Sandra Harding, 1935-2025

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Sandra Harding passed away in March 2025, after a long illness. At the time, she was retired, and living in Western Massachusetts near her daughter and granddaughter. Yet she was continuing to work, write, and give interviews; and her last book, *Decentralizing Knowledges: Essays on Distributed Agency*, co-edited with Leandro Rodriguez Medina, was just published this year.

Harding put her mark on feminist theory, epistemology and the philosophy of science in a way that will influence many generations to come. She was one of the first to pull the burgeoning field of feminist theory into an engagement with epistemology and the philosophy of science, and she was also one of the first to push the latter two fields into an engagement with postcolonial studies. She helped to elaborate in philosophical and methodological terms the concept of 'standpoint epistemology' that is today widely taught, debated and used in formulating empirical projects of inquiry. She redefined the vexed concept of objectivity, helped to publicise and analyse how racism had influenced methods of work in the sciences, and in her last decades, helped to develop collaborative relations between decolonial theory, Latin American philosophy of science and Anglo American philosophy of science.

The affiliations that Harding's work helped to bring about were hardly easy or regularly welcomed. When she began to publish in the 1970s, many theorists in the fields of epistemology and the sciences pushed back against the idea that knowledge – empirical knowledge especially – could benefit from feminist theory, or anticolonial theory. Some of these recalcitrant forces remain obstinately oppositional to exploring such questions as she put before us decades ago. And to be sure, in the early days when Harding was initiating these connections, not a few feminists also looked askance at the official academic domains of the sciences, which had for so long generated theories that legitimated the marginalisation of women in nearly every social sphere. Today, due in no small part to her efforts, the field of feminist science is strong, influential and diverse in its approaches and participants.

Being ahead of the curve can bring marginalisation, and Harding was sidelined in the very discipline she had chosen as her home base. Her last academic appointment at UCLA, from 1996-2014, was as a Distinguished Professor in both Gender Studies and Education, with no formal appointment in the Philosophy department. This was despite the fact that, in 1973, Harding had earned her PhD in philosophy at New York University, writing a dissertation on Quine's epistemology. This was also despite the fact that, by 1996 when she was hired at UCLA, she had published several books in philosophy (in the end, she published eighteen).

Nonetheless, Harding enjoyed her perch at UCLA. And the larger institution welcomed her transdisciplinarity and supported her efforts at creating collaborative endeavours, especially within the social sciences. She directed UCLA's well-established and nationally influential program at the Center for the Study of Women, and, with generous institutional support, for five years she co-edited the interdisciplinary journal *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. Throughout her career she always held joint appointments with the social sciences.

I found Sandra Harding to be a perennially optimistic, upbeat survivor of academic conservatism who could always seem to find a way to move forward. I suspected that this was because she had spent some time outside of the academy, both working and organising, and understood clearly that higher education exists within a larger social and economic context that often predetermines its predilections. She took her time to gain a PhD – not until the ripe age of 38 – and had many experiences be-

forehand teaching public school and doing organising work in civil rights, feminism and the anti-war movement. Harding was part of the trend that we today call socialist-feminism. Her world was not limited to the academy, and so she was ever alive to the challenges that the developing social movements she lived through, and was often a part of, posed for scholarly fields of research.

Harding's signal achievement – to develop the concept of a 'feminist standpoint' as a philosophically rigorous theory and approach to research design – was, and remains, controversial both in the mainstream and at the margins. It is continually misread as assuming an essentialist gender identity, and an absolute epistemic privilege. She responded to such criticisms (those she found worth engaging) with thoughtful arguments and modifications of her account. She also tested her theory in collaborations with science communities, not as someone who was gathering empirical data herself, as she was quick to point out, but as someone who could go inside the research teams, understand their processes, and engage in conversations with participants. And her theoretical approach became better, stronger, more nuanced and persuasive.

I first met Harding in 1984, in my second year of graduate school. It was one of those moments we never forget, when we first get a glimpse of a personal hero. When *Discovering Reality* came out in 1983, a collection edited by Harding and Merrill Hintikka, it was arguably the first book in feminist epistemology since Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice From the South* came out in 1892. *Discovering Reality* inaugurated the fields of feminist epistemology and feminist philosophy of science, with essays by leading science theorists such as Evelyn Fox Keller and Ruth Hubbard, political theorists such as Jane Flax and Nancy Hartsock (who published her first paper on standpoint theory here), and philosophers as diverse as Merrill and Jaakko Hintikka (who co-authored an essay on sexism in language), Naomi Scheman, Elizabeth Spelman and Janice Moulton (whose famous critique of the adversarial method in philosophy was also first published here).

