

Epistemic Privilege in the Works of Marx/Engels, DuBois, Mills, & Narayan

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Crucial to a discussion of the relational dynamics between groups of people within the context of history and power asymmetries, past and present, is the concept of *epistemic privilege*, understood as a given social group's unique ability to provide a more accurate and holistic episteme derived from its experiences as actors in a society dominated by the perspectives of the socially dominant group. In other words, oppressed groups have the advantage of acting within the context of their own group and the ideology of their oppressors. Michel Foucault in his works consistently stressed the importance of social power, of access to information, and by extension, of intellectual and political power in society, in defining which theories of social relations, which items of "common knowledge," are dominant and widely accepted in mainstream discourse. Given this asymmetry of power over public discourse, historically speaking, the viewpoints of minority groups, or of groups possessing little power, whether they be blacks, women, or the working class, have in most instances been relegated to the sidelines. However, in the modern era, the notion that the official epistemes on issues such as race and gender are objective, universally applicable theories has been questioned and replaced with competing theories coming from historically marginalized groups. The concept of epistemic privilege explains why competing theories are both useful and acceptable and serves as not only politically useful but philosophically, an avenue for a more accurate, pluralistic dominant narrative.

In modern social theory, several thinkers have detailed out what they believed are important instances of oppression between groups, showing as well the epistemic privilege

possessed by these groups. For the 19th century political philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, history could be explained well through the lens of economic class relations. For Marx and Engels, social relations in a class society were determined by the conflict between workers, termed the proletariat, and capital, termed the bourgeoisie. In the early capitalist period, working and living conditions for the working class were typically dire, with long working hours, poor wages, and awful working conditions. Perhaps more importantly for Marx, a Left Hegelian, the species-essence of man, the product of his labor, was forcibly being confiscated by the owners and sold at unaffordable prices (Rosenstand, p. 420).

The capital class in the 19th century, as it is now in a similar way, was in a dominant position in society, having successfully overthrown the old feudal system of governance with the help of liberalism. The proletariat, although comprising a much greater proportion of society, was firmly oppressed through capitalist relations by a minority class of owners. This situation granted them epistemic privilege: although their concerns were largely unheard for a period of time, the publishing of various treaties on socialism by Marx and Engels finally gave them a voice, a voice that, depending on the level of class consciousness within the proletariat in its many historical guises, has led to the improvement of working conditions and sometimes even revolution. The bourgeoisie had neither the perspective nor the desire to inspect the unjust system of social relations and to speculate as to how it could be improved. Through the eyes of the proletariat, Marx and Engels were able to construct the framework for an equitable society that for the next two centuries has been extremely influential in economics and politics and mostly beneficial for the working class.

For W.E.B. DuBois, the main social problem of the 20th century was of the color line, of the social division of blacks and whites and the oppression of blacks by whites, especially in the American context (p. 5). For me, DuBois' main concern in *The Souls of Black Folk* is the challenge for African Americans in a racist society of attaining recognition by the other as a free and equal member of a culture. On the one hand, for DuBois, blacks live with an internalized sense of inferiority and self-abnegation on the back of years of slavery and Jim Crow, and live a "double consciousness," with two contradictory conceptions of themselves as African Americans (p. 8-9). On the other, most whites deny any attempts for recognition by blacks due to an internalized belief in their racial and ethnic superiority (and maybe due to a desire to remain in a powerful relative position). DuBois, more clearly than Marx and Engels, stresses that learning from the experience of an oppressed group offers a unique, more holistic perspective on the self. Through this double consciousness, through growing up separate but "equal," blacks are both culturally inculcated with the dominant social ideology and innately aware of its contradictions. This grants them epistemic privilege over whites and therefore, perhaps a more objective viewpoint vis à vis social relations.

Charles Mills, a contemporary social philosopher, focuses on the oppression of non-whites by whites throughout history, but particularly in the colonial and post-colonial context, through his exposition of what he terms "the Racial Contract." For Mills, the Racial Contract is a largely implicit political, moral, and epistemological consensus formed by whites with regard to their race's superior status in society. The notion that whites have historically privileged their own race and dehumanized others in various contexts is a widely believed

historical fact, but Mills strongly argues that this disposition continues to be held by whites and, simplifying, constitutes the primary “contract” that structures social relations (Mills, p. 12-3).

