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A Principled Standpoint: A Response to Sandra Harding

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Take the strong rhetoric! This expression comes to mind as I set in order the ideas and impressions prompted by Sandra Harding's "An Organic Logic of Research: A Response to Posey and Navarro".

On Strong Rhetoric and Objectivity

Sandra Harding is one the leading philosophers of science on the international scene. Her work has been, and continues to be, determinant in different areas of knowledge: science policy, philosophy and history of science, sociology of scientific knowledge, social epistemology, feminism, legal theory, political theory, etc. There is no scientific discipline unaffected by the theoretical and practical impact of the methodological programme advocated by Harding. Her latest work—for some, one of the author's most accessible to the wider public, an opinion I am happy to share—offers a magnificent opportunity to become acquainted with her thinking.

In her response, "An Organic Logic of Research: A Response to Posey and Navarro", Harding reminds us of the importance of other perspectives and authors with regard to their impact on what I can consider one of the greatest aims of social scientists and humanists in the last few centuries. As any reader will immediately appreciate, this objective—to which I will refer presently—has been thematized in many different forms in recent years, the fact being that the way it has been treated has done nothing but enhance its centrality.

In some cases, for instance, this common target in research has been identified with a critical review of the role played by political interests in the development of the scientific theses upheld by the Vienna Circle and logical positivism. In others, this shared objective has been associated to the loss of scientific legitimacy—and subsequent crisis—as a consequence of the influence of the post-colonial theory in a number of fields of knowledge, such as natural history in the 18th and 19th centuries.

It is true that there is a common research objective, and Harding in her response provides a rigorous overview of some of the most outstanding contributions regarding a wide spectrum of common research of which, as a sample, we may mention studies in the political dimension of science and other academic traditions that are on a par with the economic and political assumptions undermining major epistemic values such as objectivity, with which, paradoxically, those same traditions and views on science are in line with.

Still today, for many, epistemic values such as objectivity stem from prototypical postulates of logical empiricism. This is why one of the most urgent tasks is to elucidate how to turn this situation around, or in other words, how to show the public at large that an alternative exists to the notion of objectivity defended not only by the Vienna Circle but also by other authors who have continued to defend equivalent epistemic, political and economic postulates.

Thanks to Harding we have learned that, to rise to this challenge, we need to begin by acknowledging the success of theoretical prevalence in this notion of objectivity. Indeed, the

rhetorical principle that best describes this first step could be explained in much greater complexity, though it is possible to capture it with the motto: *take the strong rhetoric!* Throughout her extensive academic life, Harding has referred to this idea in many conversations and interviews. As we shall see, this motto encompasses a rhetorical and (political) strategic content of considerable complexity and forcefulness.

Furthering Objectivity

In her response, Harding shows a courteous gesture toward other prominent colleagues whose contributions must likewise be known to those striving to unravel the political, social, economic, institutional, etc. consequences deriving from what is generally understood as the notion of objectivity associated by the general public with logical positivism.

However, among all the trends and authors cited in her response—along with many other authors with whom she entertains dialogue in her extensive works—only the standpoint theory has been taken seriously into account in the political strategy enclosed in the motto *take the strong rhetoric!* (besides Harding, perhaps only positivists and a few other analytical philosophers have taken this seriously; the latter, however, only for very different purposes to those manifested by Harding, of course).

Without doubt, objectivity is important because it is the *essential component* of one of the most forceful rhetoric formulas. Nonetheless, for many of the authors cited by Harding objectivity is but a regressive theme.

Many other authors have approached this common problem (that of objectivity). However, as we are endeavouring to suggest herein, it is also true that most have desisted from treating objectivity in other terms (undoubtedly, given their regressive nature). As a consequence, many authors have paid the penalty of being unable to offer a methodology or even an organic diagnosis on analysing how the problem of objectivity has been dealt with in the history of science. Obviously, this high price to pay is collective; and it is absurd to pay a high price for nothing, or in exchange for the absence of improvement to something that one already possesses and, in plain language, a nuisance (since this is the effect of not having at one's disposal any other notion of objectivity beyond the notion arising from interpretations of Vienna Circle).

