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*Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Summer, 1985), 296-307.

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*Philosophy and Public Affairs* is currently published by Princeton University Press.

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VIRGINIA HELD

## Feminism and Epistemology: Recent Work on the Connection Between Gender and Knowledge

Would the world seem entirely different if it were pictured, felt, described, studied, and thought about from the point of view of women? A great deal looks altogether different when we notice the realities of class brought to our attention by Marx and others. Not only do economic activity, government, law, and foreign policies take on a very different appearance. "Knowledge" itself can be seen as quite a different enterprise when subjected to the scrutiny of the sociology of knowledge. When connections are drawn between intellectual enterprise and class interests, social sciences claiming to be "value-free" can be seen to lend support to a capitalist status quo, and we can recognize how normative theories presented as impartial can be used to mystify reality rather than to contribute to needed change.

Gender is an even more pervasive and fundamental aspect of reality than class. If feminists can succeed not only in making visible but also in keeping within our awareness the aspects of "mankind" that have been so obscured and misrepresented by taking the "human" to be the masculine, virtually all existing thought may be turned on its head. As Carolyn Heilbrun noted in a recent issue of *Academe* devoted to "Feminism and the Academy," a revolution is occurring that is as important as those that took place when the views of Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud changed so radically man's view of man.<sup>1</sup> Some feminists think this latest revolution will be even more profound.

A discussion of *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, edited by Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Dordrecht, Holland: Reidel, 1983); and *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, by Alison M. Jaggar (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983).

1. Carolyn G. Heilbrun, "Feminist Criticism in Departments of Literature," *Academe* 69 (Sept-Oct 1983): 5.

What is coming to be called the “sex/gender system” can now be seen, as Sandra Harding points out, to affect “most of the social interactions which have ever occurred between humans.”<sup>2</sup> The sex/gender system is “a system of male-dominance made possible by men’s control of women’s productive and reproductive labor, where ‘reproduction’ is broadly construed to include sexuality, family life, and kinship formations, as well as the birthing which biologically reproduces the species.”<sup>3</sup> The sex/gender system “appears to be a fundamental variable organizing social life throughout most recorded history and in every culture today.”<sup>4</sup> It takes on different forms and intensities in different cultures, periods of history, and classes. But beneath the variations, all societies divide themselves into the masculine and the feminine, and constrain individuals into what are taken to be the appropriate roles and relations for men and for women. Now that the sex/gender system has become visible to us, we can see it everywhere.

For some years it has been apparent that among the most interesting work being done in social and political theory is the work of feminists. Merely extending standard concepts such as equality, justice, and liberty to include women produced startling results. The extent to which women had been excluded from their application became visible. More startling still, if women were to be included in the range of applicability of the standard principles of freedom and equality, the social world would have to be radically altered, not merely modestly reformed. For if women are to participate as equals in the “public” realm of government, and in the “productive” sphere of paid employment, relations between men and women within the family will have to be thoroughly transformed. Many couples in the last decade have been struggling with some of the implications of such realities. And feminist theory has been suggesting new ways to conceptualize and to reorder the public and private realms, production and reproduction, and the requirements for meaningful “liberation.” What “sex roles” and “gender” are and what they ought to be are among the most intriguing of contemporary questions. Should the capacities and goals of men and women be thought of as essentially similar, so that a person’s sex should be irrelevant for the contexts of work,

2. Sandra Harding, “Why Has the Sex/Gender System Become Visible Only Now?” in *Discovering Reality*, p. 312.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 311.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 312.

political life, and parenting? Or should we regard women's nurturing and caring capacities and activities not as something to be devalued, but as a model for human interactions everywhere? Instead of merely reelaborating on an already invented wheel, as so frequently happens in many academic disciplines, feminist theory has been genuinely innovative and intellectually gripping.

At the forefront most recently are feminist views of the epistemological changes that will be required by a commitment to, as Alison Jaggar puts it, "a distinctively feminist reconstruction of reality in which women's interests are not subordinated to those of men."<sup>5</sup> We can dispute the extent to which knowledge is subordinated to human interests or is capable of some independent grasp. An excellent question to consider in trying to deal with this issue, and with theories about the causes of changes in intellectual outlook, is the question formulated by Sandra Harding: "Why has the sex/gender system become visible only now?"<sup>6</sup> How is it that this new "object" for scientific scrutiny, an object which has been there all along, has only within the last decade emerged into visibility? Answering this question will in Harding's view require a new epistemology, one "not fettered by the self-imposed limitations of empiricist, functionalist/relativist, or marxist epistemologies."<sup>7</sup> None of these familiar epistemological approaches is in her view capable of dealing with the question, for "the feminist discovery of the sex/gender system certainly is more than the expression of socially unobstructed 'natural talents and abilities,' of functionally adequate beliefs, [or] of changes in the division of labor by class,"<sup>8</sup> as such approaches suppose knowledge to be.

