Realism, Deconstruction and the Feminist Standpoint

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Feminism has historically claimed that women have common interests arising out of common experience, interests of which they can and should become aware. When this awareness is reached, collective action becomes likely which can bring about desirable changes in women’s social situation. Over the last two decades of feminist theorising, this ‘obvious’ truth has been increasingly challenged. “The divisions between different groups of women, as well as between practising feminists, make it impossible to assert a commonality based on shared membership in a universal category “woman”’ (Moore, 1994:79). White Western feminists were unable to ignore the believable accusation that they—we—have unawaresly continued the exclusion and silencing of particular groups of women by treating our own as the ‘default position’ (Spelman 1990:13). Where most feminist theory had been realist, without usually spelling it out, many now took realism itself to be tainted. The project of discovering what united women by researching the details and mechanisms of their worldwide subordination was presented as a totalising will to power, racist in its denial of diversity and attempt to impose Western notions of selfhood on women of other cultures (Mohanty, 1992, Haraway, 1991:137). Poststructuralist feminists advocated unmasking and interrogating the ‘binary oppositions’ of Western thought. This undertaking was hardly new, although its precursors were rarely acknowledged (c.f. Epstein, 1988, Birke, 1986). But under the thoroughgoing deconstruction now advocated, ‘the once unitary category woman began to fracture’ (Canning, 1994:371). The question then became whether it was possible to reject the collective subject of feminism, and yet retain the feminist political project itself (e.g. Alcoff 1988, Benhabib et al. 1995, Fraser and Nicholson 1988, Hooks 1990:28m, Sawicki 1991:101).

Meanwhile, outside the academy, ‘woman’ remains a word to conjure with, and women continue to act on the basis of perceived common interests. In September 1995 dissatisfaction with the current position of women brought approximately 36,000 people to Beijing, the vast majority of whom were women.
Government teams and members of accredited non-governmental organisations (NGOs) came from all over the world to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, which met in the city, while in nearby Huairou huge numbers of activists, NGO workers and their campaigning members gathered in the NGO Forum on Women. Both gatherings implicitly took a realist philosophical position. Almost all discussions assumed that ‘woman’ is an intelligible category with a clear referent, despite the diversity between women. They assumed the reality both of the social structures which disadvantage women, and of the sex differences in terms of which these are justified—in other words, that these are irreducible to concepts. The discussions came nearest to poststructuralist critiques of ‘modernist’ feminism in debates for and against the idea of *universal* rights for women (as opposed to culturally relative ones). But even these discussions did not so much reject the universality of the category ‘woman’, as question the extent to which membership generates common interests across cultural and other differences. For poststructuralists, this moment in the attempt to build an international women’s movement is at best a tactic and at worst a serious mistake: the point is to ‘pursue the decentering of the subject and its universalising epistemic strategies’ (Butler, 1990: 118), to ‘expose the roots of our needs for imposing order and structure’ (Flax, 1987:643), to leave open the question of ‘what women are’ (Elam, 1994:27).

Historically feminism’s claim that unity between women is either real or realisable has been based on an epistemology that sees women’s experiences as yielding knowledge of common interests (cf the slogan of the Forum ‘Look at the World through Women’s Eyes’). A classic formulation is ‘feminist standpoint theory’ (henceforth FST), which argues that women are epistemologically privileged by virtue of their social positioning. In this paper I discuss several versions of this position in the light of critiques from both realists and poststructuralists. Both criticise early versions of FST for their empiricism and their failure to address the relationship between experience and knowledge. Since realists distinguish between ontology and epistemology, for them FST’s notion of being *better* positioned to know is at least intelligible. For poststructuralists this cannot be the case, since knowledge is either impossible or multiple, and the same applies to the objects of knowledge (there are none, or there is one for each discourse or for each knower). Both realists and poststructuralists have criticised FST’s tendency to overhomogenise or fragment the category of women, but realists who think in terms of ontological depth are not obliged to throw the category out. Realists need not, and should not, follow poststructuralist critics to the conclusion that the vast mobilisation in Beijing rested on a collective illusion, or at best on a worthy but ‘groundless’ solidarity. Lastly, the most devastating deconstruction of all, that of sexual difference, clarifies this concept and its social workings but fails to reduce its referent to a discursive construction. The notion of women’s epistemological privilege cannot be sustained, but other key aspects of FST remain a tenable basis for feminist politics.
Feminist thought is necessarily concerned with the relationship between social positioning, experience, knowledge, interests and action. In the social sciences, feminist scholars have used women's (and men's) accounts of their experiences as data to challenge findings and methods which naturalise women's social role (e.g. Sperling, 1991), exclude women from measures of stratification (Abbott and Sapsford, 1987, provide a useful summary), or which treat the household as a ‘black box’, ignoring questions of power and resource distribution within it (e.g. Pahl, 1989). To some extent they have been able to do this by wielding critical tools already to hand, for which no specifically feminist justification was required. But in general, to establish the legitimacy of its various claims to knowledge, feminism has had to make and justify epistemological claims. This has frequently been done by arguing for the superiority of subjugated knowledges, in particular knowledge based on the experiences of women in male dominated societies. This view has always had to deal with two immediate counter-arguments: firstly, women’s experiences are not the same, and secondly, even when they seem to be the same, women draw different conclusions from them (i.e. what women claim to know is not the same). Most obviously, the majority of women are not feminists.

1. Women are diverse. They are socially positioned on all sorts of other dimensions that affect their lives (Ramazanoglu, 1989:145). As a result, their ways of understanding their own situation and their perspectives on the world are diverse. Critics question whether there is sufficient commonality on which to base claims of common experiences, perspectives and interests (whether ‘objective’ or as ‘perceived’). For instance, as slaves, the ancestors of today's African American women were differently positioned from white women's forebears: they ‘could not transmit a name, they could not be wives, they were outside the system of marriage exchange . . . while women were not legally or symbolically fully human; slaves were not legally or symbolically human at all’ (Haraway, 1990:145). They had, of course, no rights over their children. Black women in the US are still, Collins argues, differently positioned from the white women whose houses they clean and whose children they care for (Collins, 1991:6). The argument is that these forms of oppression are not something tacked on to the (common) oppression of women, but sufficiently different as to require addressing in their own right rather than treatment as a version of women’s oppression.

