

Sandra Harding

Science and Social Inequality: Feminist and Postcolonial Issues.

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After forming my ideas for this review of *Science and Social Inequality: Feminist and Postcolonialist Issues*, I perused the internet to see what my fellow readers had thought of Sandra Harding's latest offering. Although my casual searches did not turn up any reviews, I did happen across a few critical science studies course outlines in which various portions of this quite recently published book had been listed as "required reading". Instructors take note: your colleagues leading these courses have been quick and wise in their choice to make use of this valuable resource, for this volume brings together re-worked versions of many of Harding's inquiries into one contemporary (and convenient!) collection. Reading *Science and Social Inequality* is not merely an exercise in reviewing feminist, postcolonialist and multiculturalist critiques of Western science; herein Harding also provides comparisons and evaluations of these critiques in a persuasive and well-formulated argument for a "world of sciences" – one that will help address issues of social injustice rather than advancing global inequalities that presently lack acknowledgement.

Harding divides this volume into two sections. Part one is a collection of critical essays across diverse yet interrelated themes that question both the outcomes of modern Western science and the effectiveness of various challenges and justifications that have been presented in science studies literature. The idea of this science as value- or culture-free is pulled apart by postcolonialist analyses of the culturally distinctive ways that Western science has developed specifically for the needs of European expansion, conquest and benefit, with a culturally-distinct conceptualization of the order of nature. In raising such issues, Harding problematizes the claim to universality that Western science rests upon, and explores and evaluates the various projects that have been proposed to transform this dominant model. This evaluation is not only presented in terms of how we might transform the scientific traditions of the "Global North", but also how we might transform the way we study science to be more critical, reflexive, and politically-engaged.

The first section of this book also reviews the antiracist and feminist argument that modern Western science exacerbates social inequalities through discriminatory projects, philosophies, technologies, and social structure. One of the most intriguing chapters of this section is devoted to an analysis of the discriminatory epistemologies and philosophies of science (chapter 5); here Harding reaffirms her commitment to standpoint theory in light of recent and innovative work on its application to science studies. She argues that a combination of standpoint theory and a shift in focus from merely critiquing scientific representations to considering scientific practices (forming representations being one practice of many) will help to address the epistemological underdevelopment of Western science, making a strong case for the future emergence of feminist practice-focused philosophies of science. In so doing, Harding continues to advance the significance and potential of feminist science studies.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution that this volume makes can be found in its second section, comprised of three chapters on the topic of Truth, Relativism, and Science's Political Unconsciousness. In these final essays Harding pulls together with greatest clarity (and also with the most enthusiasm) her evaluations and proposed means of securing a future "world of sciences" with the possibility for advancing social justice. It is this section that finally gives us a concrete understanding of Harding's vision for how to push forward with the criticisms of Western science,

truth claims, and the relativism debate – not just an overview of these various criticisms. Readers who are already familiar with the critiques of feminist, multiculturalist and postcolonialist literature on science will likely find this final portion of *Science and Social Inequality* the most thought-provoking. Harding lays out the “central foci of a still emerging network of postpositivist philosophies of science” (2006: 153) in a way that allows for an interlocking plurality of sciences to exist that are best suited to particular local resources, goals, environments, and cultures for producing effective and socially-just outcomes.

It is also in the second half of *Science and Social Inequality* that some of Harding’s most interesting and well-formulated critiques come forth. Here she brilliantly analyzes how both the anti-democratic and (supposedly) pro-democratic ideals of Western science are deeply problematic, preventing this model, which “speaks in a monologue” (2006: 126), from being suitable as a universal system. She makes a careful effort to avoid romanticizing the idea of “local knowledges” in her criticisms of Western science’s truth claims, and is thorough in considering interrelated issues, such as capitalist interests in the maintenance of science’s “culturally neutral” façade. Overall the essays of this final section flow together in a comprehensive progression which is lacking in the first several chapters; this leads me to my few notes of critique.

Particularly in the first section, there are points at which the organization of this book becomes frustrating for the reader. Frequent references to arguments yet to be explained distract from discussions at hand and give the impression of “skimming the surface” until said arguments actually do appear in further detail (and then sometimes seem unnecessarily repetitive as a result). This is likely due to Harding’s reworking of several of this book’s chapters from prior works; a need to re-write these pieces in a way that highlights their interrelatedness and assures the reader of the diversity of points to be presented was no doubt a challenge. This is certainly not detrimental in terms of content, however, for a great strength of this book is, as noted earlier, its sense of being a “collection” of Harding’s recent contributions and considerations. Instructors in particular will appreciate this new resource of not only a comprehensive overview of arguments in both past and present critical science studies, but also an “updated” and clarified understanding of one of the most important and influential writers in this area, who clearly has continued to push forward with innovative engagement.

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