To whatever extent human interest colors knowledge, whether the extent is total, large, or only partial, feminists must insist that knowledge count the interests of women as of equal importance with those of men. It is difficult to see how men who would be consistent with their own claims that knowledge is more than propaganda could disagree. An even stronger case than this, however, can be made for what Nancy Hartsock calls "the feminist standpoint."<sup>9</sup> In Jaggar's discussion of the argument,

5. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics*, p. 371.

6. Harding, "Sex/Gender System."

7. *Ibid.*, p. 311.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Nancy C. M. Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," in *Discovering Reality*.

it is as follows: "Because the ruling class has an interest in concealing the way in which it dominates and exploits the rest of the population, the interpretation of reality that it presents will be distorted in characteristic ways. In particular, the suffering of subordinate classes will be ignored, redescribed as enjoyment or justified as freely chosen, deserved or inevitable. Because their class position insulates them from the suffering of the oppressed, many members of the ruling class are likely to be convinced by their own ideology. . . . They experience the current organization of society as basically satisfactory and so they accept the interpretation of reality that justifies that system of organization. . . . Oppressed groups, by contrast, suffer directly from the system that oppresses them. . . . Their pain provides them with a motivation for finding out what is wrong, for criticizing accepted interpretations of reality and for developing new and less distorted ways of understanding the world. . . . In contemporary society, women suffer a special form of exploitation and oppression. . . . This distinctive social or class position provides women with a distinctive epistemological standpoint. From this standpoint, it is possible to gain a less biased and more comprehensive view of reality than that provided either by established bourgeois science or by the male-dominated leftist alternatives to it."<sup>10</sup>

The long-awaited collection of essays edited by Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka called *Discovering Reality* is the best and most comprehensive examination so far of the epistemological speculations of feminists. From a feminist standpoint, even the reliability of the physical sciences, and of all that has been thought to be most objective and immune to distortion, can be doubted. Perhaps our standard views of reality itself at its most fundamental are masculine views, and perhaps a feminist standpoint would give us a quite different understanding of even physical reality.

The usual metaphysical assumption made by the sciences is that there are entities which have properties. But, as Merrill B. Hintikka and Jaakko Hintikka point out, "studies seem to show that boys tend to bracket together objects (or pictures of objects) whose intrinsic characteristics are similar," whereas girls attach more weight to the "functional and relational characteristics of the entities to be compared. . . ."<sup>11</sup> In sum,

10. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics*, pp. 370-71.

11. Merrill B. Hintikka and Jaakko Hintikka, "How Can Language Be Sexist?" in *Discovering Reality*, p. 145.

“women are generally more sensitive to, and likely to assign more importance to, relational characteristics (e.g. interdependencies) than males, and less likely to think in terms of independent discrete units. Conversely, males generally prefer what is separable and manipulatable. If we put a premium on the former features, we are likely to end up with one kind of cross-identification and one kind of ontology; if we follow the guidance of the latter considerations, we end up with a different one. . . .”<sup>12</sup>

All this is heady stuff, and it needs to deal more than has been the case so far with the fact that continental and non-western approaches have often been based far more than the Anglo-American views with which we are most familiar on a relational and more holistic view of reality. Such continental and non-western views have usually been even more misogynous than have Anglo-American views, yet they seem epistemologically closer to what is now being suggested as a more characteristically feminine approach. One might continue the argument in some such way as the following: It would not be inconsistent for non-Anglo-American epistemological styles to be more “feminine” in the sense of incorporating more characteristically feminine ways of viewing reality, and yet to have led to more misogynous outcomes. For relative to relational and holistic views that ignore women, views that pay attention to discrete individuals represent progress; at least then individual women can recognize their own reality even if the reality of women as an entire category continues to be obscured. But then more relational and holistic views that do recognize women (along with other collectivities) may represent progress over those that can see only discrete entities and their properties. Developing such arguments, and explanations for the more relational and holistic thinking of continental and non-western approaches, remains work to be done rather than an obstacle to the views in question. And then questions concerning the implications for normative ethics and metaethics of such epistemological and metaphysical issues need to be considered.

