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FEMINISM AND EPISTEMOLOGY: WHAT KIND OF SUCCESSOR SCIENCE?

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Abstract In this paper, I address recent feminist epistemological claims – in particular, those associated with 'standpoint theory' and 'feminist postmodernism' – arguing that they share difficulties with other forms of anti-positivist social theory and contribute to an impasse in social inquiry which is becoming increasingly acute. This impasse is traced to the displacement of explanation from the centre of theoretical concerns. In arguing this, I am not, however, proposing a return to positivist social science. The view that explanation can be equated with positivism – that 'empirical' equals 'empiricism' – is a common misconception. It has led some advocates of a distinct feminist epistemology to describe much research on gender issues as 'feminist empiricism'. Such research, they argue, involves a paradoxical or contradictory reliance upon the very 'masculine' epistemological criteria which feminist theory has done so much to challenge. In this paper I shall criticise this argument, proposing instead a 'post-positivist' position in which empirical research is at the heart of any feminist challenge to mainstream approaches and the reconstruction of social theory.

Key words: epistemology, feminism, standpoint theory, positivism, post-positivism, postmodernism.

It is a theme of many recent commentaries that we are currently experiencing a crisis of social theory (Wardell and Turner 1986; Seidman and Wagner 1992). On the face of it, perhaps, this might seem to be nothing new. Crisis claims have been a constant feature of sociological debates and, arguably, crisis is a necessary condition of sociology as an undertaking. Thus, Nisbet (1966) has suggested that, historically, sociology was a product of the dislocations that brought about the modern social order. Habermas, too, believes sociology has a special relationship to crisis. 'Sociology,' he writes, 'became the science of crisis par excellence, it concerned itself above all with the anomic aspects of the dissolution of traditional social systems and the development of new ones' (1984:4). As Nisbet and Habermas suggest, talk of crisis was accompanied by claims for reconstruction and renewal. In many current discussions of social theory, however, it appears that social theory has exhausted its potential for further insight and development. Now it appears that the crisis is *within* and *of* social inquiry itself. Old certainties have given way and what will replace them, or whether they can be replaced, is unclear. For some, social inquiry is the 'discourse of modernity' and as societies move

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into a 'postmodern' phase so social inquiry is displaced (see, for example, Crook *et al.* 1992; Lemert 1992), though what will replace it remains unclear. On this view, 'social integration' is a sociological 'utopia' and anomie a routine feature of postmodern social life, including the life of social theorists.

This current crisis, I shall suggest, is one to which feminist theory has contributed, but, despite some feminist celebrations of it as indicative of the decline of male hegemony, it is a crisis from which feminist theory itself is not immune. In arguing this, I am not associating all feminist theories with a single epistemological position, as Hammersley has recently been accused of doing (Hammersley 1992; Ramazanoglu 1992; Gelsthorpe 1992). The evidence for a crisis within feminist theory parallel to that of mainstream social theory is precisely the competing and mutually exclusive epistemological claims within feminist theory. Nor am I seeking to reassert an orthodox view of social scientific epistemology against claims for a distinctive feminist epistemology (Hammersley 1992). Before I address the specific issues arising from feminist criticisms of social theory, I shall outline some of the unsatisfactory features of contemporary theoretical arguments – in particular, the denial of the possibility of a coherent explanatory undertaking – which are at the heart of the current crisis in social theory.

The Fragmentation of Social Theory

The story of social theory over the last few decades is a familiar one. The once-dominant view, which has now given way, was that social science, like the natural sciences, could bring an accumulating, neutral knowledge of the social world. For the advocates of this positivist conception of social inquiry, the knowledge produced by social scientific inquiries was 'independent' and 'value-free'. Knowledge was held to be objectively warranted, available as 'expertise' to whomsoever had a use for it. With the rise of the mixed and affluent economies and pluralist political structures of mature industrial societies, it seemed to many that political discourse could be reduced to issues of technical expertise and the determination of public opinion through mass media. A growing demand for social scientific expertise sustained the growth and professionalisation of social science around a positivistic definition of its task. By and large, professional social scientists accepted the 'modernising' role of the state and shared aims with those who ruled (Barnes 1979; Flacks 1991).

However, as feminists have observed, the 'ruling elite', from whose social circle social scientists were drawn, was composed almost exclusively of men (see Addelson 1983; Smith 1988; Mackinnon 1989). The concepts of 'positivist' social science, for them, are not merely those which suit a hierarchical ruling apparatus, but also are particularly suited to a *patriarchal* ruling apparatus. The 'values' of rule, the concern with control and domination,

reflect 'masculine' sensibilities. There is, then, according to Smith or Mackinnon, an equivalence between the 'mastery' or administration of political 'things' and a scientific project of the 'mastery' of nature, and each is a 'patriarchal' project.