2. Even when according to most descriptions women are similarly positioned on other dimensions, they may experience similar life events differently and draw different conclusions from them. There is no automatic movement from ‘similar’ ways of being to similar ways of knowing, or from experience to knowledge. Cases which a midwife might characterise similarly as ‘successful’
breastfeeding may be experienced quite differently by two white middle class 30 year old Welshwomen. For one, breastfeeding was a pleasure, a satisfying means of emotional nurturing and connection with her baby, for the other it was a desirable contribution to the infant's health but frequently uncomfortable or restricting. Either might be feminist or anti-feminist, and might adduce her experience as evidence for the rightness of her political position.

These objections to feminist empiricism have recently been given a deconstructive guise, but in their simpler forms they were leveled at second wave feminism by its contemporaries. The women's liberation movement countered these objections by spelling out two assumptions. These were: (1) women share a history of subordination and oppression which gives rise to common experiences, despite divisions in terms of ‘race’, class, religion, sexual orientation and ethnicity. (2) Dominant and mystifying patriarchal ideology obscures the truth of gendered power relations from both women and men. This, together with the contingencies of personal history which only allow some the resources to draw aside the veil, accounts for the differences in women's knowledge.

Thus, feminist empiricism, as it informed the WLM, was always partial. The belief in women’s experience as the basis of knowledge was tempered by an implicit notion of false consciousness that gave certain sorts of mediated experience privileged status. The practice of consciousness raising (CR) offered a way of working on experiences so as to produce feminist knowledge. In Melucci's terms, CR groups were ‘submerged networks’ which challenge the dominant codes upon which social relationships are founded, developing different ways of seeing and describing the world (Mueller, 1994). Despite reiterated appeals to experience, in practice the WLM held that knowledge of social relations could not be ‘read off’ women’s experience, but required collective work, telling and discussing their stories in unstructured, dialogic groups. Experiences that had been thought of as individual and idiosyncratic came to be seen as oppressive, as a function of power relations; suitable cases for political remedy.

FEMINIST STANDPOINT THEORY

Feminist standpoint theory (FST) is a feminist articulation of the epistemology implicit in CR, based on the 1970s work of Dorothy Smith and others (e.g. Smith, 1974). Hartsock's classic version of FST understood it as 'a specifically feminist historical materialism'. She took as her starting point ‘Marx’s proposal that a correct vision of class society is available from only one of the two major class positions in capitalist society’ (1983:284). She developed a parallel argument that the position of women as an oppressed group gives them a different and more accurate view of the social world, and makes them inclined (if given half
a chance) to choose or to generate more adequate conceptual schemes to
describe it. FST was developed over the next decade, by Harding (1991), Smith
(1987, 1990), Jaggar (1983), Collins (1991), and others (see Longino 1993,
Hekman 1997 and Harding 1997, for useful reviews).
Smith speaks of ‘women’s standpoint’ rather than ‘the feminist standpoint’,
and denies that standpoint theorists ever were a coherent group. She now sees
the common feature of these approaches as their undermining of ‘social science’s
embedding of the standpoint of white men as hidden agent and subject’
(1997:394). The important thing is to take women’s experiences as a starting
point both for feminist politics and for sociology: ‘a method of speaking that is
not preappropriated by the discourses of the relations of ruling’ (ibid). Her
earlier work describes the bifurcation of the world into domestic and public
spheres. The concepts through which both worlds are understood, and through
which they are governed, transform experiences into abstract administrative
constructs (such as ‘mental illness’). This creates ‘two modes of knowing and
experiencing and doing, one located in the body and in the space which it
occupies and moves into . . . the other which passes beyond it’ (Smith, 1987b:
89). Although both men and women operate with both sorts of consciousness
and in both spheres, typically and normatively women ‘provide for the logistics
of men’s bodily existence’ (op. cit. 90)

The more successful women are in mediating the world of concrete particulars so that men
do not have to become engaged with . . . that world as a condition to their abstract activities,
the more complete man’s absorption . . . the more total women’s subservience . . . and also
the more complete the dichotomy between the two worlds . . . (ibid).

For professional women, according to Smith, ‘the bifurcation of consciousness
becomes . . . a daily chasm which is to be crossed’ from the caring and cleaning
to the abstractions of the office and ‘even if we don’t have that as a direct
contingency in our lives’ it operates as a defining possibility (ibid). Smith makes
no claim to epistemic privilege for women: rather, she argues that women’s
social position means much of their tacit knowledge is unarticulated, unacknow-
ledged, or denied within social science (1997:397).

Hartsock also emphasises the sensuous nature of women’s work, but for her
this constitutes a source of knowledge. In Western capitalist societies, wage
workers—men and women—do the manual tasks that produce profit and ensure
survival and reproduction, but women of all classes are allocated the additional
tasks of producing use values in the home and the production of people through
reproduction and care. If doing affects consciousness, there should be some
similarities between the perspectives of women in general and manual workers
of either sex—but there will also be a difference. For Hartsock, women’s
subordination and their epistemological advantage are alike predicated upon
the sexual division of labour. Women are subordinated, because in capitalism
Caroline New

exchange value is taken as the epitome of value itself, and women’s unpaid domestic labour is an unacknowledged prerequisite of the production process. Women at home are excluded from the arena of class struggle over the relations of production—the source of power in capitalism. Women are epistemologically advantaged, she believes, because the production of use values requires and facilitates a more realistic relational construction of self, opposition to dualisms, and awareness of connectedness between people and nature.

...the unity of mental and manual labour, and the directly sensuous nature of much of women’s work leads to a more profound unity of...social and natural worlds, than is experienced by the male worker in capitalism. This unity grows from the fact that women’s bodies, unlike men’s can be themselves instruments of production...That this is indeed women’s experience is documented in both the theory and practice of the contemporary women’s movement... (Hartsock, 1983:299).

The reference to women’s bodies points to the uneasy balancing of early FST between Marxist sociology of knowledge and radical feminist essentialism. Hartsock also refers to the ‘boundary challenges in female physiology’ that allegedly make women feel close to nature (1983:294). (Strangely, menstruation is supposed to bring women closer to nature, but erection and ejaculation—not to mention eating, excretion and other shared experiences—are never mentioned as having any such compensating effects for men.) Although in this early formulation of FST Hartsock gestures to radical feminist ‘ways of knowing’ from the body, in general FST argues that women’s perspective results from their social position, taking its stand on the distinction between sex and gender that poststructuralist theorists have recently challenged (e.g. Haraway 1991).

Hartsock tries to pre-empt objections that women’s lives are too diverse to result in a common perspective. She does this by a double movement, first demarcating a limited field (women in Western class societies), and then universalising within it.

