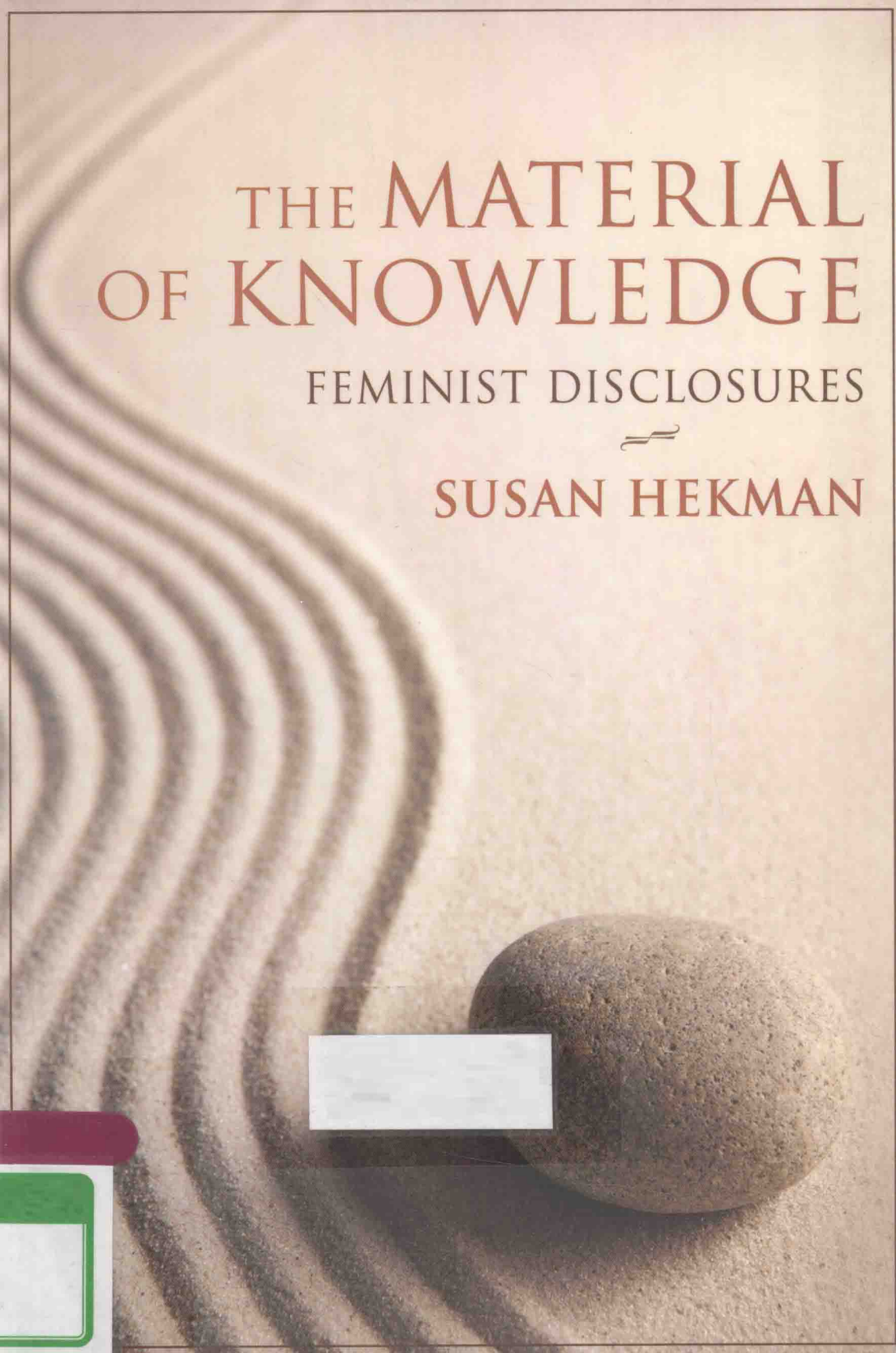
THE MATERIAL OF KNOWLEDGE

FEMINIST DISCLOSURES

SUSAN HEKMAN



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Indiana University Press
Bloomington and Indianapolis

This book is a publication of

Indiana University Press
601 North Morton Street
Bloomington, Indiana 47404-3797 USA

www.iupress.indiana.edu

Telephone orders 800-842-6796
Fax orders 812-855-7931
Orders by e-mail iuporder@indiana.edu

