

PHL 245

2nd paper

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A two-tiered analysis of the outsider within's relationship to the construction of race

I argue that Patricia Hill Collins' outsider-within standpoint is both unnecessary and insufficient for the prospect of rearticulating paradigmatic sociological methods in order to more precisely describe the sociological conditions of the typically oppressed and underrepresented. Collins points out that Black feminist thought is receptive to what would otherwise be considered anomalies to normal or typical (white male) sociological thinkers. This may be so, but in Kuhnian terms, the sort of receptive capabilities the Black feminist standpoint indicates are critical and not candidates for assimilation. It is not possible for the current paradigm to be rearticulated or refined according to the anomalies that Collins points out are indicative of and are indicated by the development of a particularly Black feminist standpoint. Kuhnian philosophy of science provides three possible outcomes to the onset of crisis, in which the community can: set the crisis-provoking anomalies aside due to a lack of methodological and conceptual tools; refine or rearticulate the existing paradigm, which amounts to reducing the anomalies to puzzles; or abandon the paradigm completely and adopt a new one—one which structures a fundamentally different grammar.

My preliminary charge is to show how the third possibility is the only real possibility with respect to a sociological paradigm conducive to accurate descriptions of the distinctly Black feminist standpoint. Collins maintains that a synthesis is possible, whereby current sociologists would learn to adopt the methods and the contents of what is observed or theorized in Black feminist theories. I argue that this is not at all possible, that doing so would amount to a paradigm completely incommensurable with what is now identified as the paradigmatic way of doing sociology. Because Collins' view calls for assimilation and synthesis of what amounts to data that is fundamentally at odds with the sociology that her 'inside self' is somewhat familiar with, her view fails to be a

critique in the most robust sense of the word. However, the Kuhnian assessment only gets us so far: at the least, it shows that there is a discrepancy between Collins' ambitions for a science of the social, and the type-anomalies she urges non-standpoint sociologists to consider. However, a discussion of the importance of this discrepancy cannot be explained with the tools of Kuhnian philosophy of science. Whereas Collins' view is prescriptive and normative, Charles Mills' view in *The Racial Contract* is sufficiently critical to warrant the label "critique" and provides the conceptual tools necessary for talking to race itself, something Collins' "insider-within" view cannot provide. Thus, after using the tools of Kuhnian philosophy of science to show that Collins' view fails to articulate a novel paradigm for sociology, I will invoke Mills' critique of social theory itself as a means for discussing the social, moral, and historical implications of the outsider-within's inability to reconcile a distinctly Black feminist standpoint with a sociological paradigm that, according to Mills, systematically substitutes discussions of racial subjects with an atomic sense of the meaning of 'subject' that originated in modernity's production of social contract theory. In particular, Mills' view talks to the framework upon which contemporary racism was made possible (it explains the *grammar* from which sociological paradigms situate both non-whites and whites as "atomic subjects") and uncovers the *intentionality* of social contract theory, as intending "man as citizen" as "white man as citizen" AND "non-white as sub-human." Among other things, my *use* of Mills' view as a way to explain the particular failures of Collins' outsider-within theory will hopefully make clear the all-important distinction between *normativity* (despite her intentions, Collins' view) and *critique* (Mills' view). Finally, a way to lend sense to my intention in doing this: I am using Kuhn's terminology to point to the *fact* that the outsider-within is more normative than one might suspect, and I am then using Mills' view to explain *how that could be* and *what that indicates* on the level of morals.

I will invoke a two-leveled assessment of Collins' view: tier one will be a Kuhnian assessment and it will show that Collins' view fails to be a critique in the robust sense and correspondingly fails to frame the type-anomalies that she (nonetheless) is so keen in pointing out; tier two will explain the social and historical significance of this discrepancy, and will show that the failure of sociology to acknowledge standpoint theorists is neither accidental nor open for discussion as an anomaly that can be 'fixed';

rather it shows that racism, in an important sense of the word, is necessary for society to work in the way Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment social contract theory has described.

