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Source: *Signs*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Winter, 1997), pp. 341-365

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3175275>

Accessed: 26/03/2013 07:49

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# Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited

*Susan Hekman*

IN 1983, THE PUBLICATION of Nancy Hartsock's *Money, Sex, and Power* changed the landscape of feminist theory. The scope of the book alone ensures it a prominent place in feminist thought. It includes a comprehensive critique of positivism, an indictment of masculinist theories of power, and even a textual analysis of Greek mythology. The central concern of the book, however, and the source of its lasting influence, is Hartsock's epistemological and methodological argument. Her goal is to define the nature of the truth claims that feminists advance and to provide a methodological grounding that will validate those claims. The method she defines is the feminist standpoint. Borrowing heavily from Marx, yet adapting her insights to her specifically feminist ends, Hartsock claims that it is women's unique standpoint in society that provides the justification for the truth claims of feminism while also providing it with a method with which to analyze reality.

In the succeeding decade, feminist standpoint theory has become a staple of feminist theory. Nancy Hartsock's essay in Sandra Harding and Merrill Hintikka's pathbreaking book *Discovering Reality* (1983) brought the concept to a philosophical audience. In a number of influential publications, Dorothy Smith developed a sociological method from the "standpoint of women." Harding featured feminist standpoint theory in her two important books on science and feminism. Patricia Hill Collins articulated a specifically black feminist standpoint. But in the late 1980s and early 1990s criticisms of the position mounted, and fewer discussions of it were published. Today the concept occupies a much less prominent position. Particularly among younger feminist theorists, feminist standpoint theory is frequently regarded as a quaint relic of feminism's less sophisticated past. Several developments in the late 1980s have led to this declining influence. First, the inspiration for feminist standpoint theory, Marxism, has been discredited in both theory and practice. Second, feminist standpoint theory appears to be at odds with the issue that has

[Signs: *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1997, vol. 22, no. 2]  
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dominated feminist debate in the past decade: difference. Third, feminist standpoint theory appears to be opposed to two of the most significant influences in recent feminist theory: postmodernism and poststructuralism. The Marxist roots of the theory seem to contradict what many define as the antimaterialism of postmodernism. For all of these reasons, the conclusion that feminist standpoint theory should be discarded seems obvious.

I think this conclusion is premature, that it is a mistake to write off feminist standpoint theory too quickly. Feminist standpoint theory raises a central and unavoidable question for feminist theory: How do we justify the truth of the feminist claim that women have been and are oppressed? Feminist standpoint theory was initially formulated in the context of Marxist politics. But from the outset, feminist standpoint theorists have recognized that feminist politics demand a justification for the truth claims of feminist theory, that is, that feminist politics are necessarily epistemological. Throughout the theory's development, feminist standpoint theorists' quest for truth and politics has been shaped by two central understandings: that knowledge is situated and perspectival and that there are multiple standpoints from which knowledge is produced. As the theory has developed, feminist standpoint theorists have explored, first, how knowledge can be situated yet "true," and, second, how we can acknowledge difference without obviating the possibility of critique and thus a viable feminist politics. Feminist standpoint theorists have answered these questions in a variety of ways; many of these answers have been unsatisfactory; the theory has been frequently reformulated. In the course of their arguments, however, these theorists have made an indispensable contribution to feminist theory.

It is my contention that feminist standpoint theory represents the beginning of a paradigm shift in the concept of knowledge, a shift that is transforming not only feminist theory but also epistemology itself. What Lorraine Code (1991) calls a "new mapping of the epistemic domain" that characterizes feminist theory owes much to the articulation and development of feminist standpoint theory. Finally, I assert that this theory remains central to contemporary feminism because the questions it raises are crucial to the future development of feminist theory and politics. Recently there has been much discussion among feminists of the parameters of a "politics of difference." I believe that feminist standpoint theory has laid the groundwork for such a politics by initiating the discussion of situated knowledges.

### **I. Defining the feminist standpoint**

In an article originally published in *Quest* in 1975, Nancy Hartsock wrote: "At bottom feminism is a mode of analysis, a method of ap-

proaching life and politics, rather than a set of political conclusions about the oppression of women" (1981, 35). The power of feminist method, she asserts, grows out of the fact that it enables us to connect everyday life with the analysis of the social institutions that shape that life (36). This early article reveals the presupposition that defines her later formulation of the feminist standpoint: the belief that feminism, while necessarily political, at the same time must be centrally concerned with method, truth, and epistemology. Feminism, for Hartsock, is about truth claims and how we justify them. But at the very outset she refers to the issue that will complicate her search for truth in a feminist mode. She notes that the reality perceived by different segments of society is varied. Thus, she concludes, "Feminism as a mode of analysis leads us to respect experience and differences, to respect people enough to believe that they are in the best possible position to make their own revolution" (40).

For Hartsock, activity is epistemology: women and men create their own realities through their different activities and experiences. If this were the whole story, however, then both truth and reality would be multiple, even "relative," and Hartsock is very concerned to avoid this conclusion. When she presents her theory of the feminist standpoint in *Money, Sex, and Power* (1983c), this is the focus of her attention. She insists that "the concept of a standpoint rests on the fact that there are some perspectives on society from which, however well intentioned one may be, the real relations of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible" (117). Hartsock's goal in the book is to define the concept of a standpoint and apply it to the case of women. She outlines five criteria of a standpoint that she adapts from Marx's theory (118). Two potentially contradictory definitions of reality structure this discussion. First, in what today would be called a social constructionist argument, Hartsock asserts that material life structures and sets limits to an understanding of social relations. It follows that reality will be perceived differently as material situations differ. It also follows that the dominant (ruling) group in society will label its perspective as "real" and reject other definitions. Second, Hartsock insists that while the ruling group's perception of reality is "partial and perverse," that of the oppressed is not, that it exposes "real" relations among humans and is hence liberatory. Throughout her work Hartsock struggles with the relationship between these two definitions of reality. It constitutes a kind of fault line that runs through her articulation of the feminist standpoint. Although her formulation changes over the years, she continues to maintain both that reality is socially and materially constructed and that some perceptions of reality are partial, others true and liberatory.

