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# Epistemology and Feminism

## INTRODUCTION

Our discussion of Dorothy Smith's *Institutional Ethnography* in Part III notes the temporary role Standpoint Theory played as the theoretical core of Smith's sociological outlook. This, we suggest, was because of the epistemological difficulties generated by any commitment to a 'point-of-view point of view'. Smith struggled with these difficulties and failed to overcome them. Since Standpoint Theory's official role (as distinct from background influence) in Smith's sociology was so short lived, we spend very little time on it. In that context, it does not seem to bulk too large. However, if we switch tack only slightly and consider its place in feminist social epistemology, then the balance of considerations changes significantly. Nancy Hartsock's fusion, amalgam, welding, coupling (or whatever) of the social organisation of gender and sexual divisions of labour to elements of Historical Materialism [Hartsock 1998] and her derivation of "the liberatory standpoint of women" as direct analogy to "the revolutionary standpoint of the working class" was and continues to be a motivating idea for much feminist theorising. This is not to say the concept is pristine. The idea of a standpoint has remained intact. What constitutes its radical possibilities has not. In this essay, we will trace the conceptual dynamics driving this change. We will suggest the somewhat fissiparous consequences currently being endured within that domain can be traced to two almost classic theoretical failings: a commitment to the belief sociological analyses can resolve philosophical questions and a failure to ensure the consistency and cohesion of the technical apparatuses being conjoined in order to provide those resolutions. What Hartsock bolted to feminist epistemology

were fragments of Marx's sociology. What she produced was a Heath Robinson contraption. Its intended function was precisely what it could never really be employed to do. The consequences were predictable.

### Section 1. Reinventing Epistemology

Anyone hoping to find among the tenets of Historical and Dialectical Materialism the wherewithal to rebut Analytic Philosophy in any of its guises has to face up to two challenges. First, it is not Hegel and the dialectics of history one has to confront but Kant and especially Kant's attempted resolution of the antinomies of material objects (the derivation of nature of 'the-thing-in-itself' from 'the thing-as-it-appears') and those of Being (the derivation of experience as both caused and contingent). Moreover, in overcoming this challenge, the philosopher's favourite Marxist (Lukács) is not to be relied on. Even the most sympathetic of his supporters such as Jaffe [Jaffe 2020], accept the Grand Tour of 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosophy set out in *History and Class Consciousness* [Lukacs 1967] failed, not because of the blatant political fawning of the final chapter on "organisation" and the role of the party as the ultimate mediation between theory and practice, nor for the reasons Lukács himself offers in his own prefatory retractions, but because, in the end, it was not philosophical enough. It did not push through to Kant's arguments and deconstruct their logic. Instead, by labelling them "bourgeois thinking", it swerved to avoid them as *philosophy*. The most you can say for Lukács is this: At least he saw Kant posed the central problem for Marxism as a philosophy. He just didn't solve it.

The second challenge might seem much more trivial but has equal effects. The usual proclamations taken from the *Theses on Feuerbach*

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it. [Marx, K., 1969, XI]

and

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth – i.e., the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question. (ibid., II)

cannot form the foundation stones of a philosophical position because they are neither the premises nor the conclusions of philosophical arguments. If it is anything, the first is a political slogan. The second makes sense only as a pun suggesting theory, like bread, takes shape and grows in substance in the heat of action.

Nancy Hartsock's Lukács-inspired re-purposing of reification and alienation as the building blocks of a feminist standpoint from which to overthrow Epistemology is unsuccessful for just these reasons.<sup>1</sup> The concept of "situated knowing" as an alternative to the Cartesian Knower is not a deduction from Epistemology's premises but the substitution for them of a sociological empirical generalisation.

I set off from Marx's proposal that a correct vision of class society is only available from one of the two major class positions in capitalist society. (Hartsock 1998, p.108)

This proposal she labels "meta-theoretical" as it carries the sociological stipulation such a correct vision is *collective*.

A standpoint does not refer to individual activities and perspectives: It can only be produced by a collective subject or group. Moreover, the group must be "marked" rather than an unmarked group, or, in Gramscian terms, a subaltern group. (ibid., p. 82)

In making this stipulation, Hartsock commits herself to three key unacknowledged assumptions—a metaphysics of social space as a Cartesian frame of reference constituted by infinitely discriminable locations, an ontology of individual and collective subjects standing in those locations and an epistemology based on the demarcation of appearance and reality. The first promotes the notion of perception as different lines of sight making up perspectival points of view rather than, say, immersion in an environment of sense perception and thus gives rise to the conceptual problem of generating summary depictions without any equivalent to the devices of mean/mode/median or ideal type field approximations. In addition, neither of the latter two assumptions could be said to be *philosophically* axiomatic since they are precisely expressions of two of the antinomies Kant struggled with and which much subsequent philosophy has felt he did not overcome.<sup>2</sup>

While it might seem patently obvious, we think it is well worth stating the point we are making as clearly as possible. What is meant by "situated knowing" is an abstraction from the everyday truism that people are not cognitive clones. While significant portions of what everyone in some cultural setting knows and believes overlap, there are differences and, in some cases,

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<sup>1</sup> Although we would not endorse his position, one philosopher who does try to argue his way from Enlightenment (and earlier) philosophy to what he calls a "solidaristic" conception not entirely unlike that which Hartsock strives for, is Richard Rorty [Rorty 1991].

