

INTERROGATIONS #3
9/23/2004
General Perspectives III: Standpoint Epistemologies

1. Matt Desmond

A certain theme in this week's readings revolves around the struggle over the legitimate definition of scientific objectivity. Feminist and standpoint criticism forces us to see how the critical realist account of knowing mechanisms, events, and experiences is much more than a problem of observation; moreover, it is one of interpretation, bodily experience, and social positioning (one could, with some effort, reconstruct the triad to take into account Saussure's *sign*, *signifier*, and *signified* to elucidate this idea). The readings point our attention to the idea of science and objectivity (brought out by Harding's, I think, astute distinction between weak and strong objectivity and Hartsock's notion of abstract masculinity) as well as the practice of science (in terms of the exclusion of women from the laboratory as Rose discussed or the relationships between science and capitalists or militarists). However, it seemed to me that the authors left out a central part of the scientific process that is key to debates surrounding standpoints and objectivity when they failed to mention the processes of *disseminating* scientific knowledge. Hence, my question for this week is: can we ever hope to obtain an objective science when conveying scientific ideas relies on hermetic language?

I am not siding with Lacan who sees language as the world, nor with Derrida who sees understanding as bound by language—an inescapable metaphor. Rather, my point is that even if science could be justified as an objective processes, the process of communicating scientific ideas only makes sense by relying on meta-theoretical systems of understanding, which are not only interpretive, but are also seeped with power dimensions that limit our possibilities of understanding to serve dominant “interests.”

[The highlighted formulation seems to suggest a kind of power/interest-functionalism: language is seeped in power in such a way that it limits our possibilities of understanding to those understandings that serve dominant interests. The limits on understanding that language imposes are thus “functional limits” for dominant interests. The question I would raise about this is: what are the mechanisms that insure that language constructed within power relations is constructed in just the right way that it embodies such functional limits? I personally think language is much more internally contradictory and inconsistent than this. Power relations certainly do have an impact on language, understanding, theory, etc., but I think that the impact is not so totalizing and coherent as to in general create this kind of self-reinforcing hermeneutic system.]

To get around this, some have suggested a highly-technical scientific language: what Ben Agger, referencing sociology, calls “secret language.” But secret language presents two problems. First, it keeps scientific knowledge in the hands of “specialists” and thus brings up questions of science, power, and democracy (this point has been brought up in a battle royal between Walter Lippmann in *Public Opinion* (1922) and John Dewey in *The Public and its*

Problems (1927)). Second, it fails to solve our problem between the idea of objectivity and the process of conveying that idea which relies on multiple systems of interpretation. To illustrate, think of the interpretive connotations that accompany social scientific phrases such as “rational choice theory,” “qualitative methods,” “causation,” or “interest.”

Harding is right when claiming that strong objectivity requires strong reflexivity (p. 149); however, she fails to mention how strong objectivity can preserve its strength in relation to the language problem of dissemination. Does feminist epistemology require a feminist language? If everyday as well as scientific language relies on dominant modes of understanding, how do dominated groups get around succumbing to these modes while conveying their “standpoints,” which, according to Haraway (p. 583) and Harding (pp.124-5), are vantage points that are more objective than dominant ones? **[I suppose it must be true by definition that scientific language relies on “dominant” modes of understanding in the straightforward sense of “the prevalent mode of understanding within the speech community of scientists.” When scientists attempt to use language that is marginal or esoteric within their own speech community, they tend to be ignored or marginalized. So, if dominant = prevalent, then I agree that science necessarily relies on dominant modes of understanding. But with this meaning of “dominant” there is no implication that it inherently has the effect of reinforcing the subordination of dominated groups. If, on the other hand, “dominant modes of understanding” means “dominating modes of understanding”, then it is no longer so obvious that scientific language is always/inevitably dominating. Scientific language/understanding can be liberating for subordinated groups when they use science as a weapon. Why is it that Fascist rulers always repress social scientific activity if it were the case that scientific understanding was always dominant in the sense of dominating?]**

2. Graham Clure

I give up: standpoint could just be something which attends our approving of otherwise interchangeable, though contradictory, theories; that is, science is fiction, or, as Rorty states, “they are stories we choose to believe” (Rose: Love, Power, and Knowledge, p.25). Even if the acquisition of knowledge of (perhaps or perhaps not putatively) objectively true facts about the world is imbued with an element of choice and a leap of faith towards an inscrutable approbation, we might attribute differences and disagreements among individuals, classes, societies etc. to the fact that the disputants arrive at their contradictory conclusions in different manners. This concerns the creation of knowledge, rather than its acceptance and dissemination throughout a community, class, or particular standpoint-position. Perhaps what I am curious about is the Classic feminist and Lukacsian positions, which posit standpoint as a crucial element in knowledge-creation or acquisition, since it is possible that perspicuous theses fail to become widely accepted (as in the case of the Church’s opposition to Galileo’s results)

on account of groups that have particular standpoints, yet standpoints which affect knowledge in its process of its dissemination, rather than its acquisition. **[This is a very good distinction. I think the idea of standpoint is generally used mainly in the epistemological context of generating knowledge rather than the institutional context of blocking dissemination of knowledge. In the latter case one is more likely to talk about the interests that are threatened by particular kinds of knowledge. But it could be that gatekeepers of dissemination of knowledge fail to recognize certain knowledge as “knowledge” not because of their interests and power, but because their standpoint clouds their ability to understand what is being said.]** Another example is Marx’s analysis of capitalism, the result being the explicit statement of the exploitative mechanisms of commerce. This certainly was not discovered by the “universal” class, i.e. the proletariat; it was discovered by Marx: “the task of the philosophers is to change the world etc.”. This theory may even be understood by individual members of both of the relevant standpoints within society, yet to what degree this is the case, and what might be expected to result from the presence of this knowledge in society may seem to be related to epistemological standpoints. Further, if this is a scientific theory to become disseminated, it is not taken to be pursued by all of society all at once. It is possible to be a woman who is not a feminist; is it possible to be a proletarian who is analogously disengaged from his or her standpoint? What does this mean for the definition of standpoint?