Further aspects of feminist standpoint theory emerge in Hartsock's well-known article "The Feminist Standpoint" (1983b). In this article Hartsock states that a specifically feminist historical materialism "might

enable us to lay bare the laws of tendency which constitute the structure of patriarchy over time" (283). Her dualistic concept of reality structures this discussion as well. On the one hand, social constructionist themes recur throughout the argument: "I will sketch out a kind of ideal type of the social relations and world view characteristic of male and female activity in order to explore the epistemology contained in the institutionalized sexual division of labor" (289). The feminist standpoint "expresses female experience at a particular time and place, located within a particular set of social relations" (303). Quickly following this, however, is the statement that the feminist standpoint allows us to "go beneath the surface of appearances to reveal the real but concealed social relations" (304). Her thesis is that "women's lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy" (284).

In this article Hartsock introduces an approach that will become closely identified with standpoint theory: object-relations theory. The introduction of this theory highlights the tension inherent in her concept of reality—in a sense widening the fault line in that concept. In her discussion Hartsock appeals to object-relations theory to explain the difference between the male and female experiences of the world (1983b, 296). Bringing object-relations theory to bear on her Marxist assumptions, Hartsock argues that if material life structures consciousness, then women's relationally defined existence structures a life in which dichotomies are foreign and abstract masculinity is exposed as partial and perverse (298–99). Implicit in Hartsock's discussion is the assumption that object-relations theory is an appropriate and useful addition to feminist standpoint theory, not a major departure. In the context of her theory it seems to fit nicely with the Marxist thesis that reality is socially constructed and supplies a needed gendered component to that theory.

The incorporation of object-relations theory, however, represents a major theoretical departure in the development of standpoint theory. Feminist standpoint theory's identification with object-relations theory has changed the focus of the approach in two respects. First, object-relations theory, unlike Marxist theory, lacks a distinction between socially constructed and "true" reality. As feminist theorists in the 1980s discovered, object-relations theory effectively jettisons the concept of objective reality. Some advocates of feminist standpoint theory see this as an advantage, others as a disadvantage. But it becomes a problem that must be continually negotiated. Second, the incorporation of object-relations theory further problematizes the issue of difference. What was merely a troubling issue in feminist standpoint theory is a major stumbling block in object-relations theory. In object-relations theory the opposition between *the* experience of men and *the* experience of women is the centerpiece of the theory. The difficulty of theorizing differences among women and the va-

riety of women's experiences that characterizes object-relations theory now becomes a major problem in feminist standpoint theory as well.<sup>1</sup>

In their perceptive discussion of the evolution of poststructuralist and postmodern thought, Rosalind Coward and John Ellis (1977) argue that the groundwork for the discursive concept of the subject that has become the new paradigm of subjectivity is already present in Marx's historically constituted subject. I would like to argue a similar thesis for the early definitions of feminist standpoint theory, particularly that of Hartsock. To establish this thesis I interpret Hartsock's criteria for a standpoint from the perspective of the work of one of the most prominent representatives of what I call the new paradigm of knowledge—Michel Foucault. Hartsock (1983c, 118) argues, first, that material life structures and sets limits to the understanding of social relations; second, that the ruling class structures the material relations of a society and hence its definition of the "real"; and, third, that the vision available to oppressed groups must be achieved through struggle. All of this translates nicely into Foucault's theory. First, his theories of sexuality, bio-power, the carceral society, and the evolution of the Western subject provide detailed analyses of how material/social life structures consciousness. Second, one of Foucault's central aims is to define how and to what extent hegemonic discourses (what Hartsock calls the ideology of the ruling class) define "reality" in any given society. Third, he is centrally concerned with defining how subjugated knowledges (the vision of the oppressed) can be articulated (Foucault 1980, 82).

But here the similarity ends. Hartsock further claims that the ruling group's vision is partial and perverse and that the vision of the oppressed exposes the "real" relations among humans. Foucault would counter that all visions are "partial and perverse" in the sense that all knowledge is necessarily from some perspective; we must speak from somewhere and that somewhere is constitutive of our knowledge. Most important, he would insist that the vision of the oppressed is itself another discourse, not the apprehension of "true" reality. It is undoubtedly a counterdiscourse, a discourse that seeks to break the hold of the hegemonic discourse, but it is no closer to "reality" than the discourse it exposes. What it may be closer to, however, is a definition of a less repressive society.

It is my contention that the deconstruction of the concept of "true" reality is already implicit in Hartsock's definition of the feminist stand-

<sup>1</sup> For an early discussion of the problem of difference, see Hartsock 1983a. She argues that in our society some empirical differences are reified into an ontologically significant "Difference" by the ruling class. She asserts that feminists should reject this construction of "Difference" and, rather, use empirical differences as sources of creativity and power. I find this to be an insightful and useful discussion of difference that has been unfortunately neglected in current discussions.

point, just as the deconstruction of the transcendent subject was implicit in Marx's theory of the social construction of consciousness. If material life structures consciousness, if the different experiences of different groups create different realities, then this must hold for the oppressed as well as the oppressor. Hartsock might reply that the oppressed's conception of reality is true because it is based on a correct perception of material reality while that of the oppressor is false because it does not. But such an argument begs the question of how a correct perception of material reality is achieved. Ultimately, it must presuppose this reality as a given, as the standard by which truth and falsity are defined. Even in her early formulations of feminist standpoint theory Hartsock is defensive about the accuracy of the oppressed/women's conception of reality. The incorporation of object-relations theory makes her defense of this position even more difficult. If, as object-relations theory claims, our relations with others define our perceptions, then selecting one of these perceptions as "real" is instantly suspect. But Hartsock also realizes the centrality of this point. Unless women's standpoint can be shown to be truer, a reflection of reality itself, why bother with feminist analysis at all?

One of Hartsock's major claims is that while the discourse of the ruling class is ideological, that of the oppressed is not: it reflects the concrete reality of their lives. An important aspect of this claim is her assertion that the feminist standpoint is achieved, not given. The nature of their oppression is not obvious to all women; it is only through feminist analysis that the feminist standpoint can be articulated. What this comes down to is that although the feminist standpoint is discursively constituted, the material reality of women's lives on which it is based is not. This important distinction is lost in much subsequent feminist standpoint theory. The belief that the standpoint(s) of women resists the discursive constitution that defines all "partial and perverse" perceptions of reality is a major theme of feminist standpoint theorists in the 1980s; it structures these theorists' efforts to define a distinctive method for feminist analysis.

