

HPSC 1001/1901/2101/2901

WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED SCIENCE?

Semester 2, 2020

**Lecture 17: Feminism and the Political
Dimension**

This week: changing political orientations towards science; the case of feminism; "science and values."

Previous picture (since C18), science often regarded in Western societies as a progressive, anti-authoritarian force, able to challenge and break down entrenched ideas and arrangements.

"Enlightenment values" emphasize individual liberty, democracy, secularism, and willing use of scientific knowledge.

Shift in late C20. Distrust of 'establishment' institutions and values (Vietnam war, civil rights movement, feminism). Science came to be seen as a force in the maintenance of the

“status quo,” especially with respect to political inequalities. The role of science needs to be rethought, and its authority perhaps reduced. A shift away from habits of trust in science by "progressive" thinkers and activists.

This occurred alongside the debates about the nature of science itself that we've been covering – Kuhn, sociology, etc. Each influenced the other.

Look at this in terms of our earlier 3-way distinction between levels. Now we are well and truly at level 3.

Probably the most prominent philosophical discussion of this kind: feminist philosophy of science.

Feminist philosophy of science

Early forms, G. Lloyd *The Man of Reason* (1984).

A historically important view of scientific investigation which emphasizes traditional male attributes, and with continual comparisons to sexual conquest, penetration, etc.

(Examples in *T&R*)

What does that mean for questions in epistemology?

(Questions about evidence, truth, etc.) Hard to say..

General approaches in the late C20:

Feminist empiricism (Longino, Keller(?))

Radical feminist epistemology (Harding, Haraway)

which includes:

Standpoint theory

Feminist postmodernism

Feminist empiricism

Longino most influential. *Science as Social Knowledge*
(1990).

Objectivity as a target concept. Objectivity is not a false goal or completely misconceived. It needs a different analysis from traditional approaches.

Two aspects of the traditional concept of objectivity:

- (i) Contact with real things
- (ii) Absence of bias and 'subjective' influences.

Longino: traditionally, (i) is achieved through (ii). And a pretty minimal account of 'absence of bias' (etc.) will suffice.

After Kuhn (etc.), both (i) and (ii) seem problematic.

Longino: build a new, more detailed account in the area of (ii). Give an account of how communities can foster criticism, include diverse points of view, ensure minority voices are heard, resolve disputes non-coercively.

Part of this – a difficult part – is having a mechanism for deeming some debates as settled, or settled *enough* to be the basis of policy decisions. You *can* question things forever, but a community with practical decisions to make often cannot afford that luxury. (More accurately: it can 'afford' it in the sense of allowing debate to continue indefinitely, but not in a way that affects the allocation of resources too much.)

A theory of community-level processes of this kind is a theory of what objectivity is, and how to get it.

On a pure version of this view, it would be an error to even think about objectivity as something an individual can display outside a social context. Objectivity exists in a community, where there is diversity of opinion and the goal is to resolve questions in the best ways. It does seem that we want to leave room for an individual-level (level 1) feature here, though.

The ideas above do not seem specific to a feminist viewpoint?

Elisabeth Lloyd: ideas like this can be seen as application of best of traditional liberal thinking. Especially J.S. Mill, *On Liberty* (1859). The importance of criticism in a 'marketplace of ideas.'

But it is no accident that feminists pushed these ideas in the 1990s.

Above I had:

"Two aspects of the traditional concept of objectivity:

(i) Contact with real things

(ii) Absence of bias and 'subjective' influences.

.... a pretty minimal account of 'absence of bias' (etc.) will suffice."

From a feminist point of view, there is a lot to say about (ii). The need for a more detailed treatment was conspicuous to feminist philosophers. Exclusion and bias in a context of discussion over options can be subtle, and need not involve a conscious intention to treat ideas or perspectives unfairly.

Do women have different perspectives on scientific questions, as a consequence of their experience?

Case study in primatology (discussed in T&R).

Lots of recent work on neuroscience (books by Cordelia Fine, Rebecca Jordan-Young).

Again -

"Two aspects of the traditional concept of objectivity:

(i) Contact with real things

(ii) Absence of bias and 'subjective' influences.

What about (i), after all this? Perhaps it's a non-issue.

We just give an account of how good communities handle debates. There is a world we live in, and we might hope to do better with it if we handle disputes in these fair ways. But no more than that needs to be said?

