



Perspectives

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REFLECTIONS ON THE TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

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A number of times during recent years I have come across references to this book as a "classic" (sometimes, in a more humbling mode, as a "minor classic"). This is, of course, very gratifying, as was Chris Prendergast's generous invitation to contribute these reflections. As with most gratifications in this life, there is a disturbing downside. The author of a "classic" (even a minor one) is commonly assumed to be deceased or soon to be so, which is a condition to which I do not as yet aspire. Be this as it may, I will do my best to rise (no pun intended) to the occasion.

When Thomas Luckmann and I decided to write this book, in the early 1960's, our intentions were quite modest. We were both junior members of the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research, our common *alma mater* to which we had returned after some years of teaching elsewhere. We found ourselves in the lucky situation of being in the company of a small but lively group of young colleagues and graduate students who broadly shared a theoretical orientation, the one that all of us had learned from our teacher Alfred Schutz. One of Schutz's unrealized projects had been to formulate a new theoretical foundation for the sociology of knowledge in terms of his blend of phenomenology and Weberian theory. We intended to realize this project. It was only in the course of working on the book that we discovered, to our own surprise, that the project developed a more ambitious scope. A broad theoretical paradigm for doing sociology seemed to take shape under our hands. This excited and pleased us; but, although we were young enough for any amount of *chutzpah*, we did not expect that many other people would share our excitement. We were conscious of our marginality in relation to the American sociological enterprise and we did not anticipate the changes that were about to occur in the field (changes, as it turned out, which did not make us any less marginal). When the book was finished, however, we were very happy with the result. Nothing that has happened since then has made us change our minds. Both of us, as we recently decided once again, would change very little in the book if we were to rewrite it today, and both of us have found its theoretical paradigm eminently useful as we turned our attention to a number of different areas of empirical inquiry.

One question asked by the editor in his letter of invitation was, "Did you mean to found a school of social theory, in which case why did you decline to lead it?" I have already answered the first part of the question; as to the second part, one can only decline an offer that has been made. No one offered. Even if one allows that the paradigm proposed by us might have formed the basis of a "school," the failure of such a development is not difficult to explain. There is, of course, the obvious fact that we were situated in an emphatically peripheral, non-elite institution. But even if we had been on the faculty of, say, Harvard or Columbia (a fate I would not necessarily wish on either one of us), I'm not at all sure that the history of these ideas would have been very different. The book was published and attracted widespread attention during what, as is now clear, was a very narrow window of opportunity for a reconstruction of sociology. In 1966, when the book came out, there was broad dissatisfaction with what had been the long hegemony of structural-functionalism in

theory and a narrow positivism in the day-to-day practice of most sociologists. Especially younger people in the discipline were looking for something new, something that would transcend the aridity of both Parsonian scholasticism and the endless refinements of quantitative techniques. Something new was indeed about to engulf sociology, but it was not the marriage of Weber and Schutz celebrated in *The Social Construction of Reality*. It was, of course, the orgy of ideology and utopianism that erupted all over the academic scene in the late 1960's, almost immediately after the publication of our book. Neither Luckmann nor I had any sympathy with this *Zeitgeist*, but even if we had been more sympathetic, our sort of sociology was not what all these putative revolutionaries were clamoring for. It is not possible to play chamber music at a rock festival.

The collaboration between Luckmann (who remains one of my closest friends) and me ended for the very simple reason that he accepted a position in Europe; it is possible to collaborate on empirical studies across oceans, but joint work in theory requires (to mix a Weberian and Schutzian phrase) the *pianissimo* of the face-to-face situation. Luckmann must speak for himself on how he sees his relationship to the organized discipline, but I have long reconciled myself to my marginality with respect to the American sociological establishment (which, though perhaps I have missed something, does not seem to me more congenial than it was two decades ago). Although I have continued to do sociology, I have done so in an increasingly interdisciplinary context, a situation in which I feel very comfortable.

