

Identity Politics and Dialectical Reason: Beyond an Epistemology of Provenance

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Identity politics is important within feminism. However, it often presupposes an overly subjectivist theory of knowledge that I term an epistemology of provenance. I explore some works of feminist standpoint theory that begin to address the difficulties of such an epistemology. I then bring Sartre's account of knowledge in the Critique of Dialectical Reason to bear on these difficulties, arguing that his work offers tools for addressing them more adequately.

Feminists have given Jean-Paul Sartre a hard time. Although second-wave feminism has deemed the works of male thinkers as diverse as Marx, Freud, and Foucault worthy of serious if critical engagement, Sartre has for the most part been vilified when he has not been ignored. In one way this is perhaps surprising, for Simone de Beauvoir, “mother of us all,” certainly acknowledged a debt to him. The central claim of *The Second Sex*—“one is not born a woman but becomes one”—presupposes Sartre’s argument that “existence precedes essence”: that human beings become what they are on the basis of no pre-given necessity or “nature.” As a radically anti-essentialist philosophy of freedom, it would seem that Sartre’s work ought, *prima facie*, still to have some relevance for feminism.

But this potential notwithstanding, there are also reasonable grounds for the hostility Sartre’s work has evoked on the part of feminists. In the phenomenological psychology developed in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), the feminine is frequently equated with a “nature” that is not only unfree, but that threatens treacherously to suck “man” into its viscous embrace and destroy “his” freedom.¹ Moreover, although Sartre is certainly no orthodox Cartesian, it can be argued that in *Being and Nothingness* he in large measure replicates the Cartesian conflation of consciousness with freedom and posits a fundamentally

autonomous, self-constituting subject. Between men—the bearers of such subjectivity—conflict and aggression are seen as ubiquitous; and society, insofar as it appears at all in Sartre's account of human existence, is essentially Hobbesian. In short, what many feminists have described as a distinctly masculinist conception of the self and "his" relation to others can be said to permeate *Being and Nothingness*.²

However, although it remains Sartre's best-known book, *Being and Nothingness* was by no means his last. The oppressive experiences of World War II (including time spent in a German prisoner-of-war camp and life in German-occupied Paris) and his involvement in non-Communist Left politics in the decades thereafter, led to significant reformulations of Sartre's earlier ideas. Along with Beauvoir—and arguably in part from her—Sartre learned of *la force des choses*, of the weight of systems of oppression, and of the intrinsically interdependent quality of human freedoms.³ I argue in this essay that his greater focus on such issues, particularly in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), gives aspects of his later work an enduring relevance for feminism. In particular, we should still turn to the *Critique* for insights that will help us address certain epistemological problems that have become acute with the development of feminist (and other) identity politics.

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Since the late 1970s, second-wave feminism has undergone a marked re-orientation: a shift away from its earlier demands to minimize distinctions between the sexes and a move, instead, toward a celebratory emphasis on women's differences from men. In what I will call global-difference feminism, modern Western culture as a whole has been depicted as fundamentally male in its individualism, competitiveness, and desire to dominate nature; in its denigration of emotions and the body; and in its faith in abstract, disembodied reason. By contrast, women—all women—have been celebrated for their connectedness with nature and with others—particularly through their maternal capacities—for their acceptance of the body, their more concrete and embodied ways of knowing and judging.

More recently, however, the argument for celebrating women's difference has been turned back against global-difference feminism. For increasingly in the last decade, many have pointed out that the rather grandiose and universal claims made about women's differences from men have obscured profound and frequently oppressive differences between women. Just as "humanist" voices, calling since the seventeenth century for the liberation of humankind, have turned out frequently to be speaking uniquely for certain male parts of humankind, so feminist voices turn out to have been speaking for only certain parts of womankind—primarily for white, middle-class, and heterosexual women. They have thus masked power relations and helped perpetuate divergences of interest between different kinds of women. By the mid-1990s feminists have

come to recognize that women have radically different experiences from each other and speak with many different voices. Furthermore, they may also have widely divergent, or even directly conflicting, interests. In short, there has been a shift toward what I will call multiple-difference feminism.⁴

The “double turn” toward difference—the recognition of difference as occurring both between men and women and between women themselves—has marked an important advance in feminism. Above all, the ideological nature of bold universalistic claims, be they about the nature of “the human self” or “woman’s self,” about freedom, justice, truth, or progress, have been demonstrated with a thoroughness never dreamed of by Marx. It is not only each ruling class, as Marx said, which has “to represent its interest as the common interest of all members of society” ([1846] 1978, 174). Similarly, those who come to dominate by virtue of sex, race, or other characteristics will tend to represent their own interests in universalistic forms, thus masking oppression and silencing those who are subordinate. The valid goals of much recent multiple-difference feminism, particularly feminist identity politics, have been to expose such ideological maskings within the women’s movement itself and to begin to create spaces of various kinds in which the previously silenced can speak.

Identity politics is important within feminism. It functions effectively both as a critique of existing power relations and as a project of self-empowerment for marginalized categories of women. Against the hegemonic claims and norms of feminism as a predominantly white, middle-class, and heterosexual movement, identity politics seeks to affirm the validity, indeed even the superiority, of different ways of being and knowing. Within feminism, black identity politics, along with that of other women of color, has functioned as a particularly powerful attack on global-difference feminism. As Audre Lorde pithily responded to Mary Daly’s account of the universality of women’s oppression: “The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those differences . . . beyond sisterhood is still racism” (1984, 70). Black feminist identity politics has asserted that what might appear as universal forms of women’s experience, be they motherhood or subjection to sexual violence, are not “the same” for all women. It also points out that white women are frequently complicit in the particular forms of oppression still experienced by black women: feminism itself can function as ideology, as a masking of power and privilege, as a means of empowering some women at the expense of others.

