

Between Spivak and Harding: «Ideological victimage» as a companion to feminist standpoint epistemology

Entre Spivak y Harding. «Victimización ideológica» como acompañamiento a la epistemología feminista del punto de vista

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Abstract: While Sandra Harding cites the value of postcolonial studies in developing a pluralistic feminist standpoint epistemology [FSE] that acknowledges race and class diversity, her approach to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work is rather shallow. By doing so, she risks practising the «additive approach» she has overtly opposed, also neglecting conceptual tools that could enrich her FSE. In this paper, I focus on the notion of «ideological victimage» [IV], commonly overlooked by specialised interpreters. This notion, I contend, further expands the reach of FSE core notions: «standpoint», «strong objectivity», and «robust reflexivity».

Key words: Sandra Harding, feminist standpoint epistemology, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ideological victimage, postcolonial studies

Resumen: Aunque Sandra Harding cita el valor de los estudios poscoloniales para desarrollar una epistemología feminista del punto de vista [FSE] que reconozca la diversidad de raza y clase, su aproximación a la obra de Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak es más bien superficial. Con ello, se arriesga a practicar el «enfoque sumatorio» al que abiertamente se ha opuesto, descuidando con ello herramientas conceptuales que podrían enriquecer su FSE. En este artículo me centro en la noción de «victimización ideológica» [IV], comúnmente pasada por alto por los intérpretes especializados. Sostengo que esta noción amplía el alcance de las nociones centrales de la FSE: «punto de vista», «objetividad fuerte» y «reflexividad robusta».

Palabras clave: Sandra Harding, epistemología feminista del punto de vista, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, victimización ideológica, estudios poscoloniales

1. Introduction

In this paper, I reconsider the value of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work for feminist standpoint epistemology [FSE], specifically according to Sandra Harding's scope. To do so, I approach Spivak's notion of «ideological victimage» [IV].

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While Harding has explicitly referred to Spivak's work to develop a FSE that resists racism, Eurocentrism, orientalism, and colonial rhetoric, she has mostly approached it as a case study that illustrates her own proposal, without engaging at length with Spivak's own conceptual tools. In my view, this harms her FSE in two ways: first, it risks reproducing the type of «additive approach» she has explicitly disputed (Harding, 1987a: 1), which solely inserts women in androcentric frameworks without challenging its pre-existing epistemic commitments. Harding denounced the pervasiveness of this approach in certain Western feminisms, content to simply «add women of color (or some feminist form of postcolonialism) and stir» (Harding, 1998: 82). In contesting this peril, I follow Kristie Dotson's (2012) cautionary tale against the perpetuation of faulty epistemic practices when identifying and addressing its forms, which I find imperative for any ulterior feminist work in epistemology that dialogues with Harding's nonetheless pathbreaking formulations –such as the one I present here. Second, the sloppiness of this approach precludes the opportunity of enriching FSE with further tools.

To overcome these two hurdles, I survey Spivak's notion of «IV», which has received little attention by specialised interpreters. In my view, this requests a closer inspection of *In Other Worlds* [1988], where it mainly appears, as well as drawing connections to Spivak's posterior works. Hence, my proposal furthers the exegetical clarification of the Spivakian corpus, too. Regarding its applicative possibilities, I contend that Spivak's notion of «IV» is a stout companion to Harding's notion of «standpoint» and to its main epistemic features: «strong objectivity» and «robust reflexivity».

My text is divided as follows: in Part 2 I provide an overview of Harding's version of FSE, focusing on the notion of «standpoint» and her standards of «strong objectivity» and «robust reflexivity». Then I turn to her approach to postcolonial thought and to Spivak. In Part 3 I consider Spivak's «IV». I start by rereading «French Feminism in an International Frame», where she mainly discusses it, and to which her interpreters have mostly stuck. Then, I analyse Spivak's definition of «ideology», other cases of IV that do not fit in its interpreters' definition, and her posterior epistemic works, in order to offer a broader depiction. In Part 4 I show how Spivak's «IV» can enhance Harding's «standpoint», «strong objectivity» and «robust reflexivity».

