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Comment on Hekman's "Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited": Truth or Justice?

Nancy C. M. Hartsock

Susan Hekman's article (in this issue) begins with a good summary of the current situation of feminist standpoint theories. She makes several important points that are often unrecognized in discussions of standpoint theories. First, she notes that standpoint theories come in a variety of forms. Second, she argues that these theories must be understood as a counterhegemonic discourse, that is, as centrally concerned with politics. And third, she reminds us that at least my version of standpoint theory operates with a social constructivist theory of the subject. There is much that is useful in her article, but here I want to address three areas where I think she reads standpoint theories through a kind of American pluralism that prefers to speak not about power or justice but, rather, about knowledge and epistemology. She is not alone in this.1

First, there is the question of the nature of the subject—If not pregiven but, rather, socially constructed, how is the subject exactly constructed, and what is the nature of this subject (subjected/collective/historically specific, etc.)? Second, What is the nature of the knowledge produced by this subject? Here I want to take up the question of whether truth, as usually understood, is the relevant category for the knowledge that is a social production. What is meant by truth, and how can it be achieved or justified? And third, What kind of privilege can one claim (or is one justified in claiming) for knowledge that arises from any particular social location, with the understanding that social locations are fundamentally structured by power relations?

As I read Hekman's article, and other critiques of standpoint theories as well, I am struck by the extent to which the Marxist roots of standpoint theories have gone unrecognized. This leads to the criticism that standpoint theories are by nature essentialist, that they assume a fixed

I would like to thank Judy Aks and Karen Stuhldreher for comments on an earlier draft of this comment. I also want to thank Nancy Hirschman for organizing a panel on standpoint theory at the 1994 American Political Science Association meetings, where a number of these ideas were discussed.

1 See also Brown 1995 for an account that not only treats my work as putting forward a model of subjects as pregiven but also argues that my work should be put in the same category as that of Allan Bloom!

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human nature for individuals with pregiven selves and pregiven needs and wants. While many would argue against a “return to the fathers,” I think there are a number of both helpful and harmful ideas to be taken, used, translated, and also discarded. In writing the article “The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism,” I was attempting to translate the concept of the standpoint of the proletariat into feminist terms (Hartsock 1983). Marx, in *Capital* (1967, 1:19), adopted a simple two-class model in which everything exchanged at its value, and only a few pages before the end of volume 3, more than two thousand pages later, he returns to the problem of class, which will now be shown to be more complicated and demanding of subtle treatment. The manuscript, however, breaks off only a few pages later without presenting such an analysis. Given the fruitfulness of Marx’s strategy, I adopted by analogy a simple two-party opposition between feminist and masculinist representatives of the patriarchy. Following Lukacs’s (1971) essay, “Reification and the Standpoint of the Proletariat,” I wanted in my article to translate the notion of the proletariat (including its privileged historical mission) into feminist terms. I was arguing that, like the lives of proletarians in Marxist theory, women’s lives in Western capitalist societies also contained possibilities for developing a critique of domination. By examining the institutional sexual division of labor, I argued that a feminist standpoint could be developed that would deepen the critique available from the standpoint of the proletariat and that would allow for a critique of patriarchal ideology. In following this strategy I committed an error similar to that of Marx. While he made no theoretical space for any oppression other than class, by following his lead I failed to allow for the importance of differences among women and differences among other various groups—power differences all.

But given this, why should I raise, once again, the importance of a nineteenth-century European patriarch for late twentieth-century feminist theory? Why Marx? Why now? The fall of the Soviet state, along with the Berlin Wall, has occasioned a global celebration of the market and of capitalism’s successes. Fredric Jameson notes that for those who do not distinguish clearly between “Marxism itself as a mode of thought and analysis, socialism as a political and societal aim and vision, and Communism as a historical movement,” Marxism can appear to be an embarrassing remnant of the past. And certainly Teresa Ebert is right when she suggests that, “under the pressure of the dominant discourses of Postmodernism, Marxism and historical materialism are becoming lost revolutionary knowledges for the current generation of feminists” (1996, x). Still, even figures such as Derrida, regarding *The Communist Mani-

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2 Jameson 1996, 14; see also Brown’s statement (1995, 4).
festo, argue, "I know of few texts in the philosophical tradition, perhaps none, whose lesson seemed more urgent today" (1994, 13, quoted in Ebert 1996, xx). I would add that in the context of capitalism, which has truly become global, and in which more and more of life is commodified, much of Marx's critique of capitalism remains very apt.³

Still, I see Marx as an anti-Enlightenment figure on balance, although it must be recognized that his relationship to the Enlightenment and whole tradition of Western political thought is that of both the inheriting son and the rebellious son (see, e.g., Benhabib 1990, 11). Thus, his account of the process of labor itself can be seen in sexual/gendered terms: Marx theorizes the relation of the worker to his own activity as an alien activity not belonging to him: "Activity as suffering, strength as weakness, begetting as emasculating, . . . self-estrangement" (Marx and Engels 1978, 76; emphasis mine). Marx's account of estranged labor thus uses some of the "second homosocial birth" images I have found in many works in the history of Western political thought.⁴ As I read Marx, he argues that the worker encounters himself in a world he has himself created, albeit in a very negative form.

