

## Realism versus Relativism: Towards a Politically Adequate Epistemology

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### INTRODUCTION

Within feminism, the argument between realism and relativism appears to be both acute and political. I shall examine this argument, primarily from a political point of view. My philosophical education taught me to follow reason wherever it went and to distrust political considerations. My experience as a feminist has taught me to stick by my political commitments even when I appear to have lost the argument. In this paper I am trying to reconcile this conflict and I hope to demonstrate that, at least in social and political spheres, the political is, and should be, given equal consideration to the epistemological. I shall do this by first looking at the strengths and weaknesses of the two positions, and suggest that the differences are not as great as first appears, because both need to appeal to the same community, in the same way, in order to decide what is the case and what we should do about it. I call this community a 'community of resistance', borrowing the term from liberation theology,<sup>1</sup> and I see it not merely as a way of being with other people, but as a way of being in, and knowing, the world; a way which sees both politics and knowledge as process, rather than as achievement. While the paper appears to be about relativism, my main concern is to make explicit the way in which this community offers the democratic epistemology which I seek.

This, then, is not so much an exercise in what feminism and philosophy might contribute to each other, as an attempt to recon-

cile the two in my own life; to do them together.

### THE APPEAL AND PROBLEMS OF REALISM<sup>2</sup>

Some preliminary definitions: I characterise realism as the view that there is an objective order of reality, which can be known by the human observer. The claim that it is a fact that women's wombs do not wither if they use their brains, or that it is in multinational corporations' interests to maintain women's obsessions with food are both examples of realism. For the moment, I define relativism as the view that every woman's experience is valid, not false, illusory or mistaken, and that all ways of making sense of the world are equally valid. I shall subsequently revise this to the view that the truth of a claim is relative to the group within which that claim is made. Thus, eventually, I wish to distinguish relativism, which may be a coherent position, from subjectivism, which is certainly not.

The primary appeal of realism is political. If all views are equally valid, so are sexist ones, and relativism appears to disarm me. We also all now agree on certain truths. It is false to say that a woman's womb withers if she uses her brain, irrational to use sexual characteristics rather than economic position as the deciding factor in granting a mortgage, and patently unjust to pay less to a woman than a man for completing identical tasks. A combination of careful observation, willingness to take account of the evidence, and a commitment to consistency will reveal these truths. They are not a matter of perspective, social position or gender.

But we have to ask how these truths are

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known, we need an epistemology. It is here that the realist runs into difficulties. For given that it is a combination of those intellectual virtues already mentioned (consistency, careful observation etc.) which enabled us to expose the bias and falsehood of sexist views; and given that these virtues are popularly recognised as the characteristics of a scientific attitude towards the world, we might look for an epistemology based on that scientific approach. For the truth to out, feminists need only to do rigorously what men have purported to do, and indeed, we owe a great deal to feminists who have, through rigorous intellectual effort, revealed that much purportedly impartial and objective scholarship and science is grounded in male bias.<sup>3</sup> We have a better knowledge of ourselves and our past because of them.

But although this epistemology, which I call rational-scientific, is politically appealing (it enables us to say to the sexist 'you are wrong') it also raises political problems. First, it is an elitist epistemology. Only some women have the resources (time, library, etc.) to conduct such research, other women will simply have to accept it on authority. This may not be a ground for rejecting it, but it means it needs to be supplemented with an epistemology for everyday life which answers the question, 'How do I know who or what to believe?' One epistemology for the élite, another for the masses is embarrassing. Secondly, women have often experienced the scientific-rational approach as oppressive both in its process and in its findings. It has been used to make women feel foolish because they have been unable to express themselves in its terms, and it has been used to 'prove' the inferiority of women. The claim about wombs and brains came out of a scientific community that was not deliberately dishonest and was committed to certain canons of observation and rationality. Why did it take so long to discover that it was false?