2. Harding's plural FSE

In *The Science Question in Feminism* [1986], Harding approaches feminist epistemologies to answer the title-book question: Can the sciences, historically entrenched in racism, classism, and sexism, be rethought so they contest the oppressions they have helped foster? (1986: 19). Siding with FSE, Harding categorises her proposal alongside feminist empiricism [FE] —which takes sexism as a deviation of existing scientific norms correctable by more rigorous adherence— and feminist postmodernism [FP] —which remains sceptical of the modern conception of the subject as a rational agent capable of objective, true knowledge— (1986: 24-28).²

FSE characteristically argues that the most oppressed members of a community —due to sexism, racism, classism or any other social prejudice— can best ascertain identity biases skewing the production of knowledge, and thus offer less distorted understandings. This claim conveys what epistemologist Alessandra Tanesini has called the «inversion thesis», which she renders distinctive of FSE.³ Still, FSE shares two other theses with other feminist epistemologies: the consideration that knowledge is situated insofar the accessibility of the evidence upon which it is based depends on the subject's perspective —*situated knowledge thesis*— and the assertion that certain standpoints are epistemically privileged insofar they produce less distorted beliefs —*standpoint thesis*— (Tanesini, 2020: 335). Harding has often stated that FSE has been misinterpreted due to this inversion thesis (1992: 442; 1998: 150). Closely inspecting the notion of «standpoint», she has clarified that they are not to be mistaken as «something anyone can have by claiming it» or as a mere «perspective» (1987b: 185), as naturally flowing from certain experiences (1998: 159), as a plain report (2005: 354), or as «an ascribed position or an individual opinion» (2006: 84). On the contrary, they can only be achieved through conscious collective political struggle (2008a: 120). These remarks are crucial, since they evidence a clear-cut rejection of any essentialist inertia.

This notion of «standpoint» is accompanied by new standards of rationality, among which Harding highlights «strong objectivity» and «robust reflexivity». With «strong objectivity», Harding contests —drawing on Donna Haraway— «objectivism», that is, «the

² For an extended account of FSE's debates with FE and FP, see chapters 6 and 7 of this same book. For the purposes of this paper, it suffices to say that: against FE, FSE tackles not only the context of justification, but that of discovery; against FP, it safeguards values such as «objectivity» or the very idea of «knowledge» (cfr. 1986: 25—28). For further information, see (Deharbe, 2020).

³ Ecofeminist Alicia H. Puleo (2017: pp. 47–48) has stated that other traditions have historically endorsed similar arguments, offering ecofeminist and suffragist writings as examples.

assumption that objectivity must always be satisfied by value-neutrality» (Harding, 1986: 137). As elaborated in *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* [1991], the objectivist conceptualisation is both too broad and too narrow: on one hand, it dismisses all values, including those which do not obstruct objectivity.⁴ On the other, it neglects the context of discovery —where, problems are deemed worthy of attention, hypotheses are formulated and epistemic resources are drawn— offering a decontextualised picture of scientific inquiry that shelves its own situatedness as potential evidence (1991: 143-144). Henceforth, strong objectivity impels researchers to introduce themselves in their own investigations and problematise their own situatedness, inspecting “particular class, race, gender, and cultural commitments” that often function as unattended backgrounds beliefs (Harding, 1991: 100). Harding thus asserts the necessity of inspecting «a kind of logic of discovery» (2003: 56), which «requires that research be fair to all existing evidence and to its severest critics» (2015a: 151). Following this strand, strong objectivity is coupled with «robust reflexivity», also called «strong reflexivity» (1992: 458) or «strategic robust reflexivity» (1998: 193), an attitude of intellectual honesty towards the situatedness of one’s own work that meets the standards by which we judge the work of others. In this sense, robust reflexivity goes beyond «listening to other voices» (2006: 92), consisting in an exhaustive exercise of self-reflection that we would also encourage others to accomplish (1991: 149-150; 2008b: 135).

2.1. Approaching Spivak: towards a postcolonial and race-conscious FSE

Harding’s resistance against racism, Eurocentrism, orientalism, and colonial rhetoric has been explicit since *The Science Question in Feminism*. Following pluralistic concerns posed by FP defendants, Harding rejected the unitary conception of «a» feminist standpoint, which would entail an essentialised and universalistic picture of women. If FSE seeks to start from women’s experiences, then it must acknowledge their class, race and cultural diversity, which yet challenges the very notion of «standpoint» (1986: 26). Thinking through Donna Haraway’s «situated knowledges» and Jane Flax’s weariness in totalizing epistemic structures, Harding reconciles with the partiality of one’s standpoint, accepting a fragmentary picture of the epistemic subject that requests mutual solidarity to assemble plural standpoints (1986: 193).

⁴ Other philosophers of science who do not ascribe to FSE have also defended that some values are compatible with objectivity (e.g., Gensollen Mendoza & Jiménez Rolland, 2018).

Hence the importance of conceiving standpoints as a collective political achievement, depicting them with metaphors and comparisons that, as we saw, reject all spoor of essentialism.

