A Review Essay

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THE FEMINIST QUESTION OF THE SCIENCE QUESTION IN FEMINISM

A Critical Analysis of Sandra Harding's *The Science Question in Feminism*

This essay is a critical review of Sandra Harding's The Science Question in Feminism. *Her text constitutes a monumental effort to capture an overview of recent feminist critique of science and to develop a feminist dialectical and materialist conception of the history of masculinist science. In this analysis of Harding's work, the organizing categories as well as the main assumptions of the text are reconstructed for closer examination within the context of modern feminist critique of science and feminist theory in general. Although a postive review of Harding's text is presented, questions are raised concerning the adequacy of socialist feminist assumptions for such a project, the limitations of Harding's theorization of gender, and the appropriateness of "postmodernism" as a final category of residence.*

> When we began theorizing our experiences during the second women's movement a mere decade and a half ago, we knew our task would be a difficult though exciting one. But I doubt that in our wildest dreams we ever imagined we would have to reinvent both science and theorizing itself in order to make sense of women's experience. (Harding 1986, 250)

Working the beat of feminist epistemology in the last decade and a half has been a difficult task, since feminist inquiry seems to constantly engender more and more questions until at last it becomes necessary to question everything. Sandra Harding's text, *The Science Question in Feminism*,[1] captures both the energy and exhaustion of this process. In the early 1970s, articles, conference papers, and discussions began to appear, sparked by the discovery of women's absence in the sciences, both as practitioners and as accurately understood subjects of study. Gradually, "the woman question" in science (or why aren't there more women scientists?) was transformed into the "the science question" in feminism (or what is wrong with science?). In this transition, the initial reformist criticism of science's exclusionary practice as regards women was altered into a new radical interrogation of science and

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its method of inquiry. "Where the Woman Question critiques still conceptualize the scientific enterprise we have as redeemable, as reformable, the Science Question critiques appear skeptical that we can locate anything morally and politically worth redeeming or reforming in the scientific world view, its underlying epistemology, or the practices these legitimate" (p.29).

What Harding's analysis provides is a reconstruction of recent feminist epistemology, as it severs its allegiance to traditional empiricism and seemingly splinters into the tensions and ambiguities of a postmodernist dialectic. This is, of course, the story according to Harding, and one finds traces in this story of a strong commitment to the parental discourses of Marxism and neo-Freudian psychoanalysis and to postmodernism. My point here is not to say that feminists need begin without borrowed assumptions, but I do believe that Harding's use of this conceptual baggage has to a certain extent limited her theorization of gender and feminist pluralism, serious flaws in an otherwise stunning historical and philosophical analysis. I will return to these criticisms.

A strength in Harding's work lies in her insistence that feminist critiques of science are a collective, though dispersed, effort to re-tell the history of science from a feminist perspective. In this history of science, one finds evidence of tendencies from social life which leave traces of gender projects in all aspects of the scientific enterprise (p.35). Perceiving science in this way requires, as Harding argues, a rejection of the dogmas of logical empiricism which separate the justification of scientific theory from its historical and social contexts of discovery and which construe ideal scientific method as having a bell-jar immunity to the influences of gender, race, class, and cultural interests. Feminist critique of science suggests not only that scientific method is culture-bound but also "man-crafted," and as such, partial and perverse. Obviously this insight is not openly welcomed within the domain of scientific practice, since what is at stake here is the method itself and its rules of application. These can no longer be shielded by the thesis of transcendental immunity. Resistance to feminist critique, as Harding chronicles it, is thus to be expected, but the ferocious nature of this resistance has taken many by surprise.

Harding provides us with a two-tiered account of feminist criticism of science: one which follows the intellectual developments in feminist epistemology and the other which asks what historical, material conditions make this feminist theorizing possible. The latter question enjoins feminist method to a moment of historical reflexivity, which requires that practitioners of method be aware of the historical conditions which make their labor possible. Although new feminist epistemology rests upon the same material conditions as feminist political consciousness in general, Harding suggests some other compelling and specific historical forces preconditioning feminist critique of science as a new critical discourse. These include the emergence of more

women workers in the sciences, the sex segregated division of labor in science, the alienation of "industrialized" scientific labor (and the return of craft labor models as a worker ideal), the general perception of injustice and perversion in scientific management, and the reappropriation of the self, body, labor, and meaning by women, as a colonized "other." Thus both the method under study (scientific method) and the methodology used to study it become reflexive enterprises under Harding's approach. Her requirement of theoretical reflexivity is thorough and in turn thoroughly grounded in a materialist view of social history.

