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EPISTEMIC TROUBLES: IDENTITY POLITICS BETWEEN PARTICULARISM AND UNIVERSALISM

by Karsten Schubert

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One problem often associated with identity politics is “[positional fundamentalism](#),” the equating of social positions with epistemic possibilities and political dispositions. The criticism is that identity politics is usually more about who says something than what is said. This goes hand in hand with perspective relativity, which no longer allows for a common, universal position and therefore also [prevents emancipative politics](#). To respond to this critique of positional fundamentalism and perspective relativism, I develop a new account of identity politics as inherently intersubjective and fundamental to democracy. This approach is necessary to address the philosophical problem at the heart of debates about identity politics: the tension between particularist power politics, on the one hand, and politics as a universalist appeal to reason, on the other.

Because the tension between particularism and universalism, or power and reason, is a core theme of radical democratic theory, it is a framework particularly well-suited to understanding identity politics. From a radical democratic perspective, identity politics is fundamental to democracy. This interpretation draws on the work of Lefort, Laclau, Mouffe, and Rancière, who propose an understanding of the existing political order as necessarily particularistic and exclusive. Democracy, on the other hand, is the ongoing struggle for equality and freedom, and therefore aims to change the existing democratic institutions. And the universal claims of equality and freedom can only become effective through their repeated actualization in particular power struggles. Disruptively breaking through established understandings of universal discourse through particular identity politics is central to the further democratization of democracy. The radical democratic affirmation of identity politics as a particular disruption of the universal, however, *prima facie* confirms the fear that it amounts to a relativist position that destroys rational discourse and thus the foundation of democracy.

This problem can be solved with the help of standpoint theories, which allow us to justify and reconcile two (at first sight) contradictory claims: that particular standpoints are necessary to critique the current discursive and institutional order; and that such standpoints are based on intersubjective reason and therefore have an inherent consensus orientation. Following standpoint theories’ concepts of “[strong objectivity](#)” and “[situated knowledge](#),” I propose to introduce a new notion of objectivity into the radical democratic account of identity politics. Standpoint theory shows how identity politics, although articulated from particular standpoints that critique conventional objectivity, contributes to the objective analysis of social relations. The radical democratic and standpoint theory interpretation of identity politics thus explains that the constant oscillation between particularism and universalism is constitutive of democracy. Thus, identity politics does not endanger democracy, but democratizes it. In what follows, I explain in four points that privileging suppressed perspectives does not eliminate intersubjective understanding but rather enables it. These four points are, first, the difference between perspective and standpoint;

second, knowledge production as mediation between particularity and universality; third, epistemic blockages and learning; and fourth, the importance of power politics for rational change.

Perspectives and Standpoints

A perspective is a specific viewpoint connected to a social position, while a standpoint requires work and development. A [standpoint](#) is not “an ascribed position [...] that oppressed groups can claim automatically. Rather, a standpoint is an achievement, something for which oppressed groups must struggle.” The term is not “simply another word for viewpoint or perspective.”

While this definition of the terms is not generally shared by standpoint theorists, and many use perspective and standpoint as synonyms, all standpoint theorists agree with the conceptual difference at stake. A standpoint is not in any way given, but the result of social knowledge production through intersubjectively shared discourses. The construction of a standpoint requires specific political and cultural techniques and methods. A key component is what MacKinnon calls “[consciousness raising](#)”: the exchange of experiences between members of oppressed groups that is the necessary condition for the development of critical consciousness among the members of this group. Consciousness raising is necessary because hegemonic ideologies are so strong that they can deform the epistemic capabilities of oppressed subjects in such a way that they often do not see their oppression.

MacKinnon leaves out another element that is crucial for the development of standpoints: the creation of a shared culture within the oppressed groups that facilitates and promotes the development of critical standpoints vis-à-vis hegemony by valuing the particularity of the oppressed group. Hill Collins [shows](#) that Black women resist the oppressive structures they face through “the act of insisting on Black female self-definition [that] validates Black women’s power and as human subjects,” often cultivating specifically those “aspects of Black female behavior that are seen as most threatening to white patriarch.” Such culture encourages Black women to “embrace their assertiveness, to value their sassiness, and to continue to use these qualities to survive and transcend the harsh environments that circumscribe so many of Black women’s lives.”

In a similar vein, the [gender performances](#) of [gay queens and fairies](#) work by amplifying and appropriating the homophobic discourse that discriminates against them as too feminine. Such a resistant culture—which does not adapt to discrimination and stereotyping but re-appropriates them to amplify the particular identity of the oppressed group—is a necessary condition for the development of standpoints.

Particularity and Universality

How can such identity-political intersubjectivity be more than a discursive bubble with no communicative links to mainstream discourse? How can standpoint particularity be connected to universality? These questions are pressing both for understanding identity politics as more than “[positional foundationalism](#)” and for understanding consensus orientation and objectivity within radical democracy. The answer is academic truth production. The definition of a standpoint, in contrast to mere perspective, involves not only intersubjective discourse and cultural construction based on the experiences of oppressed groups, but also research in connection to these minoritarian knowledges. Thus, “[a standpoint is an achievement \[...\] that requires both science and politics \[...\] to be internally linked, contrary to the standard Liberal, empiricist, Enlightenment view](#)” (italics added).

