



THE PERSONAL IS PROBLEMATIC: FEMINIST POLITICS, THE POST-TRUTH ERA, AND THE CULTURE WARS

by Shelley Budgeon

Culture Wars Papers, no. 17, September 2022

Perhaps no statement is as foundational to Western feminism as “the [personal is political](#).” In the early days of the women’s liberation movement, women were able—by sharing their personal accounts of the sexism they encountered in their daily lives—to critically analyze and understand the systematic nature of patriarchal social structures. Incidents that had previously been discounted as idiosyncratic, isolated, or private were transformed into visible manifestations of gender inequality. Taken collectively, these experiences revealed a truth about oppressive gender relations and established a point of departure for feminist politics.

The personal acquired significant epistemological status in the conjunction of experience, reality, and truth. Campaigns such as #MeToo illustrate how sharing and chronicling personal experience continues to ground highly visible feminist politics, often in the face of resistance to the claims women make about their experiences. In the era of “post-truth” politics, opposition to feminism is materializing in novel forms of repudiation that acquire their force from a set of dynamics presently shaping the social, cultural, and political landscape.

Women’s claims about the sexism they have experienced have become a renewed site of cultural contestation. Not only is the veracity of their claims subjected to intense to public scrutiny, but attempts are also made to *personally* discredit those women who speak out. This is taking place in a context defined by the rise of conservative and authoritarian populist attacks on gender as “ideological” and an animosity toward feminism animated by the claim that society is now biased in favor of women. The phrase “I Believe Her,” which has been used to confront rape myths that seek to undermine victims of sexual violence, simply yet forcefully identifies where the battle lines are being drawn in the gendered politics of the post-truth era.

In this paper, I argue that existing feminist scholarship should be revisited to find strategies for defending women’s experience as a source of critical knowledge about the workings of patriarchy. To fight against populist anti-feminist claims, these strategies must avoid locating truth within individuals as an unmediated essence or alternatively treating women’s claims as one of many competing versions of reality.

The Epistemology of the Personal

Since the women’s liberation movement first identified experience as both a source of critical knowledge and the basis for political subjectivity, feminist theory has formalized distinctive [epistemological approaches](#) to justify claims of truth about patriarchal gender relations and the structure of the social world.

[Foundational theories](#) privilege the authoritative perspective of women by arguing that *as women*, they have certain physical, emotional, psychological, and social experiences that give rise to a differential gendered capacity for knowing reality compared to men. Feminine ways of knowing—characterized by emotion, embodiment, and interconnectedness—contrast with the disembodied, dispassionate rationality associated with masculinity. This privileged access to knowledge is rooted in inherently feminine qualities, such as the nurturing instinct, or develops out of those social practices that constitute the private sphere, such as caregiving and affective relationality. On this view, taking women’s experiences as the point of departure for analysis of social relations therefore gives rise to knowledge that is more objective and perceptive of the nature of reality than that produced by men, who, as a dominant group, cannot see it because they have a vested interest in maintaining their privilege.

By contrast, [anti-foundational approaches](#) dismantle the view that external, objective reality can be known by an autonomous subject who stands outside of the social. Instead, because knowledge emerges from partial social locations, there can be no universal or transhistorical truth. This perspective draws attention to the social relations through which knowledge is produced. That which becomes understood as “true” is the effect of a struggle over the “fixing” of a particular, historically contingent representation of the world. [Postmodern principles](#) have provided feminism with further tools for challenging the kinds of supposedly objective and value-free “truths” that have been produced about women and their role in society but have also required the epistemological status of personal experience as a direct and unmediated way of knowing to be reconsidered.

These approaches are important to revisit because the problem of justifying feminist analyses is particularly salient today. Feminism has acquired mainstream currency through its visible presence across a range of sites, including global women’s marches, campaigns for reproductive rights, and hashtag activism. The centrality of the personal to these campaigns demonstrates the enduring significance of drawing on women’s experience as a strategy for connecting the individual with the collective in order to expose the systematic structure of social injustice. Hashtag movements are an example of political acts that work to circulate information about women’s experiences on a wider scale and provide a significant counter to the perpetuation of [testimonial injustice](#)—a harm that occurs when a speaker’s account is denied credibility and their status as a competent speaker challenged. The visibility of feminism is, however, also fueling the distorted logic of post-truth rhetoric, thereby fostering a climate in which women’s claims are met with resistance and outright misogynistic aggression.

The term “post-truth” has become a shorthand descriptor for a series of socio-political transformations that have led to a [reconstruction of norms](#) used to justify knowledge claims. The attachment of value to personal belief over fact-based, objective evidence has led to a form of relativism that demands that perspectives that have limited credence be accorded equal recognition to those with greater factual grounding. Furthermore, post-truth rhetoric calls for authoritative status to be given to “normal” individuals who are incited to speak the “truth” of their own authentic experience, which is valorized as common sense. A suspicion of elites, established authorities, and minority groups is driving this transformation, as these groups are seen to have been granted a [privileged](#) position that they do not deserve.

