Concepts of Realism in Constructivist Approaches

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Abstract

The thesis of this paper is that the debate on realism versus constructivism is misconceived as there exist many different variants of constructivism, each of which operates with a certain, albeit minimalist social ontology. Different concepts of realism are carved out in phenomenology, Berger and Luckmann's social constructivism, ethnomethodology, relational constructionism, and, finally, communicative constructivism. A differentiated view is recommended.

Keywords: Constructivism; realism; phenomenology; social and empirical constructivism; relational constructionism; communicative constructivism.

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Sociological textbooks typically display a variety of different theoretical approaches. Since Kuhn's idea that great progress in the natural sciences happens by way of new "paradigms," there has been a craze in sociology to call a new theoretical approach a "paradigm" and thereby to insinuate progress. Another development has been to speak of "turns." In recent decades we have had a "linguistic turn," an "interpretive turn," a "cultural turn," a "postmodern turn," a "textual turn," a "performative turn," a "postcolonial turn," a "reflexive turn," a "discursive turn," a "body turn," a "spatial turn," a "transnational turn," an "iconic" or "pictorial turn," a "material turn," a "sensory turn," etc. Such turns usually take place in many different disciplines, identifying an important aspect of social reality that, so far, was a blind spot, or only marginally considered, and now is put center-stage. Each turn is, when taking place, considered as a remarkable scientific progression (at least by its proponents).

Currently, some authors call for a "realist turn" to take aim at the constructivist movement. After Berger & Luckmann's (1967) *The Social Construction of Reality*, this movement became widespread and came with a variety of sociological ramifications. As in all such debates, the "new" must be given a profile by identifying the "old" which is to be overcome, and the "old" usually turns out to be a strawman erected to be torn down. In this paper, I will scrutinize the claim that phenomenology and social constructivism ostensibly lack realism. I will consider various forms of constructivism but restrict treatment to those which deal with social processes. Hence, I exclude, for instance, radical, cognitive constructivism from consideration and will rather focus on phenomenology, especially the mundane phenomenology of Alfred Schütz, the "social construction of reality" of Berger and Luckmann which builds on Schütz, and empirical constructivism such as ethnomethodology which is also heavily influenced by phenomenology. Subsequently, I will consider the postmodern social constructivism of Ken Gergen, who also started off with Berger and Luckmann's *Social Construction*, but developed it considerably in different, creative ways; this approach was very influential and has significantly contributed to the opinion that social constructivism and realism must be antagonists. Finally, I discuss communicative constructivism as the newest form which integrates different recent turns that are considered indispensable for a proper sociological analysis. In order to reduce complexity, I will restrict my focus on key representatives only, such as founders of an approach.

1   Husserl's Transcendental Phenomenology and New Realism

Many social constructivists agree that phenomenology has paved the way for a constructivist worldview in sociology. Why is that? Phenomenology, founded by Edmund Husserl at the beginning of the 20th century, showed convincingly that conventional dualisms such as rationalism vs. empiricism, subjectivism vs. objectivism, or idealism vs. realism, are nonsense as both are mutually dependent. Already Kant, whose transcendental philosophy asked for the conditions of the possibility of cognition, argued that we cannot uncover "the thing per se," the thing-in-itself, but only the thing-as-it-appears-to-us. These things are bound to the *a prioris* of our perception. But how could Kant know that there is a thing-in-itself at all if we cannot detect it? Husserl (2012) was more radical in this aspect: all we can cognize are phenomena, and phenomena are objects as perceived by subjective consciousness. Hence, consciousness and world, subject and object, cannot be separated; they are intertwined. This is sometimes called "correlationalism" (see Zahavi, 2016, pp. 4–9).

Phenomenology's basic call was to go *back to the things themselves* (see Husserl, 2001a; 2001b), and these are the phenomena as constituted in our subjective consciousness. Just as there is no objective thing in itself, there is no consciousness in itself. Subjective consciousness

is always a consciousness *of something*. If I perceive, think, feel, imagine — I always perceive something, think of something, feel something, imagine something. As these examples demonstrate, phenomena can be things perceived in the "outer" world but also thoughts, emotions, and imaginations in the "inner" world. The "intentionality" of consciousness is a central phenomenological concept, and these intentionalities are in a continuous flow, that Husserl speaks of as the "stream of consciousness." This temporal dimension of perceived phenomena is fundamental to phenomenology, as is the spatial dimension for objects of the outer world. In addition, every subjective consciousness is bound to a lived body whose different senses provide a variety of sensory data. A crucial insight of phenomenology is that phenomena do not just consist in sensory data, they are at the same time *meaningfully constituted*.

