# *The Lab's Quarterly*

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# The Lab's Quarterly

## 2018 / a. XX / n. 3 (luglio-settembre)

# SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM IN DECLINE
## A "Natural History" of a Paradigmatic Crisis

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## Abstract

Over the period of a half century, social constructionism earned a place in the multi-paradigmatic discipline of sociology by offering a subjectivistic explanation of contemporary social problems. This article suggests that social constructionism has run through its own "natural history" with orthodox constructionists defensively seeking a "fortress subjectivism" while more practical exponents have settled into theoretical eclecticism. Social constructionism made important contributions in filling the theoretical vacuum left with the mid-Twentieth Century collapse of structural-functionalism, but the need to move beyond it has become increasingly apparent. By examining its theoretical fissures and helping to expose its weaknesses, critical theorists can bolster their case that an alternative paradigm is needed that reconnects 21st century social problems with the global systemic crisis in which they are rooted.

## Keywords

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1. INTRODUCTION

As theoretical critiques of social constructionism have continued to accumulate in the sociological literature, a prolonged stagnation in the generation of new insights seem to point towards a deepening paradigmatic crisis. Constructionists have long argued in a pretentious way that they were the first and only sociological theory of social problems, mistaking their own subjectivistic formula of defining social problems for a "neutral", non-ideological object of inquiry. In its heyday, the constructionist critique was instrumental in contributing to a paradigmatic revolution in the Western sociological mainstream.

This article suggests that social constructionism has now seen its day, much like the structural-functionalist paradigm it courageously helped to displace. Consolidated social constructionism eventually gained respectability as it filled the vacuum created by the paradigmatic implosion of the functionalist mainstream. Tensions among its adherents, however, pushed many constructionists into a defensive posture, seeking a "fortress subjectivism" in the face of challenges to its practical relevance. More pragmatic analysts gravitated towards eclectic approaches, sacrificing orthodoxy in the search of reconnection to the real underlying relations of power that shape virtually all social problems.

By examining its theoretical fissures and helping to expose its weaknesses, critical theorists can continue to bolster their case that an alternative paradigm is needed that reconnects 21st century social problems with the global systemic crisis in which are rooted. In the end, social constructionism made important contributions to modern sociology, but the need to move beyond it has become increasingly apparent.

2. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM EMERGES WITH A HOST OF PARADIGMATIC CLAIMS

In many ways, the rise to prominence of social constructionism was made inevitable by the implosion of elitist and pretentious claims staked out by Parsonsian structural-functionalism, a paradigm that in its mid-20th century heyday dominated practically all of North American sociology. During the 1960s, a flush of alternative paradigms quickened to fill the vacuum produced by functionalism's decline in fortunes. An accumulated hostility to North American positivistic sociology, correctly seen as atheoretical, favored the emergence of more interpretative, *verstehende* approaches that would eventually mature into modern social constructionism. Particularly influential in this

regard was Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) that provided a theoretical watershed for nudging sociology more squarely into the realm of subjectivism.

In spite of its numerous theoretical virtues, Berger and Luckmann's treatise uncritically (or perhaps opportunistically) posited the central dilemma of contemporary sociology in epistemologically conservative terms. This essentially translated into a need for reconciliation between the Durkheimian and Weberian traditions. With the roots of their analysis based firmly in the phenomenological outlines of Edmund Husserl and their mentor, Alfred Schutz, the paradigmatic moment was ripe for Berger and Luckmann to stake out a timely insertion of radical subjectivism.

The impact of Berger's and Luckmann's treatise is indisputable. In his autobiographical work *Adventures of an Accidental Sociologist* (2011), Berger himself acknowledges its meteoric success in influencing the discipline, becoming "a kind of Manifesto" that would be picked up later by social constructionists (2011, 88-89.) Their paradigmatic call was for full disengagement from structural analysis through a subjective re-interpretation of patterned social behavior along with a methodological re-orientation in the direction of what Harold Garfinkel was already calling ethnomethodology. Berger and Luckmann's social construction "dialectic" effectively tilted the discipline towards the most radically neo-Kantian elements of Weberian interpretative sociology. Their particular twist on "resolving" the objectivistic-subjectivistic dichotomy proved to be seminal (although perhaps unintentionally) for paving the way towards eventual consolidation of social constructionism.