I.

For the purposes of discussion, I will present the aspects of Kuhn's philosophy of science most crucial and most relevant to my present charge. I will then represent Collins' view in light of my interpretation of Kuhn, and show how her view fails to afford a viable outcome under the present conditions of systematic and multi-leveled oppression present not only in society itself but also in our theorizing about sociology. One of the important aspects of this latter claim is the fact that sociological theories are not candidates for the kind of functional analysis the life and physical sciences assumes in practice.

On the level of productive language, I do not think it is plausible to call Collins' view a critique at all. Simply put, the most critical sort of critique is that involving the production of a new grammar which modifies and structures concepts and their objects in a way incommensurable to the grammar typical of theories characterized by their membership to a paradigm. Before getting to Collins' critique, which is not a critique in the strong sense, it is necessary to invoke the conception of paradigm in a way analogous to the way I will use it.

I mean paradigm in a way similar to, though more extreme than, the Kuhnian sense of paradigm. Kuhn's varied use of the concept muddles its function in scientific theory, but it can be recast in relatively simple terms. Essentially, the notion of paradigm indicates the shared functional organization that relates theories according to types or ways of doing a particular sort of discourse in a particular discipline. The functional identity of the paradigm expresses itself in three critical ways:

- (1) the appropriation of conceivable questions;
- (2) the appropriation of the methodology to answer those questions;
- (3) the appropriation of acceptable outcomes to those questions.

Thus, theory P and theory Q are theories of the same paradigm if they satisfy the above requirements/conditions in more or less coherent ways.¹ Recall that during a state of crisis, a theory that resists the grammar of the current paradigm can be a candidate for a new paradigm. That said, theories can become paradigms, and theories are subsumed under paradigms, but the two are not identical. My use of the two terms reflects this distinction. Moreover, the mark of a science is the mark of a universal paradigm: Kuhn maintains that the social sciences and the humanities cannot be identified with one paradigm per discipline, quite unlike the harder sciences, which (in a normal state) can be identified as having one paradigm. If true, then to hold to the prospect of establishing a hard science of sociology, in the sense of a unified science of sociology with universal standards, seems to be holding out for little promise. Collins proposes reforms to the discipline of sociology: she maintains that sociological theories could benefit from the acceptance of theorists coming from an “outsider-within perspective,” notably with respect to the prospect of theorizing about underrepresented, systematically oppressed groups. She characterizes the outsider-within in many ways, but the particular instantiation of the outsider-within offered by Black feminist thinkers plays the primary role in motivating her methodological and conceptual criticisms of sociology: for instance, that white males are studied the most, that “dichotomous oppositional thinking is natural and normal” (118-19). In developing what she takes to be some of the major threads tying Black feminist thought, (i.e., self-definition, self-valuation, and the awareness of the interlocking nature of oppression), Collins situates both the function and the conceptual import of “the insider-within as Black feminist sociologist.” Essential to the functional situation of Black female scholars in this discipline is the fact that “where traditional sociologists may see sociology as normal and define their role as furthering knowledge about a normal world with taken-for-granted assumptions, outsiders within are liable to see anomalies” (Collins 119). According to Collins, there is a causally binary association between the direction of Black feminist thought and this receptivity to anomaly: the types of anomalies seen (one, that Black female sociologists report facts otherwise omitted; two, that Black female sociologists individuate the subjects they observe in ways more conducive to the social group the subjects themselves identify

¹ That is, the way P satisfies the three conditions is at the least not inconsistent or mutually exclusive with respect to the way Q satisfies the three conditions.

with) are caused by the particular standpoint Black outside-within women occupy; the types of anomalies seen also “appear central in shaping the direction Black feminist thought has taken thus far,” which seems to indicate that type-anomalies also cause, and are not merely effects of, the way Black feminist thought develops.