Not long after our little group in New York dispersed in all directions, and for reasons that had nothing to do with this, I became interested in problems of modernization and Third World development, and these problems have remained my major intellectual focus ever since. The paradigm that we developed in *Social Construction* has shown itself to be eminently applicable. Modernization can only be understood if one perceives it as a phenomenon both of institutional change and of transformations of consciousness, and it is precisely this duality that the paradigm was meant to deal with. Obviously this is not the place to demonstrate this claim, so I can only affirm my satisfaction that this theoretical orientation has shown itself, time and again, to be useful in illuminating concrete empirical discipline. Since 1985 I have directed the Institute for the Study of Economic Culture at Boston University, which now brings together a singularly stimulating and productive team of young social scientists. Sociologists are in a distinct minority in this group, and the last thing on earth the Institute seeks to do is to propagate some sort of sociology-of-knowledge orthodoxy. But the very concept of "economic culture," denoting the interface between economic institutions and various elements of culture (ideas, religion, morality, lifestyles), lends itself beautifully to elaborations in terms of the sociology of knowledge. Whether one looks at cultural aspects of the "economic miracles" of East Asia; the socio-economic consequences of the rapid growth of Protestantism in Latin America or the way in which themes from the counterculture have been absorbed into corporate life in the United States (all topics of current Institute studies), one must find a way of relating events within institutional structures to movements within the

consciousness of individuals. I, for one, have not found a better guide to doing this than the one Luckmann and I first cooked up during many interminable conversations all these many years ago.

I have been extraordinarily busy pursuing my own intellectual agenda and I have not paid much attention to the currents of thought that, in recent years, have taken or been given the label "constructivist." What I have come across under this designation has not exactly evoked sentiments of kinship rediscovered. Again, I may have missed something, but the "constructivist" literature that I have seen seems to come from the aforementioned ideological cauldron with which I have no affinity whatever. The notion of the social construction of reality is here reinterpreted in neo-Marxist, or "critical," or "post-structuralist" terms, and it is radically altered in this translation. It is one thing to say that all social reality is interpreted reality (which is what Luckmann and I said in all our various propositions); it is an altogether different thing either to say that there are privileged interpreters or, on the contrary, to say that all interpretations are equally valid. Hansfried Kellner and I tried to formulate our understanding of the act of interpretation in our little book *Sociology Reinterpreted* (1981), but I'm not aware of any great impact of our formulation. As to ethnomethodology, I have been very much impressed by some of the early work of the school, especially that of Harold Garfinkel, though it seems to me that it owes as much to Chicago-type American sociology as to Schutz. I have not kept up with what seems to be the increasingly esoteric direction taken by a number of ethnomethodologists more recently. In any case, the major if not the only empirical application of this approach has been microsociological; by contrast, my interests have developed in an increasingly macrosociological direction, and I don't think that ethnomethodology can be very helpful there.

Finally, the editor asks whether I have any message for social theorists. I don't really consider myself as someone called to issue messages to the world (a missionary role that requires, I think, an absence of any sense of the comic), not even to that minute and not terribly important part of the world inhabited by social theorists. But I suppose that I do have a message of sorts.

Social theory, and indeed the discipline of sociology as such, originated in the effort to grasp intellectually the cataclysmic transformation that we now call modernization. Sociology in particular came out of minds struggling with the "big questions" of the modern age. Sociology entered a period of decline when it bifurcated into two groups, those who saw the discipline as an instrument of agitation and propaganda, and those who saw it as a technical tool kit (some individuals, a wonder to behold, managed to belong to *both* groups). In other words, some sociologists only looked at questions to which they already believed to have the answers and others only looked at those questions that could be answered by means of very narrowly conceived methods. In consequence, sociology today subsists under the twin distortions of ideology on the one hand and triviality on the other. Not surprisingly, the status of the discipline has gone into a steep decline. I would think that this decline will continue, possibly to the point of extinction, unless these two

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SECTION NEWS

BERGER AND LUCKMANN CELEBRATION

This issue of *Perspectives* is devoted to reflections on Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), one of the great feats of theoretical synthesis in American sociology. The book inspired many theorists trained during the last quarter century, including the editor. It seemed appropriate to use the occasion of its twenty-fifth anniversary to spark reflections both personal and critical.

There are six contributions in addition to the essays by Berger and Luckmann. Four contributors identify with the phenomenological tradition, Americans Doyle McCarthy and Mary Rogers and Europeans Thomas Eberle and Hans-Georg Soeffner. They are joined by critics Charles Lemert and John Meyer. Each was asked to recount their first exposure to the book and its significance to them as theorists. In addition, the Europeans were asked to focus on Luckmann's recent work, which is unknown in America. The result is the first discussion of Luckmann's research on "communicative genres" in English.