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Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hekman, Susan J.
The material of knowledge : feminist disclosures / Susan Hekman.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-253-35467-9 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-253-22196-4 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Philosophy, Modern—21st century. 2. Civilization, Modern—21st century. 3. Feminist theory. I. Title.
B805.H45 2010
108.2—dc22

2009045455

1 2 3 4 5 15 14 13 12 11 10

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Acknowledgments

This book is an extension of the article published in the volume that I edited with Stacy Alaimo (*Material Feminisms*, Indiana University Press, 2008). I owe an immense debt to Stacy for introducing me to this literature and, in effect, opening up a whole new world. The intellectual and personal interaction between us on this project was truly extraordinary. Both professionally and personally, Stacy has given me an invaluable gift.

During the writing of this book my husband of twenty-five years, Evan (Buzz) Anders, died. Although he never got to see the end result, this book is his in a profound sense. For the years we were together, he inspired and encouraged me in every way imaginable. I miss him deeply.

Stacy Alaimo and Timothy Luke read and commented on an earlier draft of the manuscript. Many thanks to them for helping me improve it. And, finally, thanks go to my equine companions, Justin and Pepper, who gave me love and laughs when I needed it most.

THE MATERIAL OF KNOWLEDGE

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Contents

Acknowledgments, ix

Introduction, 1

1 The First Settlement: Philosophy of Science, 10

2 The Second Settlement: Analytic Philosophy, 27

3 The Third Settlement: Foucault—We Have Never Been Postmodern, 47

4 The Fourth Settlement: Feminism—From Epistemology to Ontology, 65

5 From Construction to Disclosure: Ontology and the Social, 87

Notes, 129

References, 133

Index, 141

Introduction

The first years of the twenty-first century seem to be characterized by events with overwhelming material consequences. Terrorist attacks, tsunamis, hurricanes, tornadoes, and earthquakes dominate the news. The death toll mounts, and we brace ourselves for the next disaster. Commentary on these disasters is certainly not lacking. Yet the commentaries emerging from the academic community are curiously devoid of insight.[1] Since the linguistic turn of the mid-twentieth century, the academic world has been focused on language, and particularly on its constitutive power. Language, it is agreed, constitutes the reality that we as humans inhabit. It constitutes our social world and the structures that define it. It also constitutes the natural world by providing us with concepts that structure that world. We humans, in short, are the creators of all we survey.

Linguistic constructionism, however, has trouble with matter. Did our concepts constitute the tsunami that devastated parts of Asia? Or hurricane Katrina's destruction of New Orleans? Or, even more disturbingly, the attack on

the Twin Towers? The linguistic constructionists tell us that we understand all of these events linguistically and that it is this understanding that constitutes their reality. Yet something is missing in this explanation. Something happened in these events—and by extension all events—that escapes the strictly linguistic. Human and nonhuman entities were destroyed. Lives were lost. Matter manifested itself. It is undoubtedly true that we understand our world linguistically. But what this leaves out is that there is a world out there that we understand. Dogmatic adherence to linguistic constitution cannot account for the reality and agency of that world.

The story I want to tell in this book begins with modernity and the reaction to modernity loosely categorized as linguistic (or social) constructionism. But most importantly, it is a story about where we go from here. As the devastating material events of the last few years have illustrated, we need a new conception to understand the world in which we live. The question I want to explore is what that conception will look like. If we reject modernity and the linguistic constructionism of approaches such as postmodernism, what do we have left? What are our options? What alternatives are left to us to explain a world that escapes our current theoretical approaches? My goal here is not to present a survey of modernity and postmodernism. Rather, it is to present and defend three theses: first, that we are currently witnessing a sea change in intellectual thought; second, that feminism is at the forefront of this sea change; and third, that our goal at this point must be to define an alternative approach that brings the material back in.

The principal characteristic of the sea change we are now witnessing is a reaction against linguistic constructionism. Theorists from across the intellectual spectrum are finding linguistic constructionism inadequate. Specifically, they are finding that linguistic constructionism's loss of the material, its inability to bring the material dimension into theory and practice, its inability to talk about anything except language, imposes an unacceptable constraint on theory. A central aspect of this sea change, however, is the equally strong conviction that we must not return to the approach to the material embodied in modernity. Modernity was all about matter. For modernists the aim of philosophy was to get matter right, to develop concepts that mirror nature. The virtue of linguistic constructionism was to show the error of this approach. Linguistic constructionists revealed that matter and language/discourse are inseparable. They showed that the goal of "pure" knowledge of matter strictly separated from language is misguided.