Since the 1960s the positivist approach and the professional image of social science has been challenged by the growth of critical perspectives and not only those of feminism (Bernstein 1976). The critics argued that by taking its model of inquiry from natural science, with its conception of externally given 'facts', positivist social science was, in truth, showing a preference for the *status quo*, since it failed to accept as an issue for investigation the social processes by which 'social facts' arose as data. According to this view, the 'monologue' of positivism should be replaced by a 'dialogue' between inquirers and those who are the subjects of inquiry (Apel 1967; Habermas 1988). With an emphasis upon 'dialogue' comes a stress upon the similarity of social scientists and those they study, that the latter in their everyday lives are, in fact, 'lay' social theorists, no less 'skilful' in their way than 'professional' social scientists. This, for example, is the basis of Gouldner's (1970) claim that sociology must be 'reflexive', attributing to others what it claims for itself. Thus, he writes that in this way, 'we would increasingly recognize the depth of our kinship with those we study. They would no longer be viewable as alien others or as mere objects for our superior technique and insight; they could instead be seen as brother sociologists, each attempting with his varying degree of skill, energy, and talent to understand social reality' (1970:490).

The 'sexism' of Gouldner's language is apparent (and, indeed, is a feature of much of the 'critical' writing of the period), but it should not diminish the extent to which this understanding has become central to many feminist epistemological claims. Smith, for example, proposes a 'sociology for a knower situated in the everyday/everynight world of her actual lived experience' (1989:34). For her, this is an approach which will eschew the 'objectifying' tendencies of patriarchal social theory. Instead, she argues for, 'an insider's sociology, that is, a systematically developed consciousness of society from within, renouncing the artifice of standing outside what we can never stand outside of. Beginning from where the subject is actually located returns us to a social world arising in and known in and through the ongoing actual activities of actual people. Here there is no contrast between thought and practice' (1989:38; Stanley and Wise 1983).

Several decades after the first promises of the radical transformation of society and social theory which theorists like Gouldner envisaged, these hopes seem as far from being fulfilled as when they were first made. Everywhere, it seems, social and political opposition has subsided and fragmented, rather than coalesced. The social sciences are suffering a crisis of self-confidence, where their current offerings look insignificant when placed against earlier promises, whether these be those of positivism or reflexive sociology. Thus, however much previous generations of social theorists believed in the project

of positivistic social science and set themselves the task of bringing it to fruition, the current judgement even of positivism's contemporary advocates (Turner 1989) is that it failed, not only morally, but practically. But nor have the various critiques of positivism managed to achieve anything more substantial. Instead, social inquiry has become fragmented around mutually conflicting theoretical and epistemological claims.

Of the social and theoretical movements which emerged to challenge the old orthodoxies only feminism has lasted the course, but it, too, has been shaken by the decline of the other movements – especially, perhaps, Marxism – to which it was allied. Feminist theory, it seems, is not merely one of the fragments, but is, itself, subject to fragmentation. Hawkesworth (1989), for example, expresses the fear that the crisis in 'mainstream' social theory is being reproduced within feminism in its apparent embrace of mutually exclusive epistemological claims. Thus, she asks, 'has feminism arrived at such an impasse that its best hope with respect to epistemological issues is to embrace incompatible positions and embed a contradiction at the heart of its theory of knowledge?' (1989:483).

For some writers what is called into question by these features of the contemporary theoretical scene is not merely positivism as an approach to social inquiry, but any systematic and consistent social theory including those which sought to replace it. This conclusion is most evident in the writings of postmodern theorists. Although no inclusive definition of postmodern theory would be accepted by all those to whom the label is attached, certain features can be taken as characteristic. One is that the evident fragmentation of social theory into a series of mutually inconsistent, partial accounts is something to be acceded to as the irremediable condition of social inquiry. According to Baudrillard (1983), for example, postmodern 'social reality' is a 'chaotic constellation' which is 'unrepresentable' where there is no such thing as 'the social' which could be the object of a coherent sociological practice. Accordingly, social theorists should give up any quest for generality and coherence, for what Lyotard (1984) calls a 'grand narrative' which will explain postmodern society. Those social theorists who are committed to coherence as a criterion of theoretical adequacy, Lyotard suggests, betray a nostalgia for the 'whole and the one' (1984:81). In seeking to reduce the contradictory particularities of experience into a singular narrative, they are trying to find certainty in an uncertain world. In its place, postmodern theorists offer particularistic, temporary resistances to any inclusive embrace that would seek to reduce differences. What is proposed is 'a war on totality', in which social theorists should be 'witnesses to the unpresentable . . . [and] activate the differences' (Lyotard 1984:82). On this view, social theory cannot aim to represent social reality, but, Lyotard says, it must, 'invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented' (1984:81).