At this point, the realist may answer that ideology and false consciousness obscure the operation of intelligence and observation, or

she may argue, as Grimshaw (1986) does, that we do not have to be positivists, committed to the view that it is possible to give an objective, value-free description of the world simply by observing the appropriate scientific method, in order to believe that there is an objective reality, often masked by ideology, but ultimately knowable. I define ideology as a system of beliefs, including values, which serves a particular group's interest. Thus there is a powerful motive, not always fully conscious, for a group to believe certain things. False consciousness is a system of beliefs and values which betrays the interests of the person or group with the false consciousness. It is puzzling to the 'enlightened', who, to explain it, must usually appeal to the mechanisms whereby a dominant group persuades an oppressed group to accept the former's view of the world. Clearly, the language of science, if not the spirit, would be a useful tool in this endeavour of keeping the oppressed ignorant. The realist, thus, maintains her view that there is an objective reality, there really are certain objective interests served in certain objective ways, regardless of what the people involved might think, and argues that one of the ways of finding out about the reality is to ask whose interests are being served by any particular belief, especially one suspected of being false. Knowing those interests would explain why false beliefs are held, and suggest ways in which we might redirect our attention so as to discover truth. But it does not tell us how to decide what is true, especially where there is conflict of opinion or interest as there often is within the feminist movement. This becomes critically important when it is a matter of knowing what our interests are and how these are best served: while it may only be authoritative to tell a woman that science proves mental activity will not affect her fertility, it is authoritarian to tell her what her interests are, and that she is falsely conscious if she thinks that they are best served through, for example, marriage.

So the political problems of the rational-scientific epistemology are made more acute when questions of ideology and false con-

sciousness are introduced. At best, the use of this epistemology appears to be profoundly undemocratic. At worst, it is an exercise in domination. At best, some women are telling other women what they are like, what their interests are, and how they might best be served. At worst, some women are imposing their own interests on the movement as a whole. For example, while it is in white middle-class women's interests to show how women are like white middle-class men, in order to get their share of the jobs, money and status, it is not in black or working-class women's interests. How do we know when we are not simply being sold someone else's ideology if we cannot rely on our own judgment?

### ON WHEN TO BELIEVE AN AUTHORITY

I think it is rational to accept authorities on two bases: that they can solve our problems, and/or that they can share their view of things with us. We accept the mechanic who successfully repairs the car. Many of us treat doctors in the same way, although some are progressively learning to doubt that view of the profession.<sup>4</sup> I think we are most willing to accept authority when the issue is most acutely one of control of a situation. If I am bleeding to death, or if my car stalls at every traffic light, I have a clear test of a solution to the problem, and I am probably not very interested in the mechanics of that response. For all the debate, Popper (1957) successfully isolates one test of knowledge with his notion of technological impossibility and its implication of control. But this only applies to certain areas of knowledge, and only under certain conditions. I am, for example, unwilling to accept control where the costs are too high. If I am told that the only way we can continue to feed the population is by increasingly large-scale agribusinesses and factory farms, my distress at the destructiveness of that method of food production makes me less likely to accept the solution on authority. If I live with acute famine, I

might not balk at the solution. The costs are suddenly not so high. Where I have a clear problem, clear criteria for the successful solution to the problem, and reasonable costs for the solution, I have a test of knowledge, and a test for accepting other people's claims to knowledge. This is a conception of knowledge as control or power, and is central to our understanding and worship of scientific knowledge. Its roots go back at least to Bacon, and it is no accident that it developed contemporaneously with modern science. But as has been often said, it does not give us The Truth about the World. There can be more than one solution to a problem, more than one way of controlling a situation. We can eliminate non-solutions, but not establish *the* single correct solution. This is obvious (although not to Bacon) as soon as knowledge is conceived of in terms of control, much less obvious if knowledge is seen simply as a correct description of the world.

