthur Fellowship recipient Patricia J. Williams; African American and religious studies professor and public intellectual Michael Eric Dyson; environmental artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude; African American social historian and author Lerone Bennett; award-winning poet Nikki Giovanni; African American philosopher and public intellectual Cornel West; author and social critic Thomas Frank; author, critical race theorist, and law professor Derrick Bell; social activist and author Pablo Eisenberg; social critic and essayist Barbara Ehrenreich; and Middle Eastern history professor Rashid Khalidi. I thank all of them for inspiring this essay in one way or another.

Utopian Universities and International Activism

BY PATRICK BRANTLINGER

Since September 11, 2001, it has become standard punditry to claim that we've entered the Age of Terror. But for those who refuse to be terrified, our era may have a very different feel—that of an Age of Hope. That is certainly the emotion evoked by the motto of the World Social Forum (WSF): “Another world is possible.” Hope characterized the thousands of activists—many of them students—who came from around the world to the fifth WSF, held in January 2005 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, to exchange ideas about peace, human rights, fair trade, environmental sustainability, and other worthy goals. Founded in 2001, the WSF meets annually for this purpose. For North American scholars and activists like me, the WSF offers an amazing education about struggles for global justice, full of hope, that are taking place all over the world.

I attended the WSF as a member of both the human rights organization Global Exchange and the Progressive Faculty Coalition, established at my university after the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. Activities of the coalition have included weekly discussions, open to the public, on issues ranging from the war in Iraq to the pros and cons of the No Child Left Behind legislation. With others, I have developed presentations on transnational corporate capitalism and “alternative globalizations”—social



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movements that work against the negative consequences of global trade agreements for the poor, the environment, and peace—through which I first learned about the WSF.

For the 2005 WSF, one of my colleagues, Mike Gasser, a professor of linguistics and computer science at Indiana University and one of the leaders of the Progressive Faculty Coalition, organized sessions with activist-educators from other schools in the United States, Canada, Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina. In the land of Paulo Freire (1921–97), author of the influential 1970 book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the session title “Breaking Down the Ivory Tower: The University in the Creation of Another World” seemed especially appropriate. The proposal offered by Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos in another session on education, for establishing a “counteruniversity” capable of disseminating high-quality knowledge, but without the elitism of traditional universities, also seemed apt.

In a very real sense, however, the WSF already functions as a “counteruniversity.” It was created to serve as “a pedagogical space for activists to learn what alternatives are being proposed and enacted around the world.” That’s how William Fisher and Thomas Ponniah put it in the introduction to their 2003 anthology of documents from the second WSF, *Another World Is Possible: Popular Alternatives to Globalization at the World Social Forum*. Several of those documents focus on education “as a liberating tool,” insisting that it should not be “reduced to the status of a commodity” and affirming it as a universal human right—all ideas expressed by Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.