

# Philosophical Collaborations with Activists

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Philosophers have long endeavored to support politically relevant efforts, including institutional and legal reforms, insurrectionist uprisings, anticolonial independence struggles, cultural movements, and anti-violence work. Many philosophers today, likewise, continue to participate in a number of activist projects and forms of community organizing that endeavor to shape and transform social life. While some debates have emerged regarding normative questions of *whether* or *how* philosophers should be activists,<sup>1</sup> this chapter focuses more directly on the manner in which philosophical authors have supported, engaged in, or examined forms of political participation that seek to end forms of oppression such as racism, sexism, colonialism, and systemic poverty. As such, this chapter's selection of forms of political organizing and agency surveys only several strands of a much broader history of political activism among philosophical writers, and the chapters of this edited collection speak to some of the further breadth and depth of how philosophy can be considered a catalyst for social change. To narrow the scope of this chapter, I unpack its title in further detail, working through several loose categorizations regarding potential relationships between philosophy and activism since the nineteenth century. In what follows, I distinguish between philosophers who are writing *about* or *in support of* forms of political activism and social movements. Then, in the second section, I explore specific activists and movements that have become relevant within academic philosophy. Lastly, I examine philosophers who have engaged in direct political action while working within academic philosophy. Although the categorizations used in this chapter are open to further refinement and debate, these three overlapping areas, as I hope to demonstrate, allow us to explore a wide range of philosophical forms of political participation and to confront some of the reasons why academic philosophy has not always been a comfortable home to the various forms of political engagement that philosophers and philosophical writers have undertaken.

## 1 Philosophical Interpretations of Activism

This first category includes work by philosophical writers who have dedicated considerable effort to studying how social mobilizations against differing forms of oppression take shape and continue over time, as well as theorists who have explored the role of academic knowledge

production in response to activist endeavors. This section includes authors who have taken up critical questions regarding the need for and value of concise interpretive practices that make sense of political movements and forms of social mobilization. On this point, for example, Afro-Dominican feminist activist and scholar Ochy Curiel (2016) has argued that processes of decolonization require “comprehending what our foremothers already knew: theory is the result of practice and the production of theory is a social practice” (Curiel 2016, p. 52). In this sense, the philosophical contributions of this section are political discourses *about* and *in support of* social movements and forms of political agency that allow readers to make sense of what previous acts of rebellion might entail for political work carried out in the present.<sup>2</sup> Philosophers thus play a pivotal role in seeking to address questions of historical and moral agency, and thereby aid in highlighting key strategies that may continue to challenge the structures of harm that impacted “our foremothers” and that continue to shape our social worlds today.

One such example in this trajectory is the historiographical project of theorists within the field of subaltern studies, including Ranajit Guha (1982, 1999) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) of the South Asian collective within subaltern studies, and authors like Walter D. Mignolo (2009) and Ileana Rodríguez (2001) within the Latin American collective of subaltern studies. Drawing from Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* (written during 1929–1935 while Gramsci was imprisoned under the Italian fascist government), these diverse writers dedicate their research to exploring the conditions of *subalternity*, which refers in Guha’s words to “the general attribute of subordination . . . whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (Guha 1982, p. vii). These diverse writers address questions regarding political mobilizations among subordinate groups across South Asia and Latin America, raising complex questions regarding how or whether to depict the complexities of such struggles within academic contexts. Guha’s now-classic work within subaltern studies, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1999), is a prominent text in this vein. In this work, Guha questions the intellectual desire among social theorists for forms of collective political consciousness among subordinate groups that can explain how political uprisings take shape. Often, the task, Guha proposes, is to position historical movements and rebellions as leading to key pivotal moments, such as those found in nationalist demands for independence or fitting within Marxist narratives of historical materialism. Guha also critiques the “elitist” origins within much social theory and the official history of political uprisings, including the historical records left by “police reports, army dispatches, administrative accounts, minutes and resolutions of governmental departments and so on” (Guha 1999 [1983], p. 14). Against such tendencies, Guha develops strategies for historians and social theorists to commit to forms of “rebel consciousness” that are able to be located within extant historical documents but that surface against the desires of counterinsurgents, police, colonial administrations, and so on.