A theme that runs throughout Harding's work is her unique inversion of logical empiricism's unity of science thesis. The latter holds that physics should be considered the paradigm for all sciences and should be placed at the end of the continuum which runs from the hard and therefore better sciences to the soft and therefore less mature or more subjective social sciences. The unity of science thesis suggests that the softer sister sciences should try to emulate the methods of real science to become more credible and objective. Harding argues that we should invert this continuum, taking the social sciences as the paradigm of scientific labor and abandon the myth of the separation of science from society. According to Harding, feminist critique of the social sciences has relevance to physics, mathematics, and logic, as there are neither exceptions nor socially unaffected practices under Harding's unity of science and society thesis. The same analytic categories—gender, race, and class, for example,—can be used to analyze society and science. While Harding's arguments are controversial, her strategy of dislodging physics from its paradigmatic status in scientific practice is a reasoned reply to the tough nut often thrown at feminist critics of the sciences—the "but what about physics and mathematics?" question.

Although a lot of *The Science Question in Feminism* is descriptive, as Harding summarizes much of the terrain of feminist epistemology and critique, she also categorizes this material in a unique way. Harding organizes her analysis of feminist epistemologies into three distinct stages: "feminist empiricism," "feminist standpoint epistemologies," and finally "feminist postmodernism." Her treatment of these recent theoretical developments is accurately dialectical. Each stage is conceived as having both positive and negative aspects, as historically and materially grounded on the previous stage, and as a sublation of the limitations of that previous stage. This process of feminist consciousness, wrapped around the problematic of science, is moved both internally by the force of contradiction and paradox and externally by the material conditions of its possibility.[2]

HARDING'S ANALYSIS OF GENDER

Harding's description of various feminist standpoint epistemologies, developed by Hilary Rose (1983), Nancy Hartsock (1983, 1984), Jane Flax (1978), and Dorothy Smith (1974, 1979) is somewhat brief, but loyal to the tentativeness and fragmentary nature of these early theoretical explorations. Similar to assumptions made in the epistemologies of Marx (1964,1970), Sohn-Rethel (1978), and Lukács (1971), feminist standpoint epistemologies grant a special epistemic privilege to the perspectives of the oppressed. In the case of *feminist* standpoint epistemologies, this group is constituted by *women as gendered beings* and/or *women as political beings*, whereas for Marx, Sohn-Rethal, and Lukács, it is the proletariat. What is proposed by feminist standpoint epistemologies is that women as an oppressed group can see and understand reality more accurately or with less distortion than is possible from the vigils of social gender privilege. Similar to the distinction between the "class-in-itself" and "class-for-itself," one finds among feminist theorists a tension between those who hold that *women as gendered beings* are not only capable of seeing and understanding the social world more accurately than males, but after "politicization" or "consciousness raising," *women as feminists* are able to see and understand social reality even more clearly. Obviously, this latter stance injects explicit political values into the heart of scientific practice, again contrasting itself with the alleged "value-neutrality" of traditional scientific empiricism. Feminist science is thus a politically engaged enterprise, a research wing for a political movement.

