



On Intellectual Activism

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Since stepping down as the 100th President of the American Sociological Association, Patricia Hill Collins has been lecturing extensively at universities and at private and public organizations about the role of the intellectual in public culture and how well intellectuals communicate questions about contemporary social issues to the larger public. This book is a collection of those lectures, along with new and (a few) previously-published essays.

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Scott Neigh says

A collection of interviews, essays, and talks mostly aimed at a lay audience by Patricia Hill Collins, a senior sociologist and an important figure in the development of Black feminist thought in the United States. It explores key ideas from across her body of work, including Black feminism, sociology of knowledge, critical pedagogy, and US race politics, but also talks about the decisions, process, and meaning involved in her lifetime of intellectual activism. Despite being situated quite differently, all of this is quite relevant to my own interests and activities. Perhaps a few of the pieces that were specific to the discipline of sociology were less immediately interesting, but her insights into what it means to do intellectual work in the service of social transformation is relevant whether you are doing it in the academy or independently. And her work on epistemology, with its focus on standpoint and on dialogical encounter across difference that takes power seriously as the basis for any rigorous understanding of the world, is very relevant to how I've come to think about these things over the years.

A key distinction she makes among kinds of intellectual work done with political intent is between speaking truth to power and speaking truth to the people. Both can be important, depending on your goals and on the context – she has done both – but they are quite different endeavours and require different skillsets and different craft when it comes to communicating ideas. This particular book showcases her skill at the latter. I really appreciate her ability to convey sophisticated ideas in accessible ways. Moreover, it made me more aware that over my own 20ish years of doing the work that I do, both in writing specific pieces and in strategically orienting broader projects, I haven't always made good choices. I hope her political clarity about her process, about audience, and about what intellectual work done in relation to movements can do is something I can learn from to do a better job in the future.

I also really appreciated how she talks about the ways in which key ideas developed by herself and by other Black feminists have been taken up in the academy and by diversely situated people with no particular connection to movements or to Black communities, in a way that separates them from their original meaning and changes their political implications to produce the liberal, individualized, and reified version of identity politics that is so prevalent in certain contexts today. Too often in the last decade, a new generation of class reductionists have (I think often deliberately) mis-read this appropriative distortion as the sum total of politics that take race, gender, sexuality, and so on seriously, as a way to avoid acknowledging the actual transformative movement-grounded politics of interlocking social relations developed by radical Black women and therefore to avoid having to deal substantively with race, gender, sexuality, and all the rest in their own politics. So her very matter-of-fact critique of liberal individualist versions of identity politics not from that place but from an intersectional, collectivist, movement-oriented place is important. I also appreciated her related take on supposedly progressive/radical scholarship today – though much of it emerged historically from movements, today a lot of scholarship that has radical-sounding content is often disconnected from ordinary people's lives and from struggles on the ground, and she suggests that in order to remain a politically significant project it must go back to speaking to the ordinary people that are its constituency and organize its work around the concerns that animate their lives.

Overall, the book is clear and measured and careful – it is not polemic but scholarly reflection. Still, that measured tone should be read not as disconnection from political urgency but as a kind of materialist commitment to staying focused on what's actually happening, on what we're actually doing, and on what impact it can actually make on the world around us.