I propose to lay aside the important difference among women across race and class boundaries and instead search for central commonalities...I adopt this strategy with some reluctance, since it contains the danger of making invisible the experience of lesbians or women of colour (Hartsock, 1983:290).

But as Hartsock well knows, even within Western class societies women’s experiences are not homogenous, nor do they result in a common standpoint. A feminist standpoint, Hartsock writes, is more than a women’s standpoint—if there were such a thing. A feminist standpoint is not given by experience, but achieved via political struggle and scientific work. But here Hartsock has made difficulties for herself, for just as Marx could take a proletarian class standpoint without a proletarian class position, the feminist standpoint must be achievable by men (cf. Harding, 1986:655). What then becomes of women’s life experience as a
source of knowledge? This dilemma is one common to all versions of FST. As soon as standpoint theorists distance themselves from subjectivist forms of empiricism, they have to specify just how women’s life experiences can ground feminist knowledge. If this knowledge is available to men, women’s epistemological advantage disappears.

Hartsock’s solution is to suggest that ‘women as a sex are institutionally responsible for producing both goods and human beings, and all women are forced to become the kinds of people who can do both’ (Hartsock 1983:291). Drawing on Chodorow’s heady mix of sociology and object relations theory, Hartsock shifts the explanatory weight from ‘experience’ and ‘activities’ to psychic structures. Whatever actually happens to women in their adult lives, the asymmetrical arrangement of childcare ensures they develop personalities which fit them for the hegemonic form of the sexual division of labour (Chodorow 1978, Eichenbaum & Orbach 1987). Whatever they actually do in terms of work and living arrangements, women are therefore inclined to see things as if they were socially positioned in the ways women ‘should’ be. Thus all women share to some extent the perspective which will, in certain circumstances, bring them to a feminist standpoint.

However, this ‘solution’ is as problematic as the dilemma it is called on to overcome. Hartsock wanted to argue that women’s lives were similar, and therefore they tend to have a similar perspective. Faced with the objection that women’s lives are not always the same, she looks for common psychological attributes—but now runs the risk, with Chodorow, of overhomogenising women (Sayers, 1986:67, Epstein, 1988:77, Hekman, 1997). There is nothing wrong with theorising gendered subjectivity in psychological terms, but it puts the onus on Hartsock to specify the circumstances in which women’s lives/personalities will or will not incline them to take a feminist standpoint, and the mechanisms influencing that outcome.

**FST Responds to Its Critics**

In its early versions, FST was both welcomed and criticised. Holmwood points out the irony in the fact that the felt inadequacy of Marxist theory, in particular its gender blindness, gave rise to the need for feminist analyses which were vulnerable to analogous critiques (Holmwood, 1995:418–9). Like Marxism, FST has been criticised for its determinism and its reification—here, of woman as a collective historic actor. Part of its difficulty came from the limitations of the analogy. That the view from below is fuller and more trustworthy may be intuitively plausible, but it is a hard position to defend without an equivalent of class struggle as the motor of history, eventually leading to the revelation of the truth of social relations and the vindication of science.
Alison Jaggar attempts to provide such a motor: suffering. Mystification has a limited lifespan, for ‘the pervasiveness, intensity and relentlessness of their suffering constantly push oppressed groups towards a realisation that something is wrong with the prevailing social order’ (1983:370). Their pain motivates them to a critique which represents their interests. This critique is also better knowledge, ‘more impartial than that of the ruling class and also more comprehensive’ (ibid). This knowledge, though, is not given by daily experience, but by theoretical and political work—‘simply to be a woman . . . is not sufficient to guarantee a clear understanding of the world as it appears from the standpoint of women. . .’ (op. cit. p. 371). Whereas Marx argued that as capitalism developed, its contradictions became increasingly visible to wage labourers, Jaggar is merely asserting that suffering motivates a feminist critique, without identifying the social and political preconditions for the work involved in producing one. In any case, the questions about women’s group consciousness which she is addressing themselves come from a realist position. The most stringent criticisms of FST come from elsewhere, and reject the entire basis of its epistemology.

FST is criticised

(1) for its realism. Flax, an ex-supporter of FST, attacks it for assuming ‘that reality has a structure that perfect reason . . . can discover’ and is ‘“out there” waiting for our representation’ (Flax, 1987:642). Similarly Hekman, in a recent review, argues that FST always rested on two assumptions, that knowledge is perspectival, and that one perspective is better because it provides a more truthful view of social relations (1997:349). Hekman argues that ‘the deconstruction of the second assumption is implicit in the first’ (ibid), and that all knowledge is discursively constituted.

(2) for seeing knowledge as arising spontaneously from experience, as long as no vested interests are involved (a criticism made by realists as well as poststructuralists). In some formulations, standpoint theorists such as Smith and Hartsock seem to counterpose experiential knowledge to conceptual knowledge (Smith, 1974, but see Smith 1997).

(3) for its claim of epistemological privilege. Flax argues that this assumes ‘that the oppressed are not in fundamental ways damaged by their social experience . . . [but] have a privileged (and not just different) relation and ability to comprehend’ social relations (ibid).

(4) for viewing women as a unified category, with common experiences and interests, rather than a divided group. Thus Flax criticises FST for presupposing ‘a category of beings who are fundamentally like each other by virtue of their sex [and who], unlike men, can be free of determination from their own participation in relations of domination. . . ’ (Flax, 1987:642). In this section I show how some standpoint theorists have partially accepted and responded to the first three criticisms, before moving on in the next section to consider the fourth criticism under the guise of the deconstruction of ‘woman’. In the final section I offer a more robust defence of FST’s realism than its current proponents seem willing to risk.

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Early standpoint theorists knew ‘experience’ was a tricky concept, used to cover both life events influenced by social positioning, and their interpretation by the experiencing subject. It seemed to slip around, sometimes acting as a cause (of knowledge), sometimes incorporating knowledge. In response to criticism standpoint theorists polarised. Harding substituted the notion of ‘women’s lives’, as providing crucial information about social relations on the one hand, and an interest in using it on the other (1991). Collins, Jaggar and others developed a related view we might call ‘convergence realism’, in which different groups have privileged access to (insiders’ knowledge of) an aspect of social relations (Collins 1991, Jaggar 1983). Stanley and Wise, coming from ethnomethodology rather than poststructuralism, held on to a phenomenological definition of experience and readily accepted its relativist implications (1983, 1990, 1993).

