

Introduction¹

In the summer of 1963, my family moved from Westport, Connecticut, to Shreveport, Louisiana. I was eight years old. My mother was from Massachusetts, my father from Wisconsin. My family had moved often, even living a stretch of time in south Texas, and all four of the kids (I'm the youngest) had been born in different states. Nevertheless, we were considered "Yankees," and we came to town ignorant of the local social codes and racial norms.

Shreveport was in the midst of the upheaval of the civil rights movement when we arrived. A short article from the *New York Times* that July captures the moment:

10 Arrested in Shreveport

SHREVEPORT, LA, July 19 (AP)—Negroes stage sit-ins at the lunch counters of two downtown stores today. The police broke up the demonstrations quickly, arresting 10.

An order to pick up Charles Evers of Jackson, Miss., was also issued. Mr. Evers is the Mississippi field secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the brother of Medgar Evers, the slain Negro civil rights leader. (*New York Times* 1963)

Medgar Evers had been assassinated just a month before.

I was mostly oblivious to the civil rights protests in Shreveport. My world had just been turned upside down by this sudden move, and I was preoccupied with adjusting to a new home and neighborhood, a new school, a new climate, and the loss of all that had been left behind. What I do remember, though, is the constant correction and physical interventions that were attempts to retrain me to conform to the local norms of gender and race. These didn't come from my parents or siblings—they knew as little as I did about how to behave—but from teachers, neighbors, and strangers. The corrections did not come with explanations, either. Instead, I might be yanked away from a car door (I had been planning to sit in the front seat next to the Negro driver rather than in the back seat), or grabbed by the arm and scolded

¹ Thanks to Kate Manne, Charlotte Witt and Stephen Yablo for excellent comments on earlier drafts.

for my loud (and probably "know it all") tone of voice. I had learned how to be a privileged white girl in Connecticut, but this did not do in Shreveport, where Jim Crow and Southern gentility still had a hold. I had to relearn how to enact privilege, whiteness, and femininity. At the same time, I also had a sense, both from what I had known in my previous world and from things I overheard at home, that this new way of being wasn't quite right.² I was so confused.

I believe that early confusions can sometimes motivate philosophical reflection. In my case everyday routines and assumptions were dramatically disrupted at an age when I knew enough to ask why, but not enough to figure out the answers. Although this was a source of considerable unhappiness at the time, I believe it also taught me valuable lessons about the contingency of "common sense," the embodiment of social structures, and implicit training in political values. These early lessons have prompted me to both action and inquiry. I am a feminist. I am antiracist and committed to social justice more broadly. I am an adoptive mother of two African-American children in open adoptions. I am also a philosopher who believes in the power of ideas. Social justice will never be achieved by just working to change beliefs, for the habits of body, mind, and heart are usually more powerful than argument. However, knowledge of the workings of social structures and their appropriation of bodies is crucial. The essays in this collection are some of the fruits of my inquiry, arising out of and directed towards action. I will begin by summarizing some of the broad themes. The following three sections of this introduction correspond roughly to the divisions of chapters that follow; the final section considers themes that are more integrated throughout the essays.

Social Construction

The idea of social construction is an important tool in contemporary social theory. Social constructionist accounts of what it is to have a gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and the like systematically challenge everyday assumptions about what is "natural." However, in spite of consensus that we need to be attentive to social construction, there is striking diversity in how the term 'social construction' is used and what it is taken to imply. The multiplicity of uses across contexts and disciplines has, over time, reduced the value of the term in discussion. But the points that social constructionists have been trying to make remain important. This book explores the claim that something is socially constructed. The essays included are written over a span of almost twenty years and are

informed by work in contemporary feminist and race theory; they also draw on recent work in analytic metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of language. The overarching goal is to clarify and defend the more specific proposals that race and gender are socially constructed, and to situate these proposals within a broader philosophical and political picture.

The contemporary literature on race and gender is not only concerned with social and political questions; central to it are questions concerning reality, knowledge, and nature. For example, the claim that something is a "social construct" (or "merely a social construct") sometimes suggests that it is illusory, or at least less than fully real. And yet can we accept that race and gender are unreal? For those in subordinated positions, it sometimes seems that race, gender, age, disability, and such are all *too* real. So we need to ask: What is the illusion (if any), and what is the reality (if any) in social constructions?

Moreover, traditional efforts to justify racist and sexist institutions have often relied on viewing women and people of color as inferior *by nature*. There is an unmistakable pattern of projecting onto subordinated groups, as their "nature" or as "natural," features that are instead (if manifested at all) the result of social forces. If one function of references to "nature" is to limit what is socially possible, thereby "justifying" pernicious institutions, we must be wary of any claim that a category is "natural." Yet it would be ridiculous to maintain that there are *no* limits on what social arrangements are possible for human beings. So, what is the relationship between social constructions and natural facts? Is there any meaningful distinction between the natural and the social? Do race and gender differ with respect to their "naturalness"?

And further, in claiming that race and gender are socially constructed, we seem to be treating each as a unified category—as if we can isolate what it means to be a woman, or to be Black, by giving an analysis that applies in each and every case. But we are complex social beings with not *only* a gender or *only* a race, but with a gender, a race, a class, a nationality, a sexuality, an age, a collection of abilities and disabilities, and more. Many feminists have argued that the social forces that form us, and their effects, cannot be decomposed into discrete elements (Lugones and Spelman 1983; Spelman 1988; Crenshaw 1989; Harris 1990). Is it possible to give a unified account of gender or race, while still affirming the interdependence and experiential blending of an individual's lived social positions? Can we assume that terms such as 'woman' or 'race' have determinate meanings? If not, how should we proceed—politically and theoretically? What is the best methodology for theorizing about social categories? What determines the meaning(s) of contested terms?

Even these quick examples demonstrate that topics in metaphysics, epistemology and philosophy of language are not far below the surface of debates over social construction: What is real and what isn't? How do we know what's real? Is there reality beyond what's natural? Is the natural "fixed," setting immutable

² In case it isn't obvious, I should note that my parents were not liberal or even especially politically minded. Their goal seemed to be simply to adapt and get along, though they had some qualms about the forms of racial segregation they had not encountered so directly before.

constraints on us? How does our language hide or reveal aspects of reality? What illusions does it promote? These are all questions that demand consideration as part of social theory.

My overall strategy is to distinguish several different ways in which things are "socially constructed." For example, consider a simplified account of the construction of race or gender: to be a member of the subordinate group in question is to be viewed and treated in a certain way by the dominant group (and usually others). Members of the subordinate groups typically internalize and eventually come to resemble and even reinforce the dominant's image because of the coercive power behind it. Thus the dominants' view appears to be confirmed, when in fact they simply have the power to enforce it.

There are several different elements of this picture that could qualify as social constructions, for example, the dominant group's (mistaken) view of the subordinate; each group's self-understandings; the lived (economic, political) divisions between the groups; the group classification system; and even members of the groups themselves. In understanding these different phenomena, we are sometimes concerned with unmasking illusions that are projected onto groups: attention to the illusions is one source of the suspicion that social constructions aren't "real." In other cases we are concerned to emphasize that the causes of apparent group differences are at least mediated by social forces: attention to the profound effects of the social is one source of suspicion of the "natural." And accounts of this sort supplement individualistic explanations of behavior with explanations that emphasize the impact of social structures. Although post-structuralism and post-modernism have taught us to be wary of "totalizing" structural explanations, we cannot avoid talking about practices and institutions and local structures if we are to understand group oppression.

In this book, I aim to provide accounts of race and gender that clarify the sites and forms of construction involved, and that can also be fruitfully employed in the quest for social justice. In particular, I am interested in certain forms of oppression that are read into, marked upon, and lived through the body. The process of marking groups and naturalizing their subordination is an element in virtually all oppression, yet the form and degree of bodily involvement varies. The markers of race and gender, like the markers of disability and age, are not accessories that might be added or dropped, habits to be taught or broken; they are parts of our bodies and "as-if" indelible. Although other forms of oppression may be equally lasting, and may be more severe, it is both analytically and politically valuable to have a framework within which we can explore contemporary forms of embodied oppression (see also Alcoff 2006). In this project I focus on only two dimensions of embodiment: race and gender; this is not to suggest that they are the most important or that a full account can be achieved without looking at other dimensions as well. Rather, this is just where I begin. My hope is that the tools I provide in exploring these dimensions will be helpful in studying others.