Feminism, too, exists in an ambivalent relation to the Enlightenment. On the one hand, feminist theorists sometimes argue for a "me too" position in order to work for women's inclusion in a number of societal institutions.⁵ On the other hand, women as women have never been the "subjects" of Enlightenment/liberal theory, and so women's insistence on speaking at all troubles those theories (see, e.g., Eisenstein 1981; and Kipnis 1988). (It is certainly my suspicion that this, along with decolonization and struggles for recognition by racial and ethnic groups, is one reason why European and North American theorists have lost some of their certainties.)

But let me now turn to the several questions I want to address. First, the question of truth. In the modernist/Enlightenment version, truth has to do with discovering a preexisting external something that, if it meets some criteria, can be labeled as true. Moreover, it must be discovered from nowhere in particular so that Truth can retain its pristine qualities. The definition of truth that I relied on, and still do, is more complex than this and is heavily indebted to my own reading of Marx. I do not claim to give an accurate reading of Marx, nor do I think it is important to rehabilitate him for contemporary feminist theory; rather, I want to suggest in a shorthand way how standpoint theories approach the question of truth. In

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³ See Haraway's chapters (1996) on Oncomouse and vampire culture.

⁴ Achilles was one of the first to want to be born again in legend and song. He prayed that he would do some great thing first before he died and so could live on in legend and song.

⁵ See Ferguson 1993 for a discussion of this issue.
the “Theses on Feuerbach,” Marx argues against an understanding of “things” as “objects,” especially objects of contemplation: “Man must prove the truth, i.e., the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking in practice” (Marx and Engels 1975, 6). Finally, there is Marx’s famous conclusion: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it” (8).

The Marxian project, then, changes the criteria for what counts as knowledge: to have knowledge, for Marx, includes seeing, tasting, feeling, and thinking. If truth is the reality and power of ideas in action, then knowledge and truth must be treated in a much more historically specific way and attention should be devoted to the social, historical, and ultimately conventional form of all definitions of truth. (And on this point, one can be reminded of Foucault’s claim that truth is simply error codified.) One is reminded that the search for knowledge is a human activity, structured by human requirements.

But here I become uncomfortable with the language of truth. The search for truth is not at all the way to understand Marx’s project. The point, most fundamentally, is to understand power relations—in this case, power relations centered on the development of capitalism and the commodification of increasingly greater areas of human existence. But the point of understanding power relations is to change them. And to this end, Marx’s categories move and flow and enact the fluidity that many postmodernist theorists insist on. To give just a few examples, capital is described as raw materials, instruments of labor, and means of subsistence of all kinds that are utilized to produce new raw materials, new instruments of labor, and new means of subsistence, as “accumulated labours,” as “living labour serving accumulated labour,” as “a bourgeois production relation, a social relation of production,” and as “an independent social power” (Marx and Engels 1978, 176, 207, 208).

The result is a very complex idea of what constitutes “truth,” which now becomes a difficult term to retain if one is to avoid falling back into Enlightenment categories of analysis. Hekman is right to point to Marx’s claims about truth and their congruence with a number of Foucault’s positions. She states tellingly that, despite these similarities, Foucault would argue that the discourses of the oppressed are just that and are not closer to “reality.” She recognizes that these discourses, however, may be closer to “a definition of a less repressive society” (345). Standpoint theories are technical theoretical devices that can allow for the creation of accounts of society that can be used to work for more satisfactory social relations.

Marxist theories (and feminist standpoint theories) also remind us that the categories and criteria that come most immediately to mind for judging truth are likely to be those of the dominant groups. Thus, Marx can argue that everything appears reversed in competition, that the accumula-
tion of wealth in capitalism (currently being celebrated on a global scale) is at the same time the accumulation of misery. Yet these categories and criteria are made true for all members of society. One can think of many ideas such as this—for example, compulsory heterosexuality enforced as a "truth," not discovered but made real through a variety of practices. My arguments for adopting a feminist standpoint recognize the danger of the biblical promise, "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." In the context of power relations extant across many parts of the globe, "knowing the truth" is much more likely to get one jailed or make one disappear.