The essays by Berger and Luckmann are important documents in their own right. Many observers have wondered why *Social Construction* was not followed by other joint work, why Berger turned away from theoretical sociology toward development studies, and why the paradigm failed to develop. In their essays, Berger and Luckmann address these questions frankly and directly. An important recurrent theme is the anti-ideological posture of the phenomenological movement, a point reinforced by Soeffner.

THEORY PRIZE: CALL FOR NOMINATIONS

The Theory Prize Committee has set May 1 as the deadline for nominations for this year's outstanding work in sociological theory. Both books and papers may be nominated, but it looks like the prize will be awarded to a paper this year.

Members attending the business meeting in August will recall a resolution authorizing a prize for books. Unfortunately, the by-laws of the section must be amended first. The committee is writing the amendment now.

Nominations should include a cover letter and five copies of the text. It is not necessary to conceal the author(s)'s name(s). The committee favors papers that promise to have a lasting impact in one or more fields of theoretical inquiry. Nominees should be members of the A.S.A. Authors may submit their own work.

The members of the Theory Prize Committee are Anne Rawls (Wayne State, Chair), Jeffrey C. Alexander (UCLA), Bernard Barber (Columbia), Ruth Wallace (George Washington), and Michael Hechter (Arizona). Send materials to Anne Rawls, Faculty/Administration Building, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI 48202; tel: (313) 577-8973.

A.S.A. THEORY SESSIONS AND PRESENTERS

An "author meets critics" session will be one of five panels organized by the theory section at the A.S.A. meetings in August. The session is devoted to the work of Dorothy Smith, a feminist theorist and epistemologist. The panel (organized by Barrie Thorne and Barbara Laslett) features Craig Calhoun (North Carolina), Johanna Esseveld (Lund), Judith Howard (Washington), and Iris Young (Pittsburgh).

This year's mini-conference, organized by Craig Calhoun, is on the theme, "From Persons to Nations: The Social Constitution of Identities." The first session features papers on the social constitution of citizenship by Margaret Somers (Michigan), the politics of identity in American history by Norbert Wiley (Illinois), the formation of we-images by Stephen Mennell (Australia), and black feminist thought by Charles Lemert (Wesleyan), with Elizabeth Long (Rice) as discussant. The second panel includes Eli Zaretski (Missouri) on identity theory and identity politics, Tia DeNora (Wales) and Hugh Mehan (UC-San Diego) on the social construction of genius, Thomas Scheff on theories of nationalism, and Lauren Langman (Loyola) on nation and self, with Anna Giza-Poleszuk (Warsaw) as discussant.

The regular session, organized by Alan Wolfe (New School), is on "Morality and Society." It features papers on moral fictions by Michèle Lamont (Princeton), deindustrialization, morality and the state by Katherine Dudley (Columbia), and healing powers by Fred Frohock (Syracuse), with discussant to be announced.

Finally, twenty roundtable sessions feature both familiar and fresh faces, including Richard Münch, Robert Alford, Benjamin Gregg (on law), Jan Azner (on Parsons and free will), Carlos Forment, Valerie Haines, Diane Margolis, Jeff Livesay, Mustafa Emirbayer and Jeff Goodwin (on network analysis and historical sociology), Steven Seidman, Douglas Porpora and Kyle Cleveland (on objective interests), Sunita Parikh (on interpreting history as a game), Jodi O'Brien, Adam Seligman (on trust), Mustafa Ozcan, Lyn Spillman, Joseph Whitmeyer (on power), Mohammed Bamyeh (a MacArthur Fellow from Berlin, on global consciousness), Keith Doubt, and George Zito and Nicholas Tatsis (on the social meanings of silence).

The social psychology section will also have a mini-conference at the A.S.A. on "Structure in Social Psychology." Peter Callero (Western Oregon), Bernard Cohen (Stanford), David Willer and John Skvoretz (South Carolina), and Noah Friedkin (UC-Santa Barbara) will contribute to the first session, with Jane Sell (Texas A&M) as discussant. Cecilia Riedgeway (Stanford) will chair the second session.

distortions are overcome. If I have a message, then, it would be to return to the "big questions," of which, God knows, there is no scarcity in the world today. I must leave it to others to pass judgment on the "classic" (or "minor classic") quality of *The Social Construction of Reality*. But to those who want

to deal with the monumental realities of our moment in history without ideological blinders, messianic pretensions or methodological rigidity, I would suggest that a theoretical blending of Max Weber and Alfred Schutz will still serve them quite well.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND AFTER

Thomas Luckmann
Universität Konstanz

Habent sua fata libelli! And what a peculiar fate this book had! When Peter Berger and I, after preliminary practice in working together which led to some articles on religion, knowledge and social mobility, began writing "our" book, we never dreamt it would become a "great success"—even success measured merely by sales or citations. And, had we anticipated it as a remote possibility, we would have certainly laughed in disbelief at the suggestion that it could turn out to be a mixed blessing.