Husserl developed several methods to pursue a phenomenological analysis. All of them are descriptive and egological, i.e., a phenomenologist investigates the phenomena in his or her own subjective consciousness. One of these methods is the "*epoché*" or *eidetic reduction*; the "bracketing" of the assumptions of the natural attitude that we regularly rely upon in everyday life. It reduces iteratively the beliefs, theoretical and pre-theoretical presuppositions, hypotheses, and elements of knowledge that are usually involved in the constitution of a phenomenon. Elucidating all these presuppositions helps to clear the way from the particulars to the universal *eidos* (essence) of a phenomenon. Another method is *constitutive analysis*, which starts at the other end and asks *how we constitute the sense of phenomena*. The core is *apperception*: what is actually perceived? Phenomena are constituted with an outer horizon — against a "background," within a "context" — but they have also an inner horizon which is constituted by *appresentation*: We perceive not only what is perceivable but "appresent" other aspects that are not perceivable (e.g., we see a "house" although we only perceive its front side). Phenomena are constituted in passive syntheses and include sensory apperception as well as meaning. A crucial difference to many other, especially linguistic approaches is that phenomenology analyzes the constitution of meaning on a *pre-predicative level*. Subjective experience is always more than, and different from, what is formulated in language. It is therefore crucial to pursue an analysis at the pre-predicative level of subjective experience and not only at the level of its representations on the *predicative level of language*.

The late Husserl (1970) coined the notion of the "life-world," a notion that has become widespread in modern sociology. The life-world is the world as we subjectively experience it. It is the basis of all science. Husserl argues that the crisis of modern sciences was caused by the fact that they had taken their idealizations and abstractions — their mathematical and geometrical formulae — for bare truth, and had forgotten that they originated in the life-world. Husserl was referring to the natural sciences, but this claim also applies to the social sciences, which sometimes only see numbers, graphs and statistical distributions, but not the society as it is *experienced* by its members. The phenomenological life-world analysis aims at solving this crisis by elucidating the workings of scientific methods.

Phenomenology has become the most important philosophical tradition of the 20th century, a broad movement with many ramifications (Spiegelberg, 1982). My brief sketch of some constitutive elements cannot display phenomenology's full complexity, but may be sufficient in the present context. In spite of its many plausible analyses and its influence on many scientific disciplines, phenomenology has recently come under fierce attack. In the name of a "speculative realism," Tom Sparrow (2013) proclaims nothing less than *The End of Phenomenology*. Under the label of "speculative realism" he includes authors such as Graham Harman (2005, 2011), Quentin Meillassoux (2006) and Ray Brassier (2007), who are united in their radical opposition to the strong correlationism of phenomenology and its alleged idealism and anti-realism,

while advocating for quite different theoretical positions in other aspects. Meillassoux, for instance, considers scientific realism as the only available option. Astronomy and cosmology have proven that the world has existed for billions of years, while human subjects who consciously perceive and research this world have developed comparatively recently. Hence, it is the natural sciences who answer the ultimate questions of life, not philosophy (as Hawking & Mlodinow, 2010, also insinuate). However, they skip the crucial question how natural scientists acquire their knowledge. They obviously arrive at their results by means of certain methods, and these methods are, as Husserl emphasized, embedded in a concrete human life-world. As with all scientific realism, speculative realism takes abstractions and idealizations for bare truth, just as Husserl criticized. In this worldview, the constitutive achievements of human consciousness in gaining scientific insights are completely ignored. Indeed, human consciousness is regarded as just another object in an evolution of the cosmos which is governed by causal laws.

The phenomenologist Dan Zahavi (2016) wrote a fine critique of Sparrow's book. He points out many misunderstandings of phenomenology and fallacies in his argumentation. Sparrow reduces everything to the idealism-realism debate. But what about phenomenology's "investigations of intentionality, experience, emotions, self-consciousness, perception, imagination, social cognition, action, embodiment, truth, temporality, ethics, community, historicity, etc.?" And what about "the influence the phenomenological analyses have had on such disciplines as psychiatry, architecture, education, sports science, psychology, nursing, comparative literature, anthropology, sociology etc?" (Zahavi, 2016, p. 201). Obviously, speculative realism does not offer any alternative insights in these respects, it has rather reached its own dead-end. Zahavi concludes that we should rather speak of the end of speculative realism instead of the end of phenomenology.

2   Realism in the Mundane Phenomenology of Alfred Schütz

Speculative realism that deals with astronomical and cosmological matters is certainly not very helpful to human sciences. Dilthey (1977) distinguishes the human from the natural sciences by his famous formula that we "*explain*" nature but "*understand*" the life of the mind. When Schütz (1967) attempts to provide a philosophical foundation to the methodology of the social sciences, notably one of Max Weber's interpretive sociology and his theory of action, he carefully scrutinizes how Husserl's transcendental phenomenology can contribute to this endeavour. He considers Max Weber's methodological individualism and his definition that sociology must grasp the subjective sense (or meaning) of social actions as key-insights and uses phenomenological analyses to clarify several equivocations in Weber's conception. As cultural sciences deal with the mundane social life, Schütz (1967) advocates a "mundane phenomenology" (p. 44) that is only concerned with phenomena within the natural attitude. What does this mean?