3. Wayne Au

From a philosophical perspective, are there significant differences between critical realism and feminist standpoint epistemologies? I may be asking the wrong question (or comparing apples and oranges), since critical realism is a methodology as opposed to an epistemology, but I was stuck considering whether or not a feminist standpoint theorist could adopt critical realism as their approach to research. There are two pieces of feminist standpoint epistemology that raised this question. 1) It seemed that the need for having varying social “standpoints” in order to fully understand something (as proposed by the FSE), is basically adopting the fallibilist position of critical realism, but doing so under the guise of using “outsider” social positions to test fallibility (which seems reasonable), **[I don’t think the standpoint claim is quite the same as the fallibilist position. The fallibilist view is about the problem of never being certain about the truth of a claim. This would be the case even if the knowledge of the claim was not derived from a standpoint, was not affected by social position of the knowledge seeker. The standpoint epistemology claim is about how certain social positions enable one to see things that would not otherwise be seen.]** and 2) I was perplexed and unsatisfied with the discussion of how FSE handles relativism, and wondered, then, if it could use critical realism. Which leads to my second question:

How does FSE really deal with postmodernist relativism (subjective idealism)? I know that Rose generally draws a split between the realists and relativists as two strands/a tension within standpoint theory, but Rose also offers Quine’s (pg. 82) supposed accommodations to have truth-claims while still maintaining room for

anomalies. I'm not clear here, then, on what is being said is a "solve" to the postmodern position. By implication she is saying the realists do not make room for anomalies, which I do not think is true. Anomalies help test theories and build a "better" science, something critical realists would welcome from their fallibilist position. **[Realists certainly do believe in the importance of anomalies, since without them there would never be a way of establishing one claim over another – i.e. observations that are anomalous with respect to one claim are support for the counter-claim. The way I would frame the relativism/standpoint distinction is that relativism insists that standpoints fully determine observation, or at least do so in such a profound way that there is no way of subjecting standpoints to critique on the basis of observation, whereas standpoint theorists see observations as co-determined by real causal processes in the world and observational standpoints, and thus it is perfectly possible for an observation to contradict the subjective expectations linked to a standpoint.]** Postmodernists, from my understanding at least, would tend to take the position that anomalies are essentially the norm (which we could say is a truth claim in and of itself, I suppose). So how does Quine, and Harding by extension, maintain truth-claims?

As a possible side note (maybe related to our discussion...) **What are the current discussions/debates surrounding Feminist Object Relations?** I was bugged by the assumptions built into it, but my understanding of FOR only comes from this reading. The idea that children will automatically identify with the parent of their same sex and automatically differentiate from the other (therefore either revolt or embrace the qualities associated with that sex's gender), seems flat, too simple. It also seems highly individualistic and potentially biologically deterministic since it does not seem to fully include how larger social forces are even at play in young children through parents, language, culture, community, etc.

4. Ana Cristina Collares.

My question from the readings of this week relates especially to the claims of standpoint feminist epistemology towards strong objectivity.

First of all, it was not very clear to me the implications of this claim to the contexts of discovery and justification.

It is easier to see the link to the context of discovery. Once women belong to a "different" social extract than man, an extract of the oppressed or dominated, they have a different standpoint or perspective that allows them to perceive sides of reality that men cannot elaborate on their own, providing new questions to scientific investigation and also new approaches for the old questions. So, they have some sort of "amplified" perspective of the world that makes the context of discovery more objective, even if it is not neutral (or mostly because it is never neutral, and the socio-historical and cultural perspective of women is broader or more informed). Am I understanding it correctly here? **[I think this is very much in line with the core idea. You raise a number of possibly distinct issues under the rubric "context of discovery": 1. asking new questions, 2. perceiving "sides of reality.", 3. developing "new approaches". I think**

all of these are relevant, but perhaps the second of these is the pivot – perceiving things that will be hidden or unperceived by men. The new questions and the new approaches, I think, are linked to the standpoint-generated new perceptions/observations.

As for the context of justification, I couldn't see any clear position of feminist epistemology about this issue. Some texts (e.g. "Gender at Work") mention the attempt of Harding to "... save the truth claims while accommodating the new postmodernism" by "...drawing extensively on Quine's critique of empiricism, in which he observed that in practice theory choice draws on a coherence criterion located within a framework of belief." So, here we are with Quine again. We have to acknowledge that there is no value-neutrality in science, and we cannot decide rationally between competing theories. It seems to me that the feminist standpoint perspective adds to it that as there is no value-neutrality, we should rely more on the perspective of women - as the "outsider" or the "oppressed" or as having a more day-to-day relationship with empirical matters - to help us decide. **[I am not completely sure, but I think the "context of justification" also involves the problem of audience for communicating discoveries. Part of the way you validate certain kinds of scientific claims is to make those claims to a relevant audience which will either tell you it is nonsense or meaningful. This is linked to the coherence idea, but not in a simple way. The coherence here is a kind of hermeneutic coherence with the subjectivities of an audience. How does this relate to standpoint epistemologies? I think the idea is that if social science is in part a science about the lived experience of people in particular social positions, one of the criteria for "getting it right" is that the descriptions of those lived experiences make sense to the people whom one is studying. This would mean that standpoint would figure in the context of justification. I don't think this applies to every social scientific argument, since one is not always engaged in the analysis meaning and lived experience, but that is certainly an important part of sociological research.]**

But can we talk, on one hand, about a "unique female perspective of the world" like Marx did for the proletariat?

