

DISCUSSION PAPER – STANDPOINT EPISTEMOLOGY / EXPLAIN THE LOGIC OF EPISTEMIC PRIVILEGE DEVELOPED IN MARXIST THEORY

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Epistemic privilege, as a fundamental part of feminist standpoint theory, is based on a premise of Marxism which argues that those who are in subordinate positions in the social hierarchy tend to have a certain perspective and thus certain knowledge that is not available to those in more dominant social positions. The dialectical relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor thus epistemologically favours the slave in the Hegelian sense, suggesting that those who are marginalised in a certain hegemonic order are more likely, through embodied experiences which are directly affected by their marginalisation, to acquire a critical perspective of that particular order – a worker in a capitalist bourgeoisie system or a woman in patriarchy are deemed to have a more objective outlook on the social stratification than those who are privileged within those systems.

When Sandra Harding called for radicalisation of the objectivity that institutionalises and upholds the Western scientific method into what she formulated as “strong objectivity” (Harding, 1993), she demanded that new subjects of knowledge be incorporated into the systems of knowledge production, overcoming the disembodied, omniscient subject that escapes the scopes of social categorisation, historical contingencies and political contexts. Standpoint theory argues that the epistemic privilege of these new embodied subjects of knowledge emerges from the problematisation of their everyday life, including social practices that sustain it, which can become a “starting point for maximising objectivity” (Harding, 1993) in a

scientific endeavour. It allows a further critical analysis that takes into account not only the scientific method itself and the object of knowledge but scrutinises the social situatedness of the subject as well, proposing a stronger standard for objective perspective and objectivity.

The logic of epistemic privilege acknowledges that the production of knowledge occurs within "the unique matrix of domination characterized by intersecting oppressions" (Collins, 2000), including gender, race, social class, sexual orientation and expression, religion and citizenship status, and that the voices of those whose identities are marginalised in the hegemonic order often remained unheard in both epistemic and political sense. As Patricia Hill Collins describes in the context of US Black Feminism, recurring patterns of individual experiences of oppression come to formulate a group consciousness that establishes a collective standpoint, "[constructing] a collective body of wisdom" (Collins, 2000). However, despite its collectivity, this body of knowledge is a heterogenous and contradictory one (Harding, 1993), which through the process of feminist liberation movement becomes involved with all other social justice movements that operate in all arenas of different oppressions which overlap in lived embodied experience.

Feminist standpoint theory turns to the subjugated perspectives because, as Donna Haraway puts it, "they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective and transforming accounts of the world" (1988). Feminism, as a theory and activist world-building practice thus turns to systems of knowledge which do not inherently depend on the sustaining of the current social order, to "situated knowledges [which are] about communities, and not about isolated individuals" (Haraway, 1988), aiming to find a language of solidarity which could reformulate epistemological concerns as primarily ethical and political ones.

REFERENCES

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