<sup>2</sup> On the intractability of the logic of standpoint theorising, see Lipman [Lipman 2023]

important differences. Attributing these differences to variation in background, upbringing, walk of life or general experience is also an everyday truism. What anyone using this or any other common sense social conception as a premise has to show is either that it rests on *different logical principles* to Epistemology's worries about the Cartesian Knower and so displaces that frame of reference by proving a collective conception cannot be expressed as the sum over Cartesian Knowers, or that it enables resolution of the antinomies at the heart of conventional Epistemology's programme.<sup>3</sup>

The suggestion the distribution of knowledge is associated with location within certain 'master' social categories such as class, race and gender, is a sociological generalisation. It is based on certain theoretical presuppositions which license the attribution of findings to the operation of causal forces. Both the main clusters presenting this view (Marxism and Structural Functionalism) have their own explanatory accounts (Standpoint Theory and socialisation theory) of how the social mechanisms they theorise work to produce the effects they describe. Neither is interested in conventional Epistemology's core questions (What is Truth? How do we arrive at it?). Instead, they address different though equally interesting questions: 'Who in general knows what in general'? And 'Why'?<sup>4</sup> That is, they are mainly interested in overlaps within socially distributed knowledge. Even when what is being investigated is an attachment to "marginal" knowledge (Young Earth Creationists, say), they want to know what it is these believers have in common which accounts for why they share this point of view. It is hard to see how an interest in the social origins of shared knowledge could address Epistemology's puzzles about Truth, scepticism and the rest. Unfortunately, Nancy Hartsock doesn't offer us much help.

You cannot derive philosophical conclusions—in this case epistemological conclusions—from sociological empirical generalisations. And yet that is exactly what Hartsock tries to do in her elaborations first, of the notion of a standpoint and second, of a feminist version with which to uncover "patriarchal institutions and ideologies as perverse inversions of more humane social relations." [p. 107]. Notice, we are *not* saying you can't build a feminist account of the place of

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<sup>3</sup> To be fair, Hartsock presents us with quite an unusual situation. It is not often you find a philosopher saddling themselves with sociological findings in order to ride out against some philosophical argument. Much more often, it is sociologists who let their imaginations run riot with and take the findings of their studies of science or other societies to rebut philosophical positions.

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, neither seems much interested in how those who know things come to know them. In other words, they are not interested in the knowledge acquisition processes producing the distributions they describe and Hartsock assumes.

women in modern (or any) society on the basis of sociological observations. Simply that you can't build a feminist epistemology to displace conventional Epistemology on them.

## Section 2. The Place of Domestic Labour in Marx's Political Economy

Class is defined for Marx as relationship to the means of production; that is, how labour is located in the complex network of socio-economic processes through which a society is constituted. To define the feminist standpoint, Hartsock reduces Marx's concept to that of work. The "sexual division of labour" and the nature of women's work are what constitutes their (collective) standpoint. Taking this step though is tricky. As Hartsock admits, Marx did consider these questions and then he dismissed them. Nonetheless she ploughs on, determined to reverse Marx's judgement and even perhaps show that "capitalism is an outgrowth male domination, rather than vice versa" [p. 112].

Ask yourself what is going on here. Does Hartsock really want us to accept that Marx believed the tasks women perform were not "work" in the ordinary sense in which we might use that term? Could anyone seriously think that Marx was saying those who keep house, care for children, cook meals, do the shopping, cleaning and repairing of their own and the other residents' clothes were not doing any work (in the sense of investing application and time in those activities)?

The point to keep firmly in the forefront of minds is this. Marx was working in an intellectual environment where efforts to develop systems of National Accounting were in play. His ambition was to shape those debates. The question he wants to answer are pitched at the level of the 'global economic system'. What should be counted when adding up the total wealth of a nation state and its distribution? Presumably it should be everything which has value. But which things are they? Marx was militantly opposed to the idea value was a subjective, nebulous matter. He was committed to being a thoroughgoing materialist, so value had to be something material. He thought that 'something' was productive labour—thus, his account of value is a labour theory. A thing's value consists in, or equates to, the value of the labour required to bring it into being. In other words, value expresses the physical labour of transforming nature's materials into new forms. The wife wielding the scrubbing brush to shift the chewing gum from the kitchen floor is not engaged in physically creative activity. It cannot be a productive one as Marx conceived it. Tidying up and cleaning the kitchen does not involve transmuting the natural world whereas the shaping of steel to enclose the drums, pumps and motors of washing machines (which relieve housewives of some of the effort they would otherwise have to expend) certainly does. The challenge for Hartsock is not, as she seems to believe, Marx's supposed denial of domestic labour

as work, but something far more fundamental. As Marx saw it, systematically resolving the question of which activities involve productive work requires the use of a consistent and coherent conceptual framework to identify those activities which generate value by changing the material nature of the material world and those which don't. His rejection of the productive character of female labour is not a matter of personal misogynistic opinion but the application of his analytic frame in a consistent way. Seeking the economic independence of each individual may be guided by a desire to recognise the value people place on one another, but nonetheless it is an expression of our sentiments and attachments to other people (and so a subjective matter). Such value is not economic value, and Marx was, above all else, an economist.

