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Social Psychology and the Sociology of Knowledge

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One of the most promising perspectives to link social psychology wiht sociology has been, undoubtedly, the *sociology of knowledge* as formulated by Berger and Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality*. The current *twenty-fifth anniversary* of this book invites us to reassess its contents, to evaluate the impact it has exerted, and to examine its legacy.

It was one of Alfred Schutz' major unrealized projects, prevented by his early death, to formulate a *new theoretical foundation for the sociology of knowledge*. His blend of phenomenology and Weberian sociology promised to locate the sociology of knowledge on new ground, redefining its perspective as well as its basic concepts. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, who had studied at the New School for Social Research in New York where Schutz had taught, decided to pursue this project when they met as junior members of the Graduate Faculty at their «alma mater». The result was quite dramatic: a modern sociological «classic» was born.

In social science, *The Social Construction of Reality by Berger and Luckmann* has become one of the most cited books of the past 25 years. Its title is, undoubtedly, one of their outstanding achievements. Its contents, however, while brilliantly written have possibly never been really understood by many of its readers. Some have said, rather maliciously, that the book sold so well because many engineers (mistakenly) bought it. Unfortunately, I may add, of the many social scientists who bought or cited the book only a few have studied it.

1. THE BASIC CONCEPTION OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

The logic of the *Social Construction* was simple: Society must be grasped in its duality as an «objective» and a «subjective» reality. The objective social

reality, although produced by social action, appears to the individual as separate and independent from him or her. The subjective side consists in the consciousness an actor has, shaped in pervasive processes of socialization, and sustained and modified in daily interactions. In this duality the seeming dichotomy of Durkheim and Weber was reconciled, and the basic question for sociological theory could be put as follows: «How is it possible that subjective meanings *become* objective facticities» (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, 30)? To avoid intricate philosophical reflections, they defined the key terms from the point of view of the natural attitude: «It will be enough, for our purposes, to define "reality" as a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our volition (we cannot "wish them away"), and to define "knowledge" as the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics» (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, 13). The *revolutionary idea* was to declare *common sense knowledge* as a central focus for the sociology of knowledge. Traditionally, the sociology of knowledge has been preoccupied with the history of ideas only; now, it must concern itself «with everything that passes for "knowledge" in society» (*ibid.*, 26).

The authors' main thesis that reality is socially constructed, and that sociology has to study the ways in which this is done, was striking. 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 wich 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 how conventional 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, only 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*.

2. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND IDEOLOGY

The book was received well by its critics. Indeed, at a time when the prevalence of Parsonian structural-functionalism was eroding and the «coming crisis of Western sociology» (Gouldner, 1970) was being discussed, *Social Construction* gave new orientation to many sociologists. It offered a new reading of several sociological classics —different from Parsons' interpretation in his *Structure of Social Action* (Parsons, 1937)— and linked their perspectives in a fresh way. As Charles Lemert (1992, 10) puts it in retrospect: «To this day, I cannot think of a single book that presents with such exquisite parsimony so many different ideas so well».

Although Berger as well as Luckmann agree that they would change very little in the book if they were to rewrite it today (Berger 1992, 1), its impact on American sociology remained —in the authors' view— somewhat marginal. One reason was that both authors were situated «in an emphatically peripheral, non-elite institution» (*ibid.*). The other was «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...*» (*ibid.*). But it was this context, as I shall point out, which shaped a specific —and mislead— reception of their book.

In this respect, the situation in Europe was quite similar. *Social Construction* was translated in many languages. In Germany, for example, it was published 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, unideological approach, praised the comparatively low price of a high-quality book and expressed amazement that an American original was published in German within only three (actually four) years[1]. 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, it was the Frankfurt school as well as neo-Marxism which 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.

In this intellectual context, in the United States as well as in Europe, *Social Construction* was often interpreted with a special twist. Many left-liberal veterans of the '60s turned to this book to make sense of life and sociology, detecting the *arbitrariness* of social constructions (cf. Lemert, 1992, 10). «Constructionism» became a radical perspective which helped to reveal reality, to strip it of ideological distortions, and to pave the way for new interpretations. Academic feminism is a particularly prominent example for this view. As inspiring as such an interpretation can be, it is far indeed from Berger and Luckmann's intentions. Thus Luckmann assures: «whenever someone mentions "constructivism" or even "social constructionism", I run for cover these days» (Luckmann, 1992, 4). And Berger sees much of the «constructivist» literature as coming from the aforementioned «ideological cauldron with which I have no affinity whatever» (Berger, 1992, 2).

Instead, Berger and Luckmann advocated an *empirical sociology of knowledge* which investigates the intricate ways in which reality is socially constructed. They adhered to the Weberian maxim that a scientist's task is to describe and explain social actions and their consequences as they are, but not to proclaim any political stance how things *should be*. In practice, this maxim of *Werturteilsfreiheit* has to be seen in its own complexities: Any empirical description or proposition makes use of typifications which are embedded in systems of relevancies, i.e. necessarily has its value implications. Thus, to see existing social constructions on different premises may well sharpen one's eyes for how they are constructed, as both Schutz and Simmel have shown thoroughly with their analyses of being a stranger[2]. The main problem is not the search for ar-

bitrariness in social constructions, but the way such research is done. I would agree here with Mary F. Rogers who brands «theoretical tokenism» which unduly limits the impact of Berger and Luckmann's book: «*Social Constructionism* often serves as little more than theoretical shibboleth accompanied by a few flat propositions about how people 'construct' their identities, worldviews, and taken-for-granted ways of managing their affairs» (1992, 6).

3. PHENOMENOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY

On the other hand, even many of those who called themselves «*phenomenological sociologists*» did not grasp the logic of Berger and Luckmann's paradigm correctly. Many overlooked the central fact that the authors introduced their dualistic conception of the society as an objective and a subjective reality by a part they explicitly called «*philosophical* prolegomena» and as such «*presocialogical*»: the *phenomenological analysis* of the foundations of knowledge in everyday life. They draw a strict line between a phenomenological analysis of the life-world and a sociological analysis of society: Both are «empirical», although not in the same sense; while the phenomenological method is «egological», the social scientific method is «cosmological» (cf. Luckmann, 1973). In this sense, much of what has been labelled as «phenomenological sociology» had little to do with phenomenology and not much to do with sociology either!

It is one of the shortcomings of *Social Construction*, in my view, that Berger and Luckmann excluded epistemological and methodological considerations. I admit that tactically this may have been a good move: It stressed their intention to proclaim an *empirical* sociology of knowledge (as a «*Wirklichkeitswissenschaft*») which clearly differed from the older tradition, and it opened the door to the many social scientists who dislike any philosophical binding. However, they also risked broad misunderstandings of fundamental concepts and also missed out on a fuller analytic empowerment through Schutz' life-world analyses. For many it remained obscure why sociology should care about consciousness and subjective meanings, given their concern with social actions and social facts. Why should they not restrict their attention to external, observable behavior? Yet, it is Shutz' critical epistemological contribution to analyze in rich detail the act of interpretation (*Verstehen*) in everyday life as well as in the social sciences. The formal meaning structures of the (phenomenologically analyzed) life-world provides, on an *epistemological* level, a frame in which the *hermeneutic task* of any sociological analysis, qualitative or quantitative, inevitably has to be pursued. How (socially derived) subjective knowledge involved in concrete human actions can be explicated by the sociologist is a *methodological* issue. Its implications, however, are always epistemological.

Thus, it is highly illuminating to examine *Social Construction* in the context of the *Structures of the Life-World* (Shutz & Luckmann 1973, 1989) and of the respective authors' methodological writings (Luckmann 1973, for one; Berger & Kellner 1981). In this light, it becomes clear that rather terse term «construction» parallels «constitution»: *Construction* is a social process and has to be analyzed by sociology; the *constitution* of meaning is a subjective process which takes place in consciousness and has to be analyzed by phenomenology. Moreover, for readers bothered by the rather loose definitions of some central concepts in *Social Construction* (like "knowledge", "reality", "objectification" and so on), fine-grained specifications of each term can be found in the *Structures of the*

Life-World. Even for those skeptical of the potential of phenomenological analyses to evade the reflexive circle, few other books explicate human experience, knowledge and action, the different transcendencies and the complex interrelatedness of subjective and intersubjective knowledge in richer detail. Unfortunately, more than twenty years passed between the first publication of *Social Construction* and the publication of the second volume of *Structures of the Life-World*. This may have been one reason that the intimate relationship between the two has been recognized by rather few. In the intervening years, as indicated above, the reception of these basic ideas had taken quite diverse and often divergent routes.

4. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND SUBJECTIVE CONSTRUCTIVISM

Interestingly enough, Berger and Luckmann considered the title *The Social Construction of Reality* as self-evident: they have never delivered a clear definition of what they meant by it. Furthermore, readers of translated versions of the book may well find that what is called «construction» or «constructed» in their language is expressed differently in the English original. But, all things considered, «social construction» obviously has different meanings. For one, the term «construction» has a static as well as a dynamyc aspect. In its *static* aspect it denotes a reality-as-it-is (appears), in its *dynamic* aspect it means the *process* of reality-construction. Then again, it makes a difference if we see a natural landscape with its mountains, rivers, meadows, cows, farmhouses and so on —a *natural reality* shaped by our cultural knowledge— or if we gaze at a *society* which is produced, through and through, by human actions. To understand what is going on in society (e.g. in a social setting), the sociologist has to grasp the meanings the actors themselves employ and are embedded in.

It is one of the main theses of *Social Construction* that cultural constructs are socially stabilized by institutional structures. Constructions are thus not the subjective business of singular individuals. They are socially derived and intersubjectively shared and enacted. The *social constructionism* of Berger and Luckmann therefore stands in strong opposition to the *subjetive constructivism* that people like Paul Watzlawick and others' defend. The subjective construction of reality is always based on internalized cultural knowledge and —leaving aside deep pathological abberrations— coordinated with other human actors in interactions or collaboration. As Goffman poignantly puts it: «It some cases only a slight embarrassment flits across the scene in mild concern for those who tried to define the situation wrongly» (Goffman, 1974, 1).

Subjective constructivism leaves out just what *Social Construction* is all about: reality construction in interaction and conversation, by means of internalized social objectivations and typifications, stabilized by routines, institutionalizations and legitimations, and so on. Viewed against this background, subjective constructivism is ahistorical, asocial and blind to institutions. It is noteworthy that phenomenologists and adherents of the methodological individualism (in Weber's sense) have time and again encountered harsh criticism of being «too subjectivist», especially in American Sociology; but in fact, it is Berger and Luckmann —both phenomenologists as well as methodological individualists— who have always incisively rejected such flat subjectivism!

5. THE LEGACY FOR SOCIOLOGY

It was Berger and Luckmann's aim to «move the sociology of knowledge from the periphery to the very centre of sociological theory» (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, 29). They have partly succeeded: They managed to alter the consciousness of many sociologists and helped to institutionalize the «sociology of knowledge» as an acknowledged specialty in the sociological establisment. More encouraging may have been the fact that members of diverse disciplines, such as social psychologists, anthropologists, geographers, historians, ethologists and theologists also showed (and still show) a strong interest in *Social Construction*. If we consider, for instance, 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*[4], we can appreciate just how far ahead Berger and Luckmann were twenty-five years ago.

In addition, *Social Construction* has undoubtedly played a crucial role in making the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz popular to sociologists. Nowadays, phenomenological concepts are found throughout different fields of sociology. The German grand theorists, Habermas and Luhmann, have incorporated phenomenological concepts as central elements. Presently, even rational choice theorists are attempting to integrate Schutz' work on «choosing among projects of action» to refine their approach[5]. And in the United States, the so-called «neo-institutionalists» have developed an analysis that claims to draw directly on *Social Construction*[6]. However, there is also a lively discussion under way about how adequate these theorists are in hadling both the phenomenological framework and the social constructionist perspective and its concepts[7].

Berger and Luckmann themselves stayed close to Schutz. Both agree that their collaboration ended only because of geographical reasons (Berger, 1992, 2; Luckmann, 1992, 4). They also chose, although remaining compatible in principle, to follow different roads of theoretical development. Berger has repeatedly advocated to return to the «big questions» which are, in his understanding, of a «macrosociological» sort (Berger 1992, 2). His major intellectual focus after *Social Construction* became the problems of modernization and Third World Development. Since 1985 he has been Director of the Institute for the Study of Economic Culture at Boston University, working with an interdisciplinary group of social scientists. He still holds that the way *Social Construction* related «events within institutional structures to movements within the consciousness of individuals» is the best guide to deal with social issues: «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» (Berger, 1992, 2).

Luckmann, who has been at the University of Constance since 1970, was first engaged in editing Schutz' *Structures of the Life-World*. He then turned to what Berger would term a «microsociological» analysis, namely 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 campaings, local ecology appeals, pro- and anti-abortion arguments in various public and semi-public context, and the like» (Luckmann 1992, 4f.).

Luckmann has continued to influence quite a strong group of German sociologists. In analyzing what Berger and Luckmann (1967, 78) called the «conversational apparatus» in which a common sense of reality is constructed as an ongoing accomplishment in face-to-face situations, they borrow widely from ethnomethodology, ethnography, conversation analysis, symbolic interactionism, cognitive anthropology, and other specialities. By investigating the processes of reality construction locally and *in situ*, they complement the general level of analysis in *Social Construction* and materialize what had been Berger and Luckmann's goal from the outset: to found an *empirical sociology of knowledge*.

6. THE LEGACY FOR PSYCHOLOGY

There is a special legacy for psychology. The message of *Social Construction* in this respect is stronger than the rather scattered remarks throughout the book may indicate. Berger and Luckmann advocate a *sociologic psychology* —a psychology that derives its fundamental perspectives from a sociological understanding of the *conditio humana*. Let us review the main arguments.

If their analysis of the interrelatedness of subjective and social stocks of knowledge is right, it follows clearly that every type of psychology is based on a cosmology. The investigation of subjective reality always implies some sort of *social* definition of reality. This becomes particularly manifest in psychotherapy: Both the criteria by which pathological symptoms are identified as well as the therapeutical procedures by which the pathologies shall be cured, are socially defined. They are inevitably bound to a certain cultural world view of a given society. In a sociological perspective, therapies have common features with other procedures of legitimation and often serve a specific ideology. But also beyond pathology and therapy, psychological theories differ considerably from other types of theory: Because of the close nexus between internalization and identification they tend to exert, more than others, socializing effects and shape identities. In a dialectical sense, psychologies produce a reality, which in turn serves as the basis for their verification. Taking this argument to the hilt, we may conclude that psychology must be *critical*, in the sense that it must permanently reflect its social implications. Although we recognize a certain parallel to Habermas' postulate to hermeneutically reflect the socially defined background assumptions of social theory, there is a fundamental difference to the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt school: Psychological premises cannot serve as quasi-objective instance to criticize a given society but have to be scrutinized themselves for their cosmological implications.

A second argument for a sociological psychology results directly from the main thesis that reality is a *social* construction. It is vital to link reality constructions to their plausibility structures, to the interactive processes (often in institutionalized settings) in which they are produced and maintained. Psychology therefore always has to be *social psychology*: Subjective worlds cannot be detached from the social processes in which they are constructed, communicated and sustained; features and properties of individuals cannot be observed and conceived of without investigating the labelling processes by which they are attributed; and personal identities may not be separated from the social structure of a given society in which they are constituted.

Crucial in all these respects is the concept of *knowledge*: It reflects the dialectic between identity and its biological substratum and thus links social psychology whith philosophical anthropology. It also complements G.H. Mead's dialectic between personal and social identity with the dialectic between subjective and social stocks of knowledge. It thereby links social psychology to sociology, and by pointing to its social distribution, to the different cultural milieus with their specific typifications and systems of relevancies, it builds the bridge to the macrosociological level. These «links» and «bridges» are not just superficial rhetoric but attempt to achieve a fundamental integration. Although the authors repeatedly speak of microsociology and macrosociology, the logic of *Social Construction* proves this distinction to be artificial: Berger's «big» questions refer to the structure of society as a whole as well as to people's daily experience; modernization, urbanization, globalization, pluralism and so on are phenomena people actually experience in their everyday lives. Social psychological research therefore inevitably deals with phenomena of modernity or postmodernity even if it restricts itself to the so-called «micro»-level. The methodological implications are magnifold —e.g. concerning the status of its concepts— but cannot be discussed here any further.

To design a sociology of knowledge which links social psychology with philosophical anthropology on the one side and sociology on the other, has been an eminent contribution of Berger and Luckmann. Up to that time, neither the American social psychology nor the sociology of knowledge (e.g. Robert Merton) had recognized their relevance for each other. Even nowadays, *Social Construction* provides a theoretical framework which is much broader than most other social psychological theories. To transpose its programmatic outline of a social psychology into ambitious theory and empirical research still involves a lot of work for many years to come.

Notes

(1) Helmut Dahmer in Soziale Welt (1970/71), Wolf Lepenies in FAZ (1969) und F.U. Pappi in Sociologica Ruralis (1971) and many others. I thank Thomas Luckmann for giving me his whole set of collected reviews of the book, and for a very illuminating discussion.
(2) Schütz (1964) and Simmel (1968 [1908]).
(3) Cf. Watzlawick 1976, 1984.
(4) Cf., e.g., Holland & Quinn (1987).
(5) Cf. Hartmut Esser (1991, 1992).
(6) Cf. Powell & DiMaggio (1991).
(7) Cf. the methodological discussion of meaning adequacy in Eberle (1984). Concerning Habermas' concept of «life-world», see Matthiesen (1984); regarding Esser's interpretation of Schutz, see the critique of Prendergast (1992) and Srubar (1992).

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