The immediacy of the connection between *The Social Construction of Reality* and consolidated social constructionism is itself a matter of debate. While the inspiration has been widely acknowledged,[2] the constructionist project evolved largely without any active dialogue with Berger and Luckmann who despite their successful collaboration soon went on their own respective ways. This disconnection from the authors of the "first constructionist manifesto" may be due to a number of reasons, including the fact that despite their radically subjectivistic approach, Berger and Luckmann remained more cautiously realist than many of the orthodox constructionists who followed. In his autobiography, Berger clarifies that he and Luckmann explicitly rejected those more inclined to postmodernist approaches and instead saw their work as a defense of enlightened modernism that remains reasonably

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[2] For a full discussion of this influence, see Joel Best (2007, 41-43).

realist. In fact, Berger explicitly accuses postmodernism of "hijacking" their legacy while he belittles the constructionist approach for its failure to grasp the nuanced existence of social facticity, an approach which in his view amounts to a nihilistic recipe for disaster (2011, 94-95).

Yet, it was precisely the theoretical ambition in Berger and Luckmann's phenomenological treatise that inspired a whole generation of sociologists, many already immersed in the Meadian interactionist tradition, to climb out of the confines of social psychology and make a subjectivistic grab for the whole sociological pie. The dynamic element of pattered intersubjectivity was the new rage while discussion of any necessary linkage to social structure was left to languish. In essence, the fascination with phenomenological "critique" denigrated the objective metabolism of social life by relegating social ontology to an exclusively subjective plane. The multitude of conceptual dead ends that this generated has never been fully appreciated. Here, I wish to emphasize how its lopsided epistemological approach falters precisely at the critical point of pragmatic and political concerns of social movements, thereby cementing into place the reactionary edge of what later matured into social constructionism.

## 3. CONSOLIDATING CONSTRUCTIONISM AS A "UNIQUE THEORY" OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

As interactionists rapidly gained influence in the field of deviance, with a strong organizational influence in the SSSP, a second constructionist "manifesto" emerged in Malcolm Spector and John Kitsuse's 1977 work *Constructing Social Problems.* It was this work that completed the circuit, consolidating the emergence of "social constructionism" as a practical working model for social problems research. Spector and Kitsuse's (1977) "constructionism" staked their paradigmatic claim on a general theory of social problems. Their "natural history approach" repackaged and applied the "world openness" of human actors and the idealized objectivation process that forms the ontological lynchpin of Berger and Luckmann's social construction treatise. This now made anything and everything potentially eligible to be a social problem, once problematic claims are made collectively "real" through a dynamic *lebenswelt* of protest. Similar to Berger and Luckmann's version, the everyday knowledge remained in focus, now being constructed on the part of "ordinary joe" claims-makers seen in periodic conflict with established institutionalized practices.

The intense theoretical dispute through which this initially

precarious approach sought to contrast itself with Mertonian sociology effectively transformed objective *reality* into a ghostly haunting for the constructionist project, one to be exorcised from analysis at all costs. It was this phantastic struggle that became substituted for the real historically ongoing ones, re-creating all sorts of insurmountable obstacles within social constructionism to creating a progressive alternative for the discipline. The social construction of social problems was processual, just like Berger and Luckmann's was "dialectical", but neither were historical in a realist political economy sense.

Spector (2018) explains that while he was influenced by Chicago School approaches that kept him tied to institutional analysis, Kitsuse had greater affinity to labeling theory and ethnomethodology. The marriage of these theorists pointed to a viable paradigm that could guide empirical research in a definitionist mode that could extend up through the macro level of analysis while retaining an appreciation for the volitional human actor as envisioned by symbolic interactionism.

The constructionist process was now free to be delightfully filled with unrestrained human agency as a response to the establishment. It was a perfect sequel to the 1960's. Conflict theory could be selectively weaved into a societal reaction scenario. Meanwhile, the objective reality of structural oppression within historically-defined structures was to be discarded, politically "bracketed" so as to permit a fully ephemeral (and presumably more reliable) analysis of meanings being collectively defined as "social problems." The quotes keys of electronic typewriters everyway were getting a real workout.