One way of characterizing the shift I am trying to describe is to put it in terms of the reality/language dichotomy. Modernity chose the reality side of the dichotomy, defining its goal as the accurate depiction of reality. The linguistic

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constructionists chose the language side, insisting that since language constitutes reality we don't need to talk about anything except language. Characterizing the situation this way puts the postmoderns in an awkward position. It is central to the postmoderns' position, if indeed postmodernism can be said to have a center, that postmodernism deconstructs dichotomies. Yet in practice most postmoderns have failed to deconstruct this crucial dichotomy. Instead, they have moved to the language side to the exclusion of reality. Postmoderns don't like to talk about reality because of its modernist association. So they simply ignore it.

The challenge that confronts us, then, is to do what the postmoderns claim but fail to do: to deconstruct the language/reality dichotomy by defining a theoretical position that does not privilege either language or reality but instead explains and builds on their intimate interaction.[2] That accomplishing this goal in the present intellectual climate is a difficult task should go without saying. Linguistic constructionism is deeply imbedded in the academic culture. The theorists that I discuss here, however, provide the basis for a new definition. My strategy has two trajectories. On the one hand, I reinterpret the work of Wittgenstein and Foucault, two theorists commonly identified as architects of linguistic constructionism, and argue that their work is better understood as articulating the interconnection of language and reality. On the other hand, I build on the work of contemporary theorists such as Latour, Pickering, Tuana, and Barad who are explicitly seeking another way. In both cases my goal is to move toward a better articulation of this new theoretical position.

My second thesis is that feminist thought has been and continues to be in the forefront of this sea change. Feminist theorists have a particular stake in retaining reference to reality. Feminists want to be able to make statements about reality—that women are oppressed; that their social, economic, and political status is inferior to that of men; that they suffer sexual abuse at the hands of men. If everything is a linguistic construction, then these claims lose their meaning. They become only one more interpretation of an infinitely malleable reality. Moreover, feminists have been and continue to be concerned about the reality of women's bodies. We want to be able to talk about women's pain, their biology, the effect of medications and toxins on women's bodies. Once more, linguistic constructionism precludes this. My contention is that feminist theory has begun the difficult process of articulating a new approach to the relationship between language and reality, and furthermore, that we will continue to learn much from feminism as this process unfolds. Feminist theory is the focus of this book for both of these reasons. Feminists have, in a sense, pointed us in the right direction as we attempt to define a new theoretical approach. And feminist thought will shape that new approach in fundamental ways.

My third thesis is that what we need at this point is not another critique of linguistic constructionism but a concerted effort to define an alternative approach that brings the material back in. This approach must incorporate the insights of linguistic constructionism without falling into its error of rejecting the material. It must describe the complex interactions of language and matter, the human and the nonhuman, as well as the diverse entities we have created in our world. It must be able to explain the interactions and even agencies of these entities without retreating to the modernist mirror of nature. Although critiques of linguistic constructionism abound in contemporary discussions, what is lacking is the articulation of an alternative approach. It is my contention that this is what is required if we are to move out of the theoretical impasse in which we find ourselves.

The nature of that theoretical impasse was perhaps most bluntly stated in an article by Bruno Latour in *Critical Inquiry* in 2004. The editors of *Critical Inquiry* asked a set of prominent theorists to discuss the future of critical theory in an essay. Latour's answer was particularly crucial in this context because he has been closely associated for several decades with one of the major components of critical theory and a key element of constructionism: social studies of scientific knowledge. Latour was one of the pioneers of the movement that studies science as a social construction and argued that the concepts of science are constitutive of the reality scientists study. But after several decades of the social studies of science, Latour came to question whether the constructionist path is the correct one for critical theory. He came to the conclusion that it was an error to believe that there was no way to criticize matters of fact except by moving away from them and analyzing the conditions that made them possible.

> My argument is that a certain form of critical spirit has sent us down the wrong path, encouraging us to fight the wrong enemies and, worst of all, to be considered friends by the wrong sort of allies because of a little mistake in the definition of its main target. The question was never to get *away* from facts but closer to them, not fighting empiricism but, on the contrary, renewing empiricism. (2004:231)

Latour also offers an assessment of what we need to do to correct these errors. What is required, he asserts, is a "second empiricism," new critical tools, a new critical attitude:

> not a flight into the conditions of possibility of a given matter of fact, not the addition of something more human that the inhumane matters of fact would have missed, but, rather, a multifarious inquiry launched with the tools of anthropology, philosophy, metaphysics, history, sociology to detect *how many participants* are gathered in a *thing* to make it exist and maintain its existence. (2004:245–46)

The critic, in short, should not be one who debunks, but one who assembles.

