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REFEREED ARTICLE

Whither Standpoint Theory in a Post-Truth World?

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Abstract

This paper begins with a brief overview of the origins and continued use of standpoint theory in the social sciences. It highlights both historical and contemporary challenges to the utility of standpoint theory as a critical scholarly tool, including developments such as intersectionality and transgenderism/transracialism. Specifically, the implications of a post-truth era for standpoint theory are considered alongside the affective turn, purity politics and the critique of critique. Given the slow, but steady, erosion of the ivory tower in which academics enjoyed privileged access to 'truth', this paper concludes with the need to foster scholar activism via new forms of knowledge politics that move beyond existing approaches to standpoint theory.

Keywords

Standpoint, Post-Truth, Critique, Activism, Identity, Affect

Building upon the proletariat perspective of Marxism (Cockburn 2015) and the study of master-slave relationships (Allen 2017), standpoint theory arose in the 1980s from feminist concerns with the masculine monopolisation of knowledge claims (Hartsock 1983). Standpoint theory is based on the view that power relations shape knowledge and that members of subordinate (i.e. oppressed) groups understand the world from their own perspective while also being very familiar with the views of dominant (i.e. oppressor) group members, whose knowledge systems permeate society. In this sense, minorities have a more complete 'double-consciousness' and hence a better overall understanding of the world (Allen 2017).

As well as applying a critical lens to social conditions, standpoint theory serves to underpin feminist claims to 'situated truth' against the now largely debunked 'objectivity' of science (Tsou et al. 2015). Standpoint theory seeks to de-centre 'truth' as monolithic and disrupt the notion that it resides within bodies that fit normative ideals, epitomised by those who are young White, male, slim, able-bodied, heterosexual and affluent (Haraway 1988; Harding 1991). Although developed with concern for the oppressed, some scholars contend that 'standpoint theory is a theory for justice' which is 'inherently inclusive', being 'as much about equitable resources and opportunities for all people, as it is about recognizing...societal power' (Braun 2016, pp. 81-82).

According to the Google Ngram viewer, although use of the term 'standpoint theory' rose sharply to a peak in the year 2000, it has been dropping in popularity almost as sharply since. Despite its critical origins and clear social justice lineage, some argue that standpoint theory fails to transcend power relations but instead tends to invert them. In other words, standpoint theorists have been accused of reinforcing undifferentiated dichotomies (i.e., men vs. women) and seeking, for example, to privilege the views of women over men (Kokushkin 2014). The 'centre-margin' binary intrinsic to standpoint theory (Hancock 2016) is reminiscent of the very positivism it seeks to refute (Hills Collins 2000) and indicative of standpoint theory's own, still very much intact, Enlightenment origins (Hekman 1997, p. 401).

Intersectionality is a key challenge to the validity of standpoint theory that also arose in the late 1980s. Intersectionality as a conceptual paradigm stemmed from the observation that we tend to focus too much on prejudice, discrimination, and exclusion occurring along a single axis of power and oppression (Crenshaw 1989). More specifically, Crenshaw (1989) was concerned that feminism, for example, focused too much on the experiences of privileges of group members such as White women, while other groups such as Black women remained marginalised. Intersectionality is thus about acknowledging that all of us have multiple identities and inhabit multiple locations. However, it is also about 'mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group politics' (Crenshaw 1991, p. 1296), while remaining cognisant of relationality, social context, power and social justice (Collins & Bilge 2016). By adopting a multi-dimensional approach to identity and social location, intersectionality fractures the implicit dualism of standpoint theory. Acknowledging that any one person holds multiple overlapping identity-based

perspectives within cross-cutting axes of oppression and contradictory power dynamics, ruptures the notion that anyone can stand in a linear one-to-one relation to another.

Seeking to overcome such limitations, more inclusive forms of standpoint theory drawing from Black feminist epistemology have emphasised doing over thinking, dialogue instead of debate, as well as caring, personal accountability and integrity (Kokushkin 2014). It has also been noted that the term 'thinking' should replace 'theory' given that standpoint approaches do not represent a coherent set of ideas about the world (Kokushkin 2014), but present much more like an epistemology in providing a specific perspective on the world.

In the 21st century, we have witnessed the development of a profusion of standpoint theories, from the perspective of Indigenous people in general (Nakata 2007; Larkin 2013), Indigenous women in particular (Moreton-Robinson 2013), those with disabilities (Gilroy & Donnelly 2016), the less affluent (Allen 2017) and children (Fattore et al. 2016).