For Stanley and Wise women—like anyone else—are the experts on what happens to them, and we therefore cannot discriminate between different women’s experiences as more or less valid routes to knowledge. ‘[F]eminism . . . means accepting the essential validity of other people’s experiences’ (1993:22). Early versions of standpoint theory silenced lesbians and black feminists, claim Stanley and Wise (1990:33), who insist ‘on the existence of feminist standpoints’ in the plural and reject ‘the disguised hegemonic claims of some forms of feminism’ (op. cit. p. 47), by which I think they mean feminism which still aim at knowledge of social relations. For them, experience could only give rise to knowledges rather than to any singular ‘better’ knowledge. The trouble with this view is that it refuses to distinguish ontology and epistemology, so that experience is indistinguishable from knowledge.

Stanley and Wise accept that groups who are similarly socially positioned, such as black lesbians, may in some respects see the world in similar ways. This is particularly likely when these groups are actual communities. However, there is no way of judging whether this knowledge is better. To assume that the view of the subjugated is more accurate would oblige us to decide between the views of different subjugated groups according to how oppressed they are.

Our view is that there are no foundational grounds for judging the a priori superiority of the epistemologies of the oppressed, nor of any one group of the oppressed, in relation to the production of ‘knowledge’ . . . other than by comparing and judging the ontological bases of these epistemologies (1993:228).

It would be ethically wrong, Stanley and Wise assert, to set up a hierarchy of the oppressed and assume that the heavier the oppression, the better the knowledge it yields. And if we cannot do that, nor can we claim epistemological privilege for the feminist standpoint over the standpoints of the oppressor. However, it is acceptable to prefer (on what they call ‘ontological’ grounds) the standpoint that ‘better fits with a proponent’s experience of living, or being or understanding’ (ibid). The feminist standpoint becomes the appropriate point of
view for your way of life, and the very possibility of knowledge is thrown out along with the epistemological privilege of the oppressed.

Stanley and Wise get themselves into this unattractive spot by their wilful confusion of epistemology and ontology, which they describe as ‘merely different terms for the same thing’ (1993:226). Where they do distinguish, they mean by ‘ontology’ ‘experiential aspects of being’ such as lesbians being constrained to dissemble. By ‘epistemology’ they seem to mean ‘ways of knowing’, that is, ways of gaining the knowledge a particular way of life requires (such as of when it is safe to be ‘out’) together with the paths to knowledge that the way of life makes available and acceptable. Thus they collapse ontology into actual being: all that exists are experiences and our constructions of them. No wonder each form of being has its corresponding epistemology, related in a ‘perfect union’ (ibid, p. 226).

Stanley and Wise are equivocal about social reality. It exists but only by virtue of social constructions, including the construction of it as having objective existence above and beyond competing constructions and interpretations of it (1993:9), which seems to imply that society is not only concept dependent, but consists entirely of concepts (cf. Bhaskar, 1989:134). Yet Stanley and Wise reject the deconstructionist proposal that the binaries women/men be replaced by a ‘more fluid conceptual organisation’, arguing that we must retain the category ‘woman’ for ‘as long as women . . . are in any sense unequal, exploited or oppressed in relation to men’. Change at the level of texts would be inadequate to overcome such oppression (ibid, p. 205). This implies the reality and material force of social relations as practices, and it also implies the possibility of better or worse accounts of these. Similarly, in their remarks on feminist research, Stanley and Wise seem to go beyond the idea of knowledge as the immediate effect of experience—unsurprisingly, since such a restriction would surely put researchers out of business. Their 1983 formulation described women’s experiences as ‘a previously untapped source of knowledge about what it is to be a woman, what the social world looks like to women, how it is constructed and negotiated by women’ (1983:120). This is a simple hermeneutic conception of social science. But in 1993 they assert that

no opinion, belief or other construction . . . no matter from whom this derives, should be taken as a representation of ‘reality’ but rather treated as a motivated construction or version to be subject to critical feminists analytical inquiry (ibid, p. 200).

This formulation implies the possibility of correcting or improving actors’ own accounts. But how could we do this, without invoking either some notion of privilege or the idea of a social world irreducible to (though not independent of) ‘competing constructions’? Overall, Stanley and Wise are committed to judgmental relativism, to a merely Rortean ‘preference’ for feminism, and although their interactionist micro-sociology differs from poststructuralisms in some important respects, it is like them in undermining the feminist project.
Some critics believe Western feminism needs undermining. Mohanty examines Morgan’s 1984 text *Sisterhood is Global*, which has had worldwide distribution and ‘proclaims itself the anthology of the international women’s movement’ (Mohanty, 1992:78). She argues that any notion of universal sisterhood which ignores relations of domination between groups of women is ‘predicated on the erasure of the history and effects of contemporary imperialism’ (op. cit. p. 79). By placing women outside world history in order to insist on their commonalities, Morgan is actually denying them their real agency. In a similar vein, Clough describes FST as ‘part of Western rationalisation and its privileging of white, property, heterosexual masculinity’ by its focus on white middle class Western women (1994:82). Can FST encompass diversity?

If a standpoint results from commonality, the diversity within each identity group should split it into a multiplicity of standpoints, ultimately individual. The claim to epistemological privilege would reduce to solipsism. Patricia Hill Collins avoids this by tying epistemologies to actual social relations within and between communities. She argues that African American women have special opportunities for knowledge as a result of their long-standing ghettoisation in service occupations, which made them outsiders within the very families of their oppressors. African American communities, and Black women within them, have developed particular ways of gathering and assessing knowledge, and interests in doing so. To survive, and to live as well as possible, it has been essential to understand the dynamics of race, gender and class. It has made sense to trust reports of personal experience, rather than statistics gathered by unknown and dubious agents, and to judge the credibility of people offering such reports in terms of an ethic of caring and accountability. For good historical reasons knowledge of the concrete is more valued than abstractions, and dialogue is used to assess knowledge claims (Collins, 1991:206–219). Like Stanley and Wise, Collins see epistemology as arising within particular social contexts. Unlike them, she does distinguish between ontology and epistemology, and is prepared to recognise levels of, and different types of knowledge. The taken for granted everyday knowledge which this ‘Afrocentric epistemology’ can yield (of, for instance, strategies to deal with whites) has to be worked on by Black women intellectuals (in the widest sense) to become specialised, usable socio-political knowledge: an Afrocentric feminist standpoint.