Alessandra Tanesini (2012: 84) has stated that this constitutes the first of two prevalent criticisms against FSE. The second stems precisely from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's oeuvre, although Spivak did not directly formulate it as such. According to Tanesini, it concerns what she called «clinging to marginality», a pernicious strategy consisting in teaching someone «speaking for oneself [...] to contain the ones whom this person is supposed to represent» (Spivak & Rooney, 1993: 9). As Tanesini notes, «clinging to marginality» can be taken as the perverse antithesis of FSE, as it can be weaponized by a potential receiver belonging to a privileged community to justify their inattentiveness to contributions made by members of marginalized communities. Such a potential receiver might claim that said contributions do not concern them, and can be hence «safely ignored» (1991: 148), or claim that the «epistemic authority» of the contributor is limited to their direct experiences of oppression, which, again, are utterly alien to them (2012: 84). We shall nevertheless set aside this issue and refocus on Harding connections with postcolonial studies, as we will address it later.

The Feminist Standpoint Theory Read [2004] offers a paradigmatic stance of Harding's scope: while she asserts that FSE has provided a general guide for feminist researchers, she explicitly acknowledges the pivotality of the work developed by feminists of colour such as Patricia Hill Collins and Chela Sandoval (2004: 1–3) —who contributed to this volume with essays on black and Third World feminism. Harding has since credited the relevance that antiracism, multiculturalism and postcolonialism (along with other social justice movements) possess for FSE (2006: 2), celebrating its flourishing in those areas of research as well as in activism, thanks to authors such as bell hooks, Walter D. Mignolo or Collins and Sandoval (2015b: 50). Previously, Harding had affirmed that FSE arguments could be found in classical texts of postcolonialism such as Edward Said's or Samir Amin's —even if they do not explicitly use its terminology (1990: 141; 1991: 120–121n15; 151n19)—, and that FSE must learn from them to cultivate strong objectivity and robust reflexivity (1991: 158–25) to contest Eurocentrism and orientalism (1991: 176–177n21).⁵ Two decades later, she emphasised the connections among FSE and postcolonial studies again, as both seek to start knowledge from the lives of the oppressed (Harding, 2011a: 20). Finally, we must note that Harding authored a book on the

⁵ Said's texts Harding is here referring to are *Orientalism* [1978], and his Foreword to *Selected Subaltern Studies* [1988], edited by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Eurocentric modern understanding of «science» —*Is Science Multicultural?* [1998]—, also editing at least two collective volumes that specifically tackle this matter — *The «Racial» Economy of Science* [1993], and *The Postcolonial Science and Technology Studies Reader* [2011]—.

While this proves that Harding has actively contested racist, Eurocentric, orientalist and colonialist tropes in the history of sciences, provided a powerful methodological guide to future scholars, and rightly acknowledged the contributions of other authors, I am at certain unease with her readings of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. While Harding cites Spivak, we do not find in her writings a proper at-length engagement with her works, seemingly diminished to an example —intended to illustrate FSE— that lacks proper conceptual tools of its own. Harding sources are four: «Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism» [1985], *In Other Worlds* [1988], «Can the Subaltern Speak?» [1988],⁶ and the interview «The Post-modern Condition. The end of politics?» [1990].

Harding cites *In Other Worlds* among other «important criticisms of white, Western feminism by women of Third World descent» (Harding, 1991: 174n17) as well as among other «influential texts developing multicultural and global conceptions of gender» (Harding, 1998: 208n17). Addressing feminist readings of the history of sciences, she mentions it again, along with «Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism», as cautionary tales against the projection of Western fantasies into the Third World, which results in «expanding the empire of feminist analysis while forgetting the pressing needs of Third World women» (Harding, 1991: 247n50).

In *Sciences from Below*, Harding takes on «Can the Subaltern Speak?» to further develop this issue (Harding, 2008a: 127), following Spivak’s call to avoid the essentialization of the «Third World Woman» as the «presumedly happy recipient of Northern feminist attention», conversely conceiving Western feminists as «“innocent,” generous, and benevolent donors» (Harding, 2008c: 157). Harding has since reprised these ideas in «Interrogating the Modernity vs. Tradition Contrast: Whose Science and Technology for Whose Social Progress?» (2011b: 92-93) and in *Objectivity and Diversity* (2015a: 7). Moreover, Harding has used Spivak’s notion of «subalternity» to discuss the possibility of starting postcolonial science and technologies studies by addressing «the experiences and voices of the peoples Europeans

⁶ The version exegetically categorised as «Manuscript B». For a full discussion about the history of the text, see (Asensi Pérez, 2009).

encountered, past and present» (Harding, 2008b: 134). With Spivak, Harding notes that some groups have been forcefully subjected to silence, which renders recovering their experiences a historiographical challenge (Harding, 2008b: 135).

