

Review: Feminist Standpoint Theory and the Problems of Knowledge

Reviewed Work(s): Texts, Facts, and Femininity: Exploring the Relations of Ruling by Dorothy Smith: Feminist Praxis: Research, Theory and Epistemology in Feminist Sociology by Liz Stanley: Gender and Knowledge: Elements of a Postmodern Feminism by Susan Hekman: Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives by Sandra Harding

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Feminist Standpoint Theory and the Problems of Knowledge

Helen E. Longino

Works reviewed

Smith, Dorothy. *Texts, Facts, and Femininity: Exploring the Relations of Ruling*. London: Routledge, 1990.

Stanley, Liz, ed. *Feminist Praxis: Research, Theory and Epistemology in Feminist Sociology*. London: Routledge, 1990.

Hekman, Susan. *Gender and Knowledge: Elements of a Postmodern Feminism*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990.

Harding, Sandra. *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991.

THE PROBLEMS of knowledge are central to feminist theorizing, which has sought to destabilize androcentric, mainstream thinking in the humanities and in the social and natural sciences. Feminist standpoint theory has been one of the most distinctive and debated contributions of contemporary feminist thought to the theory of knowledge. While some feminist theorists extend its range to natural phenomena, the theory was developed in a social science context and has been advocated primarily by feminists in one or another of the social sciences or by feminists emerging from the Marxist tradition. Provisionally, standpoint theory reflects the view that women (or feminists) occupy a social location that affords them/us a privileged access to social phenomena. This root notion has had various expressions, ranging from the romantic idea that women come, by nature or social experience, to be better equipped to know the world than are men to the more

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modest proposal that a social science adequate for women must proceed from a grasp of the forms of oppression women experience. Associated with standpoint theory was the concept of a successor science, a science that would supersede male-centered science. Since feminist standpoint theory was introduced in the 1970s, postmodern theorizing, which calls into question not only the very possibility of knowledge but also the possibility of the category *women*, has influenced a growing number of feminist thinkers. These four books, representing work in three different (albeit all English-speaking) countries, reflect both the tensions and the interactions between these views.

Dorothy Smith, a sociologist at the University of Toronto, one of the original standpoint theorists, develops the theory further in a collection of her recent papers. Liz Stanley, a sociologist at the University of Manchester, has selected papers from that university's Studies in Sexual Politics series that exemplify the practice of theorizing from a feminist standpoint in empirical sociological research. Susan Hekman, a political scientist at the University of Texas at Arlington, by arguing for the convergence of feminist and postmodern theorizing, disputes what some take as central tenets of the standpoint approach. And finally, Sandra Harding, a philosopher at the University of Delaware, defends standpoint theory from postmodernist criticism and attempts to articulate a version adequate not only for a postmodern age but also for a postcolonial era.

Two themes inform *Texts, Facts and Femininity*, the volume by Dorothy Smith: the standpoint of women as a lever revealing the ideological character of sociological practices and the textual mediation of social organization. This volume, whose previously published chapters date from the 1980s, focuses more heavily on the second theme. Earlier volumes, *The Everyday World as Problematic* and *The Conceptual Practices of Power*, focused more heavily on the first.¹ Smith's work rewards the determined reader with numerous insights into the constitution of social relations and categories and with a powerful critique of sociological practice in general.

Smith adapts Marx's description of ideology in *The German Ideology* to contemporary sociology, arguing that social concepts and categories express social relations.² Traditional sociology studies relationships that have been constituted by the methods and practices of governing. A critical understanding of these categories would analyze the relations

¹ Dorothy Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987), and *The Conceptual Practices of Power: A Feminist Sociology of Knowledge* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990). (The latter book was reviewed by Bettina Aptheker in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 17[2]:467–71.)

² Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 1970).

they express. By contrast, the concepts of sociology are borrowed from these relations, but their origins are concealed and their referents treated as natural kinds, objects given in the world rather than (literally) social constructs. Smith's claim is not that the corresponding social relations are illusory but that the ideological practices of sociology make the lived realities in which those relations exist invisible. The particulars of embodied experience are left behind in the search for sociological generalizations, and, more problematical, phenomena that exist only in a social relation are treated as intrinsic properties of individuals. How are these mystifying practices of sociology revealed? Smith claims that in the point of rupture between women's experience as ruled and women's experiences as ruling (i.e., as members of the sociological profession) it is possible to learn how sociological concepts are expressions of social relations, that is, to explore the ideological dimensions of sociology. Women's standpoint in that point of rupture "reveals that sociology's conceptual procedures, methods and relevances organize its subject matter from a determinate position in society and discredit sociology's claim to constitute an objective knowledge independent of the sociologist's situation."³

Smith advocates an alternate sociology that begins with "insiders' knowledge," that is, personal knowledge of one's own lived experience, but that comes into being in the gap between that knowledge and the "objectified knowledge" produced by traditional sociological practices. It is not a successor science in the traditional sense, not about uncovering suppressed facts or creating new ones. Although Smith does at times suggest that it is possible to produce knowledge of social reality from the insider's perspective, her alternative sociology is neither a reclaiming of lived experience as the proper subject matter of sociology nor an alternative analysis of the phenomena studied in traditional sociology. It is rather an inquiry into the creation of those phenomena. The categories of sociology reflect relations of power. Smith advocates a sociology whose point is to make visible and to analyze the relations of ruling that create the phenomena traditional sociology mystifies as natural kinds.

The essays in *Texts, Facts, and Femininity* continue Smith's critique of sociology by focusing on the role of texts as active elements in social relations. The growth of bureaucratic forms of government that depend on forms, reports, data bases, tables of statistics and classifications, and so on has given power to such documents. Smith explores how in our reading of documents we become implicated in the power relations in which the documents participate. She also explores how the insider's standpoint might be used to read against the text, to lay the constructions bare. The chapters in this volume include the bravura performance "K is

³ Smith, *The Conceptual Practices of Power*, 21.

mentally ill.” This essay analyzes an ordinary (i.e., nonprofessional) narrative of an acquaintance’s developing mental illness in a way that pulls the relational quality of the so-called mentally ill behavior back into view. As Smith takes us through the narrative, we see simultaneously that K’s mental illness is behavior elicited in the social situations in which she finds herself and that the narrator resolutely reduces these social phenomena to individual properties of K. The narrator’s moves are facilitated by an individualizing discourse of mental illness that has seeped out from a psychiatric context into the broader culture. Another chapter contrasts an official report with a bystander’s construal of police action at a political demonstration. The bystander is a professor writing in outrage to a local paper; the official report is a response by the mayor. Here Smith is asking not only how the different relations of the texts’ authors to the events are implicated in the production of a narrative of crowd control in one case and of police brutality in the other but also how “the interpretive practices which activate [the text for the reader] are embedded in a relational process” (125). Other essays include a study of the textual, discursive organization of femininity and an examination of the problems of sociologically studying newsroom practices and by extension any self-organizing group activity, as well as theoretical pieces.

In addition to being indirectly indebted to Marx, these essays are in dialogue with the ethnomethodological tradition in sociology and with what Smith takes to be the Foucaultian approach to texts.⁴ Ethnomethodology studies the self-organizing activity of groups through their conversation. Conversation is regarded as the work of self-organization. By focusing their attention strictly on what is said—that is, on the sequence of utterances—in the situation, ethnomethodologists have difficulty accounting for power differentials and for strategies of exclusion. It is the silenced voice, however, that Smith seeks to recover. Foucault analyzes the power of/in discourse to shape reality. Smith maintains that power is not located in texts but exercised through texts by those who rule. Against Foucault, she insists that the lived actuality beyond the text is accessible—accessible through the rupture that is women’s standpoint.

The proposal of a women’s standpoint provokes a number of questions. Smith emphasizes and treats as a resource women’s insider knowledge of our own particular, lived experience. Is she thereby positing an unmediated raw knowledge that can ground her alternative sociology? Not necessarily. More important to Smith than the individual’s experience is the gap between particular lived experience and the decontextu-

⁴ For ethnomethodology, see Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1967). Relevant works of Michel Foucault include *The Order of Things* (New York: Pantheon, 1970), and *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

alized sociological description and analysis of that experience (from an outsider's—a ruler's—point of view). Regardless of whether we use social or psychiatric categories or socially mediated concepts in personal accounts, a fundamental discontinuity exists between how they are deployed in those accounts and how they are deployed in accounts aspiring to the status of objectified knowledge. It is that discontinuity that is the resource—and not some set of bare facts accessible to the uncontaminated mind. Furthermore, that rupture opens onto a different domain for the sociologist: an exploration of “how her life is put together by relations and forces that are not fully available to her experiencing” (5).