Race and Gender

Given the complexity of the phenomena, I argue for a focal analysis that defines race and gender, in the primary sense, as social classes (see Ch. 7). A focal analysis explains a variety of phenomena in terms of their relations to one that is theorized, *for the purposes at hand*, as the focus or core phenomenon.³ For my purposes, the core phenomenon is the pattern of social relations that constitute men as dominant and women as subordinate, of Whites as dominant and people of color as subordinate. An account of how norms, symbols, identities, and such are gendered or raced is then given by reference to the "core" sense.

My accounts focus on the social relations constituting gender and race, because these relations are an important site of injustice. As a result, on my account, neither gender nor race is an intrinsic feature of bodies, even though the markers of gender and race typically are. To have a race is not to have a certain appearance or ancestry, and to have a gender is not to have a certain reproductive anatomy. I embrace the feminist slogan that *gender is the social meaning of sex* and extend this by arguing that *race is the social meaning of "color."* To avoid confusion, I use the terms 'woman' and 'man' to refer to genders and 'male' and 'female' to sexes, 'Black' and 'White' (upper case) to refer to races and 'black' and 'white' (lower case) to refer to "colors."⁴ Sex and "color" have social meaning to the extent that the interpretation of someone as male or female, white or asian, has implications for their social position: the roles they are expected to play in the social context, the norms in terms of which they will be evaluated, the identities they are expected to have, and the like. Such implications are easily demonstrated, hence, on my view, gender and race are real. However, their reality in the contemporary context is the product of unjust social structures, and so should be resisted.

I have found it useful to present the idea of a focal analysis by using a pair of overlapping diagrams:

On the view I favor, the social relations defining gender and race consist in a set of attitudes and patterns of treatment towards bodies as they are perceived (or imagined) through frameworks of salience implicit in the attitudes. These pat-

³ Focal analyses have played an important role in philosophy since Aristotle. I believe G. E. L. Owen coined the term 'focal meaning' (G. E. L. Owen 1986). As Owen describes it (1986, 184): "A world such as 'medical,' [Aristotle] says, is not univocal—it has various definitions answering to its various senses, but one of these senses is primary, in that its definition reappears as a component in each of the other definitions. If to be a medical man is to be XY, to be a medical knife is to be of the sort used by a man who is XY (1236a15–22)." I differ from many using the concept by emphasizing that the core or focal meaning may differ depending on one's theoretical purposes.

⁴ I discuss the distinctions between sex and gender, "color" and race extensively in Chapter 6. Note that "color" (with scare quotes) on my view is not just skin color, but any socially meaningful features taken in a context as (alleged) indicators of ancestral links to a particular geographical region.

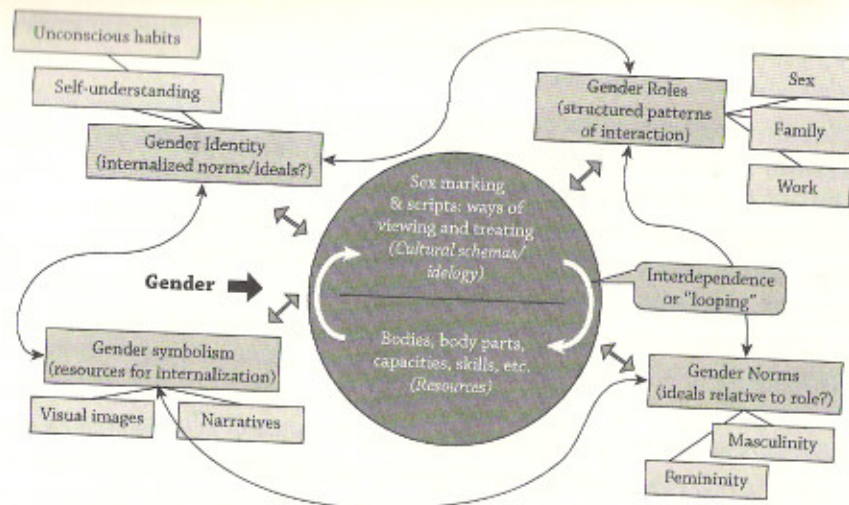


Figure 0.1 "Focal" Analysis of Gender

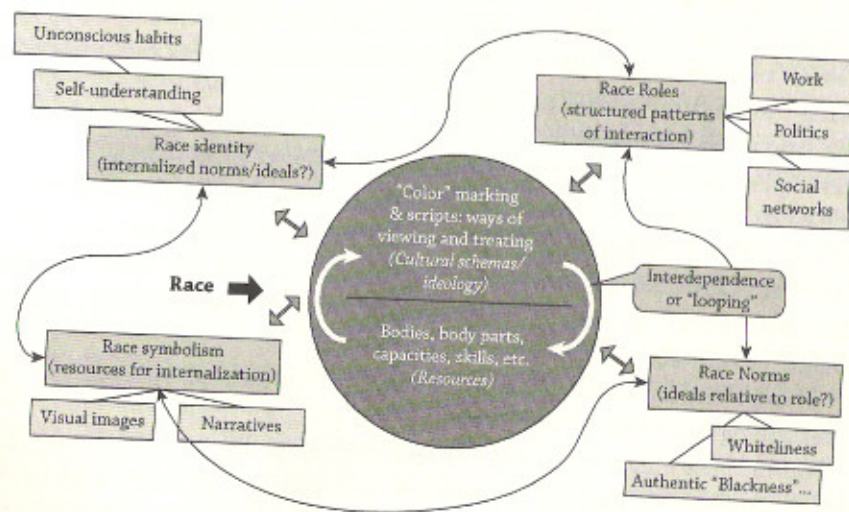


Figure 0.2 "Focal" Analysis of Race

that where there is such subordination, we should change social relations so there will be no more women (or men). (This will not require mass femicide! Males and females may remain even where there are no men or women.) However, although men and women are the only genders we currently acknowledge, if we understand gender as the social meaning of anatomical sex, then there is room in my account for the development of alternative non-hierarchical genders based on reinterpretations of sexual differences. Such genders may be radically different from ones we can now imagine.

I argue that in some ways race is parallel to gender: races are (roughly) those groups that are situated hierarchically due to the interpretation of their physical features as evidence of their ancestral links to a particular geographical region. As with gender, the social relations that constitute race vary cross-culturally and transhistorically, but there are structural parallels across these different contexts. Although I am in favor of cultural diversity, we should aim to eliminate these "color" hierarchies; on my view, to eliminate "color" hierarchy is to eliminate race. (Similarly, this is not to recommend genocide! Cultural and non-hierarchical ethnic groups may remain even where there are no races.)

To capture the specificity of the social position of an individual, it would be a mistake, of course, to consider just gender or just race. I suggest that we can gain insight into the phenomenon of intersectionality by (roughly) superimposing the diagrams offered in figures 0.1 and 0.2. Imagine race, gender, and other social positions to be like gels on a stage light: the light shines blue and a red gel is added, and the light shines purple; if a yellow gel is added instead of the red, the light shines green. Similarly, gender is lived differently depending on the racial (and other) positions in which one is situated. Just as a light may appear different colors depending on which combination of gels it is filtered through, the gender norms for Black women, Latinas, and White women differ tremendously, and even among women of the same race, they differ depending on class, nationality, sexuality, religion, historical period, and so on. However, just as we can gain understanding of the green light on the stage by learning it is created by a combination of blue and yellow gels, and can adjust the light by manipulating the gels, the hope is that we can gain understanding of the lived experience of those who are gendered and raced by having the analytical tools to distinguish them.