Husserl's transcendental reduction brackets the existence of things. It does not deny this existence; it simply brackets it. This way he can analyze the givenness of all kinds of phenomena on an equal level. He was convinced that the constitutive achievements of the transcendental ego are the source of everything. Schütz claims that the insights Husserl gained at the transcendental level are equally valid on the mundane level. However, he doubts that the problem of intersubjectivity can be adequately dealt with in the transcendental sphere of analysis, thinking this runs the risk of ending up in solipsism. Influenced by Max Scheler, a realist phenomenologist who abstained from Husserl's transcendental turn, Schütz posits the existence of the other and also the pre-existence of society as a social a priori; the mundane ego was born and social-

ized in a society that already existed before, which implies that "as long as humans are born of mothers and not produced in test tubes, genetically-constitutionally the experience of the alter ego precedes the experience of my own self" (Schütz, 2013, p. 261). Schütz thereby gains a sociological view which explains why people experience their everyday life as shared with others, why they have learned to communicate with each other and how their actions often have an impact on society.

In other words, Schütz's mundane phenomenology has not only a *subjective* but also an *intersubjective*, *pragmatic* pole — a pivotal point that has been overlooked by many scholars. The life-world is not only perceived and experienced in subjective consciousness, but it is also *constituted by pragmatic social actions*. Srubar (1988) detects this 'pragmatic turn' already in Schütz's early writings (Schütz, 2013) and postulates that Schütz complemented Husserl's *paradigm of perception* with a *paradigm of action*: a human being is not only *a cognizing subject* but also *an acting subject*. The pragmatic life-world theory encompasses both the subjective, cognitive pole and the social, pragmatic pole, and the two are related to one another. Schütz realized that his mundane, pragmatic theory of the life-world is a legitimate counterpart of transcendental phenomenology and emphasizes the *primacy of the pragma*: it is sociality that founds subjectivity, not the other way around (Srubar, 1988). The interaction in a we-relationship represents the heart of mundane sociality, and thinking is derived from communication (as postulated also by Mead, 2015). In this respect, Schütz developed much affinity to pragmatism and symbolic interactionism, but remained also critical of them (particularly in respect to their biological and behavioristic elements).

Mundane phenomenology observes that people in their everyday lives share a relative natural attitude with all kinds of unquestioned assumptions. This makes up their reality — their common-sense view of the world. In its own analyses, however, mundane phenomenology operates with a *minimum of ontological assumptions*. It is the goal of Schütz to elucidate the formal properties of the life-world that all human beings share. The structures of the life-world that Schütz carved out in the course of his life are rich and detailed (see Schütz & Luckmann, 1973; 1989). Schütz claims that they are *universal and invariant* and identical for all human beings in this world across all cultures. For example, the social world is structured in space and time in relation to the experiencing subject: there are those whom I personally know, and there are contemporaries, predecessors and successors. Every ("normal") actor on Earth has a subjective, biographically determined stock of knowledge at hand (that is derived from the social stock of knowledge of the respective society); uses (linguistic and pre-linguistic) typifications and is guided by certain relevance systems; orients in time and space; and relies on systems of rappresentation such as indications, marks, signs and symbols in order to understand others or to relate to multiple realities. Such universal formal structures can be phenomenologically described and represent a philosophical anthropology, while the *concrete contents* of a stock of knowledge, of typifications and relevance systems, of temporal and spatial orientation, and so on are *historically and culturally contingent* and therefore objects of empirical research.

This way, the mundane phenomenology of Schütz provides a solid basis for doing sociology, with a *realistic attitude* that people exist, that their actions and interactions exist, and that they collaboratively produce the society they live in. Although Schütz distinguished "manifold realities" such as the world of everyday life, phantasies, dreams, and science, he always emphasized that the world of everyday life — the world of social relationships and communication — is the "paramount" reality. But which types and which languages actors use, which knowledge they apply, and which relevance systems they are guided by as well as how the different actions and interactions are interpreted, are all matters of empirical investigation. With his

methodological postulates, above all the postulates of subjective interpretation and adequacy (the postulate that second-order constructs of social science must be consistent with the first-order constructs of common-sense) Schütz also described how social sciences (should) proceed. All in all, he showed that the methodology of the social sciences cannot be based only on the logic of research but also requires a constitution theory of social reality.