Marx was trying to establish that value resides in the material product, being invested in it through its material production process. For him, the price mechanism does not reliably track the intrinsic value of goods and activities. As a result, changing levels of payment to achieve parity of esteem will not alter the value generated through the labour process. It is not labour but labour power which the productive worker's wage buys. But the price of labour is not determined by the value that the worker produces. The price of labour power is not set by the value of the output of that labour. It is the input value needed to (re)produce the labour power which sets the worker's wage. A wage reflects a value which is intrinsic to labour power. But what creates *that* particular value in regard to the domestic work of women? Very grossly, it is what is involved in giving birth to and rearing children together with whatever activity is needed to ensure that the vital needs of current workers are provided for. In other words, the production and reproduction of the labour force. For Marx, the value of domestic work is priced into the wages of productive workers. Hence for him, the wage earner funds domestic work.

This complexity is central to Marx's thinking because the labour theory licenses the idea the organisation of productive labour under Capitalism is exploitative. It rests on a central postulate: the materially productive worker is the *sole* source of value. Hence other kinds of participants in economic life *don't add any value*. Given the rules of the theoretical system he is constructing, they simply can't. It is the fact that the price and value of labour are divergent which allows for the possibility of 'surplus value' because the purchasing price the employer pays is less than the selling price of the value bearing products which the employer gets in 'exchange' for the exercise of the labour power. It is certainly an exchange, but not a fair one because it is not an exchange of genuine equivalents. The exploitative element arises through the alienation of labour power. Since productive workers create *all the value*, if they were truly free, they would have discretion over the disposal of their value bearing products. Such products would be fully *theirs*.

It is not only control of their labour power which is alienated, though that it reflects the fact that labour power has become just another commodity among a host of others. In terms of Marx's more philosophical ruminations, alienation of labour power results from its sale to someone else. In so doing, one is being deprived of one's specific human nature, which is to create ourselves by shaping and reshaping the world around us. We see ourselves in the things we have created. They are an extension of our powers and lives. But then again, under current and previous economic systems they are not. We don't have legal ownership of many of the commodities we have created. They not 'ours' in any strong sense, and many of them are used against 'us'. Among the things of value 'we' have produced *must* be the means of production themselves. How could they come into existence without productive labour? There is an accumulation of 'capital' in our environment though its components are alienated too (it is not called Capitalism without reason). Improving the amount and quality of capital reduces the amount of labour power invested in the production of other commodities.

In summary: Marx introduced his theory of value in an effort to find ways to quantify the value of labour by focusing on equivalences in production as the creation of value by means of the transformation of the material world. The treatment of women's work is not an anomaly, distortion or an omission in the labour theory of value. It is included within that portion of value assigned to those active in the value creating activities. It is an allocation to cover the cost of preserving and expanding the labour force and takes the form of funds for feeding, sheltering, and rearing the next generation of productive labour.

Based on what we have just said, it would seem likely a feminist programme launched from a platform in Marxism would not long remain Marxist. (By the by, Engels' hostility to the bourgeois family structure might provide a better 'Marxist' basis for feminism.) It is a familiar practice in Sociology to transplant theoretical ideas from one theory into another. It is equally common when doing so, to disconnect those ideas from their identifying relationships with other parts of the background theory. Starting with Hartsock's objectives, any appropriation of Marx's 'Standpoint Theory' is unlikely to be effective as an *application of Marxism*. After all, the function of the concept 'the working class' in the Marxist scheme is to provide an explanation why the working class can be the 'universal subject'— a subject with a special relationship to reality as well as the 'correct' understanding of the nature of Capitalism (that is, 'correct' according to the theory's terms). Marx's 'epistemology' is not straightforward nor highly elaborated. It is the extension of the thesis that material conditions are logically and historically prior to the systems of thought, together with the hugely transforming idea that characterising a society is therefore best done by

understanding how its economic structure functions to give or maintain the power of some sets of ideas over others. Running through a history of a society's culture as such, as Hegel did, is an unworldly way to understand the dynamics of the totality of a society. If you leave out all this explication of why Marx holds the views he does, the idea of Standpoint Theory is in danger of becoming rather arbitrary.

Marxist Standpoint Theory supposes one group in society can be singled out as capable of encountering reality without an overlay of ideological distortion. For example, the notion of 'fairness' is taken to be misapplied when used in regard to the wage contract because labour is sold at its price. This judgement is clarified by showing that price and value are not the same. As we have said, the wage-contract is unfair because (in the logic of Capitalism) workers must necessarily be paid less than the value of their labour. The ideological overlay on the actualities of the labour market originates with money simply because money exchange renders the disparity between the two sides invisible in terms of productive effort and reward. Possibly the clearest case of this kind of obfuscation, though, might well be the (legal) compulsion on serfs to deliver a portion of their actual product to a feudal lord while gaining nothing tangible in return.