## 4. A POSTMODERN HEIST? CONSTRUCTIONISM SEEKS TO REFORMULATE BUT SPLINTERS

So beyond Berger's own theoretical implosion, what is to be made of his charge regarding the postmodern heist of social constructionism? Consider Stephen Pfohl's (1977) influential article in *Social Problems* on the "Discovery of Child Abuse", published in the same year as Spector and Kitsuse's "manifesto." Pfohl was already suggesting the possibility of a more critical and power-reflective social construc-tionism, moving far more rapidly than the constructionist mainstream. By the time of his spectacular 1992 SSSP Presidential address entitled "Postmodernity as a Social Problem", Berger's accusation was now sounding prophetic as Pfohl (1992) exposited a supercharged left-postmodernism while he lashed out at the media-fabricated war hysteria surrounding the first Persian Gulf War. The implication was clear that

social constructionism impelled critical if not unpredictable outcomes for the discipline.

To quote Pfohl's 1997 article entitled "The Cybernetic Delirium of Norbert Wiener", it is "the fluid, high speed, and densely layered webs of communicatively driven positive and negative "feedback" which, this very moment, affect the ways you are receiving my words. This is a story of how loops of cybernetic feedback are informing the energetic ritual organization of power between ourselves and others. Within the fast-flexible boundaries of global capital, the most dominant, but certainly not all, of these feedback loops carry a masculine, heterosexist, and racially inscribed charge" (Pfohl 1997, 58).

Somewhat contrary to its intended design, Pfohl's brilliant and provocative work suggested to me an urgent need to arc back towards the materiality lurking behind social constructionist imaginary. This requires a recalibration of the dynamic, processual and even sensual advances of social constructionism with a materialist analysis of 21st century capitalist structures. The task is to move us into deeper levels of analysis and strategy since the crisis is not merely a symbolic object of inquiry but rather for many a question of survival.

## 5. MOVING BEYOND CONSTRUCTIONISM

In the decades since Spector and Kitsuse, we have seen social constructionism play out its own "natural history", first with a reach towards unsustainable orthodoxy, then towards re-accommodation with the rest of the field, supplementing conflict approaches with viral strains of postmodernism. As "fundamentalist" constructionists would continue to rail against structural common sense, much sensitivity was lost as to how social actors actively construct their social realities, but do so under changing structural conditions rarely of their choosing. In the academic world that these constructionists were "constructing", left and right politics effectively became homogenized and exploitation remained ephemerally trapped in the eyes of the beholder.

Predictably, critiques pointing to the shortcomings of constructionism did not take long to appear. Just one year after Kitsuse himself had presided over the SSSP, Francis Fox Piven's memorable presidential address of 1980 amounted to a scathing critique of constructionism, demonstrating how it "purged the elemental dialectic of resistance from social life" (1981, 507). But an even more devastating, "internal" critique emerged from a 1985 *Social Problems* piece by Steven Woolgar and Dorothy Pawluch (1985) in which they

slammed orthodox social constructionism for its "ontological gerrymandering", i.e., its opportunistic or selective relativism.

Among other things, Woolgar and Pawluch showed that in practice it was the sociological constructionist who gets to decide which are the "really real", taken for granted backgrounds against which we can contrast the socially constructed constituent elements within social problems inquiry. This was a particularly heavy blow to orthodox constructionists. On one level, it revealed the basic theoretical inconsistency within Spector and Kituse's approach by showing how they exhibit notable lapses into realism while claiming to the contrary. At another level, it revealed the subtle presence of sociological elitism of the same sort for which constructionists had so vigorously critiqued the structural functionalists. Constructionists like Spector and Kitsuse had, after all, revealed how functionalists of various stripes typically posed as the ultimate "experts" in determining what social conditions were to be considered "problems".