As a political critique of global-difference feminism, identity politics is indubitably valid. Since women are never women *tout court*, but are always situated also as members of a class, a race, an ethnic grouping, a sexual orientation, an age grade, and so on, it is dangerous to assume that the inequities and power relations that pertain to those other dimensions of social situation will not play out also between women. However, in its attempts to

refute falsely universalizing knowledge claims, identity politics sometimes tends to replicate those aspects of global-difference feminism which have stressed the radical incommunicability of women's experience to men. Identity politics tends toward an excessive particularization and partitioning of knowledge, but now along the lines of race or ethnicity, for example, as well as gender. For such experience-based accounts of knowledge imply an epistemology of provenance: that is, the claim that knowledge arises from an experiential basis that is fundamentally group-specific and that others, who are outside the group and who lack its immediate experiences, cannot share that knowledge. As a corollary it is generally claimed that outsiders have no basis from which they can legitimately evaluate the group's claims about its knowledge, or those political or moral positions that it takes on the basis of that knowledge. In short, only those who live a particular reality can know about it; and only they have the right to speak about it.

Many groups that practice identity politics also advocate a politics of alliance or coalition with other groups, invoking the ideal of "bridging" differences once they are recognized and respected.⁵ Commitments to coalition-work, to alliance, to solidarity across groups are, I believe, vital for any effective progressive politics in this day and age. However, the implications of an epistemology of provenance, if consistently pursued, threaten to undercut coalition politics or other forms of solidarity among women. The unintended end-point of an epistemology of provenance can be an acute and politically debilitating subjectivism, which belies the possibility of communication and common action across differences. It is this apparent contradiction within identity politics (and other forms of multiple-difference feminism) that concerns me in this essay.

Some identity politics has tended to assert global identities for a particular kind of women, arguing for example that all black women share culture, experience, and ways of knowing (Collins 1990; Brown 1988). However, such assertions tend in turn to be challenged as falsely universalistic. There is thus a tendency for identities increasingly to subdivide. For example, many lesbian women of color have come to identify themselves as having an identity distinct from that of other women of color and of other lesbians. Or, within the lesbian community, those who accept sado-masochistic practices proclaim themselves to have a different identity from those who do not (Phelan 1989, esp. Chap. 6). Since no woman can avoid living a plurality of identities, a central dynamic of identity politics is to move toward ever-shrinking identity groups, for which the logical terminus would have to be not merely subjectivism but solipsism, since no one person's set of experiences is identical to another's.⁶

Identity politics, as an epistemological position, thus threatens to leave us without the possibility of having the kind of common knowledge, or forming the kind of collective judgments, necessary for the development of broadly organized, feminist coalition politics such as its adherents often advocate. To

exemplify: some consistent end-points of an epistemology of provenance would be to say, among other things, that those who do not experience domestic violence, or incest, or rape, or unwanted pregnancy, or even unequal pay, have no experiential basis from which to evaluate and speak about such issues. Statements such as these, which I think very few feminists would want to endorse, are not of a different propositional order than the statements, commonly heard today, to the effect that white women have no basis or right to discuss the issue of sexism in black heterosexual relationships, or that Western women should take no position on clitoridectomy in Africa or the Middle East. The challenge identity politics now presents us with is this: to find a way to recognize the power-laden dangers of global-difference feminism and to affirm the importance of the existence of radical experiential differences, but to do so without embracing an epistemology of provenance. The problem is to find a way of acknowledging the claims to knowledge of particular identity groups without thereby wholly evacuating claims for a more general basis for knowledge, or more general visions and projects of emancipation.

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To suggest a way out of this impasse I think it might be helpful to build on some of the insights of feminist standpoint theory. In this section of my essay I discuss the work of two theorists, Nancy Hartsock and Donna Haraway. In the next section I will use the later work of Sartre as a resource for further developing some of their insights.

Like identity politics, standpoint theory, for which the work of Nancy Hartsock (1983) is paradigmatic, insists on the epistemological validity of the experience of a particular oppressed group: women. But it does so while also concerning itself with a *general* human emancipatory project and with the formulation of claims about the world that are accessible and potentially valid beyond the experience of that particular oppressed group.

Hartsock appropriates for feminism aspects of a humanistic reading of Marxist epistemology. Marx had argued that dominant bourgeois accounts of reality are, as Hartsock puts it, "partial and perverse" (1983, 232) and that the proletariat, through theoretical and political practice, may rid itself of these accounts and formulate an epistemological standpoint of its own, one that is not merely different from the dominant one but which has an emancipatory potential. In so doing, it may make itself a "universal class," the vehicle not only of its own emancipation but of human emancipation more generally. Similarly, Hartsock argues, women may achieve a feminist standpoint that not only functions as an alternative to, or a critique of, "abstract masculinity," but which would involve "generalizing the human possibilities present in the life activity of women to the social system as a whole," and which would "raise, for the first time in human history, the possibility of a fully human community,

a community structured by a variety of connections rather than separation and opposition" (1983, 247).

Hartsock argues that the possibility for the development of such a feminist standpoint is given *not* in women's subjective experience per se, but in their specific forms of life activity, or practices, within the social division of labor. She is careful to distinguish a *feminist* standpoint from the experience of women in general, for the latter frequently tends to be shaped by dominant male views and values, whose hegemony can be exposed only through a critical and self-critical feminist project. Equally importantly, a feminist standpoint also involves more than recognizing and valorizing the experiences of oppression, otherness, marginalization, of which identity politics also speaks. It involves a work of critical reflection on that experience and on the *social practices* out of which it is born. It aims to develop a critique of dominant knowledge claims and an alternative account of social reality on which a project of *general* human emancipation might be based.