However, it is unlikely – Lyotard and other postmodern theorists notwithstanding – that 'reality' has changed so as to make social inquiry impossible,

rather than simply in need of renewal. If current social developments (especially, those bound up with issues of gender) cannot be grasped in the categories of current social theories, it is more likely that the problem lies with those theories than that 'reality' itself has become increasingly ungraspable. Indeed, the primary indication of 'fragmentation' is the deviation of current circumstances from the 'order' expected on the basis of existing theories. It is hard to resist the conclusion that the 'chaotic constellation' of modern social reality derives from the 'chaotic' nature of modern social theories as they have come to exhaust their explanatory resources and further potential. If this is so, *the challenge for social theory is to re-construct its explanatory categories, rather than to de-construct the explanatory undertaking.* Postmodern theory is a capitulation in the face of our problems, rather than any solution of them. It does, indeed, embed contradiction in its theory of knowledge, as Hawkesworth suggests. In the remainder of the paper, I shall consider the extent to which feminist theory can avoid this impasse.

Feminism and Postmodernism

Issues of gender and the contributions of feminist theory must be central to any task of reconstruction, because nowhere else are the limitations of standard social scientific approaches so apparent. Issues of gender disrupt the 'order' of mainstream approaches, calling into question the adequacy of their central explanatory categories. Clearly, there has been a neglect of issues of gender in mainstream social theory. They received little direct attention in the 'classics', or even in those developments which sought to transform the standard assumptions of 'professional positivism' until quite recently (Clark and Lange 1979; Sydie 1987; Wallace 1989). In part, this reflects the fact that academic (and political) life has been dominated by men and their preoccupations and they have been blind to the inequalities of gender, or have implicitly accepted them as natural.

Over the last two decades, much feminist research has documented the range and extent of gender inequalities and, in the process, transformed research agendas in most areas of social science. However, according to Harding (1986), this research – which she calls 'feminist empiricism' – accepts too much from the approaches whose evident limitations it criticises. In particular, she argues, it follows too closely dominant criteria of science and this has limited its impact upon existing mainstream approaches (see, also, Stacey and Thorne 1985; Acker 1989). Thus, Harding writes that, 'feminist empiricism argues that sexism and androcentrism are social biases correctable by stricter adherence to the existing methodological norms of scientific inquiry' (1986:24). Feminist theory, she suggests, can and should pose a much more fundamental challenge to these criteria. Where theoretical

categories claim to cover women's experience, but do not, the claims and the principles that they embody must be called into question.

It would seem that feminist theory points to the need for the reconstruction of social scientific approaches. The question must be: what sort of reconstruction? A number of feminist writers have seen a parallel, or 'elective affinity' between feminism and postmodernism (Gross 1986; Fraser and Nicholson 1990; Flax 1990; Hekman 1991). With feminist theory, the opposition to 'grand narratives' is both epistemological and substantive. The 'universalism' of the claims of mainstream social theory is confounded by the particularity of women's experience outside its supposedly general categories. These apparently gender-neutral categories belie their patriarchal substance. The re-presentation of basic epistemological and ontological assumptions of social theory as reflecting a male perspective is, quite obviously, one of the major reasons for the current unease concerning the claims of systematic, generalising social theory. However, does the problem lie with 'generality' as a condition of theoretical adequacy, or the falsity of a claim to have achieved it? Is feminist theory outside the criteria of mainstream social theory, or should it be regarded as the better realisation of those criteria (which, in the process, has refined and deepened our understanding of those criteria and how they operate in the practice of science)?

Those who argue that it is outside mainstream criteria, are, implicitly or explicitly, on the terrain of postmodernism, where the condition of theoretical activity is the diversity and context-specific nature of experiences which is to be expressed in theories which accept and embrace contradiction. On this view, since the 'social totality' is made up of partial and mutually exclusive points of view, it cannot be grasped as a whole. Feminist theory, therefore, should be concerned with the identification of concrete, specific and located differences, denying the possibility of their inclusion within a coherent and integrated scheme. As Flax puts it: 'if we do our work well, "reality" will appear even more unstable, complex and disorderly than it does now. In this sense, perhaps Freud was right when he declared that women are the enemies of civilisation' (1990:56–7).