Can we say, on the other hand, that feminist epistemology deals only with science practiced by women? If not, where does the male perspective stand? Should it accommodate women's perspective in their own notions of science, or should it revolutionize entirely the concept of science and knowledge?

5. Fabian Pfeffer

The unalterable standpoint?

(Why) Is the use of feminist standpoint epistemology restricted to female scientists only?

To start with, I would like to spend some thoughts on standpoint epistemologies in general, before turning to feminist standpoint epistemology. I understand that in

standpoint epistemologies knowledge creation is associated with the specific position in the social structure held by the observer, a specific “viewpoint”. The question is: **Is this viewpoint unalterable?** Disregarding the feminist standpoint, I found no explicit comment on what exactly makes up a standpoint (why not Peter M. Blau’s structural parameters?). Position in the division of labor is mentioned at some points; experience in early-life / socialization at other points. So what is, let us say, Friedrich Engel’s standpoint? Surely not the one of the worker, whose standpoint mechanically brings about different knowledge; and when it comes to labor relations most probably knowledge which is closer to the truth (on the relation between standpoint and explanation aim later). I wonder if it is the case that Engel’s most crucial “knowledge” had been created when he was confronted with the overwhelming poverty of his laborers in Manchester. Was this a point when the industrialist’s son changed his standpoint, or probably it is better to say viewpoint? And: Isn’t it the crucial capacity of a social scientist to change his viewpoint? Is there any ultimate argument for the imprisonment in the standpoint cage? **[I think the extent to which one can change one’s standpoint depends upon the research and knowledge task one faces. Michael Burawoy worked in a Hungarian Steel Mill for two years. He felt that he learned things about the lived experience of the workers that would have been possible if he simply went their, interviewed them, observed what went on in the factory. He had to be in their shoes in order to know what questions to ask and to be able to make sense of their answers. But this was because he was asking questions about their construction of meaning, about their strategies of coping with the constraints and pressures of work, which meant he had to understand what was experienced as pressure, etc. Now, Burawoy wasn’t born and bread a worker, but still it took time and effort to actually acquire their standpoint – he could just will it, he had to live it. I think this is the core of the standpoint epistemology position. Some questions, of course, might not require such deep engagement from a standpoint, or rather, a standpoint might have a weaker impact on some kinds of observations that on others.]**

Turning to feminist standpoint epistemology, Sandra Harding gives us a whole list of features that make up the women standpoint: socially constructed personality structure of women (grounded in infantile experience), position of the “stranger to the social order” (p.124), position of the oppressed, every-day life perspective, unity of mind and body, etc. That is to say, the superior knowledge of women “grounds in the corporeal as well as in socially produced material reality” (Rose, p.77). If this description is (still) correct, for the moment it seems to explain why women’s knowledge is different from men’s. Apart from my main concern, a question remains what makes it superior: Is it only the closeness of the standpoint to subject under investigation, i.e. being female investigating gender topics? Isn’t this simply to say, e.g. Latin American Studies should best be carried out by Latin Americans whose standpoint comes closer to truth? **[I think the presumption here is that what is being sought is emancipatory knowledge, knowledge that bears on the problems of liberation and challenging domination, etc. So, for that kind of knowledge – the argument goes – the standpoint of the oppressed is superior. I think this can be challenged. The standpoint of men committed to gender emancipation may be as central to challenging male**

domination as the standpoint of women, because men may have privileged knowledge about the sources of resistance and the contradictions in masculinity which create openings for challenge. I think it is only with respect to the problem of revealing the quality and character of oppression itself that there is some special privilege to the standpoint of the oppressed, but not for developing explanations of the conditions for transformation and the like.] And finally and most importantly: what about the capacity of changing standpoints/viewpoints? Is it out of question that men can do this - the same way a wealthy, unmarried, childless feminism professor has to do this to some extent? Or does the male 'feminist standpoint epistemologist' inhabit the same fairyland as the non-exploiting capitalist?

6. Brett Burkhardt

What is the relationship between knowledge and politics?

“Knowledge emerges for the oppressed through the struggles they wage against their oppressors (Harding 1991: 126).”

“[F]eminist politics is...a necessary condition for generating less partial and perverse descriptions and explanations...Only through such struggles can we begin to see beneath the appearances created by an unjust social order to the reality of how this social order is in fact constructed and maintained (Harding 1991: 127).”

“[P]olitical and moral values [in science] inspire the social movement struggles which are essential to the growth of knowledge (Benton and Craib 2001: 155).”

These quotations claim that political struggle and scientific knowledge are tightly linked in feminist standpoint epistemology. Yet I am not quite clear about the nature of this relationship. I understand standpoint epistemology to be realist, in that it makes claims about an underlying, real set of social relations that may run counter to appearances (for example, see the second Harding quote above). Assuming that such a real reality exists, standpoint feminism says that open political struggle, based on the relations in which subordinated women find themselves, is the only way to bring that reality to the surface. Thus open political conflict makes explicit the underlying, oppressive, and covert relations that already exist.

The logic seems to be as follows: open oppression (oppression made explicit through political conflict) is preferable to hidden oppression, and a lack of oppression is preferable to open oppression. Similarly the desired trajectory of feminist political struggles seems to be (hidden oppression)→(open oppression)→(lack of oppression), with knowledge being gained with each advancement.

