

The stakes of situated knowledges

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'Politics' appears to be everywhere in Dragos Simandan's "Revisiting positionality and the thesis of situated knowledge", so why does it seem so stubbornly apolitical? This is an article filled with references to politics and activism, one which promises a "politically attuned... framework" (3) that will "politically situate knowledge and the knowing subject(s)" (7). It claims to advance the project of situated knowledge, grounding it in novel forms of partiality and embodiment drawn from cognitive science, epistemology, and behavioural economics, that will help further the "political-practical ambitions of critical human geographers to help promote social justice" (11). And yet, I struggle to discern the politics of any of the four 'epistemic gaps' proposed by Simandan, because—despite the constant invocations of politics—at no point in this text do any of the *references* to race, class, or gender give rise to a situated analysis of how these 'gaps' might affect different people differently.

To be fair, Simandan acknowledges this 'gap', and he is quite clear that his goal is precisely to expand positionality beyond "simply social difference" (5). While there is nothing wrong with such a goal, I argue that it is crucial to maintain a focus on how social difference affects situated knowledge. An expanded positionality can only be considered *expanded* when it remains connected to the vital political insight that knowledge depends on the conditions of its production and that these conditions are differentially embodied. In this commentary, I will identify a few key places where I think that such an analysis is required, as well as some questions I have about the utility of Simandan's epistemic gaps. I will conclude with what I see as one possible alternative.

The first instance of an argument that calls out for a situated analysis of social difference is the gap between "possible worlds versus realized worlds" (6). Simandan describes this as an epistemic gap constituted by the human propensity to "attend to the real, actual world, at the expense of thinking about unrealized... worlds" (6). He attributes this gap to "the limitation of the human mind" (7)—an explanation which clearly positions it as a *universal* problem and the sort of abstract, disembodied theory that is critiqued by situated knowledge. Perhaps for this reason, Simandan adds that there are indeed social dimensions to consider, such as the ways in which power and privilege afford some the opportunity for greater choice and agency—different 'possible worlds'—while others, with less power, are denied. This explanation of the "political significance of the gap" (7), however, raises questions about the relationship Simandan is drawing between agency and epistemology.

First, it is unclear whether these social differences are an example of a supposed gap between the realized world and a hypothetical possible world, or a simple description of the fact that our agency to remake the world according to our desires varies depending on how much power we have. Such a social and political observation is perfectly comprehensible on its own, and it is hard to see how it is enhanced by reading it through metaphysical speculation about alternate realities. Second, and more importantly, it is unclear how this difference in *agency* amounts to an epistemological

difference, for, while being in a position of lesser power affords one less agency, it does not follow that such a position entails a diminished ability to envision different possible worlds.

If we follow Simandan's argument to its conclusion, it appears to turn the thesis of situated knowledge on its head, arguing that those in power have an ability to see things clearly which the subjugated lack. Simandan argues, for example, that the ability to envision new "possible worlds" requires the ability to build "abstract, high-level mental representations" as opposed to "concrete, low-level representations" (8), and that the ability to construct such important abstractions is the province of those with "power and privilege" (7). Not only does this endorsement of abstraction sound worryingly similar to the 'God trick' of Haraway's (1988) critique, but such a hierarchy of knowledge runs completely counter to the central tenets of situated knowledge, which holds that concrete representations are the very ground on which objective knowledge is built and a privileged position from which to make objective claims. I would suggest, in fact, that one could make precisely the opposite argument to Simandan here: it's rather more likely for people in positions of power to have a difficult time imagining alternative worlds, since they have a vested interest in the world as it is, and this makes seeing the inequalities that prop up their positions uncomfortable or difficult. By contrast, those who are oppressed can often see more clearly the contingency of the forces that are aligned against them. As Haraway puts it, "there is good reason to believe vision is better from below the brilliant space platforms of the powerful" (Haraway, 1988: 583). Notwithstanding his later cautions against what he calls the 'deficit model' (28), Simandan's argument in this section retreats from the radicality of the situated knowledge thesis towards the very hierarchies of knowledge it was intended to critique.

We encounter the same problem in the third gap that Simandan identifies: that of the 'witnessed versus remembered situation' (17), which argues that "imperfections of human memory" (4) constitute another way in which our knowledge is partial. While Simandan begins this section by stating that it will provide a 'deeper, politicized focus' (17) on memory, politics quickly recedes from view, being replaced by discussions of the distinctions in cognitive science between working memory and long term memory, semantic and episodic memory, conscious and unconscious memory, and the "primitive representational systems" (19) that encode memory. He notes that the encoding and recall of memory will differ depending on people's 'unique location within gendered, raced, and classed axes of social power' (19) but these differences are never elaborated upon, which leaves unanswered fundamental questions about exactly how social power relates to memory. Do oppressed people encode and recall experiences differently than those in positions of power? And if so, why? My concern is that Simandan treats this gap—as he does the others—as if it were universal rather than situated. Identifying new dimensions of the partiality of knowledge is potentially valuable, but I contend that in doing so, we must remember that these gaps are themselves situated. Sidestepping this fundamental insight of situated knowledges and proposing universal gaps in knowledge evacuates the politics from positionality.