3 Realism in the Social Constructivism of Berger and Luckmann

Based on Schütz's foundation, Berger and Luckmann (1967) published *The Social Construction of Reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. This book appeared at a time when several new approaches challenged the prevailing positivism and structural functionalism of North American sociology, creating what Gouldner (1970) called "The coming crisis of Western Sociology." Berger and Luckmann's was probably the most influential new approach; in an International Sociological Association survey it figured among the five most influential books of the 20th Century (ISA, 2023). The book title presented a thesis that was strongly provocative: reality is socially constructed. It seemed to contradict an ontological belief in a "reality-out-there-as-it-objectively-is" and to conceive of reality as something much more fluid — as something "constructed." In this sense, the book was often referenced — and often thoroughly misunderstood.

Whoever takes a clear look at the contents of the book detects a new theoretical approach with a clear structure — maybe even a new "paradigm" (Pfadenhauer & Knoblauch, 2019). The book has three sections. In the first section, a philosophical prolegomena, the foundations of a sociology of knowledge are spelled out. Berger and Luckmann recognize that Schütz's phenomenological analysis of the reality of everyday life provides an excellent basis to develop a new sociological approach. In contrast to the classic sociology of knowledge of Scheler and Mannheim, which focused on the knowledge of elites, they proclaim that sociology must deal with the common-sense knowledge that actors apply in everyday situations. Knowledge is basic and indispensable in any human and social action. "Knowledge" is therefore a most fundamental term for sociology, more fundamental than, for instance, "culture." Novel at the time was in addition that the authors, again following Schütz, emphasized the importance of language, which had remained relatively disregarded in social theories until this time. When Luckmann later edited Schütz's *Structures of the Life-World* in two volumes (Schütz & Luckmann, 1973; 1989), it became manifest how rich and detailed and, above all, how systematic Schütz's analyses are. In Luckmann's (1983) view, they provide a "protosociology," a "pre-sociological," philosophical foundation to sociology. Due to Luckmann's eminent influence in German sociology, the German Sociological Association has its own section for "Sociology of Knowledge." Many of its members still view Berger and Luckmann's approach as a solid paradigm that is systematically connected to Schütz's *Structures of the Life-World*.

On the basis of Schütz's phenomenological analyses of the life-world, Berger and Luckmann (1967) present a social theory that consists of two perspectives: society as objective reality; and society as subjective reality. These perspectives are dialectically linked, which is well formulated in their famous phrase, "Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 61). Referring to Marx's dialectics was fashionable at that time, but remains somewhat abstract in this context (with no "synthesis" in sight). The core concepts of the new social theory, however, do link its perspectives: externalization — objectivation — internalization. Humans are born into a pre-existing society with manifold objectivations, such as action patterns, institutions, language, symbols, and

so on, and are socialized by internalizing local language and social knowledge; and they reproduce, modify and complement them by externalization of their own views and ideas. In the second section, society as objective reality, Berger and Luckmann explain the social order by highlighting processes of institutionalization (routines, traditions, reciprocal roles) and legitimation, which imply the typical problems of a sociology of knowledge such as social organization, the distribution of knowledge, as well as processes of power. In the third section, society as subjective reality, the processes of socialization and identity construction are analyzed, along with how humans handle situations of crisis. The aim of Berger and Luckmann's (1967) social theory, with its two interlinked perspectives, is to reconcile Weber's approach of studying the subjective meaning (sense) of social action and Durkheim's dictum to treat social facts as a reality of their own, asking, "How is it possible that subjective meanings *become* objective facticities?" (p. 18), with the overall goal of creating a new sociology of knowledge (for an in-depth description of Berger and Luckmann's approach, see Eberle, 2019).

What is reality in the *Social Construction*? Like Schütz, Berger and Luckmann (1967) tie the term "reality" intimately to "knowledge." "Reality" is defined very simply "as a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition (we cannot 'wish them away'),'" and "knowledge" as "the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics" (Berger & Luckman, 1967, p. 1). The authors claim that any reality is socially constructed, but their book's scope is limited to the question how social reality is socially constructed. Taking Schütz's phenomenological life-world analysis as a proto-sociological basis implies that they adhere to the same social ontology: human actors and their actions and interactions are real, as are all the structures of the life-world. The depicted social processes of institutionalization, legitimation and socialization are considered as real, too. The social world, with all its manifold objectivations and social processes, is the paramount reality of everyday life, which is experienced as shared with others and which is "independent of our own volition." There are subjective meanings and views, but there are also objective facticities. The key term "social construction" means that different societies may construct different realities, as is confirmed by historical and intercultural comparisons. However, each society manages to produce a more or less stable order which can be empirically researched. Although Berger and Luckmann do not discuss the methodology of how to empirically study processes of reality construction, their explicit goal is to create a suitable theoretical framework for an empirical sociology of knowledge. It is therefore only logical that both Berger (1992, p. 2) and Luckmann (1992, p. 4) later rejected any version of "constructivism" or "social constructionism" and declared that they were not constructivists.