Well, why then is women's standpoint, in particular, a resource? Smith cites the historical exclusion of women of all sorts from the ruling side of relations of power. In the modern period, with its dichotomizing of public and private, women's symbolic place has been “in the home,” in the private sphere. In the consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s many women, consigned to the private domain as a site for (white middle-class) feminine fulfillment, learned how to describe their experience in terms they could own. Their struggle against mystified ideological descriptions of women's place can, however, be thought of as one occasion for the creation of rupture, rather than (as Smith sometimes seems to suggest) its only occasion. The anticolonialist writers Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi described similar struggles of the colonized against the ideology of the colonizer.⁵ Why are these not equally models of rupture? More questions follow upon these. Does Smith's position require conflating the feminist sociologist and the historical abstraction *woman*? Does she assume the existence of a common universal woman's standpoint? And are men equally universalized? Are distinctions of class, race, and sexuality among women and men erased by feminist standpoint theory? While Smith's text is equivocal on these questions, other standpoint theorists argue that universalization is not intrinsic to the theory.

Liz Stanley and other contributors to *Feminist Praxis* acknowledge that “Smith's feminist sociologist proceeds from the standpoint of women who are ‘like her’ ” (36). While thus recognizing false universalizing from her own location on Smith's part, they also maintain that Smith's concept of a standpoint is robust and complex enough to admit multiple standpoints. By more clearly locating the traditional male voice of sociology (white, middle class, and heterosexual) one sees that it has “the same alienating and colonizing relationship to the social world from many men's standpoints, too” (39). In a chapter addressing feminist critical responses to standpoint theory, Stanley and her collaborator Sue

⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. C. L. Markmann (1967; reprint, New York: Grove & Weidenfeld, 1982); Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (New York: Orion, 1965).

Wise argue for what might be called *standpoint pluralism*, citing particularly the work of black feminists and of lesbian feminists in the United Kingdom and in North America, work that articulates women's standpoints other than that of the white middle-class heterosexual feminist that has haunted too much feminist work.

The other essays in this volume are highly reflexive accounts of particular research projects. They include an essay by Jane Haggis on the obstacles to adequately framing a research project about how Christian missionaries in the Indian state of Kerala advanced British colonialism, and one by Chung Yeung Kay on the difficulties of teasing apart gender and ethnicity in a workplace setting. Denise Farran, Ann Pugh, and Stanley use the double perspective of the feminist sociologist in essays exploring the transformation of lived experience into statistical data—the decontextualizing that transforms individuals into discrete, separable, recombinable units. The volume also contains essays on the variety of standpoints from which to analyze interview transcripts and other textual material and essays on the conflicts facing feminist social workers whose female clients abuse their children. All these pieces are permeated by the working-class consciousness characteristic of British feminism and missing from U.S. feminism. They explore the difficulties of actually doing empirical research with the “bifurcated consciousness” recommended by Smith. In some cases this consciousness leads to the cancellation of a research project—as happened with Fiona Poland's project on child-care providers—because of the researcher's inability to represent the subjects of her study within the categories required by the social work agencies; in others it makes the researchers aim to produce a polyphonic text that can represent the multiple layers of experience in complex social interactions, involving race, gender, class, nationality, and religion.

Like Smith's work, these essays resist the temptation to see feminist science as a science focused on the same kinds of objects as traditional science but from a different point of view. Such an alternative, or successor, science would provide different information summarized in new categories but otherwise be related to the feminist project of social transformation just as traditional sociology is to the project of maintaining the status quo. The essays instead treat feminist sociology as the study of how knowledge is constructed and how power is exercised and reinforced through the construction of knowledge.