Harding's interest in the field of philosophy of science was strongly influenced by the way in which Thomas Kuhn's work on scientific revolutions challenged the overly rationalist reconstructions of scientific theory choice. But what she observed was that the post-Kuhnian philosophies of science that began to emerge in his wake were inadequate, even timid, and effected a stunting of the most important implications of his analysis.

I shared her interest in the work of Kuhn, and had written my Master's thesis defending Kuhn against various critics who dismissed him as a relativist. My PhD dissertation went on to explore what would today be called political epistemology; I did not discuss feminists in that dissertation because I wanted to get a job, though my CV revealed that I was also beginning to publish in feminist philosophy. Harding was a lifeline for many of us in those early days who were trying to navigate conservative disciplines while pursuing these newly contextual approaches to science and knowledge in general. I believe her non-academic experiences strengthened her philosophical acuity in these domains and her ability to thrive intellectually despite all.

I think all of us who were women working in the areas of epistemology and philosophy of science, even those of us like myself with backgrounds in scientific work, felt a bit like misfits. To find intellectual interlocutors who were willing to critique our ideas but also engage seriously with them – the sort of interaction that all theorists require – we generally had to find other feminists. When I worked in a nuclear research lab through my college years, I was the only woman in the four-story building other than the secretaries (so there was only one restroom for us). I think many women working in the sciences in those days were probably 'male-identified', as it used to be called, which was a way to adapt to the dominant culture in our contexts of work and study, and to avoid becoming prey. The culture of the labs certainly counselled against feminine dress or comportment. Sharon Traweek's early anthropological study of the domain of physics as a boy's club nailed it (*Beamtimes and Lifetimes: The World of High Energy Physics*). Traweek was one of Harding's best friends and she was delighted to have her as a colleague at UCLA for many years. Traweek contributed an essay to Harding's last edited collection with Rodriguez Medina. The essay, 'Making Difference at the Edge', examines the distributions of authority and influence in the fields of science, and the informal interactions in which epistemic practices are largely taught among the guys. These were the same issues that drove Harding towards the development of standpoint theory.

Instead of trying to fit in and prove her bona fides

to the male-dominated world of both science and philosophy, Harding struck out on her own course in a way that remains inspiring. On the fateful day when I first met her, she had been invited by the prestigious Pembroke Seminar at Brown University to give a seminar on her recent work in progress. So as a graduate student member of the seminar, I had the privilege of reading early drafts of what became *The Science Question in Feminism* (published in 1986 with Cornell). At the time, there were several theorists working on standpoint, such as Nancy Hartsock in political science as well as Dorothy Smith, Hilary Rose and Patricia Hill Collins in sociology. Harding was developing a more philosophical argumentation that could address how standpoint worked in relation to epistemic justification. The Pembroke Seminar was at that time headed up by the formidable Joan Scott, and was largely dominated by a form of high theory more compatible with contemporary French philosophy than analytic or Anglo-American philosophy. As the Seminar's Director, Scott was both brilliant and broad-minded, and we were treated to a slew of up and coming social scientists as well as humanities theorists (we also had an initial draft of *Gender Trouble*, with a young Judith Butler to explain it).

Harding was quite interested in these theoretical trends sweeping into feminist theory, such as post-structuralism, Lacanianism and deconstruction, that were helping to destabilise overly rationalist pretenses and bring out the political elements influencing our disciplines. Here was another set of collaborations that Harding wanted to develop, though she wanted to stop short of an 'excessively constructivist position', as she once put it. In her books in the 1990s, one can certainly see her efforts to show links between feminist science studies and post-structuralist skepticism about a final representational truth. The divide between these trends was of course not really that wide, since what we today call epistemic pluralism and the understanding that scientific ontologies are socially constructed had a strong following already in philosophy of science. But the hurdles to this particular collaboration, spanning the diverse theory worlds and linguistic styles in analytic and continental approaches, were especially difficult.

Standpoint theory was read and debated widely, but Harding believed it needed to maintain an ability to legitimate its methodological proposals with epistemic arguments. Towards that end, Harding focused more on the empirical benefits of starting research from women's lives, rather than the ontological debates over how to characterise theoretical advances. She offered a philosophically careful development of an idea that is rather obvious, that our diverse experiences not only make a difference in daily life but in the generation of empirical questions and hypotheses, as well as the interpretation and assessment of data. It is not bodies alone that do this, but bodies in context, and the particular tasks one is given in the socially designed division of labour. Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, the seventeenth-century Mexican nun, wrote that Aristotle would have been a better philosopher if he had engaged in the practice of cooking: the combustion of heat with food would have led him, Sor Juana surmised, to deeper questions about the nature of the world and its co-constitutive relations. This was the kernel of Harding's insight: that it is our different practices that engender our different questions. From this, she began to develop a standpoint methodology.