If coherence and integration are denied as conditions of theoretical adequacy, what determines that any supposed 'differences', or 'contradictory particularities', are appropriately expressed? Or is postmodern theory immune from mistakes, that, in 'alluding to the conceivable', anything goes? If 'disorder' is made the goal of theoretical activity we have the curious situation that the *worse* (from any standard perspective on conditions of adequacy) our social scientific explanations, the better they will achieve their postmodern aims. Indeed, the problem of distinguishing a real 'disorder' of the social world from the appearance of disorder created by the inadequacy of a theoretical scheme is evident, if only implicitly, in Harding's comment that, 'I am not suggesting that we should *try* to produce incoherent theories, but that we should try to fashion conceptual schemes that are more alert to the

complex and often beneficial ways in which the modernist world is falling apart' (1986:164). Certainly, if theory is 'falling apart', the world will appear to be 'falling apart'. But *any such 'disorder' attributed to the 'real' will be an artifact of our theoretical confusion, not a feature of the world adequately expressed in a disorderly theory.*

In any case, ceding both 'orderly explanation' and 'civilisation' to 'patriarchy' seems to be a high price to pay for an apparent autonomy of feminist theory (or, more properly, feminist theor*ies*). From another perspective, it might seem the ultimate 'bad faith' that postmodern theory denies the possibility of an inclusive social theory, or political practice, just at the point that feminists have identified the specific ways in which women have been excluded from the structures of modern citizenship despite formal statements of their inclusion. A number of feminist writers have expressed their suspicions of postmodernism on precisely these grounds. Hawkesworth, commenting on the abandonment of 'reason' in postmodernism, observes that, 'at a moment when the preponderance of rational and moral argument sustains prescriptions for women's equality, it is a bit too cruel a conclusion and too reactionary a political agenda to accept that reason is impotent, that equality is impossible' (1989:557). Similarly, Hartsock asks of postmodernism, 'why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?' (1990:163). While the feminist argument must be that inclusion could not be a simple issue of the mere extension of existing forms of citizenship to include women, but requires a transformation of those forms (Thompson 1986; Pateman 1989; Okin 1989), postmodernism seems to deny that there could be an inclusive citizenship at all. But why should inclusion be regarded as a denial of difference? I shall return to this issue, but, before I do, I want to address the claims of 'standpoint' theory which have a more direct, but equally problematic, relation to the post-1960s critique of social theory.

Standpoint Theory

Opposition to the postmodern 'turn' within feminism has come from those who regard the requirements of feminist theory to be continuous with the identification of a specifically feminist 'standpoint' (Hartsock 1983; Jaggar 1983; Harding 1986, 1993; Smith 1988). According to this view, social theory can be grounded in the perspective of a particular group (or groups), thereby avoiding the false 'universalism' of mainstream approaches and the debilitating relativism of postmodernism. It is apparent that the role of the proletariat in Marxist theory has an exemplary status. Thus, Hartsock comments that, 'like the lives of proletarians according to Marxian theory, women's lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point on

male supremacy' (1983:284). Harding, for her part, notes the analogy, albeit with some doubt as to its applicability to the current situation of women. 'Perhaps', she writes, 'the proletariat was the only epistemologically advantaged "right group" at the "right place in history" in the nineteenth century' (1986:163).

The problem is not only the applicability of such arguments to women *now*, but their applicability to anyone *at all*. After all, Marx 'got the proletariat wrong' and that failure must cast a large shadow across any subsequent attempt to identify any epistemological 'truths' independently of the explanatory deficiencies of the argument. For example, how is the proletariat to be identified as an 'oppressed' and 'epistemologically privileged' group independently of the specific explanation of their circumstances that Marx offered? Indeed, subsequent developments in Marxism have modified that explanation in such a way that any privileged status attributed to the proletariat is thoroughly undermined. Essentially, the trend in Marxist theory has been to shift the focus of explanation away from contradiction and change and the role of the proletariat in the transformation of capitalism to the stability of capitalism and the incorporation (even, in some cases, the dissolution) of the proletariat.

Furthermore, feminist research has demonstrated the limitations and 'gender-blind' character of Marxist categories. It should be stressed that the problem is not just an issue of the 'gender blindness' of Marxist theory, but, more fundamentally, an issue of the 'gender blindness' which that theory attributes to the central processes of the capitalist mode of production. According to the theory, the consequence of capitalist development is to produce an equality between men and women in the degraded status of proletarian. Any differences between men and women, for Marx, reflect 'conventions' outside the determinations of the capitalist relations of production. These conventions would be dissolved as capitalist relations advance. Clearly this account is inadequate. This must call into question any claim that 'women' in a feminist standpoint could be 'like the proletariat in Marxist theory'. Ultimately, as with other developments in Marxism, it must call into question the idea that *anyone* is 'like the proletariat in Marx's theory'.