Susan Hekman variously describes her task in *Gender and Knowledge* as fashioning a postmodern feminism, promoting a conversation between postmodernism and feminism, and demonstrating the convergence of postmodernism and feminism. In Hekman's view feminism and postmodernism have a great deal in common, especially in their opposition to

foundationalism and anthropocentrism.⁶ Partly because of modern feminism's partial intellectual origins in liberalism and in Marxism, however, some strains of contemporary feminism cling to Enlightenment concepts that, in the end, perpetuate the subordination of women. Like many contemporary thinkers, Hekman sees modern Western thought as structured by a series of dualisms. The three she focuses on are rational/irrational, subject/object, and culture/nature. Male/female or masculine/feminine are discussed in relation to all three, Hekman claiming that sexual or gender dualism is the ground of the others.⁷ In each case, feminists have responded to these asymmetric dichotomies by arguing either that women participate in the "masculine" privileged side (e.g., the rational) as much as men do or that the "feminine" side is really superior to the privileged side. Hekman discusses feminist standpoint theory as an instance of the latter. Her general objection is that these strategies accept the dichotomies and simply take up one or the other side. Because the dichotomies are rooted in gender dualism, which is inherently hierarchical, any theory that uses one of them perpetuates, however unwittingly, male domination. Hekman develops this argument in chapters devoted to each of the three dualisms cited and in a final chapter on the prospects for a postmodern feminism. Her postmodern sources are Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. Each chapter summarizes their approaches to a topic and then discusses much of the relevant feminist literature. The strength of the postmodernists, especially of Derrida and Foucault, is their dissolution of dichotomy generally. While they dissolve dichotomy, feminism reveals its basis in gender.

Regarding standpoint theory in particular, Hekman says that it reifies the nature/culture dichotomy that is at the root of the exclusion of women from the scientific enterprise, reinforces the false universalism of the Enlightenment, and attempts to substitute a new truth for discredited masculine science, thereby establishing a new orthodoxy. The standpoint theorists she cites are not those so far represented in this review; Hekman might, therefore, concur that the standpoint theory expounded by Smith and championed by Stanley and Wise does not commit the first of the errors she identifies. The Smith/Stanley/Wise version, after all, posits that women's advantage comes not from a special relation to nature but from

⁶ I confess to having been puzzled by Hekman's unexplicated use of *anthropocentrism* and *homocentrism*. Feminism has certainly challenged androcentrism, and postmodernism challenges a certain conception of the subject, and hence of the human knower, as well as a certain kind of humanism. But I am not sure it is helpful to classify all these as anthropocentrism.

⁷ I would demur from this formulation, believing it more useful to think of these dualisms and others as constructing one another in ways that change over time, rather than being grounded in any single concept pair.

our dual position as subject/object in the texts of ruling. As Stanley and Wise point out, this identification is not unique to women, nor is it experienced by all women in the same way. And to the extent that they call for multiple standpoints in tension and dialogue with each other, it is not clear that their version of standpoint theory commits Hekman's third error either. Although Hekman's survey of postmodernist and feminist writings is impressive, she does not convince me that feminism should adopt the thought of Gadamer, Derrida, and Foucault as its own.⁸ In part this is because she summarizes the work of the male postmodernists without sufficiently unpacking the metaphors in which their thought is expressed and without giving arguments that would support the claims they make. Furthermore, the work of dissolving problematic dualisms and other shibboleths of Western thought has been undertaken by philosophers other than the ones cited by Hekman. In the twentieth-century Anglo-American tradition of analytic philosophy, John Austin, Gilbert Ryle, and particularly Ludwig Wittgenstein raised significant challenges to the presuppositions of modern philosophy.⁹ While their work has been taken in various directions, feminist philosophers working in the analytic tradition have developed some of its more radical possibilities.¹⁰ The American pragmatists also offer an alternative to modernist thinking.¹¹ So, the choice is not as stark as Hekman presents it. We are indeed in a postmodern era, but the appropriate intellectual frameworks are not exhausted by those theorists labeled as *postmodernist*.

The latter point is also made in passing in Harding's *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* Her book takes up questions left open at the end of her previous book, *The Science Question in Feminism*, and uses them to push feminist analysis toward a more adequate relationship with analysis from other oppositional, liberationist positions (antiracist, anti-imperialist, antiheterosexist).¹² The first part of the book reviews and updates terri-

⁸ Impressive as Hekman's survey is, her interpretations of some of the feminist thinkers surveyed seem idiosyncratic, e.g., she describes Evelyn F. Keller as endorsing intuition as a ground of knowledge and gives oddly little attention to the work of Donna Haraway, work that is firmly engaged with the themes Hekman discusses but that resists classification in any ready-made "-ism."

⁹ While very different, each of these thinkers in his own way undermines the foundationalism—i.e., the belief that knowledge must rest on incontestable foundations—that characterizes so-called Enlightenment thought. See John Austin, *Philosophical Papers* (1961; reprint, London: Oxford University Press, 1970); Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949); Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963).