As for the interview «The Post-modern Condition. The end of politics?», it is quoted in *The Postcolonial Science and Technology Studies Reader* to summarise the attitude which scholars should cultivate in developing postcolonial accounts of sciences and technologies: «try to behave as if you are part of the margin, try to unlearn your privilege» (Spivak et al., 1990: 30, as cited in Harding, 2011c: 365).⁷

While this brief bibliographical review shows that Harding draws attention to Spivak's works to expand FSE beyond a too-Western framework, it also evidences that, with the slight exception of the notion of «subalternity», Harding does not engage with any of Spivak's specific contributions. In my view, this risks reproducing the kind of asymmetry that FSE seeks to contest, insofar Spivak's works are taken as a mere example that illustrate a previously constituted theoretical proposal, without highlighting how they help shape it. Observe for instance Harding's presentation of FP: while she mentions Jacques Derrida as one of the “mainstream thinkers” that shape FP, and highlights the need to embrace other feminists positions that expose the fractured character of any subject's identity —“Black-feminist, socialist feminist, women-of-color, and so on”—, Spivak's works, which precisely erupt in this intersection, are missing (Harding, 1986: 27).⁸ In this venue, while Harding does an appraise-deserving work in signalling how FSE might be enriched, she seems to fall sort in prosecuting this direction—a direction that, on the other hand, I believe to be imperative for any feminist epistemology that seeks to contest racism, Eurocentrism, orientalism, and colonial rhetoric. Spivak's case is in my view particularly grave, as her works offer conceptual tools that I find especially valuable. That is the case of «ideological victimage» [IV].

3. Ideological victimage through «French Feminism in an International Frame»

Spivak's most explicit remarks on IV can be found in «French Feminism in an International Frame» [1981], collected in *In Other Worlds*, where she elusively uses the term

⁷ Harding quotes this interview from *In Other Worlds* [1988]. However, I have only been able to find it in *The Post-Colonial Critic. Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, edited by Sara Harasym (Spivak et al., 1990).

⁸ For an account of Spivak's spousal of deconstruction see for instance (Spivak & Grosz, 1990).

to reflect on a personal anecdote that introduces the text's main topic: the prejudices of First World International Feminism.⁹

The anecdote involves «a young Sudanese woman in the Faculty of Sociology at a Saudi Arabian University», who told her to have written «a structural functionalist dissertation on female circumcision in the Sudan». Given how cruel the practice of clitoridectomy is, especially in Sudan, Spivak wondered why a Sudanese woman would have chosen a purely descriptive perspective that does not critique the practices it regards (Spivak, 1988a: 134). Reflecting on the case, Spivak affirms: «in my Sudanese colleague's research I found an allegory of my own ideological victimage» (1988a: 135). Her IV is then showed to reside in her own academic choices, which, though had led her to professional success, seem in retrospective compelled: «the “choice” of English Honors by an upper-class young woman in the Calcutta of the fifties was itself highly overdetermined», as «becoming a professor of English in the U.S. fitted in with the “brain drain”». Besides, being a woman at a time when «Jacques Derrida's critique of phallocentrism and Luce Irigaray's reading of Freud» were in vogue, «a commitment to feminism was the best of a collection of accessible scenarios». It is through this path that she encountered International Feminism (1988a: 135).

Later, Spivak uses the term to introduce Julia Kristeva's *About Chinese women*: «Here again I found a link with my own ideological victimage, “naturalization” transformed into privilege» (1988a: 136). Spivak clarifies this statement after severely assessing the book, when she addresses Kristeva's claimed position as «Indo-European» to emphasise «the difference between China and the West». It is in «the fact that Kristeva thus speaks for a generalized West» where Spivak finds the «“naturalization” transformed into privilege» that mirrored her IV (1988a: 140): as a Bulgarian immigrant in France,¹⁰ Kristeva knew of the inherent diversity of

⁹ Spivak criticises the condescendence of Western feminism (cfr. 1988a: 135), as well as its dismissal of women's diverse cultural backgrounds, built on the misconception that First World academic feminists can straightforwardly understand Third World women *because they are women too*. Far from reiterating «the tired nationalist claim that only a native can know the scene», Spivak's aim is to advise that «the immense heterogeneity of the field must be appreciated» (136). Spivak focuses on the French Feminism of the second half of the 20th Century, targeting Julia Kristeva's *About Chinese women* [1974], concerned with «all that is not the West», like other theorists such as Derrida, Lyotard or Deleuze, due to her critical position against Western metaphysics (136). Spivak refers to Kristeva's rejection of politics —because of their alleged phallocentrism— as «class- and race-privileged» (136), and describes her position as a «principled “anti-feminism” which puts its trust in the individualistic critical avant-garde rather than [...] revolutionary collectivity» (140). To conclude, Spivak warns against the blunt exportation of French Feminism to other contexts (141), exhorting First World academic feminists to rethink their questions —«not merely who am I? but who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me? Is this part of the problematic I discuss?»—, and to reflect on how they and their feminism would appear like before the Third World woman if not —«as sweet and sympathetic creatures from another planet who are free to come and go [...] as having a vanguardist class fix, the liberties it fights for as luxuries» (150)—.

