

FEMINISM AND EPISTEMOLOGY

Introduction: The “F” Word

Below are five contributions to a special colloquium on “Feminism and Epistemology“, held on March 22, 2005. The idea for this session arose spontaneously, in response to the prior emergence of disagreement among the Fellows on this issue. For some of us, it seemed no insult to refer to scholarship that criticizes androcentrism as “feminist”; rather, such work was thought to make a positive contribution to knowledge by decentering the previously unacknowledged male norm and providing a fuller, less biased view. For others, in contrast, “feminism” seemed a term of abuse; to call a work “feminist” was to question its epistemic status, to associate it with ideology as opposed to science.

What explains this divergence of views? Is it based in the uneven legitimacy achieved by feminist work in different countries and regions? Or could it be rooted in the uneven development of feminist work in the *Naturwissenschaften* versus the *Geisteswissenschaften*? Is there pressure in some fields and/or regions for scholars to disclaim or avoid feminist critique as the price of achieving professional credibility?

Aiming to open these questions for discussion, “the Globalization Girls” took the initiative in organizing the colloquium. (Composed entirely of women, but not focused on gender issues; we were a reading group that met throughout the fellowship year.) We recognized that different Fellows would bring different experiences and expectations to such a discussion. Some would begin from the premise that feminism is a political ideology that can only detract from genuine scientific objectivity. Others would assume that feminist critique could in principle contribute positively to scientific inquiry, but have little familiarity with the contributions it has made in various fields. Still others had done this sort of work themselves or had considerable knowledge of it. Despite these different points of entry, we sought to promote a discussion that would interest and challenge everyone.

To begin the discussion, some of us made individual statements about the uses and abuses of feminist reflection in our own field or in our own work. We didn’t coordinate our presentations, and they don’t fully agree with one another. By airing our disagreements

publicly, we sought to show that, far from being a species of groupthink, feminist scholarship is diverse and hospitable to productive controversy.

The Globalization Girls: Nancy Fraser, Lydia Liu, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Jamie Monson, Maria Todorova

Nancy Fraser: Gender, Epistemology, and Critique

I want to open the discussion with some general philosophical remarks about gender and epistemology. (Please bear in mind that I am a social and political philosopher, not a specialist in epistemology; so I cannot speak as an expert; nevertheless I have participated in and contributed to the development of feminist social and political theory; and I have observed the development of feminist scholarship in other subfields of philosophy and in other disciplines, including history, anthropology, and literature, but also economics and biology.)

I begin by noting that inquiry is a socially situated social practice. Knowers are social beings. When we undertake scholarly work, we bring with us prescientific attitudes, perspectives, and epistemic frames. Some of these are so deeply entrenched and taken for granted that we are not explicitly aware of them. They are like the air we breathe.

One frame we often bring with us is gender. In most human societies, gender is a powerful and pervasive sociocultural schema through which people make sense of their world. The core of the schema is a binary contrast between male and female, or masculine and feminine. How the contrast is understood varies greatly from society to society, from historical epoch to historical epoch, and from social class to social class within a given society or epoch. In some cases, the masculine is associated with calm rationality and the feminine with disruptive emotionality. In other cases, the masculine is associated with cutthroat individualism and the feminine with altruistic morality. Thus, the content of gender binarism varies – even as the structure itself remains constant.

In fact, the structure of the schema is surprisingly invariant in three respects. First, the binary contrast usually purports to be exhaustive, which implies that everything must be either masculine or feminine. Nothing can be neither or both. Thus, liminal cases become anomalous or even invisible. In addition, the masculine pole is generally valued over the feminine. Even when the latter has a positive quality, as in the case of Victorian views of women's innate sentimental sensitivity, it appears less serious and/or less powerful than the

former. Finally, the masculine is the unmarked norm, the human in general, while the feminine is marked as privative, the not-masculine.

Interestingly, gender binarism is socioculturally pervasive. It not only prestructures our thinking about men and women. On the contrary, we use gender schemata to make sense of all sorts of things that seem, on reflection, to be far removed from the male/female contrast. For example, English speakers often divide scholarly disciplines and paradigms into the “hard” and the “soft”, a division that is modeled on and that resonates with gender binarism. In this case, as in many others, gender subtly colors our perceptions and codes our evaluations.