Harding (1986; 1993), in fact, expresses unease with the idea of a singular 'feminist standpoint', arguing that there is no one identity 'woman' and that identities are 'hyphenated', or 'fractured'. This is a circumstance which she describes as 'exhilarating' (1986:164). It is an 'exhilaration' which should be tempered by the recognition that 'cross-cutting' identities are usually proposed to explain why certain groups *fail* to act upon the conditions identified by theorists as those of their 'epistemological advantage'. For example, it is often argued that it is the benefits of patriarchy accruing to male proletarians which has divided them from women in the same class, so undermining the mutual solidarity necessary to properly class conscious collective action (Hartmann 1981). By that token, it would seem that the different 'class',

'ethnic' (or other 'fractured') identities of women would undermine any gender solidarity.

More importantly for the status of the epistemological claims of standpoint theory, however, is that the very concept of 'fractured identities' derives from an acceptance of 'class' and 'gender' as independent variables, rather than from any transformation of these explanatory categories.'Class' is identified as a meaningful and relatively unproblematic category, despite the absence of the processes by which Marx made sense of it as a category. 'Feminist empiricists' are criticised by Harding (and others) for a failure to transform the categories of previous approaches, for using 'gender' in the role of an 'additional' variable alongside that of class. It is ironic, then, that Harding's (and other standpoint theorists') own use of the analogy with the proletariat in Marxist theory fails to address the deficiencies of that theory from the perspective of the very issues giving rise to their perception of the need for a feminist standpoint. After all, a belief in the idea of the independence of 'epistemological truths' from substantive explanations is what Harding attributes to, and criticises, in 'feminist empiricists'. If, as she suggests, the crucial issue for a feminist successor science is the transformation of the field of previous theories, then such a science must place its claims in the *reconstruction* of the central processes of Marxist theory, not in *additional* processes alongside them. This reconstruction would seem to be more obviously an accomplishment of the body of research she describes as 'empiricist' in its demonstration of the gendered nature of the relations of (re)production, than of work that adheres to the exemplary status of Marxism.

One way in which the problems of a specifically feminist standpoint might seem to be resolved is to argue that social inquiries should adopt the standpoint of *all* those who are oppressed. A diversity of possible standpoints might then be unified by their common constitution in oppression. The adoption of a 'feminist' standpoint – rather than that of another group – would be justified pragmatically by the fact that women represent one very significant group of those oppressed and their oppression is a significant factor in the oppression of other groups. Social inquiries might be identified with all those who are 'oppressed' or 'subjugated', but how is that identification to be secured? One principle that is proposed, following the claims of a 'reflexive' or 'dialogic' social inquiry, is to return issues of the validity of social inquiries to the judgements of those whose behaviours are the object of study. Fay (1975) puts the general argument well. He writes, 'only that which is validated as conceivable or likely by the object of study as a possibly true account of what he [sic] is doing can be counted as true, which means to say that only when both the observer and the actor ultimately come to talk about the actions and beliefs of the actor in the same way is it possible to claim that a correct account has been given' (1975:82).

The argument appears sympathetic, with its humility and its image of 'equality' between social scientists and those they study, but it is not so easy

to sustain. For example, critics of positivism frequently claim that *it* does no more than translate ordinary terms into a technical, supposedly 'objective', language which adds nothing beyond everyday understandings. Giddens, for example, comments that positivistic sociology frequently confronts the objections of the 'lay public' to the circumstance that, 'its "findings" tell them nothing which they did not already know – or worse, dress up in technical language that which is perfectly familiar in everyday terminology' (1976:15). A 'reflexive' approach grounded in everyday terminology, but with its own 'technical language', must, however, be vulnerable to the same criticism. If 'positivistic' sociology is accused of conservatism because of its acceptance of objects as given and external to its practices of explanation, such a 'reflexive' approach could be (and has been) charged with an equivalent conservatism (Apel 1967; Bernstein 1976; Fay 1975; Habermas 1988).

Furthermore, actors' own understandings might be a guide to their predicaments, but they will also reflect the operation of processes which are outside their consciousness, despite having negative consequences for them. Flax (1990) nicely captures the problem in her comment that 'standpoint' theory assumes, 'that the oppressed are not in some ways also damaged by their social experience; on the contrary, this position assumes that the oppressed have a privileged (and not just different) relation and ability to comprehend a reality which is "out there" waiting for our representation' (1990:56; see also, Hawkesworth 1989). Once this is accepted, not only is the authenticity of the experiences of the 'oppressed' called into question, but, at the same time, there must be an issue of the explanatory adequacy of any 'representations' of those processes outside the immediate consciousness of actors. At a minimum, those who are judged to be oppressed may not define themselves as oppressed in the terms of the theory of their oppression – indeed, *will not*, if they have absorbed the 'dominant ideology' (nor will they in any straightforward way if their identities are 'fractured').