The clearest example of this belief is the work of Dorothy Smith. In her influential essay "Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology" (1987b), Smith posits a contrast between the categories of sociology and the everyday life (what phenomenologists call the lifeworld) of women. She argues that the categories of sociology and sociological method embody what Hartsock calls "abstract masculinity." For the sociologist, objectivity is defined as the separation between knower and known, removal from the situatedness of knowledge. This method and these categories, she argues, obviate the experience of women, an experience that is always situated, relational, and engaged. Two conclusions follow from this. First, the lived reality of women's lives is absent from the domain of sociology; it is quite literally invisible to the sociologist.



Second, the woman sociologist experiences a bifurcated consciousness: the abstract, conceptual world she encounters as a sociologist versus her lived reality as a woman (1987b, 90). The goal of Smith's work is to define a "reorganized sociology" that would solve both of these problems by foregrounding actual lived experiences.

Smith outlines this reorganized sociology, what she calls a sociology for women, in *The Everyday World as Problematic* (1987a). She defines the world of sociology as a *conceptual* world divorced from the lived, actual world of everyday experience. The world of women, in contrast, is "material and local," the world as we actually experience it. These definitions lead Smith to her definition of "women's standpoint" as the point outside textually mediated discourses in the actuality of everyday lives (1987a, 107). The standpoint of women, she claims, is related to Marx's method but constitutes an improvement on it because it is "anchored" in the everyday world (142). This method constitutes the "Copernican shift in sociology" that Smith is seeking (1979, 183).

Smith is quite clear about what she is attempting to do in her work; whether she is successful is another matter. She posits an absolute dichotomy between abstract concepts on the one hand and lived reality on the other, indicts sociology for inhabiting the conceptual world of abstractions, and advocates a move to the other side of the dichotomy. One of the curious aspects of Smith's account is that, although it is inspired by phenomenological method, it nevertheless departs from the phenomenologist's understanding of the nature of concept formation and the role of concepts in sociological analysis. Alfred Schutz (1967), whose theory of the lifeworld is the origin of Smith's approach, claims, like Smith, that sociological method must be rooted in the lived actuality of the social actors' reality (the lifeworld) and that the lived experiences of social actors must form the basis of sociological method and concepts. But, unlike Smith, Schutz argues, first, that the social actors' world is constituted by their concepts and, second, that the sociologist also employs concepts in order to study that lifeworld. Schutz claims that the sociology of the lifeworld that he advocates is more "adequate" than positivist sociology because, unlike that sociology, it is rooted in the concepts of social actors. But he also makes it clear that his method is itself a complex conceptual apparatus with standards of truth and accuracy, that is, a discursive formation.

At times Smith seems to acknowledge that she is, in fact, advocating a conceptual shift and not a shift from concepts to reality. She asserts: "I am not suggesting, of course, that sociology can be done without knowing how to do it and that we approach our work with a naive consciousness" (1979, 174). In an explicit reference to Schutz, she claims that "as we evolve a discourse among women, it crystallizes the issues and



concerns of those of us who got there first and have defined the types of statements, the relevances, the phenomenal universe, and the conventions that give it a social form independent of the particular individuals who are active in it" (1987a, 221). But these are isolated references. The overall theme of her work is to deny that she is either studying a conceptual reality (the world of the social actors) or fashioning a discourse and advocating a method. Her constantly reiterated thesis is that her approach is superior to "abstract sociology" because it is rooted in "an actual material setting, an actual local and particular place in the world" (1979, 181). What she refuses to acknowledge is that that "reality" is also discursively constituted. To do so would be to abandon the neat dichotomy between abstract concepts and lived reality on which her approach rests.

Other early formulations of feminist standpoint theory reflect this dichotomy between concepts and reality, specifically, the abstract world of men and the concrete world of women. Hilary Rose conceptualizes the dichotomy in terms of the material reality of women's labor and abstract masculinist science (1983, 1986); Iris Young calls for a "feminist historical materialism" rooted in "real social relations" (1980, 184–85); Mary O'Brien looks to the reproductive process to provide the material basis for her social theory (1981); and Alison Jaggar appeals to an explicitly Marxist understanding of the epistemological advantages of the oppressed view of reality (1983). Even Jane Flax, who later repudiates any naive conception of reality, argues that we need ways of thinking that can do justice to our experience (1983).

Despite their significant differences, all of these accounts share the conviction that the feminist standpoint is rooted in a "reality" that is the opposite of the abstract conceptual world inhabited by men, particularly the men of the ruling class, and that in this reality lies the truth of the human condition. There are three problems with this formulation. First, it assumes that the dichotomy between concepts and reality can be resolved by embracing reality and rejecting concepts. This strategy is self-defeating. The two elements of the dichotomy are interdependent; to embrace one is to acknowledge the epistemological validity of both sides of the dichotomy, not to solve the problem it poses. Second, it denies that the lifeworld is, like every other human activity, discursively constituted. It is a discourse distinct from that of abstract science, but a discourse nonetheless.<sup>2</sup> Third, as both Schutz and Max Weber clearly realized, one can argue that sociological analysis *should* begin with the actors' concepts and that any other approach will miss the object of its study—the lifeworld—but that this requires a specific *argument*. Opposing concepts to reality is not an argument and, furthermore, entails an epistemological fallacy.

<sup>2</sup> See Grant 1993 for a similar critique.

## II. The challenge of difference: Redefining the feminist standpoint

The original formulations of feminist standpoint theory rest on two assumptions: that all knowledge is located and situated, and that one location, that of the standpoint of women, is privileged because it provides a vantage point that reveals the truth of social reality. It is my thesis that the deconstruction of this second assumption is implicit in the first and that as the theory developed the problematic nature of the second assumption came to the forefront. Another way of putting this is that a new paradigm of knowledge was implicit in the first formulations of feminist standpoint theory, a definition of knowledge as situated and perspectival, but that these first formulations retained elements of the paradigm it was replacing.