But what does this situating amount to? I am not sure, because I am not sure I understand how the receptivity to anomalies relates to the development of this standpoint. If in fact the relationship here is *causally* binary, then I am confused: A and B cannot be both causes and effects of one another unless they are causes and effects in virtue of distinct *background conditions*. For example, A is the cause of B with respect to a third-person explanation of the relationship of A to B, but perhaps B is the cause of A with respect to a first-person explanation of the relationship of A to B. This typically happens in psychological theories. But the point I’m trying to make here is that what’s required is a formulation of *distinct levels of explanation*, and I’m not sure Collins’ view affords that. If and only if p: ‘the types of anomalies Black women see “grow directly from Black women’s outsider within status” and if q: ‘the types of anomalies typically seen “appear central in shaping the direction Black feminist thought has taken thus far,” then r: type-anomalies are the cause of Black women’s outsider within status on the level of explanation R, and type-anomalies are the effect of Black women’s outsider within status on the level of explanation T. Of course, *positing the form* of the level involved does nothing to *fill in the gaps in content*. That is why I am not sure what to make of the causal relationship(s) constituting the receptivity to type-anomalies and the development of Black women’s outsider within status. Perhaps the relationship is not causal, in which case perhaps the two are indicative of one another in some sense. The presence of the reception of type-anomalies indicates the development of the standpoint of Black feminist women.

If we run with this, then we are saying: “Ok, the way our current paradigm is set up is not allowing us to sufficiently answer questions we want to conceive answers to. Notably, we cannot describe accurately the lives of Black females under these conditions. We will restructure our sociological paradigm according to the relationships between, on the one hand, the types of anomalies Black feminist theorists are disposed to perceive, and, on the other hand, the development of the distinctly Black feminist standpoint.” I think Hill’s construction of the relationship discussed above indicates essentially this

point: there is a relation between the ability of the insider-within to perceive anomalies and the development of a distinctly Black feminist thought, and yet the current paradigm in sociology is unable to articulate or even recognize this relationship at all!

As I said, Hill expresses concern over the breakdown in sociology over the development of a distinctly Black feminist line of thought, but it is clear also that she wants sociology to address these and related issues through acknowledgement of the insider-within status. In order to see how reasonable this campaign is, one must look to the ambitions of a view of sociology that conditions the sense of ‘sociology is a science’ in particular ways. What I think Hill and others have in mind is that the sense of science in “sociology is a science” intends the theory-methodology sense of science as the discipline that breaks down phenomena functionally, which is quite akin to *breaking down the concepts we use to point to phenomena* according to the functional conditions we think those concepts are organized in accordance with. (Think: the functional analysis of the concept “gravity”: gravity is the warping of space-time; the attraction between two massive objects is the result of the way those masses conjointly bend the region of space-time in which their association is said to occur). As I said much earlier, paradigms, among other things, dictate the structure (the grammar, the rules) of the concepts we use: they appropriate the acceptable way to structure concepts (and subsequently the theories which use those concepts). Collins very much wants a sociological paradigm capable of “producing accurate descriptions of Black women’s lives” (Collins 120). This amounts to a sociology that individuates the meaning of descriptions of Black women’s lives according to functional desiderata, and if it didn’t, then I would argue that it wouldn’t be appropriate to view sociology as a science. The question becomes a question of the possibility of reconciliation: Are what her criticisms point to as failures of the current paradigm reconcilable with the aspiration of yielding a paradigm that makes sociology describable as a science?

Not really, for two important reasons. First, sociological theories, as her account so aptly indicates, are as constructive of the referents their concepts point to as they are indicative of the phenomena themselves. Second, assuming that the current sociological paradigm (the one constituted by members that are mostly white males, the one precluding the possibility of studying normal subjects as black women, et cetera) indicates the systematic and interlocking oppression Collins so keenly picks out, then the

synthesis of “outsiders within sociology” is neither necessary nor sufficient for the aforementioned stipulations.