The concealment of the price-value divergence resides in the idea the worker is paid for his actual labour rather than labour power. As a result, it looks as if the exchange is a fair one since the value of labour is measured by time and a fair day's pay is given for a fair day's work. Hire yourself out for forty hours, do those forty hours and the bargain is fulfilled. The employer may well offer wages in relation to time worked, but such a contract doesn't usually specify exactly what will be done in the hire-period. What the employer has actually bought is the capacity to decide what the worker will do within the contracted period. This opens up the possibility a worker who is supported by investment in substantial capital can produce much more over the same time as one working with meagre amounts of capital. Workers themselves do not spontaneously recognise the contradiction. They think they are being paid not merely for the value of the process of their work but also for the value of its outputs. But if that were so, then they could as well just share out the product amongst themselves, leaving the employer with nothing. This is why Marx proposes the abolition of Capitalism would be a rational move for productive employees, but not for the capitalists who would lose everything (a tautology).

*The German Ideology* [Marx and Engels 1968] tells us practical consciousness is aware of material reality because it is directly engaged with it, operating to transform material being in accord with human needs and thereby coming to know the properties and ways of the real (that is the material) world. It is the introduction of the division of labour which lets the snake into the –



socially egalitarian – Garden of Eden since that innovation induces differentiation in social consciousness. Such differentiation reflects a social differentiation, not one based on the specific parts they play in the productive process but a broader one based on the relationship of their consciousness to reality. There are those who do not do productive work, but who do work: officials and functionaries, the managers of the religious imaginary, those engaged in domestic labour and there are those who do no work at all—monarchs, rentiers. The last pair's consciousness is relieved of the restraints of engaged immersion in re-forming materials into items with use value, and thus from the constant demand to resolve pressing practical matters such as the provision tonight's supper, tomorrow's breakfast, housing, clothing and so on. The breaking of the connection with practical activity is possible only because for the rest of your life someone else does the worrying over where your next breakfast comes from. Inequity is built into the division of labour. It is a necessary element of a situation in which some people can delegate the delivery of their practical needs to others. They make themselves dependent on the labour of others. That dependence does not lead them to think they are the subordinate party however, for the other's labour is at the command of the dependent one.

The possibility of 'being relieved' of the burdens of practical consciousness demonstrates for Marx the extent to which the bifurcation of material and mental labour itself is hierarchically structured in terms of 'material' and 'mental' activity, the elevating or demeaning nature of the relevant activities as sequenced relations. All these perceptions additively combine in the assessment of such forms of activity by people participating in them. Thinking is a dignified action compared with the 'mindless' or 'thoughtless' kind. It is an elevated or even spiritual engagement of the mind, removed from the potentially contaminating entanglement with messy and polluting matter. It comes before action and dictates its course. On the collective scale, thought dictates the state of the whole. The fundamental consequence is that those elevated to the status of thinkers mistake their elevated social status for an indicator of ontological priority. For Marx, the fact that their lives are pleasurable, comfortable, even luxurious does not mean that they are less alienated than the industrial wage-slave, for they have lost connection to their own fully human nature, that of world-and-self-transforming working on natural reality itself. The rulers are not in control of things, nor are they any less ideologically separated from reality than the workers under their hegemony.

On Marx's account of the logic of Capitalism, the working classes are not waiting for a scientific theory to enlighten them as to the realities of their situation. Their lives are largely immersed in practical doings, and their consciousness is still mainly anchored the taken for granted

detail of achieving them. Most probably have little time in their lives for theoretical thinking let alone the wish to engage in book learning and theoretical inventions. Indeed, they may be suspicious or deeply disparage such activity as lacking more in the way of human dignity than their own lowly but proudly held attachment to their society.

Consciousness is the product of material conditions, and the generation of a totality transforming insurgent force—and here's the point where Marx left Hegel so long before—will be the product of material circumstances, delivered through changes in the means of production. It will not and *cannot* be induced by the elaboration of theoretical schemes. It is this which is the central weakness of Hartsock's position. It aims to engineer a social revolution by constructing an *analogy* to Marx's diagnosis of the logic of the contradictions of Capitalism; an analogy in which a newly minted action-oriented epistemology would take on the role of the transformation of material conditions essential to Marx's account. Ironically, as a 'Marxism' it is an inversion of Marx.

### Section 3. Hartsock's Retreat and Harding's Compromise

Fifteen years later, if not exactly turned upside down, Nancy Hartsock's vision had undergone a considerable re-working. It is, perhaps, best captured by what she came to believe is possible for the feminist movement to aim for.

For Marx, the liberatory role of the proletariat was in part a function of their historical mission. I would like to substitute for that understanding bell hook's phrase of yearning for a better and more just world. (p. 229).

Feminism as liberation, it seems, has morphed into something considerably less sharp edged.

What has brought all this about? Two things. First, there is an acceptance the analogical transposition of gender for class obscures all other dimensions of oppression women (and men) can find themselves suffering. Any monolithic conception must be pluralised. Second, the modernisation of Marxism as the elaboration of a humanising phenomenology of subjectivity proposed by Frederic Jameson in his *History and Class Consciousness as an "Unfinished Project"* [Jameson 1988] must now be found a place. Instead of a relentless focus on (and hence the tunnel vision of) viewing everything from the logic of material relations, we are offered the panorama of kaleidoscopic consciousness. This re-orientation is worked through as a number of injunctions.

- (i). Subjective class experience rather than objective class relations is to be the fulcrum on which analysis turns. This will involve finding ways to expose and address the multiplicity of selves and subjectivities which constitute who 'we' are.