To begin with the dubious part of the mixture: A goodly part of the "success" of *Social Construction* must have been due to inattentive reading. Occasionally I even suspected that among those who either purchased or cited the book there must have been some who only read the title, lightly skipping over the "social" part of it, and some whose attention remained riveted to the (non-) dedication of the book to a "Jodler." (A yodeller, indeed! In fact, he played the zither.) The old saying *caveat emptor* should be complemented by *caveant auctores!* In any case, whenever someone mentions "constructivism" or even "social constructionism," I run for cover these days. But, while I cannot speak for Peter, I was certainly pleased by the sales of the book in its original edition as well as in its many translations. Last but not least, I profited from the productive, critical arguments offered by attentive readers of the book. I found a number of those among colleagues and students.

I was surprised by the interest in *Social Construction* among anthropologists, geographers and historians, here and there in linguistics and literary theory, and in such divergent disciplines as ethology and theology. This not only flattered my vanity but also confirmed my hope that the position Berger and I developed from various sources, most especially from the "interpretive" sociology of Weber and Schutz, had some relevance for the human sciences.

A year before the publication of the book, I left the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research (where Peter and I had met in a seminar of the philosopher Karl Löwith and where we later taught together) in order to accept a professorship at the University of Frankfurt. After five years in the partially amusing vicinity of the cathedral of "critical" sociology I moved to the University of Constance. I returned frequently to the United States but, except for half a year in Cambridge and one in Palo Alto, only for short visits. I mention this for a reason. Apart from occasional writing in phenomenology, the philosophy of social science, the theory of language and personal identity, and the sociology of

language, all my later *empirical* work was with European, mostly German colleagues, assistants and students, and, more importantly, with data formulated and analyzed in German.

Although I thought—as I still think today—that *Social Construction* provides a fair general understanding of the freedoms and constraints governing the social interactions through which human beings create the world in which they live and, conversely, the processes through which the historical worlds thus created in turn create the human beings born into them, I was eager to learn more about the concrete workings of these intricate processes. During the past two decades I increasingly turned to the detailed investigation of the structures and functions of the communicative processes through which "realities" are constructed and reconstructed on different levels of a society.

My training in linguistics, my old interests in the sociology of language, highly instructive readings in the ethnography of communication (and occasional contact with Hymes and Gumperz), profitable study of Goffman's *Forms of Talk*, useful interchanges with conversation analysts (first with Sacks and then with younger members of that persuasion), regular meetings with a small international group of social psychologists converted from rather arid paradigms to a dialogical, essentially Bakhtinian approach, contacts with a group of Swedish colleagues engaged in the interdisciplinary study of communication and, after my coming to Constance, continued conversations with a group of historians, especially literary historians whose articulation of literary "reception theory" generated an interest in the sociology of knowledge—all this may help to explain my turn to what my old friend Peter calls "microsociological" analysis. But I see this a logical (could I see it otherwise?) empirical extension of our joint thinking which may be of considerable "macrosociological" relevance.

Over ten years ago I began to link the interactionist social theory and sociology of knowledge sketched in *Social Construction* to a program for the investigation of concrete communicative processes. These conceptual links, called by some a "theory" of communicative genres, start from the assumption that for recurring communicative problems in social interactions, more or less obligatory patterns of the organization of the communicative process are constructed socially. The system of genres in use, as well as less obligatorily structured communication in social milieus and institutions, may be conceived as the communicative budget of a society. I am convinced that a description of continuities and changes

in communicative budgets is a prerequisite for the description and explanation of social stability and change. It provides the formal empirical basis for a study of the manifold historical permutations of the social construction of reality.

The first studies guided by that theoretical program looked at communicative processes which reconstruct various kinds of pasts: alarm calls to the fire department, gossip, conversational transmissions of information and wisdom, religious conversion stories, recapitulations of television programs, etc. The next four-year study will focus on "moralizing" genres. The data will consist of public debates during the Gulf War, "pastoral" counselling on radio programs, anti-smoking campaigns, local ecology appeals, pro- and anti-abortion arguments in various public and semi-public contexts, and the like.