A theory of the distinctly black feminist standpoint would not fit the grammar of the current but oppressive sociological paradigm. To be sure, one doing black feminist standpoint science would be doing something incommensurable with respect to the current sociological paradigm, assuming that, as Collins posits, black feminists are receptive to anomalies to which normal sociological theories are blind.² Kuhn discusses three possible outcomes for the community that recognizes anomalies to its current paradigm. Two of the three possible outcomes seem inappropriate given how systematically ignorant the current sociological paradigm is with respect to minority and oppressed groups. Collins goal is not realizable because it is akin to saying (on a *conceptual* level, not an ethical one!), “Well, Newtonians see the world differently from those who have switched to the paradigm of Relativistic Physics, but they may have something to offer. Maybe we can still be Newtonian in certain respects and Relativistic in others; maybe there’s something to salvage here.” There cannot be anything to salvage, for the kind of anomalies present to the eye of a Black feminist thinker is critically anomalous; it marks the end of the sociological paradigm which normalizes what counts as a subject according to the “subject as white male subject.” It is not the case that a black feminist thinker sees the same object as the traditional sociologist; rather, they see different objects, they respond to different worlds. Their research activity is *responsive to different worlds*. As Gestalt psychology has demonstrated, you can’t see both the duck and the rabbit at the same time.

The only way a sociological theory will give an accurate account of what it is like to be a black feminist thinker, or just a black feminist, is if it adopts a new paradigm that is fundamentally incommensurable with the current one. In this instance, it is not a matter of articulation. Thus, it is not a matter of synthesis, since synthesis implies the old way of doing sociology will couple with the new way, and will yield something which answers the anomalies present in the observation-statements of those who currently perceive anomaly where others see something in the realm of normalcy.

² Therefore, we assume the failure for non-standpoint theorists/non-insider-within theorists to recognize anomalies of the sort Collins points out is equally a failure of theory as it is of theorist.

If all this is true, what can be really learned in sociology from the outsider-within perspective? Or is the concept of the outsider-within itself a bizarre concept? I am not really sure, but it does not seem necessary to attack the outsider-within concept, since what it indicates already seems to be critically at odds with what is currently paradigmatic in sociology. How can a community “learn” from a position fundamentally at odds with the way in which the community regularly or normally *thinks* according to the paradigm of their discourse? Learning would amount to abandoning, which is hardly a synthesis at all. The other alternative is that Collins may accurately point out *that* there are anomalies to which normal sociology cannot receive, but that the way she describes, articulates, and explains the anomalies is not as anomalies, but simply as puzzles which the current sociological paradigm can solve. If that is the case, what exactly is the point of a critique? As I said before, I am not really sure how it is a critique at all.

II.

The question of what it means to be a critique of race takes one from a discussion in the epistemology of science (Kuhn fits nicely here) to a moral discussion of the philosophy of race: the moral critique of that epistemology. To answer the question, “What does the Kuhnian assessment of the failure of Hills’ view to yield a new paradigm indicate about the necessary conditions for something to be a critique of race at all?”, one must discuss the moral implications of an epistemic position (the current sociological paradigm) which neither acknowledges the type-anomalies Hill describes as part of the experience of being a Black feminist theorist nor explains how that failure is both socially and morally significant.

What I mean to say is, a Kuhnian assessment of this situation is satisfactory for *pointing out* the irreconcilability of the ambition for a science of the social that, as Collins points out, such a discourse has historically failed, and continues to fail, to acknowledge.³ But such an assessment leaves out the *stakes* of the issue; that is, it cannot speak to the importance of the fact that where there is a science of the social, there is a failure to

³ Again, sociology fails to acknowledge, among other things, the ability of the insider-within to detect type-anomalies and the presence of that ability’s relationship with the development of a distinctly Black feminist thought.

acknowledge the progression of a distinctly Black feminist standpoint and the relationship of that standpoint to the observation of type-anomalies amongst members of that standpoint. Thus far, the assessment can be meaningfully labeled as a philosophy of science assessment, but the sorts of questions that assessment raises alongside Hills' view require the discussion to move to a much different place. The threads that tie together the notion of the racial contract, as articulated in Mills' book, open up new ways for explaining the intentionality of a way of theorizing about race that Collins' view cannot conceive.