Criticisms of standard, existing scientific interpretations now seen as male interpretations, are already well developed. Consider evolution. In “Evolution and Patriarchal Myths,” Michael Gross and Mary Beth Averill discuss the way Darwin cast “every significant interaction in nature in

12. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

the language of competition within and among the species, and the struggle between organism and its environment.”<sup>13</sup> They suggest that “this alienated perception of nature . . . may derive largely from male socialization to strive against others and to manipulate nature in the world of work. . . .”<sup>14</sup> Surveying the literature on evolution, they note that the episodes and events considered “express the familiar sorts of processes and characteristics which men think promote progress and create history: competition, struggle, domination, hierarchy, even cooperation—but only as a competitive strategy. A number of other characteristics and kinds of processes do not appear, among them nurturance, tolerance, intention and awareness, benignity, collectivism. . . .”<sup>15</sup> Competition is imagined to be everywhere, and “life itself becomes, virtually by definition, competitive.”<sup>16</sup> But altogether different ways of interpreting evolution are possible. The authors suggest that instead of seeing evolution as “the story of an increasing capacity to manipulate nature” or “a constant struggle for occupation and control of territory,” it might be fruitful to consider a quite different story: “Why not see nature as bounteous, rather than parsimonious, and admit that opportunity and cooperation are more likely to abet novelty, innovation, and creation than are struggle and competition? Evolution in this perspective can be seen as a successive opening of opportunities, each new mode of biological organization providing a new opportunity for still more diverse forms of life.”<sup>17</sup>

On one interpretation, ethics might be relatively unaffected by such a changed view of evolution, since ethics prescribes what human beings ought to do, it does not describe behavior. On other views, ethics would be highly affected by the view that even “natural” progress has depended on cooperation as well as on a competitive struggle for survival: Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid* is illustrative.<sup>18</sup> And cooperation that cannot be reduced to a competitive strategy is of special interest. Human beings should not be asked to do the impossible, so a view which enlarges our understanding of what is possible affects the normative prescriptions that can be appropriate for them.

13. Michael Gross and Mary Beth Averill, “Evolution and Patriarchal Myths of Scarcity and Competition,” in *Discovering Reality*, p. 75.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 83–85.

18. Petr Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (Boston: Extending Horizons Books, n.d.).

Many feminists reject the goal that emerged at the dawn of science and that has continued to guide its development: the goal of conquering or dominating an alien nature. A concern for living at peace with nature often characterizes feminist as well as ecologically sensitive thought. Sometimes the special closeness to nature that women are said to feel is thought to give them an advantage in understanding nature. Instead of the limitation this closeness has traditionally been thought to impose on women's rational capacities and hence scientific abilities, some feminists claim that it may, on the contrary, provide the possibilities for special conceptualizing and knowing, through the more relational approaches of women.<sup>19</sup>

In "Have Only Men Evolved?" Ruth Hubbard points out the male bias in Darwin's account of sexual selection, as males are thought to be in continual battle for "the possession of the other sex," as Darwin puts it. The active male and passive female of Victorian myth are built into the interpretation, whereas actual observation often confounds the myth. Hubbard satirizes the standard story of evolution: "men's mental and physical qualities were constantly improved through competition for women and hunting, while women's minds would have become vestigial if it were not for the fortunate circumstance that in each generation daughters inherit brains from their fathers."<sup>20</sup> The bias continues: contemporary versions of male-centered biology are as "busy as ever trying to provide biological 'reasons' for a particular set of human social arrangements."<sup>21</sup>

In the domain of thinking about society rather than nature, the changes bound to come from a feminist standpoint are even easier to imagine and harder to deny. In *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, Alison Jaggar offers a highly useful, if slightly didactic, account of the major types of feminist theory produced by the recent women's movement. Examining the central claims of liberal feminism, traditional Marxism, radical feminism, and socialist feminism, she explains her reasons for considering socialist feminism to be the source of the strongest feminist theory now

19. See, e.g., Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980). See also Evelyn Fox Keller, *A Feeling for the Organism: The Life and Work of Barbara McClintock* (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1983).