Hartsock's standpoint theory, then, attempts both to show how knowledge emerges from specific practice-based experiences and to connect it with a broader epistemological universe and political agenda. But there are also difficulties with her work. As critics from both postmodern and identity politics positions have pointed out, Hartsock still tends to operate with an overly global conception of women's practice and experience, and thus to obscure differences and power inequities between women. As Marlee Kline puts it,

Hartsock opens herself to the same charge of false generalization that she has raised against Marx from the perspective of gender. A feminist standpoint, when viewed from perspectives attentive to considerations of race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual identity, physical ability, etc., appears limited and essentialist in the same way the proletariat [sic] perspective appears limited from a perspective attentive to considerations of gender. (1989, 38)

However, contrary to such criticisms, I do not think that the importance of differences between women is *necessarily* excluded from the central concerns of standpoint theory.⁷ Because it begins from the social division of labor and from accounts of social reality that emerge from different social practices, there is nothing intrinsic to the theory that would preclude developing an account of a multiplicity of women's standpoints, each of which would overlap in some aspects and diverge radically in others. Hartsock's work can be developed in ways she did not initially undertake herself, in order to elaborate an account of multiple feminist standpoints that are neither identical nor yet wholly distinct. As Donna Haraway writes in her article, "Situated Knowledges": "There is no single feminist standpoint. . . . But the feminist standpoint theorists' goal of an epistemology and politics of engaged, accountable posi-

tioning remains eminently potent. The goal is better accounts of the world, that is 'science' " (1991, 196).

In this significant article, to which I now turn, Haraway recasts standpoint theory through postmodern problematics to argue for the importance of a multiplicity of different epistemological locations for a non-dominative feminism. She also recognizes, however, the need for objective knowledge—by which I take her to mean knowledge that is at least partially shareable, publicly communicable and transmissible, about a world that is in some sense "real." Her question, which is also mine, is whether both a respect for different and divergent knowledges *and* some kind of account of objective—thus shareable—knowledge can be sustained at the same time.

Haraway suggests that they can both be sustained if we reconceptualize our notions of objectivity to take account, as feminism (and I would also add existential phenomenology) has taught us we should, of the embodied and situated nature of all knowing subjects. Objectivity is not to be confused with the traditional "god-trick" of "promising vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully" (191). Rather, she insists, objectivity is not about detachment but must emerge through the recognition of "particular and specific embodiment" and is "definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility" (190). Thus to privilege embodied standpoints is not to embrace relativism or subjectivism. On the contrary, Haraway suggests, "The alternative to relativism is partial, locatable critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology" (191).

Haraway takes vision as a general metaphor for knowing. She argues that we do not need to conceive of vision as the disembodied and objectifying male gaze, but can instead use it to remind ourselves that knowing selves are always embodied and that our seeing/knowing is thus always located, partial, and perspectival. But Haraway, not unlike Hartsock, is at pains to stress that not all perspectives are equally valid in the struggle against domination: simply "being" of an oppressed or marginalized group does not automatically give one a privilege in formulating truth. Rather, she argues: "Not just any partial perspective will do. . . . We are also bound to seek perspective from those points of view, which can never be known in advance, which promise something quite extraordinary, that is, knowledge potent for worlds less organized by axes of domination" (p. 192). However, such liberatory (my word) "partial perspectives" are not those of a simple identity politics, in which un-problematized, or self-identical, selves claim to present their own direct experience as reality: "Identity, including self-identity, does not produce science; critical positioning does, that is objectivity" (193).

For Haraway, the distinction between asserting an identity and assuming a *critical* positioning involves an awareness of the *mediated* nature of all experience and of the ways that power differentials permeate those mediations.

"Vision is *always* a question of the power to see" (192). This power is not equitably distributed across humanity, but depends on our differential access to various prostheses, or optical technologies: "Vision requires instruments of vision; an optics is a politics of positioning. Instruments of vision mediate standpoints; there is no immediate vision from the standpoints of the subjugated" (193). Thus, she suggests, there is no such thing as "innocent 'identity' politics"—identity politics too is always implicated in power.

This far, I find Haraway's argument helpful. But important questions remain, concerning the mediated nature of knowing, to which her answers are less than adequate. Using vision as the metaphor for knowing has the advantage of emphasizing the embodied and situated nature of knowledge; and stressing that vision is never direct, but always mediated by "instruments of vision," has the virtue of pointing out that knowledge is never a simple "given" but is structured—and power-differentiated—by human artifice. But vision per se is also a limited metaphor for knowing, implying that knowledge is rather passively received through the senses and simply varies according to where we happen to be situated. Thus Haraway has additionally to introduce the notion of optics, of the politics of the production and differential distribution of instruments of vision, to make her metaphor work. But in doing so she actually intimates that we need another account of knowing: one based on human praxis. For the questions we have to ask about situated knowledges, in order to understand how they differ and yet might still give rise to forms of objectivity, must surely concern the following: How do people come to be situated such that they have different "partial perspectives"? Who makes the instruments of "vision" that enable them differentially to see/know the world? Who has which instruments and who controls access to their use? We need, in short, a fuller account of the *politics* of the production and distribution of seeing/knowing technologies than can be derived from vision as the primary metaphor for knowing. A theory that links the emergence of knowledges more directly to action is called for.