However, despite such diversification, even relatively more sophisticated approaches to standpoint theory/thinking have attracted critiques that the oppressed do not enjoy special access to 'truth' (Warren and Sue 2011); that claims should not be made based solely on identity (Nakata 2007); and, more fundamentally, that all perceptions are mediated and partial; hence, each must be presented persuasively, because none are intrinsically more compelling than any other (Hekman 1997).

Beyond the challenges posed by intersectionality and the complex dynamics of oppressed and privileged subject positions entailed, standpoint epistemologies are similarly ill-equipped to deal with the rising fluidity of singular identities themselves. The rise of transgenderism and, now, transracialism, are illustrative of this. How does the standpoint of a woman who was once a man compare to the standpoint of those raised as female from birth? Does it matter at what age gender transitions take place? Can one become Black without any, or sufficient, ancestry? Are transracial individuals necessarily always 'counterfeit'? Rather than being novel, the mutability inherent in such border-crossings merely adds race and gender to the list of already existing identities which can vary over time for any one individual. This includes, most obviously, age, alongside other embodied states such as able-ness/dis-ability and body shape as well as affluence, and social status more broadly. This serves to emphasise that, when it comes to identities and the subjectivities they (are taken to) represent, we are all 'in motion', rather than at a stand-still.

What is perhaps different about the 'trans' phenomenon is the sense of choice and voluntariness that some consider to be entailed (Brubaker 2016). A recent article by Tuvel (2017) defending the legitimacy of transracialism attracted a storm of controversy, including whether she should write at all about such issues given her standpoint as a White cisgender woman (Botts 2018; Gordon 2018; Hom 2018; Sealey 2018; Taylor 2018). Tuvel's defense of transracialism is well-argued, including her response to critics (Tuvel 2018). The parallels she has drawn with transgenderism, which is already widely accepted within liberal circles, are particularly compelling. Rather than challenging her overall argument, I wish instead to suggest that her critique falls short of a clean break with standpoint theory, and its implied

model of identity politics. In other words, the ‘trans’ movement represents a more fundamental threat to the utility of standpoint theory in its current formulation than even Tuvel’s thesis acknowledges. This is epitomised best by Tuvel’s delineation ‘between those who might desire to be white or male *purely* to gain access to white or male privilege, and those who have other reasons for transitioning’ (p. 271). Privilege and oppression are two sides of the same coin (Berman & Paradies 2010) or, in relation to race, White privilege makes sense only in relation to non-White under-privilege (Sealey 2018). As such, it is not possible to differentiate conceptually between avoiding oppression and accessing privilege. Given that few would argue the virtues of efforts aimed at *purely* alleviating oppression for women and non-Whites, how can we then consider it inappropriate that members of an oppressed group seek to gain privilege? Tuvel (2017) contends that becoming Black is a relinquishing of White privilege, rather than a further enactment of it. While I agree with her on this point, her approach seems to leave intact a kind of asymmetrical meta-privilege, namely, the privilege of some to do away with their privilege while, at the same time, denying others the right to, in turn, specifically seek to adopt said privilege. Unlike Gordon, Sealey and Botts (2018), I am not concerned with White people becoming ‘race traitors’ (Bailey 1998) *per se*. Rather, my concern is the requirement for Black people to have a non-privilege related reason for transitioning out of oppressive identities. Rather than recognising racial ‘passing’ as ‘permissible’ (Silvermint 2018), such a ‘rule’ serves only to reinforce opprobrium for Black people engaged in ‘passing’ as White. By allowing only those in the centre to cross into the margins rather than vice versa, such unidirectional policing of identity boundaries resonates with standpoint theory’s tendency to invert power relations, precluding a unconstrained racial identity anarchy that would help subvert, destabilise and ultimately attenuate the association between race and social power.

Given the limitations discussed above, what ‘potential to change the world’ (Hekman 1997, p. 401) does standpoint thinking retain in the 21st century? Given the role that science has played as a tool of oppression used by White heterosexual males against Indigenous people, women, homosexuals etc., a key aim of standpoint thinking was to disrupt the very notion of ‘scientific facts’. To some extent, this goal is being realised with advent of developments such as the research replication crisis in scientific fields spanning the gamut from physics to chemistry to medicine (Baker 2016), combined with the relative sidelining of ‘the expert’ more generally; for example, in key controversies such as global warming and the anti-vaccination movement (Lewandowsky et al. 2017). However, the fading ‘authority of institutions’ has not been replaced by voices from the margins, as championed by standpoint thinking. Instead of diversified perspectives driven by egalitarian values, we are beset by populism, driven in most cases by ‘lowest common denominator’ impulses and desires rather spearheaded informed, engaged and principled citizens that form the linchpin of robust democracies.

