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SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

The argument that *social constructionism* proposes, with more or less insistence, about objects of social and cultural inquiry is in some sense the "other" to essentialisms of all sorts. To wit: Things—including even nature—are not simply given, revealed, fully determined, and as such, unalterable. Rather, things are made, and made up, in and through diverse social and cultural processes, practices, and actions. Much of the force of social constructionist argument is in this irony—its proposal that some assumedly taken-for-granted phenomenon not only could be otherwise but that its "local" form has a history that can be written to show a collection of interests, actions, and flows of power that have created and that sustain it. It seeks typically to show how some arguably social or cultural thing came about, how it is maintained, and, often by implication, how it might be changed. Social constructionist argument offers critique as a resource against all analyses that say, in effect, "This simply is the way things are and/or always have been." This emphasis on critique becomes particularly pronounced in work where the line between constructionism and *deconstruction* blurs.

BERGER AND LUCKMANN'S SOCIOLOGY

In *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge,* Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) build their argument on "classic roots" of Western sociology: the work of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Schütz, and Mead. But classic roots for some are minor literatures for others, and Berger and Luckmann intended their book as a corrective to what they saw as an overemphasis on "purely structural" argument in the then-popular versions of structural-functionalism in U.S. sociology. They "correct" by forefronting acting and interacting human(ist) beings as the primary agents in the constitution, maintenance, and change of the social.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) contend that "reality is socially constructed and that the sociology of knowledge must analyze the process in which this occurs" (p. 1). They treat this project as one equally relevant to academic philosophy and to everyday life, but their constructionism is distinct from philosophical argument and analysis. Rather than asking ontological and epistemological questions such as "What is real?" and "How is one to know?," Berger and Luckmann shift attention to more specifically pragmatic considerations appropriate to an empirical, by which they mean "scientific," sociology. Central among these are the following: What does a collection of people located at a particular time and in a particular place take to be "real," and how is this construction to be understood as something they do? How are their conceptions linked to relevant social and historical contexts? How are differences in social realities/constructions/worlds across different collections of people understood as implicating those varying contexts? The very existence of difference in such social realities and contexts, they argue, underwrites the need for studying the *social processes* through which such difference has come about and by which it is maintained as well as changed. They assert that the sociology of knowledge "must concern itself with whatever passes for 'knowledge' in a society, regardless of the ultimate validity or invalidity (by whatever criteria) of such 'knowledge'" (p. 3).

Berger and Luckmann (1966) credit Marx with the clearest statement of the social construction of reality argument in that "man's consciousness is determined by his social being," specifically through the human activity of laboring together and the social relationships that emerge and are inextricable from that labor. For them, Marx's famous concepts of substructure and superstructure are seen most accurately "as, respectively, human activity and the world produced by that activity" (p. 6).

Berger and Luckmann (1966) propose their theory as a major redefinition of the sociology of knowledge, making

it and the study of the social construction of reality central to sociological theory. They cite what they call two "marching orders" for modern sociology as at the heart of their argument: Durkheim's advice to "consider social facts as things" and Weber's statement that "both for sociology . . . and for history, the object of cognition is the subjective meaning-complex of action" (p. 18). These "orders" might be restated in their version of social constructionism as follows: Treat socially constructed realities as things, as objective; and see the meaning and action in social life that are these realities as mutually constitutive and contingent. That is, the objects that emerge in and through situated, meaningful social action can come to have precisely the "obdurate" quality that Durkheim used to describe "social facts." These then become habituated and typified in individuals' understandings of themselves, others, and their worlds and are used as resources to create, sustain, and change those objects. "Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man [sic] is a social product" (p. 61). This, they say, is the essence of the social construction of reality.

Also central to Berger and Luckmann's social constructionism are the *phenomenology* of Alfred Schütz and the *symbolic interactionism* of George Herbert Mead. From Schütz, the authors take a stated focus on the natural attitude of *everyday life* and the knowledge therein and attention to how these are taken up, reiterated, and changed in and through the routine interactions and taken-for-granted understandings of the people whose lives are lived in a given locale. For Schütz, this concept of the everyday was an analytical resource with which to focus attention on how the social is continually accomplished by human beings pursuing practical but mundane projects. From Mead comes a sense of the absolute importance of human *social interaction* as symbolic interaction, suffused with and by shared meanings in language that feed back into and shape the ongoing lines of joint and always open action as well as the selves at the center of that action.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) underline the importance of processes of historically situated legitimation in carrying forward and sustaining all such social realities, realities that illustrate what they call institutionalization. *Language* and knowledge are the coordinating and integrating symbolic resources that bring a coherence to the diverse lines of situated human interaction. While the paramount or everyday realities thus constructed are mostly taken for granted by those who produce and are produced by them, "every symbolic universe is incipiently problematic" and routinely requires conscious "maintenance work" by embodied individuals who make it up (pp. 106, 116). From the analyst's view, then, as Berger and Luckmann note, "Says who?" is a critical question: "What remains sociologically essential is the recognition that all symbolic universes and all legitimations are human products; their existence has its base in the lives of concrete individuals, and has no empirical status apart from these lives" (p. 128).

FOUCAULT'S POSTSTRUCTURALISM

The name and work of Michel Foucault are often linked to social constructionism. While, like Berger and Luckmann, Foucault wrote in conversation with a legacy of Western European, *humanist* thinkers, unlike them Foucault mostly wrote against that legacy—at least as it typically is read in the origin stories of U.S. sociology—and toward what he hoped would be a new way of thinking about human beings in social and historical terms. The proto-heroic humanist subject at the heart of Berger and Luckmann's story—and most other sociological stories—has a much less glorious role to play in the social construction work proposed here.

Drawing on their own intellectual and personal relationships with Foucault, philosopher Hubert Dreyfus and anthropologist Paul Rabinow offer a careful reading of Foucault's difference from the dominant traditions of Western European thought in the social and human sciences. They argue that Foucault was neither a *structuralist* nor an advocate of *hermeneutics*—what they call the two "poles" of the human sciences—but that he sought to develop a "new method" that would preserve "the distancing effect of structuralism, and an interpretive dimension which develops the hermeneutic insight that the investigator is always situated and must understand the meaning of his cultural practices from within them" (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983:xii). Deeply influenced by Marx but not Marxist or Hegelian, Foucault's new method would eschew the dialectic as explanatory device in favor of a view of history as discontinuous, marked by epistemic breaks rather than linear development. More Nietzschean than Husserlian, Foucault would dismiss the search for deep meaning and truth behind social formations and practices ("texts") characteristic of hermeneutics, seeing the history of Western thought as revealing nothing to give a deep interpretation of (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983:xxiii–xxv, 123–24, 180–83). Relying on methods that he called archeology and *genealogy,* Foucault sought—especially in his later books—not to provide a new theory of anything but, rather, to encourage a critical understanding of, "a history of," as he put it, "the present." Indeed, the human sciences themselves, and the objects and subjects that populate and define them, became prime targets for this critical and ostensibly new kind of analysis.

If Berger and Luckmann bring forward the importance of the acting and interacting individual in the context of the everyday to better understand how social realities are constructed, Foucault might be seen to diminish considerably what he called the "anthropological" theme that individual people are the prime sources of movement and force—especially through the operation of rational choice and

intentionality—in society and in history. Although he later moved away from claims that the person is fully an effect of discourse, he retained through his last books on the care of the self the view that while not fully determined by prescribed cultural and institutional practices, the space of the resisting and "creative" subject should not be framed in terms of the humanist fantasies of "freedom" or "free will." Indeed, Foucault's skepticism about the optimistic stories in the legacy of humanism sets off his contributions from those carried forward by Berger and Luckmann and others who wrote more from within that tradition (and that also is apparent in the pragmatism of Richard Rorty).

In some of Foucault's most widely read books, we might say that the sources of the social construction about which Foucault writes are differentially distributed across particular *discursive practices,* their objects and subjects, and the individual, acting human beings who both take them up/are taken up by them and who give them life/are given life by them in real time and place. The distinction implied here between the body or bodies acting in time and space, on one hand, and the nature of the objects and subjects given life thereby, on the other hand, is, arguably, one of Foucault's most enduring contributions. In the focus on disciplinary practices, Foucault may be said to show us, in fine-grained empirical detail, the social and cultural machines through which docile and useful bodies and subjects were/are made into objects in service of "society." In his analysis of sexual subjects, he shows us how, through expert knowledge and discourse, culture and society create a "deep inside" essence—sexuality and the desire for sex—as the condition for the discovery of true, "healthy," and useful knowledge about each and every one of us. Here, especially, we see that which was thought to be prior and fundamental proposed, rather, as product and resource for the operation of power and "social good."

In these images of social construction, the individual still acts and interacts, but the choices are circumscribed in advance to serve and reinforce the structures that define the everyday. Although he professed very little interest in a study of the everyday realities so produced or in the meanings they had for those who enacted them—topics of central interest to Berger and Luckmann and "interpretive" philosophies and theories they wrote—Foucault was far from resigned to despair about the possibilities for change and *resistance* in the face of such structures. Most particularly, he did not see the human being in society as fully determined by the subjectivities that serve to embody that being. Perhaps particularly in his distinct but not always fully elaborated conception of *power* as always dynamic and relational, not as a commodity-like thing that some have and others do not, can we see the sense in which Foucault granted the acting individual within a constraining/enabling *subjectivity* or "self" a notable importance in society and history. For Foucault, one is "in" power as long as one is "in play" in relational dynamics with others in social and cultural sites that hierarchically allocate prerogatives, responsibilities, and duties. While there is constraint both from the subjectivities through and in which one takes up/is given an identity in such settings and from the prerogatives and responsibilities that define and link these entities together, the fact that the individual, as human individual, has the capacity to act and thus to act otherwise and in some degree of resistance to those constraints is critical to Foucault's vision. Even in social arrangements that appear to offer one party no power—for example, a woman in an abusive heterosexual relationship—Foucault's concept of power would encourage us to see how her "local" subjectivity could provide resources for possibly effecting change. While he emphasized social construction as operating beyond, around, in, and through the individual—as social and cultural processes and practices—Foucault allocated to the acting individual the possibility for both doing and thinking otherwise, something to which he himself aspired.

Beyond the notion of resistance, in his books on the care of the self, Foucault focuses attention on what he calls a "genealogy of ethics" based on careful study of life in ancient Greece. The problem of ethics there, which for Foucault is the problem of how to develop, how to craft, one's relationship with one's self, is not about resistance and power but, rather, about the ways one might put together a life. That framing does not imply, of course, an absence of social and cultural constraint, but it does bring forward the acting individual, using and adapting, applying, social and cultural codes to the mundane details of life, the space, of course, in which a life is made and made up in countless reiterations.

SUBSEQUENT LINES OF WORK

Constructing Social Problems

Against the commonsense and often social scientific wisdom that social problems exist as obviously undesirable conditions threatening social and cultural stability, health, and happiness, Malcolm Spector and John I. Kitsuse ([1977]2001), in their *Constructing Social Problems,* propose a definition of social problems and a kind of empirical analysis that draws on many of the themes in Berger and Luckmann's work and that have come to exemplify a certain kind of social constructionist theory. Both lines of work might be read in part as humanist responses to the then dominance of structural and functional analysis of social systems apparent in U.S. sociology and the corresponding de-emphasis on situated, ongoing, social interaction. Parallel work in psychology, often referred to as "constructivist," marks similar reactions against a dominant positivism there (see Burr 1995).

Social problems, Spector and Kitsuse ([1977]2001) wrote, are "the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions" (p. 75). The inquiry should focus on what they called *claims-making and responding activities* by specific persons at and in particular times and places and about things they do not/do like and hope/hope not to change. Here, the analyst is not concerned with evaluating or examining the validity or truth of the claims made about the things in question, which of course has been the conventional sociological assignment. "Even the existence of the condition itself is irrelevant and outside of our analysis. We are not concerned whether or not the imputed condition exists" (p. 76). It is, rather, the viability or "life" of such claims and responses that interest Spector and Kitsuse.

Social problems—and, by extension, all of what can be called "moral work" or "morality" understood as the making of evaluations and judgments—are thus seen as accomplishments that exist in and through claims-making, responding, and related activities. Although this gives prime place to actual language in use and the strategies those who press such claims or respond to them might adopt, Spector and Kitsuse's view also incorporates activities that participants pursue that seem to the analyst to be clearly premised on member definitions of the objects, arrangements, and theories that they imply. Attention thus is given not only to language and *discourse* but to the individual and joint activities that appear to be premised on these member understandings and interpretations.

Spector and Kitsuse's constructionism contains an explicitly *reflexive* flavor. Sociologists themselves are seen as among the primary champions of various definitions of social problems—in both the public and professional arenas in which they can be found—and these definitions easily become topic for the theory and strategy of analysis this constructionism encourages. Indeed, professional and official claims-makers of all sorts have been among the most commonly studied participants in constructing social problems in the large body of research and writing this work has stimulated. Much of the early empirical research using this perspective—studies by Stephen Pfohl on child abuse, by Peter Conrad on hyperactivity, by Joseph Schneider on alcoholism, and by Conrad and Schneider on the medicalization of deviance—focused on such professional and medical claims-makers and their interactions with various lay populations (see Conrad and Schneider 1992).

Sexuality: Identity and Body Constructed

Foucault's writing on the disciplining of the body and the shaping and embrace of subjectivity has had an enormous effect on subsequent research and theory on various aspects of sexuality across the human sciences. Among the clearest of these lines of influence are those found in the argument that *sexual identity* is socially constructed and that "the body"—and the *sexual body* in particular—and sexuality are "inscribed," "performed," and thus, too, constructed. This work offers examples of the two different ways in which social constructionism seems to be read: as at the more or less rational and intentional direction of an individual self or subject, on one hand, and as the operation of constraining but not fully determinative social, cultural, and historical processes that more or less shape/constitute subjects and their activities, on the other.

Before Foucault—and in U.S. sociology—an early and notable example of the former kind of social constructionist argument dealing with what might be called "gender identity" is Harold Garfinkel's famous case study of Agnes. Arguably paradigmatic of ethnomethodological analysis, Garfinkel drew on detailed interviews with and observations of a male-to-female transsexual to reveal the mundane practices or "methods" that Agnes had to learn and then use in order to be, to exist in the world as, a taken-for-granted, "bona fide" female and woman in society. Garfinkel shows how Agnes worked to achieve this mundane ontology and, in doing so, makes clear just how much all normalized gender identity is an accomplishment produced by and through an ongoing set of intentional practices that are the seen but unnoticed stuff of social and cultural reality. Garfinkel's ethnomethodology and subsequent work in *conversation analysis* helped us see the material real as an achievement in which human beings in local settings put society and culture together using the mundane practices that every society/culture makes available to them. (A parallel kind of analysis that is not particularly about sexual identity and is not seen as ethnomethodological but is, arguably, constructionist in a similar sense, is found in Erving Goffman's work on the presentation of self.)

Against this kind of constructionism, elements of which also can easily be found in writing on the social construction of sexual identity linked to gay and lesbian identity and social movement politics, some feminist scholars have taken up from Foucault and from poststructuralism more generally an analysis of how sexuality and sexualized bodies are inscribed and performed in and through social and cultural regulatory practices that simultaneously produce the very subjects or subjectivities through and in which human beings are said to "have *agency.*" Indeed, the very possibility of "agency"—not to mention "rational choice"—is seen here as a cultural and social resource with various but circumscribed possibilities that are always politically charged. The writings of Judith Butler and Elisabeth Grosz, in their emphasis on performativity, materiality, the psyche, and the volatility of bodies have been among the most influential here. In this work, we can see a critique of the version of constructionism that highlights the intentional, choosing, and rational subject. While not erasing the significance of a moving, acting human individual,

this work resituates the notion of human agency within a complex of forces that can be said to "construct" the social and cultural objects under study. Poststructural influence in scholarship on gay and lesbian sexuality has produced congenial analyses, sometimes referred to as queer theory, that aim to deconstruct sexual identity as itself a social construction that regulates and serves that which it seems to critique. In all these latter works, the emergence, force, and consequences of categories of knowledge and their related practices, never simply "used" or "directed" by the familiar humanist subject, are at the center of attention.

Posthuman Actant Networks in Technoscience Studies

A third line of work that can be seen as social constructionist in yet another sense has grown up in the interdisciplinary field of technoscience studies, particularly as found in the work of Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway. Here we come almost full circle from Berger and Luckmann's claim that social constructionism takes knowledge and its categories, their creation, history, complexity, and movement as its central topic of analysis. But this circle is not quite closed. Although Berger and Luckmann claimed that "whatever passes for 'knowledge' in society" should be subjected to constructionist analysis, they were not quite willing to subject their own kind of work—science—to a thoroughgoing or "radical" constructionism. The work referenced here does precisely that.

Pushing the decentered humanist subject even farther afield, this work might be characterized as a *posthuman* or postpersonal constructionism in which the human player does not disappear but, rather, becomes one of a diverse collection of "*actants*" linked together in a network that itself can be seen to construct facts and technoscientific knowledge. In no case is this network directed by the humans who participate in it, although they retain a special importance linked to their particular capacities as users of language and meaning and as those who can ask often difficult moral and ethical questions.

Grounded in early ethnographies of scientists at work at the bench, Latour, Steve Woolgar, and others contributed to what Latour calls an *actor-network analysis* of science. Eschewing much standard sociological explanation, Latour has seen the production of scientific knowledge and the actual work of science as collective accomplishments of a network of actants, only some of whom are human or even alive. Latour saw that scientists rely heavily on the action of the ever-expanding collection of writing machines ("inscription devices"), observations, and laboratory-sited events, and objects that ostensibly stand in for "nature" and on whose behalf the scientists hope to speak as they defend their claims to skeptical colleagues. Successful scientific knowledge becomes that which the scientist and other actant collaborators can defend against all attempts to undermine it as "subjective" or merely a human speaking for herself or himself alone.

Haraway has contributed importantly to this view of technoscience, although she writes as a socialist-feminist sympathetic to poststructuralism and who longs for what she calls a "successor science" that is networked, collaborative, partial, strongly objective, and that seriously seeks to make a better world, with less suffering and more "happiness," for all living beings. Writing explicitly against sexism, racism, and patriarchy, Haraway offers a constructionism that is considerably more open, messy, and unpredictable than versions that locate the rational human actor—historically almost always a white male European or North American—at the center of its story or that give "discourse" a determinative force. From her famous "cyborg manifesto" to later critical analyses of technoscience, Haraway urges an understanding and vision by human actants in this process—among other "material-semiotic objects"—that not only make explicit their own dependencies but that also speak their own implication in the shaping of and responsibilities for the local worlds being built. Haraway wants scientists to ask if the worlds they help to construct are worth living for, for whom this might be more or less the case, and what all life in these worlds is likely to be, being able to admit that while they know, they do not know for sure. Others have pursued work that reiterates and extends various themes of contingency, distributed cognition, and complexity in the networks that can be said to construct and embody technoscientific knowledge.

— Joseph W. Schneider

See also Butler, Judith; Conversation Analysis; Discourse; Essentialism; Ethnomethodology; Foucault, Michel; Postmodernist Feminism; Sexuality and the Subject; Social Studies of Science; Sociologies of Everyday Life; Symbolic Interaction

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SOCIAL DARWINISM

Social Darwinism is the application of the theory of natural selection to human society. Alfred Wallace, the theory's codiscoverer, once asked Charles Darwin whether he would follow up his *Origin of Species* with a book on human beings. Darwin replied:

> You ask whether I shall discuss "man." I think I shall avoid the whole subject, as so surrounded with prejudices, though I fully admit it is the highest and most interesting problem for the naturalist. (Cited in Hawkins 1997:20)

Darwin was understandably cautious. But others have felt less constrained, with the result that massive theoretical and political issues have arisen.

Most living creatures, Darwin and Wallace argued, produce many more offspring than are needed to reproduce their numbers. Such multiplication, if left unhindered, meant that "the earth would soon be covered by the progeny of a single pair." However, the numbers of each species remained much the same from one generation to the next. What was taking place?

A struggle for survival and reproduction must be occurring, one between individuals and the rest of nature. No two individuals are alike, each possessing variations that confer advantages and disadvantages in the struggle. Those individuals with particular advantages will be those that develop and reproduce future generations. All this, Darwin and Wallace believed, occurs in the context of inevitable resource shortages. As Malthus had argued in the late eighteenth century, populations grow at a geometric rate while food supplies grow arithmetically. The environment was therefore active in eliminating those individuals without the characteristics necessary to survive and reproduce.

Turning now to *social* Darwinism, human characteristics can also be seen as resulting from struggle to survive. Herbert Spencer, for example, looked forward to a society in which individuals are free to realize their full potential. A long evolutionary process would take place, leading to a race in which people found fulfilment in aesthetic and spiritual matters rather than in the materialism of Spencer's own day. Those individuals not adapting and developing in this way would slowly die out. Note, however, a divergence between Spencer's views and those of Darwin. Spencer had no Malthusian fear of overpopulation, believing that humans have the capacity to adapt to environmental and social change. There are also differences between social Darwinists. Spencer believed that state intervention would delay the improvement of the human species, while William Sumner, the influential Yale Social Darwinist, increasingly saw a need for social reform.

The transfer of evolutionary ideas to human beings is an intellectual and political minefield. There are five themes here; the politics of knowledge, the question of "struggle," the notion of "progress," the assumption of direction, and an "end" to which evolution is developing.

As regards knowledge, the theory of natural selection can easily be seen as a product of its era and knowledge recruited to distinctive political ends. "The struggle for survival," for example, can be seen as a transposal of the social struggle (all too apparent in Darwin's Britain) to the nonhuman world. Similarly, the "successful" variations are no less than the human success stories of middle-class Victorian society again transposed to the natural world. Similarly, Malthus's theory of necessary resource shortages is by no means the objective and scientific theory as he claimed. Wallace, though clearly influenced by Malthus, was also sympathetic to Owen's socialism. Such a politics argues that "resource shortages" are not inevitable. They are a product of social and property relations.

Similarly, forms of social evolutionism were well established before Darwin's *Origin.* Herbert Spencer coined the phrase "the survival of the fittest" some 10 years before the publication of *The Origin.* As applied to humanity, he meant the struggle between *races* to survive, the demise of the weakest leaving the strongest to "keep up the average fitness to the conditions of life." Here again was an apparently objective science being used to enhance an overtly political programme. Social Darwinism is sometimes seen as a "neutral instrument," albeit one capable of being recruited to by a range of political positions. Such adoption by a range of causes is a matter of historical fact. But to describe the theory as "neutral" or "objective" is probably being overdeferential to this "science."

These issues remain important today. "Neo-Darwinism" in the form of sociobiology also claimed to be an objective