For example, it is frequently argued that inequalities may be masked by ideologies which, internalised by actors, serve the reproduction of their disadvantage. Thus, a central argument of critical social theory – including 'standpoint' theory – is that an adequate social science must combine an emphasis upon the 'internal', subjective meanings of actors with an 'external' appreciation of the operation of large-scale social processes in terms other than those of actors' meanings. In this development, actors' meanings can be criticised, apparently, because they do not embody their 'true' interests (that is, the 'interests' they would have were they to know what social theorists know).[1] The 'dialogic' condition of the validity of such criticism is that it is accepted, 'ultimately', by the actors to whose behaviour it is applied. This leaves a 'gap', where any current lack of acceptance by actors is to be 'explained' by 'blockages', 'repressions', etc., which must first be removed before acceptance will follow. It is this which explains the importance of the 'psychoanalytic' model of patient and therapist in statements of the relation

between critical theorist and those in whose interests inquiry is conducted (Habermas 1971; Bernstein 1976).

Obviously, this model will be rejected by many feminists as implicitly 'authoritarian' (as, indeed, it is), but the problem that resort to such a model reflects is evident, even in those who, on the face of it, might seem to be most strenuous in rejecting it. Thus, Smith offers the relation of feminist inquirer and her women subjects as one of 'careful and loving listening' (1989:35). At the same time, she offers a biographical account of herself as having previously enacted 'relations of ruling' in her earlier 'objectified' practices as a professional social scientist (1989:36ff). She has 'learned' from feminism. But – and this is the same problem that arises in the psychoanalytic model – how are those who have not 'learned' to be listened to? Prior to their 'learning' from the inquirer there will be a division between the understandings of observers and those of actors. Whatever the methodological ideal, that ideal would now offer no practical guide to the conduct of social inquiries, since only in agreement is a unity of thought and practice achieved, but agreement cannot be guaranteed in advance (Holmwood and Stewart 1991).

In any case, who must accept a characterisation in order for it to be valid? Usually, our inquiries involve a number of parties whose claims are frequently in conflict. Whose judgements would we choose as validating or invalidating our own? Would the judgements of one of the parties to a relationship be enough? For example, in identifying the capital-labour relation as exploitative, who must accept that characterisation – workers, or both workers and capitalists? These are not trivial issues. The difficulties are clear in Habermas's statement of conditions of authenticity. He believes that an answer to the question of truth can be arrived at by asking how would the members of a society have acted, 'if they could and would have decided on organization of social intercourse through discursive will-formation, with adequate knowledge of the limiting conditions and functional imperatives of their society' (1976: 113). Yet, what Habermas would regard as the 'false' ideology of capitalism itself lays claim to an adequate knowledge of the limiting conditions and functional imperatives of *any* system of production. After all, ideologies which extol capitalism do not do so on the basis of *affirming* exploitation, but by *denying* it. How would we decide between his view and that of his opponents? It seems that we would need some way of distinguishing between competing *explanatory* claims.[2] In other words, the 'adequacy of knowledge' is precisely what is at issue and cannot be assumed.

Moreover, oppression has to be redeemed, at least in part, by those who are not oppressed, but must come to understand themselves as 'oppressors'. This would seem to require a different sort of theoretical perspective than one grounded merely in the experience(s) of oppression, or validated by those whose 'standpoint' we have adopted. If a self-conscious affirmation of patriarchy could only be negated externally by proposing an alternative set of values, then that challenge would have no force with those that embraced the

values being denied. As Harding expresses the dilemma: 'men see the world in one way, women in another; on what possible grounds other than gender loyalties can we decide between these conflicting accounts' (1986:137). And, we might add, when identities are 'fractured', could even gender loyalties be guaranteed?

A social inquiry which addressed 'oppression' would, then, have to locate itself in something more than the standpoint of the oppressed.[3] Yet *inclusiveness* – whether of citizenship or social science – is what many advocates of a specifically feminist epistemology argue to be chimeric. Yet, the standard categories (whether of social science, or liberal citizenship), which many feminists assign to 'patriarchy', occur in seemingly gender-neutral terms. It is precisely the gender-neutrality of the claims which allows the lever of criticism to be inserted. Claims are made which can be shown to be problematic in their own terms. It is this which enables those who previously accepted the categories to come to a recognition of their partial and unsatisfactory character. It is the self-defeating nature of what is being claimed which gives criticism force *within the position* being criticised. At the same time, it offers the possibility that the *position from which* the criticism is being made is the better realisation of what the original position claimed. This 'dialectic' is well-illustrated in Pateman's discussion of democratic theory, where she writes that, 'the lesson to be learned from the past is that a "democratic" theory and practice that is not at the same time feminist merely serves to maintain a fundamental form of domination and so makes a mockery of the ideals and values that democracy is held to embody' (1989:223; Nelson 1990; Okin 1989).