As I have summarized elsewhere, Woolgar and Pawluch's critique "staked out social constructionism's lack of any reliable basis for the erection of conceptual firewalls within the construction of their own discourse, compelling them to be either opportunistic in the establishment of objectivistic escape routes or else burn up in the very process of their hot pursuit of subjectivistic purity" (Dello Buono 2004, 42). The impact of this critique was still being felt a decade later when an important collection by Miller and Holstein (1993) entitled *Reconsidering Social Constructionism* offered a broad albeit mostly orthodoc collection regarding social constructionism's influence in social problems research.

This collection arose out of SSSP sessions of the late 80s and at the onset, recognized the strong influence that former-SSSP President Kitsuse has had in the field. Indeed, they referred to him in their preface as the consistently "radical, constitutive voice" within constructionist sociology. By then, the great debate raging among constructionists largely revolved around exactly how subjectivistic the overall approach should be if it was to sustain its own paradigmatic claims-making.

In an essay that reflected back on his pioneering work, Spector offered a telling commentary: «It has been forty years since the public-cation of Constructing Social Problems. In many ways the goals of our approach have been realized. Everyone who has adopted the approach has succeeded in focusing exclusively on the definitional process. No one has fallen back into a search for the causes of the putative conditions. [...] Many who have followed this approach have had

excellent careers and produced a large body of interesting work» (Spector 2018, 5).

Hence, Spector clarifies in no uncertain terms that the constructionist perspective properly speaking demands subjectivistic exclusivity and that the goal of academic respectability has been realized. This offers a candid version of what others have argued more subtly, namely, that social constructionism was the first and remains the only uniquely sociological theory of social problems.

Critics from within constructionism have largely disputed the orthodoxy of the paradigm's founders. The substantially more pragmatic approach taken by Joel Best in the early 90s (e.g., 1993) and continuing in much of his later work expounded the necessary internal calibration for constructionist analysis. His urgent recommendation was that constructionism should be coaxed away from epistemological debates and overextension of reach in favor of stressing modest empirical contributions to studying claims making that are compatible with co-validation through other methods. Best therefore made a pivotal contribution to building in marking a sustainable path for further paradigmatic development of liberal constructionism.

Best, unquestionably one of social constructionism's greatest theorists, more recently broke still further with the paradigm's more orthodox and often defensive voices as he reflected back the foundational work of the paradigm: «*Constructing Social Problems* was an important statement: it drew attention to the problem of defining social problems as a field of study and offered a useful approach to developing a more coherent study of social problems. But the field has moved on. We now have all of those case studies, and *Constructing Social Problems* no longer offers a satisfactory general framework for thinking about social problems» (Best 2018).

Amidst this internal struggle for paradigmatic sustainability in the face of its more orthodox variants, one overarching problem with constructionism was rarely being discussed within their ranks. Namely, that the perspective was becoming mired in political irrelevance and pervasive accusations of "so what?" In the end, it seemed that social constructionism had merely succeeded in displacing functionalist jargon with its own finely cultured, apolitical academic discourse. As Ian Hacking put it: «social constructionism [initially] carried excellent shock value but it became tired; [worse yet,] it became part of the discourse that it is trying to undo» (2000, 25-36).

Part of social constructionism's undeniable appeal was its processual approach in capturing the subjective complexity of human agency. It is

its failure to re-link back to the structural constraints of political economy that seems so badly out of touch to many scholar activists grappling with the current crisis. The processual world of the ahistorical claims-maker who actively goes about constructing their own social problems explicitly de-politicizes and rips social actors out of their structural context. It eerily resembles the patterned dogma of rational action approaches which in their contrary case seek to exit history by harmonizing the voluntaristic human actor with the neoliberal premises of self-interested human nature and universalized constructs of *homo oeconomicus.*

In short, social constructionism tends to freeze the historical moment of the larger political economy in a way that takes our eye off the moving ball. What is needed is a critical approach that privileges the centrality of human praxis as situated within the historically defined relations of the larger political economy. As scholar-activists, we need something to the left of social constructionism. This kind of approach can begin with a reconstituted dialectical model of social problems that is politically sensitive to addressing both the objectivistic and subjectivistic elements of social change.