As I've mentioned, the "focus" of my analyses are the relations that constitute some embodied groups as dominant and others subordinate. However, as indicated in figures 0.1 and 0.2, these relations are part of broader structures that are both pervasive and entrenched. Gender and race are systematically maintained in a culture because they are performed and internalized. The interdependence of the different elements of the structure is illustrated in figures 0.1 and 0.2 by the boxes surrounding the core relations that give bodies racial and gendered meaning.

Begin with the upper right box in the diagrams: The interpretation of human bodies as "fit" for some activities (and not others) motivates and "justifies" divisions

terms of thought and action take different forms depending on time, place, context, culture, and they generate divisions of labor, roles, norms, identities, and so on that are specific to the location. Gender varies tremendously cross-culturally and transhistorically, but there are, I argue, important structural similarities across these variations. Roughly, women are those subordinated in a society due to their perceived or imagined female reproductive capacities. It follows that in those societies where being (or presumed to be) female does not result in subordination along any dimension, there are no women. Moreover, justice requires

of labor and the separation of domains and forms of activity, that is, social roles. For these roles, then, there are norms (lower right): what it takes to do that labor or activity well. For example, those interpreted as having a female body are regarded as fit or suited for mothering, which is taken to entail a different relation to small children than fathering. Correspondingly, there are different norms for mothering and fathering: even if the norms for mothering and fathering differ across time and culture, what makes a good mother is not thought to be the same as what makes a good father. But if females are expected to perform the role of mothering and to perform it well, then rather than coerce them to fulfill this role, it is much better for females to be motivated to perform it. So the norms must be internalized, that is, they must be understood as part of one's identity and defining what would count as one's success as an individual (upper left box in the diagram). Ideally, one will develop unconscious patterns of behavior that reinforce the role in oneself and others and enable one to judge others by its associated norms. And in order for large groups of people to internalize similar or complementary norms, there must be a cultural vocabulary—concepts, narratives, images, scripts, cautionary tales—that provide the framework for action (lower left box). The cultural vocabulary, of course, will be very complex, for the scripts and images for an White able-bodied 20-something rural Southern (U.S.) Christian woman will have elements that pertain to the multiple social roles and norms she is expected to satisfy. Not all complex positions will have defined roles or norms, and not all defined roles will be consistent.

Although I have described the broader structure illustrated in figures 0.1 and 0.2 in a sequence that suggests linear causation from gender relations, to gender roles, norms, identities, and then symbolism, this is misleading, for there is a thoroughgoing causal interdependence. My claim is not that gender relations are the focal category because they *cause* these other social phenomena; rather I am making an analytical point in keeping with the concept of focal meaning. Consider the question: What makes being weak and helpless a gender norm for women in some contexts and yet not others? In other words, by virtue of what is weakness feminine in certain contexts? If we just consider weakness itself, or even the representations of weakness in that context (are they typically images of females?), we won't have an explanation. Rather, what's required is an examination of the roles that women are expected to occupy in that context. These, of course, will be varied. What we will often find, however, is that weakness is a norm for women in certain classes/races/periods and not others, corresponding to the sort of role that women of that sort are assigned, or corresponding to the reference domain (weakness is not a norm for women in childbirth). By considering how weakness functions in context to make one "well-suited" for some roles and not others, we can disentangle the social factors that situate weakness as feminine. For example, it might have been a norm for "Southern belles" to be weak, but not for their maids, because it is a crucial indicator of race and class privilege that females are relieved of the burdens of physical work and are to be

cared for by males and non-privileged females. The link between gender norms and gender roles invites an interrogation of the complex interaction between different dimensions of privilege and subordination. In the example just considered, the norm of weakness is a social mechanism for coercing White women into their proper place within a race and gender hierarchy that brings with it both privilege and disadvantage. Moreover, the dominant norms dictating that women should be weak but Blacks should be strong puts Black women in an impossible bind; they cannot possibly excel in the terms set by the dominant culture. So this form of analysis also calls attention to the fact that what's construed as "feminine" in a culture may be the norm for only a privileged group, making women in subordinated groups either invisible or apparently inferior *qua* women.

Several broad themes emerge in my discussion of race and gender. First, individuals stand in complicated relationships to the collectively formed and managed structures that shape their lives. Structures take on specific historical forms because of the individuals within them; individual action is conditioned in multiple and varying ways by social context. Theory, then, must be sensitive to this complexity: focusing simply on agents or simply on structures will not be adequate in an analysis of how societies work and don't work, or in a normative evaluation of them (Sewell 1992). We must be attentive simultaneously to both agents and structures.

Second, although in understanding agents we must do justice to experience, we must also be aware that we are bodies, and in the practices of day-to-day life, the movement, location, and meaning of our bodies often has little to do with the agent's consciousness or intentions. As a result, it must be a nontrivial part of feminist and antiracist efforts, not just to change minds, but also to retrain bodies, and not just to retrain bodies, but to change the material conditions that our bodies encounter on a daily basis.

And third, in understanding structures we must be sensitive to the interplay between material and cultural dimensions of social life (Young 1980). In interdisciplinary feminist studies, scholars have learned to play close attention to the complex relationship between representations and the material reality of the social world. Both ordinary narratives and "scientific" theories sustain structures of power; unjust allocations of resources appear to provide evidence for certain cultural myths. Dialogue across disciplines has urged humanists to consider the material circumstances that condition representation, and has led social scientists to recognize the complex ways that institutions are interpreted, reinterpreted, and resisted by the agents within them. Social theory, as I aspire to do it, must be always alert to the interdependence of material and cultural realities.

Although in a single project I cannot do full justice to the relationships between agents, human bodies, cultural meanings, social structures, and the

material conditions for social life, I hope to reveal some crucial sites where interaction between these elements makes a difference.

Language, Knowledge, Method

It is important to note that I am not offering a phenomenology of gender or race. A phenomenological approach to social categories studies the first-person lived experience of those positioned in that category (Smith 2009). Feminist phenomenology is a valuable part of the study of women's oppression (e.g., Young 1990; Bartky 1990; Al-Saji 2010), as are studies in the phenomenology of race (e.g., Fanon 1967; Gordon 2007; Yancy 2008). However, interdisciplinary social theory, more broadly, draws on a range of methods from the social sciences and philosophy to understand, explain, and critique society. Although first-person experience is an important source of evidence for any social theory, the primary subject matter of the sort of social theory I'm undertaking is not experience, but social structures and the social relations that constitute them.

However, one might reasonably complain that it is not necessary to be a phenomenologist to find the analyses of gender and race that I offer to be counter-intuitive. Who on earth would ever find intuitively plausible an analysis of *woman* according to which women are, by definition, subordinate? Given that the analyses are at odds with any ordinary understanding of the terms, on what basis can I meaningfully claim that I have captured what gender and race *are*, or what terms such as 'woman,' 'man,' 'White,' 'race,' mean? The analyses I offer are not only at odds with the phenomenology of being gendered or raced, but with common sense.

One response to this complaint is that social theory is not in the business of trying to capture common sense and, as already mentioned, need not be true to the phenomenology of first-person experience. Do we expect economics to provide a theory of the market that accords with our common-sense ideas or that is phenomenologically realistic? Surely not. The market works, in part, because of its ability to mystify those engaged in its transactions. An adequate economic theory attempts to see through such mystification to explain and predict changes and trends. To do so, it will need to have definitions of key terms, for example, labor, unemployment, profit, that differ from our common sense understanding.

In keeping with this thought, one might want to distinguish *theoretical* and *non-theoretical* uses of terms. Lots of terms have a life both within a theoretical project and also in everyday usage, for example, 'energy,' 'force,' 'solid,' and we do not require scientific theories (whether in natural or social science) to change in order to accommodate ordinary intuitions. It would not be unreasonable to claim that the accounts of *race* and *gender* that I offer are theoretical and should be evaluated by theoretical standards. But what is the relationship between

theoretical and non-theoretical meanings of a term? Is a term such as 'energy,' or 'woman,' ambiguous, that is, does it have multiple meanings, theoretical and non-theoretical? Is the common sense term 'woman' a different term from the various theoretical terms 'woman'? And how might a theoretical account of gender or race play a role in social critique?