The reason Mills' Racial Contract affords one the tools to shift the discussion in this way, or rather, to take the discussion to a level that the philosophy of science cannot penetrate, is because Mills demonstrates exactly what Collins' view failed to yield: a critique in the most robust sense. Whereas Collins' view traces responsibility for acknowledging the development of a Black feminist way of thinking from the outsider-within's perception of type-anomaly to a reconstruction of sociology, Mills' view penetrates the system itself: "There is obviously all the difference in the world between saying the system is basically sound despite some unfortunate racist deviations, and saying that the polity is racially structured, the state white-supremacist, and races themselves significant existents that an adequate political ontology needs to accommodate" (Mills, 123-124). Collins' view affords the acknowledgement that there is a critical level of anomalies in sociology: namely and at the least, the ones reported by those in the outsider-within status. Nevertheless, implicit in Collins' criticism is the possibility of reconstructing sociology to remain a science in the most basic sense. The difference between Collins' view and Mills' is rather like the difference between saying "you're not paying attention to the right thing; I'm talking about x, not y!" and "your whole system of attention is flawed, you're not even paying attention." The fact that Collins calls the problems she raises "anomalies" only for those theorists that do not occupy a particular standpoint implies a normative with respect to non-standpoint theorists that is consistent with the contract's call for diversity with (relatively) stable division of power; that is, just because x and y are observation statements that are anomalous with respect to the observation statements of white theorists in a given discourse does not necessitate a problem for the discourse since the discourse, as an institution made possible by the racial contract, is concerned with the division of power.

Where Mills critiques the very concern of the contract in calling our attention to the conjunction of the requirement of diversity and the stability of power, Collins, in addressing the discrepancies of sociology and Black feminist thinkers in the rhetoric of “anomalies that must be observed by white theorists” nevertheless presumes that it is possible for these “anomalies” to be corrected within a community of thinkers that can easily be composed of diverse “standpoints” while maintaining a relatively unchanging power scheme.

This is not the case with Mills. Mills urges first and foremost that we recognize our democratic institutions as maintaining a systemic racism that is necessary to its operation: it is not just a critical mass of anomalies that requires our attention. More importantly, it is surely not just sociology or academia which is plagued in this sort of thinking; the racial contract extends throughout the totality of contemporary western society, from the public discourse of the constitution to the private affairs of Americans talking about “the Black people” in the “wild” of the city. To say that the brands of racism produced in society are correctable mistakes is to hold faith in a system that necessarily produced it, according to Mills. Collins’ observation that “...many Black feminists appear to be...embracing the creative potential of their outsider within status and using it wisely” seems unable to effect a move for themselves “and their disciplines closer to the humanist vision implicit in their work” (122). To embrace the creative potential of a particular standpoint that is structured according to system-wide power relations between whites and non-whites is itself neither necessary nor sufficient for opposing those power relations since the act of embracing is only done at (what the racial contract constructs as) the subhuman level.

The problem is not that we fail to theorize about non-whites, but rather that our theories take non-whites to be sub-human. Thus, Collins’ prescription to find a way to include the outsider-within (the sub-human without, human within?) mistakes the location of responsibility, placing it on a discourse (sociology) that developed in correspondence with the motivating guideline of scholarship itself; that is, “...to evade and to elide and to skim over” (18). The way in which we normally theorize about non-whites, let’s say in terms of socioeconomic status, is itself a strategy put in place by the system of oppression the racial contract makes possible to avoid and ignore what is going on at the fundamental level. Mills argues that what is going on is not an accident of