Gender coding of this sort is rhetorically powerful. Because it touches on matters that are so central to human society, and so redolent of “common sense”, it carries a persuasive charge that can be difficult to counter. In the 2004 US election, for example, the so-called “war on terrorism” was the decisive issue; and the strategic manipulation of gender coding was a crucial instrument of Bush’s victory. His campaign painted the “war on terror” as a problem of leadership, which it addressed in terms of a gender contrast. Bush cultivated the image of a reassuringly steady and determined commander-in-chief, a protector who never doubts and never wavers – in short, a real man. In contrast, the Republicans presented John Kerry as a “girlie man”, to use Arnold Schwarzenegger’s memorable phrase, an effeminate “flip-flopper” who could not be trusted to protect American women and children from the crazed violence of bearded fanatics. Despite its crudeness, this gender coding proved immensely powerful – to male and female voters alike. So powerful in fact that it appeared to neutralize what everyone agreed was the Bush campaign’s weak point: its economic policies, which have effected a dramatic upward redistribution of wealth and income, from the working classes to business and the wealthy. Thus, an androcentric coding of “the war on terror” was successfully used to distract attention from an unjust distributive politics. This example shows not just the power of gender-coding, but also the way it can distort people’s thinking.

Unfortunately, scientific inquiry is not immune from the distortions of gender coding. In my own field of political philosophy, core concepts, such as citizenship and labor, public and private, still bear the marks of their development over centuries in the closest symbiosis with gender schemata. The effect has been to distort our thinking not only about gender relations, but also about politics in general. Yet so deep-seated is the gender subtext of political philosophy that scholars have only recently learned how to recognize and correct the

resulting deformations. But of course political philosophy is by no means unique. Feminist scholars in virtually every discipline have uncovered analogous gender subtexts.

One key aim of feminist scholarship, although not the only one, is to make visible the distorting force of gender-coding in science itself. Much of feminist scholarship consists in the critique of mainstream scholarship. The aim is to improve our knowledge by revealing how unreflective assumptions and taken-for-granted common sense limit and deform our knowledge. Seen this way, feminism has an affinity with conceptual critique.

In general, then, the feminist interest in combating androcentrism is not a threat to scientific objectivity. This interest, rather, promotes improvement of the quality of knowledge by promoting critical reflection on the concepts that organize it. Moreover, men can do and *do* feminist work – although not (yet) in sufficient numbers. Doubtless there are sociological reasons why women make up the majority of practitioners in this area. In sexist societies that have given rise to feminist political movements, women may be more likely than men (at least at first) to adopt a gender-critical perspective. But such a perspective is in principle available to everyone. I for one hope to see more feminist men!

Lydia H. Liu: Feminism and Science

Besides the issue of androcentrism in biological thinking and the kind of questions concerning objective knowledge, it seems to me that there is yet another level of difficulty in broaching the subject of feminism in relation to science at Wiko, namely, the lack of a shared basis for conversation among the Fellows. There is a sizable feminist scholarship out there raising important philosophical questions about scientific knowledge and the history of science. I am aware that this is not the right moment or place to engage at any length with the insights and blind spots of this scholarship; neither do I believe that it is in our best interest to reinvent the wheel after what has been done by Evelyn Fox Keller, Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, Helen Longino, Cynthia Kraus, and many others over the past three decades. Still I believe that there ought to be some level of engagement – even if superficially – with the kinds of questions that have been raised by the feminist studies of science. That is why I took the liberty of circulating Cynthia Kraus’s article “Naked Sex in Exile: On the Paradox of the ‘Sex Question’ in Feminism and in Science” (2000). In my view, Kraus’s work is one of the most rigorous feminist studies of experimental science and epistemology to appear in recent years. I was very pleased that Kevin Foster followed up

by posting Evelyn Fox Keller's short review "What impact, if any, has feminism had on science?" (2004), so our conversation could at least begin somewhere.

As Nancy Fraser suggested in her opening remarks, gender is a powerful and pervasive sociocultural schema through which people make sense of their world. The misunderstanding of "feminism" itself can often shed interesting light on one's positioning as a scholar in the human sciences broadly defined. If feminism is sometimes taken as a liability with respect to scholarly objectivity, it is interesting to recall that some feminist scientists had started out by embracing the episteme of objectivity in order to reject androcentrism. Keller writes that her original goal was to make science "more truly objective, and, necessarily, 'gender-free'." Though not all feminist scholars had the same vision, they all shared the "bottom line commitment to making this undeniably human achievement more inclusive and more humane." Of course, there is nothing wrong about this earlier feminist agenda. Looking back a quarter of a century later, Keller raises the following questions: "What in fact did we accomplish? Did we change the conditions of women? Did we change the world? Did we change science?" The answer is yes. The broad shifts in biology came about not as a result of better lab work or better criteria for judging objectivity but through the change of society as a whole by women's movements in the 1970s and '80s. The influx of women scientists into biology, in particular, has caused a number of important shifts to reshape the discipline, including what is called the "maternal effect" research.