That they leave most of their theoretical key concepts loosely defined and ambiguous reflects their *strong resistance against reifications*. They vehemently object to detaching agency from human actors by, for example, locating it on the level of systems, as if "institutions" or "society" as entities could act. Only actors can act. This is why Berger and Luckmann adopt methodological individualism — not in the sense of isolated actors making choices as in many rational choice theories, but in the sense of socialized actors who live in social relationships, as Weber and Schütz conceived them. The social processes of reality construction must be studied empirically on the level of concrete actions and interactions. A group or community may construct a transcendent reality of spirits and apparitions that are not directly observable, but their social actions, their rituals and ceremonies around it can be empirically researched. (see, for instance, Knoblauch & Schnettler, 2015).

4　Realism in Empirical Constructivism

With his *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, Garfinkel (1967) paved the way to an empirical constructivism. Inspired by phenomenology, particularly that of Schütz, he created an alternative approach to explain the problem of order than the one of his mentor, Talcott Parsons. Garfinkel explicitly embarks on the pragmatic, social pole of Schütz's life-world analysis and dismisses the subjective pole. He is only interested in what is empirically observable, i.e., in social actions. What happens in the head or in the subjective consciousness of an actor remains hidden to the observer and is therefore regarded as irrelevant. Like Berger and Luckmann, he objects to any sort of theoretical reification but is much more radical than them. He disapproves of all theoretical concepts of conventional sociology because he considers them hampering a clear gaze on what is actually going on — they just "gloss" over the real phenomena. Like Schütz, Garfinkel strives for a minimalist social ontology, but even more minimalist: he repudiates the systematic structures of the life-world and concepts such as "biographically determined stock of knowledge at hand," "shared knowledge," and so on. How could we know that there is such a thing as "biography"? If such a thing as "biography" ever becomes relevant, it must be empirically observable in social interactions.

Garfinkel also gets rid of all anthropological premises. Actors in the ethnomethodological perspective are not concrete individuals of flesh and blood, who act on the basis of their intentions, play different roles in different settings, and who have a self or a personal identity — a biography or plans for their future. Actors are, rather, meaningful constructions that are produced in a given sequence of interaction. Put laconically: for ethnomethodology there exist no actors but only actions. It is not actors that produce actions but rather actions that produce actors. Actors are not persons but identities that are constructed by situated actions (Garfinkel, 2006, p. 186). By introducing the concept of a "member" (1967, p. 76) which, in Parsons' sense, implies membership in a collectivity, Garfinkel reduces the inclination to reify actors as individuals or human beings. Deciding if someone is a member is not up to the scientific observer but rather to the other members of the collectivity; a member is who is accepted as a "member" in interaction, something which is empirically observable.

Garfinkel shifts the focus away from the *What* and the *Why* and towards the *How*. If there are no persons who act, they cannot serve as a container for knowledge or share knowledge with others. They do not have a biography, life experiences, or motives. *How* members know is observable in concrete social settings. Members make their actions observable, tellable, reportable or — in his famous wording — "accountable." It is the "communicative efforts" of actors that make actions recognizable, interpretable and intelligible. The task of ethnomethodology is, as he formulates later on, to analyze the methods, or the practices, with which such a concerted sense-making in its temporal sequence is achieved. Later on, Garfinkel speaks of "embodied practices." By the notion of "practices" he avoids a confusion with action theory, which is often associated with "action" and "actors." By "embodied" he points to the bodies involved — which is the result of studying Merleau-Ponty (1945) — not in the sense of the bodies of "actors" but in the sense of "embodied practices." When observing practices one inevitably observes bodily movements, and the practices in their pursuit constitute the situated identities of involved members. Now and then, the late Garfinkel still spoke of "actors" and "the actor's point of view," but always in this restricted sense.

Grounded in this perspective, Garfinkel developed an empirical research program that is characterized by openness, intellectual curiosity and a willingness to experiment. He used interviews, observations, field reports from his students, a variety of breaching experiments, as

well as audio- and video-taped materials for ethnomethodological analysis. These analyses consisted in highly complex, elaborate and detailed reflections that were formulated in a difficult language and therefore remained incomprehensible to many readers.

Since the 1970s, more and more ethnomethodologists converted to *conversation analysis*, as it seemed to produce "better," i.e., more demonstrable and plausible, results. This reduced the scope of research interests but strengthened methodical rigor: interview data or field notes are not accepted as proper data anymore, and only audio- and video-taped material are used for analysis. This allows for attending to detail in ways no other procedure does; each sequence of interaction can be repeated a hundred times until everything has been analyzed in every detail. There is an exclusive focus on *natural settings*, interactions, and conversations as they happen in real life. Ethnomethodology and conversation analysis have much enriched qualitative methods and qualitative research, especially with its research attitude that research has to be *data-guided*, not *theory-guided*. No proposition is accepted if it cannot be substantiated in the data at hand. The rigorous stance that all relevant context is to be produced within the setting prohibited an observer or analyst to introduce contextual knowledge from the outside: either it is observably made relevant within the setting or it is of no importance for the analysis. This methodical principle helped, as in hermeneutics, to discern very carefully which knowledge was in use in the observed setting and what could not be seen properly in the data.