20. Ruth Hubbard, "Have Only Men Evolved?" in *Discovering Reality*, p. 56.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 60. See also R. C. Lewontin, Steven Rose, and Leon J. Kamin, *Not in Our Genes: Biology, Ideology, and Human Nature* (New York: Pantheon, 1984).



available. Summarizing the alternatives, she finds that “Contemporary feminists are united in their opposition to women’s oppression, but they differ not only in their views of how to combat that oppression, but even in their conception of what constitutes women’s oppression in contemporary society. Liberal feminists . . . believe that women are oppressed insofar as they suffer unjust discrimination; traditional Marxists believe that women are oppressed in their exclusion from public production; radical feminists see women’s oppression as consisting primarily in the universal male control of women’s sexual and procreative capacities; while socialist feminists characterize women’s oppression in terms of a revised version of the Marxist theory of alienation.”<sup>22</sup>

Jaggar offers a socialist feminist view that builds on various radical feminist insights. One example of the suggestive interpretations a combination of socialism and radical feminism can yield is the discussion of alienation. On the traditional Marxist view, “alienation is a condition specific to humans under capitalism,”<sup>23</sup> and women are alienated only to the extent that they enter into capitalist relations of production as wage laborers. In contrast, Jaggar argues that in contemporary society, “women are alienated in all aspects of their lives,”<sup>24</sup> and this alienation takes gender-specific forms. Women’s sexuality is developed for men’s enjoyment rather than for women’s; thus “women’s sexual situation resembles that of wage workers who are alienated from the process and product of their labor.”<sup>25</sup> Since men control the prevailing images and theories of the culture, women are led to accept “the male identification of [women’s] selves with their bodies.”<sup>26</sup> Women come to be alienated from one another as they are made to compete for the sexual attention of men. And women are alienated as mothers, as they are unable to control the conditions of motherhood. They cannot afford to support children alone, and they are forced to raise their children according to the standards of male “experts,” within the structures of patriarchal society, and with fathers who, instead of being parental coworkers with mothers, “function as agents imposing the standards of the larger society.”<sup>27</sup> The mother’s condition, Jaggar says, recalls Marx’s description of the work of the alienated wage laborer whose work “mortifies his body and ruins his mind.”<sup>28</sup> Finally, mascu-

22. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics*, p. 353.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 307.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 309.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 315.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 308.

26. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, p. 313.

linity and femininity are defined by society as contrasting forms. "To the extent that men and women conform to the definitions" Jaggar notes, "they are bound to be alienated from each other,"<sup>29</sup> in contemporary society, and to have incompatible interests: "men in maintaining their dominance and women in resisting it."<sup>30</sup> Thus, "both sexes are alienated from their humanity."<sup>31</sup>

Although building on Marxist theory, socialist feminists can be acerbic in their criticisms of traditional Marxism. Lydia Sargent offers this caricature of traditional Marxist strategy: "Workers at the point of production (read white working class males) will make the revolution led by revolutionary cadre of politicians (read middle class white males steeped in marxist economic theory). Women (mostly white) would keep the home fires burning during it, functioning as revolutionary nurturers/secretaries: typing, filing, phoning, feeding, healing, supporting, loving, and occasionally even participating on the front lines as quasi-revolutionary cheerleaders."<sup>32</sup> This strategy, Jaggar adds, "has a well-established record of failure."<sup>33</sup> And Marxists and feminists agree that the strategy of change engaged in will surely effect the outcome that results.

Capitalism, however, can even more easily be seen to be detrimental to most women, and incompatible with fundamental feminist values. Even liberal feminists must demand such substantial changes in standard capitalist practices and social structures as to make such practices and structures almost unrecognizable. Providing children with the adequate care and upbringing they need to become free, autonomous, equal persons in a society of non-sexist families and non-sexist institutions will require a thoroughgoing replacement or reinterpretation of individual self-interest as the primary motive of action, both in the workplace and elsewhere.

The most interesting discussions that can be anticipated in the coming period, in my view, will have to do with whether socialism is or is not a "necessary stage" on the road to a society feminists can accept. Socialist feminists will be inclined to think yes, while radical feminists will be inclined to think no, and liberal feminists will join one or the other tend-

29. *Ibid.*, p. 316.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. Lydia Sargent, *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), p. xiii.

33. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics*, p. 235.

ency. The issues will be not only the empirical ones of what “works,” or of what the connections between socialism and bureaucracy “must” be, or of whether bureaucracies will “inevitably” be dominated by men. They will also concern the goals of feminist efforts, and will reflect the conviction shared by feminists of all persuasions that the processes by which these goals are sought will have to be evaluated by feminist standards along with the goals. Interpretations of the experience of women will be essential.

Socialist feminists will not lose sight of the economic and social realities sometimes neglected by radical feminists. The latter will not lose sight of the genuine insights of feminists with more interest in, say, birthing practices, or attitudes toward menstruation, or witchcraft, or religious myth, than in Marxism or capitalism. Both are paying attention, as well, to the view that, as Jaggar says, “physical force plays a far larger part in controlling women than previously acknowledged.”<sup>34</sup> One study shows that at least 50% of the Midwestern marriages investigated involved some physical abuse of the wife. Other studies show that half the women in the U.S. suffer beating at least once, and usually more than once. Rape is frequent; if present trends continue, one out of three women in the U.S. will be sexually assaulted at some time in her life. As Jaggar notes, “whether or not she is actually assaulted, the knowledge that assault is a permanent possibility influences the life of every woman. . . . This fear restricts women’s areas of residence, their social and political activities and, of course, their study and work possibilities.”<sup>35</sup> Women have to devote a great deal of attention to avoiding behavior that will “provoke” men. And attitudes developed in response to physical power may have analogues in other contexts of power—which may, alas, be all the contexts that so far exist. Feminists are calling for new conceptualizations of power and of empowerment, and for new recommendations concerning the kinds of relations which ought to prevail between human beings.

Actual and threatened violence is of course only one of the ways in which men exercise domination. By now it is apparent that the domination of women is far deeper and more extensive than can be accounted for on any theories prior to distinctively feminist ones. As feminists try to understand this domination, they discover much about the role of images in the formulations of thoughts, about the connections between

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 93–94.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

emotional and rational components of thinking, about the structures through which some human beings exercise power over other human beings, and about how society might evolve into more harmonious and liberated forms. While a socialist focus on the economic realities which enter into this process may be necessary, so may a focus on the symbolic and communicative layers of society which do so also. Questions of what is base or primary and what is superstructure or derivative are wide open.

The transformation in thinking and feeling that is likely to result from the adoption of a feminist standpoint will almost surely be a much more collective endeavor than previous revolutions of thought have been. This is no accident. Instead of a male giant seen as almost single-handedly slaying the dragons of prior authority, or creating from the genius of his own mind a radically new theory, and instead of a hierarchically ordered "research team," there will probably be a cooperative enterprise, and one that will be recognized as cooperative, of feminist theorists working together, and working with those who are not theorists, to weave the new fabric. Feminist scholars are often aware that the styles with which they work are intentionally less possessive, less aggressive, more open, and more mutually supportive than are traditional styles.<sup>36</sup>

The personal costs are often high. Feminists are frequently denied institutional supports, as many academic departments hold feminist scholarship to be less than "solid," and not worthy of counting toward tenure and promotion. Feminists are also often subjected to personal emotional hostility, and they may be overwhelmed by the burdens of motherhood in a society which comes closer to punishing than to rewarding the work of mothering. The wider culture still often ignores even the most important feminist thought.<sup>37</sup> That television and the more popular journals prefer to pay attention to the flakier expressions of feminist thinking is not surprising, but this preference is often evident on

36. The first fully integrated and interdisciplinary basic textbook in women's studies was, for instance, collectively written by eight authors. See *Women's Realities, Women's Choices*, by the Hunter College Women's Studies Collective (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

37. Such recent classics as Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) and Susan Moller Okin's *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979) are by now known to some others than feminist scholars, but were originally largely unnoticed beyond quite specialized circles.

the part of journals which not only purport to be but are highly serious in other domains. Women, however, increasingly listen to each other.

Many women have offered emotional, intellectual, and material support to previous revolutions of thought and social structure. Their own feminist discoveries and advances have again and again been washed over by the tides of male-dominated cultures. For knowledge to approach its appropriate goals, a reconstruction of the methods by which it is sought will have to take place. The visibility of male dominance will have to be maintained as long as it exists, and the experience of women will have to be accorded as central a place in the pursuit of knowledge as the experience of men.

I am grateful to Carole Pateman and the Editors of *Philosophy & Public Affairs* for helpful comments.