There is, however, no uniform position to be found among feminist scholars. In fact, the lively debate on gender and sex in the 1980s and 1990s, which led to Judith Bulter's *Bodies that Matter* (1993) and later to Cynthia Kraus's *Drosophila* studies, is a case in point. When Kraus opens her important essay with a question "Is there anything left to 'sex' that is not the 'gender construction of biology'?" she is responding pointedly to the decades-long debate. And I believe that hers is a brilliant response. If the essay "Naked Sex" strikes the reader as a bit dense and hard going, it is well worth the effort. I myself had to go through it a number of times before appreciating the full complexity of her research and insights. Her essay is useful also in the sense that it provides a quick introduction to how the debate among feminist scholars on the Woman Question and the Science Question evolved in the 1970s through the 1990s. Kraus's own contribution to that debate is in taking the Science Question in feminism from its earlier critique of the androcentric methodological discourse of rigor and objectivity to the critique of a "substantive" construct (sometimes termed biological sex), which is to say, to the questioning of "substance" itself as an object of scientific study.

Thus the earlier feminist discussion of essentialism and constructivism is subjected to a new round of critique along the lines of what Butler calls the discursive limits of “sex”. For Kraus, *Drosophila* sex-determination research provides a new critical entry into the allegedly material foundation of sexual difference in feminism and in science. She recounts a fascinating experimental history of the sex-determining gene in the fruit fly, *Sex-lethal*. Her work challenges the epistemological framework of the feminist critique of gender biases in science to come up with new analytical insights into the experimental life of “sex”. In that sense, Kraus is moving the feminist debate from the high theory room to the fruit fly laboratory as she tries to test the various claims that have been advanced about sex, gender, nature, culture, etc. Her analysis of how the “same working process that brings sex into existence, simultaneously unmakes sex as a biological given, by remaking it into an experimental tool” represents an important philosophical intervention in the ongoing discussions of the episteme of experimental science. Her work conveys a good sense of how feminist studies of science have evolved, what their debates are, and where they are currently situated.

Ziba Mir-Hosseini: Feminism Discussion

I want to say a few words about “feminism” in a non-Western context – in the Muslim world – and the way it has been received by an academic discipline, Islamic Studies.

“Feminism” is of course a highly ambiguous term and covers a range of political movements and ideologies as well as orientations and agendas, both in the academic world and the world outside. If there is a single epistemic core to “feminism”, I want to suggest that it cannot be separated from the way it has been enmeshed with the politics and the legacy of colonialism. European colonialism in the nineteenth and the earlier part of the twentieth century, and now the processes of globalization/Westernization, in tandem with neo-colonial configurations of power and nationalist and Islamist responses to them, have all left their marks on the area of knowledge production, on what feminism has come to mean to different people in different contexts. In the Muslim world, the situation is further vitiated by some kinds of “orientalist” scholarship on Islam. The latter continues to provide the ideological basis for military interventions in the Middle East, and feeds popular Western stereotypes of Islam as a violent, medieval, and especially misogynist religion.

In short, the debate on feminism and the issue of women’s rights in the Muslim world must be seen in the wider context of the history of civilizational polemics between “Islam”

and “the West”. Ideological hypocrisy and double standards abound here. The very men who early championed feminism in a Muslim context often took a very “unfeminist” stance when it came to their own situations. The classic example is Lord Cromer, British Consul-General in Egypt in the late nineteenth century, who was the champion of Egyptian women’s rights and saw their “unveiling” as a requisite for their participation in society; but when it came to British society, he opposed women’s participation in politics and was president of the men’s league for opposing women’s suffrage. Much the same can be said of the current American president, George W. Bush: while he claims to champion freedom, democracy, and women’s rights in Afghanistan and Iraq, he has been steadily undoing many gains of the civil rights and women’s rights movements in the USA. Ironically, under the dictatorship of Saddam Hossein, Muslim women in Iraq enjoyed much greater rights and protection in the area of family law than what they are likely to get in the kind of “democracy” that the occupiers are trying to foster.