What is required for grounding a feminist standpoint epistemology is an analysis of what it is that women as a group share in common as a basis for this special epistemic privilege and further how feminist "politicization" of this gender context can lead to a better grasp on social reality. Although Harding and the standpoint epistemologists she analyzes have not paid enough attention to this second problem, what I call "the feminist question of the science question in feminism," Harding does accurately locate two sites very often used to buttress feminist standpoint epistemologies. These are found in the formal or general characteristics of women's social labor (Rose, Hartsock, and Smith) and/or in the gender-specific identity projects of women (Flax, Keller, Hartsock). Theoreticians working from the first perspective argue that women's labor, especially the domestic, affective, and reproductive labor performed in the private sphere, gives women a fundamentally different perspective on social reality. This includes a different way of relating to self, others, and nature (the ultimate ontological components of human inquiry). The second approach borrows heavily from Chodorow's object relations theory and holds that what is distinctive about women as a group is shared participation in a gender-identity project which differs from that of males. This identity project provides the formal structure for developing a different model

of science. Both approaches belie the effort to reduce explanations of gender formation to biological determinants, and both rely on the intransigent category of *division of labor* to explain gender categories. Women's insertion into the social division of labor is considered the significant variable, and this shared gender context in turn makes possible gender-specific standpoint epistemologies.

What is surprising in Harding's reconstruction of feminist standpoint epistemologies is the omission of much radical feminist writing. Catherine McKinnon (1982), whose work alludes to another standpoint articulation, is consigned to a footnote and cajoled for practicing victimology dogma.[3] The suggestive and provocative writings of Marilyn Frye (1983) and Jeffner Allen (1986), in what could be called lesbian epistemology, are not even mentioned. Adrienne Rich's (1980) by now classic contribution to theories of gender and sexual constructionism is not discussed. Women's positioning outside of masculinist discourse, a standpoint developed by French feminists (Marks 1980, Irigaray 1987) is only tangentially mentioned. This silencing of feminist theorizing that falls outside of neo-Freudian/socialist feminist accounts of gender is problematic in Harding's work. It represses an important component in contemporary feminist dialogue, and it profoundly affects Harding's own theorization about gender. The feminist question of *The Science Question in Feminism* returns, the question of what kind of feminism should inform a work such as Harding's.

This question hinges on an important area of controversy which is central in Harding's analysis: what constitutes an adequate theorization of gender for the purposes of feminist work? Harding insists, quite rightly, that we must consider gender "an analytic category" through which social experience and social division of labor are organized. Gender is more than an empirical characteristic of individuals; it also functions as a category for organizing social meaning and difference. According to Harding, an adequate theorization of gender must take into consideration three crucial aspects in the social construction of gender:

> Gendered social life is produced through three distinct processes: it is the result of assigning dualistic gender metaphors to various perceived dichotomies that rarely have anything to do with sex differences; it is the consequence of appealing to these gender dualisms to organize social activity, of dividing necessary social activities between different groups of humans; it is a form of socially constructed individual identity only imperfectly correlated with either the 'reality' or the perception of sex differences. I shall be referring to these three aspects of gender as *gender symbolism* (or borrowing a term from anthropology, "gender totemism"), *gender structure* (or the

> division of labor by gender) and *individual gender*. The referents for all three meanings of masculinity and femininity differ from culture to culture, though within any culture the three forms of gender are related to each other. (pp.17-18)

Although this three-part analysis of gender is progressive and obviously more adequate than any conception of gender construction limited to only one factor, it is dependent on post-Chodorowian socialist-feminist assumptions. The three-part analysis simply combines the social division of labor thesis of socialist femininism with Chodorow's theory of gender development, adding to this the overdetermining factors of gender symbolism or gender totemism. These theorizations articulate the variables, according to Harding, relevant to the complex socio-historical and personal aspects of gender construction. What is clearly lacking in this analysis of gender is any sense of the other coercions and forces at work in the social construction of gender, those factors most clearly linked with violence against women and sexual abuse of women. I would urge Harding to take a more careful look at western culture's social construction of "woman" and consider how the sexualization and subordination of women's bodies creates a deeper infrastructure for gender construction (Haug 1987). Harding does call attention to the asymmetry of gender construction. This is not enough. The explanatory categories of socialist feminist/neo-Freudian/culturalist theories about gender are also not enough.

