Comment on Hekman’s “Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited”

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I HAVE WRITTEN THIS grudgingly. Susan Hekman’s (in this issue) interpretation of my work is so systematically out to lunch that it is difficult to write a response that does not involve a replication of what I have already said, at length and in various versions, elsewhere. But that would interest neither me nor readers. So I have asked myself: Apart from lack of care and thought, what is she doing that leads to her systematic misreading? And what might be systematic about other mistakes such as the chronology of “standpoint theory”’s development (a work published in 1979 is attributed to the decade following, 1983), or that its roots were in Marxism (Where’s the women’s movement?), or that it is less used and interesting currently (speak for your own discipline, Susan; in sociology it flourishes), or that feminist standpoint theory has become identified with “object-relations” theory (news to me).

A major problem is the reification of “feminist standpoint theory.” Feminist standpoint theory, as a general class of theory in feminism, was brought into being by Sandra Harding (1986), not to create a new theoretical enclave but to analyze the merits and problems of feminist theoretical work that sought a radical break with existing disciplines through locating knowledge or inquiry in women’s standpoint or in women’s experience. Those she identified had been working independently of one another and have continued to do so. In a sense, Harding created us. I do not think there was much interchange among us. As standpoint theorists, we became identifiable as a group through Harding’s study. And as a construct of Harding’s text, we appeared as isolated from the intellectual and political discourses with which our work was in active dialogue. I cannot speak here for Nancy Hartsock, Patricia Hill Collins, or others mentioned in Hekman’s article, but, for myself, I am very much aware of being engaged with the debates and innovations of the many feminist experiments in sociology that, like mine, were exploring experience as a method of discovering the social from the standpoint of women’s experience.

But Hekman goes beyond Harding to constitute us as a common theoretical position, indeed as a foundationalist theory justifying feminist theory as knowledge. A coherence is invented for us: “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 ab-

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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" (Hekman, 348). Given the realities of our nonexistence as a group except on paper, she must distort in order to bring off this representation. The quotation comes on page 348, after Hartsock and Smith have been thoroughly worked over, and Smith at least (Hartsock is speaking for herself) has been tortured into the shape that fits this conclusion. What's wrong with this account so far as I am concerned?

First, I am not proposing a feminist standpoint at all; taking up women's standpoint as I have developed it is not at all the same thing and has nothing to do with justifying feminist knowledge. Second, I am not arguing that women's standpoint is rooted in a reality of any kind. Rather, I am arguing that women's standpoint returns us to the actualities of our lives as we live them in the local particularities of the everyday/everynight worlds in which our bodily being anchors us. As I use the term, actuality is not defined. The notion of "actual" in my writing is like the arrow on the map of the mall saying "You are here," that points in the text to a beyond-the-text in which the text, its reading, its reader, and its concepts also are. It is, so to speak, where we live and where discourse happens and does its constituting of "reality." Third, I do not embrace reality and reject concepts (Hekman, 348). It is precisely the force of women's standpoint (at least as I have developed it) that it folds concepts, theory, discourse, into actuality as people's actual practices or activities (a fully reflexive notion applying to the concepts of such a sociology). The contrast I draw between the abstract conceptual modes of ruling and a location of consciousness in the particularizing work that women do in relation to children does not constitute two equivalent regions, and the move I propose is not from concepts to reality. Rather, it is to recognize that concepts are also in actuality and that the objectifications of what I early on described as the relations of ruling are themselves people's socially organized practices in the actual locations of their lives. I and others working with this approach have developed a body of systematic study in which concepts and theories are examined for how they are activated in organizing social relations (Smith 1987; Walker 1990; Campbell and Manicom 1995). I realize that this is a bit tricky to grasp, but Hekman's (prince-pleasing) glass slipper will not fit the feet of this ugly sister.

In the end, the oddest thing is to find Hekman restoring us to the law of the father: Alfred Schurz, Michel Foucault, and, finally, Max Weber. Sandra Harding remarks, in her comments on Hekman, that she (Hekman) "loses the point that standpoint epistemologies and methodologies were constructed" oppositionally (383). Somehow Hekman misses altogether that such epistemologies and methods came out of and were dialogically implicated in a women's movement that offered a profound
challenge to established discourses in almost every region of the political, artistic, and intellectual discourses. In various ways, those who have been identified with "feminist" standpoint theory became active in working with other women in our fields to undermine social science's embedding of the standpoint of white men as hidden agent and subject. Its distinctively experiential methodology was only a systematization of a political methodology that had been foundational to the women's movement.