Epistemologists have devoted much attention to the concept of "reality" in the past decade, offering powerful arguments against the notion of a given, preconceptual reality that grounds knowledge. The "linguistic turn" of twentieth-century philosophy and the influence of hermeneutics, postmodernism, and poststructuralism have all contributed to the present skepticism about "reality." These speculations are directly relevant to the evolution of feminist standpoint theory, an approach initially grounded in just such a concept of reality. But it was another discussion, the discussion of difference within the feminist community, that stimulated a reassessment of feminist standpoint theory in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Originally, feminist standpoint theorists claimed that the standpoint of women offers a privileged vantage point for knowledge. But if the differences among women are taken seriously and we accept the conclusion that women occupy many different standpoints and thus inhabit many realities, this thesis must be reexamined. The current reevaluation of feminist standpoint theory is an attempt to reconstitute the theory from the perspective of difference. These discussions focus on two questions that are central not only to this approach but also to feminist theory itself. First, if, as we must, we acknowledge that there are many realities that women inhabit, how does this affect the status of the truth claims that feminists advance? Second, if we abandon a single axis of analysis, *the* standpoint of women, and instead try to accommodate the multiple, potentially infinite standpoints of diverse women, do we not also lose the analytic force of our argument? Or, in other words, how many axes can our arguments encompass before they slip into hopeless confusion?<sup>3</sup> The political implications of these questions, furthermore, inform both of these arguments. If we abandon the monolithic concept of "woman," what are the possibilities of a cohesive feminist politics?

The concern both to accommodate difference and preserve the analytic and political force of feminist theory, specifically feminist standpoint

<sup>3</sup> See Bordo 1990 for a cogent statement of this problem.

theory, is prominent in the recent work of Nancy Hartsock. It is obvious that Hartsock cares very deeply about these issues. She is painfully aware of the evils of racism, particularly within the women's movement. She is also passionately committed to feminist social criticism as a force for social change and is determined not to let forces such as postmodernism erode that potential. These concerns emerge forcefully in a 1987 article, "Rethinking Modernism." The point of departure for Hartsock's argument is the differences among women. She asserts that we need to develop an understanding of difference by creating a politics in which previously marginalized groups can name themselves and participate in defining the terms that structure their world (1987, 189). Central to Hartsock's argument is the claim that unless we provide a systematic understanding of the world, we will be unable to change it. The object of her polemic in this and several other recent articles is postmodernism. In the past decade the issues of difference and multiplicity have come to be closely identified with postmodernism. Hartsock wants to reject this identification. She wants to valorize difference, to claim that the differences among women are significant both theoretically and practically, while at the same time rejecting postmodernism on the grounds that it obviates the possibility of the systemic knowledge that is necessary for social change.

Hartsock's efforts both to valorize difference and to retain at least some notion of reality and truth, of the "way the world is," produce some odd results. In "Rethinking Modernism," she significantly alters the basic thesis of feminist standpoint theory by asserting that although women are not a unitary group, white, ruling-class, Eurocentric men are (1987, 192). The ruling class, now referred to as the "center," is defined as unitary, while those on the periphery, the "others," are defined as heterogeneous. Hartsock's argument is that we must create a politics that lets the "others" into the center, a center that, she claims, will "obviously" look different when occupied by women and men of color (201). Hartsock's solution raises some troubling questions. It posits a center that is heterogeneous rather than homogeneous, but this suggests that it may not be a "center" at all. We might also ask whether, if the "others" have moved into the center, this move effectively eliminates the periphery. We can, I think, assume that Hartsock would not endorse a politics in which any group was marginalized. But it is difficult to retain the concept of "center," as she does, without a corresponding concept of periphery.<sup>4</sup>

All of these questions could be quite easily eliminated by abandoning the center/periphery dichotomy. But Hartsock is adamantly opposed to this move. Those of us who have been constituted as "other," she states,

<sup>4</sup> Bar On 1993 offers an excellent account of the epistemological problems entailed by the claim to epistemic privilege and that of the center/margin dichotomy.

must insist on a world in which we are at the center rather than the periphery. The postmoderns, she claims, who want to eliminate the center, thereby deny us our right of self-definition. She also claims that they deny us the right to speak the truth about our subjugation, obviating the very possibility of knowledge and truth. Informing all of Hartsock's recent work is a fundamental dichotomy: either we have systemic knowledge of the way the world is or we have no knowledge, no truth, and no politics. For Hartsock, postmodernism represents the second term of this dichotomy (1990). I could argue, against Hartsock, that truth, knowledge, and politics are possible without an absolute grounding and that some postmodern writers make this argument quite persuasively. But I would like to examine Hartsock's position from a different angle. Her fears for the future of feminist analysis are not unfounded. If, as she realizes we must, feminism abandons *the* feminist standpoint and, with it, *the* correct view of reality, then we are in danger of abandoning the whole point of feminist analysis and politics: revealing the oppression of "women" and arguing for a less repressive society. If there are multiple feminist standpoints, then there must be multiple truths and multiple realities. This is a difficult position for those who want to change the world according to a new image.

I would argue that Hartsock has defined the problem correctly but is pursuing a solution in the wrong direction. She wants to embrace the "situated knowledges" that Haraway and others have theorized, but she cannot accept the logical consequence of this position: that no perspective/standpoint is epistemologically privileged. She wants to retain a notion of privileged knowledge that can accommodate both diversity and locatedness. But her attempts to achieve this goal are not successful. "Situated knowledges," she claims, are "located in a particular time and place. They are therefore partial. They do not see everything from nowhere but they do see some things from somewhere." Borrowing postmodern terminology, she refers to the knowledges produced from the various subject positions of different women as "the epistemologies of these marked subjectivities." She then goes on to argue: "The struggles they represent and express, if made self-conscious, can go beyond efforts at survival to recognize the centrality of systemic power relations" (1989-90, 28-30). What this formulation requires is a sustained argument for how such systemic knowledge is possible. But such an argument is not forthcoming.

Other feminist standpoint theorists have also attempted to deal with the challenge of difference and its implications for the truth claims of the feminist standpoint. Dorothy Smith (1990a, 1990b) gets around the problem of difference by definitional fiat: she defines "women's actually lived experience" as a category that encompasses the diversity of women's

lives and activities. She then opposes this category to the abstract concepts of sociological analysis, contrasting the “ideological” categories of the sociologist to “what actually happened”—the “primary narrative” (1990a, 157). But the method that she derives from this dichotomy is flawed and incomplete. First, despite the unmistakable influence of Schutz’s work, Smith does not offer any argument for why the located knowledge of women is superior to the abstract knowledge of the sociologist; this is assumed to be obvious. Second, despite frequent references to Foucault and his theory of discourse, Smith refuses to identify the women’s standpoint as a knowledge-producing discursive formation. She offers a detailed discussion of how the sociologist’s discursive formations constitute the instruments of state power. At times she comes close to admitting that the discourse that women have developed about their lived reality, a discourse that includes concepts such as rape, sexual harassment, and battery, is also constituted. But ultimately she shies away from this conclusion. Like Hartsock, she continues to privilege the standpoint of women because she assumes that without such privileging the knowledge women claim loses its necessary grounding.