I see that I wrote of my recent work in rather too much detail. I hope, however, that I succeeded in showing its connection to the book I wrote with Peter Berger so long ago.

Incidentally, the fact that I haven't collaborated with him since then is attributable to geographical, not intellectual distance. In any case, retirement from official duties is approaching in a few years. If we are still healthy we may resume a venture we planned half-jokingly many years ago--formulating a "theory" of the unnecessary declines of states and societies, focusing on the role played therein by the intelligentsia and the "experts" in social constructions of reality, especially the masters of self-fulfilling prophecies. Just as well that I have no space for a message. I have none.

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"THIS LITTLE BOOK" AND ITS LEGACY

E. Doyle McCarthy
Fordham University

I was introduced to Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* in 1968 when I started graduate studies at the New School for Social Research. In a proseminar in sociological theory, the graduate assistant leading the day's discussion engaged in a bit of prediction at the seminar's beginning. He held up the paper edition of the book with the cover design by Norman Ives in attention-getting orange, and biting his pipe as he spoke, suggested that, in his view, "this little book" would, in time, have an enormous impact on American sociology. As sociologists' predictions go, not bad.

Now almost twenty-four years later, it is difficult to imagine a more important work for an entire generation, if we mean by that a work we drew upon as a model for how to think and write sociological theory. Continuing sociology's conversation with the classical theorists and focused specifically on the sociology of knowledge, the work argued a radical rethinking of the foundational problem of "knowledge" and "reality." *Social Construction* identified as a *sociological* problem what was commonly considered the terrain of philosophy--the constitution of reality. In so doing, Berger and Luckmann demonstrated that sociology could study any part of reality from within its own discipline's presuppositions. This work and others by Berger (his essays on identity and on psychoanalysis, as well as his books on religion) demonstrated that sociologists could, with authority, venture into areas previously claimed by psychology or theology, or for that matter, medicine. Since this book, and undoubtedly because of it, there is almost no domain of knowledge free from the scrutiny of "constructionism," as contemporary studies of the body and emotions testify.

The central thesis--that knowledge constitutes social reality--launched a new phase of social scientific inquiry, reoriented the sociology of knowledge, and put empirical sociology on a new footing. The focus of this reposition

became the broad range of signifying systems that form and communicate social realities. This focus animated empirical work for two decades and forced theoreticians to formulate a theory of culture consistent with the work being done in cognitive psychology and anthropology, linguistics, and semiotics.

In other ways, this volume prepared American sociology for its current postpositivist stance, especially with the claim that all knowledges (theoretical and pretheoretical) are continuous with one another and that all "typifications" are part of particular historical contexts and social configurations. This idea allowed for a critique of sociological theory, such as that explored by Berger and Pullberg (1965), namely, that theoretical reifications in sociological discourse had their foundations in the reified concepts of world and self found in everyday life and carried over into sociological discourse. This idea--that realities *lived* by actors and *conceived* by theorists were continuous--also meant that sociology and everyday life were vitally and essentially linked. For the concepts and theories of social science were to be interpreted and assessed within the framework of a theory of the "natural attitude." The sociology of knowledge was no longer an optional specialty for theorists, for it provided the catalog of operations required for any account of the processes through which groups of human beings construct worlds of meaning. This is the legacy "this little book" gave to twentieth-century sociology. It provided a theory of the foundations of knowledge in everyday life, and it asked us to use it to assess the quality of *sociological* knowledge.

Reference

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Mary F. Rogers
The University of West Florida

Assigned in 1968 as a teaching assistant in introductory sociology, I was also blessedly assigned to encounter Berger and Luckmann's *Social Construction of Reality*. The freshmen and sophomores I helped guide through social constructionism were also reading four or five other volumes for their introductory course. More than twenty years later, I am guiding other students through Berger and Luckmann's treatise on the sociology of knowledge, but they are mostly seniors studying contemporary sociological theory. Today I would hesitate to walk my freshmen and sophomores through the same volume their peers studied with considerable success a generation ago.

