**Getting Less Simpleminded About Objectivity**

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> *Objectivity is a myth designed to make us believe that there is one proper way of seeing and representing reality - and therefore a means of marginalizing all that is different, other, alternative. (Glesne, 2001)*

As an engineering student foraying into qualitative research, I used to see objectivity as The Great Lie, blinders placed in the service of Efficiency during technial studies. As an "enlightened" scholar, I felt duty-bound to battle the Great Lie: when my colleagues argued *mechanical objectivity* as a justification to avoid "tainting" The Truth with subjectivity (Porter, 1995, pp. 7, 229), I retaliated that objectivity was blinded to many truths. But I was partially blinded in that war myself, clinging to my own Truth that objectivity was a single and False thing. Choosing to value objectivity is distinct from adhering to objectivism, the reverence of a particular brand of objectivity as the one and only Truth. Objectivism is a technological solutionist recasting of complex social webs into "neatly defined problems" with "transparent and self-evident processes that can be easily optimized" (Morozov, 2013[1]). It was objectivism, not objectivity, that I was fighting.

Objectivity can be described as a multitude of values and perspectives that pulses entangled among other multitudes of values and perspectives, with subjectivity as a companion multitude (but not the only one). Objectivity can hold echoes of realism, the "ability to know things as they really are," but it is not realism (Porter, 1995, p. 3). Objectivity can, as post-positivism does, admit imperfection in human abilities to find truth, while still insisting on a One Truth independent of its disinterested observers (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Alternatively, the observers may be very interested indeed, and co-creators of a multitude of truths. And so on and so forth.

I don't claim to see clearly now; in fact, I say that I will always hold some form of blindness, and that my single voice is inherently unable to express those multitudes, which are often not in any form of harmony that you might call a "chorus." Its many evolving definitions are "marked by multiplicity and competing discourses that do not map tidily onto one another," (Lather, 2006, pp.

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1I recommend Morozov's book as something with a few useful definitions amidst an oversimplified, strawman-filled diatribe against technological solutionism that doesn't realize it's a parody. I recommend the remainder of this paper's citations as reasonably self-reflexive reads.

47), but all seem to (mostly) share some variants of these two ideas: that there can be a separation between the knower and the known, and that knowledge can be shared with multiple other knowers while retaining the same essence of truth (or Truth, depending on your perspective).

The former implies some form of legitimation of what constitutes valid “knowledge” and “knowers,” but does not dictate how that legitimacy ought to be determined. The latter highlights a hope for “immunity to all kinds of local distorting factors” (Porter, 1995, p. 217), but the distinction of what constitutes “distortion” (as opposed to, for example, “refinement”) is left for us to draw. The word “objectivity” is a symbol, given meaning by its repeated use in different contexts; if we share the same rules for the repeated use of the symbol, it will have the same meaning to us, for some value of the word “same” (Cavallaro, 2001, p. 39). It it is not a platonic idea that comes pre-specified; it is up to us to specify it as a knowledge that is itself separate from its knowers, a plethora of ideas that can be transmitted and shared.

Objectivity (I will write of the multitude as if it were a single thing) is therefore what Harding calls “socially situated knowledge,” a puzzlement because "socially situated" things are supposed to be opinions, in contrast to "knowledge" which transcends local and personal agendas and histories (1993). The development of objectivity itself has multiple agendas in its history that can be traced geneaologically (Saukko, 2003), a variant of Becker's “machine trick,” (a more engineering-friendly phrasing) (1998). What historical forces led to the design of our current objectivity “machineries”? Porter's history depicts *scientific objectivism* as filling a need for a long-distance communications technology that could bridge communities of science into a society of science (1995, pp. viii-ix). When the scientific world became large enough that we could no longer depend on personal relationships to reach our desired spheres of influence in a timely manner, we needed another way to determine what to trust. Numbers, prominent symbols of objectivity, became a form of validation currency shaped to privilege some forms of “expertise” over others. Bower's history describes the desire of readers to see as “experts” saw, which similarly granted “experts” a peculiar power: permission to modify “messy” data into something closer to Platonic Truth, as

when Dutch anatomist Bernhard Albinus dictated to an artist how to modify drawings of a real skeleton for his atlas of the human skeleton and muscles (1998, p. 360).

The privileging of some forms of “expertise“ over others led to the situation standpoint epistemologists critique and deconstruct, believing that less privileged groups may "see more" of the world because they have their own worldview but must also work within the dominant one (Nielsen, 1991, p. 10). As Harding pointed out, when science is done by those of the same dominant culture, that culture is unconsciously transported into their research; the supposedly “value-free” pursuit of objectivity has instead resulted in the research keeping only the values the researchers share (1993, p. 57, 70). Although scientists may relish the illusion of “making decisions without seeming to decide,” it is impossible to obtain a mechanical objectivity based completely on explicit rules; tacit knowledge is always in play (Porter, 1995, p. 7-8), including in the judgment of how to craft those rules and when to apply them.

Gibson's discussion (1997) of how humans cut across subjective/objective boundaries to shape the *affordances* of things for their convenience foreshadows Barad's (2007) *agential realist* depiction of scientists as slicing reality in order to generate convenient affordances for themselves, including the ability to *not* be reflective about their practices and the consequences thereof (Harding, 1993, p. 71). Barad also describes the *Bohrian cut* as enacting *agential separability*, the distinction between the „knower“ and the „known“ (pp. 139-40, 142, 174) that enables that sliced-off „known“ to be shared by Porter's "long-distance communications technology" of numbers and quantization (1995, pp. viii-ix) with a scientific society. Although I've melded Porter and Barad, I can't seem to neatly fit Nielsen and Harding's *standpoint theory* into the same pot[2] – and that's okay. My paper struggles for a “neat” end (and to fit within 3 pages, cut from 12), but that makes my point; although “knowledge” of “objectivity” can be transmitted via this paper, it's a messy, limited slice of all the conflicting things that could be said.

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2To say that standpoint theory calls for an inclusion of more perspectives into that scientific society would be an oversimplification, and to say it critiques societies as unable to fully acknowledge the marginalized due to their absence of personal knowledge is to ignore the definition of a society as that which *must* reach beyond personal knowledge to span more people than a community.