The paradox of the requirement of inclusivity at the same time as announcing its impossibility is graphically illustrated in Harding's comment that, 'if feminist criticisms can no longer be seen simply as demands that the social sciences . . . adhere more rigorously to their own directives for objective, value-neutral inquiry – if those directives are themselves suspected to be an expression of androcentrism – feminist inquiry has apparently grounded its claims in a paradox. Clearly, more scientifically rigorous inquiry has produced the evidence supporting specific charges of androcentrism – but that same inquiry suggests that this kind of rigor and objectivity is androcentric' (1986:109–10). What should be clear is that any paradox is, to a large extent, of Harding's own making. It is she (though she is by no means alone) who has assigned 'scientific rigour' to androcentrism, at the same time as arguing that the positive substance of feminist research derives from that rigour. Standpoint theory, far from answering the paradox, reproduces it. The answer lies in deconstructing its terms.

'Feminist Empiricism' Reconsidered

Why should we accept 'rigor' and 'objectivity' as androcentric? Certain ways

in which they are represented and practised may appropriately be regarded as patriarchal, but what underlies them – the requirements of coherence and inclusiveness among theoretical objects and relations – need not. Indeed, in this final section of the paper, I shall suggest that recent developments in 'post-positivist' philosophy of science have radically challenged the conception of natural science that has formed the basis of many of the charges of androcentrism.[4] My discussion of the issues raised by post-positivism will necessarily be brief and, as with any general characterisation of postmodern theory, the identification of agreed characteristics is problematic. Notwithstanding any unresolved issues within the area, my purpose is the identification of some features which suggest a different way of thinking about the 'science question in feminism' and of the contribution of feminist research to social science. Feminist criticisms of science, I suggest, apply primarily to a positivistic *philosophy* of science which holds that scientific practices are concerned with the search for a set of 'eternal', timeless laws which are true, universally, rather than to the *practices* of science which positivist philosophy sought to interpret. Indeed, it is precisely the failure of positivist theories of science adequately to account for those practices which has contributed to its demise.

The role of a positivist philosophy of science in feminist criticisms of science is evident in Gross's (1986) identification of a specifically feminist epistemology. She writes that the intellectual commitments of feminist theory are, 'not to truth, objectivity and neutrality, but to theoretical positions openly acknowledged as observer and context-specific' (1986:200). In the process, she offers a list of characteristics of scientific epistemology which, she argues, are, in essence, patriarchal. These are: a singular or universal concept of truth and methods of verification (or falsification); objectivity and observer-neutrality; a universal subject of knowledge; a fixed, static truth and an immutable, given reality; and the inter-translatability of concepts and terms (Gross 1986:198–9). In this way, the coherence and integration of theoretical categories and relations, which would be conditions of adequacy in any positive reconstruction of social inquiry, are assigned to 'positivism' and 'science' is not unique, yet each item on the list of patriarchal commitments of science is denied in post-positivist conceptions of science.

Although many commentators have seen a parallel between these developments in the philosophy of science and criticisms of positivism in the social sciences, there is no simple convergence between them. In particular, the post-positivist view of science does not confirm the postmodern critique of social theory. Post-positivist philosophers of science, with their identification of paradigms and research programmes grounded in different theoretical principles, seem to have given emphasis to the incommensurable 'differences' between approaches. Yet, despite the emphasis upon discontinuities in the history of science (against a positivist view of an accumulation of 'truths') the development of science remains a progressive undertaking. 'Anomalies' and

apparently 'disconfirming instances' within programmes remain problems that must be addressed. Any anomaly, or counter-instance, in a programme is regarded as a problem that calls into question its scientific constructs. In consequence, the explanatory drive in science remains firmly tied to problem-solving as the creative activity of science. Where the problems lie and how they should be addressed *produces no one obviously correct strategy*. That is, there is no single appropriate methodology outside specific located explanatory practices. All that can be said is that the 'correct' strategy is the one which, after the event, proves to be successful. It is in this sense that post-positivist theories of science eschew prescriptive methodologies and can, thereby, be said to share an 'anti-foundationalism' with postmodernism. Nonetheless, as 'ideologies' of science, they continue to emphasise 'problem-solving' as the creative practice of science and mutual coherence of theoretical statements and their empirical instances as a condition of adequacy.