Another difficulty concerns the way Haraway characterizes the power-saturated technologies upon which situated knowledges depend. Mixing her metaphors with blithe abandon, Haraway suggests that the instruments, or technologies, of vision are above all semiotic: it is what she calls "a semiotic-material technology" that links "meanings and bodies" (192). But it is never clear in her account what justifies the hyphen here. Semiosis, could be described as a technology and as involving a "skilled practice" (194). But in what sense is this technology, or practice, "material"? Because it emerges from and affects bodies? Because it uses material analogues of such manufactured objects as the eye-glasses, microscopes, telescopes, or cameras of optics? We are not told. Haraway's insistence on the materially mediated nature of all knowledge, including knowledge of the located self, is of prime importance. But her conceptions of the material and of human-material interactions remain far too

sketchy. I will turn shortly to Sartre's description of the emergence of the human world as a multiplicity of "practico-inert" totalizations of practices for a way of clarifying and developing her insights.

Although Haraway claims that from "partial perspectives" and "partial connections" there can emerge "webs of connection" and "shared conversations"—that is, forms of objective or partially shareable knowledge—her account never makes clear *how* it is that such connections and communications across difference are possible. What is it that is shared between the occupants of different "partial perspectives"? If we are able to make partial connections, what precisely are the connecting "parts," and why and how do they do the connecting? What needs to be explained is what is taken for granted here: "We do need an earth-wide network of connections, including the ability partially to translate knowledges among very different—and power-differentiated—communities," Haraway writes (187). I agree. But what is it that makes knowledges even "partially" translatable across radical differences? What enables escape from an epistemology of provenance? Haraway hints at a couple of answers, but develops neither very far. One is to do with the nature of selves; the other with the kinds of shared, or overlapping, milieux in which selves exist.

The first answer is that if we cease to view the self as unitary and stable, realizing that it is instead "split and contradictory" we will see that such a split self can join easily with other such selves: "The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another. Here is the promise of objectivity" (193). It is an attractive metaphor: our rough edges, our seams, our openings perhaps, are the places where we can join with other and different selves. But, we must surely ask, *who* does the stitching together of this self? Is the self a kind of transcendental seamstress who sews her own parts together? If so, this self is perhaps more originary and cohesive than Haraway wants to admit; perhaps the self can even be conceived as a "project," as Sartre would put it.

Alternatively, with a certain further mixing of metaphors, the stitching together might be construed as an operation taking place on the self from without: automated sewing machines, which stitch us together, are parts of the "semiotic-material technology." Put less metaphorically, Haraway's second suggestion seems to be that what connects diverse knowing selves is, indeed, the existence of some common dimensions to their otherwise disparate lives. Experiences are never as radically distinct as either identity politics or post-modern notions of fracturing would imply because there are, after all, some elements common to all human lives—elements that make the communicability of experience across difference possible. Semiosis is one of these elements, but Haraway also points to others. She suggests at one point that gender

is “a field of structured and structuring difference” (195). Feminism, she also tells us, must critically position itself in “inhomogeneous gendered social space” (195). But to talk of “a field” (even one of difference) and of “social space” (even if it is “inhomogeneous”) is to posit an at least partially continuous social world that mediates between differently located selves and, as it were, underwrites their ability to communicate through the presence of common externalities.

In order for our partial perspectives to ground a situated objectivity they must be formulated from our different locations within something continuous, something in which all of us are embedded—be it field, social space, discourse, or some other medium. “Webs of connections” can arise across our diverse standpoints and identities *only* if the world mediates between them in some very general ways. Haraway implies as much, but her discomfort with anything that might be seen as universalizing discourse seems to leave her reluctant to explore explicitly how such general mediations might be constituted. Her project thus remains suspended in mid-air.

Haraway points us in the right direction by insisting that we need to seek ways of formulating objective knowledges that originate from, rather than obscure, differences and multiple standpoints and which acknowledge embodiment and location. But she offers us neither a sufficient account of selves, nor a sufficient account of how it is that the world mediates between them.

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Re-enter the later Jean-Paul Sartre. In the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* ([1960] 1976), Sartre develops a theory of situated, practical subjectivity that can be of help in addressing the difficulties raised by an epistemology of provenance. What makes this theory of particular interest to feminism is Sartre’s concern to defend particularity and difference while still exploring, at least as a heuristic device, the universalistic emancipatory vision of Marx. One of Sartre’s main protagonists in the *Critique* is the “orthodox” Soviet-style Marxism that the French Communist Party still espoused in the late 1950s. Such a Marxism, Sartre charged, “is identical with Terror in its inflexible refusal to *differentiate*; its goal is total assimilation at the least possible effort. The aim is not to integrate what is different as such, while preserving for it a relative autonomy, but rather to suppress it” ([1960] 1968, 48).⁸ Against such a totalitarian Marxism, Sartre seeks to elaborate a Marxist theory that would privilege differences while still exploring the possibility of a project of worldwide human emancipation.

To emphasize Sartre’s sensitivity to difference is not, however, to deny that the *Critique* is still deeply flawed by sexism—it is! For example, Sartre’s account of how social relations come to be constituted out of praxis simply ignores the whole area of reproduction, from pregnancy to child-care. In *Search for a Method*, Sartre criticizes orthodox Marxism for failing to recognize the impor-

tance of childhood: "Today's Marxists are concerned only with adults. Reading them, one would believe that we are born at the age when we earn our first wages," he writes ([1960] 1968, 62). Alas, the very same criticism can be leveled against the *Critique*, where both childhood and the various kinds of praxis involved in giving birth to and bringing up children are ignored. Moreover, those rare mentions of sexuality in the many hundreds of pages of the *Critique* treat it above all from a male point of view.⁹ Even so, a selective appropriation of the *Critique* is worthwhile. For my purposes, Sartre's criticism of what he calls "analytic reason" and his development of an account of what he calls "dialectical reason"—that is, a reason which recognizes itself to be situated and to be able to grasp reality only from its own location—are of particular significance.