A modern example of this pervading, unconscious ethos among whites is IMF and World Bank structural adjustment: although the motive behind 21st century foreign aid seems altruistic, the hidden motives reveal themselves to be less so: in order to qualify for loans, third world countries are forced to structure their economies around neoliberal free market policies that supposedly grant a road to prosperity. However, when put into place, these policies in effect, among many other things, suck capital from third world economies to the West, give foreign governments, corporations, and charitable billionaires access to cheap labor and natural resources, and provide opportunities for massive tax deductions and positive PR. It is easy to make the claim, from the perspective of Mills’ theory, that this is simply a cloaked example of the Racial Contract, of imperialist, racially-motivated (but probably mainly unconscious) intentions masked by a facade of magnanimity and caring.

Mills is clear in his prescriptions: non-whites of all races have a wealth of historical oppressions from which social movements can be formed, and this epistemic privilege provides the cornerstone of their potential success. He references steps already being taken; the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement and of several pan-African and pan-aboriginal groups, as well as the consciousness of racial opposition and conflict held by many non-whites (“I hear the Japs done declared war on you white folks” (p. 116)) shows steps towards collective resistance to various oppressions (p. 115-9). The non-white individual is also encouraged to alter their self-conception, to “[claim] the moral status of personhood” (p. 118), and to challenge the dominant European social ideologies intellectually (p. 118-9).

Uma Narayan, a contemporary Indian feminist, approaches the concept of epistemic privilege from a unique, intersectional perspective. As a non-western feminist, as someone who continues to hold a link to the traditional gender roles of her Indian heritage, Narayan has qualified sympathy for the concerns (and philosophical arguments) of western, white feminists. She argues that the cultural context and hierarchy of values from which western feminists philosophize from, that derived from the European Enlightenment, does not gel exactly with the concerns of feminists of a non-western background (p. 294-5). She specifically mentions the problems derived from colonialism: that not only are women in non-western cultures acting from a position of oppression, but so are the cultures themselves (p. 295). For non-western feminists, a difficult balance between emancipating women from historical oppression and preserving traditional cultures (for which, at least in the Indian context, gender roles are exceedingly important) must be eased out.

For Narayan, feminists, and people in general should recognize that non-western feminists have, for sure, this unique predicament, but also the unique privilege of having a broader perspective on oppression. Her solution for people with her “double-minded” predicament is to adopt a critical attitude towards both the dominant and the oppressed ideologies, to continue to fight for greater political freedoms but to also be informed in their actions of their unique group identities (p. 299-300).

However, Narayan’s stance towards this “double-mindedness,” of the epistemic privilege non-western feminists have, should not be read as wholly positive. She stresses that straddling between identities is always problematic and stressful. A feminist in a non-western country, for instance, may choose to “dichotomize her life,” professionally fighting for women’s

emancipation but domestically relegating her life to traditional, self-oppressive roles. She may also choose to abandon her social expectations entirely, becoming more masculine or western in attitude; vice versa, she may retreat into traditional roles and choose to be oppressed; both of are ostensibly in some sense a retreat from the feminist project (p. 299). Again, Narayan thinks adopting a critical attitude towards all relevant forms of oppression is the best synthesis. However, having this stance of negation, of being between groups, can lead to a feeling of alienation, and of ambivalence and uncertainty (p. 299). Her prescription for this is to pick and choose contexts in which certain group identities are enacted: maybe traditional garbs can be abandoned for western clothing, but maybe spending long periods of time raising a family is something to find enjoyment in (p. 299-300). This is perhaps a form of freedom, not of alienation.

I think all of us in some way live with “double-consciousness.” Although I am a member of many dominant groups in society, there are a few contexts from which I can act and think from a position of epistemic privilege: for example, half of my family is Russian; I was born in Siberia, I speak the language, and I have grown up with the culture. Growing up in the United States, this gave me a truly unique perspective on most things. When I moved to Kazakhstan for the last two years of high school, I attained the opposite form of epistemic privilege: most of my classmates in my international school had moved around the world all their life while I was the guy who had lived in America for 15 years. Most of us have similar experiences of having backgrounds that grant us epistemic privilege. In being unique in some way, we both learn the dominant, normative way of looking at things and hold onto our own respective group identities. This can in some contexts be alienating or difficult in some other way, as is clear in Narayan, but

really I think it depends on what your own oppressions are. For me at least, epistemic privilege is only a good thing for my ability to make sense of the world.

References

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