Dancing between Ideology Critique and Standpoint Epistemology

Rethinking Strategic Ignorance

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Introduction

Recently, there has been a renewed interest in feminist standpoint theory. Under the headline of standpoint epistemology, these theories mash feminist standpoint theory with feminist critiques of science, such as Anderson's pragmatic approach to science (1995), Harding's strong objectivity (1993) or Longino's analysis of political values (1990). While feminist standpoint theory and feminist critiques of science share the idea of knowledge and knowers being situated—Harding (1993), for example, writes that we should start our investigations from the perspective of women—, they do not share more radical assumptions about knowledge and knowers. Feminist critiques of science are not in direct relation to Marxist materialist approaches nor to shared consciousness of oppressed social groups. Hence, it remains an open question how radical standpoint epistemology wants to be.

Here, I want to briefly discuss a difference between feminist standpoint theory and standpoint epistemology; claiming that standpoint epistemology has a less materialist approach to knowledge. I then focus on how critical knowledge can be achieved by marginalized and oppressed knowers despite—what I call—ideological ignorance and what could be described as false consciousness in Frankfurt School Critical Theory's toolbox. Next, I show that ideological ignorance is not the only way in which emancipatory knowledge is blocked. Instead, marginalized and oppressed knowers might decide—for many different reasons—to block access to emancipatory knowledge; a phenomenon that is sometimes labelled *strategic ignorance*. However, this seems to point to a tension between ideological ignorance and standpoint epistemol-

ogy. If ideological ignorance can be tackled well by sharing knowledge and actualizing emancipatory and critical knowledge practices, it seems that any form of strategic ignorance is problematic for denying access to this deeply needed knowledge. In other words, if critical knowledge is not simply given but results from struggle and communal practices, then failing to engage in struggle or communal practices for strategic reasons blocks access to critical knowledge. It would then follow that strategic ignorance is problematic for our knowledge systems—a conclusion that I want to resist. Instead, I argue that strategic ignorance is a contextual phenomenon and that often practices of recognition and resistance should take priority over our responsibility for ameliorating the epistemic system. In fact, while considering the consequences for epistemic systems is important, this is often done on the backs of those who are oppressed; as concepts such as epistemic exploitation show.

Importantly, in this paper I am not interested in the way in which false consciousness or ideological distortions and ideological ignorance can be overcome and who is in a particularly good position to do so—even though those are important questions that I tackle elsewhere (Hänel 2025; see also Toole (forthcoming)). Instead, I am interested in (a) how false consciousness should be understood in a more complex way and in combination with cases of strategic ignorance and (b) the question of whether blocking access to critical knowledge—as can be the point in cases of strategic ignorance—is problematic.

1. From Standpoint Theory to Standpoint Epistemology

Marxist standpoint theory is an epistemological approach rooted in Karl Marx's materialist analysis of society. Roughly, it asserts that knowledge is socially situated, and that individuals' positions within the structures of capitalism fundamentally shape their access to and understanding of truth. The theory highlights the epistemic privilege of marginalized or oppressed groups, particularly the working class, arguing that these groups, by virtue of their material conditions, are better positioned to perceive and critique the contradictions of capitalist society. Standpoint theory includes the following key assumptions: First, that knowledge is socially situated; that is, all knowledge is in some form mediated by material social relations (for example, by relations pertaining to class, labor, and economic position). Second, that the oppressed (potentially) have epistemic privilege. The idea being that the lived experiences of oppressed groups offer a more complete and less distorted un-

derstanding of social totality; for example, the proletariat can (under certain conditions) unmask the ideological distortions of the ruling class (cf. Lukács 1923). Third, that knowledge can be gained to some extend through experience; the everyday life of oppressed people is not only a site of suffering but also a potential source of insight and critical awareness (cf. Smith 1987). And, finally, that standpoint theory's function lies in unmasking ideology and false consciousness insofar as dominant ideologies obscure the workings of capitalism and standpoint theory seeks to reveal these ideologies by grounding analysis in the material realities of those at the bottom of the hierarchy (cf. Marx & Engels 1976).[1]

Feminist standpoint theory was developed in response to Marxist and socialist feminist debates in the 1970s and early 1980s and draws significantly on Marx's historical materialism. The main aim was to understand relations of domination and exploitation not primarily with regard to the working class and their class consciousness, but with regard to gendered power relations. Feminist standpoint theory includes a rather diverse group of theories; for example Hartsock's historical materialist perspective of relations of domination as gendered (1983), Haraway's situated knowledges (1988), Collins' black feminist thought (2000), Smith's world sociology for women (1987, 1990), Hennessy's interpretation of standpoint theory as ideology critique (1993), MacKinnon's world making capacities (1982), and, more recently, Sandoval's third world feminist consciousness (2000); to name but a few.[2] What these

1 I am merely giving a brief overview here that should not be taken as conclusive. I will also not engage with critique of standpoint theory such as the potential problem of epistemic essentialism or relativism and the question of how standpoint theorists validate a "privileged" standpoint and how to account for intersectionality and heterogeneous experiences within oppressed groups; although I will touch on some of these below. See Collins (2000) as well as Rolin (2009) for a detailed discussion of feminist standpoint theory.

2 For a good overview, see Naples (2007). It should be noted that not all of the feminist standpoint theorists mentioned agree that feminist standpoint theory is in fact a specific methodology or that these theories share any significant overlap and some of them have been very vocal with regard to the limits of standpoint theory, for example Smith (1992). However, that these insights and theories share some general perspective can be seen in Harding's (2003) attempt to collect all influential essays on feminist standpoint theory. However, there are of course texts missing that have been written in different languages; German feminists writing in the Marxist tradition, for example, have been very involved in feminist standpoint theory (cf. Haug 1982, 1989; Scholz 2000).

attempts have in common is the acknowledgement that power dynamics influence knowledge in many important ways and the Marxist historical materialist view that "knowledge develops in a complicated and contradictory way from lived experiences and social historical context" (Naples 2007, 1). For example, Nancy Hartsock (1983) has adapted Marxist theory to argue for a specifically feminist standpoint that is grounded in women's (reproductive) labor and social roles. The sociologist Dorothy Smith (1987) has advanced a sociology rooted in the everyday experiences of women, emphasizing how dominant knowledge systems marginalize oppressed perspectives. And, Sandra Harding (1991) has expanded on standpoint theory by advocating "strong objectivity", arguing that starting research from the lives of the marginalized leads to more robust and objective knowledge.