But it is unclear what the precise knowledge/politics project is. Again, the assumption is that real relations are at work in society, and that they are often hidden. Given this, is political struggle, through its illumination of real oppressive relations, designed to bring knowledge to more and more of the oppressed until they are able to take up a dominant position in society (at least with regard to knowledge/science production)? Or is the laying bare of oppressive relations through conflict intended to “persuade” the oppressors to accept the *real* relations of oppression they are engaged in and to consequently change their practices? **[Lots of interesting themes interwoven here. Part of what you are suggesting is that perhaps struggle is important for the dissemination knowledge: “political struggle, through its illumination of real oppressive relations, [is] designed to bring knowledge to more and more of the oppressed.” What still needs to be clarified is the precise sense in which struggle helps to “lay bare” or “reveal hidden” forms of oppression. Why just challenging oppression “reveal” oppression? Obviously, insofar as the challenge provokes a response from the oppressor, it will reveal something about the character of the oppressor through that response, but it isn’t so obvious why this necessarily reveals something deep about the nature of the oppression as such. An alternative idea is that what is being revealed through struggle are otherwise hidden limits-of-possibility. You can’t know how changeable a social relation is until you try to change it, and thus the struggle to change the relation “reveals” something about the limiting process. But I am not sure this is what is meant. A third possibility centers on identity and solidarity: struggle forges new forms of communication, dialogue, shared lived experience, etc. among those engaged in the struggle, and through that dialogue they come to understand each other better. This is “consciousness raising” and “identity formation.” Workers come to understand what it means to be a worker when they struggle because it is through struggle that they deeply get to know each other, feel solidarity and common identity, and that transforms their knowledge of the commonality of their social situation. I think something along these lines is probably what is important.]**

7. Elizabeth Holzer

Feminist standpoint epistemology rests on the belief that the theorist can isolate a “distinctively female, or feminist, way of knowing and experiencing the world” (Craib and Benton p.148). I’d like to consider this effort in more depth.

First, by way of nitpicking clarification, does a “distinctively female way of knowing and experiencing” mean a mode of thought that is distinctively female because (1) *all* women share it, (2) *some* women but *no* men share it (3) it is more likely to be found in women than in men. Hartsock’s emphasis on birth (not all women give birth but no men do) makes me think she at least holds to the second view (Benton and Craib 148) **[I think this is a very hard question. The human capacity for empathy is pretty big, so it is certainly possible, it seems to me, for people to adopt the standpoint of someone unlike themselves – although perhaps not for the purposes of generating knowledge**

but only of understanding knowledge once generated. Also, social positions are so multidimensional, that the social position which embodies “a” standpoint is likely to actually embody a variety of standpoints. So, is it possible for a white to really have the epistemological standpoint of an African-American, or is on only that whites can come to understand that standpoint with sufficient empathy that they can acquire knowledge generated from that standpoint? Could a white discover new knowledge about the experience of petty discrimination, about the lived experience racial exclusion? What I think is certain is that a white could never generate new knowledge about such things without being in very deep dialogue with African-Americans, and that would require a level of solidarity and mutual trust that is very hard to achieve. Perhaps, then, the real bite of “standpoint” comes from the problem of communication?]

Second, I’m a bit concerned about one strategy used to identify the woman’s standpoint: trying to pull together common biological experiences—for example, arguing women’s experience in childbirth gives them superior insight into the connectedness of the world. Maybe it’s just knee-jerk anti-biological determinism, but the idea that experience translates uniformly (or even consistently) into knowledge irrespective of class position or childrearing practices strikes me as implausible. This, I suppose, is not a large concern, since feminist standpoint epistemologists tend to emphasize historically-situatedness [I agree completely with you on this one. In any case, when I held my daughter in my arms for the first time I felt such a powerful sense of connectedness that it is hard to imagine what could be deeper and more meaningful.]

Third, the general feminist standpoint effort is to me more plausible when it’s presented as the effort to *construct* rather than to *find* commonalities—as others have written, the construction of the sense of “women” as a group of individuals with shared interests has been the major success of the women’s movement (Eisenstein on “sex-class” and Fraser on similar issues). [I think this is close to my point about communication and solidarity as being the stakes in standpoints, rather than just individual perception-experience]

Fourth, I *don’t* think that the difficulties in creating a convincing notion of the woman’s standpoint undermines the efforts to expose the masculinist assumptions of the current science programmes. So it seems to me that the insights of the feminists serve better as critiques of the existing programmes than as comprehensive alternative programmes—they serve best to guide where the skepticism be focused. [Some versions of the critique of masculinist ideas are a critique of the male standpoint, and others are a critique of male interests which get translated into self-serving ideas. I think that is a somewhat different kind of view.]

Lastly, I’d like to consider Collins’s alternative, which I like. My concern is a general one—how does one deduce a general research programme from a theory that emphasizes the specificities of the context?

8. Gokcen Coskuner

Benton and Craig do not go into detail explaining the difference between post structuralism and post modernism except for saying that postmodernism gives up altogether the attempt to find or establish bases for knowledge and that the poststructuralists such as Derrida still stay connected to the tradition he criticizes. What are some epistemological and methodological differences between the two? **[I never really understood this either....]**

Harraway suggests employing a critical and deconstructive stance to realize the power sensitivity of knowledge and to find metaphors and means for understanding in the patterns of objectification in the world (p. 589). She maintains that through deconstructive discourses we can actually find the means to obtain situated knowledge-objective reality. Although following Derrida, Harraway seems to use the term in a different way. Because Derrida criticizes logocentrism, the overarching belief in a presence, some firm and finite meaning. So does Harraway hold a critical realist view of knowledge whereas Derrida denies meaning ever being present? **[I don't think I can comment much about these issues because I never really understood Derrida very well. Harraway does affirm the realist idea of real mechanisms existing the world, but she insists that these can be studied only through observations that are situated and embodied, not abstracted from social vantage point. It is not entirely clear why she insists on this, what the mechanism is that enables knowledge to be generated this way, but I think it has to do with communication and shared knowledge rather than just perception. On p.584 she makes an interesting statement about this: "The alternative to relativism is partial, locatable critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology." It is the shared conversation which she sees as the core of epistemology here, and such sharing is always – the claim is – from a social position, i.e. situated. I am not completely sure why this is so. Why cannot there be shared conversation from relatively universalistic positions? Why cannot the capacity for empathy create something like fuzzy boundaries to positions and more open-ended situations?]**