* Connect to previous lecture about Latour... Still thinking about that.

More radical views. Distinctions in T&R:

Feminist empiricism

Radical feminist epistemology (Harding, Haraway)

which includes

Standpoint theory

Feminist postmodernism

Their boundaries blur and is not clear who is in which camp.

Treatment in T&R: standpoint theory is not relativist,

feminist postmodernism is.

Science, especially biology, has suffered from sexist assumptions made by individual scientists – also from educational and institutional arrangements (eg., career paths) that discourage women. But focus on content.

The vantage point of women can lead to *better* work being done. A superior "standpoint"? (Harding?)

But: this will only apply to some ideas and issues, at most (Longino). In other areas, the standpoint of a dominant group will be advantageous. It can't be a general advantage. (Might this be questioned?)

Also: 'women' are not a monolithic unit in this context. Role of class, race, sexual orientation... (see Okruhlik in "Gender and the Bio Sciences").

Perhaps: need to abandon the idea that there could be a "best" standpoint, or view of the world, etc. Move to a more relativist position.

Okruhlik: "feminist postmodernism":

giving up altogether the endeavor to become more and more objective and by accepting the existence of an irreducible plurality of alternative narratives about the way the world is. The notion of a scientific method that might allow us to transcend the constraints of culture, time, and place is repudiated once and for all by feminist postmodernists. Transtheoretical criteria for rationality and objectivity are dismissed as products of a masculine mythology, and the 'successor science' project is abandoned.

Consequences: projects of *reform* are undermined to some extent.

* A familiar problem with relativist views: is the position applied to itself? Best and usual answer is: yes.

Note also the role of the earlier point re standpoints: there are many overlapping groups and viewpoints (--> more recent discussions of 'intersectionality').

A tendency, as far as I can tell: to move back towards the moderate options, versions of 'feminist empiricism'

(Longino, Okruhlik). In part because the view makes more sense internally, in part because of unwillingness to abandon the simpler reformist objectives.

A broader realignment:



If this shirt was transported back to 1990, it would have made no sense at all.

What happened?

Climate change debates, mostly. (Entirely?)
See the Latour interview discussed last time.

Now: Covid-19. A general tendency for center-left politicians to say: "we are guided by science" in response to more libertarian leanings from the right.

Joe Biden in US: ""I would shut [the country] down. I would listen to the scientists" (at start of course).

Keir Starmer in UK. "Keir Starmer takes the side of science to shatter Covid consensus" (*Financial Times* last month, <https://www.ft.com/content/a0265334-239e-418f-aecc-d68bf2b709b5>)

Re the UK 2-week short lockdown recently proposed: "Johnson parting ways with the scientists was the perfect opportunity for Keir to step in and call for a more science-led approach,' said one Labour MP."

Dan Andrews in Vic: "You can't argue with this sort of data, you can't argue with science"

<https://www.crikey.com.au/2020/09/08/dan-andrews-victoria-covid-19-modelling>

Radical science studies and the Sokal Hoax

A bit about 'postmodernism'.

* What is *modernism*?

A central usage of the term is in architecture, allied to movements in art, philosophy, politics. Our old friends the Log Pos. Carnap and Neurath.

In architecture: Corbusier, Van der Rohe. In Aust: Seidler. Ideals of: shedding of unwanted clutter and reconstruction from simple elements (in architecture, in language). See Galison, "Aufbau/Bauhaus".

Breakdown of this project.

Postmodernism: Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (1979).
An abandoning of 'meta-narratives' and overarching theories.
Replacement by mosaic of local theories, languages, projects.
Also the architectural side, and this is part of what was early.
Eclecticism, whimsical drawing on many influences.
(Frank Gehry, UTS building)

In philosophy and related areas: rather extreme relativism.
'Dissolving' not just of ideals of objectivity, but idea that
'stable' meaning is a feature of language, etc. Instead we
inhabit an ever-changing mosaic of 'texts'

Standard intellectual goals replaced in large part by a high degree of politicization. (And a cultivated, showy style exemplified by Jacques Derrida.)

When I was an undergraduate in the 80s here, the conflict between movements of this kind and more standard intellectual styles was acute.

The 'science wars' -- postmodernist views of science, *versus* some scientists and philosophers.

The combination of politicization and an embrace of obscure writing laid the field open to Sokal's hoax.

<http://www.physics.nyu.edu/sokal/>