¹⁰ See, e.g., the work of Kathryn Addelson, Marilyn Frye, Maria Lugones, Naomi Scheman, and Elizabeth Spelman, among others.

¹¹ Pragmatists rejected the classical conception of truth as correspondence with reality and urged that "true" be understood as designating beliefs that advanced the goals of a believer (or her society); truth was identified with utility (see John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* [New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1938]).

¹² Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986).

tory covered in the earlier book. The second defends feminist standpoint theory from postmodernist and other criticism. The third contemplates the advantages of expanding traditional standpoint theory to include the perspectives of “other Others.”

Three main themes run through the book. One is that we must learn to see the history of Western science from the standpoint of the targets of Western imperialism, a second is Harding’s claim that the natural sciences are best conceived as a special case of the social sciences, and the third is her recommendation of “strong objectivity” (138). Provocative though these ideas are, they have been insufficiently developed in this book.

Harding’s discussion of the history of Western sciences in relation to the intellectual systems of other world cultures contrasts two stories. According to the first, the inspired insight of a few men of genius in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries generated a superior way of thought in Europe—“the scientific method”—which is gradually being adopted by “primitive cultures” as they modernize. According to the other story, European science is dependent on Africa intellectually—because classical Greek thought derives from African origins—and materially—because the enrichment of Europe derives from the exploitative underdevelopment of Africa. European colonization of Africa dramatically halted indigenous scientific growth and permitted the systematic concealment by European scholars of the African roots of Europe’s intellectual heritage. The history of Africa and of the colonizing powers from the perspective of the colonized must be researched and told, but it would be wrong to frame the historiographic issue as a choice between these two stories. No serious student of Western science believes the first, “a few European men of genius,” story, although Harding rightly points out that few social studies of science go beyond social-cultural-political influences within the North Atlantic region.¹³ Elements of the second story are hotly contested, and until more research is done, Africa’s role in the history of science will not be entirely clear. (For example, while script was invented long ago in several sub-Saharan African cultures, according to Kwasi Wiredu, these scripts were used not to record intellectual thought but to record trade transactions, so one important condition for the perpetuation of an indigenous scientific tradition was not satisfied.)¹⁴ The stories to emerge from current research are likely to be more complex and

¹³ Yet Harding oddly does not mention Sharon Traweek’s *Beamtimes and Lifetimes* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), which both brings the tools of cultural anthropology to the study of the U.S. particle physics community and compares the culture of that community with that of the particle physics community in Japan.

¹⁴ Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 40.

challenging than ones populated by one-dimensional heroes, villains, or victims.¹⁵

Philosophers of science influenced by logical positivism thought of the sciences as arranged hierarchically from the less to the more basic.¹⁶ Each scientific discipline, starting with the social sciences, could be reduced to the next one down in the hierarchy until one reached the most basic of the sciences: physics. Harding's claim that the natural sciences are best conceived as a special case of the social sciences is a clever reversal of the positivist ideal, and while it would certainly be convenient for standpoint theorists if the natural sciences were a subfield of the social sciences, Harding's grounds for this are unconvincing. She argues first that the natural sciences need to be developed in ways that take into account the social and political dimensions of their knowledge construction. It is social sciences, according to Harding, that reveal such dimensions and that have pioneered reflexive methodologies. To conclude that this fact about the social sciences shows that they are models for good natural science, however, is just confused. We can recognize the social construction of both natural sciences and social sciences and incorporate that recognition into our epistemologies and into our design of scientific institutions without supposing a reduction of one kind of science to the other. Harding's second argument is that nature as an object of knowledge "never comes to us 'naked,' but only already constituted in social thought" (147). In this respect "it simulates intentional beings" and hence is to be studied by methods appropriate for the study of such beings (147). The social (and human) sciences require distinctive methods, however, not because we encounter other humans only as constituted in social thought but because humans engage in meaningful (social) interactions with each other. We are intentional in this latter respect, and it is one that natural objects do not simulate. Feminists and philosophers of science alike are better served by accepting the disunity of the sciences (and perhaps of nature) than by seeking yet another false unity.