Why Black women? Collins seriously considers the idea that Black feminist thought is a political perspective that could be held by white men. She denies any automatic or necessary relationship between being a Black woman and a producer of Black feminist thought. Nevertheless, Black women are more likely to use the everyday knowledge of African American communities as a political resource, because they have the opportunity and the interest in doing so. Ideas cannot be ‘evaluated in isolation from the groups that create them’ (op. cit. p. 21). Feminist standpoints are not merely codified sets of beliefs; they are also sets of principles for changing the world that emerge from struggles to do...
Caroline New

so. ‘Black women intellectuals provide unique leadership for Black women’s empowerment and resistance . . . Black feminist thought cannot challenge race, gender and class oppression without empowering African American women’ (op. cit. p. 34). In Harding’s words:

knowledge emerges for the oppressed only through the struggles they wage against their oppressors. It is through feminist struggles against male domination that women’s experience can be made to yield up a truer (or less false) image of social reality than that available only from the perspective of the social experience of men of the ruling classes and races (1987:185).

Nevertheless, Collins is unwilling to claim that these ways of knowing and opportunities for knowledge give Black feminists a privileged view in any general sense.

The overarching matrix of domination houses multiple groups, each with varying experiences with penalty and privilege that produce corresponding partial perspectives . . . No one group possesses the theory or methodology that allows it to discover the absolute ‘truth’ (1991:234).

Subjugated knowledges can be key to social change, not because they are the whole truth, but because they include information and ways of thinking which dominant groups have a vested interest in suppressing. The standpoints of the oppressed are partial, and they overlap. ‘Those ideas that are validated as true by . . . [various oppressed groups] become the most ‘objective’ truths’ (ibid, p. 236). Recognising the partiality of one’s own knowledge and considering that of others through dialogue is the way forward to a human standpoint. Collins takes the rather Habermassian view that human beings have common interests discoverable through dialogue once ‘existing power inequities among groups’ are addressed (ibid, 237). Jaggar has a similar sort of convergence epistemology. She maintains that until the historic (though partial) exclusion of working class women and black women from intellectual work is ended, and political and theoretical work is carried out by all sorts of women and brought together in a co-operative process, the feminist standpoint cannot be achieved. The feminist standpoint is simply a more adequate representation of reality, and the test of the adequacy of that knowledge is its usefulness in the process of social change (ibid, 386). Despite some gestures to poststructuralism in Collins’ work, both thinkers remain realists—and humanists.

Sandra Harding has been a key thinker in the feminist current arguing for a ‘successor science’ that recognises the socially situated nature of scientific knowledge (1991:152). This project is unambiguously realist. Harding argues that instead of the social sciences taking physics as a model, the natural sciences should abandon their pretensions to neutrality, and recognize that all knowledge is socially situated. Knowledge that acknowledges its social roots is more objective and reliable. Whereas I mean by ‘feminist empiricism’ the belief that knowledge emerges directly from women’s experience, Harding means the attempt to
reform science by ridding it of androcentric bias. In contrast, FST puts knowledge in social and historical context, and is thus an important part of a ‘successor science’.

Harding has taken poststructuralist critiques of FST extremely seriously. She worries, for example, about whether the rejection of judgmental relativism commits her to a ‘mirror’ theory of representation (1991:158), and about whether it is possible to speak of ‘women’s experience’ without essentialism. In response to Flax’s attack on the ‘Enlightenment idea’ that ‘reality has a structure that perfect reason . . . can discover’ (Flax, 1986:642) Harding argues that reason is, in her book, not abstract and disembodied but socially located, and substitutes the term ‘less false’ for ‘true’ (Harding, 1991:185). On the whole, though, she has not responded by modifying her version of FST, but by embracing the contradiction between feminist postmodernism and the successor science project. She characterises FST (along with ‘feminist empiricism’) as a ‘transitional epistemology’ (1987:187), and recognises and welcomes—in true poststructuralist mode—the ‘instability of the analytical categories of feminist theory’ (1986).

In *Enlightened Women*, Alison Assiter makes a similar compromise with poststructuralism. On the one hand, she defends realism against the ‘flight from universals’, but on the other, she argues for a ‘situated view of knowledge that has some realist features and some perspectival features’ (1996:78). Like Collins, Assiter identifies communities as knowing subjects. An interesting feature of her work is the argument that epistemic communities ‘may not share any form of social interaction. They may never communicate with each other . . . they form a collectivity by virtue of the values that they share and through their collective interest in providing evidence for the truth of their views’ (op. cit. p. 82). Where Harding sees better knowledge emerging from the bringing together of multiple perspectives, especially those historically silenced, Assiter claims ‘it is not the experiences of any particular group that reveals the gaps and particularities in any viewpoint, but rather . . . the emancipatory values from which the group speaks’ (1996:87). Prima facie, we should prefer the ‘radical insights’ of the oppressed, which can open ‘a window on the world’ (1996:91). We should prefer them, because of the political necessity to ‘unhook “knowledges” from power’ (op. cit. p. 94). We should reject the postmodern stand of the ‘generalised other’, for the stand of the ‘concrete other’—particular epistemic communities with emancipatory values. Yet Assiter, like Harding, ends up making unnecessary and untenable concessions to relativism.

Before coming to my own more robust defence of the useful features of FST, I discuss the strongest post-structuralist ‘anti-essentialist’ case: the denial of sexual difference. For if ‘women’ are an arbitrary group, if sex and gender are twin illusions, a feminist standpoint must be not merely historically contingent but a historical delusion.
The weak poststructuralist case against standpoint theory is that women are
diverse, and FST’s aim to discover and develop unity runs roughshod over that
diversity. The strong case is that the category ‘woman’ is no more than a
‘nominal essence’. This is not the view that being female has different meanings
in different times and places, but the view that femaleness itself is a discursive
construction. Butler believes that by insisting on the sex-gender distinction
feminism colluded with the naturalising of sex, and thus with a political system
which secures the subjection of subjects by getting them to define themselves as
essentially different from abject, excluded others. Our collusion is understandable,
for while sex is ‘a fiction retroactively installed as a prelinguistic site to which
there is no direct access’ (Butler, 1993:5), gender is ‘a corporeal style, an act, a
strategy of cultural survival under duress’ (Butler, 1990:141). For Butler, bodies
are materialised through discourse. This construction of sexed bodies is no superficial
obstinacy, but a constitutive construction without which we could neither think
nor live. It is brought about through a re-iterative yet unstable process of ‘gender
performativity’.