Many of the essays in this collection consider these issues of meaning indirectly, and a few more directly. On my view, there is not a sharp line between ordinary language and theory, and it would be a mistake to treat the terms in question as ambiguous. My approach to meaning is influenced by three broad movements in contemporary analytic philosophy: naturalism, scientific essentialism, and semantic externalism. Books have been written on each, and anything I say here, or in the chapters that follow, will barely scratch the surface. However, I will say a bit about each to give some background context relevant to my project and then explain why I believe that these movements are more friendly to the project of critical social theory than is sometimes supposed.

Although it took me years to recognize its influence, V. W. O. Quine's essay, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (1951) was at the core of my philosophical training, and my impulses in metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of language and even normative theory are tutored by Quine's legacy. Much of modern philosophy has relied on a sharp divide between propositions allegedly necessary, true by virtue of meaning, and known a priori, and propositions that are contingent, true by virtue of the world, and known a posteriori. "Two Dogmas," along with Quine's other work, challenged this divide. On Quine's view, all inquiry is of a piece and results are justified by satisfying a variety of criteria, both logical and empirical. There is no sharp line between those parts of inquiry that tell us what the world is like and those parts that create the tools—including definitions of new terms or redefinitions of old ones—for understanding it.

The lore of our fathers is a fabric of sentences. In our hands it develops and changes, through more or less arbitrary and deliberate revisions and additions of our own, more or less directly occasioned by the continuing stimulation of our sense organs. It is a pale gray lore, black with fact and white with convention. But I have found no substantial reasons for concluding that there are any quite black threads in it, or any white ones. (Quine 1976, 132)

Nor is there a sharp line between science, philosophy, and ordinary efforts to make sense of the world:

... my position is a naturalistic one: I see philosophy not as an *a priori* propaedeutic or groundwork for science, but as continuous with science. I see philosophy and science as in the same boat—a boat which, to

revert to Neurath's figure as I so often do, we can rebuild only at sea while staying afloat in it. There is no external vantage point, no first philosophy. All scientific findings, all scientific conjectures that are at present plausible, are therefore in my view as welcome for use in philosophy as elsewhere. (Quine 1969, 126–7)

Although Quine himself was skeptical of "meanings," semantic externalists such as Putnam, Kripke (1980), and Burge (1979) embraced his naturalizing impulse and proposed that the meaning of a term is its referent, and determining what the meaning is requires empirical inquiry. Although the ordinary person may use words meaningfully to refer to things having in mind only a vague, non-individuating, or even mistaken description of them, the meaning is not, correspondingly, vague or incomplete. This is because, as Putnam put it, "meanings' just ain't in the head!" (Putnam 1973, 704). Rather, our ordinary referential efforts succeed directly, without mediation by a Fregean sense or implicit description, and knowledge of meaning is an achievement that requires expertise, not something we gain simply by linguistic competence.

Semantic externalism, in the work of Putnam and Kripke, came hand in hand with scientific essentialism. The scientific essentialist holds that it is possible to discover a posteriori the essence of a kind such as water or gold. For example, according to the scientific essentialist, we know (a priori) that if what it is to be water *just is* to be H_2O , that is, if water = H_2O , then water is essentially H_2O . So if we learn through scientific inquiry that water *just is* H_2O , then we can infer that water is essentially H_2O . Because one of the premises of this argument relies on empirical investigation, the conclusion is a posteriori. However, it is important to note that the conclusion that water is essentially H_2O is fallible. Our best chemical theory says that water *just is* H_2O , but we know that no scientific theory is infallible. Scientific results are overturned, rejected, eclipsed, regularly. So if we come to have reason to reject the claim that water *just is* H_2O , likewise we will have to revise our understanding of the essence of water.

If we combine naturalism, semantic externalism, and scientific essentialism, then we get a view according to which we regularly communicate about the world with only a partial grasp of what we are talking about: the boundaries of our references are not clear, nor is it clear what features are crucial for distinguishing the individuals or kinds we speak of. This can only be determined holistically in light of broader considerations about our purposes, the inquiry we are engaged in, the community we are part of, and expert information from those with greater empirical knowledge of the domain. Recently semantic externalists have further explored the dynamic aspect of meaning that allows ongoing reinterpretation of meaning in light of past practice and present concerns (Bigelow and Schroeter 2009; but see also Quine 1972).

For most conversations the incomplete hold we have on meanings doesn't matter, for we are good at figuring out enough to communicate and get by. But the indeterminacy of our grasp of meanings also allows for confusion and mystification; one goal of social theory, as I see it, is to clarify meanings with social justice in mind. Although Putnam, Kripke, et al. were keen on the holistic nature of our inquiry, they also tended to be biased in favor of the natural sciences in seeking the a posteriori conditions for membership in a kind. But an externalist bias towards the natural sciences is not warranted, for social kinds are no less real for being social. I argue that in the social domain we should rely on social theorists, including feminist and antiracist theorists, to help explicate the meanings of our terms. Much can be gained, I believe, by including *both social science and moral theory*—broadly construed—in the web of belief that has a bearing on our inquiry.

I discuss explicitly some ways in which this approach to language, knowledge, and metaphysics can be useful to social theorists in Chapters 1, 14, and 16. Let me suggest, very briefly, how these ideas apply to the social domain. It is my view that although we have terms to describe the practices in which we engage and the institutions of which we are a part, we usually have only the vaguest idea of what we are actually doing. Most of our knowledge of practice is know-how; it is implicit, embodied. However well this serves us in some situations (we should be grateful that so much of it is implicit, for we could not manage without habits of mind and body), there are times when we need a fuller understanding of what is going on. Charles Taylor suggests:

In a sense, we could say that social theory arises when we try to formulate explicitly what we are doing, describe the activity which is central to a practice, and articulate the norms which are essential to it. . . . But in fact the framing of theory rarely consists simply of making some continuing practice explicit. The stronger motive for making and adopting theories is the sense that our implicit understanding is in some way crucially inadequate or even wrong. Theories do not just make our constitutive self-understandings explicit, but extend, or criticize, or even challenge them. (Taylor 1985, 93–4)

The theorist who studies a social practice (or whatever) is not talking about something wholly new. It is the same practice that we've been talking about and engaging in all along, but without a clear understanding. The social theorist undertakes to place the practice within a larger social matrix. Taylor suggests that in some cases the theorist

... alters or even overturns our ordinary everyday understanding, on the grounds that our action takes place in an unperceived causal context,

and that this gives it a quite different nature. But there are also theories which challenge ordinary self-understanding and claim that our actions have a significance we do not recognize. But this is not in virtue of an unperceived causal context, but because of what one could call a moral context to which we are allegedly blind. (Taylor 1985, 95)

The failure of understanding that the social theorist aims to correct is not a lack that only some of us have; it comes with being an ordinary agent living in a culture whose practices we engage in, often "unthinkingly," just as we speak our native language. Broader causal and moral reflection on the practice, however, may reveal it to be quite different from what we might have imagined, or even what we thought pre-theoretically. This is potentially a crucial moment of demystification, and, as I see it, calls for an approach to language that allows radical revisions to our ordinary understandings of what we are talking about, based on a broad-based inquiry. In short, social theory needs, at least, semantic externalism and a holistic Quinean naturalism. At this point it will be helpful, I believe, to say more about my general approach to social theory and social critique.

Social Theory and Social Critique

Social critique is an interdisciplinary enterprise that comes in many forms. One central form takes aim at existing social institutions, laws, and practices, for example, health care policies, the gendered distribution of family work, racial profiling, and argues that they are bad or unjust. Let's call this *institutional critique* (allowing the notion of 'institution' to be very broad). It is tempting to see such critique as involving two steps. One step involves describing the social practice in question in a way that highlights those features that are relevant to normative evaluation. Another step invokes explicitly normative concepts to evaluate the practice as just, reasonable, useful, good, or not.