To turn to the second issue—the nature of the subject—I found in Marx the kinds of social constructivist theories of the subject that others have encountered in poststructuralism. But in contrast to the American tendency (certainly with the help of some European poststructuralists themselves) to interpret these theories in liberal pluralist, and in some cases libertarian, terms, terms that rely on accounts of the microprocesses of power, I found in the Marxian tradition an insistence on what some have called a "global" as opposed to a "totalizing" theory (see Hennessy 1993). The focus is on the macroprocesses of power, those that, although they may be played out in individual lives, can be fully understood only at the level of society as a whole. To claim that we can understand the totality of social relations from a single perspective is as futile an effort as to claim that we can see everything from nowhere.

A focus on large-scale social forces highlights different aspects of the subject. Thus, Marx can be read as providing a theory of the subject as subjected, as does Foucault. That is, one can read the essay on estranged labor or the theory of surplus value in Capital (which I would argue are two versions of the same philosophical argument) as accounts of how men (and they are) constitute themselves as subjected, pouring their lives into the objects that belong to another. Yet Marx’s theory of subjects/subjection differs from Foucault’s in its stress on potentials and possibilities for developing other forms of subjectivity. In addition, the Marxian theory of subjectivity is rightly classified as a "theoretical antihumanism," an idea developed under this heading by Althusser and passed on by him to his students, Foucault and Derrida (see Hartsock 1991). That is, the subjects who matter are not individual subjects but collective subjects, or groups.

These groups must not be seen as formed unproblematically by existing in a particular social location and therefore seeing the world in a

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As I would like to adapt Marx to the use of contemporary feminism, I would like to change the potential of the proletariat, its "historic mission," to what bell hooks has described as a yearning for a different (and I would argue, better) world. See hooks 1990, esp. the essay "Postmodern Blackness."
particular way. My effort to develop the idea of a feminist standpoint, in contrast to "women's viewpoint," was an effort to move in this direction. Chela Sandoval's notion of the importance of strategic identity for women of color represents an important advance in understanding this process, as does her development of the notion of oppositional consciousness.7

Sandoval argues that U.S. Third World feminism can function as a model for oppositional political activity. She proposes that we view the world as a kind of "topography" that defines the points around which "individuals and groups seeking to transform oppressive powers constitute themselves as resistant and oppositional subjects" (1991, 11; emphasis mine). She holds that once the "subject positions" of the dominated are "self-consciously recognized by their inhabitants," they can be "transformed into more effective sites of resistance" (11). She discusses a "differential consciousness," which she states operates like the clutch of an automobile, allowing the driver to engage gears in a "system for the transmission of power" (14).

Here, Sandoval's views parallel those of Gramsci, who suggests that we rethink the nature of identity: "Our capacity to think and act on the world is dependent on other people who are themselves also both subjects and objects of history" (Gramsci 1971, 346). In addition, one must reform the concept of individual to see it as a "series of active relationships, a process in which individuality, though perhaps most important, is not the only element to be taken into account." Individuality, then, is to be understood as the "ensemble of these relations... To create one's personality means to acquire consciousness of them and to modify one's own personality means to modify the ensemble of these relations" (352). Moreover, Gramsci holds that each individual is the synthesis of these relations and also of the history of these relations, a "précis of the past" (353). The constitution of the subject, then, is the result of a complex interplay of "individuals" and larger-scale social forces. Groups are not to be understood, as Hekman seems to do, as aggregates of individuals. Moreover, the constitution of the "collective subject" posited by standpoint theories requires an always contingent and fragile (re)construction/ transformation of these complex subject positions. As Kathi Weeks has put it, "This project of transforming subject-positions into standpoints involves an active intervention, a conscious and concerted effort to re-interpret and restructure our lives... A standpoint is a project, not an inheritance; it is achieved, not given" (1996, 101).

I turn now to my third point, the issue of privileged knowledge. Fundamentally, I argue that the criteria for privileging some knowledges

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7 Sandoval (1990) makes an excellent point in her article on the development of the category of "women of color" out of the consciousness-raising sessions at the 1981 National Women's Studies Association meeting. Much of what follows comes from Sandoval's (1991) article on U.S. Third World feminism.
over others are ethical and political rather than purely “epistemological.” The quotation marks here are to indicate that I see ethical and political concepts such as power as involving epistemological claims on the one hand and ideas of what is to count as knowledge involving profoundly important political and ethical stakes on the other. Hekman is right that I want to privilege some knowledges over others because they seem to me to offer possibilities for envisioning more just social relations. I believe there is a second aspect to the idea that some knowledges are “better” than others, and here I think Sandoval has stated the most important point: the self-conscious transformation of individuals into resistant, oppositional, and collective subjects.

The most important issue for me is the question of how we can use theoretical tools and insights to create theories of justice and social change that address the concerns of the present. Marx, for all of the difficulties with both his theoretical work and the state of actually (non)existing socialism, calls our attention to certain macrolevel issues to be addressed. In addition, one can find in the work of theorists such as Gramsci a much more useful and complex theorization of relations between “individuals” and society as a whole, one that opens up possibilities for both new knowledges and new collectivities.

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References