9 Dan Warshawsky

For this week's readings, my central questions challenge feminist notions of objectivity, subjectivity, and positionality. As Sandra Harding asks, "Has feminist standpoint theory really abandoned objectivity and embraced relativism?" (Harding 138). Is the argument more about perspective when analyzing an objective reality, or is it more about an extreme relativity, where each person interprets and produces a different reality

which is no less superior than someone else's? Of secondary interest, I delve back into Marxist modes of analysis, especially as they relate to last week's notions of critical realism. To interrogate these questions, I will delve through the origins of my main questions.

According to our readings this week, three types of feminism pervade the literature. First, feminist empiricists claim that science is not inherently biased or problematic; rather, the disproportionately high percentage of male researchers has biased science. With the addition of female scholars, "bad science" can become "good science." Feminist empiricists intend to maintain many aspects of the existing science infrastructure. Therefore, the feminist empiricism critique is only a partial attack on science. In my opinion, although quite valid, feminist empiricists only begin to challenge problematic notions of science and scientific research.

Secondly, standpoint feminists contend that all knowledge is produced by individuals maintaining specific locations within social structures, and it is these specific locations which directly influence the type of knowledge one can generate. Among the three main feminist standpoint critiques (biological categories for women, psychoanalytic object relations theory, humanist materialism of early Marx), Hillary Rose's analysis of Marxism within the feminist perspective strikes my interest.

She says Marxist analysis has provided researchers with a means to understand oppression in terms of class, but what about gender? She states that Marxists should add emotional work to the physical and mental work dichotomy. When reading her critique of Marxism, among others' critiques, I begin to question Marxism's all-applicability to society. It seems that Marxist analysis fits well into the three-pronged critical realism framework (mechanisms generate events, events caused by mechanisms, events are directly related to our ability or inability to visualize those events-visualization and interpretation are internal to the process of observation). In this way, I see Marxist analysis strongly critically realist; however, I am unsure what role gender, race, religion, culture (among others) play in Marxist scholarship. **[One stance towards this specific question – how all encompassing is Marxism as a distinctive theory – is to see Marxist as a theory of some particular important social mechanisms (class, economic structure, exploitation). It is not a theory of all social mechanisms, but only those bound up with class and economic structure. It can, however, develop a class analysis of gender insofar as class mechanisms affect gender practices in the open-system of society, but this does not imply that other mechanisms – gender mechanisms for example – don't also affect gender practices.]**

In this way, my thoughts transitioned into post-modern feminism. Once issues of positionality have been posed, such as "What is the impact of various different positionalities by gender, race, religion, etc." it is easy to ask a far more radical question. Is there the possibility that infinite contexts and positions to understand and interpret the world exist? And secondly, is truth attainable or just illusion grandeur?

I would say that standpoint feminism, among other critiques, have brought most scholars to admit that infinite positions are possible when interpreting or studying the world. As we discussed last week, this notion is intrinsic to critical realism. What has not been posed yet, until this week, is the role of truth and challenge of post-modernism.

That is why Sarah Harding's question from the first paragraph ("Has feminist standpoint theory really abandoned objectivity and embraced relativism?" (Harding 138)), is especially central to this week's readings. Although feminism's impact, especially feminist standpoint theory, on various social science, humanities, and natural sciences has been uneven, it seems that feminism's ultimate contribution to scholarship has been the added awareness that one's standpoint or position has been underemphasized in most critically realist scholarship (gender). In terms of feminism's turn to radical relativism, I am unsure.

In all, I would pose two main questions to the class. What have feminism's main impacts on various disciplines been across campus (although we, of course, are most familiar with sociology)? Secondly, to what extent, has feminism embraced radical relativism, and if yes, to what extent has standpoint feminism been influential or connected to post-modernism at large. **[Standpoint epistemology – at least as elaborated by Harding and other Feminists – is in principle a brake on relativism, since the argument is not that the perspective of a standpoint fully constructs the observations from that standpoint, but rather than the standpoint makes it possible to see things that would otherwise be unseeable. It is like saying that you can see things from a mountaintop than you cannot see from the valley, without believing that the view from the mountaintop is an illusion – what you see is really there.]**

10 Mark Cooper

1) I see a central distinction between the varieties of feminist epistemologies (or post-epistemologies) in the question of how they define "truth." Benton and Craib use the metaphor of a landscape and its description as a metaphor for the relationship between belief and perspective. The empiricist/positivist view would seem to claim a one-to-one relationship between the observation and the observed. Feminist epistemologies would criticize such a view in that its claims to a perfect correspondence are only possible through the exclusion/delegitimation of any perspective but its own. Moreover, this practice does not accomplish correspondence, but only results in the false appearance of correspondence. The interesting issue for this topic though, might be whether perspectives taken from different standpoints are "mutually compatible" or "potentially conflicting." In what ways might it be useful to divide realists from non-realists before evaluating this question, and how do (or why don't) those who maintain a (critical) realist epistemology seek resolution of these ontological issues. **[That is an interesting issue, not directly raised by anyone else so far: if observations are always from standpoints and partial or situated, is there any reason to believe that they are incompatible or conflicting? One way to infuse standpoints with conflicts is to argue**

that the interests of actors are part of their “standpoint” and influence what they can see and think. Elster makes this point in an interesting way when he distinguishes between positional theories of knowledge and interest theories of knowledge. In pure positional theories, one’s position influences one’s observations, but may do so in a way that undermines one’s interests rather than supports one’s interests. Commodity fetishism is, supposedly, a set of beliefs induced by a social position which harms workers. If, however, ideas adjust to interests in such a way as to serve interests – for example, through rationalization – then ideas-linked-to-positions/standpoints are likely to contradict each other. If rich people believe that poor people are lazy because, being rich, this serves their interests, then one could say that their standpoint infuses their ideas with interests in a way that would make it conflict with the standpoint of poor people. I am not sure, however, if this is really what Harding and others are claiming.]