In my experience, philosophers tend to neglect the first step. In some cases they miss the social level of analysis completely (focusing instead on the individual or the state); in other cases they note it, but are insensitive to the challenges of describing it well or aptly. (This latter weakness may be exacerbated by the assumption that fact and value should be kept separate, so description must be value-neutral and normative concepts only become relevant once description is done and evaluation begins.) Non-philosophers, in contrast, tend to neglect the second step. Although they are committed to social justice and skilled at describing the social world in ways that reveal its tensions and constraints, they are uncomfortable in the face of moral disagreement or disagreement about values, and are unfamiliar with the resources of moral and political theory, both

normative and meta-normative.⁵ As a result, they are often wary of outright normative vocabulary and prefer more implicit evaluative judgments that avoid theoretical scrutiny.⁶

As I see it, the two steps are deeply interdependent: in order to describe the world in a way that is apt for moral evaluation, one must have an appreciation of the multiple dimensions of moral value and adequate language to describe features that moral theory is, or should be, attentive to. Moreover, moral theory should provide grounds for evaluation and remediation that are informed by rich descriptions and our best theories of the social world. Attention to this interdependence of description and evaluation encourages critical reflection on the resources available for these tasks: Do our descriptions—ordinary or theoretical—capture what's morally significant? Do our evaluations address the complexity of social life? Should we revise concepts or introduce alternative narrative tropes to expand our expressive repertoire?

Ideology Critique

Reflection on the terms used for description and evaluation will sometimes reveal that institutional critique needs to be supplemented by *ideology critique*. Ideology critique focuses on the conceptual and narrative frameworks that we employ in understanding and navigating the world, especially the social world. Elizabeth Anderson describes the critique of a concept this way:

A critique of a concept is not a rejection of that concept, but an exploration of its various meanings and limitations. One way to expose the limitations of a concept is by introducing new concepts that have different meanings but can plausibly contend for some of the same uses to which the criticized concept is typically put. The introduction of such new concepts gives us choices about how to think that we did not clearly envision before. Before envisioning these alternatives, our use of the concept under question is *dogmatic*. We deploy it automatically, unquestioningly, because it seems as if it is the inevitable conceptual framework within which inquiry must proceed. But envisioning alternatives, we convert dogmas into *tools*; ideas that we can *choose* to use or not, depending on how well the use of these ideas suits our investigative purposes. (Anderson 2001, 22)

⁵ Although I use 'they' to refer to both groups, I find myself situated, sometimes in one, other times in the other, with all their strengths and weaknesses.

⁶ The histories of the disciplines make sense of these tendencies: social scientists are "scientists" so their research should be "objective" in the sense of value neutral; philosophers are not "scientists" and their realm of expertise is normative inquiry, so they should leave the description to the scientists (or common sense).

I would add that in order to create the critical distance that gives us "choice," critique need not introduce a wholly new concept, but can just suggest a revision to a concept or a new understanding of a concept. Ideology critique disrupts conceptual dogmatism and extends this method further to other representational tools, capacities, and culturally mediated patterns of response; it raises questions about their aptness, what they capture and, importantly, what they leave out, distort, or obscure.⁷

The term 'ideology' has a long and complicated history and in recent years some have rejected the concept of ideology in favor of the notion of 'discourse' (Hoy 2004). However, I have chosen to stick with a rather broad notion of ideology that plausibly captures the less controversial core of both notions. Alan Hunt and Trevor Purvis argue, for example:

... ideology and discourse refer to pretty much the same aspect of social life—the idea that human individuals participate in forms of understanding, comprehension or consciousness of the relations and activities in which they are involved. . . . This consciousness is borne through language and other systems of signs, it is transmitted between people and institutions and, perhaps most important of all, it *makes a difference*; that is, the way in which people comprehend and make sense of the social world has consequences for the direction and character of their action and inaction. Both 'discourse' and 'ideology' refer to these aspects of social life. (Purvis and Hunt 1993, 474; see also McCarthy 1990, 440)

Although from this quote it might appear that ideology is always conscious and intentional, on my view, ideology includes habits of thought, unconscious patterns of response, and inarticulate background assumptions (see also Taylor 1985, chap. 1, esp. pp. 36, 46, 54; Althusser 1970/2001). In this regard my own use of the term is probably closer to Bourdieu's (1977) notion of *habitus* than either a Marxian concept of 'ideology' or a Foucauldian notion of 'discourse' (Foucault 1982). Let me emphasize, though, that 'ideology,' in the intended sense, is not a pejorative term. It is an essential part of any form of social life because it functions as the background that we assimilate and enact in order to navigate our social world.

Although societies tend to have dominant ideologies, ideologies differ across social groups, and alternatives to dominant ideologies are ubiquitous at every level. Individuals who navigate different social spaces become expert at a kind of

⁷ Miranda Fricker (2007) introduces the term 'hermeneutic disablement' and discusses the kinds of epistemic and political injustice that arise when our concepts fail us. Such circumstances call for ideology critique.

social code-switching; not only forms of speech, but manner of self-presentation, degrees of self-revelation, style of reasoning, and such change from context to context, to accommodate the ideology of the milieu. These ideologies, and the practices they partly constitute, *make a difference*, as Purvis and Hunt say. In particular, they enable both the reproduction and disruption of social inequality by guiding our perceptions and responses to existing social conditions.

One crucial task of ideology critique is to reveal ideology as such. In some cases this will involve calling attention to aspects of the discursive frameworks that we consciously employ, their history, and their relation to the practices and institutions they underwrite. This is sometimes called *genealogy*.⁸ In other cases, however, ideology is invisible to us, that is, it is *hegemonic*, and it is necessary to articulate it and make it accessible for critical reflection. Questions of aptness or justice don't arise for what is taken for granted. However, once articulated, ideology can (in principle) be debated and reformed. So one goal of ideology critique is to elucidate the conceptual and narrative frameworks that undergird our social interaction, thus making them available for critical examination.

In some cases, ideology critique can succeed in its critical task simply through redescription; once the social phenomenon in question is seen anew, it is clear that it is problematic, even immoral. The problem might have been simply that the previous description of the phenomenon did not adequately capture the morally relevant features, or that the descriptive tools we employed were not well-suited to the evaluative tools we were attempting to apply. In these cases, the burden of argument lies in the reinterpretation of the phenomenon, not in moral theory per se. For example, once we recognize that non-consensual sex in marriage is rape, or that domestic violence is assault, we don't need an elaborate moral theory to tell us that we should change our evaluation of it from permissible to impermissible. At some point we may legitimately want to know what is the best moral theory to explain what's wrong with rape or assault, but such explanation is not necessary to critique the practice of marital rape and domestic violence within a context in which there is consensus that rape and assault are wrong.

Correlatively, it might be that a genealogy (or other reconsideration) of our evaluative concepts demonstrates their weaknesses and, once they are revised, it becomes clear that social phenomena we thought benign are not, or vice versa. For example, reflection on the concept of patriotism may reveal that although it is often assumed that patriotism requires an unconditional support for one's nation, especially in times of war, a better understanding of patriotism involves a commitment to values somehow fundamental to the nation, for example, enshrined in founding documents. Patriotism, then, may be exhibited in criticism of national policy, war resistance, and civil disobedience

⁸ I discuss one approach to genealogy in this volume, Chapter 13.

when the nation's actions violate its central values. Ideology critique, as I understand it, occurs against a backdrop in which some values are assumed; it is not part of its task to provide a foundation for normative evaluation or answers to metaethical questions.

There are several specific issues concerning social phenomena that make the tasks of description and evaluation especially challenging. Social structures, as such, are not part of our ordinary experience and so can be hard to notice and describe; moreover, our most familiar terms of moral evaluation apply first and foremost to individuals, though we are also comfortable bringing states and the explicit actions of states (laws, policies, and such) under moral scrutiny. What is less clear is how to describe the target and choose the right terms of evaluation when we are considering the huge array of social practices, traditions, and norms. Should fashion be subject to moral evaluation? What about etiquette or cuisine? Or religious practices? Or art? What is relevant when we evaluate the social organization of families, child rearing, and education, work? How is an evaluation of a social practice related to the evaluation of individuals who engage in it?

