

Irrational Women, Unscientific Savages, and the Quest for Knowledge

Midterm for Sexuality, Ethnicity, and Class

Jedidjah de Vries

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Introduction

Professor Lévy-Bruhl tells us, to put it in a nutshell, that primitive man has no sober moods at all, that he is hopelessly and completely immersed in a mystical frame of mind. Incapable of dispassionate and consistent observation, devoid of the power of abstraction, hampered by "a decided aversion towards reasoning," he is unable to draw any benefit from experience, to construct or comprehend even the most elementary laws of nature. "For minds thus orientated there is no fact purely physical." Nor can there exist for them any clear idea of substance and attribute, cause and effect, identity and contradiction. (Malinowski, 1954, p. 25)

Loden (1985) portrays male managers as unemotional and analytical problem solvers and suggests that women supplement this rational approach with intuition and empathy. In a study of sex stereotypes and leader behaviour, Brenner and Bromer (1981) report that men are described as being more analytical and logical and women as more intuitive. Green and Cassell (1996) refer to women managers as embodying what are perceived as the emotional, illogical and sexual aspects of organisations, compared with men who tend to symbolize gender-neutral rationality and decision making. (Hayes et al., 2004, p. 403)

The juxtaposition of the above two quotes brings out the remarkable fact that the racist and sexist narratives they respectively summarize seem to bear distinct echos of each other. There is no obvious reason that this should be the case and it suggests the possibility that there is some sort of relation between them, beyond their obvious bigotedness. In this paper I seek to understand that relationship by unpacking these narratives to see how they function, and then examining how they relate to and interact with each other.

The Narratives

This paper does not analyze the quotes themselves but the stereotype of subalterns and women they respectively depict. These stereotypes can best be understood as narratives because they are not encapsulated by a single sentence but are instead a loose set of related statements. Thus, I cannot give a definitive articulation of the narratives but will instead sketch a rough skeleton of each of them that captures their key elements.

Lévy-Bruhl's assessment of "primitive man", as described by Malinowski, summarizes the colonial narrative about "the natives" that describes them as unscientific, yet attuned to spiritual matters. According to this narrative, it is not merely that subalterns are not familiar with or used to the western scientific mode of thought but their minds lack the very traits required — "dispassionate and consistent observation, [...] the power of abstraction, [...] reasoning, [and the ability] to draw any benefit from experience" —, and are thus "Incapable [...] to construct or comprehend even the most elementary laws of nature" (1954, p. 25). The second part of this narrative emphasizes the subalterns' "mystical frame of mind" (ibid.) and innate connection to nature. While Lévy-Bruhl casts this solely in the negative light of hindering scientific thought, it can also take on the *seemingly* more positive tone of granting access to magical power, such as with the stock character of the magical negro (Wood, 2002) or the noble savage (Ellingson, 2001).

Hayes et al., in their recap of previous studies of women managers in the workplace, summarize the misogynist narrative about women that describes them as irrational on the one hand, but uniquely intuitive on the other. Here it is emotion and fuzzy intuition that get in the way of clear-headed rational thought and solutions. While this example is framed in the context of the workplace, it is representative of a broader narrative about women. Interestingly, the Hayes et al. quote comes from a study that sought to refute this stereotype — in so far as it pertained to managers in the workplace — using analytic data. The fact that such research was deemed worthy of a serious academic article is a testament to the pervasiveness and power of this narrative.

It should be noted that these narratives each grew out of their own situated historical context. Due to the length of this paper I will not be able to tease out their genealogies. Instead, I will focus on exploring a possible theoretical framework with which to understand them, which can hopefully serve as the basis for further research.

Epistemic

A facile reading of these narratives would simply see them as derogatory stereotypes that raise the status of one group by putting-down the other. It is, of course, true that calling all women irrational and all subalterns unscientific is

insulting. However, such an approach does not illuminate why these narratives took the specific form they did, and — specifically for our purposes — why they took such similar forms. Therefore, a deeper analysis which examines the nature of the traits picked out by the narratives is required.

The narratives stereotype mental capacities, that is the ability to think. The thinking of women is said to be clouded by emotion while subalterns are lead astray by their inability to shake off a belief in magic. Herein lies an implication beyond that white men are superior because they are smarter. By discounting the thought processes of women and subalterns these narratives also discount all conclusions that result from them. That is, what is at stake is the validity of all utterances made by the subordinated groups. More precisely, the narratives are about the epistemic grounding of women's and subalterns' claims of truth for their statements and beliefs. Patricia Hill Collins points out that the privileged epistemic framework is that of white men, and specifically that it demands an "absence of emotions" and abstract objectification (2000, p. 255), precisely the two traits denied to women and subalterns respectively. In other words, these narratives deny women and subalterns access to the privileged epistemic framework and hence the ability to put forth truth-claims. In "Black Feminist Epistemology" Collins goes on to point out the importance of this:

Epistemological choices about whom to trust, what to believe, and why something is true are not benign academic issues. Instead these concerns tap the fundamental question of which version of truth will prevail. (2000, p. 252)

Edward Said brings out the political consequences of this when he writes in "The Politics of Knowledge": "It was still true that various Others [...] were being represented unfairly, their reality distorted, their truth either denied or twisted with malice" (1993, p. 307).