Instead of a profusion of embodied subjective truths, reflexively deployed with fidelity, honesty and integrity as envisaged by some proponents of standpoint thinking, we now live in a post-truth society. In 2016, the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year was *post-truth* – defined as ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential

in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'. The word 'objective' used in this definition clearly signals the relevance of post-modernism in understanding the post-truth phenomenon, with some suggesting that this 'mega-trend' is best understood as 'an alternative epistemology that does not conform to conventional standards of evidentiary support' rather than as simply 'misinformation' per se (Lewandowsky et al. 2017, p. 356).

Taking such a perspective, we can conclude that post-truth societies are not so much about tension between falsity and truth, but about how the most popular constructions, discourses, worldviews etc. pass as, and end up being, what is true (epistemology), right (axiology) and real (ontology). Of course, such a focus on the production (i.e. fabrication in the mechanistic sense) of truth can be situated as a continuation of the last 40 years of post-modernism which itself is deeply embedded in centuries of Western social and political theory from Plato to Machiavelli to Kuhn (Fuller 2018). Just as clearly, there is no sense in which there is anything new about misdirection, deceit, or bullshit, which have, no doubt, been around as long as humans.

Nonetheless, while bearing such modalities and histories in mind, we can nevertheless perceive a significant juncture in history at which 'truth' is now marketed via a diversified commodity market of personal and emotive opinions masquerading as 'facts', with the sheer scale of fact fabrication reaching unprecedented levels since the advent of the Internet. As tweeted on the last day of 2016, 'post-truth is to digital capitalism what pollution is to fossil capitalism - a by-product of operations' (Evgeny Morozov). The Internet acts as 'a mutual-affirmation apparatus' powered by the social media economy through recursive algorithms that value the 'logic of big data'. It has been suggested that, under neo-liberal forms of hyper-capitalism, 'society reconceived as a giant market leads to a public life lost to bickering over mere opinions'¹.

Just as the existence of post-truth is not new, neither does it spell a failure of politics or the 'end of history'. Of course, proponents continue to vie for whose truth is more compelling while, more generally, bodies such as the International Fact-Checking Network established in 2015 are attempting to stabilise 'facts' in relatively less partisan ways. Third-party fact-checkers on Facebook are now required to be verified signatories of this network² while comprehensive research agendas for combating fake news are now being developed³.

More broadly, we are now experiencing a re-invention of societal knowledge itself. In the 21st century, a disquieting, perhaps even dystopian, fulfillment of post-modernity is the advent of truth by numbers. Just as we can now 3D print everything from furniture to food, truth is now 'printed' according to our self-selected networks of reinforcing relationships. The written textual fixity of modernity with its focus on contracts, copyright, and currency⁴ is being supplanted by the virtuality of digital money and distributed ledgers secured by the

¹ https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/aug/18/neoliberalism-the-idea-that-changed-the-world?CMP=share_btn_link

² <https://www.poynter.org/international-fact-checking-network-fact-checkers-code-principles>

³ <https://shorensteincenter.org/combating-fake-news-agenda-for-research/>

⁴ <https://youareyourmedia.org/2017/07/02/are-digital-technologies-making-politics-impossible/>

network majority rather than any ‘authority’ in and of itself. In a newly-forming world driven by relationships, who you stand by, and move with in virtual realms, matters more than your location or even your physical body. The penning of the printed word is being pipped at the post by a palimpsest of pixels in a world where block chains beat bonds and catfishing consumes courtship.

This move away from a modernity in which knowledge (and the literacy it requires) is selectively deployed from vast archives to shore up oppressions of various kinds, is not entirely unwelcome. While a more dynamic epistemology has significant potential to realise a post-capitalist world, we need to also consider how ‘truth’ is utilised in the current digital relational marketplace.

‘Facts’ are being deployed to foster certain emotional registers by engineering specific atmospheres, energies and feelings that ‘act on bodies, are produced through bodies and transmitted by bodies’ (Lorimer 2008, p. 2) often on social media. In non-representational theory, these phenomena come under the rubric of ‘affect’. A ‘strong argument for thinking about affect in non-representational theory is that it is being “engineered” by the powerful’ Pile (2010, p. 15). Because ‘affect precedes decision, rather than the other way round...in modern democracies, mastery of the means of affective capture is essential for making political gain’ (Amin & Thrift, 2013, p. 158).