Beginning in women's experiences told in women's words was and is a vital political moment in the women's movement. Experience is a method of speaking that is not preappropriated by the discourses of the relations of ruling. This is where women began to speak from as the women's movement of our time came into being. When we assembled as "women" and spoke together as "women," constituting "women" as a category of political mobilization, we discovered dimensions of "our" experience that had no prior discursive definition. In this political context, the category "women" is peculiarly nonexclusive since it was then and has remained open-ended, such that boundaries established at any one point are subject to the disruption of women who enter speaking from a different experience as well as an experience of difference. It is this commitment to the privileges of women to speak from experience that opens the women's movement to the critique of white and/or heterosexist hegemony from those it marginalizes and silences. The authority of experience is foundational to the women's movement (which is not to say that experience is foundational to knowledge) and has been and is at once explosive and fruitful.

Experience is a method of talk, a language game, in which what is not yet spoken struggles dialogically to appropriate language sedimented with meaning before the moment in which she speaks. It is through and through saturated with the social relations, including the social relations of discourse, in which what is being spoken of is embedded as well as those of which the moment of speaking is part. Experience gives direct access to the necessarily social character of people's worlds; it is in bow people talk, the categories they use, the relations implicitly posited among them, and so forth, and in what is taken for granted in their talk, as well as in what they can talk about. It is the saturation of experience as a language game with social relations that makes nonsense of Hekman's notion that standpoint ultimately dissolves into the endless idiosyncratic consciousnesses of unique individuals.

The knowledge people have by virtue of their experience is a knowledge of the local practices of our everyday/everynight worlds. It is for the most part what Michael Polanyi (1967) called "tacit knowledge"—a knowing that is the very texture of our daily/nightly living in what we know how to do, how we go about things, and what we can get done.
We know how and where to go shopping; we know how to read a book in the less-than-aware dimensions of turning pages from left to right; we know washing dishes, sweeping floors, cleaning; we know putting on makeup and washing our hair; we know how to recognize the boundary between street and sidewalk; we may not know what it is to be battered by a man, but we would know if we had been; some of us know what it is to suckle children; some of us know menstruation; some of us know getting on a bus and going to work; we know how to do our work and who works with us; we know . . . ; we know . . . ; we know as a matter of doing. This is a knowing that is of the socially organized ground of our participation in living with others, some of it, indeed, altogether beyond consciousness, but no less what we know how to do.

Such tacit knowing, of course, becomes a knowledge only at that point when it is entered into the language game of experience, that is, in the course of telling. For the most part, it remains the secret underpinning of everything we do. We discover it vividly as we learn from small children that they truly do not know the same world that we do or when we travel among a people whose everyday/everynight living is radically different from ours. A sociology built on such a social ontology differs from Hekman’s interpretation of Weber (and I have some reservations about the accuracy of her interpretation) as resting “on the assumption that what the social researcher studies, the activities and concepts of social actors, is already constituted” (361). Rather, I take the view that the social is always being brought into being in the concerting of people’s local activities. It is never already there.

The women’s movement and its methodology of working from experience began to unearth the tacit underpinnings of gender. But at the very moment when experience is summoned by what women can find they have in common, it is being translated into the universalizing discourse of a movement making political claims across a variety of fronts. It has seemed to me that in the women’s movement, some women have wanted to be able to go directly from what we know by virtue of how we participate in social relations to claims to knowledge at the level of a universalizing discourse. The critique of “essentialism” aims at this move. Standpoint theory is often understood, as I think Hekman understands it, as foundational to knowledge claims of this kind according to which women’s experience is privileged. I do not make this claim. Rather, taking women’s standpoint and beginning in experience gives access to a knowledge of what is tacit, known in the doing, and often not yet discursively appropriated (and often seen as uninteresting, unimportant, and routine).

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1 Ethnomethodology is that sociology that seeks to uncover the taken-for-granted that is prenormative and prior to discursive positing (Garfinkel 1967).
Here is where I have held we might begin, as sociologists committed to discovering society from where people are as participants in it.

