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## **Sciences from Below: Feminisms, Postcolonialities and Modernities by Sandra Harding**

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### **REVIEW**

Sandra Harding's new book *Sciences from Below: Feminisms, Postcolonialities and Modernities* is of a piece with the 'studying up' methodological commitment of Marxism. Studying up is perhaps most influentially articulated as 'history from below' in Edward Thompson's (1963) classic text, *The Making of the English Working Classes*. Here the researcher positions herself alongside the oppressed, here solidarity is enjoined with scholarship. It is not necessary to rehearse here the pluses and minuses of Marxism. Class is important but not sufficient but Harding has set herself the demanding task of synthesising a huge range of the social studies of science literature to aid and support the social justice movements. The clarity of her thinking and writing are crucial for such an ambition. However the book was written within the context of intensifying globalisation but is read in the context of the gravest economic crisis since the 1929 depression. Then bankers threw themselves from Wall Street skyscrapers; today they are bailed out with immense sums of money from people's taxes. Welfare for capitalists replaces welfare for the people.

But even before this crisis, the poor of the South have been paying the price of globalisation. Desmond Tutu observes that the massacres in Darfur are fundamentally about the lack of water, which gives rise to lethal conflicts over grazing. But if the peasants and herders on the ground had had their problems of water listened to, the lurid media accounts of tribal/religious



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conflict might well have had less influence. For that matter to maintain a commitment to taking the voices from below seriously, it is difficult to accept the concept of post coloniality as sufficient. Today the colonised of the last white colony have been speaking of the sixty year suffering. They describe the classical colonial language and practices. The land was as usual, described as 'empty', and those who unfortunately were there, to be removed by massacre and ethnic cleansing. To follow Latour's question of were we ever modern, should we be asking were we ever postcolonial?

So while not denying the strength of post colonial discourses in influencing our thinking, these are to be weighed alongside the current forms of colonialism with what are increasingly recognised as breaches of human rights and international law.

So there we have it, could it be that with socio-ecological disaster growing apace and the world of hedge funds, sub prime markets tumbling about our ears, globalised capitalism is imploding, just twenty years after Soviet style socialism imploded? As Ghandi once said, when asked what he thought about western civilisation, "it would be nice?" But we should remember, it is times of turbulence and conflict rather than in times of apparent calm, which present new challenges and new possibilities. So let me turn to Harding's optimism about how we might begin to move on.

To achieve this Harding sets herself to analyse the ways in which western modernity remains "haunted" by anxieties about the feminine and the primitive i.e. the traditional. She reads northern philosophies of science as maintaining the spectre of the traditional while simultaneously offering men the chance to escape. Here there is a problem. Once I would have agreed with Harding that it was Western men i.e. Euroamerican males, who held the elite place within modernity, not least within science, but the West, and above all the single superpower of the US, is in decline. China, India and Brazil are the coming super powers. Today US laboratories have researchers-sometimes even a majority- from Japan and China. (Needless to say men are still numerically and hierarchically dominant). With globalisation the old order has changed. Perhaps it is this shifting of both people and power that explains why Harding - normally someone of formidable intellectual consistency - moves her categories between Stuart Hall's unforgettable formulation of 'the West and the Rest' to 'the South and the North'. There seem be no magic language solutions, as this is a time of transition. Nonetheless the problem at times becomes acute in a book with such global ambitions.

Harding turns to a number of gender free analysts of science and modernity, to unpack the multiple concepts of modernity. She cites for example Bjorn Wittrock's fruitful distinction between those who see modernity as an epoch and those who see modernity as having distinctive features. Thus in the same society the science and technology may be modernist, but familial relations traditional. But while she engages with Bruno Latour's critique of

the claims of modernity, his futurist project of challenging the science saturated concept of modernity remains problematical. We live in that scientific society, jumping clear of it, even with Latour as our guide, seems distinctly improbable. For that matter even though Harding rightly welcomes Ulrich Beck's thinking about modernity, above all the risk relation between science and society, she fails to recognise the situatedness of his theorising. Located in the former West Germany with its strong economy and robust welfare state, thus leaving behind the old social problems, then indeed risks, generated by science and technology, could be seen as 'the problem'. For a unified Germany now joined with the impoverished east, a revised analysis might look rather different. But in the world of social theory, ideas often march on, unconstrained by the reality of human suffering. The risk society generated by science and technology is real enough but the agony of the dispossessed, which arrives with the current crisis, is equally real.

She scrutinises the thesis of the new mode of production of scientific knowledge developed by Michael Gibbons and his colleagues. In this they claim that the first mode of knowledge production (roughly speaking classical disinterested academic science) is being replaced by what they speak of as Mode Two. This mode of production is now of multidisciplinary teams recruited around projects directly influenced by socio-economic pressures. Their distinctly managerial vision is to some extent explained, (not least in the cases of Gibbons, Nowotny and Scott whom Harding identifies as the central authors) by their own social locations. But whether their explanation only fits that of the elite universities and whether there are differences elsewhere in the research system is unclear. Certainly the CERN Cyclotron remains very much part of Big Science and historian Stephen Shapin's recent research among industrial laboratories suggest that "mode one" is alive and well, no longer in the universities but in some of today's big industrial labs. One of the problems here is what do different groups mean by 'science'. Thus in a study of the public understanding of science I was engaged in together with some fellow sociologists, we found that none of the non scientists we had talked to had used the word 'science'. (Irwin and Wynne, 1996). What they spoke of was 'reliable knowledge', a matter worth thinking about.

But what Gibbons et al ignore in their managerialist vision is the gender dimension of what happens to the many researchers on short-term contracts and on soft money. As the crisis deepens it will the more marginal researchers (their word is fungible) who will be displaced. One thing that is certain is that the usual markers of exclusion will be in place, and Harding makes it clear through her book that these are her 'below'.

She defends and extends standpoint theory with its situatedness in women's diverse lives, as a methodological means of moving on. She returns to the centrality of women's work in the context of domestic production and reproduction within the processes of globalisation. She is not naïve about the ways in which other women care for the households of privileged Western women, but what she insists on, is knowledge learnt from doing.

Here Harding comes close to the mostly ungendered discourse of European science studies presently widely enrolled in within the concept of 'public engagement'. Managerially this is seen as a means of closing the trust gap between science and society exposed by the mass protests against GM crops and 'Mad Cow' disease. But the democratising view which locates itself as part of science below is that laboratory science is incomplete. Knowledges derived from the practices of everyday life must be treated with respect for there to be a sustainable socio-ecosystem. That said, much of the public research focused on environmental issues remains ungendered, while feminist studies of science, particularly of the reproductive technosciences, are building the kind of knowledges/sciences from below Harding advocates.

Even in the context of writing the book Harding needed the scholarship as well as imagination and courage displayed here, in her advocacy of and methodological commitment to the inclusion of women's everyday lives, and what has been dismissed as the traditional. These must be made integral to the social reconstruction of the sciences. And crisis or no crisis, there is no alternative.

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