Realism in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis means that communicative actions or practices are considered as real insofar as they can be demonstrated in concrete data. All other knowledge is bracketed and considered as irrelevant to sociological analysis. Ethnomethodology and conversation analysis presuppose an even more minimalist social ontology than Schütz or Berger and Luckmann. All theoretical concepts of conventional sociology are suspended, only the ordering activities in social interactions and conversations are considered as real phenomena of social life. However, there is a methodological problem: how can it be ascertained that registered audio-visual data are correctly interpreted? Obviously, analysts need the same skills to employ ethno-methods as the researched members. As far as conversation analysis is concerned with ordinary conversations it can assume that every "normal" member of a community can practice and understand regular conversations. But it gets more complicated if ethnomethodology undertakes studies of work in expert settings, such as the practices of mathematicians or lawyers. Garfinkel (1986) proposes the concept of "unique adequacy," which requires that ethnomethodologists should be competent practitioners of the subject they study. In a later publication he even moved a step further by not tying "adequacy" to descriptions but to (successful) instructions. An ethnomethodological description is adequate if it successfully serves as an instruction to carry out that practice (Garfinkel, 2002). Not everyone agrees with this criterion.

How can the multiplicity of empirical studies generate accumulated knowledge without theory-building? Ethnomethodology and conversation analysis are nowadays often combined with ethnographic data in order to depict a somewhat larger picture. A number of empirical constructivists have also mixed ethnomethodological procedures with concepts from anthropological theory (e.g., those of Clifford Geertz) and theories of social practices (e.g, Bourdieu, Foucault), especially those who are concerned with *the social construction of facts* in the natural sciences (e.g., Knorr-Cetina, 1981; Latour & Woolgar, 1986; Lynch, 1985). These authors have also created theoretical concepts of their own, some of which have become quite influential. In spite of a certain diversification, they share one commonality: it is not what reality is, but how it is constructed, that is the question to ask, and such has to be answered by empirical research.

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5   Realism in the Social Constructionism of Kenneth Gergen

There are variants of social constructivism that have significantly departed from phenomenology and the theoretical approach of Berger and Luckmann, and some also doubt whether empirical research can find "facts." A prominent example of such a variant is the "social constructionism" of Kenneth Gergen. Inspired by Berger and Luckmann, Gergen elaborated the basic idea that reality is constructed in social processes and concluded that by altering these processes, reality can be changed. What we take for granted in our natural attitude is not grounded in natural facts but in social processes. A crucial task of social constructivism is therefore to critically examine concrete reality constructions, develop new, alternative vistas, and collaboratively change the world for the better. Gergen is the key proponent of this rather revolutionary variant of social constructivism (Gergen, 1994; 1999; 2001; 2009; 2015; Gergen & Gergen, 2003). The edited volumes and the book by Burr (2003) demonstrate how widespread this movement has become.

Gergen (1985, p. 3) suggested the term "social constructionism" in order to emphasize the *social processes* of construction and demarcate it from constructivism in Piagetian theory, anti-Gibsonian perceptual theory, and the movement in 20th century art. He criticized the positivism, empiricism, and essentialism in his discipline of psychology, and introduced a *sociological* perspective to psychological phenomena. He pondered how our perspective changes when viewing a "person" as socially constructed (Gergen & Davis, 1985); when focusing on social processes and not on essentialist properties of individuals; when considering emotions such as love, anguish or pain not as individual feelings, but as constructed in interaction; and, even more radically, when perceiving scientific test results and theoretical discourses not as "truths," but as constructed and negotiated in a discourse among scientists.

Recently, Gergen (2019) has written a telling intellectual history of his approach. He distinguishes *four stages* of "an intellectual transformation of major proportions" (p. 259). The *first stage* was "the controversial intellectual climate into which the Berger and Luckmann treatise arrived" (p. 259). It was a time of upheaval, strikes and demonstrations against the Vietnam War and the establishment. Within science, skepticism against logical empiricist philosophy of science increased (see the critiques of Wittgenstein and Quine), established assumptions were questioned and paradigm shifts welcomed (see Kuhn). In this context, Berger and Luckmann's sophisticated account of the social processes by which reality claims are constructed proved seminal. It provided an invitation to adopt a social view of science instead of a philosophical view (as previously) and to transform the concept and practice of knowledge-making.