Analytic reason, (or "positivist reason" as Sartre sometimes calls it), is the kind of reason that has also been subject more recently to postmodern critique as "Enlightenment" thought.¹⁰ It lays the world out before itself as a set of objects for contemplation and dispassionate investigation. Analytic reason thus presupposes a knowing subject who stands, transcendent, outside the domain he or she investigates. It engages, in short, in Haraway's "god-trick," positing the theorist as the all-seeing spectator, the great panorama of history laid out at his or her feet. Against such a conception Sartre had written to Camus some years earlier that, "we are up to our eyebrows" in history ([1952] 1965, 77). In short, our vision is always from within or under, never from without or above. When analytic reason purports to study the world as if the theorist were not immersed in it, it functions ideologically: it serves to mask forms of oppression and exploitation by making the present human condition appear "natural" and thus not amenable to alteration ([1960] 1976, 820).

Against analytical reason, particularly as it has been used in Marxism to give a "scientific" account of the "laws of motion" of society, Sartre sets out to develop his account of "dialectical reason." Dialectical reason begins from the situation of an embodied and practically engaged self. It involves an investigation of the human world for which an individual situation is the point of departure but which, Sartre argues, can proceed far beyond our direct experience. It must begin from "the *life*, the objective being, of the investigator, in the world of Others" ([1960] 1976, 51).

But what then, we must ask, prevents Sartre also from slipping into relativism and an account of fragmented and incommunicable knowledges? If each of us comes to know the world and to theorize about it from our own particular historical and social location, do we not risk embarking, as with identity politics, on an epistemology of provenance which has solipsism as its worst-case terminus? For Sartre, the answer to such a question is, after much consideration, "no." Such particular, situated knowledges are, in principle, communi-

cable and intelligible to others. But this possibility has to be systematically demonstrated, rather than, as in Haraway's work, rhetorically asserted.

The demonstration begins for Sartre from the examination of the purposive and transformative human activity that he calls *praxis*. Sartre defines praxis as "an organising project which transcends material conditions towards an end" ([1960] 1976, 734). In its most abstract form, praxis arises from our existence as organic entities: we need to engage in praxis in order to transform nature into means of survival that will ward off death. But in its more concrete manifestations, this kind of action generates not only the world of products (of use-values in Marxian terminology) but also less tangible phenomena, such as aspects of culture, forms of social organization, even language. In choosing praxis as his starting point Sartre differs significantly from many postmodern thinkers, who tend to grant constituting primacy to discourse. He differs also from advocates of identity politics, who generally begin not from action but from subjective experiences of shared oppression in order to construct an affirmative identity.

Like Hartsock, Sartre argues that an adequate social theory must start from what it is that human beings *do* in the world. He also argues that the specific characteristics of human practical activity must be the point of departure for accounting for the possibility of knowledge and reason. An adequate theory of situated knowledges, Sartre teaches us, cannot be developed primarily from Haraway's metaphor of vision. Although Sartre's exemplifications of praxis tend to involve primarily masculine activity, I think that the structure of praxis as he describes it applies also to uniquely female forms of activity. Insofar as becoming pregnant, giving birth and nursing are human actions, rather than natural functions, these too are not fundamentally different in structure from what Sartre calls praxis.¹¹

Sartre begins his account of dialectical reason at the most abstract point possible, with praxis as a purely individual undertaking. However, this individualistic starting point is heuristically chosen, in order to be able to demonstrate that human action is in fact social through and through. "Critical investigation," as Sartre also calls dialectical reason, "will set out from . . . the individual fulfilling himself in his abstract *praxis*, so as to rediscover, through deeper and deeper conditionings, the totality of his practical bonds with others and, thereby, the structures of the various practical multiplicities" ([1960] 1976, 52).¹² Through what might initially appear a thoroughly subjectivist project, the study of one's own situated praxis, ever wider sets of social and historical processes may be made intelligible. It can be demonstrated that "there is no such thing as an isolated individual" ([1960] 1976, 677) and that it is possible for us (whoever "we" may be) to understand and communicate about kinds of human praxis radically different from our own. The relevance of such an undertaking to the issue of connections across differences between women is, I think, obvious.

Examining such abstract, individual praxis, Sartre identifies two sets of analytically distinct but always mutually implicated, indeed dialectical, properties that together account for the fact that praxis is always social. These sets of properties also justify the claim that situated knowledges can encompass realities far wider than the scope of our own direct experience. First, individual abstract praxis comes to discover that it is connected to that of others “in exteriority,” through the mediations of what Sartre calls “the practical material field.” Second, individual praxis involves “interior” qualities. It possesses a fundamental intelligibility because it is intentional: it requires a purpose, a project to transform something existing into a future possibility. As such *any* praxis has certain qualities that enable us, *reciprocally*, to recognize it as human praxis.

CONNECTIONS IN EXTERIORITY

Any praxis, Sartre argues, has to involve a transformation of that segment of the world on which it acts, of its “practical material field.” When it acts on the world, however, praxis also produces the “practico-inert”: forms of worked matter, or externalized embodiments of praxis, which in turn will both mediate and constrain future praxis. These may then be encountered as forms of “exigency,” which in part dictate the necessary forms of future praxis. Simply because it cannot take place without the mediation of the material world, praxis always produces something more and other than is intended, be it simple waste matter or changed social relationships. This process is compounded by the fact that even what might initially appear to be isolated and individual praxis never is.