It is clear that such a view of knowledge only has limited application. As Carolyn Merchant (1982) has pointed out, implicit in it is the idea of domination. Most of us are unwilling to accept domination, even by 'scientific' knowledge, in social life, and many of us are unwilling to accept it even within so-called scientific areas. Thus many feminists have struggled to regain control over birthing from the scientific experts, and few would accept that the issue of how to achieve orgasm can be settled by anyone but themselves. Indeed, one of the reasons for the feminist distrust of science is that issues presented as scientific turned out to be political, for example, the control (knowledge) of women's sexuality and fertility. Issues of control and domination, and of what counts as a solution, then become relevant in deciding whether or not to accept a particular epistemological approach. Popper's notions of piecemeal social engineering (Popper, 1957) are unacceptable precisely because he treats social problems as technological problems to be controlled by technique rather than democratically resolved.

We also accept knowledge on authority where experts can share that knowledge

with us, for example, where they have done surveys, or been in a position to make observations, which we cannot. Here it is necessary that we understand what is going on, unlike the problem-solving cases, and that we trust the expert, and this often gets very close to allowing our political commitments to decide our view of the truth. For example, my suspicion of the health risks run by people living near to nuclear power stations is confirmed by statistics about child leukemia in such areas. But counter-surveys may be done, which show the rate not to be as much above normal as suspected, which refer to acceptable levels of radiation, and so forth, until I run out of time and expertise to judge the case on its 'merits' and instead decide on the basis of my prior commitment against nuclear energy. This decision is not irrational: BNFL and I are going to disagree about acceptable levels and risks, what constitutes a 'normal' rate of child leukemia, and so on, through a complex of value judgments and decisions about the facts that do not necessarily involve either of us in distortion, dishonesty or even error. This becomes even clearer in the light of H. L. A. Hart's analysis of cause (Hart and Honoré, 1959), which shows how we use value judgments in picking out certain conditions as precipitating events. For example, background radioactivity and certain nutritional patterns may both be necessary conditions for the disease. BNFL and I will disagree over which to call the cause. Further, my grounds for deciding which set of statistics to accept are neither more nor less rational than the expert's. We have both decided as honestly as we can on the basis of our best efforts to assess the evidence, we have both thought within a complex of judgments, values and beliefs (which are also going to include our view of acceptable solutions to problems). At this point, the differences between the realist and the relativist do not look very great. The realist could end up saying that the claim that nuclear power stations cause child leukemia is not false, the relativist saying that it depends on your general views about nuclear energy whether or not you believe it.

This leads me to consider another way in which knowledge is shared: where what is shared is an idea, vision or theory. Here we seem to be out of the realm of being told what is true, more into an exchange between someone who holds a view and others who try out that view for themselves. Much of the best teaching is like this, a matter of introducing people to ideas which they can then play with and use (or ignore) to create and correct their own views. Introducing someone to the idea that she lives in a sexist society, where she is frequently not counted as a fully human person, is an example of this (Frye, 1983, pp. 41–51). It is also an example of the sort of issue over which the differences between the relativist and the realist become critical. For the realist is often cast by the relativist as *telling* us, 'You really are oppressed regardless of what you feel.' The relativist insists that only our experience of oppression can show we are oppressed, and if we do not have that experience, we are not (Stanley and Wise, 1983). Some of us live in a sexist society, and others do not. The realist responds:

Theories, ideas and ideologies are not *just* ways of making sense of the world. They may also be the means by which one group of people may dominate or exercise control over another. And the fact that one group has power over, or exploits another cannot be reduced to anyone's belief that this is so.