¹⁰ Kristeva's biographical itinerary from Bulgaria to France has been well documented by Alice Jardine (2020).

Europe. Still, «as she investigates the pre-Confucian text of the modern Chinese woman, her own pre-history in Bulgaria is not even a shadow under the harsh light of the Parisian voice» (1988a: 140-141).

Spivak's interpreters (Young 2004 [1990]; Sanders 2006; Nita 2018; Ray, 2009; Roberts 2019) have stuck to these paragraphs when discussing IV, limiting its outlook to academic debates on feminism and cultural diversity. Although their positions slightly differ,¹¹ they all seem to understand IV as *the undesirable consideration of a single individual as a representative*¹² *speaker of an inherently heterogeneous social group because of their identity.*

Taking it as a synonym of «“naturalization” transformed into privilege», Robert Young describes IV as «a process» to which Spivak has been forcibly subjected, and which she has repeatedly contested. Her IV presumably resides on «the inevitable risk of presenting herself as the representative of that very “Third World Woman”», given her identity «as an Asian, educated in India and in the United States where she now works» (Young, 2004: 214). Also targeting Spivak's identity as an Indian woman in Western academia, Sangeeta Ray states that IV arises from the position she occupies —only visible when she «steps back and takes a long look» (Ray, 2009: 115)—, while Keiko Nitta describes IV as «psychological experience» of «susceptibility to the ideological apparatus of European feminism» —though she states that «the sense of this “victimage” is hard to tell precisely» (Nitta, 2018: 118). Similarly, Laura Roberts links IV to the pressures exerted by Western Academia. However, she argues that Spivak's IV does not refer to her identity as an Indian woman, but to the fact that her *subjectivity is fragmented*: «ideological victimage evokes, I think, an awareness that the ability to articulate the relation between her own fractured subjectivity and her own research has been necessarily silenced by the mainstream US feminist discourse» (Roberts, 2019: 111). Given that Spivak «inhabits a space somewhere between the binary categories of «“East” and “West”, alongside “First” and “Third” World(s)», Roberts refers her IV to the constriction of «her “inbetweenness”, [...] silenced and objectified in the unwanted projections from a well-meaning feminist discourse» (Roberts, 2019: 112).

Interpreters emphasise that, thus understood, being ideologically victimised requires some privilege, though the term as such serves to question it. Young draws attention to the

¹¹ Although they all consider Spivak's own case, Young does not approach the Sudanese colleague's nor Kristeva's. Roberts observes the Sudanese colleague's case but not Kristeva's, while Sanders, Ray and Nitta speak of both.

¹² Following *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, I here use «represent» in a political sense, as «speaking for» (*vertreten*) (Spivak, 1988b: 275-276).

«unassailable political credentials» derived from «such a position as an Asian woman in the Western academy», although he situates IV among «certain hegemonic forms of Western critical thinking» that Spivak has tried «to pull herself out of» (Young, 2004: 214). Similarly, Ray argues that Spivak is able to identify her IV precisely because she rejects to «sit contentedly on her moral high ground» (Ray, 2009: 115), while Roberts agrees that, in remembering her anecdotes,¹³ Spivak does not forget «her (somewhat privileged) location» (Roberts, 2019: 112). Less concessive, Nitta writes that «while she is aware of her “ideological victimage,” Spivak tries to stay in her “highly overdetermined” vantage point as a Euro-American-based elite feminist of color», although she asserts that the overarching tone of Spivak’s writing is critical (Nitta, 2018: 119). Mark Sanders, the most explicit in this regard, argues that «engaging in feminist consciousness-raising along its classical lines», IV is what «Spivak rethinks her privilege as a female academic in the United States as [...], and appeals to colleagues to do likewise» (Sanders, 2006: 77). In a similar vein, Ray affirms that «the lesson that Spivak wants all of us to learn» is precisely to «unlearn one’s privilege» (Ray, 2009: 115).¹⁴ Given Spivak’s own insistence on not being considered, given her background, as the “true native” that comes to represent a “pure East” (Spivak & Grosz, 1990: 8), I am also inclined to highlight the critical tone of the term.

These depictions undoubtably provide an insightful starting point, and even permit us to link IV to the problem of «clinging to marginality»: if the latter shows how pinpointing an individual as representative can be used as a strategy to deter any epistemic articulation that bridges different standpoints, the former shows how the very same strategy of *pinpointing an individual* can be detrimental.