As Sartre painstakingly demonstrates, praxis always takes place situated in a practical material field that brings it into mediation with other individual praxis. In the process, it brings social entities of various kinds into being, whether or not the individual actors are aware of it at the time. Moreover, this field is generally shaped by scarcities which compound the exigencies of praxis. Scarcity here does not mean merely an objective insufficiency of material goods. It encompasses also the threat or fear thereof (as in the dynamic that can create hoarding) or less-tangible lacks—of time, status, affection, or social recognition, for example. Thus a praxis such as child-care, or other forms of noncommodified “sex-affective production,”¹³ also takes place in a field of scarcity.

Sartre gives the history of deforestation in China as a simple paradigmatic example of the material mediation of individual praxis conditioned by scarcity: individual peasants, seeking to increase their arable land, cut down trees. But in the process they *collectively* denuded the land, inducing massive flooding of the Yangtze river and ending up by reducing the total amount of arable land available. There was, says Sartre, “no joint undertaking.” However, the trans-

formation of each individual undertaking through its unanticipated mediation with other identical undertakings issued finally in a “joint result,” which each encountered as the alienation (that is, the making other) of his or her own praxis ([1960] 1976, 163-64).¹⁴ An analogue to Sartre’s example would be the way that decisions by individual women in the United States to enter forms of traditionally female employment, such as the “caring” occupations, result in the consolidation of a segmented labor market, in which women tend increasingly to be locked into low status and poorly paid employment. Another example would be the outcomes of decisions made by many poor women in “third world” societies to give birth to a large number of children as a strategy for ensuring support in old age. Given existing economic inequities, such individual strategies may give rise to the “joint result,” intended by none, of increasing pressure on resources and may, paradoxically, result in greater destitution in old age.

What is important in Sartre’s example is that a simple social identity has come into being on the basis of apparently individual praxis: the Chinese peasants who produced deforestation constitute a “practical ensemble,” Sartre’s most general term for a set of human beings whose praxis connects them together through the mediation of the material world, whether or not they are aware of it. As the book proceeds, Sartre’s examples deal with ensembles that are unified by an increasingly complex and socially constituted practical material field, be they a number of people waiting at a bus stop for a bus that might not have seats for all of them, a collection of people listening to a propaganda broadcast, consumers linked by the market, or workers competing for jobs.

Insofar as such ensembles are constituted through the mediations of the external field, whose practico-inert exigencies react back upon the further praxis of each of its individual members, Sartre describes the relationship of the members of such ensembles to each other as one of “seriality.” That is, they are passively and unintentionally connected, each a victim of the unchosen links that alter the outcome of the praxis of each. Sartre uses the term “collective” to describe such an ensemble. By contrast, he uses the term “group” to describe individuals who come together in a more purposive and direct manner. Thus, in his analysis of the history of the French working classes, he depicts a complex set of dynamics between workers as collectives—individuals who are serialized, atomized, isolated and placed in competition with each other by the labor market—and workers as groups. Only the latter form organized and conscious nodes of resistance of various kinds (ranging from union activity to spontaneous participation in brief acts of sabotage to attempted revolution).

Sartre’s account of collectives and of the serial relations of their members can help us to resolve issues about the identity of “women.”¹⁵ The identities of individual women, I suggest, are constituted in large measure “in exterior-

ity," as members of multiple collectives (for example, as objects of male sexual desire, as consumers of particular kinds of products, as members of ethnic collectives, as pregnant females, as workers in a segmented labor market). Moreover, the relationship between women and feminism (Hartsock's *feminist* standpoint; Haraway's *critical* positioning) can be clarified by using Sartre's distinction between collectives and groups, that is, between passively mediated ensembles and intentionally created ones. Indeed, one could write a fascinating history of the feminist movement in the United States and its relationship to diverse ensembles of women by adapting Sartre's methods of analyzing class as collectives and as groups. However, my main point here is epistemological: the fact that individual praxes are materially and serially connected is a necessary pre-condition for the possibility that critical reflection about one's own praxis can extend into a wider investigation of society. It is not, however, in itself a sufficient condition.

INTERIORITY AND RECIPROCITY

Co-given with its exterior conditionings and mediations, praxis must also have what Sartre calls an "interior" dimension. If it had none, it would be some kind of blind force that we simply would not recognize as human action. However, this is not to say that praxis must be guided by a Cartesian consciousness, existing independently of the world it contemplates—or indeed by any kind of constituting consciousness. Far from it. As we have seen, Sartre anticipates feminist critiques of Western rationalism by rejecting the possibility of a de-situated and detached subject surveying the world as its object. Sartre's practical subject is not the disembodied propagator of the god-trick.

However, although consciousness is not autonomous, Sartre argues that any praxis, as a transformative engagement with the world, must necessarily involve intentional consciousness, even if it is often at a pre-reflective level. There is an embodied intentionality to human existence that is prior to both conscious knowledge and to discourse.¹⁶ This also implies that perhaps the practical subject is not as "split" as Haraway's account of the subject suggests: there is a basic bodily intentionality that knits an existence together, integrating its multiple and apparently fragmentary collective identities, each of which is itself the outcome of a multiplicity of prior and present praxes.