My sense is that Simandan is acutely aware of the dangers of attempting to transform an inherently politicized theory into one that is only tangentially related to politics. Wary of such a critique, he quotes Bilge's remarks on the "grim irony" that intersectionality—a tool developed to "confront the racism and heterosexism of White-dominated feminism"—has been increasingly appropriated by White feminists who continue to marginalize women of colour (Bilge, 2013: 418, quoted on

16). I find this reference doubly ironic because—however well-intentioned it is—it describes precisely what I think is happening to situated knowledge in this article. Just as Bilge critiques the defanging of intersectionality, here a radical political epistemological critique has its edge blunted as it is turned away from pressing political concerns towards facets of human experience—the fact that we do not know everything, or the fact that memory is imperfect—that Simandan himself describes as “banal fact(s)” (6 and 15).

It is difficult to see, then, what these new examples of partiality add to our understanding, still less what they help us to *do*. Simandan suggests at one point that a recognition of the limits of our knowledge “is humbling and we can learn to live with it and learn from it” (9). While such humility is certainly prudent, I think that there is more that can be gained from a theory of situated knowledge—after all, Simandan argues at a number of points that a key goal of his framework is to help us “*operationalize* the idea of situated knowledge” (12).

For my part, I have attempted to develop answers to this question of how to operationalize situated knowledge in my work on psychoanalytic reflexivity (Proudfoot, 2015). There, I respond to Gillian Rose’s (1997) argument against “transparent reflexivity”, which describes attempts at positionality that fail because they are only directed at the most obvious markers of social difference, when that which most requires reflection are those places where researchers remain opaque to themselves—in particular, the unconscious. While it may appear that this argument—like Simandan’s—shifts attention away from social difference, my argument is that a psychoanalytic reflexivity *extends* feminist reflexivity by answering Rose’s call to go beyond the transparent subject, which ultimately better equips researchers to attend to their own positionality and to social difference. Including psychoanalytic methods in the project of reflexivity allows us to grapple with our anxieties and fantasies about our research, our informants, and ourselves, and the ways in which these shape the questions we ask and the conclusions that we draw. The purpose of such reflexivity is not simply to engage in narcissistic introspection—dredging up and confessing uncomfortable truths that serve to shore up one’s sense of being a worthy researcher—but rather to take these insights and *fold* them dialectically into our research where they can inform it going forward. In this way, a psychoanalytic reflexivity goes beyond simply generating an awareness of partiality—which, I argue, is as far as Simandan’s article goes—towards actually transforming the way in which knowledge is produced. This idea of folding the insights of reflexivity is one suggestion that I offer as a means of operationalizing an expanded positionality.

Revisiting Rose’s seminal work on reflexivity offers another way of framing my critique of Simandan’s framework, which is that it mistakes a listing of all the different forms of partiality for a properly reflexive account of knowledge production. A reflexive account does not simply catalogue the various ways in which knowledge is situated; rather, it reflexively considers *how* these each of these positions constitutes knowledge, as well as what is required to work through and move beyond these problematic forms of knowledge-making. Acknowledging, for example, that individuals are limited in their knowledge because they are “finite entities processing information on an imperfect biological substrate” (23) is indeed an example of the situated nature of knowledge, but it falls short of reflexivity because it does not go beyond *acknowledging* partiality.

The question of what Simandan's epistemic gaps can *do* is ultimately the question of what is at stake in them. A theory such as situated knowledge finds little air in a vacuum of scholastic speculation about the nature of knowledge—it lives and breathes in a world of political struggle. It is easy to see what is at stake in the question of positionality when it concerns itself with questions of whose knowledge is treated as legitimate, who is permitted to speak and who is silenced. It is more difficult when these politics are displaced by attention to the “banal” ways that knowledge can be understood as partial, or by metaphysical speculation on parallel universes. According to the metaphysicians quoted by Simandan, there are “possible worlds” in which pigs fly and donkeys talk. Whatever problems in logic are solved by such “whimsical” (8) speculation, we should not forget that the goal of feminist, queer, and anti-racist geographers dedicated to situated knowledge is to build a world in which their lives are, quite literally, *possible*.

References

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