¹³ Roberts refers to a second anecdote with which Spivak introduces the pitiful compassion that feminists must avoid when approaching Third World Women. The anecdote takes place during Spivak’s childhood [1949], and involves two old women she saw washing clothes in the river. When one accuses the other of invading her side of the river, the accused laughs: «You fool! Is this your river? The river belongs to the [East Indian] Company!». Spivak, who then deemed the woman as a poor ignorant —as the EIC had dissolved time ago—, now glimpses the truth contained in her claim: given the current capitalisation of the global world, one cannot rightfully assert that India has become independent (Spivak, 1988: 135) —Spivak (2021: 21-22) has recently written again about this to argue why India cannot be properly considered «postcolonial»—. Ray (2009: 116) affirms that this anecdote does not illuminate Spivak’s IV because she does not occupy the same place as the washerwomen.

¹⁴ Sanders links the issue to Spivak’s urges to *unlearn one’s privilege* and to *learn from below* (Sanders 2006: 77). While Spivak initially claimed unlearning one’s privilege as a political practice (Spivak et al., 1990: 30; Spivak & Grosz, 1990: 9) she has recently rejected that terminology —«you cannot unlearn your privilege, and if you keep too focused on trying, you are engaged in a kind of narcissism»— calling to «turn it [privilege] round against itself» (Spivak, 2014: 71). As for the idea of learning from below, Spivak has called it one of the cores of her project (Spivak & Chaturvedi, 2000: 333). As we saw, «starting knowledge from below» is also a common trope in Harding’s writings.

While these interpretations successfully encompass the sense in which the term is used in «French Feminism in an International Frame», there are three reasons that lead me to believe that this depiction is too narrow:¹⁵ first, it does not observe Spivak's own definition of «ideology», also presented in *In Other Worlds*. Second, it does not take into account other scenarios of IV discussed in the book, which do not concern gender nor cultural difference — let me clarify that although I will examine those cases, I will *not* judge whether they do in fact entail IV. Rather, I will just reconstrue them to clarify the meaning of «IV». Finally, it is my belief that «IV» should be read in light of Spivak's further epistemic projects, both in the immediately subsequent years and in her latest writings, which offers a constellative comprehension crucial to appreciate its epistemic usefulness.

3.1. Ideology, other cases of IV and epistemological performance

Spivak's definition of ideology can be found in «The Politics of Interpretation» [1982],¹⁶ where she discusses the formation of (individual and/or collective) subjectivity. In her view, a clear definition of ideology dissolves the apparent dilemma between voluntarism and contextual determinism (1988a: 118).

Spivak defines «ideology» as «what a group takes to be natural and self-evident, that of which the group, as a group, must deny any historical sedimentation» (1988a: 118). Roughly depicted as the *given* milieu against and within which the subject conceives themselves, ideology works as «both the condition and the effect» of the picture of the subject as an agent capable of «freely willing and consciously choosing in a world that is seen as background» (1988a: 118). Dialectically embedded in its ideology, the subject thus conceived, embodied and situated, «cannot of course “choose” to step out of ideology», only aspire «to know it as best one can, recognize it as best one can, and, through one's necessarily inadequate interpretation, to work to change it» (1988a: 120). In this sense, Spivak preserves both agency and freedom, which nonetheless must be thought of as always inserted in specific coordinates. Being that the case,

¹⁵ Conversely, one could also argue that their depiction is too broad, as they overlook how agency and responsibility are not equally affected in all the cases. Investigating this, I fear, requires a space I do not have here.

¹⁶ This text originally appeared in *Critical Inquiry* 9(1) (1982) as a response to the papers published the issue. They orbited around «the proposition that criticism and interpretation, the arts of explanation and understanding, have a deep and complex relation with politics, the structures of power and social value that organize human life» (Mitchell, 1982: i).

the idea of a «sovereign subject» —as defended by sheer voluntarism— is itself an ideological picture, produced precisely by the lack of a proper definition of «ideology» (1988a: 118).¹⁷

In this piece, Spivak explicitly attributes IV to the literary critic Wayne C. Booth in his paper «Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism», where he conducts a feminist critique on Rabelais. Before proceeding, Booth problematises his own explicit adherence to feminism, questioning whether his theoretical *choice* curtails his freedom as a literary critic or precisely exemplifies it. According to Spivak, either answer presupposes «freedom» as pure voluntarism, which reveals a gap in his conceptual resources, where «ideology» could be. Hence, Wayne C. Booth is ideologically victimised insofar he remains insensitive to the way his intellectual coordinates shape his stance (1988a: 121-122).

