

Who Gets to Talk About Oppression? (Online Article)

Historical Note

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Content

WHO GETS TO TALK ABOUT OPPRESSION?

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If you are a leftist or liberal these days, sooner or later you are bound to come across the view that the people who experience certain kinds of oppression the most are the ones best positioned to understand these oppressions and tell us what needs to be done about them. On the issue of sexism the highest authorities are necessarily women, on the issue of racism people of color, on the issue of colonialism citizens of former colonies, and so on.

This view is based on a theory called standpoint epistemology in philosophical circles. According to standpoint epistemology, knowledge and understanding of oppression goes hand in hand with experiencing said oppression first-hand. To be an authority on a form of oppression such as racism or sexism you need to have experienced it and have an identity that is a regular target of such a form of oppression. If you do not meet these criteria, your opinion and judgment on said oppressions is worth less and you better acquiesce to the authority of the oppressions' victims and try to learn from them. Regardless of how much you study and try to understand these forms of oppression, your knowledge and understanding will never match those of its victims. This is because direct experience of something is the main source of knowledge and understanding of that thing.

Standpoint epistemology seems intuitive, but it is actually wrong in its one-sidedness. I provide some simple counterexamples to the theory.

First, consider the case of military oppression, a very familiar case for Cypriots due to the compulsory military service we have here. According to standpoint epistemology, the people best positioned to understand military oppression and tell us what needs to be done about it are those who have experienced it first-hand by being conscripted. However, while some of us who served are very critical of military service's oppressive character, many others are not, and do not even recognize military service as oppressive. We all served and all experienced the same oppressive living conditions more or less, but our conclusions about the nature of these conditions varies a lot. I think we can safely say that while we all experienced the same phenomenon, we did not all understand it equally well. Moreover, a lot of people who never served in the military appear to understand very clearly what is oppressive about it, and we do not tend to ask them to stay silent and listen to what nationalist pro-military conscripts have to say.

Second, consider the case of sexism. It is widely accepted in leftist circles that Cypriot society is a sexist society. Women are regularly the targets of casual sexist remarks and behaviors in their everyday life and face different expectations than men on a number of issues. One would expect that the women who experience sexism the most are the ones best equipped to talk about it, but this is far from the case. Plausibly, the generation of elderly Cypriot women has experienced the most sexism while growing up, but it is the generation of Cypriot women least critical and least understanding of sexism. On the other hand, many Cypriot men appear to be more knowledgeable about sexism than many Cypriot women.

These examples suggest that standpoint epistemology cannot be correct. While it is true that direct experience of something can be a source of knowledge and understanding of that thing, it is not our only source of knowledge and understanding, and on its own it is insufficient as a source of knowledge and understanding. As we have seen, you can be very oppressed and be unaware about it, and vice versa: you may not be personally oppressed but still be aware and sensitive of the forms of oppression existing around you. In fact, the discipline of psychology is premised on the view that people do not necessarily understand their own problems and issues best; external observers can often understand and judge a situation more accurately than the ones directly experiencing it.

Knowledge and understanding require good reasoning and open-mindedness, the willingness to entertain different perspectives and to examine them carefully. This holds in general, and holds for phenomena of oppression too. We all have the capacity to understand the nature of different oppressions and judge what needs to be done about them, as long as we can free our reasoning from prejudice. People of all stripes and identities have been providing reasons and arguments for why elements of our societies are oppressive and bad, and have been organizing collectively to fight oppression, for centuries now. We are all capable of grasping those reasons and arguments because we all share the faculty of reason. Reason enables us to communicate and understand each other pretty well, regardless of our different particular experiences.

So, in our political conversations, we should try to judge what each of us has to say on the basis of the quality of our reasons and arguments, and not on the basis of our particular identities.

Any views expressed are the author's.

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