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre had argued (with a certain debt to Husserl) that consciousness is consciousness *of* something, that it cannot but intend an object. But now, in the *Critique*, where Sartre's concern is no longer consciousness per se but consciousness as the interior dimension of praxis, intentionality has additionally to do with the purposive quality of our apprehension of the world in which we are actively engaged. To talk of intentionality as purposive is not to say that our ends have always to be fully articulated prior to action. But it is to say that intentionality is what ensures that action is amenable to

at least a degree of post hoc comprehension. Most important, since intentionality is a general structure of human action, this is also what enables the intelligibility of a particular practical action to be grasped, at least to some degree, by any other practical subject.¹⁷ Even if we cannot grasp the full import of the praxis of another (or indeed of our own praxis), we can generally recognize that an intentional human project is taking place.

Sartre uses the term "reciprocity" to describe this mutual comprehension of each other's projects. It is important to point out that reciprocity need in no way denote empathy, such as subjective feelings of care or connection between human beings. "It cannot," says Sartre, "be based on a universal abstract bond, like Christian 'charity'; nor on an *a priori* willingness to treat the human person . . . as an absolute end; nor on a purely contemplative intuition revealing 'Humanity' to everyone as the essence of his fellows" ([1960] 1976, 109-10). Nor, one might add, can it be based on a mystical or emotional bond of "womanhood," such as one finds in some ecofeminist and other variants of global-difference feminism.

Reciprocity lies in no generic essence, feminine or otherwise. It emerges and endures only in the mutual encounter of specific praxes, where the recognition that others are engaged, like myself, in intentional projects of transformation of the practical material field may result in either reciprocal antagonism or in reciprocal solidarity, depending on whether our projects threaten each other or are complementary ([1960] 1976, 112-13).

Moreover, in relations of reciprocity each of us comes to recognize that the praxis of others actually *alters* our own praxis, through the mediations of the practico-inert. For example, the significance of what I have written in this essay will depend not only on what I believe to be its import but also on my situation within the collective of feminist theorists. Through future scholarship others may well return my thoughts to me profoundly altered—for either better or worse—even though this essay will remain "my" product. This process of alteration depends in turn on such practico-inert structurings of the field of academic production as the marketing and distribution of journals, the positioning of feminist scholarship within the institutions of American academia, and the hierarchies within feminist scholarship. Thus, as Haraway also insists, my relationship to you, the reader, is never one of directly communicating consciousnesses but rather of *materially mediated* selves.¹⁸ Moreover, the material mediations are what enable the relationship to take place at all.

To make this point Sartre now criticizes Hegel's "master-slave dialectic"—which had been central to his own account of human relations in *Being and Nothingness*—as idealist: "Hegel . . . ignored matter as a mediation between individuals. Even if one uses his terminology, one has to say that while each consciousness is the counter-part of the Other, this reciprocity can take an infinity of different forms, positive or negative, and that it is the

mediation of matter which determines these forms in every concrete case" ([1960] 1976, 113).

Such a reciprocal relationship may in some instances involve overcoming seriality to form groups engaged in a common praxis, including forms of common resistance to domination. Indeed, this has frequently been the case in the women's movement, when what are experienced by isolated women as private problems, such as the fear of rape or unwanted pregnancy, become the basis for group action. But an even more important point here, bearing on the issue of whether partial perspectives can give us "shared conversations" and objective knowledges, is that in those very different instances where relations of the most profound conflict of interests exist there must also be reciprocity. As Sartre points out, while denying the humanity of his slaves, a U.S. slave owner still had to recognize that they were, like him, practical subjects, who could choose either to put their labor and skills at his disposal or else to plot revolt or escape. "This is the contradiction of racism, colonialism and all forms of tyranny: in order to *treat a man like a dog*, one must first recognise him as a man" ([1960] 1976, 111).

The sexism of Sartre's statement notwithstanding, his point is vital: even in relations of profound antagonism, such as may of course exist not only between men and women but also between women of different races, ethnicities, social classes, sexual orientations, religions, and so on, a reciprocal comprehension of praxis exists. Indeed, if it did not exist, conflict or struggle would not be possible. Whether it be conflict between classes, as in Sartre's examples,¹⁹ or strife between diverse collectives of women whose unequal power or contradictory interests pit them against each other in relationships of antagonism, struggle is possible *only* because we can reciprocally comprehend praxis as intentional action. Thus the claim to an exclusive domain of knowledge—the very core of an epistemology of provenance—is put into question through the very act of asserting that it exists.

* * *

Reciprocity, even when it is antagonistic, thus limits the tendency toward extreme subjectivism which I have argued is implicit in identity politics. An epistemology of provenance is shown to undermine itself. The investigation of one's own praxis, that is, one's own situated knowledge, may develop into wider knowledge of the praxis of others beyond the collectives or groups through which one directly acts.

Thus, to conclude by returning to Haraway's work, we can now see more clearly why it is indeed possible for the "webs of connections" that Haraway calls both "shared conversations" in epistemology and "solidarity" in politics to be created. If we conceive of the self not only as one of situated vision but also as a practical situated subject, one whose knowledge and whose reciprocal relations with others (be they antagonistic or solidaristic) come into being

through praxis and its practico-inert mediations, we avoid the problems of global-difference feminism, which posits a pre-given and universal female essence. We also avoid the fragmenting tendencies implicit in identity politics, as well as other forms of multiple-difference feminism. It might be the case that it is impossible—as identity politics suggests—for others to know the subjective experiences, that is the “inner” emotions and feelings, of a particular woman or even an ensemble of women.²⁰ However, the fact that all of us engage in a diversity of praxes, mediated through the same or overlapping practical material fields, means that however different our worlds appear, and however antagonistic our interests really may be, reciprocity and the possibility of a mutual comprehension of each other’s actions always remain possible.