Additionally, a number of authors within Black studies have explored the possibilities for narrating, expanding, and theorizing the forms of everyday activism and resistant worlds of Black peoples, and offering deep philosophical resources throughout such analyses. Addressing the “violence of the archive” (Hartman 2008, p. 1),<sup>3</sup> for example, theorists such as Saidiya Hartman (1997), Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2013), Frank B. Wilderson III (2020), and Hortense Spillers (1987), among others, have studied the historiographical conditions created via the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Such conditions include the prefacing of modern conceptions of individuality, freedom, and agency on the derogation, subordination, and brutal violence inflicted on Black peoples. Accordingly, many of these authors explore the possibility of addressing forms of resistance and the social worlds of Black peoples outside the

terms of white modernity, including conceptions of liberation, joy, and affect that exist beyond modernity's anti-Black configurations. Notably, Hartman's work has been pivotal for questions of historiographical impasses regarding the task of narrating the life-worlds of Black women and girls. Hartman's works have explored extant forms of archival evidence of Black enslaved peoples, specifically Black women and girls, to develop methods for the seemingly impossible task of writing their stories. This impossibility arises due to the fact that often the only mention of enslaved women and girls during the middle passage from slave ports in Africa to the Americas are death records or further evidence of brutality and chattel status. Hartman thus develops a method called "critical fabulation" to conduct work against this historiographical impasse. She describes critical fabulation as "straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration" (Hartman 2008, p. 11). Through such a methodology, Hartman seeks to narrate the lives of Black women and girls beyond the constraints produced through archival documents that, on their surface, depict only an anti-Black social world. Elsewhere in her work, Hartman calls this "latent history" that narrates the acts of "young black women as social visionaries, radical thinkers, and innovators in the world . . . [a] revolution in a minor key" (Hartman 2018, pp. 470–471).

In addition to theorizing the possibility of framing social movements and resistant life-worlds, philosophical collaborations with activists also includes analyzing the role of philosophers in supporting direct political action and activist groups. Within this purview, we might consider, for example, the writings and editorial work of French existentialists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Notably, feminist philosophers have documented Beauvoir's public advocacy for Djamila Boupacha, a young Algerian woman imprisoned during the Algerian independence struggles in the 1950s (Kruks 2009; Mosko 2017). They note that, while the journal *Les Temps Modernes* took a firmly anticolonial stance regarding French occupation of Indo-China as early as 1946, Beauvoir, like many French intellectuals of the time, remained quiet regarding the Algerian independence struggle in its early years in the mid-1950s (Kruks 2009, p. 188). By the late 1950s, however, Beauvoir began describing her growing awareness of the abuse, torture, and systemic violence being inflicted on Algerians by the French, and thus began to reflect on her own complicity with French occupation, "as being French meant she was part of the oppressor nation" (Kruks 2009, pp. 188, 190). In 1960, Beauvoir was contacted by Gisèle Halimi, an anticolonial feminist attorney for Boupacha, a young member of the National Liberation Front, the primary group of the Algerian independence movement. Halimi wanted to draw public attention in France to the arrest, torture, sexual assault, and continued imprisonment of Boupacha.<sup>4</sup> Halimi contacted Beauvoir to request that she use her public status in France to bring awareness to Boupacha's case and pressure the French government to allow her trial to be held in France (rather than in the colonial courts of Algeria) and push for her acquittal. Beauvoir agreed and leveraged her publishing connections with the French newspaper *Le Monde* to circulate the details of Boupacha's case. She also published a book on Boupacha and started the *Comité pour Djamila Boupacha* to raise attention to her case (Mosko 2017, pp. 335–336).

Additionally, writers who supported various important political efforts through their public roles have shaped the philosophical terms of questions of anti-racism and feminism throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many such authors were writing from conditions of struggle and exemplify what Leonard Harris calls "philosophy born of struggle," a metaphilosophical position of theorizing from within one's own strivings toward social

meliorism and freedom (Harris 2000, 2020). For example, Black abolitionist writers and orators of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, authors like Olaudah Equiano, Ottobah Cugoana, Sojourner Truth, David Walker, Maria W. Stewart, Martin Delany, Harriet Jacobs, and Frederick Douglass, contributed significant forms of anti-slavery scholarship that shaped the political and philosophical conversations regarding abolitionism during their respective eras and beyond. A number of these authors also contributed to significant philosophical dialogues about Black women's demands for suffrage rights, political mobilization, and freedom from slavery and racist violence, including Sojourner Truth, Maria W. Stewart, Harriet Jacobs, Anna Julia Cooper, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Notably, Ida B. Wells-Barnett's pamphlet, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (1892), was a pivotal work that documented the prevalence and moral depravity of anti-Black lynching and mob violence during the Jim Crow era. Wells-Barnett argued against the idea that Black men presented a sexual threat to white women and girls, a common accusation that led to a number of grotesque forms of torture, maiming, and murder of Black men and boys. As Joy James (1997) notes in her work, Wells-Barnett also condemned the lynching and sexual assault of Black women, a practice that haunts Black women in the United States (James 1997, p. 61). As we see in the final section, Wells-Barnett and a number of other philosophical writers were also, as James describes, "militant activists," whose foundational writings *and* actions were pivotal for advancing philosophical conversations regarding systemic injustices and the possibility of eradicating those injustices. Other authors, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Addams, Harriet Taylor Mill, John Stuart Mill, and Carlos Vaz Ferreira, contributed significant written and editorial work to the cause of white women's education and enfranchisement, including voting and marriage rights. White abolitionist writers of the nineteenth century, such as Henry David Thoreau and Lydia Maria Child, also wrote significant works in support of slave rebellions and interracial marriage, respectively. Moreover, philosophers today continue to discuss and debate interpretive issues relevant to political activism, such as the nature of civil disobedience (Delmas 2016), the social and pragmatic dynamics of public dissent (McKinney 2018), the ethics of insurrectionist actions (Harris 2002), and the virtues and vices of philosopher-activists (Oxley 2020).<sup>5</sup>