- (ii). A feminist epistemology is needed to provide for the possibility of secure knowledge. Given the experiential multiplicities just mentioned, this security should take the form of "good enough" certitude.<sup>5</sup> Jameson refers to such a position as "principled relativism".
- (iii). To fill out the feminist standpoint, practical knowledge and its epistemology must be treated on a par with abstract or theoretical knowledge. Achieving this requires both direct and theoretical engagement with the ways of life of the oppressed.
- (iv). Political action is no longer just a matter of the logic of historical necessity. It arises as a human response to the inhuman relationships within which many are forced to live.

A programme of theoretical and empirical research framed around these injunctions will result in a number of enhancements to the feminist standpoint's conception of the life worlds which women inhabit.

- (i). It will be possible to celebrate the variegated nature of women's experience and its interpretation and so allow the exploration of the variety of political consequences which arise therein.
- (ii). There will be a greater understanding of groups as the intermediary form of social organisation linking individuals and society. Groups will be seen to be emergent communities rooted in shared experience and not as aggregations of anomic, alienated individuals.
- (iii). Finally, an alignment will be forged between the tenets of epistemology and the principles of political action applicable across cultural settings. Inevitably this will involve a "de-centering" the Western model of socio-economic class relations as the explanatory paradigm.

In jettisoning the armaments of Marxist class theory for the therapy of post-modern phenomenology, what has been let go is the robust analytic framework on which feminist epistemology modelled itself. What has been added is fashioned from a collection of sociological concepts within which social relations can be de-constructed and re-materialised at will. We have individuals, groups and societies, but how do they relate?<sup>6</sup> We have experience and

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<sup>5</sup> Surprisingly, the reference offered for "good enough" certitude is Wittgenstein.

<sup>6</sup> One central and deeply knotty issue is what Arthur Child [Child 1941] called "the problem of imputation". How do you move from categorial attributions of knowledge, belief and attitude to attributions about what individuals know

interpretation. How are they aligned? We have varieties of knowledge and 'good enough' certainty, but how do you pass from one to the other without devaluing both? Into this mix is introduced a multiplicity of selves and their situations. On what basis do we now constitute the subjective unity of the social actor and generalise it to the standpoint of an oppressed category, be it class, gender, race, sexuality or the intersection of them all? Hartsock's Standpoint Theory once designated a broad, if ill-defined, programme of purposeful social intervention. It has now turned into just another academic discourse.

In the Afterword to her 1998 collection essays, Hartsock reflects, somewhat ruefully it must be said, on the state of feminist epistemology. The openness to challenge and radical thinking which Dorothy Smith and she had so embraced was now being used as licence for denigration and caricature, so much so that she and other senior members of the discipline could find themselves traduced as "positivists" and any insistence that there were points of view which were objectively correct denounced as forms of 'Fascist', 'totalitarian' or some other form of oppressive thinking. The virtues of rigour in theory and discipline which she and others had taken for granted were now viewed as suffocating constraints on the free rein of personal liberation.

This is the context into which Sandra Harding launched her paper *Rethinking Standpoint Theory* [Harding 1992]. In it, she makes the case for disciplinary rigour in pursuit of what she terms "strong objectivity". The feminist challenge cannot simply be a meta-critique of the epistemological practices of the sciences, including the social sciences. It must engage with those sciences in order to transform them by facilitating the production of knowledge for women not simply knowledge about women.<sup>7</sup> This cannot be done by denying theory and rigour but only by transforming what the terms mean in the context of any particular discipline. Following the injunctions of Smith and Hartsock, these transformations must be based in empirically grounded research not personal experience and the expression of feelings about that experience, however justified they may be. In being empirical, though, it cannot be empiricist. For Harding, study after study has shown empiricism and its methodologies to be shot through with bias, prejudice and blindness. What Standpoint Theory has to do is provide an enhanced objectivity which empiricism cannot attain. It will do so by starting from the real problems of the socially marginal and their life

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and believe and what lies behind their actions. See [Child 1944; Child 1956]. This problem remains unresolved in Standpoint Theory and, as is made clear in Part Three, was imported into Institutional Ethnography where it remained even after Standpoint Theory was officially abandoned.

<sup>7</sup> Harding has a fine line in ringing phrases and pithy epithets. This one, of course, paraphrases a similarly ringing phrase alleged to have been used by Marx.

struggles with those problems not the theorised versions taken up by the natural and social sciences.

The starting point of Standpoint Theory—and its claim that is most often misread—is that in societies stratified by race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, or some other such politics shaping the very structure of a society, the activities of those at the top both organize and set limits on what persons who perform such activities can understand about themselves and the world around them [Harding, 1992, p. 442]

The shift, of course, is not just in terms of what the disciplines are about. It is also what they are for. They can no longer be legitimated by appealing to the virtues of curiosity or unmotivated understanding. They must be treated potential instruments of liberation and shaped as such. The justification is brusque.