I do not, therefore, argue, as Hekman says I do, that the “knowledge of women is superior to the abstract knowledge of the sociologist” (352), in part, of course, because my interest is in a sociology that does not displace what people know as the local practices of our everyday/everynight living but, rather, seeks to build on and enlarge it beyond the horizon of any one person’s daily experience. I call this taking for sociology the problematic of the everyday/everynight world (Smith 1987). To take up Sandra Harding’s metaphor in her comment in this exchange, I want a sociology that would seek to discover the shape of the pond that positions the people and their perspectives vis-à-vis one another.

People’s tacit knowledge of what they know as a matter of daily/nightly practices surfaces as people speak and as what they speak of is taken seriously, undistilled, untranslated. Speaking for themselves and from their experience has been a fundamental commitment of the women’s movement, and it remains foundational to the method of inquiry I have been trying to develop for sociology. I stress “method of inquiry” since what I do as theory is not really an epistemology, although it must wrestle with epistemological problems; it is surely not a theory foundational to feminist theory, nor yet a theory of history, society, the laws of social systems, or anything of that kind. As a theory it is a systematic formulation of a method of developing investigations of the social that are anchored in, although not confined by, people’s everyday working knowledge of the doing of their lives.

Since I want to take people’s experience as a place to start, Weber’s notions of “ideal types” leaves me cold. What could this be but an assertion of the right of the social scientist to impose her framework on the world and to resume the effectivity of the relations of ruling in subordinating voices speaking from people’s experience in and of their lived actualities. “Ideal type” methodology brokers differences among intellectual colleagues but is wholly unreflexive with respect to observer-observed relations. Different idealizations could be constructed of the same historical events. They could coexist without being either exhaustive with respect to those events or necessarily in contradiction with one another. But ideal type methodology creates no commitments to how things are experienced by those who live them. It creates no openness toward those it studies. The sociologist working with this method is not committed to hearing

2 Note that much more needs to be done to show that Carole Pateman, Arlie Hochschild, or Karen Sacks makes use of ideal-type analyses. Hekman seems to conflate ideal types with concepts and typifications; the latter is in general use in the analysis of ethnographic types of materials in social science, and neither is the same as Weber’s systematic exploration of the logic, say, of rational legal forms of authority.
and honoring what the other has to say. Despite Weber’s commitment to an interpretive sociology, his specification of Verstehen as a method in social science clearly privileges the standpoint of the external observer. For example, in his specification of “direct observational understanding” he discusses in terms of alternative motivational accounts the problem of explaining why a woodcutter is cutting wood in the forest: Is he cutting wood to sell it? for his own use? because he is angry? But shift the standpoint to that of people’s actual experience. The question of why he is cutting wood does not arise for the woodcutter who is in the course of cutting wood to sell, because he is angry, for his own use. From the Archimedean perch of social scientific discourse, the reality that comes into being only in relation to it (constituted by it, if you will) appears puzzling and confusing. So it was for Weber, who struggled to comprehend the complexities of historical change and found in his “ideal type” a method of wrestling order from what he conceded was beyond ordering. But from the standpoint of experience in and of the everyday everynight actualities of our lives, it is the oppressively routine organization, the persistence, the repetition, of capitalist forms of exploitation, of patriarchy, of racial subordination, of the forms of dominance Foucault (1980) has characterized as “power/knowledge,” as the local contouring of people’s lives that constitute a sociological problematic. The system of sociological principles that Weber developed and on which his “ideal type” methodology is based is incompatible with a sociology for women, or for people.

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References

3 This instance is extensively analyzed and discussed along with others in a chapter of my The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology (Smith 1987, n. 1). In that chapter, I examine how the relations between observer and observed enter into (and can be found in) the accounts that are produced from the encounter.

4 The problem is endemic to a sociology that begins from a standpoint in its own self-sustaining theoretically constructed world and constitutes an Archimedean point for its discursive subject. “The disorganized flow of empirical social reality is the only thing that creates problems difficult enough to make it worthwhile to have a discipline trying to tame the flow into theoretically and methodologically unimpeachable sociology,” writes Arthur Stinchcombe (1983, 10).
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