In my view, this example, which exposes the notion of «ideology» itself, suffices to hypothesise that the notion of IV is broader than stated by Spivak's interpreters. The cases discussed in «French Feminism in an International Frame» indubitably illustrate it, but do not exhaust its richness. Across *In Other Worlds*, we can find two other explicit usages of «IV» that confirm this hypothesis.

In «Sex and History in *The Prelude* (1805): Books Nine to Thirteen» [1981], Spivak offers a literary comment on the autobiographical poem *The Prelude* by English poet William Wordsworth. Interlinking the literary piece with its historical context, Spivak calls to lay aside «the reverence due to a poet», and regard Wordsworth as «a human being». This enables the reader, in her view, to appreciate Wordsworth's «ideological victimization», most evident in his political cavillations: while Wordsworth abandoned (English) patriotism (1988a: 64) — which he had conceived up to that point as «a “natural” tie between man and the soil» (1988b: 65)—, to embrace the ideals of the French Revolution, he would soon disavow them, pressured by «England's warring with France» and «the fear of a French invasion» (1988a: 64). Wordsworth seems to be ideologically victimised insofar he is compelled to express certain motifs due to historical and political pressures.

Spivak uses the term again in «A Literary Representation of The Subaltern: A Woman's Text from the Third World» [1987], where she discusses Mahasweta Devi's novella

¹⁷ Spivak cites the «sovereign subject» as an ideological picture common in Anglophone philosophy, which has historically lacked the notion of ideology. According to Spivak, other examples are certain readings of Marx and «a homogeneous notion of woman» (1988a: 118). Across this piece, Spivak exposes how the different contributors have been victimised by these ideologies, though Booth's is the only case where she explicitly mentions IV.

Stanadayini [«Breast-Giver»]. Focusing on Devi's *re-presentation*¹⁸ of Hinduism, Spivak attributes IV to a particular reading of Hindu polytheism historically employed by Indian subaltern movements, by which it is taken as an appropriate articulatory underpin for decolonial insurgency (1988a: 266).¹⁹ According to Spivak, while Devi's characters enact this prejudice, the *re-presentation* of the protagonist of the novella, Jashoda, serves to contest it: Jashoda is a subaltern woman who starts working as a wet nurse in a prosperous household after her husband becomes disabled. Her astounding fertility allows her to nurture both her offspring and the prolific descendance of the house Mistress, which leads the characters to believe that she has been blessed by a goddess, to whom they even compare her. Spivak denounces that Jashoda is nonetheless a victim of «the goddess-infested reverse sexism of the Hindu majority» (1988a: 244).²⁰ the same characters who fawn over her nonetheless abuse her without repent; the fact that she is gazed «from below», by virtue of her enshrinement, only serves to partially conceal the brutal exploitation she is subjected to as a woman (1988a: 244). Spivak then asserts that Devi's *re-presentation* of Jashoda's gendered subalternity demonstrates the inadequacies of Hindu polytheism to underpin, on its own, a militant discourse (1988a: 266).

As we can see in these two cases, victimage seems to be primarily located in the incapacitation of the subject to resist the contextual pressures which shape their epistemic agenda. Therefore, IV can be broadly understood as *a pernicious contextual limitation of the epistemic resources available to a subject due to their inevitable ideological location*. This is a sufficiently general definition that nonetheless permits us to revisit the examples presented: Wayne C. Booth's was ideologically victimised insofar he presumed the picture of the free subject most extended in his intellectual background (without noticing its shortcomings). William Wordsworth was so in reconsidering the political position he was to express in his oeuvre due to nationalist pledges (which conflicted his initial faith in the French Revolution). Certain subaltern Indian movements were ideologically victimised in assuming that the Hinduist polytheism within which they were culturally situated could be successfully articulated as a political credo (while ignoring that it contributed to women's oppression). Finally, Spivak's, Kristeva's, and the unnamed Sudanese colleague's IV derives from their

¹⁸ Following *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, I here use «re-present» in an aesthetic sense, as in artistic mimesis (*darstellen*) (Spivak, 1988b: 275—276).

¹⁹ Spivak points out that Devi's novella also undoes an otherwise assumed link between subalternity and polytheism. According to Spivak, it springs from the specular assumption that monotheism, while «largely bred in its contemporary outlines by way of the culture of imperialism» (1988a: 266), was only cultivated by the upper classes. This hierarchical opposition is undone when, at the end, Jashoda is abruptly equated, not to a goddess, but to «God manifest» (Devi 1988: 240, as cited in, Spivak 1988a: 266).