That standpoints are based on academic theorizing that seeks objectivity, truth, and intersubjectivity is most clear in Hartsock’s Marxist feminist [account](#): “The vision available to the oppressed [...] requires [...] *science to see beneath the surface of the social relations* [...]. [It] exposes the *real relations* among human beings as inhuman” (italics added). From a post-foundationalist perspective, such a concept of ideology as opposed to the objective truth of real relations raises objections. After all, it is such traditional Marxist epistemology against which the [radical democratic critique of objectivity](#) is directed, as the former has turned out to be under-complex and politically exclusionary. Specifically, such universalist epistemology is put forward by contemporary Marxist critics who accuse identity

politics of lacking an objective class analysis. The problem of such conventionally objectivist accounts is that they falsely universalize one social theory, failing to take into account the multiplicity of standpoints. Thus, what is needed is a third way between conventional objectivity (such as in liberalism and Marxism) and relativism that easily follows from the post-foundationalist skepticism.

The concepts of “situated knowledges” and “strong objectivity” are meant to navigate this tension. The key is not only to pluralize knowledge production, which follows from the fact that “[only partial perspective promises objective vision](#),” but also to continuously critically reflect on the construction processes of these situated knowledges and the “instruments of vision [that] mediate standpoints [as] there is no immediate vision from the standpoints of the subjugated.” This critical reflection is the opposite of the essentialism that sometimes structures (failed) identity-political practice but is today often associated with identity politics as a whole: “The search for such a ‘full’ and total position is the search for the fetishized perfect subject of oppositional history.”

To be sure, specific acts of identity-political practice might engage in such problematic essentialism and positional foundationalism. Standpoint knowledge gains stronger objectivity by intersubjectively reflecting that “[subjects/agents of knowledge \[...\] are multiple, heterogeneous, and contradictory incoherent](#).” The critical reflection of multiplicity allows intersubjective understanding and strong objectivity.

While standpoint knowledge is constructed from the experiences of specific groups, it aims at its universalization; it can and should be universally understood. Harding insists that “women are [not] the unique generators of feminist knowledge. [...] Feminist theory, with its rich and contradictory tendencies, has helped us all—women as well as men—to understand how to do.” This is also a crucial clarification of radical democratic theory: emancipatory “[chains of equivalence](#)” can be constructed by intersubjective work toward strong objectivity.

Communication and Learning

The objective knowledge generated through standpoints can and should be learned and known by everyone, independent of their perspective. This entails high critical reflexivity regarding the construction of all situated knowledges, especially those of dominant groups. As today’s epistemic exclusions are mostly due to a lack of such critical reflexivity on the part of privileged actors that can blend out the situatedness of their knowledge by referring to the conventional concept of objectivity as a “god trick,” [standpoint theory](#) “challenges members of dominant groups to make themselves ‘fit’ to engage in collaborative, democratic, community enterprises with marginal [sic!] peoples. Such a project requires learning to listen attentively to marginalized people; [...] it requires critical examination of the dominant institutional beliefs and practices that systematically disadvantage them; it requires critical self-examination to discover how one unwittingly participates in generating disadvantage to them . . . and more.”

While the feminist and post-colonialist standpoint theories of the 1980s and 1990s focused on conceptualizing the privileged knowledge of oppressed groups to refine the notions of objectivity and intersubjective understanding, a new generation of standpoint theorists researches the epistemic shortcomings of both the dominant groups and the supporting social institutions in great detail (see [Fricker 2007](#); [Mills 1997, 2007](#); [Medina 2013](#), [Tuana and Sullivan 2007](#); [Peels and Blaauw 2016](#)).

These works detail which “dominant institutional beliefs and practices” of ignorance need to be overcome to allow for the democratization of democracy through strong objectivity. [Fricker](#) differentiates between two kinds of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice describes the lack of credibility attributed to the speaker due to the prejudices of the listeners. It hinders the communication of knowledge, doubt, and critique and thus leads to false beliefs on the part of the listener, beliefs they could have corrected had they listened unbiased. Thus, testimonial injustice is not only problematic for the speaker, but also

harms the general epistemic system. When testimonial injustice is structural and persistent, for example through its inscription in social institutions, it can lead to hermeneutical marginalization.

[Hermeneutical marginalization](#) describes a situation in which some social groups make only a very small contribution to the shared pool of concepts we use to communicate about our social experiences. When members of these oppressed groups explain their social experiences to members of dominant groups, their experiences may not be understood due to a lack of shared concepts. For example, when women are hindered from contributing to the pool of concepts, this can result in a very narrow definition of rape, such that they might not be understood when they report rape, as what they report might not be covered by said narrow definition. The injustice that results from this lack of understanding is what Fricker calls hermeneutical injustice, i.e., the institutionalization of hermeneutical marginalization and testimonial injustice.