We cannot do without some constitutive constructions, no doubt, but Butler
thinks we could dispense with those which currently establish us as dichotomised
‘opposite’ sexes, dressing norms in flesh. The job of feminists is to subvert, not
to reinforce; not to call on women, but to render the category incredible. In
Butler’s terms, FST is conservative in its reification. Instead of calling on women
to meet, network and agitate in their tens of thousands in Beijing, feminism
should aim at ‘collective disidentification’.

In the discussion following the publication of Gender Trouble Butler has, in my
opinion, lost ground. She gets annoyed at the idea, quite understandably
attributed to her, that she is denying the solid kickable existence of bodies, the
fleshy reality of different sorts of genitalia, the pluckability of differently distributed
body hair, the measurability of hormones and so on. What she is saying is that
the coherence which we posit as normal by clustering various attributes as ‘male’
or ‘female’ is not given but ‘culturally established’.

The notion of an abiding substance is a fictive construction produced through the compulsory
ordering of attributes into gender sequences . . . gender as substance, the viability of man and
woman as nouns, is called into question by the dissonant play of attributes that fail to conform
to sequential or causal modes of intelligibility (Butler, 1990:24).

But this notion of a ‘fictive construction’ is an interesting one which would itself
bear deconstruction. It suggests that some categories are better than others, and
that we can find, and argue about, evidence for their adequacy. Here lurks some
residual realism, some sense in which Butler is saying that sexual characteristics
are more real, or better constructions, than their harnessing into dichotomised sex.
Butler denies that she is a linguistic monist or an idealist.

To claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates, causes or exhaustively composes that which it concedes; rather, it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body (1993:10).

From a realist point of view this is just plain wrong. Bodies have causal powers in themselves. Their powers and tendencies underdetermine our descriptions of them—sexual difference certainly need not be dichotomised, for instance, nor is it inevitably such a central dimension of social organisation (Epstein, 1997). But these intrinsic powers and liabilities of bodies affect the extent to which our descriptions are adequate to our practical purposes. It may well be politically subversive to deconstruct our conceptualisation of sexual difference, to emphasise how large a number of people are ‘intersexed’, to expose statements like ‘75% of women have unnatural body hair’, to emphasise and parade unacceptable clusters of gender attributes and reject the exclusions and ‘abjection’ currently entailed by particular historical forms of the construction of gendered subjectivity. Sex is gendered, but it is also extradiscursive. I mean by this that although its causal powers are exercised within and through discursive understandings of them, their ontology is not exhausted by this.

Oddly enough, in her rejection of the idea of ‘a generalisation of “the body” that pre-exists the acquisition of its sexed significance’ (1990:129), Butler claims that this view of sex usually has the body as a passive medium, a sort of blank sheet, culturally inscribed. From a realist point of view the opposite is true. Poststructuralists get annoyed with realist arguments that they liken to Dr Johnson’s vulgar attempt to refute Berkeley by kicking a table. In fact, it is not so much that we know the table to exist independent of mind by kicking it, but rather that the table (or here, sexual difference) kicks us. It is not passive, it will not conform to whatever categories and attributions we may arbitrarily assign to it. Some will work, and some will not (Sayer, 1997:468). Sexual difference is over-dichotomised, but a bi-polar distribution of the family of relevant criteria permits human classifiers to get away with this particular simplification—allows it to work, up to a point. And the shape of that distribution is no accident in evolutionary terms.

In fact, from a realist point of view, there is no problem at all with the category ‘woman’. Instead of the much disputed concept of essence, I will follow Sayer in using ‘the realist concept of causal powers possessed by objects (including people and social phenomena)—that is powers and dispositions which are generative of behaviour’ (1997:460). We can then remember that these powers are not necessarily unchanging, and that they may be conditional both for their existence and their exercise. Women are female subjects, that is, social beings who live within and through the local meanings attributed to femaleness. The existence of people with some attributes of either sex, or who are sexually
different, does not threaten the concept of femaleness, though it may challenge our dichotomous simplicities. Femaleness is a relatively enduring set of powers and attributes, although it is still context dependent. The realisation of its powers is even more so: most females will have the power to bear children, but many never do so. A woman is not just a female, though, but a female person, and poststructuralists are right to say that ‘woman’ does not always mean the same thing (which is true of almost every category in social science, such as ‘family’ or ‘individual’). Where would feminism be, if there were no possibility of changing the social meanings of womanhood?

A REALIST DEFENCE OF FEMINIST STANDPOINT THEORY

Feminism offers a number of related accounts of social relations and of what women and men are and could be like—accounts which are highly critical of the way things are, on the grounds that in various ways current arrangements constrain women, prevent them flourishing, and cause them to suffer. It is necessarily realist, and I shall show how poststructuralists constantly revert to realism when they try to articulate a politics. Lovibond has argued that feminist politics are also necessarily humanist, in the sense that they presuppose at least the relative externality of the subject to her field of action (1997). Certainly poststructuralist feminism is humanist in the sense of silently falling back on an ethic of human need.

If social relations are reduced to the internal relations of discourse, poststructuralist feminism is reduced to deconstruction of the hidden hierarchical, naturalist etc. assumptions built into concepts. A useful task (though if knowledge is not the aim, the goal and its rationale are unclear), but in what sense feminist? ‘Materialist feminist’ Henessey understands the feminist standpoint as a ‘dis-identifying critique’ which ‘calls into question and then historicizes the pre-constructed system across which subjectivities are constructed’ (1993:97). This critique speaks ‘from/for a counter-hegemonic collective subject’ which has nothing to do with women’s lives or experiences. (Note that she is not just saying that a feminist standpoint need not follow from women’s experiences, but that we must abandon the idea of the experiencing subject as having any relevance.) The relationship between this critical discourse and women then seems tenuous.

The main programme put forward by poststructuralist politics is to disrupt certainties, undermining the entire apparatus of gender. We may try crossdressing and other surprises, having horns grafted on to our foreheads, let our facial hair grow, in general refuse to ‘do’ gender. In the limited space of such politics we encounter the contrast between the voluntarism of the postmodernist emphasis on choice and structuralist discourse determinism. Again and again we are reminded that we must be prepared to embrace uncertainty (Henessey, ibid). Thus Elam recommends a ‘groundless solidarity’; a ‘politics without the subject’,

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Realism, Deconstruction and the Feminist Standpoint

a ‘politics of undecidability’ which refuses ‘to close down the question of difference’ (1984:81). She offers a typically mysterious warning:

There are differences among women, there are differences between women and men. These differences are not symmetrical, nor do they fit into a simple hierarchical order. All these differences must be respected, but we will never come to the end of them (Elam, 1994:85).