The story that Latour tells in this article, the tale of how critical theory went down the wrong path despite the best of intentions, is clearly evident in the history of recent feminist theory. Like Latour, feminist theorists were fascinated by social construction. They embraced the social constructionist thesis that facts are constructed, not discovered. Social constructionism provides an invaluable tool for explaining the workings of the social structures that create and maintain the subordination of women. As a consequence, social constructionism became the centerpiece of feminist theory for several decades. But feminists, like Latour, never meant to reject the reality they studied, to move away from the material in favor of the discursive. Rather, their intent was to better understand material reality. For feminists, the baseline has always been the reality of women's situation and an attempt to understand that reality and alleviate the pain it causes. But as with the situation of science studies that Latour describes, things did not work out as intended.

The work of Donna Haraway exemplifies the dilemma of feminist theory that ensued. Haraway, like Latour, was a pioneer in the social constructionist movement in science studies. Her pathbreaking analysis of primatology revealed how race and sexuality are written into the definition of nature in twentieth-century Western science (1989). Her application of social constructionism in science studies debunked the objective reality of nature in primatology. She revealed how the masculinist concepts of the field created a masculine world of apes and women in which nature was gendered and raced.

But Haraway's intent was never to remove herself or feminist theory from the real world. Like others engaged in social studies of science, her goal was to understand the reality she studied, not to obliterate it. This intention is clearly evident in her influential essay "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" (1990). The aim of her article, Haraway states, is to "build an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism" (1990:190). Many of the themes that will dominate subsequent feminist thought are here. First, the cyborg: a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality and fiction. By the late twentieth century, Haraway argues, we are all cyborgs: "The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics." Second, there is social reality: "lived social relations, our most important political construct, a world-changing fiction" (1990:191).

This, according to Haraway, is the world we face. It is a world of cyborgs, a world that breaks down the binaries of human/animal, organism/machine, physical/non-physical. In this world, Haraway argues, we need a new political myth for socialist feminism. Although she does not say so explicitly, Haraway implies that the old myth, the Marxist myth of an objective reality, is no longer

applicable. We need a new approach that can not only deal with cyborgs but can combine fact and fiction into a political conception. But at the outset, Haraway also realizes that there is a danger in taking the path she has described: "We risk lapsing into boundless difference and giving up on the confusing task of making partial, real connections" (1990:202).

The task that Haraway sets for feminism, then, is a difficult one. She wants to formulate a politics rooted in claims about fundamental change in the nature of class, race, and gender in an emerging world order (1990:203). She wants this conception to understand discursive constructions as "no joke." And she wants a conception that is not anti–science and technology but that nevertheless understands them as a matrix of complex dominations. Science and technology, she asserts, provide fresh sources of power; we need fresh sources of analyses and political action to meet this power (1990:207).

In hindsight, it seems fair to conclude that Haraway's vision has not been realized. Instead of deconstructing the discourse/reality dichotomy, instead of constructing a new paradigm for feminism that integrates the discursive and the material, feminism has instead turned to the discursive pole of the discourse/reality dichotomy. Inspired by theorists such as Haraway who revealed the discursive constitution of scientific "reality" and by postmodern theorists who examined the discursive constitution of social reality, many feminists turned to discourse at the expense of the material. Haraway's desire to define a feminist discourse of materialism was lost in the linguistic turn of feminism and critical theory as a whole. It is significant that Haraway's article is reprinted and reaches its widest audience in a volume, *Feminism/Postmodernism* (Nicholson 1990), that examines the question of the relevance of postmodernism for feminism. By the time the volume was published, the question was already moot: postmodernism had transformed feminism.

But although Haraway's goal of a new materialism has not been realized in feminist theory, discontent with the linguistic turn in feminism has been evident from the outset. Early on, Christine Di Stefano complained about "The Incredible Shrinking Woman" (1987). Susan Bordo challenged Judith Butler's turn away from the material and argued that the materiality of the body must be at the center of feminist theory (Bordo 1998). Nancy Tuana took on the fundamental dichotomy of nature/nurture (1983). Other feminists tried to articulate a concept of identity more substantial than the postmodern's fictional self (Valverde 2004; Moya and Hames-Garcia 2000; Hekman 2004). A number of feminist philosophers argued that analytic philosophy should not be dismissed out of hand by feminists because of its association with modernity (Antony and Witt 2002).