2) I would also like to discuss how standpoint scholars cautiously negotiate their use of essentialism. Rose calls such “constrained essentialism,” and describes how materialist standpoint epistemologies were initially ‘born’ from the physicality of women. It is not clear to me how non-realist feminist (non-)epistemologies maintain use of this essentialism while offering primary to linguistic or non-material processes.

11 Matt Dimick

Overcoming science’s non-neutrality.

One of the more interesting things that I found about feminist/standpoint epistemologies are their resolutions to the problem of science’s non-neutrality. Science is non-neutral because by taking place as a social- and value-laden process, it inevitably takes the viewpoint of certain social groups and values. **[Is the core of the argument about value-ladenness? IS the idea that there is a situated knowledge anchored in the social position of women the same as saying that knowledge is infused with values linked to that position? Would a claim about non-neutrality being linked to interests be, for practical purposes, the same as one made about values? I am not sure if the partial vision/situated knowledge idea is primarily about values or about interests – but maybe it is.]** Some of the proposals for overcoming this problem were interesting. For example, Benton and Craib write that one way to better evaluate knowledge claims freed from the “power and status hierarchies among the participants to the debate” is to “re-institutionalize scientific debate in ways which open it up to a more diverse and inclusive range of participants, and at the same time to resist the existing hierarchies of power and status. If the contributions of all are equally valued and respected, then the shield of anonymity and impersonality is no longer so crucial” (p. 187) A similar resolution might be given to the problem of values: since the notion of a value-free science is impossible, values should openly be brought into scientific work and

investigation, to be assessed like the rest of science's findings. (As I understood it, values also play a part in generating new problems and knowledge, a required step before competing views can be assessed and adjudicated.) This is sometimes how I think media organizations should operate: forget trying to be objective, just let each media organization report news in accordance with its values. **[I would not say it this way: you can have biased leftwing news and pretty objective leftwing news. One of the reasons why I never liked party newspapers of left sectarian organizations is that the news was not simply from a standpoint, it was systematically self-serving and distorting in a way that could not just be called "value laden." It is one thing for values to determine the questions you ask, and another to say that they should determine the answers themselves.]** The general viewpoint seems to be: Instead of trying to place one's values aside and to take an objective approach to discovering truth, one should let various views contend such that the truth will emerge collectively out of the debate. The notion could be likened to a "marketplace of ideas" but the metaphor would be inapt inasmuch as powers and hierarchies exist in the market. Perhaps another metaphor is an adversarial legal system, where contending lawyers slug it out in a (relatively) controlled and (putatively) procedurally fair environment, the truth supposedly emerging from the melee. Is this a preferred method of arriving at truth? Adversarial litigation consumes a lot of resources, so it is open to the charge of inefficiency. But we might be willing to pay a premium for the truth. Yet again, more is at stake than truth in a competition: does the truth become a casualty in the struggle to win? Maybe the Lysenko affair is partly instructive here. So we might be able to ask if this method is still preferable to stifling one's values and commitments in an attempt to achieve universal and impersonal knowledge. Even when values are brought into scientific debate, it still seems necessary that one restraint one's commitments to some extent. **[Two lies in opposite direction don't make a "truth" or even, necessarily, advance us towards truth.]**

12. Mara Eisch-Schweitzer

In Donna Haraway's, *Situated Knowledges*, she states, "Here in lies the promise of objectivity: a scientific knower seeks the subject position, not of identity, but of objectivity, that is, partial connection" (p. 586.) Is this to imply an objectification of the 'Other' point of view? **[What precisely do you mean by "objectification"? I am not sure**

She continues with, "Identity, including self-identity, does not produce science; critical positioning does, that is objectivity." Is she arguing here that objectivity is in the standpoint, or perspective, of the subject position (gender, race, class, etc) contributes to the knowledge of understanding reality only if the subject position is seen as objective? **[I think the point is not that the subject position "is" objective, but viewing the world from a self-understood/critical subject position enables one to make objective observations. Or, at least, to make observations that have stronger claims of objectivity than observations that deny their positionality.]**

She then continues with, “It is unfortunately possible for the subjugated to lust for and even scramble into that subject position – and then disappear from view.” Is this to mean that a subject moves from a dominated position to that of a dominator, or merely to internalize the ideology of the dominator and not recognize that they too as dominated? **[I think she is talking about subordinated people someone assuming the position of the dominator and thereby losing their vision – like women become elite professors, or something like that.]**

My problem is then, as she continues, “The only position from which objectivity could not possibly be practiced and honored is the standpoint of the master.” I do not understand why a scientific knower could not seek the subject position of the master, not of identity, but of objectivity? Is this not a subject position that needs to be understood by the scientific knower in order to fully see the objectivity of the subjugated? **[I agree with you here, but it may be because I don’t fully understand here idea about the “standpoint of the master”. She may not mean, for example, “the standpoint of men” when she invokes the expression that standpoint of “the Man” (with a capital M). If the standpoint of the master is taken to be unsituated and abstracted from positionality, then one cannot occupy it in order to gain knowledge of that position. But I am really quite unsure of the reasoning here.]**