There is an alternative perspective to Harding's understanding of the sex-gender system. From this alternative standpoint, an adequate theorizing of gender includes Harding's contributing factors of sex division of labor, mother-centered child-rearing practices, and symbolic/ideological determinations, but also, and perhaps more importantly, it includes the impact of the sex division of erotic as a category just as significant as the sex division of labor. A materialist analysis of sexuality is linked to the dispersion of power, forged by the institution of compulsory heterosexuality, selective eugenics and forced pronatalism, male appropriation of reproduction, the practices of sexual violence and sexual sadism, etc. Where one might ask do the gender-specific violations of rape, incest, battery, sexual harassment or sexual terrorism in general fit into Harding's analysis? There is little mention of these factors in her book. Are these not in some way part of the social construction of gender? My fear is that the omission of such important components of the sex-gender system is another instance of using theory, in this case revisionist socialist feminist theory, to erase the experiences of many women and to place these experiences outside of our comprehension of socially constructed gender.

Something must be added to or used to restructure entirely Harding's three factor approach to gender. Gender must be seen as more strenuously and additionally crafted through the deployment of power in the codes of sexual

violence and sexual practice. It is as much a part of the force used by the state, judicial, and academic apparatus to "make" sex and sexual difference as it is part of the localization of that power within concrete social acts of fornication, intimacy, and touch. Gender analyses based on Chodorow's work misplace the entire force field of the sex-gender economy into a middle-class heterosexual family drama. Socialist feminist analyses based on the sex division of labor and the significance of economic factors in shaping gender often obscure the sex division of the erotic (Zita 1987). Culturalist analyses of symbolic gender systems often leave unexamined how ideology impacts on the body and its insertion into a culture of domination. Forcing a *menage a trois* between these three theoretical approaches does not amend all the difficulties. Harding's question—what constitutes an adequate theorizing of gender?—is a crucial one, but her own categories of analysis call for expansion or further justification.

Why Postmodernist Feminism?

The third stage of Harding's reconstruction of feminist epistemology—the recently emergent feminist postmodernism—is the most provocative in her analysis. As Harding suggests, the program of feminist standpoint epistemologies still carries theoretical commitments to fictional modernist essences and a politics of unity—that something that all women share in common and which constitutes a unity of standpoint and politics—through which the "one true story" of women's oppression can be told. Radical postmodernism undermines these commitments and leads us to embrace our selves as part of an ensemble of fractured identities; our politics as the possibility of solidarity between different oppressed groups; and our knowledge of social reality as "the permanent partiality of feminist inquiry" (pp.193-194). The feminist route to "postmodernism"—the recent malaise over the loss of a unifying "subject" as a centrism in hegemonic discourse—has a unique point of origin, occasioned by dialogue and struggle between women of different classes, races, sexual allegiances, and nationalities.

Rather than examining this historically recent feminist exchange, Harding introduces the notion of "postmodernist feminism" through the literature of Africanist philosophy. She discovers a striking parallel between the feminist critique of white male western science and the critique of science generated by radical Africanist philosophers.[4] Both western feminist and Africanist worldviews aim towards closing the gap between self and the phenomenal world, establishing harmony between the human and natural worlds, representing the knowing subject as a person bearing a social identity, and incorporating feelings into knowing. Harding infers from this that it is not gender- specificity as such that makes feminist epistemology possible, but the social and historical conditions of oppression, formal features shared by

differently oppressed groups which in turn explain the overlap in ethics and epistemologies between feminist and Africanist philosophies. Oppressed groups develop conceptual schemes, which are useful in identifying the anti-emancipatory aspects of Western knowledge-seeking and which are historically conditioned by the dialectics of oppression and liberation. In this curious twist in her analysis, she undermines the exclusive epistemic privilege of western feminist standpoint epistemologies and ethics:

> For instance, because women in our culture tend to have an ethic of caring rather than rights, this is conceptualized as feminine. As we all know, correlation is the most reliable form of explanation. If men of African descent also tend toward an ethic of caring rather than rights, we need to look beyond Western women's distinctive social experience to identify the social conditions tending to produce such an ethic. Our own gender totemism obscures for us the origins of the gender dichotomies we observe. (pp.176-177)

I don't think Harding ever recovers from this intellectual turn of events in her own thinking. As a result, the rest of her exploration on the future of feminist epistemology becomes more tentative, not because of any deficiency on her part, but because she is now writing within the moment of feminist theorizing rather than about its past. The question we need to ask is whether feminists should accept the invitation to join the currently male-dominated conversation called postmodernism.