(Grimshaw, 1986, pp. 160–1)

But that difference becomes less acute and critical as soon as we consider the question of how we can know, or decide, whether or not we are oppressed. I ask myself whether such claims and theories make sense of my experience, whether they articulate discomforts and frustrations that I had previously dimly apprehended but been unable to articulate, and so on. I do not look for 'an experience of oppression' which validates the theory, for it is only in the most extreme and repressive situations (the South African black, the Guatemalan peasant) that such experiences are so obviously identifi-

able. I look rather at a pattern (the double-bind, for example (Frye, 1983, pp. 2-4), or hidden discrimination in the classroom (Mahony, 1985)). I did not notice such a pattern until someone else pointed it out to me, but once it has been, I not only see a pattern of discrimination, I find myself reinterpreting behaviours and events. Small courtesies, for example, become subtle insults. This whole process looks to me like an attempt to get at what is really going on, but an attempt that is consistent with the relativist's insistence that we should not allow ourselves to be bullied into accepting views about ourselves which do not, in some way, match our experience. Furthermore, it seems to me that it is only through such checking that the theorist herself can test her hypotheses. Whether feeding disorders are expressions of self-hatred or political revolt depends ultimately on the experience and testimony of the women suffering or revolting.

This section anticipates the argument to come. For I am arguing that the ultimate test of the realist's views is their acceptance by a community, and that it is also in a community that the non-expert decides what to believe and what not. This is not to say that such acceptance makes those views true, or rejection makes them false, but rather to say these are the best methods available to us for making decisions which accord with reality.

## THE APPEAL OF RELATIVISM

The appeal of relativism is political and epistemological, and it is often difficult to distinguish the two. Women's oppression has partly been understood in terms of the silencing of women, the denial of their experience as valid, or the treatment of it, when discovered, as neurotic. The woman who failed to find satisfaction in the fulfilment of domestic duties or who did not want to have babies was treated as a suitable case for treatment. The apprehension that such women were not sick but oppressed by a false view of what they should be came about only through women sharing these feelings and

experiences with each other. The view of what they should be was seen as false, first, because it failed to tally with how they felt—women, apparently, did not become happy and fulfilled in the ways that they were supposed to, and furthermore experienced feelings of relief in being able to say this in public—and second, in the perception that the demand that they find fulfilment and happiness in these ways fitted the interests of men rather well, maintaining women's dependence upon men. It is wrong to undermine a person with the claim that she does not know what she wants or feels, or that what she wants or feels is inappropriate; and you cannot know *what* is wanted or felt and cannot discover oppression unless you listen to people. A clear example of this can be found in the abortion debate. Unless we listen carefully to women opposed to abortion, the feminist movement will simply ignore (be ignorant of) them and cut them off. Further, the woman charged with false consciousness is charged with not really understanding where her interests lie. But she is likely to have a clearer view of her particular situation, than a more distant observer has.<sup>5</sup> For example, if she has few marketable skills, it may be in her immediate interests to emphasise her mothering and childbearing capacities (Luker, 1984). To reply that she fails to see her interest *as a woman* may be true, but to insist that she be a member of a group that she fails to identify with seems to me as oppressive as the insistence that we all keep to our place in the patriarchal family. If our communities are to be epistemologically effective, then they cannot be politically coercive.

Relativism also fits with the feminist experience of finding that the world is not what it appeared to be, that instead of relying on the descriptions she grew up with, she has to create her own descriptions. Bartky (1977) gives a clear account of this process of confusion. She speaks of a realisation that what is really happening is quite different from what appears to be happening, and a frequent inability to tell what is really happening at all. It is not so much that we are aware

of different things, but that we are aware of the same things differently, and this is an experience of anguish and confusion. Is what I say in a meeting foolish and irrelevant, or am I being ignored because I am a woman? If I refuse to compete aggressively for promotion, am I acting out of timidity and self-denial that I have been educated into seeing as proper to women, or am I demonstrating my independence of a contemptible system of values? Everyone can make her own list, but several things are clear about the kind of question or doubt that is being expressed. These are doubts about who we are, what kind of people we think that we ought to be, and hence about what we ought to do, how we ought to behave. I no longer know how to describe myself, and my relations with others, and part of the reason is my uncertainty about meanings and values. It is not that I have discovered an identity that was denied expression within a particular system of values. Rather, a feminist more commonly has the experience of changing her identity as she takes a series of decisions. An existentialist account best fits the experience: there seems little basis for these decisions, no compelling evidence or desire. On the other hand, there may be a sense of compelling need to do something, without quite knowing what.