In retrospect it seems obvious that the discontent with the linguistic turn and social constructionism that Latour expresses so bluntly has been building for some time. Feminists are not alone. Philosophers, never enthusiastic about postmodernism, have engaged in seemingly endless debates about relativism, realism, and anti-realism. Philosophers of science, who quite obviously have a stake in the material world, have objected to the loss of that world. Given the gathering objections to social constructionism/the linguistic turn, one wonders why it gained such popularity in the first place. There is a very simple answer to this question: it reveals a profound truth about human knowledge. Linguistic constructionists were right about one important point: human knowledge is constructed by human concepts. It is of overwhelming importance that we do not abandon this insight. The challenge posed by the linguistic turn will not be met by a return to modernity. Rather, we must fashion an approach that brings the material back in without rejecting the legitimate insights of the linguistic turn.

It is easy to criticize the excesses of the linguistic turn. What is difficult is articulating a new theoretical position that meets the challenge of the linguistic turn. The purpose of this book is to do precisely this: to move the discussion toward a clearer articulation of a new theoretical approach. The framework I will use for my discussion is a concept developed by Bruno Latour: the new settlement. Latour argues that our task today must be to arrive at a "new settlement" that resolves the fundamental issues of language and reality posed by modernity (1999b:81). Although Latour would be the first to admit that his new theoretical approach needs much development, his work has the advantage of providing a clear understanding of what this new approach should look like.

In his 1993 book, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour poses a challenge to social constructionism in science:

> Are you not fed up at finding yourself forever locked into language alone, or imprisoned in social representations alone, as so many social scientists would like you to be? (1993:90)

Postmodernism, Latour claims, is a symptom not a solution. The problem is what he calls the "modernist settlement," the assumption that nature and society, science and politics, are and must be kept separate. Latour's analysis of this settlement appears contradictory. He asserts, first, that "we have never been modern," that is, that the attempt to separate society and nature was doomed to failure from the start. He also asserts, however, that our attempt to be modern, to effect this separation, has skewed our understanding of what is at stake and

distorted our attempts to find a new settlement that better describes our situation. The contradiction of trying to be what we never can be, in other words, has complicated our attempts to find another way.

Building on Latour's insight, I will argue here that there are a number of versions of the new settlement emerging in contemporary discussions. My goal is to build on and add to these settlements as a way of moving toward a clearer understanding of an alternative conception. The first settlement I will discuss has its origins in the philosophy of science. Theorists such as Latour and, especially, Andrew Pickering are formulating an approach to our relationship not only to language and reality but also to the other entities that comprise our world. This settlement springs from the influential social studies of scientific knowledge that have transformed science studies, but it also departs from this tradition in significant ways. The second settlement has its origins in the work of analytic philosophers. Focusing on the work of Wittgenstein, I argue that his work as well as that of various contemporary analytic philosophers provides an alternative to both modernity and constructionism that points toward another version of the settlement.

The third settlement involves a reinterpretation of postmodernism. Although postmodernism has been associated with the worst excesses of linguistic constructionism, it is possible to read the work of certain postmoderns in a very different light. The work of Deleuze and, particularly, Foucault, can be interpreted as accomplishing precisely what postmodernism claimed but generally failed to do: a deconstruction of the discourse/reality dichotomy. Finally, a fourth settlement is emerging in feminist thought. I consider the feminist settlement last in order to highlight its comprehension and scope. My argument is that the feminist settlement is particularly significant in that it provides the clearest articulation of the elements of the new settlement.

I conclude with a discussion of the concept that, I argue, best describes the knowledge/reality connection analyzed in the settlements: disclosure. My argument is that disclosure opens up a space between construction and representation that the settlements are seeking to articulate. Finally, I explore what I call "social ontology." The settlements I discuss are focused primarily on the interface between nature and the discursive and how this interface constitutes knowledge. What is missing from most of these analyses is an account of the social—how social institutions are constituted by the interface of the discursive, the material, the natural, and the technological; how institutions such as politics, economics, and kinship evolve. Turning to Marx, I construct a social ontology that begins to explain this constitution.

My intention here is not to provide an exhaustive survey of contemporary reactions to what Latour calls the failure of the modernist settlement. Rather, it is

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