While experientially based assertions of personal truth have acquired heightened epistemological significance, this feature of the post-truth environment does not extend to claims regarding women’s experience of oppression. Their repudiation is driven by anti-feminist sentiment consistent with the logic driving post-truth cultural politics. There is an affinity between [post-truth norms and populism](#), as the latter also rejects the fundamental principles of democratic communication, including fact-based, reasoned debate and tolerance—essential elements of a thriving public sphere in globalized and multicultural societies. Anti-feminist misogyny and toxic masculinity [anchor](#) populist conservatism by providing a focal point for the socio-political anxieties experienced by diverse constituencies. Unification against the perceived threat of gender ideology offers a

platform for marshalling broad-based support against liberal progressive perspectives and carrying out a wider [assault](#) on critical knowledge.

Anti-Feminism

Two key components of anti-feminist discourse mobilize populist standpoints and serve to undermine the claims women make regarding gender issues. First is the contention that societies have been reconfigured into “femocracies” that explicitly—and systematically—favor women’s interests over those of men. In this reformulation of gender hierarchy, masculinity is reconstituted as a site of injury ensured by the operation of extensive misandry and the widespread normalization of male victimhood. Second is the assertion that feminism threatens to destabilize the social order by redefining natural sexual difference as socially constructed. This “gender ideology” materializes in a series of reforms, including sexual citizenship debates, LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive rights, and sex and gender education, all of which are fiercely opposed by anti-gender activists. This [discourse aligns](#) feminism with a perceived “liberal elite” who seek to advance their own interests and consolidate power.

In this narrative, the imposition of gender ideology is not about knowledge but is rather a central plank in a wider plot to seize power and impose deviant, minority values on ordinary people. Anti-gender activists claim they are defending what “normal” people really want—for example, for women to have the “right” to embrace conventional femininity, or for “natural” heterosexual flirtation in the workplace to continue without undue anxiety and confusion about men’s roles. These two components of anti-feminist discourse—that feminism has manufactured a biased system that routinely victimizes men, and that there exists a conspiracy amongst feminism to undermine “natural” gender roles and consolidate power—anchor post-truth populism and create several epistemological problems for the role of personal experience in feminist critique.

Defending Feminist Claims

Foundational epistemologies, which argue that feminine attributes give rise to a differential gendered capacity for knowing reality, and anti-foundational approaches, which emphasize that what is known is a partial “truth,” or one of multiple socially constructed narratives, prove limited due to the ways post-truth knowledge norms operate in conjunction with anti-feminist discourse. The first norm to examine is how the expression of feeling is valorized over rational argument. Populism endorses a set of “[feeling rules](#)” that reformulate the definition of “truth” and encourage people to free themselves from liberal notions of what they *should* feel in order to express what they *actually* feel is their own truth. The presence of deeply felt emotion signals that there is a truth that needs to be told regardless of the dictates of political correctness. This creates a strong sense of belonging to a like-minded majority driven by an emotive sensation of empowerment.

Within the logic of feeling rules, emotion as a source of truth, is gendered in a wholly different way. No longer feminized, emotion is a resource commanded by masculinity in ways previously unavailable. Therefore, the assertion that emotion, in opposition to male reason, can serve as a foundation for women’s claim to know the truth is weakened by the contention that male pain and suffering are expressions of *authentic evidence* that society is now structured by reverse sexism and male disadvantage. This articulation of male victimhood is present across numerous [online spaces](#), such as antimisandry.com, which solicits men to tell their stories of the systematic oppression and hatred they have experienced, while the [#HimToo campaign](#) has sought to redirect concern away from men as perpetrators of harassment and recognize men as the victims of false allegations in sexual harassment cases. In this discourse, men are the “real” victims because they are systematically made vulnerable by a culture that privileges women’s claims while silencing men. The consequent depth and intensity of feeling is deployed by many men’s rights groups as the basis for making anti-feminist claims and defending misogynist views. Evidently, therefore, in the era of post-truth populism, it is problematic to assert that

emotion, as a uniquely feminine capacity, should be afforded epistemic supremacy over masculine rational argument.

Aspects of anti-foundationalist epistemology also prove limited in this context, particularly in relation to the deconstruction of naturalized sexual difference, which is central to feminist theories of gender. In the 1980s [postmodernism](#) provided principles that could be used to critique the vestiges of old patriarchal and imperialist justifications for the white male advantage that was entrenched within Enlightenment ideals. These included the refutation of disinterested objectivity, the rejection of a singular truth, and the recognition that reality is not merely represented by language but constituted through opposing narratives vying for cultural dominance. While for feminism this meant that personal experience could no longer be justified as making *a direct link* to an objective external reality, it did allow for many aspects of the social world previously understood as objective to be rethought as effects of representation. Significantly, naturalized sexual difference was reformulated as a socially constructed ideology that served male interests. Such insights facilitated an anti-establishment critique by revealing a link between power and knowledge.

In [post-truth](#) populism, critiques of the establishment are increasingly expressed by the Right through the co-optation of anti-foundationalist principles once predominantly associated with the Left. This shift involves a somewhat incongruous appropriation of schools of thought that in the past would have been denounced by the Right as the esoteric domain of an elitist academia, a category into which feminist theory would certainly fall. Many of these principles—chief among them the insight that knowledge, far from being disinterested, is linked to [power](#)—are deployed selectively to advance populist claims.