Butler speaks of the need to avoid totalisation and exclusion, by ensuring that the term ‘women’ is used to designate ‘an undesignatable field of difference... a site of permanent openness and resignifiability’ (Butler, 1995:49–50).

An alternative scenario is local women’s politics, extending to coalition-building between groups of women without any prior expectation of success. Mohanty contrasts the sentimental notion of universal sisterhood with the down to earth coalitional politics of Bernice Reagon, whom she quotes approvingly as saying ‘You don’t go into coalition because you like it. The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that’s the only way you can figure you can stay alive’ (quoted in Mohanty, 1992:84). But what would make such coalitions feminist, unless some expectation that different groups of women do have common interests at some level? Nor is pessimism about the possibilities of unity philosophically distinct from the hope of sisterhood. To justify them, both require a realist philosophical position from which to mount an investigation about just what the extent of unity currently is and could become.

Poststructuralists seem to find themselves in an impasse, for they increasingly recommend the tactical use of the term ‘women’ as a basis for feminist mobilisation (e.g. Hennessey, 1993:98, Spivak, 1988). Butler concedes that ‘there is some political necessity to speak as and for women’. She recognises that while her own work has been concerned to expose and ameliorate those cruelties by which subjects are produced and differentiated... this is not the only goal... there are questions of social and economic justice which are not primarily concerned with questions of subject formation (1994:141).

Like most poststructuralist feminists, Butler refers to the wrongs done to women. Yet it is hard to see why cruelties matter, whether suffered by women or men, without some implicit ethical naturalism to identify them and base our opposition. Why, for ‘tactical’ reasons, do we want feminism to bring together the disparate groups of women? Why not let feminism itself go the way of gender, the target of the ‘subversive bodily acts’ Butler recommends—i.e. of discursive, deconstructive ones? It can only be because Butler, and others, care about the real conditions of women’s lives, and want to see them ameliorated. Despite the rejection of ‘self-present subjects, natural rights or transcendental truths’ (Elam, 1994:88), post-structuralist works are pervaded with references to oppression,
cruelty, abuse and relative freedom, which only makes sense in terms of a hidden ethic of human needs, and collective interests in the light of these.

Despite realism's current resounding unpopularity among feminist theorists, they cannot do without it. Haraway’s 1985 essay ‘A Manifesto for Cyborgs’ (1991) argued that ‘woman’ was no longer an adequate category on which to ground feminist politics, and proposed instead an ‘ironic political myth’ of the self as cyborg (1991:145), ‘a metaphor for the post-gender, postmodern, pulverised subject of late capitalism’ (Hennessey, 1993:72). Her interesting 1988 essay ‘Situated Knowledges’ returns to the notion of a ‘successor science’, because

My problem and ‘our’ problem is how to have simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognising our own ‘semiotic technologies’ for making meanings, and a no nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world. . . (Haraway, 1991:187).

Yet even after this clear statement she adds: ‘the approach I am recommending is not a version of realism, which has proved a rather poor way of engaging with the world’s active agency’ (op. cit. 197). She simply does not realise that realism can recognize the historicity of theories and knowledge claims (what Bhaskar calls the ‘transitive dimension’ of science (1989:11)), without assuming that what is true of our constructions need be true of their referents (Sayer, 1997:468).

We can be ‘epistemic relativists’, recognising ‘that all beliefs are socially produced, so that all knowledge is transient, and neither truth-values nor criteria of rationality exist outside historical time’ (Bhaskar, 1989:57) without becoming ‘judgmental relativists’ in the manner of Stanley and Wise, who maintain that all beliefs are equally valid (1993:228). Hekman, another judgmental relativist, warns us against assuming the existence of a self-evident ‘metanarrative’ of standards which allow us to distinguish better and worse accounts (1997:355). There are no self-evident criteria, no uncontested standards, what constitutes good evidence for an account is, of course, itself part of the argument. But those who argue about what good evidence looks like will refer to the internal coherence of the account, its scope, its implications for other accounts, its practical effects and their evaluation of these, because these non-arbitrary criteria direct us to theories that work (Sayer 1992:78). Feminism makes claims about the nature of social relations, and adduces various sorts of evidence for these. It points out the falsity of dominant accounts of the social world and argues on the basis of rival accounts that deep and wide changes should take place. A realist approach (and an ethically naturalist one) is therefore essential to the feminist project.

If FST needs realism, it also needs ontological depth. As usually formulated it is extremely weak. It tries to argue from the presumed similarities of women’s lives/experiences to a tendency for women to develop more accurate—feminist—
accounts of social reality. In Bhaskar’s terminology, life events are at the level of the ‘actual’ (Collier, 1994:44). FST should be arguing at the level of the ‘real’, i.e. of the structures which give rise to life events and women’s responses to them. At that level, there may be more commonalities between the constraints and possibilities women variously face. Nor does the fact that the relationship between lives/positioning and knowledge/attitudes/action is not always manifest necessarily mean there is no causal relationship; it simply means that we are dealing here with several sorts of structures and mechanisms, whose interrelationships are complex and need investigation and theorising.

I suggest the structures which produce the current possibility of a feminist standpoint are of four sorts. (1) Social structures, such as the articulation of the domestic and formal economies in capitalist societies, and the institution of marriage. (2) The conceptual systems and beliefs which justify and continually reproduce these structures, such as beliefs about ‘normal’ sexuality. (3) The psychological processes which allow us to perceive, to think and to act, and through which, in particular social contexts, subjectivity becomes gendered. (4) Lastly, the capacities and liabilities associated with sexual difference. (To say physiology underdetermines social positioning by sex is a massive understatement. Nevertheless, social structures certainly presuppose embodied agents, and sometimes sexual difference really is salient to what these agents can do.) Commonalities between women, then, are on the one hand contingent, and on the other the result of a multiplicity of real structures, more or less widespread and enduring.

Like poststructuralism, such a realist approach rules out the idea of experience as unmediated ‘innocent’ knowledge. But unlike poststructuralism, it does not reject the notion of an enduring agentic subject, a ‘self’, who does the experiencing (although, as already said, concepts are certainly involved in this activity, and to posit a self does not entail that the self be ‘transcendent’ ‘unitary’ or ‘prior’). If there is no self to experience, epistemology falls, and feminist epistemology with it. For such a view experiences and ‘knowledges’ become mere effects of discourse.