²⁰ Spivak also mentions the masculinism of Hinduism in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (Spivak, 1993: 185).

forceful subjection to certain unfair academic and intellectual commitments (such as clinging to marginality).²¹

Finally, my inclination to believe that IV refers to a broader epistemic harm stems from certain directions that Spivak's thought has taken, both in the immediately subsequent years and in her latest projects. In *Outside in the Teaching Machine* [1993], Spivak adhered to a «critical» philosophy, «that is aware of the limits of knowing», as opposed to a «dogmatic» philosophy, «that advances coherent general principles without sufficient interest in empirical details» (Spivak 1993: 25). In this sense, it is worthy to note that, while Spivak (1988a: 83) never claimed to participate from FSE, she exposed her interest in the work of Nancy Hartsock, who in turn was acknowledged by Harding as one of the pioneers of FSE (e.g., 1986: 26n14). Moreover, in *Readings* [2014] she expresses interest in «epistemological performance», that is, «how we construct objects for knowing» (Spivak, 2014: 3) be it «yourself, or anything [else]» (Spivak, 2014: 79). This passage leads me to suspect that the notion of IV anticipates a wider epistemological preoccupation, that has explicitly flourished in later writings.

Having clarified IV from a broader scope, we are now in position to address its relationship with the main conceptual tools of FSE: the very notion of «standpoint», and its two main epistemic features, «strong objectivity» and «robust reflexivity».

4. IV and FSE

As we saw, Harding's «standpoint» presents knowledge as necessarily situated, immanently developed by embodied epistemic subjects. As standpoints are only achievable through collective political struggle (2008a: 120), they presume the critique of «class, race, gender, and cultural commitments» that shape one's epistemic situatedness, and which most often go unquestioned (Harding, 1991: 100). In my view, Spivak's «IV», which draws attention to the partiality of the subject's scope, evaluating the epistemic limitations inherent to any knower, can enrich the notion of «standpoint» in at least two ways:

First, Spivak's «IV» scrutinizes the notion of epistemic subject as such, focusing on their relation to the set of assumptions that constitute their worldview –ideology. By signalling

²¹ This general definition does not exclude that, in each particular case, secondary damages are caused. As stated before, agency and responsibility are not equally affected in all the cases, which opens the door for further explorations that I cannot conduct here.

how the idea of a purely autonomous and voluntaristic subject is itself ideological, as the subject cannot be neatly separated from their milieu (Spivak 1988a: 118), Spivak's «IV» implicitly reinforces the relational and collective dimension of every subject, which some commentators have found lacking on Harding's original formulation (see Pohlhaus, 2002).

Second, acknowledging one's «IV» implies scrutinizing one's presumed beliefs, something that is in turn constitutive to the cultivation of the type of political lucidity required by Harding in order to properly constitute a standpoint. Placed in the context of “critical” philosophy (Spivak 1993: 25), «IV» serves as a reminder of the need to permanently reconsider the ways in which one is affected by their ideological coordinates: as Spivak emphasises, one cannot choose to «step out», only aspire to relentlessly clarify one's situatedness in a process that knows no end (1988a: 120). Henceforth, this reminder also applies for those who, belonging to marginalized communities, are epistemically advantaged according to FSE's «inversion thesis». This is not to deny such advantage, nor the social and political hurdles these communities face, but to insist on the importance of delving deeper in the differences *among members of marginalized communities themselves*. Spivak's reflections in her own inbetweenness, or her rejection of an overarching “postcolonial” tag that overlooks important contextual differences (e.g. Spivak, 2012: 152) serve as paradigmatical examples of what means to reconsider the fractality of subjectivity.

Finally, I argue that, precisely because recognising one's IV implies paying attention to one's situatedness, it involves strong objectivity and robust reflexivity, as it involves inspecting the contexts in which we shape our investigations as situated knowers, being as critical as we would hope others would be with themselves (Harding, 1991: 149-150). In my view, both the above stated points—the investigation of collectivity and relationality, and a further inspection of the overlapping nuances of difference—represent crucial issues that any exercise of strong objectivity and robust reflexivity need to take into account. In turn, Spivak's recent insistence on investigating our «epistemological performance» moves along the lines of FSE, signalling a promising direction for feminist epistemologies.

5. Conclusions

Taking into account the points made, I contend that, Spivak's notion of «IV» proves a helpful companion to the main concepts of FSE as proposed by Harding: «standpoint», «strong

objectivity» and «robust reflexivity». A deeper exegetical analysis of Spivak's oeuvre as offered here shows that many of Harding intuitions were also posed by Spivak, also providing us with a conceptual tool that can help us shape future developments of FSE. By incorporating these tools, we can resist the temptation of falling into «additive approaches», as Harding rightfully signalled, and cultivate a feminist epistemology that resists racism, Eurocentrism, orientalism, and colonial rhetoric.

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