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CONSTITUTIONAL FAILURES OF MERITOCRACY AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

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Many of the commentators—let’s ignore their sex for the moment—suggested including women in the Feyerabend conference. Then the question was raised, “but are they of the right quality, status, rank?” That is, do they bring down the average quality of the conference in virtue of their being of inferior status, or, in Vincenzo Politi’s words, not “someone whose work is both relevant to the topic of the conference and also as widely recognized as the work of the invited speakers” (HOPOS-L archive, “CFP: Feyerabend Conference,” Tuesday, July 17, 2012, 14:57:20)?

It is extremely important that such a discussion of quality, status, and rank recognize the scourge of evaluation bias and its long-term and pervasive consequences. One well-designed study this past year, published by the National Academy of Sciences, established prominent evaluation bias among both male and female science faculty in their evaluations of a student applying for a managerial job, who was randomly assigned either a male or a female name (Moss-Racusin et al. 2012). These professors examined the qualifications of the students and decided whether to hire them, what salary to give them, and whether to mentor them and how much to do so. The results were that both male and female scientists hired more men, gave them higher salaries, and offered more mentoring to them, even though the male applications were identical to the female applications. When probed about their reasons for not hiring or mentoring the female applicants, the professors explained that they based their decisions on the inferior competence of the applicant: the female applicants were perceived as less competent by all professors (with identical applications between males and females). This is what “evaluation bias” looks like, and it has been established in many, many contexts since the 1970s—this is only the most recent.

Unless philosophers and historians of science wish to claim that they are not like all other human beings and academics that have so far been tested and that they never exhibit the unconscious biases affecting all of their colleagues, both male and female, we must always take a serious degree of evaluation bias into

account as a contextual factor in our judgments and actions. This means, for one thing, that evaluation bias has likely affected our meritocracy and that a woman in a professorial position is likely to be underemployed; that is, she likely is qualified for a higher status position than the one she is in. This is also, of course, true for men, given the way the job market works today. But it is extremely important to remember, when offering speaking engagements to conferences, not to infer someone's abilities from her academic positions or institutions, given the likely operation of evaluation bias in her situation.

The evaluation bias conclusions from a large pile of studies (see Moss-Racusin et al. 2012) indicate that promotion will also be more difficult for female faculty and that, therefore, it will also be incorrect to read abilities off of academic rank. It goes without saying that evaluation bias will affect women faculty's ability to get hired at the most high-prestige institutions, when evenly talented with male professors. In addition, equally talented women will be less likely to be included in edited collections and top journals that are not completely sex blind in their review process, due to evaluation bias (see preliminary studies in Haslanger [2008] and Paxton et al. [2012]). And so on. It is extremely important that the key comparisons are to equally talented men and not to whether a hiring or publication occurs at all. When standards of building meritocracies are undermined by evaluation bias, they no longer reflect real merit. The crucial point is that the existence of the documented evaluation bias positively disables meritocracies—including that which is assumed in ventures like conferences organized on meritocratic principles.

Thus, the conversation about the Feyerabend conference—and, indeed, at the Feyerabend conference—could have been improved by some more discussion about evaluation bias and its impacts on status, rank, and visibility of female faculty and meritocracies in general. The resulting sex bias is just the sort of unconscious suppression of opinion that Feyerabend abhorred, as it reduced the diversity of opinion that he favored in the pursuit of knowledge (Lloyd 1997).

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DATA, PLEASE

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What should we think when we hear female pronouns used as the generic in a room filled primarily with men? Well, I suppose it does depend on what the topic of conversation is, but without meaningful change represented not only by numbers of women but by the uptake of what female colleagues are (or could be) contributing to the discussion, the pronominal strategy seems not only shallow but hypocritical. There are two kinds of issue here. One is the inattentiveness to (if not exclusion of) members of the community with something to say, regardless of their intellectual orientations. Another is the inattentiveness to (if not exclusion of) members of the community identified with a particular point of view. Women in the philosophy of science profession, with the exception of a few extraordinary individuals, have mostly experienced the former. Feminists in the philosophy of science have experienced both.

A recent survey focused on meetings of the Philosophy of Science Association correlated various demographic variables such as age and gender of responders with their responses (Settles and O'Connor 2012). Among those reporting, significantly more women than men reported perceiving the climate at meetings of the association and in the profession in general as sexist and exclusive. While reports of personal incivility and harassment were much lower than those about the general climate, again more women than men reported being subject to such behavior. This tells us two things: that some significant fraction of the profession, both male and female, perceives it to be exclusive and characterized by sexist attitudes but that more women than men so perceive it. What is promising for the future is that younger men are more likely than older men to perceive sexist behavior and gender and racial disparities.

For the first 60 years of its existence, there had been only one woman elected to the position of president of the Philosophy of Science Association, Mary Hesse. Then in 2007, Nancy Cartwright was elected. Perhaps this will open the floodgates, as another woman was elected 4 years later. But visibility at