There are several problems with Harding's entrance into the discourse of postmodernism. First she really doesn't want to be there: it slides all too casually towards relativism. The intellectual seduction into postmodernism assumes a pseudo-reciprocity between culturally diverse groups, which overlooks the structural relationships of domination. As Harding suggests we cannot afford to give up the projects of feminist standpoint epistemologies, but we "should also learn to live with" the tensions of postmodernist "permanent partialities" (p.195). My question to Harding is why we "must live with" this, when we could instead call for a sophistication in our theorization of gender and sexuality inclusive of the diversities, complexities, and antagonisms of women's experiences. Postmodernism, by and large a recent invention, tends to operate against feminist and socialist struggles by pulling the ground out from under (Haug 1987, 15),

Harding's resort to postmodernism is problematic in two other ways. First, she introduces postmodernist tendencies in feminist theorizing in terms of emergent "fractured identities," such as Black-lesbian-working-class women who challenge the orthodoxy of feminist theorizing. The term "fractured identity" is unfortunate, since it is slightly perjorative and suggests that there are other identities which are 'unfractured,' unbroken, and whole. This is

not Harding's point, since the pseudo-generic "woman" of earlier feminist theorizing does not carry the connotations of whole or unbroken, except in misleading ways.

Secondly, by moving her analysis from a discussion of feminist empiricism to feminist standpoint epistemologies and finally to the multiple identity politics of "postmodernism," Harding fails to examine the class, race, and nationalist contexts within which the first two stages of the feminist critique of science were developed. From a western white middle-class academic point of view, the gender unities upon which the first two stages rested were "fractured" by the emergence of multiple identity politics within the women's movement. But this way of telling the story, as if some unity has been broken, is the story told from the class and race of women who experienced loss. Harding's interest in reflexivity is less perspicuous here, as the reader would like to know what made this misleading way of thinking feminism possible. Harding's endorsement of the critical interpretive tradition (p.33), as the search for explanation of irrational beliefs and behaviors, falls short. Her romantic mystification of craft labor and the unification of hand, mind, and heart in women's labor as a precondition for feminist theorizing about science is somewhat misleading in this respect.

The text seems to end with many speculative and suggestive ideas which set the agenda for feminist epistemology. Where to go from here is a difficult question. Harding averts the impending threat of relativism, occasioned by post-modernism, by appealing to participatory values as "objectivity-enhancing values," as preconditions and constituents of objectivity (p.249). What this really means is not clear. Which specific values should be adopted? Which feminism should be employed? How do these values enter into theory construction, experimental design, and research method?[5] Harding further argues that we should adopt a new standard of adequate theorizing, one that enjoins fidelity to certain parameters of dissonance with and between the discourses of different oppressed groups (p.246). This is an intriguing idea, but when this dissonance is heard by some as antagonism and contradiction between enemy camps, the future of feminist theorizing and its interment in pseudo-solidarity or opportunism stands in jeopardy. What does it mean to use the criterion of dissonance, rather than, for example, the more traditional criteria of consistency and simplicity for theorizing? Finally, Harding argues for the primacy of fragmented identities "but only for those healthy ones constructed on a solid and nondefensive core identity, and only within a unified opposition, a solidarity against the culturally dominant forces for unitarianism" (p.249). One has to wonder what this means. Is a person with a healthy, nondefensive fragmented-identity one who is willing to work with all women regardless of privilege or status or is there some other criterion? Who decides what counts as "nondefensive behavior?" Obviously, Harding is struggling here to find the words, just as the current scene of feminist

epistemology has entered a new stage of problem groping.