More than just the place where one stands to view something or even attitudes to a specific issue (i.e. a stand or viewpoint), we need to consider issues of affect, emotion and action. This takes us away from the task of boundary setting (e.g. whose truth stands above another) to entanglements with the affinities and disjunctures (i.e. relationships) that individuals have with various others across online and offline spaces. It bypasses questions of where we stand to ask who we relate to and in what ways this affects us. Today, the most important ideas are not those which bombard the greatest number of people; rather, they are ideas resonant to the extent that they ‘become individualized expressions of affiliation and identity among peers’ (Heimans & Timms 2018, p. 43). In particular, as academics, we need to create opportunities for various publics to connect with, act upon and extend scholarship from the academy (Heimans & Timms 2018).

Rather than entrenching our epistemological positions by simplistically declaring our standpoints as knowing/oppressed vs. ignorant/privileged (Nash & Warin 2017), we need to uproot ourselves enough to intersect orbits, and even journey, with those whom have differing (and, especially, diametrically opposed) positions from us. This echoes ongoing work to produce a transversal politics which encompasses the notion of being both rooted in place while being able to shift perspectives (Yuval-Davis 2018), also known as ‘pivoting the centre’ (Walters 1996).

We need to take seriously not only the ‘oppressed’, but also attend to the emotive registers of, for example, cisgender heterosexual straight White middle-class males (cf Joore 2016). This means utilising new technologies of democracy (Rothschild 2016), among other things, to move beyond a ‘fixed in place’ entrenched understanding of whose views are

‘worthy’ or otherwise, to a recognition that engaging in activism is not restricted to specific identities (Nash & Warin 2017) and that ‘care of the other’ must encompass each and every one of us.

This will require us to transcend the simplistic notion that some of us stand upon the hallowed ground of truth while others are ever-always beyond the borders of salvation. Nobody and no group has ‘authority over determining the nature of reality itself’ (Graeber 2015). In an academic sense, we must transcend the restricted, and restricting, confines of critique (Thomas 2016) as an ‘unmasking tool’ (Rebughini 2018) for the ‘diagnosis of error’ (Barnwell 2016).

Instead of yet more critique, I propose a pluralistic flexible post-structuralist form of standpoint thinking, feeling, doing, being, and becoming that is justified through its virtue (Ludwig 2016) in disrupting unsustainable and unjust aspects of the status quo (Kokushkin 2014). Rather than relying on the rapidly decreasing utility of overlapping and intersecting static, distinct and singular identities, standpoint then becomes synonymous with taking a stand on specific points while rallying the social and political support required to stand against the inevitable resistance. This calls for academics to engage in social activism and political action, collectively, supportively and with tolerance for the diversity of approaches required. If, as experts, we no longer have a mandate to stand above and dictate truth and reality to others, then we must instead join the crowd-sourced coalitions (Lee 2017) who are shaping new truths and realities.

Such activities usher academics into the messy reality of the ‘real-world’. It brings to the fore the value of acknowledging that we are ever-always complicit in historical and ongoing forms of oppression and the need to embrace compromise, imperfection and impurity as constitutive rather than seeking to expunge all our conceptual or ethical blemishes in pursuit of an unattainable purity of action (Shotwell 2016).

Leftist elites (Shibuichi 2016), as many social scientists are, have a duty to walk beyond the ‘ivory tower’, to show that, more than ‘stroking the egos of academics’ (Rutzou 2016), scholarship is about putting ideas into action within complex and entangled social, political and affective contexts (Neale & Vincent 2017). We need to reject ‘purity politics’ (Shotwell 2016) and seek ‘imaginative elements to disturb our present torpor’ as scholar activists⁵ (Tilley & Taylor 2014) in an ongoing effort to bring forth a world of human dignity and social justice. In sum, what we need are ‘genuinely dangerous idea[s] that offer...meaningful challenge to existing structures’ (Graeber 2015) through their implementation, dissemination and uptake ‘on the ground’ (Bastow et al. 2014; Alvesson et al. 2017).

⁵ For examples, see:

<http://auburnseminary.org/scholar-activism/>

<http://www.cesjsig.org/scholar-activist-award.html>

<https://antipodefoundation.org/scholar-activist-project-awards/>

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