We might usefully reflect on a question raised by all of these books: What is the relation of feminist theorizing, particular standpoint theorizing, to knowledge construction, science, and epistemology? Traditional epistemology assumed single knowers all sharing a common framework of belief and evaluation and asked how such knowers might

¹⁵ Ibid., along with Valentin Y. Mudimbe in *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) and Paulin Hountondji in *African Philosophy* (London: Hutchinson, 1983) express complex attitudes toward science, European science, and their relation to African thought.

¹⁶ See Paul Oppenheim and Hilary Putnam, "Unity of Science as a Working Hypothesis," in *Concepts, Theories, and the Mind-Body Problem*, Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, vol. 2, ed. Herbert Feigl, Michael Scriven, and Grover Maxwell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), 3–36.

distinguish knowledge from (mere) opinion. What standpoint theory, postmodernist theory, and other arguments in history and philosophy of science reveal is the irreducible multiplicity of such doxastic (i.e., belief) frameworks, grounded in particular historical sociopolitical locations. This argument runs through all four of the books reviewed here—and it fundamentally complicates matters for epistemology. One of the complications is the choice between plurality and unity. While Smith is silent on this matter, Stanley and Wise insist that the best interpretation of standpoint theorizing is one that rejects the ideal of a successor science; they endorse pluralism as the prerequisite for theoretical and empirical development. Hekman, too, endorses pluralism as an effective resistance to hegemonic orthodoxy. Harding advocates instead what she calls “strong objectivity” (138), which seems to be a proposal for fashioning unity from seeming disunity.

“Strong objectivity” means recognizing the historically situated character of all knowledge claims and seeking to have one’s own thought permeated with each (oppositional) standpoint. Feminist thought must be African-American thought, and vice versa. While abjuring an ideal of absolute truth, Harding does endorse an ideal of less partial and less distorting thought. The least distorting is that which begins from as many life situations as are constructed as Other by mainstream discourses. Although Harding lists the advantages of “starting thought” from the situations of women in postcolonial societies, or of lesbians, she gives few directions as to how, say, a white working-class Scottish woman might act on the recommendation to start thought from the life of a Myanmar peasant woman.¹⁷

“Strong objectivity” sounds like a criterion to be applied along a continuum: the least distorting is the most inclusive. Hekman would undoubtedly point out that to the extent this idealizes a single universally acceptable/applicable theory, it replicates the goals of Enlightenment thinking and fails to avoid the problem of truth, which is presupposed in the concept of distortion. But it is not clear to me that there is any neat continuum. I cannot produce thought from the life situations of women in India, although I can produce thought that takes their point of view and research as seriously as theirs takes my own. However much I and they inform ourselves about one another’s life situations we can neither share nor escape our social locations unless we materially dismantle them, and even then we cannot escape our histories. There is, therefore,

¹⁷ Harding misses an opportunity radically to challenge mainstream and feminist academic practices. One of the most effective ways to learn what life looks and feels like in the shoes of others, short of living their lives, is to read their fiction. Insisting on the contributions of artists, visual and literary, to feminist theorizing would really shake things up.

no guarantee of a convergence of theory, even when it meets Harding's criterion for maximal objectivity.

The work of feminist, postcolonial, and postmodern theorists has shattered the chimera of unity. This might be considered the first stage of new epistemological thinking. If we abandon the idea that knowledge is one, and when achieved, absolute, if we assume the location of knowledge in sociohistorical contexts and become pluralists, we are still faced with the ancient problem of distinguishing knowledge from opinion and what the distinction amounts to. Sue Wise argues in *Feminist Praxis* that feminists cannot act on simple rules like "always believe the victim" or "the mother never colludes [in child abuse]" because reality is too complex. Even among those the feminist social worker takes it upon herself to protect, conflicts occur and the social worker must sort out what kinds of intervention are required rather than simply devise ways to keep the state out of her clients' affairs. A comparable point might be made about sociology: May not the feminist sociologist feel it necessary to produce information when that would be helpful to those with whom she feels solidarity—for example, regarding the extent of the damage inflicted by a poor community by poverty? Under what conditions would we call that knowledge? And what would we mean by such a designation? While standpoint theory might answer the first question, it does not answer the second. But if standpoint theory does not answer the recurring questions in the theory of knowledge, it has helped reframe the terrain in which epistemology can be done. The New Theory of Knowledge that must follow has a more complex task than and must avoid the arrogant aspirations of modernist epistemology. I think it will also be less removed from the actual conditions in which we strive to produce knowledge.

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