As Crawley (2018:9) succinctly states: "some critically important topics about social problems – power, equity, and human suffering – become unsanctioned by strict constructionism. History and context become irrelevant in this formulation. This is too great a price. Constructionist work must be about something and it ought to be focused on the relevance of social relations for people in the world".

6. CONCLUSION

Social constructionism, despite early struggles with its climb out of social psychology, eventually made significant progress in pulling social movements into the mainstay of analysis. However, Benford's (1997) insider critique of the constructionist approach to social movements accurately characterized its generalized tendency towards reification in a way that neglects human agency, leading to the oversimplification of collective action. This agency is, in historical reality, constrained in highly patterned ways. Similar critiques of resource mobilization approaches suggested the inadequate attention being paid to the macro structures of the contradictory political economy. Following Buechler's (2000:61) insight that social movements are rooted in multiple, historically specific levels of social structure, there is a need to more fully incorporate the global level of sociohistorical structure.

Contemporary social movement analysis in the context of global crisis cannot be addressed at the frontiers of social psychology, but rather in the real structural spaces that constrain and shape their movement. Resistance, activism and social movements both in more and less developed countries cannot be either understood or informed apart from the synchronic layers of their structural location in a global movement of accumulation, with due attention to the regional and national dynamics that shape multiple resistances and sites of struggle.

Disappointingly, Malcom Spector suggests that young scholars and others should "Ignore the critical literature. Do not waste too much time reading it. Do not cite it. Do not contribute to it. Do not feel that you have to master it before beginning your empirical research. Do not take sides in the controversies (2018, 6). Best (2018) contradicts this view as he continues to advocate a pragmatic case for "saving" social constructionism. In choosing to comment directly on my own critique of constructionism, Best asserted: «Some analysts might prefer to forego constructionist thinking altogether, to instead devise a non-constructionist theory of social problems. For example, Dello Buono (2013, 2015) has called for moving beyond social constructionism through a dialectical approach. […] This approach promises a couple things. First, it adopts a conflict-centered analysis of social structure and the oppression that derives from it. Whereas constructionists argue that all knowledge is a product of social construction, Dello Buono (2015, 331) confidently speaks of the "objectively real context of capitalist social relations"» (Best 2018, 5-6). So while Best seeks to dispute the objective reality of capitalist social relations, seeing it as "ideological", he acknowledges that constructionists should welcome the emergence of rival theories of social problems.

Social constructionism was never particularly well-suited for the task of engaged activism. Its principal defect rests in its self-imposed political limits and its failure to adequately situate the subjective elements of critical analysis in the objectively real context of capitalist domination. Even now in its patched-up eclectic phase, it has lost the ability to generate new insights into confronting problems and to adequately interface with the 'actually existing' struggles underway to transform and transcend the present crisis. Just in the past, this opens the door for alternative paradigmatic approaches and I believe that critical sociologists should seize the moment and move decisively through this opening.

Crawley (2018) deftly reiterates the question for social constructionism as needing to actually address the "so what" question:

What does constructionist work help us know? How is it relevant? […] The question of relevance is theoretical; it is also practical. We live in an historical moment in which social relations seem defined by increasing division, animosity, violence, and human suffering. What can constructionist perspectives tell us that is useful to practical actors attempting to understand such a world? How can constructionism yield information helpful to practical actors working to change the world? [...] [T]he future of constructionist perspectives on social problems likewise depends upon developing new insights about how constructionist examinations yield information useful to broader publics (2018, 12).

Indeed, the challenge is to rescue the sociological common sense that is now the legacy of social constructionism, namely, to recalibrate its processual analyses of constructionism and re-link it with the material and structural elements of 21$^{st}$ Century capitalism in structural crisis. In the end, a viable social ontology is needed to balance the subjectivistic emphases of constructionism to the end of preserving its most salient insights and incorporating them into a more powerful synthesis for social problems inquiry. Yet, this must somehow be done free of engaging in endless ontological inquiry or constraining it with an overly-determined structural straightjacket. The aim should be to replace the docile and politically useless attitude of detached reflexivity and in its place, implant an insurgent attitude that presupposes the necessity of structural change.

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