So, not surprisingly, many Muslims see Euro-American cultural hegemony coupled with a xenophobia directed at Islam and Muslims. For them, “feminism” is part of a broader Western enterprise to discredit and misrepresent Islam. Of course, many of these Muslims also misrepresent “feminism” by stereotyping it and associating it with all that they consider negative and problematic in Western culture: feminism, for them, stands for antagonism between men and women, as well as immorality in the form of sexual promiscuity for women. Some religious and nationalist personalities have no hesitation in associating feminism with colonialist strategies to undermine indigenous social and religious cultures.

For a feminist like me, who wants to locate her feminism within her own religious and cultural traditions, the question becomes: how to pursue a feminist project in a context where “feminism” has served as a handmaiden of colonialism where the promotion of women’s rights has been appropriated by the US neocons in their drive to reshape the map of the Middle East, while local authoritarian forces are silencing Muslim women’s demands and aspirations for equality and human dignity in the name of defending Islamic religion and culture against the legacy of the old colonialism and the onslaught of the new one.

In such a situation, the only way forward is to practice a double critique. That is, to remain critical of Western feminist discourses, their cultural blind spots, and their imperial history, and at the same time not to give in to the pressure coming from one’s religion but to use feminist epistemology, methodology, and insights to question the patriarchal insti-

tutions and traditions in one's own society and religion. But this is not an enviable position to be in. The awkward place in which Muslim feminists like me find ourselves in academia is encapsulated in the very term by which we are referred to: "Islamic Feminist". This label, when it first became current in the early 1990s, was designed to exclude or marginalize us from two disciplines that we want to bring together through our scholarship: Feminist Studies and Islamic Studies. The "Islamic" component of the label put us outside the pale of mainstream feminist scholarship, and the "feminist" component was enough to exclude us from Islamic Studies. But things have changed since then, and we are making our impact on both disciplines. If, in the 1970s, black and third-world feminists were able to offer a critique of Western feminisms that has enriched and contributed greatly to feminist theory, in the first decade of the twenty-first century feminist voices in Islam are helping to redefine the uneasy relationship between feminism, both as an academic discipline and as a movement and religion. This, I hope, will in time help free Islamic studies from the grip of patriarchal mind-sets, and feminism from secularist essentialism.

Maria Todorova: Feminism and Objectivity

I would like to slightly shift the focus and emphasize the issue of objectivity, because it seems to me that this is what makes the reception of feminism, particularly in the sciences, so difficult. I will actually begin with an example from my own discipline: History. In the late 1980s, Peter Novick from the University of Chicago wrote a highly acclaimed and highly contested book (not the Holocaust one, but *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question"*). It was essentially an intellectual history of the historical profession in the United States vis-à-vis this central category, and it could be characterized as one of many works in different disciplines that critique the correspondence theory of truth (namely, that humans can define and know the categories that constitute the external world), that are skeptical about universal categories, and that believe that knowledge is historically contingent. One can compare his role for American history at least with what Thomas Kuhn did with *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

I will spare you the reception of his book: it did produce a lot of discussion and at least two book-length responses (Tom Haskell and Richard Evans), but for me the most interesting thing that came out of these discussions was that they point in the direction of the historian's *practice* rather than only on their theoretical formulations and reflections on their work. When Novick responded in a very nice essay in the *American Historical Review*

(1991) called “My Correct Views on Everything”, he emphasized that, in fact, the historical scholarship produced by the so-called “objectivists” is little, if at all, distinguishable from the historical scholarship produced by the so-called “relativists”. And this led Novick to joke that “just as in matters religious non-believers feel that they can go along without God, so we who are relativists believe we can get along without objectivity.”

I’m coming now to my point. The idea is that the “objectivity *question*” (and not objectivity in a common sense approach) is not a methodological one, i. e., it does not have to do with research techniques. It is rather an epistemological one: about who we are and why we are doing what we are doing. Feminism, the way I see it, belongs to the epistemological realm: it can shape the kinds of questions we ask and it opens cognitive spaces, as Evelyn Fox Keller nicely puts it. It influences how we articulate our results, but there is no quarrel about the ways we reach our results. In fact all disciplines have elaborated rules and practices of how to judge peer work and all of this can be subsumed under methodological objectivity. But because, here at the Wissenschaftskolleg, our encounters are on the level of the articulation of our results, we meet the scientists at the threshold of rhetoric, and since rhetoric is not simply a means for communication but an epistemic code, this produces some friction.