In saying that social structures are hard to notice, I'm not suggesting that people are unaware of the social practices in which they engage. Food, family, and work are a huge part of everyday life (though notably not a huge part of philosophical inquiry), and people are well aware of that. What is hard to notice—and sometimes even grasp—are the structural features of everyday practices and the interconnections between them. For example, food choices are related not only to health, cultural tradition, money, and lifestyle, but also the growth of agribusiness, global food security, animal well-being, environmental degradation, and economic exploitation (Roberts 2008). At this point in time, the moral questions we need to ask about food concern its place in a broad social structure with complex causes and effects. This echoes Taylor's point in the quote above: the social theorist's task is to situate a practice within a broader causal and moral context that those engaged in the practice ordinarily aren't aware of.

But what is a social structure? I discuss this question at length in some of the chapters that follow, but very briefly, on my view, a social structure is a set of interdependent practices. Practices, in turn, are shared dispositions (schemas) to respond to certain parts of the world (resources); some of these dispositions are encoded as beliefs and other attitudes, but some are merely habitual responses (Sewell 1992). Social practices are more or less coordinated. Coordination can be facilitated by adjusting salient parts of the world to trigger the right dispositions, for example, signs, to exit. Social structures are not unique to humans. Non-human animals engage in interdependent forms of coordinated behavior as well. Humans, however, have distinctive capacities to critique and change the practices, and to design them for conscious ends. However,

because social structures often involve coordinated responses—both habitual and intentional—by many individuals, they can be very hard to change.⁹

Gaining insight into what a social structure is doesn't immediately solve the problem of how to evaluate it, however. For example,

- (i) As indicated before, it can be difficult to locate the object of moral evaluation. For example, what precisely is "the heteronormative family"? It is not a particular family, of course; it isn't the set of families with homophobic beliefs or attitudes; it isn't the set of traditional two-parent families. It is a complex set of interdependent practices, cultural resources, laws, policies, and such, that privilege heterosexual couples and their biological offspring living together. But how, exactly, do we adequately describe, much less evaluate *that*?
- (ii) Social structures constitute our social world and serve as frames of meaning within which we act as social beings. Our desires and intentions, our sources of pleasure and pain, are partly a function of the schemas we have internalized and which also partly constitute the structure. If moral evaluation relies on what satisfies preferences or desires, what causes pleasure and pain, how can we both rely on these states of mind to guide our evaluation and also critique these states of mind as conditioned by problematic structures? What is the ground of critique?
- (iii) Individual practices that make up an unjust structure may be harmless in themselves and so not a proper target of critique; it may be only the systematic interdependence of multiple practices that creates the injustice. But social structures are often sufficiently complex that it is difficult to identify not only their causes, but also their effects. Given that we are rarely in a position to experiment with whole societies, how do we isolate the particular source of the problem? And unless we know the source, how can we proceed with moral evaluation—which practice or practices are the problem?
- (iv) Social structures are created and sustained by us, collectively, but are not within any individual's control; they are often not even within any group's

⁹ A careful reader will note that I never define the term 'social,' here or in the essays that follow. This is not an accident. I believe that it is not possible to define 'social' in non-circular terms, so an analysis, strictly speaking, is not possible. This does not rule out giving an account of the social, but the contours of this, like those of any account, will depend on the particular project, the purposes for which one needs a notion of the social, and so on. My approach to this, as in other cases, is to employ a focal analysis. For my purposes, coordinated activity is the focal notion. Social relations are those that constitute and support the coordination, and social groups consist of those standing in these relations. This approach allows for forms of sociality that are quite demanding (Margaret Gilbert's excellent work (e.g., Gilbert 1989) on activities such as taking a walk together would be included), social-structural groups that are social groups in a more attenuated sense (Young 2000), and even the sociality of bees and flocks of geese.

control. However, it is often assumed that we are only morally responsible for what we can control. Should we conclude that social structures are not within the scope of moral evaluation?

How should we proceed? It will be useful to say a bit about my identification with critical theory and what I think a critical theory can and cannot do. This will help us think a bit further about the possibility of social critique.

Critical Theory

Ideology critique is often associated with critical theory. Critical theory is situated theory. It is situated in two ways: epistemically and politically. Critical social theory begins with a commitment to a political movement and its questions; its concepts and theories are adequate only if they contribute to that movement. A feminist or antiracist critical theory does not attempt to be "neutral" on questions of race or gender, but begins with the assumption that current conditions are unacceptably unjust and a commitment to understand and remedy that injustice. Consider Nancy Fraser's characterization:

To my mind, no one has yet improved on Marx's 1843 definition of critical theory as "the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age." What is so appealing about this definition is its straightforwardly political character. It makes no claim to any special epistemological status but, rather, supposes that with respect to justification there is no philosophically interesting difference between a critical theory of society and an uncritical one. However, there is, according to this definition, an important political difference. A critical social theory frames its research program and conceptual framework with an eye to the aims and activities of those oppositional social movements with which it has a partisan, though not uncritical identification. . . . Thus, for example, if struggles contesting the subordination of women figured among the most significant of a given age, then a critical social theory for that time would aim, among other things, to shed light on the character and basis of such subordination. It would employ categories and explanatory models that revealed rather than occluded relations of male dominance and female subordination. And it would demystify as ideological any rival approaches that obfuscated or rationalized those relations. (Fraser 1989, 113)

Critical theories arise out of social activism. The questions they ask are those that are important for bringing about social justice in a particular time and place. They do not begin by asking what justice is, in the abstract, and, unless it

is important for the purposes of the movement, attempt to provide a universal account of justice. Often a universal account of justice isn't necessary to improve the situation, for the activism is a response to a situation that is straightforwardly unjust. Alternatively, the situation may not appear obviously unjust, but the challenge is then to reframe it so the injustice becomes salient. In such cases, the theoretical task is to demystify the situation to reveal what is easily acknowledged to be unjust. The task is to turn a complaint into a critique.

In keeping with the embeddedness of critical theory, feminist social critique need not attempt to argue that a social practice is sexist or racist from a starting point that all rational inquirers must endorse. It is assumed that not all rational inquirers have the understanding or the values that constitute a feminist outlook, though perhaps they could and should. The first goal is to find or construct the conceptual and evaluative frameworks that do justice to the phenomena that are the source of complaint, the phenomena that give rise to the movement. Of course there will be political and practical questions about how to use critical frameworks to promote social justice; appropriating the rhetoric of the dominant discourse may sometimes be politically necessary. But the demystification that comes from ideology critique reveals the need for, and often promising directions for, social change.

Critical theory, like all good theories, aims to be empirically adequate. However, as just indicated, it also has a practical aim: it should be helpful to those committed to furthering the aims of social justice through the movement in question, for example, the feminist and/or antiracist movement. This is not as radical as it might sound. Theories offer a response to the needs present in a social context; among other things, they offer a framework of concepts for understanding a domain. Consider, for example, medicine, engineering, economics. In addition to allowing us to make true, or empirically adequate, statements, the point of the theory is to provide resources that can inform us as we navigate the world. The framework of concepts serves as a tool. This means that justified truth is not enough; practical significance is an additional condition of success. So a critical theory, like other theories, should be judged according to several criteria: (1) Does it meet ordinary epistemic standards of empirical adequacy, consistency, and the like? (2) Are its concepts apt? Do they reveal the phenomenon in a way that helps us provide an answer to our guiding questions? (3) Does it function as part of a larger picture that enables us to address our practical concerns? (see also (Anderson 1995a)). The point of theory in such cases is not to convince someone that there is a problem, or to prove to an unbeliever that a particular belief is the only rational option, but to answer a question, to address a concern.