## 2 Activists as Subjects of Philosophical Research

The second rough category of "collaboration" between philosophers and activists I consider, which overlaps with the previous section, includes activists whose work is taken up as the subject of research within professional academic philosophy. The works mentioned in this section, rather than focusing on the historiographical conditions for narrative collective struggle or general normative features of political agency, address the specific philosophical insights found within activist endeavors and social movements.

Beginning with the wide-ranging forms of Black freedom struggles, the work of social organizers and political movements has been analyzed by philosophers for decades. For example, within academic philosophy, we find concerted works on African American activists like Martin Luther King, Jr. (Krishnamurthy 2015; Cherry 2019; Shelby and Terry 2020), Ella Baker (Spence 2020; Sabl 2002), Howard Thurman (Neal 2015, 2019), Assata Shakur (Nagel 2015; Paris 2016), Malcolm X (Yancy 2008; Bove 1992/1993), Robert F. Williams (Curry and Kelleher 2015), Alain Locke (Harris 2010; Harris and Carter 2010), and James Baldwin (Drabinski and Farred 2015; Lombardo 2009). These works span a number of important philosophical themes

such as democratic institution-building, the meaning and use of violence in liberation struggles, differing forms of political consciousness, and gendered and sexual dimensions of Black resistance and activism. Within Caribbean philosophy, scholars have examined the writings of political activists and writers such as Aimé Césaire (Diagne 2018), Frantz Fanon (Gordon 1995), June Jordan (Collins 2012), M. Jacqui Alexander (Roshanravan 2014), and Audre Lorde (Dotson 2012). These writings address, among other issues, conceptions of Black nationalism, feminist gender and sexual politics, as well as the hermeneutical dimensions of armed rebellion. Additionally, writings about African activists such as Steve Biko (Sithole 2016), Nelson Mandela (Kalumba 1995), Wangari Maathai (Graness 2018), Kwame Nkrumah (Ifeanyi Ani 2015), Mamphela Ramphele (Paris 2016), Leopold Sedar Senghor (Diagne 2012), and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (Slaymaker 1999) have also played prominent roles within philosophical discussions regarding freedom struggles, environmentalism, decolonization, and politics on the continent. Among these authors, critiques of the institutional and political implications of apartheid, existential dimensions of language, systemic poverty, and pan-African solidarity have been important themes.

Latin American philosophical discourses of activism, social movements, and armed rebellion have also been among those studied and valued for their political import, including the actions of the Zapatistas (Pappas 2017; Gallegos and Quinn 2017), the Sandinistas (Betz 2000), liberation theology (Dussel 2003), and individual political agents like Luisa Capetillo (Rivera Berruz 2018), Enrique Dussel (Alcoff 2018; Allen and Mendieta 2021), Eduardo Galeano (Wallace 2016), and Rigoberto Menchú (Ruíz 2012). Some themes found in this area of philosophical scholarship are the relationship between individual and collective forms of resistance, articulations of labor struggles, and the forms of constraint and violence faced by Indigenous women across Latin America. Among US-based Chicana/o/as and Latinx/o/as, there has been philosophical attention to activists such as César Chávez (Orosco 2008), Gloria Anzaldúa (Ortega 2016; Alessandri and Stehn 2020), Cherríe Moraga (Hom 2013; DiPietro 2020), and movements such as the Chicano rights movement (Soto 2020) and feminist efforts in Cuba (Murphy et al 1991). Among the issues explored in this work are the functions of cultural assimilation and resistance to demands for linguistic and embodied conformity, labor and gender rights under socialism, and nonviolence as an activist strategy.