In the *second stage*, the assumptions of this social account of science were questioned by two other intellectual developments. First, critical theory in the tradition of the Frankfurt School revealed the ideological and political contents and implications of research projects, such as gender biases in biology. When Foucault's studies demonstrated the intimate relationship between knowledge and power, minority groups across society began to fundamentally challenge empirical knowledge claims — a movement that has since expanded greatly, as the label "woke" symbolizes. Second, after Berger and Luckmann had emphasized the importance of language in society, literary theory and rhetorical studies elaborated on such and argued that scientific accounts of the world are not driven by the world, but rather by discursive conventions (see Goodman, McClosky). These developments affirmed that reality is socially constructed, but they also challenged the very premises of Berger and Luckmann that a "value-free," ideologically uninflected theory is possible and that there are "empirical facts."

In a *third stage*, social constructionism turned from a theory of knowledge into a field of

shared practices. As the quest for foundationalist metatheory was abandoned and legitimation of knowledge claims seemed impossible, the pivotal question became, "what is the pragmatic outcome of a certain theoretical or empirical construction of the world?" What is achieved by it? What forms of life are created or subverted? Gergen calls this "reflective pragmatics." This does not imply an "anything-goes" mentality, but the criteria of acceptability of knowledge claims are multiplied and the rights to reality opened to all. A continuous flow of studies with the title "The social construction of…" were published tackling all kinds of topics, and a broad array of new, qualitative methods were developed that were pluralist in character and allowed for the revival of hitherto marginalized practices. Society is considered as consisting of different enclaves where communities of practice collaboratively construct a common reality. Constructionist ideas provide a vocabulary of practice which helps both scholars and practitioners to create new vistas and imaginative alternatives, and thereby stimulates creative theorizing and innovations in practice. Gergen presents plenty of examples how this works in practice, e.g., in psychotherapy, as well as in the vast field of organizational development.

Finally, Gergen suggests a relational turn which reconstructs the social. The primacy of the individual subject or actor which has been so central in Western culture shall be substituted by *relational processes*. Dialogue is a super-individual process in the micro-social world that lies between the macro-social world and the individual. The relational turn resonates with much of practice theory and its assumption of interlocking actions and performances. As this meanwhile includes material settings, objects and technologies, "we move from a specifically micro-*social* realm into a more holistic conception of a relational process" (Gergen, 2019, p. 269).

What is realism in social constructionism? It is again a minimalist social ontology. Considered as real are certainly the communities of practice in different enclaves of society as well as their relational processes, the discourses in which meaning — the meaning of anything — is collaboratively constructed. Real are further the demonstrable consequences of concrete discourses. Viewed as real is also the exertion of power by dominant discourses in relation to marginal discourses and "unheard voices." As social constructionists also attempt to create new discourses with "new vistas" in order to create a better world, an additional "realist" criterion is if a concrete new discourse actually does evoke the desired consequences and bring positive change — a pragmatist criterion of "does it work?" It is not surprising that people working in innovative areas such as management practice and organizational change, consulting, and therapy, and so on, are attracted by this approach. What is real is essentially reduced to what is constructed as real in a discourse, in an everyday or scientific discourse, and if this discourse works in practice and brings about change.

6   Realism in the Communicative Constructivism of Hubert Knoblauch

This brief overview of different concepts of realism in various constructivisms inevitably has its shortcomings. The more detailed the analysis gets, the more complex the picture and the more intricate a proper typology becomes. All of these constructivisms do not pose the question of what reality is, but of how it is constructed. In order to pursue this question they operate with a certain, more or less minimalist, social ontology, although none of them has a clearly specified concept of reality. But they obviously differ in some of their ontological assumptions and in that sense in their concepts of reality.

For many sociological questions, e.g., in the sociology of religion, it is irrelevant to take a stance of whether an apparition people believe in is "real" — it is sufficient to find that it is real for the people who are studied. A sociological study may restrict its sense of reality to the

empirical actions, rituals and ceremonies actors pursue. Likewise, if empirical constructivists investigate the social construction of "facts" in the natural sciences, it is legitimate that they as sociologists restrict their interest to the social aspects of the scientists' activities. However, in the same way as natural scientists are interested in the facts their research reveals, sociologists must be interested in how "real" the results of their own empirical research are. In other words, sociologists can easily bracket the reality status of common-sense constructions, the first-order constructions in the sense of Schütz, but they must have a vital interest in the reality status of second-order constructions. Or are all discourses, common-sense as well as scientific discourses, equally valid, as some postmodern authors suggest?

While Husserl suggested that the natural sciences had taken their idealizations and abstractions for bare truth and had forgotten that they originated in the lifeworld, ethnomethodology demonstrated what conventional sociology hitherto had overlooked. Garfinkel (1967) revealed that the "good" organizational reasons for "bad" clinic records, selection practices in psychiatric outpatient clinics and rational properties of scientific activities, are relevant aspects of methodological practices (pp. 186–283). And Cicourel (1964) elucidated which interpretive procedures were involved, and which were overlooked, by conventional sociologists when applying their different empirical methods such as interviews, survey questionnaires, demographical methods, historical materials, and content analysis, as well as experimental methods in sociology. Douglas (1967) showed that the official suicide statistics are quite problematic as they do not investigate the social meaning(s) of suicide and the contexts from which these meanings were derived. All of these contributions and those thereafter have vastly contributed to a more refined methodology of empirical research, but in the end the question remains of how to assess the quality of a certain study and the validity of its results. Even if one takes the main question to be how social facts are constructed, how is the quality and the validity of one's own research to be evaluated?