To say that critical theory is epistemically (as well as politically) situated, is not to reject the goal of objective inquiry (Anderson 1995a; Anderson 1995b; Anderson 2011). Once we acknowledge that the questions we ask arise out of a

particular social-historical context and that we draw on familiar assumptions and metaphors as sources of intelligibility, then it is only reasonable to be alert to the potential distortions as well as the glimpses of truth our epistemic position affords. In fact, one might argue that any plausible empiricism has to take into account the situatedness of knowing in order to address the potential for bias: the idea that multiple observers of a phenomenon are desirable in order to increase objectivity is itself an acknowledgement of the situatedness of perception and cognition. The task is not, I believe, to aim for objectivity by repositioning oneself as an abstract subject, suspending all "subjective" beliefs and values. We need not view the philosopher as a "neutral" observer of a realm of concepts. Instead, we can embrace the limitations and opportunities of our position and to undertake self-consciously situated inquiry, that is, inquiry that arises from and speaks to social conditions at a particular historical moment.

'Situating knowledge' is a term that one often finds associated with *standpoint epistemology* (Hartsock 1983). Standpoint epistemology is a cluster of views according to which a socially situated perspective is granted epistemic privilege or authority with respect to a particular domain; *feminist standpoint theories*, in particular, typically grant such privilege to members of subordinated groups. Usually the privilege in question is granted over the domain of social relations that oppress them. A commitment to *situated knowers* is, however, a weaker commitment than a commitment to standpoint epistemology. To claim that knowers are situated is to claim that what we believe or understand about something is affected by how we are related to it. This is consistent with themes already discussed: if being a member of a certain social category brings with it pressure to learn the practices and internalize the norms and expectations of that category, it is not surprising that this process would reveal some phenomena and obscure others, depending on the social position one occupies. A commitment to situated inquiry does not commit one to *privileging* any particular perspective or to the idea that one is unable to "step outside" one's particular perspective.

But, one might ask, how does it help to say that feminist social critique or antiracist social critique begins with the commitments and projects of feminism and must be evaluated relative to that domain? It would seem that either there is a single "approved" feminist viewpoint that offers social criticism but few will endorse it (since so few occupy the "approved" feminist viewpoint); or there are multiple feminist viewpoints and there are multiple critiques, but no coherence and so little power in the account.

These are real concerns, but they are concerns for virtually any disciplined inquiry in which there is disagreement about the subject matter, the methods, or the precise standards for acceptability. There is always a trade-off between the breadth of the target audience for an argument and the strength of its conclusions. Moreover, the fact of disagreement does not undermine a theoretical

endeavor, but potentially strengthens it. However, the multiplicity of feminist perspectives raises two deep issues: first, if feminist critical theorists are doing both institutional and ideology critique in very different contexts, facing different political and cultural pressures, should we expect feminism to offer a single coherent "theory," "framework," or utopian vision? If not, then what does it offer? And is it meaningful to use the term 'feminist theory'? Second, if feminist critical theory is situated, as suggested, and looks to those in subordinate positions for insight into the practices and structures they enact, how can the theory challenge or demystify the dominant understanding of the practices? The majority will plausibly reflect back to the theorist the dominant understandings and reject critical reframings. Must it rely on "experts" or "theorists" as authorities to validate its claims? Is ideology critique, then, inevitably epistemically (and politically) elitist?

Let me say something brief about each of these issues in turn. As I see it, feminist critical theory does not offer a broad overarching "theory" or utopian vision that can be applied across the board. As I mentioned before, critical theory is not primarily in the business of constructing normative theories from scratch, but of exploring the opportunities within and limits of existing normative and descriptive frameworks. Even if there were rational consensus on a single universal theory of justice, the job for critical theorists would be to engage in critique of its conceptual and narrative presuppositions. As Anderson described above, the result of critique would not necessarily be a rejection of the theory's principles and frameworks; critique might yield reflectively endorsement of them as tools in the work for justice. What feminist critical theory does offer is a range of strategies, priorities, and tools for doing both institutional and ideology critique. Some of these may be very abstract and useful in many contexts; others may be only locally useful. But it is not necessary to develop a single coherent position in order to promote social justice. There are many very different ways for women and members of other subordinated groups to flourish. And the goal of feminist critical theory is to open up those possibilities, not to define a single approved form of life.

This still leaves the question of epistemic and political authority: Whose values and whose insights count in doing critique? It is important first to set aside the suggestion that critique is only successful if those in subordinate positions, that is, those in whose name the movement in question seeks justice (immediately?) endorse it. The idea of situated knowers allows that those situated in a particular social position may have special access to certain phenomena, but also that they may be especially vulnerable to mystification. All of us are dogmatic about aspects of the conceptual and narrative frameworks we employ—agency would not be possible without an assumed cultural frame, a language, a set of basic social dispositions. It is hardly surprising that efforts to disrupt this frame in order to reflect on it meet with suspicion and a rejection of alternatives. Nevertheless,

critical theorists are committed to the possibility that anyone can engage in critique—not just intellectuals, not just the elite. (Historically one feminist version of this is consciousness raising; in the 21st century it is more often called “raising awareness.”) Critical theory is anti-elitist not because it takes every idea or every reaction equally seriously, but because its methods are based on a capacity to critically reflect that we all share. Consider Anderson again:

Reason is the power to change our attitudes, intentions, and practices in response to reflection on the merits of having them or engaging in them. . . . reflective endorsement is the only test for whether a consideration counts as a reason for having any attitude or engaging in any practice of inquiry: we ask: on reflecting on the ways the consideration could or does influence our attitudes and practices and the implications of its influencing us, whether we can endorse its influencing us in those ways. If we can reflectively endorse its influence, we count the consideration as a reason for our attitudes or practices. (Anderson 1995b, 53)

Ideology critique invites us to withhold reflective endorsement from our ordinary ways of thinking and speaking to consider whether and how they guide our participation in unjust structures; critique gives us alternatives to explore. It does not follow from our shared capacities for reasoned reflection that feminists will all agree, or that any critical theorist will find universal (or even broad) endorsement of the revisionary frameworks she proposes. Consensus is a standard no theorist can be expected to meet, even those committed to anti-elitist and situated epistemologies.

But even if critical theorists cannot gain the endorsement of everyone subordinated by the institutions and practices they critique, a crucial feature of critical theory is that it supposed to make a difference. In its early forms, the idea was that critical theories are “inherently emancipatory” (Geuss 1981, 2). I’ve articulated a much weaker form of this criterion, suggesting that a critical theory must be judged, in part, by its practical pay-off. It must be useful to the movement. Is this a reasonable basis for evaluation?

One way of developing this idea would be to claim that a critique is acceptable only when it can gain a foothold among those adversely affected by the practice or structure being criticized; in other words, it is a necessary condition on acceptable critique that the subordinated and their allies find it illuminating or useful, that it contributes to their quest for social justice.¹⁰ This condition would

¹⁰ Taylor suggests something along the lines I’m suggesting: “Put tersely, our social theories can be validated, because they can be tested in practice. If theory can transform practice, then it can be tested in the quality of the practice it informs. What makes a theory right is that it brings practice out in the clear; that its adoption makes possible what is in some sense a more effective practice” (Taylor 1985, 104).

be both a strength and a weakness: on one hand, it is easy to imagine that there are unjust social structures that are so ingrained that few directly affected can recognize their harm. Shouldn’t we count a critique that demonstrates the injustice of those structures as acceptable, nevertheless? On the other hand, if the success of a social critique depends on the reflective responses and choices of those affected, we build respect for their autonomy into the practice of critique. Acceptable feminist social critique, on this view, must be meaningful to the women in whose name it speaks. This is not to say that it must be compatible with everything women say or desire, but that social critique is an adequate tool in a context only if it can reach those whose complaint it allegedly articulates.