Indigenous and Native American activists and movements have also circulated across differing philosophical discourses. Alongside the works mentioned previously regarding the Zapatistas and Rigoberto Menchú, writings on Vine Deloria Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) (Makes Marks 2013; Welch 2019), Taiaiake Alfred (Mohawk of Kahnawá:ke) (Burkhart 2016; Shotwell 2016), Winona LaDuke (Ojibwe White Earth) (Whyte 2018), and movements such as the #WeAreMaunaKea movement (Kimoto 2018), the #NoDAPL movement (Whyte 2017), and Idle No More (Weir 2016) are important contributions from activists to philosophical study. Within this area of research on activism, philosophers have highlighted the relationships between environmental activism and Indigenous sovereignty, the land rights of Indigenous nations, the grappling of health and healing discourses under the terms of settler colonialism, and the functions of dance within Indigenous resistance movements.

Asian and Asian American activists have likewise impacted a number of important philosophical conversations. For example, philosophers have explored the work of Mahatma Gandhi (Iyer 2000; Kupfer 2007), Muhamad Iqbal (Al-Saji 2019), B.E. Ambedkar (Stroud 2018), Grace Lee Boggs (Lake 2020), Mitsuye Yamada (Roshanravan 2018), and

Mao Zedong (Liu 2000; Badiou 2013). Among the themes explored within these writings are the Dalit movement and critiques of caste, nonviolent political tactics, care as a virtue, temporality and decolonial futures, resistant imaginations, and the functions of aesthetics within cultural movements.

Additional activist movements that have garnered significant attention from philosophers include environmental activism (Cuomo 1998; Marietta and Embree 1995), disability justice (Hall 2011; Tremain 2017), and gay, lesbian, queer, and transgender liberation movements (Halperin 1997; Zurn and Pitts 2020). For example, as noted in an interview with some of the founding authors within trans philosophy, philosophers such as Talia Mae Bettcher, Loren Cannon, Miqqi Alicia Gilbert, and C. Jacob Hale developed much of their previous and current work in conjunction with organizing issues such as labor and union rights, HIV/AIDS health activism, anti-violence work, and efforts to expand print cultures for trans and gender variant communities (Zurn and Pitts 2020).<sup>6</sup>

### 3 Professional Philosophers as Scholar-Activists

This final section explores a category of analysis that includes philosophers who have engaged in activist struggle through both academic writing and through forms of direct action and community organizing. This category includes prominent Anglo-American and European authors like analytic philosopher and logician Bertrand Russell, who was well known for his anti-war efforts throughout the twentieth century, and Michel Foucault, whose work in the 1970s to publicize and circulate information about the atrocities of the French prison system was accompanied by theoretically rich writings on carcerality, sexuality, and knowledge production (Thomson and Zurn 2021).

Additionally, within the early twentieth century, African American philosophers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, and Alain Locke were significant researchers who likewise engaged in vital public debates on issues of art and activism, religion and culture, and Black institution building. Within this Black American legacy of activism, philosophers such as Cornel West and Angela Davis continue to engage in public dialogue on issues of Black liberation, anti-war politics, and the systemic racialized and gendered harms of capitalism. Also within Black diasporic thought, Frantz Fanon's legacy of anticolonial and armed revolutionary struggle paired with his nuanced existential writings on political revolution, nationalism, and philosophy of medicine have been touchstone works on the relationship between activist and scholarly praxis.

Today, a number of philosophers continue to work within academic philosophy while engaging in broader activist struggles. For example, Potawatomi activist-scholar Kyle Powys Whyte has developed a prolific academic career in philosophy while also participating in a number of environmental justice institutes and committees, including the Sustainable Development Institute of the College of Menominee Nation, the Michigan Environmental Justice Coalition, and, most recently, the White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council. Additionally, feminist decolonial philosopher Elena Ruíz publishes scholarship on issues such as Indigenous language and land rights (Ruíz 2020) while working with 'me too.' International to build toolkits for survivors of sexual violence and to develop strategies to end sexual violence. Additional examples of politically engaged public work can be found among philosophers working against mass incarceration and immigration detention, including scholar-activists such as Myisha Cherry, Natalie Cisneros, Nancy McHugh, Brady Heiner,

Sarah Tyson, and Lisa Guenther, all of whom work with different anti-carceral organizations and projects in the United States and Canada.