history, not some sort of blemish on an otherwise satisfactory democratic model; it is, rather, a feature, in some sense *the* most important feature, of contemporary society. Sociology may theorize about Black females in terms of their marked probability to use cocaine as compared to other drugs and other social groups. Perhaps economists will describe the economic conditions of Black men in a particular US city. They may in fact argue that the local governments should increase expenditures in housing developments in a certain area in light of a particular economic and demographic discrepancy between Caucasians and African-Americans. Mills argues that this sort of thinking is merely conveniently ignoring a discussion of *race*. It is glossing *race* over with economic and social terms that cannot serve a conceptual basis for a discourse that makes basic this fundamental fact: that after all these years, it is not a mistake of history that the US is fundamentally racist. Moreover, this sort of substitution thinking typical in academia presupposes a colorless and atomic individual. This sort of thinking cannot attend to race, since race is a colored concept; conveniently for whites, talk of economic status, per capita income, and even Collins' discussion of type-anomalies, cannot go far enough since it cannot admit that *the system cannot be revised under economic or social conditions*. The only way in which one can morally address the contract and the racist foundations of virtually every institution it structures is for *whites* to satisfy their special role.

Although Mills cannot offer advice for how a given white individual could go about race tyranny, or the process of rejecting the white supremacist nation, it is clear that history offers some hope, though hope must not be mistaken for the prescription of action. During periods of legislative reform, when Blacks formed groups and opposed the legal instantiation(s) of the racial contract, there were whites who supported and aided them. This fact speaks to the possibility that whites have been *concerned*, and while concern alone is not sufficient, it may be a starting place. For Mills, to suppose that civil rights activism "...is sufficient to remedy inequities created on a foundation of several hundred years of racial privilege" is to repeat a mistake-ridden history that liberalism has substituted with the likes of Marxist and Enlightenment views about society, but such activity has only served "the epistemology of ignorance" because it failed to call into question the appearance and reappearance of white power in virtually all social and political institutions (Mills 73). The responsibility of whites cannot be predicated on the

action of non-whites; the responsibility of whites cannot be satisfied through activist groups that are organized and formed by Black members. Collins' prescription of white sociologists opening themselves up to Black feminist sociologists and the particular type-anomalies they perceive can be seen as a step in the right direction, but it is not the responsibility of Black feminist theorists to make their voice heard; rather, the theorists who fail to acknowledge the type-anomalies perceived by the outsider-within must shed the Racial Contract in whatever way they can, and whatever action they take in opposing the contract must come independently, not from pressure from the "outsider-within." It must be achieved through whites, organized by whites, and be the mark of an opposition to the contract itself, not what the contract makes legal, or yields in legislation.

The failure of Collins' view to yield a novel paradigm can be traced, using Mills' notion of the racial contract, back to the necessary conditions of the white-supremacist state: where Collins' view speaks to the type-anomalies perceived by Black feminists, Mills' view points to the necessity of having the anomalies in the first place. Under the racial contract, a necessary condition for the white-supremacist state is the presence of the non-white in "wild spaces." This explains why the notion of the insider-within fails to yield a critique of sociology in the most robust sense. The outsider-within occupies either one space or the other, in Mills' view. The story goes like this, assuming the racial contract: if S is a white, then S's political space is the one typified in sociology's typical theory; S enjoys certain benefits in virtue of occupying a space that is made possible only by the spaces of colored occupants, i.e. wild spaces. One cannot occupy *both* the wild space and the white space at the same time, since the contract necessitates the mutual exclusivity of the one with respect to the other. In this sense, Collins' hope for sociologists to acknowledge the outsider-within seems predicated on a framework that cannot obtain in a society that has been structured according to the racial contract for centuries.

The two-tiered method adopted here has yielded (a) an ostensible characterization of the failure of Collins' outsider-within theory to either produce a new paradigm that takes seriously the type-anomalies she points out or to successfully articulate what the outsider within can do from within contemporary sociological thinking; and (b) the social, moral, and historical implications of the application of Mills' view on the discrepancies showed via the Kuhnian assessment of Collins' view. Most importantly,

the use of the method manifests an important distinction that philosophical treatments must constantly remember: the distinction between a normative theory (characterized by its prescriptive content) and a critique (characterized by its opposition to the standard way of categorizing the sorts of prescriptive claims provided in normative theories).