Classic volumes like Berger and Luckmann's thus serve as weather vanes indicating where the winds of educational change might be taking us. Today my students are less comfortable with and attuned to the written word; abstract thought more discernibly intimidates them; "foreign" and technical words raise their suspicions; the subtle practicalities of theoretical sophistication often lie beyond their highly schooled but poorly educated imaginations. Thus, each time I renew my acquaintance with *Social Construction*, I see anew the many faces that have increasingly registered perplexity while grappling with that text.

Symptomatically, even while we teaching assistants were introducing undergraduates to Berger and Luckmann's work, our graduate professors were inculcating the "standing" perspectives associated back then with the "Parsonian synthesis," Homan's behaviorism, and Mead's social pragmatism. By 1977 I was applying for an NEH Summer Seminar on phenomenology and existentialism that Maurice Natanson was offering at Yale, mostly because I felt theoretically stymied whenever I tried to use the perspectives inculcated during my graduate-school days. That summer I discovered the perspective that has since served me in innumerable, perhaps unutterable (that is, metatheoretical), ways. Then and only then did I find out what Berger and Luckmann had masterminded in *Social Construction*--a theoretical framework that does, as they claim, transcend the Durkheimian and Weberian perspectives on social life while offering a philosophically rigorous foundation for theorizing sociologically. Time and again since then, my experiences have confirmed that their treatise offers sure-footed access to the most oblique and consequential of social realities.

Yet theoretical tokenism continues, limiting the impact of Berger and Luckmann's contribution. My perception is that for most sociologists and some theorists "social constructionism" often serves as little more than a theoretical shibboleth accompanied by a few flat propositions about how people "construct" their identities, worldviews, and taken-for-granted ways of managing their affairs. Over the past

twenty years many papers and monographs have involved token nods at social constructionism followed by ahistorical, philosophically naive analyses of the matters at hand. Granted, those who resist such theoretical tokenism have dramatized the pervasive applicability and theoretical rigor of Berger and Luckmann's perspective. I think of such works as *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (1978), where Gaye Tuchman shows how available technologies, organizational structures, and social-spatial locations constrain journalists as they socially construct the mass-media reality known as "news," which its consumers in turn put to use as they construct and reconstruct their own shared worlds. Large groupings of social and behavioral scientists, particularly many gender scholars and feminist scholars of science, have also put social constructionism to incisive use. In the end, though, such works may be no more than glorious exceptions to the rule of theoretical tokenism.

A few years ago, James Hunter and Stephen Ainsley edited and contributed to *Making Sense of Modern Times: Peter L. Berger and the Vision of Interpretive Sociology* (1986). In its epilogue Berger noted, "Of all the books I wrote or coauthored during the earlier part of my career, this is the one that I would change least if I were to revise it today (and I know that Luckmann feels the same way)... It seemed to us then that we were putting together a conceptual tool that would have wide applicability" (1986: 222). He goes on to observe that sociology may be "more of a perspective than a specific field," a perspective that "has enormously influenced...the human sciences, indeed has become an important ingredient of modern thought as such." For me and many others who came of professional age after the publication of *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann's framework is justifiably characterized in the very terms Berger applies to sociology.

I urge renewed attention to the subtitle and key propositions of Berger and Luckmann's work. It does, after all, concern the sociology of knowledge; its propositions concern legitimation, reification, conceptual machineries, collective sedimentations, and much else that falls by the wayside in many sociological reports purportedly applying its perspective. Reexamining this masterpiece with these and closely related matters in mind will enlarge our theoretical options while reminding us that the sociology of knowledge, informed by phenomenology and shaped in response to our predecessors' ideas, lies at or near the core of virtually every topic that concerns us. The sociology of knowledge, Berger and Luckmann taught us, not only informs the most imaginative varieties of sociological consciousness, but also illuminates the extra-sociological consciousness we can never banish entirely from our texts or our classrooms.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION IN CONTEXT

Thomas S. Eberle

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Switzerland

The Social Construction of Reality by Berger and Luckmann is one of the most cited sociological books of the past twenty-five years. Its title is, undoubtedly, one of their outstanding achievements. Its contents, however, while brilliantly written, have possibly never been really understood. Some have said, rather maliciously, that the book sold so well because many engineers (mistakenly) bought it. Unfortunately, I may add, of the many sociologists who bought or cited the book only a few have studied it.