However, despite these important examples of activist-scholars, a number of philosophically trained writers have not found academic philosophy to be hospitable to their ongoing political projects. Influential public figures like Grace Lee Boggs, Angela Davis, and Adrian Piper have been forced to leave academic philosophy due to various obstacles present within the field. For example, Davis, who was pursuing a PhD in philosophy under Marxist theorist Herbert Marcuse at the University of California, San Diego, was denied a renewal of her teaching contract in 1969 due to her affiliation with the Communist Party. In particular, when asked in a letter by The Regents of the University of California whether she was a member of the Communist Party, and on which her future academic teaching career depended, she replied, “While I think this membership requires no justification here, I want you to know that as a Black woman I feel an urgent need to find radical solutions to the problems of racial and national minorities in white capitalist United States. I feel that my membership in the Communist Party has widened my horizons and expanded my opportunities for perceiving such solutions and working for their effectuation” (OAC 1969). Davis’ remarks here demonstrate her commitment to a set of political strategies and opportunities outside the constraints of the academic demands being placed on her by the Board of Regents. While she chose not to complete a PhD in philosophy, she did continue to have a prolific scholarly career that has shaped contemporary prison abolition and Black liberation projects in academic philosophy and beyond.

Such stories regarding the political repression of scholar-activists in higher education are not uncommon, including in academic philosophy, with Black philosophers, communists, and various other theorists being targeted for their political activism both inside and out of the academy.<sup>7</sup> For example, highly acclaimed African American conceptual artist Adrian Piper, who received her PhD in philosophy at Harvard University and who taught philosophy for 30 years, decided to eventually leave academia after, she notes, “the threats to [her] psychological and emotional wellbeing escalated into threats to [her] physical safety” (Piper 2019, p. 116). In this same vein, philosophers such as George Ciccariello Maher, Sara Ahmed, and Tommy Curry have all faced considerable backlash and threats from right-wing conservatives for the authors’ critical public remarks condemning white supremacy, sexual harassment, and the moderate and ineffective character of liberal politics (Parent 2017; Kolowich 2017; Ahmed 2016). Relatedly, Latina feminist philosopher Linda Martín Alcoff (2021) has argued that recent attacks on critical race theory that are being proposed through state legislation<sup>8</sup> treat the field of critical race theory – a “loose and interdisciplinary collection of scholars [who are] discerning and unraveling the material and ideological effects of slavery, colonialism, land annexation and genocide” – as the “new conservative bogeyman.” Legislative efforts to ban critical race theory in public education, she notes, echo previous McCarthy-era efforts to prevent instructors from teaching Marxism within higher education (Alcoff 2021). Notably, such right-wing attacks on curricular and research efforts to critically examine racism, sexism, capitalism, and US nationalism continue to surface under ever-evolving conservative calls for the protection of individualism, freedom, and state neutrality. As the backlash, threats, and efforts to silence publicly-facing leftist philosophers attest, academic philosophy, like many areas of academia, continues to be a precarious space for scholar-activists and our ongoing demands – both through the written word and direct action – for liberation, joy, and a future without systemic oppression.

## Notes

- 1 See, for example, van der Vossen (2015, 2020), Jones (2020), Brister (2020), and Oxley (2020).
- 2 I should note here that much of the philosophical work described in this first section has been conducted outside of the discipline of academic philosophy, although the theoretical insights from these discourses continue to shape various conversations within subfields of philosophy, specifically on issues of colonialism, racism, philosophy of history, and knowledge production.
- 3 Hartman's central claim here, developed across several of her writings, is that the brutality and dehumanization enacted upon Black peoples through the trans-Atlantic slave trade has created historiographical conditions of erasure that leave little to no records of the agential, affective, and imaginative worlds of enslaved peoples. Instead, the only available resources within the ship logs, legal documents, census records, and so on that often make up the archives of slavery are scenes of physical, sexual, and psychological violence, chattel status, and further enactments of degradation that diminish possibilities for interpreting and understanding the life-worlds of Black enslaved peoples.
- 4 Boupacha had been detained on charges of planting a bomb in a café in Algiers, a crime she denied, although she did offer a coerced confession following her torture and abuse by French officials.
- 5 Oxley's essay is published in a special issue of *Essays in Philosophy* dedicated to "Activism and Philosophy" (see Ilea 2020). The journal *Bioethics* also has a special issue dedicated to "Bioethics and Activism" (see Draper et al. 2019).
- 6 For further discussions of activism among various traditions, see the chapters in this volume on disability activism (Chapter 7), Africana philosophy (Chapter 9), Indigenous philosophy (Chapter 10), and trans activism (Chapter 19).
- 7 In addition to the dismissal of Davis in the late 1960s, a number of other academics, including academic philosophers, have been denied faculty positions and promotions in US universities due to their membership, activism, or associations with the Communist Party. See, for example, Zimring (1981) and Schrecker (1986).
- 8 See, for example, Idaho's House Bill 377 (2021), Iowa's House File 802 (2021), and Louisiana's House Bill 352 (2021).

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