Patricia Hill Collins has a particular stake in theorizing difference: she wants to account for the unique standpoint of black women. She defines her problem in the context of the issue of difference: her goal, she states, is to articulate the unique aspects of black women’s standpoint without denying the differences among black women. She tackles this problem by claiming, following Hartsock, that the black feminist standpoint she articulates, although rooted in everyday experiences, is constructed by the theorists who reflect on that experience. One of the goals of her own theory is to define the common experiences of black women that constitute their unique standpoint (1989; 1990, 208–21). Collins deals with the difficult issue of the truth status of the black feminist standpoint in an ambiguous way. In an early article she claims “objectivity” for the “outsider within” status of black women (1986, 15). In her more recent work, however, Collins retreats from this claim. In *Black Feminist Thought* she appeals to Donna Haraway’s concept of standpoint as the most valid and concludes that “a Black women’s standpoint is only one angle of vision,” a “partial perspective” (1990, 234). But despite her endorsement of Haraway’s position, Collins is unwilling to embrace the full implications of situated knowledge. She rejects the claim that the perspective of the oppressed yields “absolute truth,” but she also rejects “relativism,” which she defines as the claim that all visions are equal (1990, 235). Her final position holds out some hope for a redefined concept of objectivity. She asserts that black feminists who develop knowledge claims that can accommodate both black feminist epistemology and white masculinist epistemology “may have found a route to the elusive goal of generating so-

called objective generalizations that can stand as universal truth." The ideas that are validated by different standpoints, she concludes, produce "the most objective truths" (1989, 773).

Other than Haraway herself, the only prominent feminist standpoint theorist to embrace fully what Collins labels the "relativist" position is Sara Ruddick. Citing Wittgenstein as her intellectual influence, Ruddick claims that feminism challenges the universality imperative of masculine thinking (1989, 128). In her discussion of "Maternal Thinking as a Feminist Standpoint," Ruddick appeals to both Hartsock and Foucault, apparently seeing no contradiction between Hartsock's definition of the feminist standpoint and Foucault's theory of subjugated knowledges (130). She concludes, "Although I count myself among standpoint theorists, I do not take the final step that some appear to take of claiming for one standpoint a truth that is exhaustive and absolute. . . . Although I envision a world organized by the values of caring labor, I cannot identify the grounds, reason, or god that would legitimate that vision" (135).<sup>5</sup>

Ruddick's solution to the problem of difference and privilege would not satisfy many feminist theorists. Like Collins and Hartsock, few feminist theorists are content to define the feminist standpoint as simply a "different voice" (or voices), one perspective among many. The difficulties of redefining feminist standpoint theory in light of the epistemological issues raised by difference and the challenges to "reality" are most fully explored in the work of Sandra Harding. In her influential *The Science Question in Feminism* (1986) Harding defines three feminist epistemologies: feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory, and feminist postmodernism. Although sympathetic to standpoint epistemologies, Harding is persuaded that there cannot be *one* feminist standpoint; the situations of women are too diverse. Yet she also sees problems with the postmodern alternative. On her reading, postmodernism posits fractured identities, an apolitical approach, and the rejection of any kind of knowledge that results in an absolute relativism. In this book, Harding avoids choosing one epistemology over another by arguing for the necessary instability of feminist theories. Coherent theories in an incoherent world, she concludes, are either silly, uninteresting, or oppressive (1986, 164).

In *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* (1991), Harding appears to reverse her position by fashioning a coherent theory for feminist science. The theory she offers, however, is a blend of diverse elements and thus continues the eclectic spirit of her earlier book. The aim of the book, she states, is not to resolve all tensions and contradictions between feminism and Western science but to "advance more useful ways for us to think

<sup>5</sup> For other recent accounts of standpoint theory, see Winant 1987; Aptheker 1989; Stanley and Wise 1990; and Campbell 1994.



about and plan their future encounters" (xi). Harding defines her position as "a postmodernist standpoint approach that is nevertheless committed to rethinking and revising some important notions from conventional metatheories of science" (49). In the course of developing her approach, Harding offers both a critique and a redefinition of standpoint theory, developing "the logic of the standpoint theory in ways that more vigorously pull it away from its modernist origins and more clearly enable it to advance some postmodernist goals" (106). For Harding, standpoint theory is attractive because it offers an alternative to a crucial and seemingly irresolvable dichotomy facing feminist theory: essentialism versus relativism. Her rejection of *one* feminist standpoint avoids the danger of essentialism; relativism is defeated by her claim that we must insist on an objective location—women's lives—for the place where research should begin (134–42). But as her theory unfolds it becomes clear that Harding does not so much deconstruct this dichotomy as locate her position along the continuum it creates.

The ubiquitous issue of relativism leads Harding to her most significant contribution to standpoint theory: "strong objectivity." She begins by noting that "although diversity, pluralism, relativism, and difference have their valuable and political uses, embracing them resolves the political-scientific-epistemological conflict to almost no one's satisfaction" (140). Standpoint epistemologists, she argues, embrace historical-cultural-sociological relativism while rejecting judgmental or epistemological relativism (142). The "strong objectivity" she advocates recognizes the social situatedness of all knowledge but also requires "a critical evaluation to determine which social situations tend to generate the most objective knowledge claims" (142). It is significant that Harding follows traditional standpoint epistemology in assuming that the higher the level of oppression, the more objective the account: "It should be clear that if it is beneficial to start research, scholarship and theory in white women's situations, then we should be able to learn even more about the social and natural orders if we start from the situations of women in devalued and oppressed races, classes and cultures" (179–80).