The stabilization of racism is a typical case of epistemic injustice in all its different forms. Mill calls it [White ignorance](#), “a systemic group-based miscognition” entailing “false belief and the absence of true belief” that stems from racist perceptions, white-supremacist ideology, and hegemonic (racist) collective memory narratives. Mills reiterates the point of earlier standpoint theories that the goal of the critique of knowledge is to build stronger objectivity: “Mapping an epistemology of ignorance is for me a preliminary to reformulating an epistemology that will give us genuine knowledge.” [Medina](#) further differentiates the ignorances that support racism: While racial insensitivity indeed follows from “basic ignorance,” it is mostly strengthened by “active ignorance,” an array of resistances against knowing to protect systematic ignorance. Medina calls the result meta-ignorance: “Racially insensitive people of this sort are [...] *numbed to their own numbness*, that is, incapable of reacting to it or even of recognizing how they have become numbed” (italics original). Most often, it comes along with a further form of resistance, namely active meta-ignorance, which is directed against “epistemic friction,” or interaction with different perspectives, which could otherwise alleviate meta-ignorance.

The focus on the epistemic shortcomings of social institutions and dominant groups underlines the crucial point for the radical democratic interpretation of identity politics. Identity politics is offering intersubjective knowledge about the social world; it is a matter of strong objective truth. As such, this knowledge can be understood and productively implemented in democratic deliberation.

Reason and Power

The discussion has shown that identity politics based on standpoints is a matter of reason and knowledge, not of decisionistic power struggles. It is a matter of curing epistemic failures such as epistemic ignorance, insensitivity, and numbness. To this end, it is vital to secure equal access to social and political institutions, which generates strong objectivity. In other words, to reach strong objectivity, it is necessary to democratize democracy. However, the epistemic blockades that are iterated through social systems of oppression—such as racism, sexism, homo- and transphobia, and capitalist ideology—often prevent reasonable voices from being heard. Thus, the academic mapping and analyzing of the objective shortcomings of the current hegemony is not enough to foster political and epistemological change.

The reason for this is that political institutions are not designed on the basis of a reasonable agreement, but are the sedimentation of historical power struggles. Radical democratic theory sees protest and civil disobedience outside of the realms of institutionalized discourse as key for democratization, precisely because of the relative political impotence of reason alone (Celikates [2020, 2016](#)).

To understand this process, we need a historical and dialectical model of power and reason. Existing regimes (police, in Rancière’s terms) are challenged by protest that transgresses the hegemonic standards of reasonable deliberation, as these standards are not universalist, but privilege dominant groups through hermeneutic injustice. The protest, while engaging in political power struggles that can take confrontational and non-discursive forms (i.e., shutting

down people, rejecting discourse, etc.), is guided by strong objectivity developed by reason. This reason draws on the shared normative conceptual pool of democracy and is thereby understood and adopted by some members and/or institutions of social hegemony. This is more likely when identity political projects manage to form alliances through “[chains of equivalence](#)”—that is, when they search for and build common political goals and strategies with other political projects and develop a practice of solidarity with them.

Through a combination of power and reason, the oppressed standpoint can slowly inscribe itself into the hegemonic knowledge and the institutions that uphold it and correct its shortcomings. When the minoritarian discourse has gained some wider social support and understanding but remains essentially contested, power politics often take the form of redistributing access to institutions and discourses, such as through affirmative action programs, diversity quotas, or the de-platforming of representatives of the dominant discourse, commonly called “cancel culture.” These mechanisms are needed to create epistemic friction over the resistance of actively ignorant subjects, as an “[insensitive individual will need external help](#).”

This “help” is a matter of power rather than just reason, as reason alone is of limited use precisely because of the epistemic limitations that privileged actors suffer. Nevertheless, it is key that these power politics cannot work without being backed up by reason, without leading to higher standards of rationality that can be and are being rationally defended. Such power politics only find support among some members of the dominant groups because/if they are reasonable, they (implicitly or explicitly) refer to the shared pool of universalist democratic commitments, and they are aimed at intersubjective understanding.

In sum, the radical democratic and standpoint theory account of identity politics shows that particularist identity politics are necessary for the democratization of democracy. By communicatively disrupting conventional understandings of universalism and objectivity, identity politics reestablish the space for deliberation. Because interpretations of equality and freedom will remain contested, democratization is a dynamic process that does not come to a halt. Thus, the tension between particularity of perspectives and universality—or power and reason—cannot be resolved; rather, the oscillation between particularism and universalism is a necessary feature of democratization through identity politics, and thus of democracy as a whole. Positional fundamentalism and perspective relativism are the result of politics that nevertheless attempt to resolve this tension unilaterally toward particularism. They are not, however, a fundamental problem of the further development of democratic universalism, which must begin with the pluralization of identity-political standpoints.

Some of the material of this text appeared in an earlier and shorter German text at

<https://rise-jugendkultur.de/artikel/partikularismus-und-universalismus-in-der-migrationsgesellschaft/>.