... all knowledge attempts are socially situated, and that some of these objective social locations are better than others as starting points for knowledge projects, challenges some of the most fundamental assumptions of the scientific world view and the Western thought that takes science as its model of how to produce knowledge. It sets out a rigorous "logic of discovery" intended to maximize the objectivity of the results of research, and thereby to produce knowledge that can be for marginalized people (and those who would know what they can know) rather than for the use only of dominant groups in their projects of administering and managing the lives of marginalized people. [Harding 1992, p. 444-5]

Its adoption of this point of departure and its insistence on the impossibility of a view from nowhere does not condemn Standpoint Theory to relativism. Neither is it bound to some feminist version of ethnocentrism. It strives for an epistemology which recognises, honours and enacts a multiplicity of 'ways of knowing' rather than seeking to distil the essence of knowledge by abstracting over them. Developing this transformed sociology will require breaking with both the pre-eminent methodological clusters in the contemporary discipline, empiricism and with Marxism. Both assert the possibility of a singular position from which to survey social life, though of course, how that position is constructed is very different in each.

For Harding, the epistemic virtue against which Standpoint Theory is to be assessed is carried by the contributions its studies actually make to the transformation of the conditions under which their subjects live (they deliver the 'liberatory' goods, so to speak) and a combination of strong objectivity and strong reflexivity. Standpoint Theory brings exactly the same critical perspective to its own programmes as it does to those of other sociologies. It insists on the examination of the cultural presumptions and expectations which shape the framing studies and the

preference structures which lead to priority setting in the objectives for research programmes. It is not only in the logic of justification where bias is to be found. It also lurks in the formation of the logic of discovery. Along with broadening of the notion of objectivity is a denial of 'absolute' value freedom for any social activity including research. Unlike empiricism, strong objectivity does not seek an aseptic moral environment clean of values, but one which recognises the differing character of different values. Some values are democratically, ethically and culturally regressive while others are not. The challenge here is to achieve the multiplicity of viewpoints needed to guarantee the achievement of socially transforming objectives whilst not losing adherence to conceptual clarity and precision. In sum, what Harding proposes is a reconstructed investigative methodology in the light of Standpoint Theory as a fully formed feminist sociology not a philosophical tinkering with conceptual reformulations.

Over time Harding's views too moved somewhat. True, the notion of a disciplinary basis remained though what that might mean changed. The core was still to be found in

....a logic of research that focuses attention on problems that are deeply disturbing to anyone reflecting on contemporary challenges to Western thought and practice, and yet insoluble within the philosophical, political, and theoretical legacies that they provide. [Harding, 2009, p. 198]

She accepts the identified methodology has a pretty humungous agenda. As a logic of research, the approach should be able to rely on an encompassing set of fully defined concepts and derived theoretical premises in terms of which investigations are to be mounted. There should also be a list of objects or phenomena which are to be the subject of those investigations and a description of practices by which evidence/data/information concerning the phenomena under investigation can be collected as well as rules for the collation of evidence and prescriptions for generalisations over particulars. She makes no bones about it. If Standpoint Theory is a logic of research grounded in this way, then it is part of a disciplinary endeavour. Harding also reinforces two other features of her earlier depiction of Standpoint Theory. It is committed to liberationist politics and opposition to the foes of the oppressed. It knows whose side it is on. In addition, it deals with forms of oppression which involve "intersectionality", loci in the social structure where individuals are subject to multiple dimensions of exploitation and discrimination because of the identities they hold or are perceived to hold. Finally, the requirement of a combination of grounded research logic and political commitment implies an insistence that investigations of actual cases of oppression will excavate and formulate sufficient relevant and effective knowledge to address and overcome the conditions of oppression; conditions which elude other disciplinary approaches.

It is clear, the focus of attention has turned away from radical change in the intersectional settings where Standpoint Theory is to be deployed and the political commitment which drives results through to deliverable outcomes. Instead, the key issues seem to relate to what membership of a discipline should mean for those engaged in the investigations and hence to developing applied theories which confront a variety of not always easily integrated topics. To begin with there is the fact that Standpoint Theory and feminism in general have not evolved into a single free-standing discipline. Instead, they remain themes, problematics, which have been taken up across multiple disciplines. Whether they would or no, Standpoint Theory and feminism are *de facto* multidisciplinary. Because their scope and remit cannot be confined to one disciplinary purview, this development is taken to be an important step forward. Second, they are now transdisciplinary. There has been an acceleration in the use their methods across very many disciplinary settings. This methodological diaspora is noted without further comment or reservation. Does this silence imply an assumption the tailoring and adaptation necessary to facilitate the translations have been universally consistent, coherent and integrity preserving?

Anticipating our later discussion of the debate on intersectionality, Patricia Hill-Collins offers a somewhat more jaundiced comment on the challenges a multi and transdisciplinary intersectionality faces as a form of Standpoint Theory.