Harding argues for keeping the concept of objectivity despite its historical associations with masculinist science because of its "glorious intellectual history" (160). The concept of objectivity she advocates departs from the masculinist definition in that it does not lay claim to "true beliefs" or "transhistorical privilege." But it also retains one important aspect of that definition: "Starting research in women's lives leads to socially constructed claims that are less false—less partial and distorted—than are the (also socially constructed) claims that result if one starts from the lives of men in the dominant groups" (185). The "less false stories" Harding advocates mediate between transhistorical universals on the one hand



and absolute relativism on the other, forming a kind of middle ground between the polarities of this dichotomy. Harding intends this middle ground to be a critique of postmodern and poststructuralist positions. The postmodernists, Harding declares, assume that giving up on the goal of telling one true story about reality entails giving up on telling less false stories (187), a position that is unlikely to satisfy feminists' desire to know "how the world is" (304).

Once more, I could argue that Harding, like Hartsock, misinterprets the postmodern definition of knowledge and that at least one "postmodern" writer, Foucault, is very interested in telling stories that will result in a less oppressive social order. But, again, I will take a different tack in my criticism. Harding's reassessment of standpoint theory contains two serious oversights. First, she argues that starting research from the reality of women's lives, preferably those of women who are also oppressed by race and class, will lead to a more objective account of social reality. Like Hartsock, Harding offers no argument as to why this is the case. Particularly from the vantage point of the 1990s, it is not enough simply to assume that Marx got it right on such a crucial point. And, like Smith, Harding does not acknowledge that "the reality of women's lives" is itself a socially constructed discursive formation. It is a discourse that has been constructed, at least in part, by feminist standpoint theorists who define it as the ground of their method. The fact that it is closely tied to the social actors' own concepts and provides a counter to the hegemonic discourse of masculinist science makes it no less a discourse. Feminist standpoint theory can and, I argue, should be defined as a counterhegemonic discourse that works to destabilize hegemonic discourse. But this can be achieved without denying that it is a discourse or according it epistemological privilege.

Second, all of Harding's talk of "less false stories," "less partial and perverse accounts," and more "objective" research necessarily presupposes a shared discourse—a metanarrative, even—that establishes standards by which these judgments can be validated. Yet the centerpiece of Harding's critique of masculinist science is the denial of the possibility of such a metanarrative. She seems to assume that when feminist scholars offer their "less false stories" they will be universally acknowledged as such. This assumption fails both practically and theoretically. It seems abundantly obvious that within the masculinist discourse of science the accounts of feminist standpoint theorists have not been judged "better" than conventional scientific accounts. On the contrary, the scientific establishment has devoted much effort to discrediting feminist claims. Comparative statements such as those Harding advances require shared standards of judgment; no such standards bridge the gap between feminist and masculinist science. It is ironic that Harding's polemic against

the metanarrative of masculinist science ultimately relies on the reconstruction of a similar standard for its validity.

### III. Truths and methods: Toward a new paradigm

When feminist standpoint theory emerged in the early 1980s, it appeared to be exactly what the feminist movement needed: a method for naming the oppression of women grounded in the truth of women's lives. Standpoint theory constituted a challenge to the masculinist definition of truth and method embodied in modern Western science and epistemology. It established an alternative vision of truth and, with it, hope for a less repressive society. But the theoretical tensions implicit in the theory soon came to the forefront. The contradiction between social constructionist and absolutist conceptions of truth that characterizes Marx's theory were translated into feminist standpoint theory. As the theory developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s questions of how feminists should theorize differences among women and the status of feminism's truth claims became impossible to ignore—and equally impossible to answer within the confines of the original theory.

I argue that although it was conceived as an alternative vision of truth and reality, this vision does not constitute the theoretical legacy of feminist standpoint theory. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century a paradigm shift has been under way in epistemology, a movement from an absolutist, subject-centered conception of truth to a conception of truth as situated, perspectival, and discursive. It is my contention, first, that feminism was and continues to be at the forefront of this paradigm shift and, second, that feminist standpoint theory has contributed an important dimension to that shift within feminist theory. Because of the dualistic conception of truth and reality that characterized its original formulation, feminist standpoint theory has had the effect of problematizing absolutes and universals, focusing attention instead on the situated, local, and communal constitution of knowledge.

Another way of putting this is that in attempting to interpret feminist standpoint theory, we should look to Kuhn, not Marx. Feminist standpoint theory is part of an emerging paradigm of knowledge and knowledge production that constitutes an epistemological break with modernism. Feminist standpoint theory defines knowledge as particular rather than universal; it jettisons the neutral observer of modernist epistemology; it defines subjects as constructed by relational forces rather than as transcendent. As feminist standpoint theory has developed, the original tension between social construction and universal truth has dissolved. But it is significant that this has been accomplished, not by privileging one side of the dichotomy, but by deconstructing the dichotomy itself. The

new paradigm of knowledge of which feminist standpoint theory is a part involves rejecting the definition of knowledge and truth as either universal or relative in favor of a conception of all knowledge as situated and discursive.

This new paradigm of knowledge necessarily defines a new approach to politics. Modernist epistemology defines politics in terms of the dichotomies that inform it. Thus for the modernist, politics must be grounded in absolute, universal principles and enacted by political agents defined as universal subjects. Under the new paradigm, politics is defined as a local and situated activity undertaken by discursively constituted subjects. Political resistance, furthermore, is defined as challenging the hegemonic discourse that writes a particular script for a certain category of subjects. Resistance is effected by employing other discursive formations to oppose that script, not by appealing to universal subjectivity or absolute principles.

As a way of illustrating my thesis that a new paradigm is emerging, it is useful to look at the three epistemic positions that Harding defines in her 1986 book. In the course of a decade the distinctions between these categories have nearly collapsed. Feminist empiricism has been radically redefined by epistemologists such as Lynn Hankinson Nelson and Helen Longino. Nelson (1990) provides a redefinition of empiricism from a feminist perspective that conforms to what I call the new paradigm of knowledge. Relying on the work of W. V. Quine, Nelson defines an empiricism in which, as she puts it, the world matters, but scientific communities produce knowledge. Her principal thesis is that it is not individuals but communities who know. Nelson's empiricism involves evidence, but it is evidence defined and constrained by public standards, not data observed from an Archimedean point by a neutral observer.<sup>6</sup> Longino offers a similar argument in *Science as Social Knowledge* (1990). She defines her position as "contextual empiricism," a view of science in which scientific knowledge is socially created and objectivity is a function of community practices. It is significant that both Nelson and Longino reject what they call "relativism," but they do so by appealing to widely shared but communal—that is, constructed—standards of evidence.