There is currently, social and political research suggests, considerable global similarity as well as difference in relation to (1) and (2). The social structures that organise production and reproduction take forms that generally make women subordinate to men, in public and private. Women do not do all the caring work involved in the ‘production of people’, but the bulk of it is normatively assigned to them, and in most places a lot of unpaid work is considered related and also allocated to women. This social positioning is not completely determining, but it does mean that women who cannot or do not choose to take part in canonical feminine activities are likely to be disadvantaged in some respects, so that the structural discrimination against women in the labour market is not avoidable by being childfree or in a ‘male’ job. Indeed, the structure of labour markets is influenced by the work women are ‘supposed to’ do in the private sphere.
The similar though not identical, and variously articulated, structures within which women live do produce a ‘family’ of commonalities between them, which may or may not be obvious and salient—given the existence of significant differences as well. Do these commonalities give women an epistemological advantage? And do they make it likely that women will, in certain circumstances, develop a feminist standpoint? The answer to the first question is—no. There is no epistemological privilege for women or for any other group. The viewpoint of the subjugated amounts to two things, firstly, opportunities for knowledge that their positioning and their very subordination allow, secondly, interests in using that knowledge—and other knowledge, of course—to take collective action against their oppression. This point applies, mutatis mutandum, to all oppressed groups. Knowledge is always mediated, contested and partial, and this is why to think of wage labour, unpaid work at home, or giving birth as conferring epistemological privilege is so unhelpful. The point is rather that such direct experience can draw the reflecting agent’s attention to the detail of these life events, the energy used, the thinking done, the needs left unmet; and once such attention is given, received conceptual tools are often exposed as inconsistent, inadequate and deceptive. All the sorts of work women habitually do are to some extent addressed by the theories that naturalise the current form of the sexual division of labour—they are not entirely ignored but regulated, trivialised or sentimentalised. What characterises a feminist standpoint is not whether it results from an intimate knowledge of women’s assigned work (there may well be a tendency for this to be the case), but rather the weight it assigns to the details of women’s lives. It requires that these details, these experiential reports, are accounted for rather than dismissed. Studying these, it can use them as clues, indicators, and evidence of causal mechanisms at various levels which generate them as effects.

The analytically separate types of structure listed above do not determine women’s fate, but the particular way they are positioned within these structures (and others) decides what options and resources they have. In the widest sense of causality, such structures (which I have only begun to sketch) are causally powerful: they form the causal background to any individual agent’s story. The agent’s reasons for doing what she did are the immediate cause of her action, but these in turn depend on what she wanted, what she knew, what she was (in terms of her own capacities), how she was positioned in a network of relationships and institutions, what meaning she gave that positioning and so on. Any effective politics must focus on precisely this relationship between social situation and reasons for acting; condensed in the concept of interests.

If we give up the idea of women’s epistemological privilege, FST becomes (1) an expression of the claim that women do have common interests, rooted in commonalities between them, (2) the proposal that feminists investigate the grounds for unity through the attempt to build it, honing their knowledge of social relations through political practice itself. The argument that women have

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common interests recognises that there is no single universal form of the oppression of women, but maintains that nevertheless the oppression of women is universal, and always justified in terms of the characteristics that supposedly stem from their sex. Laclau and Mouffe (1985:190) would have us distinguish between subordination and oppression, and argue that a group is only oppressed where it recognises and resents its subordination. But for a realist ethic of human needs, the systematic subordination of any group is necessarily oppressive, if the group is thereby disadvantaged in getting its human needs and special needs met to the extent that social resources currently permit (Doyal and Gough, 1991). Women have similar interests to the extent that their needs are not met on the pretext of some real or imputed characteristic of womanhood, but they have common interests to the extent that all women stand to gain by the ending or lessening of women's subordination in particular respects and localities. But for women to have common interests in this sense does not preclude divergent sectional and individual interests, which act as centrifugal forces within the enormous group of women. We need make no assertion that what women currently contingently have in common (pace Lacan and Levi Strauss) is the only reality, nor that it necessarily permits alliances between groups in conflict on other dimensions.

To take one example, how does it benefit me, as a white Western middle class feminist, if female genital mutilation (FGM) disappears the way of footbinding? Women's subordination in the public realm, and relative exclusion from policy making, extends to all countries. For the cruelty of FGM to be widely acknowledged in places where it is traditionally done, the details of women's lives—including the mechanisms which make women the prime agents—would have to become contested items on the public agenda. Such a shift would probably require a greater public role for women, and a questioning of presently accepted understandings of their nature and capacities, which would indirectly benefit women elsewhere. But if FGM were ended by fiat from governments pressurised by ex-colonial powers, there might well be conflict between the interests of women defending their traditions and those opposing the practice. It would not be immediately clear what would constitute a feminist standpoint – but the arguments on each side would refer to the long term good of women.

Poststructuralists have rightly emphasised difference and conflict between women. We can think instead of many potential and real bases for solidarity, so that the actual trajectories of social movements and individuals joining them are multiply-determined. Rational choice theory's narrow instrumentalism plays a very limited role here, for short term interests are invariably at war with long term ones, and individual with sectional interests of wider and wider scope. If we relied on rational choice theory alone, in most conditions there would be a downwards spiral to the interests of the singular human being (or even the subject position). But rational choice theory represents a historically contingent individualist notion of interests. To theorise the conditions under which the
downwards spiral can be reversed, we need to acknowledge the reality of the human natural capacities of identification and connection and to study these processes. Without these, a feminist standpoint (and the human one that beckons beyond it) could not be achieved.

We can characterise the feminist standpoint then as the imagined upshot of an investigative political programme that aims to build unity on the basis of knowledge of the social world. It uses women’s knowledge of their own and others’ lives to discover the causes of their common experiences and the ways in which desired changes can be brought about. It involves political work to create the conditions for pooling and collectively analysing these various accounts, as well as the political work involved in using them as evidence that change is needed and possible. I see the work done by the NGO gathering in Beijing as part of the process of constructing a feminist standpoint. This work assumed, in the main, that women do have some interests in common, and used accounts of experience as evidence for what these might be. The process was highly contested and conflictual, yet it occurred and continues. It is, as poststructuralists would say, the construction of unity, yet it is also the discovery of real bases for that unity.

What women’s collective interests are remains, and will remain, contested. It depends on what the differences between women and men currently are, given the social organisations with which we have to deal, and what they could become. But again, post-structuralists tend to mistake the inevitability, even the desirability, of permanent contestation about gendered social relations for unknowability or unreality. I suggest we accept that politics are undecidable, but instead of elevating undecidability into a feminist principle, continue the search for better though always partial knowledge.

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