The basic underlying idea of feminist standpoint theory as well as feminist critiques of science is the idea that knowers are not interchangeable. Rather, the social position of knowers is of epistemic relevance. Not only can differences in experiences lead to differences in perspective, but a differently located knower might not be able to have the same perspective even if they had the same experience. Feminist standpoint theory has expanded on this insight by arguing that differences in knowers are not random, but are socially structured, mediated by material social relations, such that experiences are differentiated along the lines of social location and social group membership. On the one hand, this implies that if we know the world and interact with it through our specific perspective, we only see a certain part of the world and are likely to miss other parts of it. Hence, our perspective not only shapes what we see and how we see it but also limits what we see. On the other hand, the importance of social location and social group membership is not that simple. It is neither the case that different experiences result in different knowledge nor that one's social location or one's social group membership results in some specific form of knowledge necessarily (cf. Intemann 2010, 783–4). Rather, as Gaile Pohlhaus summarizes, "the situations resulting from one's social positioning create 'common challenges' that constitute part of the knower's lived experience and so contribute to the context from which [they approach] the world" (2012, 716–7; cf. Alcoff 2000, 2006; Collins 2000). The argument is not that there is a direct link between having a certain experience or a certain social location or group membership and therefore necessarily obtaining some specific knowledge. Instead, what we develop are 'common challenges' or, in Heidi Grasswick's words, 'a perspective' (2018).

Recently, the insights of standpoint theory have seen a revival with both epistemology of ignorance and standpoint epistemology. Standpoint epistemology can best be understood as a critical theory of knowledge that asserts the epistemic significance of social location. Similar to what we have seen above, it challenges the Enlightenment ideal of a neutral, detached knower by positing that all knowledge is socially situated (Haraway 1988; Harding 1991). According to standpoint epistemologists, marginalized and oppressed groups, by virtue of their structural positions and/or their social identity within systems of domination, possess the potential for an epistemic advantage—particularly when it comes to understanding the power relations that shape social life (Hartsock 1983; Collins 2000).

Yet, analogue to the insights of standpoint theory, this epistemic privilege does not arise automatically from one's social identity but requires a process of critical reflection and and/or consciousness raising. A *standpoint*, in this sense, is not merely a perspective derived from experience, but a historically and socially achieved position from which critique of dominant ideologies and knowledge systems becomes possible (Harding 1991; Smith 1987). For example, Nancy Hartsock's (1983) foundational work develops a feminist standpoint grounded in women's labor and embodied experiences, drawing on Marxist notions of class consciousness. Similarly, Dorothy Smith (1987) emphasizes the epistemological significance of women's everyday experiences, arguing that mainstream sociology marginalizes these experiences through abstract, male-centered frameworks. Sandra Harding (1991) extends this logic by proposing the concept of "strong objectivity," claiming that beginning inquiry from the lives of the oppressed produces more rigorous and less distorted knowledge. Unlike traditional claims to objectivity, which often conceal the interests of dominant groups, strong objectivity embraces reflexivity and situates the knower within the structures of power they seek to understand. Patricia Hill Collins (2000), in her theory of Black feminist epistemology, further elaborates this approach by integrating the intersectional experiences of race, class, and gender, and emphasizing the communal and dialogical nature of knowledge production among marginalized groups.

At the core of standpoint epistemology, then, is the critique of the so-called "view from nowhere"—the idea that knowledge can be produced independently of social and political context (Haraway 1988). Instead, standpoint epistemologists argue that marginalized standpoints often yield more complete or less distorted insights into social reality because such groups must navigate both their own lived experiences and the dominant worldview. As

Pohlhaus (2012) writes, being in a position of vulnerability or dependence to those with more power implies that it is in the interest of the oppressed to know both their own experiences as well as the expectations of those in power. This dual consciousness, reminiscent of W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness," allows for a deeper understanding of social contradictions (Collins 2000).

While feminist standpoint theory and standpoint epistemology are closely related and often used interchangeably, they represent distinct, though overlapping, intellectual projects. Both challenge traditional notions of objectivity and neutrality in knowledge production, emphasizing the social situatedness of knowers. However, they differ in their scope, orientation, and theoretical commitments.

Feminist standpoint theory originates within Marxist feminist thought and is primarily concerned with constructing a political and epistemological framework that arises from women's material and social experiences. It posits that women, by virtue of their structural position within patriarchal or sexist societies, can develop a critical standpoint that reveals the gendered dimensions of knowledge and power. The theory is normative and emancipatory in orientation: it seeks not only to describe epistemic structures but to ground a feminist critique of science, society, and ideology (Hartsock 1983; Smith 1987). For example, Nancy Hartsock's seminal work on the feminist standpoint draws directly on Marxist theory, particularly on the notion that the working class can develop a "standpoint" that reflects the contradictions of capitalism more clearly than the bourgeoisie. Similarly, Hartsock argues that women, through their roles in reproduction and domestic labor, occupy a material position that offers epistemic insights into the structure of patriarchy (Hartsock 1983).

In contrast, standpoint epistemology is a broader philosophical and methodological approach that focuses on the epistemic implications of social positions and social identities. It is not limited to gender or feminism and is used across a range of critical traditions, including critical race theory, decolonial theory, and disability studies (Harding 1991; Collins 2000). Here, the focus is on how knowledge is produced, validated, and legitimized across different social locations. Moreover, standpoint epistemology is often concerned with developing meta-epistemological claims—that is, claims about the nature, limits, and structure of knowledge itself. For example, Harding (1991) and Collins (2000) argue that marginalized standpoints can reveal the partiality and bias of dominant knowledge systems calling for the systematic inclusion of multiple, especially marginalized, perspectives in the construction of

knowledge. This marks a shift from the distinctly political project of feminist standpoint theory to a broader epistemological critique of the assumptions underlying Western knowledge production.

Feminist standpoint theory can be understood as a subtype of standpoint epistemology, with a more politically specific and normatively oriented agenda. Standpoint epistemology, by contrast, serves as a broader theoretical framework for analyzing how epistemic privilege and marginalization are structured by social position and social identity, and how these structures shape what counts as knowledge.

We can observe another conceptual shift from standpoint theory to standpoint epistemology that lies in the distinction between social position and social identity and that reflects deeper changes in both epistemological orientation and political strategy over time. Feminist standpoint theory, particularly in its early Marxist-influenced formulations, focuses on social position—understood in structural and material terms. Thinkers like Hartsock (1983) and Smith (1987) grounded their theories in women's economic, domestic, and reproductive labor. The emphasis was on the objective location of women within systems of patriarchy and capitalism, and how that location shaped epistemic access to social reality. In this framework, a *standpoint* was achieved through collective political struggle and consciousness-raising. In this sense, "social position" refers to a relational and structural category: one's place in the economic division of labor, family roles, institutional power structures, and so on. The focus is less on how individuals identify themselves and more on how systems of domination assign roles and locations; sometimes in contradiction with how individuals identify themselves.

By contrast, many contemporary versions of standpoint epistemology, particularly those influenced by poststructuralist or intersectional theories, place greater emphasis on social identity—as a subjectively meaningful, often self-ascribed category. These newer approaches draw from critical race theory, decolonial theory, LGBTQ+ studies, and intersectional feminism, and are more attuned to how individuals experience and articulate their own identities in relation to systems of power (Collins 2000; Alcoff 2006). Here, epistemic standpoints are increasingly linked to how individuals or groups identify themselves and how these identities shape lived experience, epistemic exclusion, and access to epistemic resources (Fricker 2007; Medina 2013). This emphasis on identity also tends to foreground narrative, testimonial, and affective experience as legitimate sources of knowledge—especially in contexts where dominant epistemologies have silenced or pathologized marginalized knowers.

The shift from social position to social identity reflects a broader transformation in critical epistemology—from a materialist, structural analysis of knowledge to a more cultural, discursive, and experiential one. While this shift has allowed standpoint epistemology to become more inclusive and responsive to intersectionality and identity-based exclusion, it also introduces tensions, in particular with regard to the achievement of standpoints. In the Marxist tradition, a standpoint had to be *achieved* through critical consciousness (cf. Lukács 1923). In contemporary formulations of standpoint epistemology, standpoints are often *ascribed* based on identity and experience; thus, raising questions of epistemic authority that I will come back to below.

Briana Toole's work, particularly in her 2020 paper, offers a reformulation of standpoint epistemology grounded in contemporary epistemological theory. Toole proposes a theory that centers social identity as an epistemically relevant factor—especially in explaining how credibility, authority, and access to knowledge are shaped by socially constructed and politically charged identity categories. Toole emphasizes that it is not simply one's objective social position—such as being part of a specific social class—that confers epistemic privilege or vulnerability, but rather how that position is mediated by one's lived social identity and its recognition within a given epistemic community. This allows her to draw on insights from theories of epistemic oppression (cf. Dotson 2011), where individuals are wronged in their capacity as knowers because of how they are relationally positioned in epistemic structures of inclusion and exclusion. Yet, while relying heavily on social identity in her account, Toole highlights the fact that standpoints are not necessarily given qua the knower's identity. She argues that standpoint epistemology consists of the following three theses:

(1) According to the situated knowledge thesis, whether an epistemic agent is in a position to know a certain proposition *p* depends on some non-epistemic social fact about that agent;
(2) according to the epistemic privilege thesis, some epistemic advantage can be drawn from positions of powerlessness; and
(3) according to the achievement thesis, knowledge accessible from a particular social location is not given, but must be struggled for.[3]

3 All three theses are taken from Toole 2019, 3.

Here, I want to take a closer look at the achievement thesis that "knowledge accessible from a particular social location is not given, but must be struggled for" (Toole 2019, 3; cf. Jaggar 1983, 383–4). In the feminist standpoint theory literature, the problem of achievement is well discussed; as Harding has argued, there is "no typical women's life" (1991, 10–1) such that all women have the same experiences; hence, standpoints of the lived experiences of women are necessarily heterogenous. And, women's lived experiences are not necessarily in line with feminist knowledge of women's lives (cf. Harding 1991, 123; Hennessy 1993, 14–5). In other words, whether or not a critical standpoint is achieved and whether or not such a standpoint captures robust knowledge of intersectional structures of oppression cannot be purely linked to a person's social group membership or social identity. Yet, taking a closer look at Frankfurt School Critical Theory can provide insight into how standpoints can be achieved and by whom.

In standpoint theory we can, roughly, identify two approaches to the problem of the standpoint of the working class. On the one hand, Frankfurt School Critical Theory broadly refers to the intellectual tradition that emerged from thinkers like Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse. While it is often associated with critiques of culture and ideology, Frankfurt School Critical Theory in the context of the working class emphasizes the role of culture, ideology, and social norms in perpetuating capitalist structures. The focus here is on how capitalist societies maintain control through ideology and culture (media, education, etc.), rather than purely economic factors. This tradition highlights the cultural production of consent, arguing that the working class is oppressed not just through economic exploitation, but also through the ways in which culture and ideology are shaped by the ruling class. These critical Marxists argue that the working class's consciousness is shaped by alienation, lack of control over cultural production, and the way they internalize the dominant ideology; a critical standpoint has to be achieved by the working class itself. This standpoint is seen as crucial for critiquing dominant values and revealing the false consciousness that maintains capitalist power structures.

On the other hand, the Leninist approach to the standpoint of the working class has a more revolutionary focus, rooted in the writings of Lenin and his interpretation of Marxism. For Lenin, the working class's consciousness (or proletarian standpoint) was important, but it needed to be developed and advanced through external leadership. Lenin argued that the working class, in its immediate conditions, is often incapable of achieving revolutionary consciousness on its own due to its narrow economic interests and so-called 'trade

union consciousness'. Lenin's approach focuses on the role of the vanguard party (led by a conscious, revolutionary elite) to guide and politically educate the working class towards revolutionary action. The standpoint of the working class is not just one of alienation or cultural critique, but a strategic position to mobilize political action that can overthrow the capitalist state. Hence, Leninists argue that the working class can only realize its revolutionary potential through strategic intervention and leadership—specifically, the party that acts in the interests of the working class. While critical theorists assumes that the working class has the potential for radical self-consciousness, though it is often stifled by ideology, according to the Leninist approach, the working class needs external guidance to move it towards revolutionary consciousness of its own power. It does not see the working class as inherently capable of achieving this consciousness on its own.

2. Between Achievement and Ideology: No Man's Land

To get a better understanding of the achievement thesis of feminist standpoint theory, I propose to look at it with the help of ideology critique; inspired by the Frankfurt School Critical Theory approach. The general idea being that we are all embedded in a pervasive ideological structure that shapes our lived experiences, our live projects, our social relations, and how we understand the world and our place in it. If this is the case, then what we do and how we understand what we do and who we are is at least to some extent distorted by the prevalent ideology; I have spelled this out in terms of sexist ideology (Hänel 2018, 2021, 2025), but it can and should be expanded to intersecting racist, white supremacist, ableist (etc.) ideologies. Understanding experiences of oppression happens within our embeddedness of these ideologies, significantly raising the bar for emancipatory or critical understanding. Since there is a wide range of theories and uses of the term 'ideology' and to avoid misunderstanding, let me give a brief overview of what I have in mind.

I understand ideology as a practical form of consciousness; that is as (a) a form of consciousness that (b) stands in relation to social practices. Ideology, according to this understanding, is not merely a distorted framework of the world, a problematic worldview, an illusion or delusion; it is not purely cognitive. Rather, it is a frame of intelligibility (or, in the words, of Marxist historical materialism, a system of beliefs) that is both *induced by social practices and has practical consequences*. In Rahel Jaeggi's words, "ideologies constitute our rela-

tion to the world and thus determine the horizons of our interpretation of the world, or the framework in which we understand both ourselves and the social conditions, and also the way we operate within these conditions" (2009, 64); hence, the frames of intelligibility motivate and rationalize our specific positions within society. According to Marx, the practical form of consciousness is determined by the economic conditions of a specific society. As social agents within this society, we adapt the economic relations that structure our lives and adopt a particular way of seeing the world and make sense of ourselves and our practices within that world according to virtues based on economic relations; hence the economic relations both make sense of our actions and our actions reproduce the very conditions and frames of intelligibility.

Understanding ideology as being comprised of the interplay of intelligibility frameworks and social practices directly relates it to questions of standpoint theory and epistemologies of ignorance. For example, according to Charles Mills, white ignorance—that is, the ideological frame of intelligibility that shapes, rationalizes and justifies white supremacy—causes white people to be ignorant of their own role as oppressors and their actions that (contribute to) oppress others. In this particular case, the frame of intelligibility naturalizes and, thus, legitimizes white supremacy, making it "easier" to participate in oppressive social practices. The general idea is simple: Depending on our place and the relations within that society, different rules, norms and expectations apply to us and are internalized by us, such that we reproduce the very frame of intelligibility that makes sense of our world in the first place. This is why, according to Barbara Fields, ideologies are a negotiated social terrain "whose map [we] keep alive in [our] minds by the collective, ritual repetition of the activities [we] must carry out in order to negotiate the terrain" (Fields 1990, 113).

It follows that if we are all in the grip of ideology, then questioning, critiquing, resisting the given frame of intelligibility—or merely seeing it for what it is—is far from easy. In fact, it requires to pause in our rituals and to turn away from what gives meaning to our lives; what makes us get out of bed in the morning. Let us consider an example to illustrate: The reason for why hardly one day goes by where I do not think that I did a bad job as a mother, because I try to juggle both two small kids and a full-time job and so neither job nor kids get the full attention they deserve, is largely to be found in the material conditions of the nuclear family and the norms and expectations that a sexist ideology constructs for what it means to be a good mother that govern my everyday life (even if I resist them): The ideal of a good mother is impossible to live up

to; being attentive and calm while helping one child with their homework and happily engaging with the other one over some well-chosen toy that trains their imaginative skills, while also preparing a healthy afternoon snack for two hungry kids and a sugar-free cake for a school event the next day, while also doing the laundry and organizing a playdate for the weekend, while also re-scheduling the dentist appointment, and the list could go on. The expectations that a sexist and patriarchal society places on mothers are impossible expectations. Yet, the reason why I can turn to my girlfriends and complain about these impossible expectations or about the fact that being a mother is not my biggest fulfilment (despite this being what the sexist ideology makes it out to be) is because I am a *white* and *middle class* mother, which makes it less risky to complain about my life without anyone thinking that I do not love my kids or that social services need to be informed about a case of neglected kids and a struggling mother. A recent study shows that social services in Germany intervene more often and more drastically (for example, by taking kids away from their home) than in other cases when single mothers *ask* for financial help when there is no reported cause to do so (Hammer 2022). And this is despite the fact that single mothers are reported to be 4-times as likely to end in poverty (Lenze 2014). In the US, Black children and their parents are disproportionately reported to the child welfare system, often due to racist bias and discrimination (Boyd 2014, Harris 2021, Merritt 2021) with a gendered dimension playing an overlooked role (Breger 2012, Roberts 2014). The way in which the intersection of sexist, racist, and/or classist ideologies make intelligible what it means to be a good mother limits some mother's freedom even further, where already a complaint *about* the tasks associated with motherhood can be taken as an indicator that the wellbeing of her children is in danger.

Understanding the shortcomings of many mothers with respect to the ideals, norms, and expectations of motherhood not as an individual failure but as a structural problem—that is, as a distorted frame of intelligibility that brings it about that most of our maternal practices fall short of the ideal—is an achievement and not a given; even for mothers. Consciousness raising has developed as a strategy to collect knowledge and support women's political activism. Sharing their individual experiences of sexualized violence, domestic abuse and other forms of gendered oppression, women were able to see the commonalities of their experiences that then helped them to understand these experiences as structural rather than individual and to identify the social factors in place that shape these oppressive structures. This in turn helped to develop strategies against gendered oppression. The main idea,

thus, is that knowledge about the particularities of women's lives can help to develop emancipatory strategies for social change. Catharine MacKinnon—as one proponent of early feminist standpoint theory who is directly influenced by Marxism—articulates an elaborate theory on how standpoints can be actualized through consciousness-raising groups (1991) and should, thus, not be taken for granted. Most recently, Toole (forthcoming) has developed an account of how consciousness-raising is a primary strategy to overcome dominant and distorted intelligibility frameworks.

Yet, Critical Theorists have long argued that people can be complicit in their own oppression and fail to access the specific knowledge related to their social position.[4] Wilhelm Reich famously stated "[w]hat has to be explained is not the fact that the man who is hungry steals or the fact that the man who is exploited strikes, but why the majority of those who are hungry *don't* steal and why the majority of those who are exploited *don't* strike" (1975, 53). Critical Theorists in the Marxist tradition answer by pointing to ideology, the product of a social system that engenders a form of consciousness that prevents its subjects from acting according to their own interests; as Adorno wrote, ideology is "necessary false consciousness" (1974 , 169).[5] When we speak of false consciousness, what we have in mind is *practical* false consciousness, not cognitive false consciousness or distortions of identity (cf. Rosen 1996, 72 for this distinction).[6] Practical false consciousness describes the way "in which we respond to and act within the world" (Rosen 1996, 72), for example, by being distorted in our beliefs, desires, interests, or will, in our values, ends or norms, or in our emotions. So, one Marxist explanation for why the hungry don't steal and the exploited don't strike is that they have a poor perception of their own interests. Their interests

4 Parts of this explanation are taken from my 2025 paper on standpoint theory and the relation between Critical Theory and non-ideal theory.

5 I should note that I do not take a stance on which theory of ideology is superior to others or whether ideology is nothing but a matter of false beliefs. For the purposes of this paper, I follow the idea that ideology is a practical form of consciousness (i.e., ideology is a system of belief—which are both true and false—that is induced by social practices and has practical consequences); as it was, for example, argued for by Rahel Jaeggi (2009). I will say more about this below.

6 This is not to say that an analysis of cognitive false consciousness or any other form cannot be useful in our theoretical endeavors. Yet, what I have in mind here is the way in which practical false consciousness relates both to our social practices and the ideological framework that justifies, legitimizes or naturalized the given social order; cognitive false consciousness, in comparison, remains on the level of cognition.

and "desires have been organized by a system which depends on their docility" (Meyerson 1991, 7) and have been shaped according to commercial values and consumer goods; here, their "immediate" interests are being taken for "real interests" (Marcuse 1964, xiii). The general idea being that we, as social actors embedded in ideological systems, fail to see what our real interests are and instead succumb to our immediate interests.

On the other hand, ideology is real in so far as it produces the actual social relations and practices in which we engage. This means conceiving of ideology as both real and unreal—or, quoting Adorno's famous remark, in ideologies "truth and untruth are always entwined" (1972, 465; translation in Jaeggi 2009, 66)—in so far as the distorted or false ideas of ideology leave an imprint on the social reality. This relates to the idea of "necessary false consciousness" because consciousness here is false in so far as it contains a false understanding of reality, yet, at the same time, it corresponds to reality by being socially induced.[7] Hence, being embedded within an ideology at least bears the risk of being ignorant to a critical or emancipatory understanding of the oppressive structures. A point also made by Charles Mills, when he writes about white ignorance: "producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made" (1997, 18). In fact, the way in which we understand the world and make our actions intelligible "needs to be scrutinized for its adequacy to the world, for how well it maps the reality it claims to be describing." (Mills 2007, 24) In other words, ideology maps a reality that does not in fact exist, while also being the terrain on which people are forced to live.

3. A Closer Look at Strategic Ignorance

So far, I have argued that ideology can lead to various forms of problematic ignorance such that those under its thrall fail to understand the world and their position in it adequately, while at the same time often actively (re-)producing

7 This was more recently described by Haslanger as so-called feedback-loops; that is, something becomes real because of what is attributed to it as when the identity of an agent is constructed by the social context providing certain concepts for their particular self-understanding, which are taken on board by the agent in question and evolve in line with their self-understanding (Haslanger 2012, 124; cf. Hacking 1988, 55).

the very conditions of oppression. This seems to imply that being critical of ideologies results in a better understanding of the world and its oppressive workings. Thus, anything that stops us from gaining a better understanding seems inherently problematic. In this section, however, I want to argue that the way in which false consciousness can hinder the achievement of epistemic privilege should be understood in a more complex way that allows for cases of strategic ignorance. The key idea being that ideological (or false) consciousness is not the only reason for why emancipatory or critical knowledge is not engaged with or shared. In this section, I have a look at cases of strategic ignorance, where a standpoint is achieved but not being shared with others and then turn to discuss the question of whether blocking access to critical knowledge—as is the point in cases of strategic ignorance—is in fact problematic because it restricts access to an adequate picture of reality.[8] In the next section, I argue that the question of whether holding back adequate knowledge in cases of strategic ignorance is problematic, is misguided insofar as practices of recognition should take priority over our responsibility for ameliorating the epistemic system.

Let us start by outlining specific social positions that can achieve epistemic privilege and consider one explanation of why this is the case. In his 2007 article on white ignorance, following W.E.B. Du Bois (1989), Mills presents three examples of double consciousness; the awareness of one's own experiences and identity and the understanding of how others see oneself or not see oneself and the expectations that follow. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1989, 4), Du Bois writes:

> It dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil.

A similar theme can be found in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1995, 3), where he recounts being invisible:

> simply because [white] people refuse to see me … When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.

8 Raising the question of whether this could be problematic comes up in debates about the responsibility or duty of those oppressed to work against their oppression; see, for example, Boxill 2010.

And, as Mills details, Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* (1986), where the protagonist boards a slave ship that was taken over by the Black slaves, who are holding the white crew hostage. For the protagonist, the very idea that Black slaves could accomplish such an act of insurrection is beyond the epistemic framework of white supremacy that he relies on, thus, he is trying desperately to find alternative explanations for the strange behavior on board of the ship; despite the many ways in which the actual evidence presents itself. In Mills' sharp words: "The white delusion of racial superiority insulates itself against refutation" (2007, 19).

The key insight then is, that asymmetrical relations of power produce incentives, on the one hand, to understand the world better for reasons of survival, and, on the other, to be ignorant of the social structures and unjust relations that make up the status quo of oppression. Mills uses the work of David Roediger (1998) to explain: Here, we have groups of Black and white people

> whose respective privilege and subordination tend to produce self-deception, bad faith, evasion, and misrepresentation, on the one hand, and more veridical perceptions, on the other hand. Thus [Roediger] cites James Weldon Johnson's remark "colored people of this country know and understand the white people better than the white people know and understand them" (5). Often for their very survival, blacks have been forced to become lay anthropologists, studying the strange culture, customs, and mind-set of the "white tribe" that has such frightening power over them (Mills 2007, 17).

Vulnerability, powerlessness or (problematic) dependence vis a vis others brings it about that one has to understand not merely one's own experience but also what the other can and will do and the assumptions, rules, and norms these actions are grounded in. In James Baldwin's words: "I have spent most of my life, after all, watching white people and outwitting them, so that I might survive" (1993, 217). Using the wording of "outwitting" suggests that while a critical standpoint was in fact achieved, the knowing subject choses (for reasons of survival) not to share the accumulated knowledge but instead to "play along" with the ignorance of the other. As Ella Surrey concludes: "We have always been the best actors in the world… We've always had to live two lives—one for them and one for ourselves" (Gwaltney 1993, 240). In fact, the writings of Black feminists provide not only insight into double consciousness, but also into the ways in which double consciousness can be tightly connected to strategic ignorance.

Both Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks show how Black women are torn between being feminist and being anti-racist; in fact, they often have to give up on their feminist ideas and struggles to prioritize the more existential fight against racism.

There are good reasons for Black women to prioritize the fight against racism; and some of these reasons can be found in the shortcomings and failures of a prevalent white feminism (cf. Zack 2007 and 2005, Chapter 1). Mariana Ortega, for example, argues for what she calls "loving, knowing ignorance", the way in which white women exclude Black and brown women while at the same time wanting to include them. The loving feminist "knows (and wants to know) about" (2006, 61) Black and brown women; yet, the loving feminist is producing (often inaccurate) knowledge about Black and brown women to further their own end of being an inclusive and righteous feminist (cf. Ortega 2006, 58–61).[9] Ortega's theory of ignorance highlights the complexity of ignorance that is rooted in sexism, racism, and white supremacy while staying within the framework of ignorance as produced by the asymmetrical hierarchies of systems of power. In a similar spirit, Audre Lorde asks "[w]hat woman here is so enamored of her own oppression that she cannot see her heelprint upon another woman's face?" (1984, xx) and argues that white feminists are invested in ignoring the real differences between women (1984, 117–8; cf. Lugones 2003 and Spelman 1990). This is both a problem of injustice and a problem for our acquisition of knowledge. In fact, Gloria Anzaldúa writes that "[r]acism is especially rampant in places and people that produce knowledge" (1990, xix) and this is at least partly because of the intersection of sexism with racism and white supremacy, where dominantly situated women (read: white women) expect to have an epistemic advantage in so far as they are women, while also being "used to having conversations about racism and sexism in discursive spaces where [their] perceptions go unchallenged" (Bailey 2021, 59) and, thus, wrongly assume that their own position is "the 'default position'" (Spelman 1990, 13).

Yet, prioritizing the fight against racism over sexism is not without costs for Black women: Their experiences have always differed from the experiences of Black men to an extent that is hard to ignore or suppress (hooks 1990, 57–64). Gender is racialized. Collins shows how a Black gender ideology portrays Black

9 Interestingly, Ortega relates these observations to standpoint theory by asking how such loving, knowing ignorance can be possible despite claims of epistemic privilege of marginalized women; I will say more about this in the last two sections of the paper.

men as too weak and Black women as too strong; however, replacing the ideas of Black gender ideology with more emancipatory ideas of Black femininity and Black masculinity "will be difficult because elite groups have a vested interest in perpetuating ideologies of Black deviancy" (2004, 184–5). Furthermore, Collins shows that differences among African Americans cause different (racist and other) experiences; she writes "[e]ach Black person […] had a common struggle, but the form it took differed greatly as well as our responses to it" (2004, 3). On the other hand, Collins makes explicit that there is a distinctive Black women's standpoint often expressed through "alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge" (2000, 252), what Collins calls 'subjugated knowledge' (251) based on lived experience and dialogue, which "has been devalued by dominant knowledge validation processes" (256) and, thus, "may not be claimed by many African-American women" (256). Both Collins and hooks were deeply troubled by and aware of the fact that the problem lies in how the intersection of racism and sexism dismisses the standpoint of Black women; not only of women and not only of Black people in general, but of *Black women*.

Let us relate these insights to accounts of strategic ignorance. Writing about Black social movements and, in particular, Black feminists' struggles, hooks starts her book *Ain't I a Woman?* with the following lines:

> Contemporary Black women could not join together to fight for women's rights because we did not see "womanhood" as an important aspect of our identity. Racist, sexist socialization had conditioned us to devalue our femaleness and to regard race as the only relevant label of identification. In other words, we were asked to deny a part of ourselves—and we did. Consequently, when the women's movement raised the issue of sexist oppression, we argued that sexism was insignificant in light of the harsher, more brutal reality of racism. (hooks 1982/1990, 1)

Here, hooks shows how a part of one's identity and, thus, a part of one's lived experiences can be *deliberately* devalued or suppressed. And in so doing, the Black women's standpoint is subsumed under the standpoint of Black experience. However, this is not due to ignorance. Rather, while the critical standpoint of what it means to be subjected to both sexism and racism (or white supremacy) has been achieved, the Black *woman*'s standpoint is not realized due to the deliberate decision that the knowledge underlying the critical standpoint of what it means to be a Black woman will not be shared with those outside of the social group.

As briefly mentioned before, this raises the following question: If it is the case, that to achieve a critical standpoint is an epistemic weapon against ideological and false consciousness because it unmasks the unjust social structures, then strategic ignorance for its power of omitting adequate knowledge is problematic. To explain: Accumulating knowledge about how the world is that maps reality adequately is necessary in dismantling unjust ideologies, hence, it seems to become a duty to feed critical standpoints into the epistemic system to allow more people to resist oppressive structures. According to this account then, being strategically ignorant means to be complicit in a system of oppression.[10] In fact, this assumption is implicitly made in the debate about epistemic injustices, when it is argued that testimonial and hermeneutical injustice are not merely bad and harmful to the person facing them, but to the wider epistemic community insofar as important knowledge is lost (cf. Fricker 2007).

4. Strategic Knowledge as a Form of Peer-Recognition

In the last section, I want to take a closer look at this problem and resist the assumption that strategic ignorance is problematic in the ways outlined above. My overall claim is that the question of whether holding back adequate knowledge in cases of strategic ignorance misguided insofar as practices of recognition should take priority over our responsibility for ameliorating the dominant epistemic system. First, let us consider two examples of strategic ignorance to gain a better understanding of what is at stake. In her article on strategic ignorance, Alison Bailey recounts research by Robin Kelly on Black working classes that shows that Southern Black laborers used the white assumptions according to which Black workers are lazy and incompetent to mask their calculated slowdowns of labor as laziness and their deliberate tool breaking as incompetence. Similarly, Ellison's *Invisible Man* gives an account of some of his teachers wearing chauffeur caps when driving through small surrounding towns to

10 I am leaving aside here the problem that many who have achieved a critical standpoint are not in positions of power which would allow them to feed their standpoints into the dominant epistemic system such that they became available to others as well as the very real and physical dangers that come with sharing critical knowledge. For now, I am interested in whether being strategically ignorant is problematic *assuming it is possible to share one's standpoint in some way or another.*

avoid trouble, well aware of the fact that whites assume that any good car is owned by a white person anyway (Bailey 2007, 88). These are cases of strategic ignorance that are grounded in a standpoint of racism and white supremacy and that makes use of said knowledge to both navigate the world unharmed (as in the case of masquerading as chauffeurs) or to resist the prevalent ideology without putting oneself in danger (as in the account of Southern Black workers).

Kristie Dotson develops the concept of *testimonial smothering* to describe cases in which a "speaker perceives [their] immediate audience as unwilling or unable to gain the appropriate uptake of proffered testimony" (2011, 244). In these situations, an oppressed or marginalized person truncates their "own testimony in order to insure that the testimony contains only content for which one's audience demonstrates testimonial competence" (ibid.). Dotson continues to outline the three conditions that can result in testimonial smothering: the content of the testimony is perceived as risky; the audience demonstrates or is known to be incompetent regarding said content; and, there is a form of pernicious ignorance at work (Dotson 2011, 244). Let us consider an example to illustrate. Black women sometimes engage in testimonial smothering about domestic or sexual violence within theor communities to avoid invoking problematic stereotypes of the "violent" black male in their white audience (Dotson 2011, 244–5; cf. Crenshaw 1991, 1256 and White 2001, 36). As Dotson shows, testimonial smothering only works if there is ignorance on the side of the audience and the knowledge about such ignorance on the side of the speaker; in other words, to be able to truncate one's testimony in the case above, one must be aware of the reality of domestic abuse as well as the ideological framework that includes the "violent" black male stereotype; while one's audience must be ignorant about these ideological stereotypes being stereotypes. Thus, this form of double consciousness grounds the decision to "hold back" knowledge.

Yet, there are two important aspects to these cases of strategic ignorance: First, the rationality behind "holding back" knowledge is the perceived danger that follows either from the content of the testimony or from the situation the person is engaged in. In other words, for *some* speaking the truth is riskier than for others. Second, strategic ignorance happens in contexts in which a person from a vulnerable position holds back knowledge from others who are positioned in such a way that they have power *over* the other person; and this holds even if said power is not actively used. Let us consider each aspect in turn.

First, as Kristie Dotson analyzes, situations in which testimony is given are shaped by dependency relations between speakers and audiences (Dotson 2011,

237; cf. Hornsby 1994, 134 on reciprocity in linguistic exchange). For such a situation to be successful, uptake on the side of the audience has to take place; that is, the audience has to understand the words that are uttered by the speaker *and* understand the meaning of these words as intended by the speaker. Dotson takes this to imply, and I follow this idea, that audiences have to make an effort to understand what the speaker is doing with their words (2011, 238). Hence, to successfully give testimony it is not merely important that a speaker receives credibility but also that the audience is "*willing and capable of hearing*" what the speaker tries to say. Receiving uptake under conditions of systemic ignorance can easily fail, especially when testimony is contradicting the dominant epistemic system that the audience has an interest in preserving. The more effort an audience is willing to take to preserve the (epistemic) status quo or the more embedded they are in the ideological form of consciousness, the harder and the more dangerous it will be for an oppressed speaker to try to receive uptake.

Second, many (if not most) situations of testimonial exchange happen under conditions where one person has more social power than the other. Holding back significant knowledge from those who are situated differently, can help navigate life better (and safer). Consider again the example from Ellison's *Invisible Man*: Sharing knowledge about how some Black men wear chauffeur caps when driving through small surrounding towns to avoid trouble at a specific time beyond the Black community could have meant to put the lives of these men in danger. Similarly, sharing accounts of domestic abuse beyond a trusted circle of other women can put a woman's life in danger. Yet, there are other situations, in which sharing the very same knowledge—for example to warn other women—can be equally important. In other words, whether strategic ignorance is in fact problematic for limiting the pool of accessible knowledge for the wider community or emancipatory for preserving the safety of others is a contextual question, in which the interplay between the content of what is said and the historically shaped power asymmetries between those in the conversation play crucial roles.

One way in which to understand this contextual framing of strategic ignorance is through the lens of recognition theory. As is well known from recognition theory, we—as social agents—rely on the recognition of others to become who we are, to form a positive relation to self, and to develop and maintain life plans. This is first and foremost a psychological insight; it tells us something about the conditions necessary for us to grow into full persons. Often, this claim is being put in relation to a theory of justice or a wider political project of the relation between state and individual, where recognition is assumed to be

necessary for being equal and for being an individual member of a social group (cf. Honneth 1995, Taylor 1992). Yet, as recent critiques show, it is far from obvious why the psychological insight that recognition of others is a necessity to develop who we want to be has to be given within the context of (state) politics. As, for example, Coulthard (2014) has argued, recognition theorists have a tendency to think of recognition as a gift that is bestowed on the powerless by those in power. What is far more interesting, or so I have argued (cf. Hänel forthcoming), are claims of recognition *within* marginalized or oppressed communities. Here, we find important ways in which recognition and resistance or tightly connected.

The main idea is, that if we rely on the recognition of others to become agents, we also rely on the recognition of others to become epistemic agents; to be able to accumulate, use, and share knowledge. This aspect is particularly important for those, who are denied state recognition or who face conditions of oppression. To be capable of resisting a dangerous and hateful world, we need the recognition of our peers insofar as it lays the foundation for us to have a sense of who we actually are in this world; and not merely a distorted view of how those in positions of social power see and define us. We could say, double consciousness—as understanding who we are and how others see us—is only possible if we receive adequate recognition by our peers and communities and are, thus, able to form a positive relation to self, next to the distorted one that is imprinted on us by ideology. Furthermore, resistance requires accumulating ideology-critical knowledge and sharing knowledge; for example, the knowledge of harm suffered, the knowledge of how to engage in community building or to engage in acts of civil resistance. Elsewhere, I have described these forms of knowledge as *reflective knowledge* and *know-how knowledge* (cf. Hänel forthcoming). Reflective knowledge is what standpoint theory is interested in. Know-how knowledge, on the other hand, is simply what is needed for practices of resistance. Then, being strategically ignorant is grounded in reflective knowledge; as I have argued above, strategic ignorance relies on a critical understanding of one's position in the unjust social structure as well as the other's position, that comes with specific expectations, interests, and understandings of the world. And, being strategically ignorant can be important in certain contexts as it keeps know-how knowledge within certain communities and, thus, makes resistance possible in the first place.

5. A Very Short Conclusion

Before I end, I want to point out that this account of strategic ignorance fares well with the notion of epistemic exploitation brought forward by Nora Berenstain. Epistemic exploitation "occurs when privileged persons compel marginalized persons to educate them about the nature of their oppression" (2016, 569) and when the labor that goes into this education is "unrecognized, uncompensated, emotionally taxing [or] coerced labor" (ibid.). This can be the case, when the labor of teaching others is not compensated at all; in fact, often the labor that goes into such education is not even recognized *as labor*. It can also be the case, when the labor is recognized or compensated but the person positioned more powerfully then uses the knowledge to their own benefit. And, epistemic exploitation highlights the fact that the relevant kind of knowledge—what I have spelled out as *reflective* knowledge above—is often emotionally exhausting for those asked to educate others. Epistemic exploitation, according to Berenstain, plays a key part in maintaining the ideological system by reproducing problematic forms of ignorance insofar as those in powerful positions can use the shared knowledge "as fodder for skeptical responses and harvest them for content that can be developed into straw arguments and rejected out of hand" (2016, 587) while at the same time keeping those who share knowledge busy and, thus, distract them from epistemic resistance. Furthermore, those situated in powerful positions can mask epistemic exploitation as a "balanced, reasoned debate" (Berenstain 2016, 587), thus, making it harder still to dismantle the ideological system. Remember that I have started with the question of whether not sharing reflective knowledge can mean to by complicit in one's oppression insofar as knowledge about such oppression is necessary to unmask it. Berenstain provides another powerful argument for why *sharing* knowledge under conditions of asymmetrical power can mean to become complicit in the oppression as one delivers the insights necessary for others to uphold the status quo.

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