Under these conditions, facts, values and decisions become inextricably combined, I have to decide on them *together*. Contrast this with MacIntyre's (1962) account of the practical syllogism: greenfly harm roses (more of a fact than a value because of our clear agreement of what constitutes healthy and beautiful roses), spraying kills greenfly, and hence the obvious decision to spray. Now consider how this clear and compelling decision could be muddled: a realisation that all I ever see in my roses is potential defect from disease and pest might lead me to revise my aesthetic standards; I never see a perfect rose so much as a potential victim; a weariness with gardening might lead me to aspire to a different kind of garden (consider the dog roses of the hedgerow), and I may come to see the cultivated rose as artificial, gaudy,

or, because of an awareness of the consequences of pesticide spraying, to see it as an expression of destructive values, an attempt to make nature conform to art, an example of destructive control. Or I may continue to appreciate the roses, while considering spraying to be too high a cost to pay for them or I might decide to let the greenfly weed out the weaker specimens. Raising questions about the way in which the rose is produced can cause questions about the value of the rose, but does not have to. My decisions about what I am willing to do will affect my decisions about how to view the rose, and vice versa. But it may be objected, it is not a matter of decision that spraying kills greenfly. Perhaps not, but I can take decisions which make that 'fact' irrelevant.

To return to the feminist example: I am arguing that you cannot prioritise the problems, in the sense of saying: decide what the facts are, what you want, and then what to do. Each of these decisions affects the others, they may be mutually supported, but it is impossible to claim that one follows from the others. My decision not to compete aggressively for promotion is a decision to see youthful fierce competitiveness as experiments in a dominant ethic which I have discovered does not suit; not as self-assertion. Or it may constitute another decision, to see myself as no longer having the energy for such self-assertion, and in this case I may find (decide?) that I am acting out of low-esteem.

Now the realist may wish to insist, but which? One of these descriptions will be correct, some decisions will be dishonest, some self-deluded, and some simply mistaken, and that suggests a standard of at least truthfulness, if not truth, and correctness, if not reality. This is a valid query. If the violence of a man against a woman is seen as an expression of love, of her desirability and the strength of his desire for her (as it has been seen in so much literature), it cannot be said to be aggressive assault. Rape in the marriage bed is not simply a discovery of a previously unnoticed fact, it is a decision to understand behaviours in a different light,



a decision involving men and women in a process of scepticism about what we were really doing and really meant. Our subjective consciousness is critically important in this, but we cannot wilfully decide what it is or was. We painfully try out concepts and descriptions, which partly create it but are also constrained by the need to fit. So how do I find out when I am being honest, when self-deluded?

### THE COMMUNITY OF RESISTANCE

The answer for me is through painstaking questioning and checking of precisely the kind that went on in women's consciousness-raising groups. For this, a commitment to listen, to care for and to support each other, and to express ourselves honestly is necessary. Only when all feel safe to speak of hidden or barely recognised experiences can knowledge of our desires and our situation emerge. I can only discover whether my experience of 'passionate' intercourse as assault means that I am frigid by making comparisons with other women's experiences, and discovering the possibilities in love-making. We will need to discuss the meaning of passion, violence and frigidity, which must include comparing cases. Our agreement in judging sameness will determine these meanings, and recreate our pasts and our futures.<sup>6</sup> In this process, we also decide what is really there. Our feelings, for example of inadequacy or alarm, are indicative of reality, but it is only through intersubjectively checking that several of us have those feelings that we can feel confident that they are a response to something real, and know what those feelings are.<sup>7</sup> There is a close analogue with perception here. We do not have necessary and sufficient tests of the truth, which we can individually apply, such as Descartes and so many since him have sought, but a process of conversation which may allow the truth to emerge, and which each of us may individually be able to judge at the end, albeit with identities and frame-

works of understandings which may have only emerged through that conversation. For example, as the abortion debate developed in the seventies, women developed an understanding that they, rather than their biology, could determine their roles in society. This gave the issue a new symbolic importance in terms of who controls our lives, changed the terms of the debate from one about crime to one about rights, and led reformers to identify themselves as women rather than reformers. None of this could have happened if the unspeakable had not become speakable:

As one early activist put it:

'I was alone at first, but every time I gave a speech I was no longer alone because people came from everywhere saying, "You've said what I felt, but I didn't know how to say it".'

(Luker, 1984, p. 120)

She might have added that she was no longer mad or bad, although she was not necessarily right.

Each individual's experience, as an unconsidered given, cannot show what is going on. As an isolated individual, I often do not know what my experiences are. There can be no argument for subjectivism here, but rather for an intersubjectivism which begins in individual experiences, but instead of multiplying them (we *all* saw flashes in the sky) seeks to understand them through conversation. (Lightning or Reagan's secret weapon or group fear?)

This commitment to engage in conversation to find out what the world is like is a moral or political commitment to a community, to be with a group through growth and change. It involves me in an act of faith, not only that we will each struggle honestly for our understanding, but to a view of knowledge and politics as process, rather than achievement. In multiplying heads, we do not simply multiply intelligences and confirmations, but we produce knowledge in the exchange of views, multiple, slightly different, sometimes opposed, and in the questioning, perhaps precisely because of our

differences. This is unlike the working out of an argument. Putting two heads together produces a bigger and better computer, but once you have a computer adequate to the task, multiplying it gets us no further. This suggests that the *kind* of knowledge we seek is the sort that *requires* all our contributions, requires us to act together, in conversation (Buber, 1965). The shifts in meanings and values exemplified in the abortion debate above show this. Neither knowledge *nor* political solutions are final, they consist rather in continual doing. This is not a coincidental similarity; the two are inextricably bound up with each other. Knowledge tells us how to make sense of the world, how to adapt to it, what demands realistically to make of it. It tells us what is there. Politics too is trying to make sense, to live with, adapt to. Put another way: we won't so much finally achieve peace as continuously make it, and that will mean continuous efforts at understanding. We will not achieve a final equality of persons, so much as continuously make it. In doing these things we will doubtless discover previously unimagined meanings to peace and equality. I say 'discover' because they will be implicit in, or prompted by, previous understandings and decisions. In that sense they lie beyond the individual, are not simply an arbitrary choice. But neither is the knowledge of what peace and equality are something that can be bumped into by an individual with a map and compass, as Columbus bumped into the West Indies. What peace and equality are discovered to be will depend on the decisions that various communities have taken. Through our decisions with a community, we decide how we want to belong to the world, how we want to set about understanding it, living in it and changing it. We have nothing else to rely upon except each other in taking those decisions.

### THE COMMUNITY AND THE PROBLEMS OF RELATIVISM

Using the community to take our decisions seems to retain the appeal of relativism with-

out its problems (which amounts to the paradox of claiming that all views are valid while aspiring to the truth). This is seen clearly in two examples: what can I say about those who *fundamentally* disagree with me, (e.g. sexists, Nazis), and about my own past?

First, my past: as I became engaged with feminism, I found myself changing in ways that are most simply and honestly described as: I used to think . . . feel . . . but I was wrong. The relativist seems either committed to saying that I was right then, and that although I now disagree with what I thought then, I am also right now, or to abandoning the use of such terms as 'right' and 'wrong'. Either of these paradoxical positions seems to commit me to denying that I have developed in a progressive way. This denies the experience I have of progress and commits the relativist to the claim that while I might *feel* as if I have developed in fact I have only changed. The relativist is then validating *all* my experiences except that which I might count as the most important in my life.