What should we say, then, about unjust structures that one cannot convince the affected are problematic or unjust? Are they not unjust? On the view I am exploring, there may be compelling theoretical grounds for claiming that a particular structure is unjust, but a critique based on that theory may nevertheless be less than fully acceptable.¹¹ Theoretical soundness is not all that critical theory aims for. A broad failure by those affected to sign-on to social critique—at least under conditions where they are willing and able to understand it and evaluate it fairly—is defeasible evidence that there is something left out, for example, that some part of the critique needs to be revised. Dissent does not determine that the critique or the values on which it relies are illegitimate, but it does show that it is not functioning as the tool it is designed to be; this may require us to not accept it until after further inquiry to determine what is going wrong.

Although there are appealing features of this approach to acceptability, there is something untoward in saying that a theory is acceptable only if it is (broadly?) accepted. (Are those who initially accept it accepting an unacceptable theory that becomes acceptable only once others have accepted it?) Moreover, whether a theory is broadly accepted may depend on highly contingent issues such as publicity. However, given that there are several criteria on which critique should be judged, and effectiveness or usefulness is only one, it is reasonable to have a variety of evaluative terms that reflect this. As Anderson emphasizes: “. . . there are many goals of scientific inquiry. Multiple goals support multiple grounds for criticizing, justifying, and choosing theories besides truth” (Anderson 1995a, 53). She continues by providing some examples:

- “The theory, although it asserts nothing but truths, may be trivial, insignificant or beside the point: it doesn’t address the contextual interests motivating the question.”

¹¹ Another, perhaps better, option would be to claim that a critique is satisfactory if it could be effective, should more accept it (assuming also that its claims are well-justified and its concepts apt), but unless it is useful to those needing it, it is not fully successful (because it doesn’t have the practical import that successful critique must have).

- The theory "may be biased: it offers an incomplete account, one that pays disproportionate attention to those pieces of significant evidence that incline towards one answer, ignoring significant facts that support rival answers."
- "The theory may be objectionable for trying to answer a question that has illegitimate normative presuppositions."
- The theory may "misconceive the relevant legitimate interests [motivating the inquiry], and thereby classify together phenomena that should be separated or exclude phenomena that should be included in a class."
- The theory may employ a classification "based on illegitimate contextual values and for that reason should be rejected altogether."
- The theory may rely on "methods that foreclose the possibility of discovering that we have certain valuable potentialities or that certain important differences or similarities exist among the subjects being studied" (Anderson 1995a, 53–4).

We might add that even a theory that employs open-ended methods to organize significant truths and apt classifications to answer a legitimate question may still fail to make a substantial difference. It may not achieve broad reflective endorsement. It may not help the cause of social justice. Perhaps what we need is a distinction between an acceptable theory and a (wholly) successful one. A critical theorist not only aims for an acceptable theory that satisfies the various epistemic criteria Anderson outlines (and potentially others as well), but also a successful theory that makes a difference, one that has meaning within a social movement.

There are at least two ways that a critical theory might be acceptable in Anderson's sense and still, in some sense, fail. On one hand, the failure might be purely political: the theory gains reflective endorsement by a significant number of those who have the opportunity to consider it fairly, but it doesn't help the cause for any number of practical reasons; an extreme version could be that the leaders of the movement are killed or imprisoned. On the other hand, the failure might be more epistemic: the theory does not receive reflective endorsement even after opportunities for reflection have been offered. Those who ask the question motivating the inquiry just don't find it illuminating. This suggests that the theory is missing a bridge that allows a shift from seeing the world in one way, to seeing it in another. This "bridge," however, may not be simply a matter of ideas. Charles Taylor suggests:

... we have great difficulty grasping definitions whose terms structure the world in ways which are utterly different from or incompatible with our own. Hence the gap in intuitions doesn't just divide different theoretical positions, it also tends to divide different fundamental options in life. The practical and the theoretical are inextricably joined here. It may not just be that to understand a certain explanation one has to

sharpen one's intuitions, it may be that one has to change one's orientation—if not in adopting another orientation, at least in living one's own in a way which allows for greater comprehension of others. Thus ... there can be a valid response to 'I don't understand' which takes the form, not only 'develop your intuitions,' but more radically 'change yourself.' (Taylor 1985, 54)

This suggests that critique may fail to garner broad endorsement not because the theory itself is unacceptable or because the inquirers are epistemically at fault, but because the social context does not provide for ways of being that are necessary in order to find value in the critique. Social critique is a process of rethinking the practices that we constitute partly through our thinking, of trying out new responses to the world in place of the old responses that have come to seem problematic. The task is to situate ourselves differently in the world, not just to describe it more accurately. Although we can go some way in this direction by thinking and acting in new ways, social conditions may make it rational for one to resist such change (Cudd 2006).

Nevertheless, critique is sometimes fully successful. Clear examples include critical reframings of marital rape, domestic violence, hate speech, and sexual harassment. These are cases in which feminist critique has been incorporated into law. But social critique is not always a legal matter (though relevant legal permissibility or impermissibility must be ensured). There are valuable critiques of just about any contemporary practice, for example, the care economy (Folbre 2002; Kittay 1998), mass incarceration (Alexander 2010; McLennan 2008), reproductive freedom (Roberts 1997), aesthetic/cosmetic surgery (Heyes 2007), pornography (MacKinnon 1987; Langton 2009), disability (Wendell 1996), the American diet (Roberts 2009; Pollan 2008), consumerism (Schor 1999), militarism (Enloe 2007), orientalism (Said 1978), the social contract (Mills 1997; Mills and Pateman 2007), race (Appiah 1996), gender (Butler 1990), gender/race (Alcoff 2006), and sex (MacKinnon 1989; Fausto-Sterling 2000), to mention just a tiny sample. This just is so much of what feminist and antiracist intellectuals do. And success should not only be gauged by political progress towards justice. Even if social justice is a only a distant hope, not to be achieved in our lifetime, and social change only minimal, we can gain much through clarity about our current circumstances: we become more aware of the injustices in which we participate; we can identify and perform acts of resistance; and our attitudes, for example, of sadness, regret, celebration, remorse, and frustration, are better attuned to the reality that warrants them.¹²

The title of the book, *Resisting Reality*, is intentionally ambiguous. On one hand, it reflects a common resistance to recognizing the reality of the social

¹² Thanks to Kate Manne for pointing out how having our attitudes attuned to the injustice around us is valuable even if there is little hope for change.

world and the tendency of theorists, in particular, to opt for an anti-realist approach to social categories such as race. I reject this approach and argue throughout for the reality of social structures and the political importance of recognizing this reality. On the other hand, given that much of the (very real) social world consists of unjust social structures, I think this reality must be resisted. Another theme in the book is that one of the main goals of social constructionism is to lay bare the mechanisms by which social structures are formed and sustained so that we are better positioned to locate the levers for social change. We should not resist seeing the reality that we should, in fact, resist; in fact, disclosing that reality is a crucial precondition for successful resistance.

Originally I intended this book to be a monograph developing an overarching argument. It now seems best to publish it as a collection of essays with closely interconnected themes. Part of what made a monograph difficult was the issue of audience. I have had in mind multiple audiences to whom different parts of the book speak more or less directly: students interested in social theory, feminists and anti-racists in a broad range of disciplines, analytic philosophers, legal theorists and policy makers, adoption advocates, perhaps a few non-academic activists who can tolerate my academic prose. Given the range of audiences, there will certainly be parts where each of you feels left out of the discussion. And there will be parts where you can't believe I have ignored a literature you are familiar with and, perhaps, even contributed to. I apologize. I wish I could have researched more, said more, understood more. I hope if you keep reading there will be a thread drawing you back in and insight to make it worthwhile.

It is a rare book that has "timeless" value. But especially because of the nature of the project, my hope is that this book will be, at best, useful for a while, and will then become obsolete as our social conditions and narrative resources evolve. What you'll find is my effort to sustain a delicate balancing act—balancing race and gender; agents and structures; bodies and subjectivities; material realities and cultural interpretations. In the end, there may be a great crash as the edifice topples of its own weight, but there is something valuable to be learned from giving attention to these various elements. It is my hope that although methodologically I'm deeply entrenched in philosophy, my arguments will speak across disciplines, and will provide resources for us to work together, at least in the short run, towards greater justice.

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PART ONE

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION