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1 Introduction

Realism and social constructionism are often regarded as opposing traditions in social theory, and indeed even as mutually contradictory. This book, however, develops and substantiates the critical realist argument that social scientists should be *both* realists *and* social constructionists. Such an argument rests on particular readings of both terms. Certain kinds of realists cannot be certain kinds of social constructionists, and vice versa. But this book will argue that the most tenable version of social realism is entirely consistent with the most tenable version of social constructionism, and it will develop detailed accounts of both in order to justify the case for them.

The purpose of this book, however, is not only to give a realist evaluation of, and version of, social constructionism. It approaches social constructionism primarily because I believe that any attempt to make sense of our social world must be able to explain the roles that culture, language, discourse and knowledge play in it. It is in stimulating debate on these questions that social constructionism has been most valuable. Proceeding as I do from a critical realist perspective, I believe that we cannot make sense of such issues without understanding questions of ontology: what kinds of things are operating, how they can exist, and how they can be causally influential. It is by developing a social ontology of *normatively based phenomena* – specifically, culture, language, discourse and knowledge – that this book seeks to make an original contribution to the debate on social constructionism. It is by offering such an ontology that it justifies its claims about how these phenomena could possibly participate in processes of social construction.

These discussions of social ontology, I hope, already reveal something of the disciplinary orientation of this book. The book is a work of social theory, which draws on sociology and philosophy but also on arguments advanced by linguists, historians, psychologists and even literary theorists. It does so, however, in order to focus on the nature of the social world, and aims to offer insights that are relevant to practitioners across the social sciences. It therefore crosses many disciplinary boundaries. This might seem intimidating, but I have attempted to make every step of the argument accessible to the ordinary academic reader. On occasions, this might leave specialists in the areas concerned frustrated by my simplifications of their complex fields. For this, I apologise, but I consider it a reasonable price to pay for the prize: an argument that is able to engage with many of the diverse intellectual influences that have coalesced into contemporary social constructionism.

This introduction seeks, very briefly, to place this argument in its intellectual context and to explain the relation between the structure of the book and its argument.

Varieties of social constructionism

Social theory in the late twentieth century was dominated by the challenges raised by postmodernism and poststructuralism. In the twenty-first century postmodernism, at least, is dead. Yet social theory is still in a process of coming to terms with its legacy, and most particularly with the challenges it raised to the status of social scientific knowledge claims and to the doubts it raised about traditional – particularly Marxist – conceptions of social structure. In a sense social theory is still working through the process of synthesising perspectives that, on the one hand, draw on the strengths of earlier traditions while, on the other, seeking to modify them in response to these challenges. Perhaps the most widespread and influential product of this process is social constructionism, which has been booming since the 1980's.¹

If there is one claim that is definitive of social constructionism, it is the argument that the ways in which we collectively think and communicate about the world affect the way that the world is. But social constructionism is not a single synthesis; rather, there are a range of social constructionisms, each striking a different balance between traditional sociological arguments and postmodernist innovations.

¹ One rough indication of the timing of this boom can be obtained by examining the dates of the A-Z of “Social Construction of X” book titles offered by Ian Hacking (2000: 1-2). He gives two titles from 1979, eight from the 1980s, and 21 from the 1990s. The exception is Berger and Luckmann’s classic text, which gave us the term in the first place (Berger and Luckmann 1971 [1966]).

The intuition that guides this book is the belief that some of these constructionisms assume plausible processes through which our thinking and communication could affect the world while others depend on thoroughly implausible claims about such processes. In evaluating such claims, I will place them on a scale that stretches from *trivial* constructionist arguments, through *moderate* arguments that are based on plausible claims about the causal processes involved, to *radical* or *extreme* constructionisms that depend on what I will argue are implausible claims.

Let us dismiss *trivial* constructionism quickly, with an example: when a group of workers co-operate to build a house or other building, they co-ordinate their actions by talking to each other. Such communication clearly affects the ways in which they subsequently act in the physical process of producing the building. While this is indeed an example in which the ways in which the builders collectively think and communicate about the world affect the way that the world is, it is not such cases in which social constructionists are interested. If this is a case of social construction at all, it is a trivial case in the sense that the concept of social construction has added nothing to our ordinary day to day understanding of the case. There is no real dispute between social theorists about the fact that such communication affects subsequent physical acts, but social constructionists are interested in more challenging arguments.

Social constructionisms derive their force from a further claim: that changing the ways in which people collectively think and/or communicate about the world *in itself* constitutes a change with significance for the social world. If, for example, we all stopped believing that money was a suitable thing to exchange for goods and services, if we stopped believing that it had *exchange value*, then money as such would cease to exist: there might still be banknotes, coins, and credit cards, but they would no longer function as money (Searle 1995: 46). Money, then, is in some way socially constructed.

As Ian Hacking stresses, one of the most significant implications of any claim that something is socially constructed is that it could be constructed *differently*: it would be possible for us collectively to think differently and this would make the constructions that depend on this thinking different in themselves (2000: 6-7). Perhaps the most influential formulation of this argument was Simone de Beauvoir's famous claim that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature" (Beauvoir 1997

[1949]: 295). Gender, in other words, could be different; woman, or at least our social expectations of women and how they should act, could be produced differently in a different civilization. One of the strengths of social constructionist arguments is that they make us aware of such possibilities.

To state that such phenomena as money and gender can be socially constructed, however, leaves open some rather large questions that must be answered if social constructionism is to be more than just a handy form of political rhetoric. Most strikingly, it leaves open the questions of what *exactly* it is that is being constructed, what it is that is doing the constructing, and what the process is through which this can occur. It is in answering such questions that moderate and radical constructionists differ. I do not propose to examine those differences in detail here since they will be examined from a variety of different perspectives over the course of this book. Indeed, it is precisely by examining these questions that the book will seek to make its argument. Still, the basic principle can be enumerated here: realists divide the world into that which depends on how we (individually or collectively) think about it and that which does not. For realists – and moderate constructionists – only the former can be socially constructed while the latter can not. Radical constructionists tend to deny any such distinction on the grounds that *everything* depends on the ways in which we think about it, or at least to include in the socially constructed category things that realists would not.

Realism versus social constructionism?

It is this radical variety that leads to the belief that social constructionism is incompatible with realism (e.g. Gergen 2001: 8-9, 14; Shotter 1993: 12-13, 65).² Realism, at least in the context of this debate, may be taken as the belief that there are features of the world that are the way they are independently of how we think about them. By contrast, radical constructionists deny that there are any such features, or alternatively, that there is anything we can say about whether such features exist. The incompatibility of these two approaches is clear, and there has been some tendency for battle lines to be drawn on this basis, which has often obscured the possibility that a more moderate social constructionism might be entirely compatible with a realist understanding of the social world. One consequence of these battle lines is that some social constructionists invoke the rhetoric of the radical tendency to position

² For a series of examples of radical constructionist claims, see (Smith 2010: 127-9).

themselves as antagonistic to realism, while baulking at the substantive claims of the radical wing and insisting that they do not deny the reality of the external world – “leaving open an escape door of plausible deniability”, as Christian Smith puts it (Smith 2010: 126). Meanwhile, realists have sometimes displayed the mirror image of this reaction, rejecting any perspective carrying a constructionist label while simultaneously acknowledging, for example, the concept dependence of social reality and thus one of the fundamental components of moderate constructionisms.³ Yet a more careful examination of the work of leading thinkers on both sides suggests a more ambivalent relation between the two traditions. On both sides, the denial of common ground is frequently accompanied by the deployment of arguments that are thoroughly compatible with the supposedly opposing tradition.

This book argues for a realist social constructionism – or, if you prefer, a socially constructionist realism. In doing so, it follows a lead suggested by Roy Bhaskar, who challenges Shotter’s belief that realism and social constructionism are incompatible (Bhaskar 1993: 186). Indeed, Bhaskar’s work on the concept dependence of social structure makes it eminently clear that critical realism implies some kind of social constructionism (Bhaskar 1998 [1979]). I hope that this book will encourage more realists to embrace a moderate social constructionism and indeed to recognise that many of them already do so implicitly; that it will encourage social constructionists to recognise the value of realism and their own need for it; and that it will show those with no previous commitment to either tradition that they can be combined fruitfully. At the same time, the book is a polemic against radical social constructionism, which, it will argue, is not justifiable in any circumstances.

The title of the book pays homage to two classic works of moderate constructionism. The first is Berger and Luckmann’s *The Social Construction of Reality* (1971 [1966]), which introduced the term *social construction* to sociologists and began the trajectory that has led to its current ubiquity, although the concept itself goes back much further.⁴ Although Berger and Luckmann’s title sounds radical, it is not reality in general, but social reality, that they regard as being socially constructed – an argument that will be returned to in chapter eleven. The second classic work referenced in my title is John Searle’s *The Construction of Social Reality* (Searle

³ Or abandoning constructionist elements of critical realism when they come to apply it empirically (Al-Amoudi and Wilmott 2011).

⁴ Lock and Strong, for example, trace it back to the work of the early eighteenth century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico (Lock and Strong 2010: ch. 2).

1995), which will be discussed in some detail in chapter four. In rearranging their titles to form mine, I have sought to draw attention to the ways in which social construction is both a real process and a process whose products are real: real, in both contexts, in just the sorts of way that critical realism would lead us to expect.

Given the importance of these two books, it is perhaps predictable that others should already have rearranged their titles in the same way that I have, most notably Christian Smith in a recent chapter title (Smith 2010: ch. 3). Smith's chapter (which I became aware of only after I had already written the majority of this book) is perhaps the most substantial previous critical realist discussion of social constructionism and there is a great deal of overlap between our perspectives. Like Smith, I divide social constructionisms into moderate and radical versions (he calls them *weak* or *realist* and *strong* versions respectively), I regard moderate constructionism as enormously valuable and thoroughly compatible with realism, and I see radical constructionism as thoroughly unsound (Smith 2010: 119-122). The objective of this book, however, is to take the argument beyond Smith's version of it by developing a substantive realist ontology of the phenomena that underpin processes of social construction, which enables us to pinpoint more precisely what is viable in constructionism and what is not. This book also digs deeper into the arguments of some key constructionist thinkers in order to reclaim rather more of their work for a realist constructionist synthesis than Smith does.⁵

The social ontology of normatively based phenomena

Constructionist arguments generally assign key roles in the process of construction to one or more of: culture, language, discourse, and knowledge. For a realist, if these are significant then it is because they have a *causal* effect, and the attribution of causal significance to these normatively based phenomena demands an investigation into their ontological structures. To be more precise, we must identify the *mechanisms* by virtue of which they can be causally effective. Chapter two begins to build the argument of this book by introducing the critical realist approach to ontology and the key ontological building block which, I will argue, underpins all of these phenomena: the social entities I call *norm circles*. In doing so, it summarises some key elements of the account of normativity developed in my previous book *The*

⁵ Inevitably, there are also issues on which I disagree with Smith, such as the nature of personhood – the main focus of his book – and his endorsement of moral realism, a view which I have criticised elsewhere (Elder-Vass 2010b).

Causal Power of Social Structures (Elder-Vass 2010a). Those readers who are already familiar with that book could skip much of chapter two, but for other readers this chapter is essential reading: the rest of the book will make little sense otherwise.

The remainder of the book is divided into four further parts, each of which iterates back and forth between discussions of ontology and of constructionism. Part two addresses the ontology of culture and normativity, and how these are implicated in the construction of institutional reality; part three the ontology of language, and its role in the construction of categories and, more particularly, the human sex categories; part four addresses the ontology of discourse, and its role in the construction of cultures, social classes, and subjects; and part five considers the ontology of knowledge and extreme constructionist arguments for the social construction of reality itself. Generally, the later chapters of each part draw on the arguments developed in the earlier ones, so while it may be viable for readers to be selective about which *parts* of the book they read, I would advise against trying to read the later chapter(s) in a part without making sense of the earlier one(s) first.

Constructionist arguments are so diverse in so many ways that the sequence in which this book addresses them is inevitably a little arbitrary. If there is a logic at all, it is perhaps that the sequence of the parts reflects the degree to which realists are likely to be comfortable with the claims they consider. Nevertheless, each part will cover both constructionist arguments that it will argue realists should accept and others that it will encourage them to reject.

Culture and institutions

Just as there is more than one way of being a social constructionist, there is also more than one way of being a social realist. This book pays much more attention to the varieties of social constructionism than it does to the varieties of realism; there are many varieties of philosophical realism that it will not engage with at all. Part II, however, engages with two important realist authors in closely related traditions to my own. Chapter three, in developing a realist account of the social ontology of culture, engages critically with Margaret Archer's account of culture. Archer works within the same critical realist tradition as I do, and my argument is influenced by hers in important ways, but our disagreement over the nature of culture illustrates the point that even those who share very close philosophical views can differ on their application to the social realm.

Archer and I would nevertheless agree, I believe, that there are collective social entities with causal powers. By contrast, John Searle, although profoundly realist in other ways, often seems to deny the existence of such social entities, and seeks to construct an account of complex social institutions that is both realist and constructionist in relatively weak senses of both terms. Chapter four engages with Searle's account of institutional reality in some detail, and argues that although there is a great deal we can learn from it, his most interesting and useful concepts can be reused more fruitfully in a framework that *is* realist about social structures.

Taken together with chapter two, chapters three and four provide a realist – and yet also a social constructionist – account of the social ontology of both culture and complex social institutions. It is not until part three, however, that we engage with the more radical forms of social constructionism.

Linguistic constructionism

Perhaps the commonest constructionist answer to the question 'What is it that is doing the construction?' is *language*. For radical linguistic constructionists, it is language that shapes our understanding of the world, rather than the world that shapes the way we describe it using language. Ignoring for the moment the many different variations of linguistic constructionism, we can simplify the radical linguistic constructionist position into the form of a three step argument. Step one is *linguistic arbitrariness*: the claim that language is arbitrary in the sense that it is not influenced by the world it is taken to describe. This is an argument that is often based on the work of Ferdinand de Saussure on signification. Chapter five argues against the more radical versions of linguistic arbitrariness, offering a realist take on Saussure's analysis.

Step two in this radical constructionist argument is what I will call *linguistic hegemony*: the claim that it is through language, rather than through perceptual experience, that our conception of the world is formed. Perhaps the most familiar consequence of this argument is the common denial in contemporary social theory of the concept of natural kinds, a denial that is often labelled *anti-essentialism*. Chapter seven responds by defending the notion of natural kinds and essences, and discussing their relation to our linguistic categories. Those categories are always social products, but I will argue that they can and do sometimes refer to natural kinds of things and that when they do the external world does influence our linguistic categories. These

categories are the outcome of a series of causal interactions between the world that our categories purport to describe, our own capacities as individual knowers, and the social forces that influence language. While our perceptions of the external world are influenced by our concepts, this is not a one-way but a two-way process, one in which we collectively tend to develop concepts that are ‘good to think with’ because they tend to produce reliable ways of intervening in the world. The implications of this argument for natural kinds and essences are illustrated in chapter seven by a discussion of the nature of the human sexes.

Steps one and two combine to produce the argument that our understanding of the world is itself arbitrary and undetermined by the world itself – perhaps even, in the most radical versions, uninfluenced by the world. What, then, *does* determine our meanings and our understandings of the world? Step three in the radical linguistic constructionist argument offers an answer to this question: *the social determination of meaning*. This is the claim that the meanings that we associate with linguistic terms and structures are fixed, not by reference to the world, but as the outcome of social power battles. Combining step three with the previous two steps leads to the conclusion that our conceptions of the world are determined by some sort of social power through the medium of language. Again this way of thinking draws on Saussure, and his account of the social aspects of the language system. Chapter six engages with Saussure again to develop a realist account of the language system that shows how concrete social forces – linguistic norm circles – can influence our language without *determining* it. We can thus take on board the constructionist insight that the social world influences our language without accepting the radical constructionist conclusion that our language is entirely a product of the social and therefore independent of the world it purports to describe.

I have formulated this overview of part three as a response to linguistic constructionism, which has produced what may seem to be an oddity: the order of my chapters does not follow the order of my argument here. There is, however a good reason for this: these chapters also construct a (partial) realist ontology of language, and they are ordered so that this unfolds in a logical sequence. Here, as throughout the book, the principle underlying the structure of the book is that a careful response to constructionism must rest on a careful analysis of the ontology of the forces that it seeks to invoke. The outcome, in this case, is the claim that the language system is not a free floating realm of signs but rather a set of materially-based mental properties of

human individuals influenced and standardised through normative pressure by social groups: linguistic norm circles.

Discursive constructionism

Other constructionists have a different answer to the question ‘What is it that is doing the construction?’ Their answer is drawn primarily from the work of Michel Foucault. For Foucault, it is *discourse* that shapes the social world. The distinction between language and discourse is often missed, but it is an important one: *language* provides us with the tools to express meaning and therefore shapes *how* we may do so, whereas *discourse*, at least as Foucault uses the term, relates to the regulation of the *content* of *what* we say. Chapter eight begins part four by building a realist account of discourse, drawing heavily on Foucault’s work but going beyond it, as with Searle’s, to identify the social entities, the collectives, that stand behind the system of discursive normativity he invokes. Once again, I will argue, it is a variety of *norm circles* that is responsible: what we may call *discursive norm circles*.

Such norm circles, chapter eight argues, regulate what we may say and influence how we think. The consequence is that they have the potential to shape concept-dependent social structures. Chapter nine discusses two examples of social structures that may be discursively shaped, and examines the processes involved – cultures (with an ‘s’) and classes. In both cases, these causally influential structures are themselves shaped by discursive pressures on how we think about them. Pierre Bourdieu has described this process as *symbolic struggle*, and chapter nine relates my argument back to his account of class: a classic example of how to combine realism and social constructionism in the analysis of concrete social phenomena.

The most influential application of Foucault’s argument, however, has been to the other side of the structure/agency pair. Chapter ten discusses the idea that *subjects* are discursively (or indeed linguistically) constructed, developing a critique of Judith Butler’s performative account of the construction of subjects. While it rejects the extreme constructionism of Butler’s account, it accepts that there is a more moderate sense in which subjects are (at least partly) constructed: our senses and/or concepts of ourselves are shaped by discursive forces, as well as by other forms of experience. This remains, however, the kind of process that is consistent with a realist social ontology

Knowledge and reality

Part five addresses the most radical variety of social constructionism, which argues that we have no warrant for believing in reality because we have access only to our own beliefs about it, glossed as ‘knowledge’, and not to reality itself. If knowledge, then, is socially constructed, and reality is only accessible to us in the form of our beliefs about it, then there is nothing we can think or say that is not socially constructed. The implication of this view is that everything is a social construction, and our belief that we have access to an external world is itself such a construction – a construction that we can never escape from in order to actually obtain epistemic access to that world.

Chapter eleven develops a realist constructionist account of knowledge. It accepts and indeed clarifies the constructionist argument that the quality of being ‘knowledge’ is one that is socially conferred on certain beliefs or types of beliefs. But it goes beyond existing constructionisms by offering an account of the normative structures that produce this effect: once again, these are varieties of norm circles.

Nevertheless, accepting that knowledge is socially constructed in this restricted sense does not entail that knowledge is uninfluenced by the external world, nor does it entail that we cannot access the external world. Radical constructionists do not generally deny that the external world exists; but they do argue that it is unknowable to us in any form but that of socially constructed knowledge claims. If this is so, their argument suggests, then whether or not the external world exists we have no effective epistemic access to it. What we think of as reality, on this account, is nothing more than a set of socially constructed beliefs.

Chapter twelve argues against this extreme constructionist conclusion. Constructionist denials of access to the world are necessarily unstable. They cannot consistently make their argument without accepting, for example, that there is someone to offer this argument to, or that communication is possible, or that there is some social influence on our knowledge claims. The implication is that in offering their argument at all they implicitly accept the existence of a reality external to themselves. And if the very activity in which they are engaged is possible, if communication is possible, then it can only proceed through a process in which each participant gains access to something of the external world: the communication itself. It is impossible to argue successfully that we cannot have access to the external world independently of our beliefs about it unless we retreat into solipsism: the belief that I

am the only thing that exists. Once we accept that we can communicate then we implicitly accept that those communications are something external to us and that we have access to them, even if that access is mediated by our existing beliefs.

Reconciling realism and social constructionism

A variety of other critical realist scholars have already argued that realism and moderate social constructionism can and should be combined, while radical constructionism should be rejected. Andrew Sayer, for example, writes that “Realists need have no problem with ‘weak’ social constructionism, that is with the idea that accounts of facts or the real are socially constructed” (Sayer 2000: 62) and on the next page argues that while weak constructionism is compatible with critical realism, strong constructionism (i.e. radical constructionism) is not. More recently, Christian Smith, as noted earlier, has endorsed moderate constructionism, while rejecting strong constructionism’s claim that “Reality itself for humans is a human, social construction” (Smith 2010: 121-2). Jonathan Joseph and John Roberts reject the excessive claims of some discursive constructionists, but then seek to incorporate some aspects of them “within realist frameworks” (Joseph and Roberts 2004: 5).

Nor is it only self-declared critical realists who have endorsed this kind of view. William Sewell, for example, has argued that “Nonhuman resources have a material existence that is not reducible to rules or schemas, but the activation of material things as resources, the determination of their value and social power, is dependent on the cultural schemas that inform their social use” (Sewell 1992: 12). David Nightingale and John Cromby endorse social constructionism in psychology while calling for a recognition of the real world and condemning those constructionisms “that steadfastly refuse to engage with anything other than talk” (Nightingale and Cromby 1999: 222). Diana Coole and Samantha Frost have argued that we can “accept social constructionist arguments while also insisting that the material realm is irreducible to culture or discourse” (Coole and Frost 2010: 27). Sergio Sismondo, in a book on science studies, has argued for “realism as well as constructivism” (Sismondo 1996: 2). And as we saw above, Pierre Bourdieu has already combined realism and constructionism highly effectively in his account of class (Bourdieu 2010).

What this book brings that is new, then, is not the basic idea that realism and moderate social constructionism might be compatible, but rather a careful realist

exploration of the mechanisms, the social entities, and the processes that lie behind social construction: the social ontology of social construction. The concept of norm circles has proven to be exceptionally (and to some extent unexpectedly) useful here, providing as it does the ontological key to each of the normatively based phenomena that are substantially implicated in the process of social construction. In exploring the mechanisms by which social construction can occur, I believe this book provides an excellent basis for judging what kinds of constructionist claims are viable and what kinds are not.

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