This period of discovery was initially energizing. Yet as intersectionality as a form of critical inquiry and praxis has matured, and continues to be discovered by even more people, its advocates must become more self-reflective about intersectionality's objectives, analyses, and practices. Specifically, intersectionality needs to find ways to adjudicate often competing perspectives on what it is, what it should be doing, and why it should be doing it. Having so many people claim intersectionality and use it in such disparate ways creates definitional dilemmas for intersectionality (Collins 2015). Leaving the theoretical dimensions of intersectionality unexamined only heightens these dilemmas. Without analyzing how its own critical analyses and social actions are interrelated, intersectionality may become trapped in its own crossroads, pulled in multiple directions and drowning in ideas. Without sustained self-reflection, intersectionality will be unable to help anyone grapple with social change, including changes within its own praxis. [Hill-Collins, 2019, p 3-4]

Any strengthening of disciplinarity is likely to be Janus-faced. Standpoint Theory defines disciplines as complicit in the operation of dominant power because of the way social structural interests pervade the foundations of those disciplines. Most important here are University and Government administrations and the way their priorities lock together with those of funding bodies, be they

public, private or charitable. But, of course, the way disciplines channel such power is one of the challenges which Standpoint Theory sets out to overcome and so it must continue to press for novel ideas and attitudes as well expositions of divergent experience. What this inevitably does is stretch its range in ways that will threaten internal coherence. And yet there seems to be no recognition of this possibility when what was designed to be an endeavour producing knowledge for women is applied to the intersectional situations of male, bi-sexual and transgendered individuals inhabiting the interstices of race, class, ethnicity and migratory status.

What is also missing from this cross disciplinary methodology is any reference to strong objectivity and strong reflexivity. Since the former was rooted in the adoption of a disciplinarily correct stance on the objects of research, this is, perhaps, not surprising. It is hard to insist on certainty whilst trying to maintain an attitude of openness to other ways of seeing things. Regarding strong reflexivity as the contemplation of one's position as a well-placed, successful academic from an alien culture engaging with the issues and problems of the marginalised who have no access to or even conception of the benefits their observing researcher enjoys, perhaps the challenge of

..thinking from marginal lives leads one to question the adequacy of the conceptual frameworks that the natural and social sciences have designed to explain (for themselves) themselves and the world around them. This is the sense in which marginal lives ground knowledge for standpoint approaches. (Harding 1992 p. 451)

proved too discomfoting?

#### Section 4. Crenshaw's Fragmentation

Whatever else they do or do not agree with one another about, it should be pretty clear by now standpoint theorists share a common metaphor: members of society occupy distinct locations in social space. It is when things get substantive, they get a little tangled. If we talk about this space being multi-dimensional and parameterise the dimensions using notions of class, race, gender, religion etc. etc. and so talk about the individual in terms of a bundle of *variables*, this is certain to be seen as objectivist, scientific and unfaithful to the phenomenology of the member's experience. The way this issue was first handled was to select what, in other discussions of research method, might be called 'control variables', namely class and gender, or rather class refracted through "the lens" (another metaphor) of gender. Eventually, what emerged was the conception of social space as a 1+1/N dimensional world with N standing for the count of all the other variables being refracted through gender. For Kimberlé Crenshaw [Crenshaw 1989; Crenshaw 1991], this was not just unsatisfactory, it was misleading and wrong. The majority of women she encountered in her



studies of violence were as much black and working class as they were women. They sat in a confluence/intersection where the oppressive forces of race, class and gender were equally on display not one where the first two forces worked through the dominant factor of gender.

Since that critique, intersectionalism has permeated the field of what, just because its proponents do, we will now call 'resistance knowledge production'. The result has been extraordinary.

Over the intervening decades, intersectionality has proved to be a productive concept that has been deployed in disciplines such as history, sociology, literature, philosophy, and anthropology as well as in feminist studies, ethnic studies, queer studies, and legal studies. Intersectionality's insistence on examining the dynamics of difference and sameness has played a major role in facilitating consideration of gender, race, and other axes of power in a wide range of political discussions and academic disciplines, including new developments in fields such as geography and organizational studies. [Cho, 2013 p 787]

Although this proliferation has been met with some reservations (we will talk about Hill Collins' influential contribution in a moment), Crenshaw thinks the trade-offs involved are well worth making. In fact, for her many of these reservations reflect lack of sufficient familiarity with what the burgeoning work comes to.

.....the widening scope of intersectional scholarship and praxis has not only clarified intersectionality's capacities; it has also amplified its generative focus as an analytical tool to capture and engage contextual dynamics of power. In consequence, we think answers to questions about what intersectional analysis is have been amply demonstrated by what people are deploying it to do. (ibid., p. 788)

There is more.

Thus, interpretations of intersectionality within other discursive fields may not escape the dynamics that rendered Black female plaintiffs illegible to courts in the cases initially analyzed. It is far from mere coincidence that current debates about intersectionality's capacity to represent anyone other than Black women bear striking resemblance to courts' discomfort with centering Black women in class-action lawsuits. (ibid., pp 791-2)

What Crenshaw and her colleagues see the range of studies which work with an intersectional "sensitivity" (their term) displaying is the fluid character of the melange of categories being invoked in analysis as those categories are deployed either on the circumstances of actual marginalised

persons or on the forms of conventional and institutionalised corpora of knowledge brought to bear when such persons become entangled in the machineries of social welfare, the legal system and government. All underscore the need to surface, frame, appropriately weight and relentlessly oppose the scale of political inequality described. Eventually this opposition must successfully overcome the injustices such marginal persons experience.