Harding herself has been instrumental in blurring the distinction between feminist standpoint theory and feminist postmodernism with her advocacy of "a postmodernist standpoint approach." The principal theme of feminist standpoint theory, that knowledge is situated in the material lives of social actors, has become the definitive characteristic not only of feminists influenced by postmodernism but of feminist theory as a whole. The major distinction between postmodernism and standpoint theory, the

<sup>6</sup> See Tuana 1991 for a compatible analysis of Nelson.

claim of privileged knowledge and one true reality, has been almost entirely abandoned. Both Hartsock and Harding radically modify the claim to privileged knowledge. Ruddick abandons any claim to privileged knowledge at all. Flax, an early proponent of the feminist standpoint, has enthusiastically embraced postmodernism and the multiple truths it entails. The notion of a feminist standpoint that is truer than previous (male) ones, she now claims, rests on problematic and unexamined assumptions (1990, 56).<sup>7</sup> What these theorists are effecting is what Lorraine Code calls “remapping the epistemic terrain into numerous fluid conversations” (1991, 309). What is significant about this remapping, however, is that for all of these theorists, defining reality as socially constructed and multiple does not obviate but, rather, facilitates critical analysis.

The feminist theorist who has done the most to define what I am calling the new paradigm of truth and method is Donna Haraway. Her famous essay “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” even though it does not mention feminist standpoint theory, can be read as an attempt to refashion that theory in light of the challenge to privileged reality. Haraway asks, What would another political myth for socialist feminism look like? What kind of politics can embrace fractured selves and still be effective and socialist feminist? (1990, 199). Implicit in these questions is the assumption that the “myth” of socialist feminism—feminist standpoint theory—cannot be sustained and that feminists must look for another. What is also implicit is that, for Haraway, what we must look for is not “truth” and “reality” but, rather, another story. “Women’s experience,” she claims, “is a fiction and a fact of the most crucial, political kind. Liberation rests on the construction of consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility” (191).

In an equally famous article, “Situated Knowledges,” Haraway relates her position directly to feminist standpoint theory: “There is no single feminist standpoint because our maps require too many dimensions for that metaphor to ground our visions. But the feminist standpoint theorists’ goal of an epistemology and politics of engaged, accountable positioning remains eminently potent. The goal is better accounts of the world, that is, ‘science’” (1988, 590). In this passage Haraway defines what I see as the central problem facing feminist theory today: given multiple standpoints, the social construction of “reality,” and the necessity of an engaged political position, how can we talk about “better accounts of the world,” “less false stories”? And, indeed, how can we talk about accounts of the world at all if the multiplicity of standpoints is, quite literally, endless? In the past several years, a number of feminist theorists have tried to answer these questions by articulating what might be called

<sup>7</sup> See also Hirschmann 1992; and Bar On 1993.

“quasi-universals.” Martha Nussbaum (1992) and Susan Moller Okin (1994) have argued for a revival of the notion of basic human needs and a common humanity on which to ground ethics and feminist theory. They argue, as another theorist puts it, that “successful coalitions and political action require a substantial concept of common humanity grounded in an explicit notion of human nature” (Kay 1994, 21). These authors argue for what they call a “rich” and historically situated concept of human nature. But implicit in these arguments is the assumption that we need a concept of how the world *really* is, a metanarrative that provides standards for cross-cultural judgments, if we are to fashion a feminist, or any kind of, politics.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest another answer to these questions. The problem of constructing a viable method for feminist analysis, a method that also provides the basis for a feminist politics, is twofold. First, if we take the multiplicity of feminist standpoints to its logical conclusion, coherent analysis becomes impossible because we have too many axes of analysis. Ultimately, every woman is unique; if we analyze each in her uniqueness, systemic analysis is obviated. So is feminist politics: we lose the ability even to speak for certain categories of women. Second, if we acknowledge multiple realities, multiple standpoints, how do we discriminate among them? How do we select the perspectives and standpoints that are useful to us, that will help us achieve our theoretical and practical goals, or are we necessarily condemned to the “absolute relativism” that some critics fear?

In discussing the problems of developing a method for feminist analysis, Jane Flax argues, “Any feminist standpoint will necessarily be partial. Thinking about women may illuminate some aspects of a society that have been previously suppressed by the dominant view. But none of us can speak for ‘woman’ because no such person exists” (1990, 56). The problem here, as Flax realizes, is not to replace the absolutism implicit in the claim to *the* feminist standpoint with a relativistic stance but to deconstruct the dichotomy, to articulate a method and, hence, a politics, grounded in a different epistemology. I suggest that the methodological tool that meets these requirements, a tool that fits the methodological and epistemological needs of feminism at this juncture, can be found in a source rarely employed in feminist discussions: Weber’s methodology and, specifically, his concept of the ideal type. Weber’s methodology has many advantages for the current debate over feminist methodology. Most fundamental is that his approach presupposes that social analysis is always undertaken by situated, engaged agents who live in a discursively constituted world. Although a range of contemporary theorists—most notably Foucault—share this presumption, Weber’s position supplies three elements that these contemporary approaches lack. First, Weber provides a

detailed analysis of the conceptual tool that can effect this analysis: the ideal type. Second, he provides extensive examples of how this concept operates in empirical analysis. Third, he develops an elaborate justification for the partial and circumscribed approach he advocates.