Am I correct in summarizing the feminist position as arguing against the empirical definition of objectivity, which is that it should aim at knowledge of the world as it is, that feminists believe that the way the world is is not the way empirical research sees it. That the empirical idea of objectivity neglects to recognize that the way the world is from the subject position of the subjugated? **[The rejection is of empiricist ways of knowing, not empirical. The standpoints Hardings talks about make possible systematic observations which generate (situated) knowledge. That knowledge requires observation and is thus empirical, but the self-consciousness of the position from which the knowledge is acquired makes it non-empiricist.]**

Throughout the course of our reading I have struggled with why the social sciences feel the need to with empirical science dictates

13 Eva Williams

In her section titled: *The myth of the neutrality of science*, Hilary Rose (1994) argues that within the sphere of capitalism, since scientific findings can be patented as intellectual property, they therefore constitute a commodity. According to Rose, “Even for the basic sciences, seemingly remote from technological exploitation, the rewards and prestige go to those who publish the knowledge first” (8), with the value declining “...as it passes from the centre of production to the periphery” (8). How does the competition for publication and intellectually property ownership shape scientific inquiry and is this

process sufficient to say that no science is neutral? Is value neutrality necessary for something to count as a knowledge/truth claim? (Knowledge as separate from the *true for me* opinion) Finally, if we agree that scientific neutrality is a misnomer, where do we go from here and does this determination not call into question all prior scientific knowledge? What is agreeable about this line of inquiry and Rose's presentation, for social scientists, is that it turns upside-down the claim by the traditional sciences (e.g. physics, chemistry, biology, etc) that only they constitute "real science" since only they can be truly value neutral.

Feminist Standpoint theory which, according to Rose, "...looks to the possibility of a feminist knowledge to produce better and truer knowledge claims" (23). This theory posits that only when we **consider the perspectives of those** who have traditionally been silent or silenced will we reach anything close to an objective reality or truth claim.

[There is some ambiguity in the expression "consider the perspectives of those...." This does not mean, I think, "consider the beliefs of those..." or "treat the concrete views of those as someone being inherently 'true'". The idea is that you have to take their standpoint and see the world through their eyes, with their vantage point. But this still may involve criticizing the opinions and ideas of people in such positions. This is what feminist consciousness-raising is all about: raising the consciousness of people situated in a particular way within gender relations, not taking their ideas as givens. The claim is that the communication and dialogue for such consciousness-raising requires taking the standpoint of the subjugated.] Borrowing heavily from both Freud and Marx, Standpoint addressed issues of language and perspective in how they have been used historically to shape science. According to Rose, traditional science has been concerned only with the context of justification, whereas Feminist Standpoint theory is equally or more concerned with the context of discovery, "...where problems are defined and hypothesis fashioned" (93). This serves to challenge science at the question asking stage, not at the methodological stage which has been the traditional battle ground. Additionally, Standpoint Theory proponents argue that Feminist Standpoint theory in particular and Standpoint theory in general is not equal to but a superior epistemology. "The most common justification for this", according to Benton and Craib (2001), "is that the view from the top is necessarily distorted by the deceptions and self-deceptions made necessary by social domination" (153). Is this a rational argument? If yes, how is it determined *which* silenced voices should be heard? Is this only reserved for racial, gendered, or class categories? What about religious or political? **[The Benton and Craib point about self-deception is basically an argument that interests shape ideas: people adapt their ideas about the world to conform to what ideas would be in their interests. If that is the main mechanism of standpoints, it would seem to mean that if you want to get valid knowledge about how to transform any relation of domination in an emancipatory way you must adopt the standpoint of the dominated, since for them the interest-belief mechanism would not generate domination-supporting beliefs. If they hold domination-supporting beliefs it would be because of some other mechanism – say indoctrination – but not self-serving self-deception.]**

14 Matías D. Scaglione

Feminist standpoint epistemology and productive labor under capitalism

Nancy Hartstock and Hilary Rose's versions of standpoint epistemology adhere to the assertion according to which "social divisions are the basis for different and opposed ontologies and epistemologies" (Benton & Craib, 146). Both Harstock and Rose compare the standpoint epistemologies of women and workers – "the social groups who make society" – and arrive to the conclusion that the distinctive women's and/or feminist viewpoint confers a superior view. **[Do they really affirm, generically, that women have a "superior" epistemological standpoint than "workers" regardless of the problem being investigated? A standpoint is meant to provide a vantage point for vision, perspective, observation, but surely this depends upon what problem one is trying to solve. I would be surprised if Rose believes that women qua woman have a superior standpoint from which to gain knowledge of the dilemmas of trade-union solidarity or workplace deskilling.]** Although this extremely provocative contention gives raise to innumerable questions, I would like to focus in the comparison between the "social groups" women and workers and their respective *reproductive* and *productive* capacities or functions. As far as I know, it seems to me that the adherents to a materialist feminist standpoint take a unilateral view of *wage labor*, insofar as the working class is associated with the sphere of production. My point is that as well as *not all women give birth, not all workers are productive* (this distinction is not derogatory and refers to the fact that not all the workers participate in the production of capital, i.e. in the production of surplus value, in contrast with its circulation). **[Within the perspective of standpoint epistemologies it is pretty hard to see why the productive/unproductive worker distinction should have an epistemological impact on the workers perspective and capacity for observation. What would be the mechanism? What would be the mechanism by which a janitor in a factory (who I would argue is a productive laborer since cleaning the work place is part of the process of production) has a different standpoint than a janitor in a bank? It is very clear why giving birth generates different lived experiences than not giving birth, but how does being a productive worker in the technical labor theory of value sense generate the kinds of divergence in lived experiences that have plausible epistemological consequences?]** Can we infer from the viewpoint of the "standpoint epistemology" approach or theories that the "non-productive worker" has access to an inferior view vis-a-vis the "productive worker" and, of course, vis-a-vis women? If the answer is affirmative, can we also infer – always following the feminist standpoint epistemology–, that women that are also "productive workers" have a *superior view* over "non-productive" female workers?