The other point or question I would like to raise (which is also not resolved for myself) is about feminism in science. I read all the materials (courtesy of Lydia, Kevin, Tom and Barbara), and I specially liked the article by Evelyn Fox Keller. As a whole, I am inclined not to see social sciences and humanities, on the one hand, and natural sciences, on the other, divided by a deep chasm, maybe because my mother was a scientist and I am married to one. I really don’t like the talk about the “two cultures” and how it is perpetuated by some superficial if funny observations on who stands and who sits, who speaks and who reads, who uses PowerPoint and who doesn’t. There are, of course, differences, but they have to do more with existing hierarchies of disciplines in academia and their social valorization (in terms of money and prestige) by politicians, industry, and the public at large, and this often reflects on the self-consciousness and accordingly, the relationship between the disciplines.

But I would concede one deeper difference, and it has to do with the distance between the scholar and the object of research. In all human sciences – from the most mathematical (economics) to the ones dealing with society at large and the ones focusing on the individual – in all of these, the relations between the object of study and the subjectivity of the researcher is much closer than anything we have in the natural sciences, and the life sciences

are somewhere in between. So, I am wondering (and this is half statement, half question): I believe that there can be physicists and neurologists as well as historians and anthropologists who can be feminists (and they don't necessarily need to be women), but is it conceivable (and I harbor my doubts) that there can be feminist physics or chemistry or mathematics, as there can be, and we know there is, viable feminist literary criticism or jurisprudence, i. e., fields deeply marked and informed by the epistemology of feminism?

This is what I have been struggling with while thinking about today.

Jamie Monson: Feminism and Methodology. The African Life History Narrative

In Maria's comments, she makes the point that the question of feminism – or rather, the larger question of objectivity that feminist scholarship raises – is not methodological, but rather epistemological: it is about what questions are asked, by whom, and in what contexts. It is about how results are articulated and shared. I find this interesting because in my own work at the Wissenschaftskolleg, I use a methodology that has self-consciously declared itself to be feminist: the African life history narrative.

Life histories were used initially by African women's historians who wished to "write women back in" to African history in the 1970s and 1980s. Life histories were a means to retrieve the voices of women and others whose stories were not told in the official archives, or who were not included in the formal (primarily male) "oral traditions" collected by historians. Women's life histories brought forward the voices of those who sat at the margins. They were held up as feminist because they were a means to give voice to the silenced, to those whose accounts of the past had not yet been heard. The life history narrative – later termed the "personal narrative" – was embraced by feminist historians who were interested in retrieving the stories of those "others" whose experience was not reflected in canonical historical texts. These personal narratives proceeded to stimulate wide-ranging debates about subjectivity, experience and "truth-telling".

It was the late Susan Geiger whose critical work moved the life history to center stage in feminist theory. (Susan Geiger. "What's So Feminist About Women's Oral History?" *Journal of Women's History* 2, 1, 1990: 169–182.) Interestingly, in doing so she shifted women's life history from being merely a "method" that brought women's voices out of the silence to being a new way of "knowing" about the past. Life histories were not feminist because they were about women, she argued, nor were they a "true" representation of women's experience. Rather, what made them feminist was the way they challenged us to

think about location – moving us away from what we understood to be the center. Her narratives illuminated the androcentrism of prior accounts, yet she did not seek to establish a new “centrism”, but to encourage historians to think differently about homogenizing categories. She also wrote about other feminist themes in her work, for example the idea of collective biography as a form of “truth” and the importance of self-consciousness on the part of the researcher/scholar.

In the case of women’s life history narratives, it was the methodology itself, and especially the transparency with which scholars wrote about their methods, that led scholars to raise epistemological questions. In a now famous debate between Kirk Hoppe and Heidi Gengenbach (Hoppe’s challenge in the *International Journal of African Historical Studies* was titled “Whose Life Is It Anyway?”), the issue at hand was the way “Western women” scholars were collecting, editing, interpreting and publishing the life stories of African women who were not literate. Their field methods were intensely scrutinized and became another object of study. Weren’t these scholars merely appropriating African women’s stories to achieve their own ends as feminist historians? Ironically, it was the self-consciousness of women’s historians, their willingness to critically examine their own motives and methods, that gave Hoppe and other critics the material they needed to question them. In the process of this debate, it became clear that the life history methodology – or rather the way that method was revealed in feminist writing – had led to much broader epistemological reflections.

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