What was more startlingly new, certainly in academic circles, was Harding's inversion thesis, that the marginalised had distinct advantages because of these different practices, at least in regard to specific kinds of empirical work. Thus, she argued that institutions and scientists in general should take these potential epistemic differences into account as they craft research teams. Predictably, Harding's efforts at a feminist social engineering of male-dominated science was treated a little bit like the herbal healing methods found in Puritan societies: we were dangerous know-nothing heretics.

Harding was to face diverse reactions throughout her career and modelled for us a way to remain open and recognise the limits of what her theory could sufficiently address. But she also began to amass many concrete empirical examples to showcase the difference that 'starting research from women's lives' could make. And she redefined the concept of objectivity – the scare word regularly used to discredit the whole field– so that its normatively productive elements were not only retained but strengthened within standpoint theory. Harding also pursued the expansion of feminist philosophy of science beyond the realm of gender, to take on in a serious and deep way questions of race and coloniality. She began to explore how, once we begin to put science in a multicultural context (the topic of her collaborative book with

Robert Figueroa), we could see how excessively narrow our own sciences were.

Harding's patient and dogged persistence in pursuing, refining and elaborating the theory of standpoints did eventually lead to a wider discussion with some wonderful engagements from some of the more mainstream philosophers of science and epistemologists. The growing fields of social epistemology and political epistemology should all recognise their debt to her, though some seem embarrassed by the association.

Harding took the issue of essentialism especially seriously, since she knew that the complexities and intersectional nature of gender and sex categories required careful thought before we offered any iteration of a standpoint. Her approach to standpoint, like Hartsock's, was informed by Hegel's lord/bondsman dialectic, so influential on Marx. Such categories were never fixed and stable for either Hegel or Marx. 'Lords' and 'bondsmen' are socially recognised, and socially invented, positions, with both imagined and real effects on our work, our skills and our perspectives. I have always been irritated by the misreadings of her as an essentialist.

But Harding, less hot-tempered, listened carefully, addressed the concerns of such critics, even while standing her ground on the importance of standpoints. One concern she found legitimate (and I concur) is that a gendered sensibility is not automatic or always paired with sexed differences. I certainly saw that in some of the male-identified female scientists I encountered, though as I knew, they hardly had a free choice in the latter if they wanted to survive in such fields as physics. But Harding knew also that standpoint could not work in any simplistic DEI policy proposal, however much we may hesitate to criticise these programmes in the current moment.

Standpoints for Harding were an achievement rather than an automatic effect of identity. One had to reflect about one's experiences, and this is what the feminist social movements made possible. Standpoints are not naturally occurring epistemically relevant aspects of the mind of a female embodied person, or based on transparent experiences, yet remain valuable as a place to theorise from. They do not overdetermine the eventual path of theoretical development but can be enormously productive in suggesting new lines of inquiry and new considerations about how to assess both the relevance and the sufficiency of evidence. In her book on objectivity, Harding argues that the diversity of a research team should be an epistemic concern because it can bear on the adequacy of justification.

Harding drew a lot of her arguments from the newer histories and social studies of sciences that have developed in recent decades. She regularly gave talks at the Society for Social Studies of Science and the History of Science Studies international meetings, two organisations that were surely instigated by Kuhn's cohort of science theorists, exploring a more socially embedded account of scientific developments. And these sites have often been more self-aware of the positive role social movements can play in pushing scholarly research forward.

Harding took these new fields that she contributed to from the beginning to be telling a 'truer story' of science itself. Thus, she always took a different position than what she called an 'excessively constructionist position' on science and its production of theories, a position that could eclipse empiricism entirely.

Undaunted by her many critics, Harding frequently explained her approach as one based on the idea that communities of theorists could 'benefit from greater dialogue with each other', as she wrote in the Preface to her 1998 book, *Is Science Multicultural? Postcolonialism, Feminisms, and Epistemologies*. As a result of these multilayered dialogues, her book titles were often long, a string of subject areas positioned alongside one another. She insisted that feminists, philosophers and scientists needed to do more reading across, engaging with and listening carefully to each other. And, with her as a model, in recent decades these divided communities began to spawn young academics fluent in multiple traditions. Starting our own research from these collaborative transdisciplinary spaces may be the best lesson she taught us.

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