At the root of Weber's concept of the ideal type is his claim that no aspect of social reality can be apprehended without presuppositions: "As soon as we attempt to reflect about the way in which life confronts us in immediate concrete situations, it presents an infinite multiplicity of successively and coexistently emerging and disappearing events" (1949, 72). Weber argues that we bring order to this multiplicity by relying on values and, specifically, cultural values: "Order is brought into this chaos only on the condition that in every case only a *part* of concrete reality is interesting and *significant* to us, because only it is related to the *cultural values* with which we approach reality" (78; emphasis in original). The cultural values of a society, thus, impose an initial ordering of the multiplicity of possible meanings that confront social actors. But Weber argues that values also structure the meaning apprehension of the social scientist. It is the investigator's individual value choice that guides the selection of a subject of analysis: "Without the investigator's evaluative ideas, there would be no principle of selection of subject-matter and no meaningful knowledge of the concrete reality" (82). The result of the investigator's choice is the conceptual tool that Weber calls the "ideal type": "An ideal type is formed by the one-sided *accentuation* of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent *concrete individual phenomena*, which are arranged according to one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified *analytic* construct" (90; emphasis in original).<sup>8</sup>

For Weber, ideal types are neither hypotheses nor descriptions of reality but "yardsticks" to which reality can be compared; they are neither historical reality nor "true reality" but are purely limiting concepts or "utopias"; the purpose of ideal types is to provide a means of comparison with concrete reality in order to reveal the significance of that reality (90–93). This aspect of Weber's concept is crucial. We cannot justify ideal types by claiming that they accurately reproduce social reality. No concept can do that—all positions are partial and perspectival. But neither can we justify ideal types on the grounds that they uncover the universal truth of social reality, that they have the status of the universal laws of the natural sciences. Universal laws, Weber claims, can reveal nothing about what social scientists want to explain: the meaning and significance of social reality. Unlike universal laws, ideal types cannot be refuted by contradictory cases; the discovery of contradictory cases reveals the irrele-

<sup>8</sup> See Hekman 1983, 1995.



vance of the concept to the problem at hand, not its “error” (1975, 190). The only justification we can appeal to, Weber concludes, is significance: an ideal type is valid if it helps us understand social reality.

Weber’s concept of the ideal type can be useful in explaining the epistemological status of feminist research. First, it makes explicit that no perspective is total, all are partial; ideal types are, in his words, one-sided. Knowledge is always situated in a particular locality, the particular standpoint of these particular women. Second, it specifies that the subject of any analysis is dictated by the interest of the investigator. It is the values of feminist researchers and their political goals that have motivated them to investigate issues like wife battery, rape, incest, and even the origins of patriarchy itself. In Weber’s terminology, what feminist social science has accomplished is to create a set of ideal types that allow us to “see” a different social world. Carole Pateman’s “sexual contract” (1988), Arlie Hochschild’s “second shift” (1989), and Karen Sacks’s “centerwoman” (1988) are but a few examples of this conceptual set. Third, the ideal type rests on the assumption that what the social researcher studies, the activities and concepts of social actors, is already constituted; it is, in postmodern jargon, a discursive formation that constitutes “reality” for those who participate in it. This is a crucial point for the critique of many versions of feminist standpoint theory. Hartsock, Smith, and even, occasionally, Harding make the mistake of assuming that women’s daily lives constitute a given reality that provides the necessary grounding for feminist theory. Weber’s concept emphasizes that, like all other aspects of social life, women’s daily life is a reality constituted by shared concepts.

The epistemology of Weber’s ideal type also provides an answer to the charge of “absolute relativism” that many feminist theorists have raised. The problem is this: How do we convince nonfeminists that the ideal types of feminist analysis, concepts informed by the values of feminist researchers, are useful and insightful? How do we construct an argument for *these* ideal types rather than for the infinite variety of concepts that is possible? Weber argues that there is no metanarrative to which we can appeal to justify our value choices. Thus he would argue that the values that lead feminists to investigate the workings of patriarchy cannot be shown to be “objectively” correct. But Weber does have an answer to this problem. Although he argues that values are necessarily irreconcilable, he maintains that the logic of analysis itself rests on universal grounds (1949, 58). His argument is that although we cannot agree that we should be studying a particular topic—this is a value choice—we can agree on whether the analysis is logical. I would not offer quite so optimistic an answer. Weber’s neat separation between facts and values is unfeasible. But this need not be cause for despair. Wittgenstein (1958) offers an argument that can be useful here. He asserts that our society is held together



by certain basic values and assumptions that constitute what he calls “a form of life”; one of these assumptions is a very broadly based and loosely defined concept of what constitutes a persuasive argument. Because of the long-standing domination of patriarchy, these assumptions are masculinist; rationality, as many feminists have argued, is gendered masculine. But it does not follow that feminists cannot use these masculinist assumptions for their own purposes and, in so doing, transform them. We may not be able to persuade nonfeminists that the institutions of patriarchy are evil and should be dismantled. But we may be, and indeed have been, able to persuade them, through the use of skillful arguments, that sexual harassment, marital rape, and wife battery should be defined as crimes.

I am not claiming that the ideal type solves all the epistemological and methodological problems of feminist theory. I am claiming that it is highly appropriate to some of the problems that feminist theory is currently confronting, problems raised in large part by the development and evolution of feminist standpoint theory. The ideal type emphasizes that there is no metanarrative, either normative or methodological, to which we can appeal. Nor is there a truth about social totality that is waiting to be discovered. But this does not mean that the systemic analysis of the institutions of patriarchy is necessarily precluded. Weber’s ideal type makes it clear that social analysis is a necessarily political activity, undertaken by agents who live in a world constituted by language and, hence, values. We engage in specific analyses because we are committed to certain values. These values dictate that certain analyses are trivial and others are important; all are not equal.<sup>9</sup> It is our values, then, that save us from the “absolute relativism” that the defenders of modernism so feared. Feminists cannot prove their values to be the objectively correct ones. On this point the postmoderns are correct: we live in a world devoid of a normative metanarrative. But we can offer persuasive arguments in defense of our values and the politics they entail. Some of these arguments will be persuasive: in the past decades feminists have been successful in beginning to change the parameters of patriarchal economic and political institutions. Other arguments will not be persuasive.<sup>10</sup> But by advancing both persuasive and unpersuasive arguments, feminists are, in the process, changing the norms of what constitutes an argument.

I think that recasting feminist standpoint theory in terms of the epistemology of the ideal type can make a significant contribution to contemporary feminist theory. Such a recasting would involve defining the feminist standpoint as situated and engaged knowledge, as a place from

<sup>9</sup> Flax 1993 makes a similar argument.

<sup>10</sup> MacKinnon’s antipornography argument (1987) is a notable example.

which feminists can articulate a counterhegemonic discourse and argue for a less repressive society. Women speak from multiple standpoints, producing multiple knowledges. But this does not prevent women from coming together to work for specific political goals.<sup>11</sup> Feminists in the twentieth century have done precisely this and have, as a consequence, changed the language game of politics. And, ultimately, this is the point of feminist theory.

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<sup>11</sup> In a similar argument, Judith Grant asserts that political similarities can be cultivated to help feminists speak across suppressed differences (1993, 123).

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