It is precisely in this light that we should understand the methodological response by Harding. A methodology that, in her latest book, is presented hand-in-hand with a survey of other equally important concepts, whose historiographical effects may lie in the same direction as her own proposal (i.e. to disclose the supposed neutrality of any form of research), though this does not imply that they provide an *organic* view. In 1995, Harding was already showing her concern over these issues in her statement:

[...] is advancing strong objectivity, strengthening objectivity, a regressive or progressive tendency? Many feminist and non-feminists think that it's a regressive tendency, and they make very good arguments—they've made

terrific arguments, and I try not to forget them. For one thing, it reinstates the authority of science; it reinstates a kind of internalist notion of science and argues that this can provide the most powerful, critical perspective on science. Yet, in other ways, my work resists that. I talk about starting from “outside” science. And so, there’s something a bit regressive about insisting on strengthening the notion of objectivity. Many critics of objectivity have made just that notion. For instance, Feyerabend tries to strengthen relativism, and Lorraine Code works with subjectivity and relativism. They’re taking the other side of the dichotomy.

Now, my view on these matters is that if you are going to stick with that dichotomy, why take the weak side? Take the strong rhetoric (Hirsh, Olson and Harding 1995, 216-217).

Harding has defended in other circles this important epistemic and historiographical aspect of the standpoint theory as a methodology (i.e. the organic view of the logic in scientific research). For example, in “Standpoint Theories: Productively Controversial” she states:

I have been arguing that the continual renewal of the controversiality of standpoint theory is organically linked to its ever-expanding uses in actual research projects. Standpoint theory provides a logic of research that focuses attention on problems that are deeply disturbing to anyone reflecting on contemporary challenges to Western thought and practice, and yet insoluble within the philosophical, political, and theoretical legacies that they provide. Engaging with the needs and desires arising from the daily lives of less advantaged citizens of the globe, and learning how our projects impact on their lives—these projects cannot cease to be controversial as long as social injustices exist (Harding 2009, 198).

Or attention is drawn to the fact that in other works by Harding such as “The Social Function of the Empiricist Conception of Mind” (1979), in which she examines how certain ungrounded interpretations by Hume leading to an empiricist view of the mind—with the social and political effects of which not even Hume himself would agree—failed at the time to provoke such a polemic as this controverted and organic logic of scientific research has awakened through the standpoint theory. What is it that renders the latest contribution by Harding more controversial?

Many authors find that the motive is surely related to the insistence with which, throughout her career, Harding has defended the centrality of the subjects and producers of knowledge occupying marginal positions. We believe that the answer to this question has to do with one of the issues that Harding has postulated most insistently in her works and through which she is aiming for something more than merely catching our attention:

How shall we study our lives? What can we learn from them? If we start off our thought from the lives of men in the dominant classes and races, we can gain

only partial and distorted understanding of women's lives, men's lives and the social order. These are the partialities and distortions that characterize the conventional Western discourses and disciplines. In contrast, if we start off our thought from women's everyday lives, we can see things that were invisible in and from the culture's dominant conceptual schemes, things that make it possible for women to understand better the social forces that tend to shape the way we live our lives (Harding 1989, 16).

If we are not mistaken in our interpretation, from the above quote we can deduce that, for Harding, what is essential is not to acknowledge that there are observers whose perspective must be considered, but rather that there are individuals whose beliefs and standpoints—precisely because they occupy a subordinated/insubordinate position against cultural patterns of domination—can provide a *better* interpretation (i.e. showing greater consistency, truthfulness, fecundity, representativity, etc.). The latter is the important thing: the fact that these beliefs in particular are *better than others*. Nevertheless, as we shall demonstrate below, this is the most important thing but only in the initial stage.