Productive

What is interesting about these narratives is that they are not blanket denials of women's and subaltern's truth claims. Instead, they have a bicephalous form, denying one the one hand while affirming another. Subalterns are denied science while "given" magic. Women are denied rational thought while given intuition and emotion. This giving brings out that none of these concepts have platonic reality, but are in fact constructed by the narratives themselves. The narratives can be understood as Foucauldian discourses, which are "systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of actions, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak" (Lessa, 2006). In other words, the narratives do not map women and subaltern onto a pre-given continuums of rational-emotional and scientific-magical, but actively produce those continuums. So now we see that not only do the narratives police

access to certain epistemic frameworks but they in fact create those epistemic frameworks. And furthermore, it is not simply that women and subalterns have no access to the privileged epistemic framework but that in order for statements they make to be accepted as valid they must be based on their own, subjugated, epistemic frameworks. The produced nature of these frameworks will be important for understanding the relationship between the two narratives (cf. §INTERSECTIONS).

Therefore, it would be too simplistic to see emotion and magic as important only in so far as they hinder access to the rational and scientific. In order to fully understand the narratives we must focus not only on what they deny but also on their productive side, because they operate and apply power in their production of subjugated epistemologies as much as in their denial of privileged epistemologies. So we should understand “the mystical frame of mind” Lévy-Bruhl attributes to “primitive man” (Malinowski, 1954, p. 25), as well as stock trope of the noble savage in tune with nature, as part of the construction of an epistemic framework. Likewise, with the attribution of “intuition and empathy” to women (Hayes et al., 2004, p. 403). Thus, even the seemingly positive flip-side of these narratives — affinity with nature and access to intuition — are still part of the same mechanism of power. Next, I will examine how these constructed epistemologies operate.

Non-Universal

The two narratives produce different, but closely related epistemic frameworks. They share many of the same broad characteristics, but certain features are more pronounced in one or the other. Thus, by analyzing them side-by-side a fuller picture of the logic behind these subjugated frameworks can emerge. An important thread that runs through both is that knowledge in these subjugated epistemic frameworks — that is, the types of propositions whose truth can logically be asserted on the basis of these epistemic groundings — cannot be universalized, because it is by necessity local, a-historical, and non-cumulative.

The telluric nature of the knowledge stems from the subaltern’s asserted unique connection to nature. This can be seen, for example, in how in popular media “the native” is nearly universally cast as a tracker or scout who has intimate knowledge of the land. More generally, subaltern knowledge is always directly tied up with their specific geography. This trope is less strong in the narrative about women, but has echoes in women’s privileged (epistemic) position within the context of the home and housework.

By a-historical I mean that knowledge in these epistemic framework has no past and exists only the moment. Lévy-Bruhl specifically notes the inability to “to draw any benefit from experience” (i.e. the past) and lack of “cause and effect” (i.e. there is only the moment) (Malinowski, 1954, p. 25). Similarly, the emotion and empathy attributed to women (Hayes et al., 2004, p. 403) are immanently

tied to the current (ephemeral) situation — as opposed to “masculine” logic-based knowledge, which is the result of a process of thought.

Lastly, these knowledges are non-cumulative in that each statement stands on its own and cannot be used as the basis for further knowledge claims. Magical knowledge is revealed, not arrived at, and remains mystical and occult. Intuition springs out of no where and never sustains firm footing.

Together, these three traits make knowledge claims in both these epistemic frameworks non-universal (though, for slightly different reasons). That is, they can only be true for a limited and circumscribed space and time, specifically that of “lived experience” (Collins, 2000, p. 266). The inability of these epistemic frameworks to produce universal truths because particularly illuminating when one looks at how the two narratives intersect.

Intersections

Till now we have looked at the two narratives only in so far as they run parallel to each other. We have focused on what they mean for women and for subalterns, that is on the subjugated epistemic frameworks. However, what ties them together more than anything is that both, implicitly, construct epistemic frameworks in opposition to that of white male epistemology, i.e. scientific rationality. So, these narratives do not simply produce female and subaltern epistemology respectively, but are both part of a broader discourse that produces white male epistemology. Furthermore, the realization that the underlying commonality between the epistemologies produced by the two narratives is non-universal knowledge show the centrality of the ability to make universal claims to white male scientific rationality. Also note how the opposite of universal knowledge is set up to be knowledge based in “lived experience”, i.e. non-objective, and thus untrustworthy knowledge.

This analysis not only shows the constructed nature of scientific rationality but brings out its inherent political nature. The ability to make universal claims is not a neutral feature — a benign quest for truth —, which is imbued with power as a result of happening to be attributed to the dominant group, but is a direct product of the power dynamic (via the discursive system represented in the narratives). Specifically, by noting how it is a product of narratives vis-à-vis subalterns and women its imperial and patriarchal undertones stand out. Science’s need for universal knowledge becomes immanently linked with the imperial and patriarchal project. White male rationality is not just *a* way of arriving at truth, but results in truths that, because of their unique universalness, can speak of and for others without being assailed from the outside.

Conclusion

Due to length constraints, this paper has dealt with these narratives on a highly abstract theoretical level. A robust historical analysis is required to explore how the above hand been put into operation. Still, we can already begin to see the contours of what is going on. Patricia Hill Collins argues that white male epistemology is privileged over black feminist epistemology because of the power position of white males over black women (Collins, 2000). However, this paper has shown, first: that the epistemic frameworks are not prior to the power relation but are, in fact, produced by it; and, second: that the epistemic frameworks themselves are an integral part of how the power relation works. Specifically, that they do not simply cleave off subalterns and women from “rationality”, but are part of the production of scientific rationality as a universalizing, imperial, and patriarchal epistemic framework.

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