Finally, I find that Harding remains quite ambivalent concerning what parts of feminist standpoint epistemologies are worth salvaging, since, for example, she both questions the psychological assumptions of object relations theory as a basis for feminist standpoint epistemologies (p. 185) and resorts back to them in her final comments on masculinism in science (p. 238). If feminist critique of western science constitutes just one conceptual scheme among many, then we may lose our privileged and largely uncharted insight into the gendered nature of Western science. This is an insight developed by feminist critique and often erased or trivialized by other conceptual schemas.[6] What then is unique and worth saving in the conceptual schemas developed by women?

This brings us full circle to the feminist question of the science question in feminism. What kind of feminism should inform women's conceptual schemas? If women potentially share a common epistemological standpoint, I think this is both an ontological and political consideration. Which feminism or which feminist values should be used to articulate that standpoint? Finally, what kind of feminism should inform the criticial viewpoint from which a book such as Harding's is written? As I have suggested in my criticism of Harding's work, we have been given the story of science and its feminist critique according to Harding, but a further examination of the theory used for theorizing is called for. Can the project of theoretical reflexivity be carried out in other than a neo-Freudian socialist feminist framework? Are there other feminist methodologies for developing critiques of science? Is theoretical justification different from theoretical reflexivity?

Harding's attempt to give us a sketch of a feminist materialist account of the social history of science, while at the same time surveying the more recent developments of feminist epistemology and its effort to ground knowledge on an adequate theorization of gender, is an extraordinary feat. Although there is little way for me to comment on the details and capacities held together in her writing, I have tried to sketch out the broad strokes and some of the unanswered questions. My criticisms are simply meant to push the dialogue along and to hopefully abandon our unhoped for paddling into postmodernism. What Harding chronicles and analyzes is indeed part of an enormous revolution in scientific practice, philosophy of science, and epistemological inquiry. Both the possibility and the responsibility for such a project are overwhelming and require much collective labor, all of us together. Harding has given us the first map of this new radical terrain, a grand overview of what has been done and where we might choose to go. The details need to be filled in, and more geographical discoveries need to be added. The route beyond postmodernism requires a slightly different cartography. Given these additions, remarkably, the map is quite useful and serves us well.

NOTES

1. All pages numbers in this review essay refer to Harding (1986), unless otherwise indicated.
2. For a very brief analysis of these three different epistemologies and their conceptual interrelationship, the reader is referred to Harding (1987). See especially p. 27.
3. Harding does again mention MacKinnon's work in her essay p. 27. (1987,20-21). However, what is most relevant to Harding's work, MacKinnon's views on gender and sexuality, are not discussed. Harding chides MacKinnon for "thinking of method in ways very different from uses of the term in "methods" courses in the social sciences or in lab work in biology." (pp. 20-21) However, given Harding's distinction between methodology and method, MacKinnon's notion of consciousness-raising as feminist method can be read as "a technique for gathering evidence about women's lives for the purpose of developing methodology and political practice, both of which will inform the application of more traditional methods used by feminist researchers." Harding's miscasting of MacKinnon's place in Harding's own typology of distinctions seems increasingly strange.
4. We are given no class, ethnic, national identity or other information about these Africanist philosophers. They are representative of the whole.
5. In Harding's essay (1987), she makes an attempt to spell out more directly the relationship between feminist theories (methodologies), feminist epistemologies, and what feminist researchers actually do. She argues against the need to define and defend a *unique* feminist method and instead offers a cogent analysis of how certain background assumptions regarding the social nature and function of gender, the role of women's experiences in inquiry, and the socially constructed subjectivity of the inquirer inform how methods are applied in feminist inquiry. This is a step forward from the abstract levels of analysis found in her 1986 text. Yet as feminist philosophers continue the descent and intermixing into the real labor of feminist researchers, I would hope that we can dialogue more together—as feminist philosophers and feminist empirics—about how specific background assumptions inform research decisions and evaluations, etc. The search for paradigms of good feminist research is important, as is the practice passed on to students learning from these paradigms.
6. This error is reinforced where Harding (1986, 171) neglects to emphasize that the radical Africanist critique of Eurocentric science is primarily a critique of Eurocentric *male* labor, a point which escapes the androcentric solipsism of the radical Africanist critique. I say this without diminishing the ferocious failure of western feminism's ability to recognize its own racist and ethnocentric character.

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