15 Martin Santos

I am, in general, very sympathetic with the idea of a standpoint epistemology which acknowledges *both* the importance of the social position and identity of the producers of knowledge, and the existence of a *knowable* “external world in virtue of whose character our beliefs are either justified or not” (Benton and Craib, p. 155). In this context, I am concerned with the issue of *assessing* the validity of knowledge-claims made by “traditional” and standpoint methodologies in Social Science. Is it possible for “traditional epistemologies” to assess knowledge-claims made by “standpoint epistemologies” and viceversa? Benton and Craib suggest that the answer is yes. Since these two epistemologies share the premise of an external knowable world, as well as the logic of theory construction (in which consistency is a core criterion) and verification (through assessment of “evidence”), then, the adjudication between their knowledge-claims is certainly possible. However, Benton and Craib offer later some ideas that would lead us to be more skeptical. Thus, for standpoint epistemologies the creation of scientific theories consists of a rational and collective (social) process *requiring to make exclusion and domination RELATIONSHIPS visible* (p.156). Likewise, what counts as evidence is not (always) understood in the same way by these epistemologies (p. 156). **[Do you think that standpoint epistemologies are only about viewing domination relations and not any other kind of social relation? Are their standpoints that are relevant for understanding difference but not domination?]**

I do believe that there is no logical impossibility for assessing the knowledge-claims coming from these different epistemologies; at the same time, I wonder if a Social Science (“traditional”) Epistemology that benefits from power and domination, but which does not make them its main theoretical concern, can assess the knowledge-claims made by another one which is devoted to unpack exclusion and make silent voices audible. I will finish in a skeptical note: what finally decides what counts as true knowledge in society is the *power structure outside social science*. **[I think the general issue of assessing knowledge claims is pretty hard to sort out without their being a more specific content to the knowledge in question. Much of the bite in the standpoint approach comes from the centrality given to knowledge about lived experience and meanings of actors, and how this bears on understanding processes of social change. If, as I have mentioned in some of the other comments, a pivotal aspect of standpointism is the problem of dialogue and communication as part of the process of verification, then it may be that traditional epistemologies will fail to properly assess knowledge.**

16 Ricky Leung

I understand that Harding's standpoint theory aims to put forth a strong objectivity not only through a critical understanding of one's own standpoint but also inclusion of 'others' voice. For example, one of the things researcher should do is to make evidence of cultural

assumptions available for critical scrutiny (p.149). I am wondering how relative power plays a role in standpoint theory. In particular, whether Harding's conceptualization is based too much on a dichotomous view of 'powerful' and 'powerless'. It seems that Harding's theory emphasizes that the privileged group should be aware of their biases and that the unprivileged group might have very different concerns. Does Harding imply that the under-privileged group is aware of the privileged group's concerns more readily? If there are more than two groups in a society (e.g. upper class, middle class and lower class), whether the middle class should be aware of both the upper and lower classes as 'others' voices, or they should pay particular attention to their biases in relation to the less powerful lower class? **[I think the answer to these questions hinges on the precise bias-inducing mechanism that is thought to be linked to social positions and which the standpoint epistemology is meant to render self-consciousness. If the mechanism, as I have suggested in some earlier comments, is via interests and self-deception, then probably powerful actors are more vulnerable to bias than dominated actors. But interests and self-deception are not the only thing going on here. There is also the lived-experience shared conversation dynamic, which is relevant to acquiring certain kinds of knowledge and verifying it through communication. For this I think the issue of what groups are more biased becomes less clear and has more to do with the nature of the problem being investigated and how it is affected by the specific mechanisms of lived experience for different categories.]**

17. Matt Nichter

Here's how I understand the basic premise of Harding's 'standpoint' view: scholars committed to furthering progressive political agendas are often better positioned to ascertain the truth than are scholars lacking such commitments; moreover, they are likely to ask different questions, opening up important new fields of investigation. **[You are identifying "standpoint" with an ideological position of the observer/researcher, not with their social location within a structure of relations. In places I think Harding emphasizes ideological standpoint, but mostly it is about social location and the consequences of location. Partially this has to do with what questions one asks, but even more important, I think she believes, is the question of "web of connections" and "shared conversations" and how this impacts on observation and inquiry.]** I agree with these claims, which contradict the traditional insistence on 'value-free' inquiry and inattention to the 'context of discovery.' (It should go without saying that the foregoing does not imply that having a progressive political agenda constitutes a magic pill guaranteed to generate good science.) But beyond having progressive commitments and a willingness to be reflexive, I can't quite put my finger on what Harding means by adopting the standpoint of the oppressed. She rightly says it should not mean merely accepting whatever members of oppressed groups happen to believe since, among other things, such beliefs are often false and mutually inconsistent. Is she saying that scientists committed to advancing social movement struggles should focus their

research on problems generated by those struggles? That researchers should formulate their theories in dialogue with movement activists to benefit from their factual and theoretical insights? I sense that she wants to say something more radical than this, but it's not clear exactly what it is. **[The dialogue point is pretty crucial here, since true, deep, dialogue is very tough if you are an outsider with real connections.]**