The epistemic dimension of the standpoints of those suffering from diverse causes of marginalization owing to their localization (e.g. symbolic, cultural, economic, geopolitical, racial, gender, etc.) has been painstakingly analysed by Harding. Those interested can follow the fascinating evolution this subject has undergone in her thinking process (Harding 1977, 1986, 1992, 2001, 2002, 2005, 2006).

In the answers given by Harding to the questions posed by her interviewers, we can single out narratives that bring us closer to the political and social sensitivity and psychology of this author, who, on more than one occasion, has described how she was influenced by the following idea in Robert Burns:

So, strong objectivity is an issue, to put it in an extremely simplistic way, of learning to see ourselves as others see us. (What's that Robert Burns said, "Oh, would some power the gift give us/ To see ourselves as others see us!?") (Harding 1995, 204).

Standing in the place occupied by those who are deliberately and systematically marginalized can become a theoretical strategy that is not only justified but also necessary in any social claim for epistemic justice. The *raison d'être* for such a claim rests on the (presumed) epistemic virtues of standpoints that often emerge from those very places (e.g. greater legitimacy, objectivity, social relevance, testimonial interest and worth, etc.). However, from our point of view, what needs to be highlighted here is how Harding upholds that paying attention to those occupying such *places* (i.e. marginalized lives, lives treated as if they were worth nothing) is more than (and different from) a discursive strategy. In fact, according to our interpretation, in the final stages of her thinking, Harding considered this to be an obligation.

Harding nudges us further, asking us to “try and rethink how one’s social location can nevertheless be used as a resource in spite of the fact that we’re members of dominant groups,” (Hirsh, Olson and Harding 1995, 206) and to be the radical or progressive instructor who can critique and build discourses (and skills) is to position oneself as a resource” (Lyon and Conway 1995, 576).

Time and time again, Harding has insisted that it is unfair to lay exclusively in the hands of those occupying marginalized positions the responsibility of making it known (to all other human beings) what the effects are of their points of view having the type of value that they do. With regard to this problem, what we deem of greatest importance is that in her works she gives us the arguments we need to qualify as a duty what others prefer to present in terms of responsibility (i.e. epistemic justice). In addition, if we are not mistaken, the consequences deriving from this view surpass the sphere of what is moral, to enter the realm of the theory of law. The theory of law is an area that has always been at the forefront of Harding’s thinking, especially in underscoring the fertile connections between Feminism and Legal Theory Project, as conceived by Martha Albertson Fineman (1995, 2005, 2008) or as conceived by Cristina Sánchez Muñoz (2014, 2005, 2004) in legal and political theory.

Our wish to highlight in this paper that for Harding the impetus for social change must come from “outside the dominant conceptual framework” (Harding 2015, 30) is due to the fact that this issue has not always been treated with the attention it deserves by other interpreters of Harding’s work. In writing this, we have in mind, for example, the objection formulated by Fernández Pinto (2016, 4):

Of course, the strong objectivity approach may grant that a position outside the dominant knowledge framework is better for scrutinizing the methods and background beliefs of the dominant knowledge system, but there are many possible positions outside the framework, and it is not clear that all of them have equal epistemic value. In particular, it is not clear why we should encourage all of them, following the democratic value of diversity, instead of picking some of them, perhaps the positions of the most marginalized or of the groups that are most in need, and even explicitly reject some others, perhaps the positions of extremist groups.

From our standpoint, the weak spot in said objection is rooted in Fernández Pinto’s application of an indifferent deontological operator to classify the epistemic and democratic value of diversity. (This is done tacitly, as the application of deontological operators is not even considered.) In accordance with our interpretation of Harding’s works, the dilemma referred to by Fernández Pinto disappears when the obligatory deontological operator is applied. Precisely because we occupy a culturally and epistemically dominant position, we are under the obligation to verify the value (e.g. epistemic, social, moral, emotional, economic, symbolic, etc.) of each and every one of the beliefs emanating from marginalized people, groups, collectives or geographical regions. And assuming this obligation is a necessary normative requirement in relation to the question of objectivity.

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