Let me briefly consider some of the ways in which I vindicate my later position, for I think that these will show the way in which appeal to community resolves the problem. I can now acknowledge and recognise feelings and experiences which I previously barely took account of or tried to rationalise as irrelevant or insane. (For example, feeling deeply insecure in the nuclear state.) I recognise that in some ways I have always thought this way but not always been able to articulate it properly. (For example, that doctors have no right to control my life.) I do not as frequently have to pretend about what I feel or like. I now find patterns of behaviour that make better sense of my life, and I also find I can honestly acknowledge inconsistencies and be prepared to live with them, while I try to work them out with others. I am no longer bullied into accepting consequences that I really do not believe. The list could be longer, and no one item on it is conclusive. Each item could be demonstrated with autobiographical details, which show how conversation, being listened to and listening, enabled me to see these things. I would sum-



marise these vindications as a progressive release from feeling isolated, finding the world an alien and unfathomable place, into finding a community that enables me to live in the world rather than trying to escape it and, no matter how confusing these attempts are at times, to make some sense of it. This again brings out the importance of the distinction between subjectivism and relativism. I pay attention to my subjective experiences in order to find what Arendt (1963) called 'the world'. It is not that every individual's unexamined and undiscussed experience is true, much less her opinions, but it is only *through* examining and discussing individuals' experiences that we can do what the realist calls finding truth, what the relativist calls contributing to the construction of reality as opposed to simply being the victims of other people's constructions. Again, there seems little importance in the difference between the realist and the relativist.

I find it more difficult to deal with those who fundamentally disagree with my politics and I can only sketch a solution. If I am honest, I believe that if only they examined their lives, they would find all the things that I have found, that is, that life could be better. This is a Socratic position, and maybe too close to wishful thinking to be persuasive. I do not have much evidence for it, although I have progressively come to approach them in that spirit. There are, I think, two problems involved: how to persuade them to change their ways, and how to persuade bystanders not to join them. The realist would do this by pointing to false beliefs. This might work for bystanders, but not for the committed Nazi or sexist, and raises again the problem of why 'the truth' is not compelling. The relativist engages in a struggle to see that her community prevails, a struggle that may include charges of inconsistency or dishonesty. My response is not merely that I don't want to live with such people as Nazis and sexists, but that their approach is based on the assumption that some people are not persons and therefore cannot be fully participating members in creating their communities and hence the world. Thus they make it

impossible to the majority of us to live with them, at least in the way that persons might live together. We are communities in a state of war, and although it does not necessarily follow that our relations are violent, I think that they may necessarily be subversive. This vindicates neither the relativist nor the realist position. Once again, it indicates that the differences between them become less important in the light of questions about what to do.

## CONCLUSION

Reasonable people who are located in different parts of the social world find themselves differentially exposed to diverse realities, and this differential exposure leads each of them to come up with different—but often equally reasonable—constructions of the world.

(Luker, 1984, p. 191)

Quite so, and we require that our constructions fit, in a *real* way, our needs and desires, which are decided upon together with the constructions. This is neither realism nor relativism, but finding the best way to recreate our world, which can only be done through a genuinely democratic movement based on a genuinely democratic epistemology of the kind I have sketched above.

## NOTES

1. See Welch (1985) for an excellent example.
2. 'Realism' is the term that comes closest to capturing the range of beliefs that I want to discuss. I hope that the context of the paper makes it clear that I am not concerned with various theories in the philosophy of science, but rather with a view that, especially in the context of feminism, and more generally in the social and political sphere, is best understood in opposition to relativism. It is the view that there is an objective order in human affairs, independent of people's beliefs about it, which can be discovered by some methodology generally characterised as rational and scientific. Thus, on this view, both Marxists and positivists might be characterised as realists because they believe in a social reality discoverable by the use of a method they specify as scientific.