For Crenshaw, intersectionality represents a starburst of radical Action Theory. For Patricia Hill Collins [Hill-Collins 2019], it is more like incandescent flying debris. Collins is conflicted though. She too wants to confront all the forms of oppression, subjugation and disadvantage which studies of intersectionality have rooted out. Unfortunately, she can find no intellectual coherence nor a systematically set out the rationale motivating what is being done. To begin with, what does the term 'intersectionality' actually designate? There is no point, she thinks, in saying (as Crenshaw does) that it means whatever those who use the term want it to mean because they take it in so many different ways. For some, it is an insightful metaphor alerting them to issues. For others it is a handy heuristic. The corpus of studies built up provides exemplars, rules of thumb and templates of investigative protocols which can be borrowed, adapted and re-purposed. Yet again others take it to be a paradigm more or less in the Kuhnian sense. It constitutes an (inter/multi-) disciplinary frame of reference which has both overthrown the old 'objectivist' and 'externalist' explanatory order and is addressing problems and questions which that order had no place or account for. True, intersectionality has broken down the silos of disciplinary explanations. But, instead, it is trying to hold them together not as multiple competing perspectives but, borrowing a mathematical image, as manifolds of surfaces. The trouble with this unconstrained usage is that claiming some initiative to be intersectional legitimises almost any kind of mode of investigation and intervention and can be justified merely by asserting the study's articulation of "liberatory" resistant knowledge.

Hill-Collins' reaction is epitomised in a concern over the much over-used term "critical". Every instance of intersectionality promotes itself as critical. In many, many cases Hill-Collins thinks this just means they dislike, disapprove of or want to change the institutionalised routine practices of public agencies because such processes tend to prioritise the wants and needs institutional processes can deal with over the wants and needs their 'clients' call out. Although she doesn't say so, Hill-Collins implies the emphasis Crenshaw and the other leading intersectional researchers have placed on starting from the situation and experience of the individual has generated not just tolerance for atheoretical sentimentality but a contempt for those who would do things differently. Where, Hill-Collins asks, are intersectionality's Max Horkheimer, Stuart Hall or Franz Fanon? From each, she extracts a nugget, a theme, which could be used to tie intersectionality together more

tightly. From Horkheimer, it is the Frankfurt School's notion of "massification" as late-Capitalism's mechanism for reproducing alienated consciousness. From Hall, it is the way the different cultures of disadvantaged and discriminated groups exhibit adaptive "articulations" of alternative modes of subjugation. Fanon brings a post-structural awareness of the importance of legacy of colonialism and the rise of neo-imperialism to be found in the psychologies of subjugation among once colonised communities and their immigrant migrations. Appropriately theorised, Hill-Collins suggests, some conjugation of these ideas could provide the scaffolding for a robust theory to underpin intersectionalism. On its basis, coruscating analyses of the generative structural conditions and subliminal constraints shaping the consciousness of oppression could be developed rather than overwrought condemnation which she thinks far too often passes for critique in intersectionality.

We could go on, following her through her consideration of the muddles of "resistant knowledge", the idiosyncratic position of "Black feminism" within intersectionality, the conceptual elusiveness of relationism and the characterisation of what constitutes social justice (among many other things). But we won't. Instead, we will close with her summary of what intersectionality needs to do now if it is to survive as a credible theoretically motivated form of radical social action.

First, intersectionality cannot carry on dodging the problems posed by its freewheeling epistemology. It has to develop an appropriate conception of *truth*, one which can stand as a counterweight to the absolutist conceptions which underpin the various forms of empiricist naturalism and realism. Inevitably this will mean returning to the topics of social epistemology and the variability of what is taken to be 'justified, true belief' in societies as well as why some matters are foregrounded and others ignored or even repressed. This will require developing an approach to data which gives it due weight while recognising its stochastic character. You might say what Hill-Collins wants is a conception of "reasonable truth" based in "circumstantial evidence". But it has to be one which allows a closure of attempts to contest that reasonability.

Second, there is power. Within intersectionality (and most political and social philosophy), power is a residual category. It is the fallback explanation when other reasons, factors and causes don't close the explanatory loop. The complexity of contemporary social relations has only increased its unsystematic usage. It is conceptualised as force, influence, repressive tolerance, alienated consciousness and in many other ways without working through and co-ordinating within a single conceptual framework the denotations and connotations carried by each.

Finally, there is the place of ethics and social justice.

What is the place of ethics within intersectionality as critical social theory? What role should ethics or normative principles play within intersectionality's methodology or way of arriving at truths? Can ethical issues such as social justice be so neatly cordoned off and ignored because they seemingly lie outside intersectionality's theoretical concerns? (2019 p. 289).

## Section 5. Summary

What is grounded knowledge in the analysis of the social and how should we acquire it? What is the relationship between power, position and interests and how can we evidence it? What is the role of social values in resolving the first two questions? These are Patricia Hill-Collins' challenges to intersectionality as the latest manifestation of Hartsock's Standpoint Theory. It is only by addressing and resolving these three clusters of issues that Hill-Collins believes Standpoint Theory will be able to find a path back to the focus and mission it once defined for itself. Unless it does so, she feels it will inevitably continue to become even more diffuse, differentiated, and uncoordinated. Eventually, rather than a body of theoretically devised analytic concepts, its central terms will have degenerated into political slogans. That following the path she seeks involves collectively addressing and overcoming precisely the same paradoxes, dilemmas, and other wicked problems the social and human sciences have unsuccessfully grappled with over the last 3000 years, does not bode well.

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