This is illustrated primarily by the struggle over definitions of gender. Feminist and queer activists radically dislodged the concept of gender from its normative descriptive origins and repurposed the term as an analytical tool that could reveal how “natural” sexual difference was the product of androcentric norms and patriarchal institutions. Anti-gender ideologues now harness the power-knowledge relationship to argue that institutionalized feminism seeks to impose this version of gender, taught in gender studies courses, on average people as part of a conspiracy aimed at seizing power through the imposition of deviant and minority values.

Describing gender as a form of ideological colonization creates the impression that feminism and LGBTQ+ activists are pursuing a consolidation of power at the expense of the status quo. [Anti-gender rhetoric](#) is therefore an epistemological response to emancipatory claims about sex, gender, and sexuality, as well as a political strategy used to limit associated policy developments. Where feminist epistemology once argued that the perspective of the powerful could not be objective because of self-interest, anti-gender activists now turn this logic against the femocracy.

Defending Feminist Critique

While post-truth culture is riven by deeply felt disagreement about what can be said, what can be known, and the relative status of competing claims, feminist epistemology must continue to put forward a defense of women’s personal experiences, upon which feminist political action is based. Although problematic for the reasons explored here, it remains the case that personal experiences patently reveal something significant about the gendered structure of daily life that otherwise would not be understood. For feminism, the enduring [epistemological status](#) given to the conjunction of personal experience, reality, and truth can be made defensible by implementing well-developed, longstanding theoretical frameworks developed by feminist theorists that allow for sophisticated critical analysis of the gender order. Therefore, notwithstanding claims that the reversal of sexism is producing a state of male victimhood or that feminism is pursuing an ideological conspiracy via sex education programs—which have an inflection distinctive to the emergence of post-truth politics—the task for feminist theory remains unchanged. For that reason, and in conclusion, it is useful to revisit existing feminist scholarship to map a way through the post-truth populist landscape.

Long before the term “post-truth” entered our vocabulary, feminism had already developed a critique of the essentialist tendencies associated with arguments for distinctly feminine ways of knowing on the grounds that these can lead to the assumption that truth is located within individuals as an [unmediated essence](#). This problem is now central to ways post-truth norms operate. When personal experience is taken at face value as giving direct and unmediated access to truth, there is no way to evaluate the claims being made; truth is that which the individual directly feels and experiences as reality. By adopting poststructuralist principles, feminism moved the emphasis away from the specific attributes of the person making a knowledge claim—as in feminine ways of knowing—to the question of what can be known. This strategy draws attention to the act of knowing as a social process mediated by socio-cultural factors while avoiding the excessive relativism that results when multiple versions of the social world are treated as equal but different perspectives. Following on from this insight, cognition—or the *act* of knowing—may be analyzed as a [human practice](#) that is theoretically mediated.

In this approach, personal [experience](#) remains central to feminism’s claims—not as the authoritative origin of “truth,” but as that which we seek to explain by means of reason, evidence, and fact-based analysis. This framing identifies a course that may be charted between dismissing experience as unable to produce perfect knowledge, on the one hand, and saying that experience can only tell us various stories, on the other hand. When feminist critique takes women’s experience as a starting point for its analysis of the social world, the legitimacy and value of these accounts rests upon the capacity of feminist theory to explain the structure of social relations, to develop robust analyses that expose the weaknesses of alternative interpretations, and to debate arguments that oppose feminist positions. Its force comes not from a privileged standpoint, but from the strength of rational argument and a systematic demonstration of the deficiencies of alternative explanations.

In a “post-fact” world, feminist theory disputes contested claims about gender relations—such as the view that society is increasingly institutionally biased against men due to femocratic dominance—by responding with a systematic argument based upon facts. Unlike “truths” that are defended by a set of “feeling rules,” which uphold claims because they are authentically experienced as true, “a fact is a theoretically constituted proposition, supported by theoretically mediated evidence and put forward as part of a [theoretical formulation](#) of reality.”

The frameworks developed by feminist scholars allow us to understand how experience is produced and, moreover, allow for the critical assessment of specific experiences as a [response to relativism](#). For instance, when allegations are made, as in the case of sexual misconduct, the victim’s account is likely to be partial. Human cognition is unavoidably so. Yet the impossibility of transcending our social location does not mean that we cannot establish objective grounds for adjudicating claims. It does not mean that partial views are inescapably biased or that all partial views must be granted the same status. Some can be found to be false, distorted, or erroneous.

Conclusion

In the climate of post-truth populism, the various contestations that emerge around gender issues are struggles over different types of knowledge and truths in a world where mobilization against feminism is serving as a focus for disparate groups who stand, more generally, in opposition to liberal values, democratic norms, and multicultural diversity. The project of feminist theory is to continue to provide tools to analyze the conditions under which “truth” can be claimed—not because truth arises out of unmediated personal experience or because all versions of reality matter, but because the claims that can be made (and that which can be known) continue to be a social process that is theoretically mediated.