The book was published in German at S. Fischer in 1970, opening the new series "Conditio Humana," and was introduced by the great Helmuth Plessner. Interestingly enough, it was not reviewed by the renowned *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*. Otherwise it was well received. Book reviewers commended the new, non-ideological approach, praised the low price, and expressed amazement that an American original was published in German within only three (actually four) years. Although the sociology of knowledge used to be a pet theme of German readers (as Plessner notes in the introduction), *Social Construction* did not have an easy time of it. When structural functionalism and quantitative sociology--both imported from the United States after World War II--confronted growing criticism in the sixties, the Frankfurt school and neo-Marxism reaped the benefit. Then, after Habermas entered into a well-publicized debate with Niklas Luhmann (who defended a functionalist systems theory blending Parsonian and phenomenological concepts), the two became the most cited and quoted German sociologists of the period.

Nonetheless, a growing group of sociologists sought a closer and more adequate approach to social reality than these highly-abstract general theories allowed. To these people, *Social Construction* beckoned the way to symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, socio-linguistics, and other facets of the "interpretive paradigm." This is how I came to study these approaches as a graduate student in the early seventies.

What struck me most were the theses that reality is socially constructed and that sociology has to study the ways in which this is done. The book resurrected Alfred Schutz' phenomenological analysis of the life-world, used it to clarify basic sociological concepts like role and institution, and offered a new synthesis not only of Weber and Durkheim, but also of Mead and philosophical anthropology (Gehlen and Plessner). Berger and Luckmann's explication of the media through which social order is objectified--typification, signs, symbols, habitualization, and so on--rendered deep insights into the richness of human interaction. Their analysis of the relationship between social institutions and the symbolic worlds of meaning (*Sinnwelten*) which legitimize them proved once and for all that conventional sociological jargon about the "logic of institutions" obscured the actual processes through which institutions become social realities. They presented a sociological theory which conceived of social

actors as competent humans, evaded sociological reifications, and abjured the widespread arrogance of social scientists (who at the time loved to talk of "false consciousness" and Freudian "unconscious constraints," properly identified, of course, by themselves). But above all, they made clear how naive an objectivist stance towards social reality is. Put simply: The *how* of social phenomena has to be explicated before we can attend to the *what* and the *why*.

Undoubtedly, the book had its shortcomings. The main one, in my view, was the exclusion of epistemological and methodological discussions (which tactically, I admit, may have been a good move). Why should sociologists care about subjective meaning, given their concern with social actions and social facts? For sake of reliability, should they not limit themselves to external, observable behavior? Schutz agreed that methodological considerations limit the extent and ways in which sociologists can explore subjective experience. Sociological and phenomenological analyses have different purposes even when they focus on the same phenomenon. In *Structures of the Life-World*, Schutz and Luckmann offer fine-grained descriptions of the formal meaning structures of everyday life. Phenomenologists trust that these structures can be explicated by the reflexive analyses of intentionality. Phenomenological analysis, however, is *proto-sociological*. Thus a division of labor is struck: The meaning structures of the life-world form, on an *epistemological* level, a frame in which the *hermeneutic task* of sociological analysis inevitably has to be pursued. How interpretation is conducted is indeed a methodological question within the finite province of meaning of sociology. But the sociological preoccupation with sociality, understanding and intention arises not from a preference of one "method" over another, but from the intersubjective nature of the lifeworld itself.

Seen from Europe, the portrait of "phenomenological sociology" in American textbooks was often crude caricature. The twenty-fifth anniversary of *Social Construction* provides the opportunity to redress this impression. If the arguments in the book sometimes seem to be written a little too elegantly, and if you are bothered by the loose definition of some central concepts, you can find detailed specifications in *Structures of the Life-World*. Even if you are skeptical about the possibility of phenomenological analysis, you will not find another book which explicates human experience, knowledge and action, and the interrelatedness of subjective and intersubjective knowledge in richer detail. If you consider that a discipline like cognitive anthropology moved from the linguistic analysis of terms to the investigation of idioms and is now slowly arriving at the notion of cultural knowledge and its complex relation to action, you recognize how far ahead Berger and Luckmann were twenty-five years ago.

What are the prospects for a phenomenologically oriented sociology in Germany today? It is evident that phenomenology has vastly spread in the past two decades. Phenomenological concepts are found throughout the different fields of sociology. The grand theorists Habermas and Luhmann have incorporated phenomenological concepts as central elements. German rational choice theorists are attempting to integrate Schutz' work on "choosing among projects of action" into their approach as well (e.g. Hartmut Esser).¹ As for the institutionalization of phenomenology, two facts are worth