And what of Haraway’s call for standpoint theories and situated knowledges that are “potent for worlds less dominated by axes of domination”? Can we both value differences and pursue broader political agendas for human emancipation that transcend differences? Epistemology is political, since claims about knowledge involve the exercise of power; but politics functions along many other axes than that of knowledge claims and is not co-extensive with epistemology. Thus, to establish, as I have set out to do here, that knowledge must be both practical and situated—and that these are the very conditions for the possibility of a knowledge that is both particular and general—does not in itself give us a difference-sensitive yet general emancipatory politics. It is, however, a necessary element of such a politics.

NOTES

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1. For the first—and much cited—feminist critique of this see Collins and Pierce (1973).

2. I have offered such a reading of Sartre’s early work in Kruks (1990). For similar readings, see Nancy Hartsock’s critique of the Sartrean elements in the thought of Beauvoir (Hartsock 1983, app. 2) and Lorraine (1990, chap. 4). A related critique is developed in Le Doeuff ([1989] 1991). However, for a defense of *Being and Nothingness* against such charges of masculinism see Barnes (1990). Barnes argues that although one can find plenty of sexist statements in *Being and Nothingness* they are merely contingent and not integral to Sartre’s philosophy.

3. On Beauvoir's influence on Sartre see Simons (1986) and Kruks (1991). For the argument that Sartre actually stole most of his ideas from Beauvoir, see Fullbrook and Fullbrook (1994).

4. Many advocates of this kind of feminism have rightly urged that differences between women should be conceived not as discrete and additive, but as multiplicative in their effects: "The modifier 'multiple' refers not only to several, simultaneous oppressions but to the multiplicative relationships among them as well" (King 1988, 270).

5. For early statements linking identity politics and coalition building, see Johnson (1983) and Combahee Collective (1983). See also many of the writings in Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983). For more recent statements see essays in Anzaldúa (1990a) and Albrecht and Brewer (1990). Some advocates of identity politics have, of course, taken more separatist positions, but these are not my concern here.

6. An alternative tendency is to shift toward a postmodern emphasis on the fragmentary and unstable nature of the self. Although the postmodern notion of the self as fragmented and shifting well captures some of the complexities of identity today, it frequently tends to beg the question of how to characterize the "self" that experiences itself as multiple and unstable. Often a transcendental "self" is tacitly assumed, one that is capable of the meta-experience of itself as living its multiple identities. For example, Gloria Anzaldúa's statement, "This morning when I got up I looked in the mirror to see who I was (my identity keeps changing)" (Anzaldúa 1990b, 216), tacitly posits some kind of a core "I," or "self," which can observe (in the mirror) how its identities come and go. I address the difficulties of the conception of the fragmented or split self more fully in my discussion of Haraway below.

7. I thus disagree also with Sandra Harding's claim that "the importance of differences in women's politics . . . appears to be excluded from the central concerns of standpoint theories" (1986, 164). See also on this issue Alarcón (1990).

8. Sartre's *Search for a Method* ([1960] 1968) forms the prefatory essay to the original French version of the *Critique*, but it is published as a separate essay in English.

9. The most extended discussion of sexuality is to be found in the second volume of the *Critique* (Sartre [1985] 1991, 255ff.), published only posthumously.

10. Sartre himself has of course also been subjected to the charge of "Enlightenment" thinking, for example by Foucault and Derrida. For a review of Sartre's treatment at the hands of postmodern thinkers and a persuasive argument that Sartre's ideas have far more in common with many of them than they care to admit, see Howells (1992).

11. Sara Ruddick (1989) has creatively explored mothering as a practical activity which gives rise to its own specific knowledges and ways of thinking. See Emily Martin (1987) and the essays of Iris M. Young (1990), "Pregnant Embodiment" and "Breasted Experience," for materials from which to construct an argument that pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing are forms of praxis.

12. Sartre's style is consistently masculinist. The English translation of the book, which I use here and in subsequent quotations, has not attempted to render it more gender neutral and neither have I.

13. This useful concept is developed in Ferguson (1989).

14. One can also think of many environmental examples closer to home that fit Sartre's model, from the dustbowl to the destruction of forests through acid rain.

15. See Young (1994) for a fuller treatment of these issues. Young suggests that Sartre's account of serial collectives offers a way of talking about the category of "woman" without essentializing or reifying it.

16. Indeed, for Sartre discourse—like any other human artifact—is practically produced. It thus cannot have the constitutive primacy that is accorded to it in most postmodern theory. Although over all Sartre pays insufficient attention to the question of discourse in the *Critique*, I find the notion of discourse as praxis to be helpful: it places us in a less passive position in relation to discourses and enables us to raise questions about their origins.

17. When we cannot comprehend in any degree we tend to say that the other person is “mad,” connoting that their behavior is not recognizably human to us. The project of some alternative psychiatry—notably that of R. D. Laing (1969)—is to reveal that there still is coherence and intentionality to what might appear to be non-intentional and unintelligible behavior on the part of psychotics.

18. This would also be the case if you were part of the audience at a conference where I was presenting this paper orally, or even if I were telling you my ideas in a one-on-one conversation, although the practico-inert mediations would be somewhat different in each case.

19. For the most part members of classes are, alas, male in Sartre’s account. Where he does use an example concerning women workers, it is to exemplify a situation where alienation is so extreme that no effective choice is left to an impoverished woman worker who “chooses” an abortion over an impossible motherhood ([1960] 1976, 232-35).

20. But it might also be possible to comprehend purely subjective experiences in alternative ways, for example through poetry, dance, or music. Sartre’s theory does not preclude other such forms of knowledge: he simply does not establish their formal possibility.

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