There is no 'fixed point' to explanation – whether that be the standpoint of a 'single scientific method', or, equally, the 'standpoint of the oppressed' – but the conclusion does not need to be the relativistic position that there are simply different points of view and no criteria for distinguishing among them. Standards of evaluation may and, indeed, do shift in the process of the development of explanations which transform theoretical objects and relations, but scientific judgements are 'indeterminate' only in the sense that there is no one, pre-given best way forward, not in the sense that judgements of superior adequacy cannot be made. Superior adequacy must be an issue of the greater inclusiveness, or resourcefulness, of one theoretical scheme over another. This does not mean that a 'totalising', general scheme of categories is a *pre-condition* of social scientific inquiry, that a general framework is either possible or necessary in advance of any substantive inquiry. This is a position which postmodern theorists have rightly criticised. Social inquiries should be regarded as 'particularistic' – the better term might be substantive – in the sense of beginning from particular, located problems (large-scale, or small-scale). However, the dynamic of inquiry is that of inference and extension to other 'particulars' and the general requirement of such inquiries, in social science as in natural science, is consistency among statements of objects and their relations. Lack of consistency constitutes a problem to be solved. The solution of problems is a creative task which involves the transformation of theoretical objects and relations, including the observations associated with the problems.

This is far from involving a denial of 'difference'. Any elaborated scheme is *necessarily* a scheme of differentiated entities. The issue is not one of the acceptance or denial of 'difference', but the coherence, or otherwise, of the scheme in which difference is expressed and accounted. Indeed, the idea that an 'inclusive' scheme would deny difference and is therefore 'oppressive' takes its force from those occasions on which there are attempts to uphold the coherence of a theoretical scheme despite apparently 'disconfirming'

instances: that is, from denials of any need to transform basic categories in the face of apparent inadequacies. In these circumstances, the attempt to reassert the 'order' of pre-existing categories will, indeed, appear to suppress the 'differences' that the observations of behaviours apparently at odds with that order seem to embody.[5]

Although the immediate apprehension of 'differences' will be transformed by their re-statement within a new theoretical order, the reconstruction of empirical understandings is not, by that token, empiricist. Ironically, *it is precisely postmodern feminism which is empiricist* in its acceptance of the 'reality' of the 'observations' which deviate from the 'order' of pre-existing theoretical claims and its belief that those 'observations' have integrity as the expression of 'differences'. Indeed, the best indication of the 'empiricism' of postmodernism is precisely the way in which, faced with the deficiencies of previous approaches, postmodern theorists do not seek a greater adequacy, but accept the deficiencies as adequate descriptively of a 'disorderly' world.

These arguments about the nature of creative social science also have consequences for any judgement about issues of power and oppression in social relationships. Such judgements must concern *specific* social relationships and circumstances. They cannot be issues of general methodological principle – for example, constituting a 'critical' theory of society, or an *a priori* standpoint – but must arise in relation to specific claims about the nature of particular social arrangements. Criticism is consequent upon substantive research and argument, not an *a priori* attitude which can inform it regardless of the substantive content of research findings. The explanatory undertakings of feminist social inquiries, then, are at the very heart of any critical contribution they can make. Feminist empirical inquiries pose a major challenge to existing approaches and are, currently, at the centre of creative social science. By identifying issues and problems of gender intrinsic to 'mainstream' approaches, but beyond solution in their categories, they point to the necessary reconstruction of theoretical objects, categories and relations as a condition of adequacy. Feminist inquiries are not grounded in a paradox. *They are grounded in the very requirements and possibilities of creative social science.*

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Notes

1. As Lukes puts it, 'men's [sic] wants may themselves be a product of a system which works against their interests, and in such cases, [a radical view of power] relates the latter to what they would want and prefer, were they able to make the choice' (1974:34).

2. The problem is especially acute for Habermas since his ultimate criterion is 'consensus', but he allows that those on whose behalf he speaks seem to agree with his opponents. That is, he accepts the possibility of a consensus which he deems 'false' when it does not include social theorists, but includes those on whose behalf they speak. See, Holmwood and Stewart (1991) for a detailed treatment of this issue.
3. In fact, Marx's account of proletarian interests does not identify with their *standpoint*. They are identified as a 'universal' class because of how they relate to the *solution* of the central contradictions of capitalism (which are manifested in all behaviours), not simply because they experience exploitation.
4. The emergence of post-positivist philosophies of science is associated with a range of critical positions, but, see, especially, Hanson (1958); Quine (1953); Kuhn (1962); Popper (1963); Hesse (1974); Lakatos (1970). For a recent feminist revision of the feminist critique of natural science, offered in the light of a post-positivist conception of science, see Nelson (1990).
5. For example, a standard claim within Marxist theory (and other mainstream class theories) used to be that gender could be subsumed under class categories and that the theory did not require transformation of its categories in order to account for issues of gender.

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