Communicative constructivism takes these challenges into serious consideration. As this is a broad movement with slightly different conceptions, I just focus on the version of Knoblauch (2020a) here. In contrast to Gergen's social constructionism, Knoblauch does not intend to create a better world but rather to create a better sociology. His goal is to devise a comprehensive theoretical framework which is suitable to inform empirical research, but which is also informed by empirical research. Knoblauch refers to the *Social Construction* of Berger and Luckmann, and agrees that sociology not only needs empirical research but — in contrast to ethnomethodology — also theoretical concepts to put empirical results into a wider context. Already in the 1990s Knoblauch (1995) suggested distinguishing different cultural contexts that are constructed by communicative action: contexts of immediate communication in social interactions such as conversations; contexts of mediated contexts where institutions, mediatization and anonymization are relevant; and societal contexts such as communicative campaigns by the knowledge class of modern societies.

In *The Communicative Construction of Reality*, Knoblauch (2020a) argues that there are two major reasons for developing a new approach. One is the further development of social theory which should not be ignored. The second is a transformation of society by processes of digitization and mediatization.

First, as an objectivist sociology, which neglected the importance of language and interpretive practices, prevailed until the 1960s, it was pivotal for Berger and Luckmann to complement it by a subjectivist view of typifications and language as well as interpretation. Thereafter, most sociologists stressed the subjective pole of Schütz's phenomenology and processes of consciousness, while underemphasizing the intersubjective, pragmatic pole. As new devel-

opments in social theory have shown, there were various kinds of subjectivation in different societies and epochs, which questions the generalizability of phenomenological analyses without comparisons. Other developments have demonstrated how important material, bodily and other aspects of the social are. Knoblauch now defines the social in the vastest sense as a triad between at least two subjects who, mediated by objectifications, relate to each other.

Second, it is not only new developments in social theory that Knoblauch wants to integrate; he also sees the necessity of a renewed approach by current changes in society. Processes of digitization and mediatization have fundamentally changed the ways that subjects (can) achieve reciprocity. Their relevance in contemporary societies is so pervasive that talk of a "communication culture" is not sufficient anymore; it is more adequate to speak of a "communication society."

Knoblauch builds on Berger and Luckmann, but transforms their approach considerably. He suggests several revisions which stem from new theoretical developments as well as from a thorough reflection on his extensive empirical research experience of several decades. The first is a shift from subjectivism to relationality: the starting point of analysis is not the individual actor, but the relationship between actors and their relation to relevant objectivations. This has a significant affinity to the relational theory of "social constructionism," as well as to Actor-Network Theory, with one crucial difference: the subject is not denied, but de-centered. Knoblauch insists that a social theory cannot do without the concept of a transcendental, non-essentialist subject, neither on the side of the observer nor on the side of the observed actors, and that subjects are inevitably bound to a (lived) body. In other words, communicative constructivism still acknowledges both poles of Schütz's life-world analysis but emphasizes the intersubjective, pragmatic pole.

The second revision is a substantial elaboration of "objectivations": they do not consist only in language, as Berger and Luckmann seemed to insinuate, but include all kinds of material things, technologies, and mediums (Knoblauch uses the term "objectification" to highlight this difference of meanings; see also Pfadenhauer & Grenz, 2017). This clearly represents a "material turn" within constructivism. The social is defined not only by social relationships and communication between actors, but also by their production and use of material objectifications. Objectifications as the third form of the social represent social reality in the form of data, documents, and artefacts.

A third modification is the substitution of the notion "social action" by "communicative action." This is a direct consequence of the relational perspective: every social action is communicative. To underscore this, Knoblauch (2019) substitutes the "social" construction with the "communicative" construction of reality and introduces the term "communicative lifeworld." From this perspective, the subjective view of the lifeworld is still relevant, but so are the processes of subjectivation which constitute it. Knoblauch's social theory also emphasizes not only relationality and reciprocity, objectifications and signs, but also performance (integrating the "performative turn") as well as the lived body, sensuousness and affectivity (the "body turn," "sensory turn," and "affective turn"). Concerning the latter he stays in line with phenomenology which has investigated these topics since its inception (which is often ignored). Schütz as well as Berger and Luckmann have used a wide concept of knowledge, which includes the embodied knowledge of routines and recipe knowledge. Most researchers, however, have subsequently focused primarily on meaning contexts and not so much on embodied knowledge, sensory data, emotions and affects. In communicative constructivism they are moved to the foreground as integral parts of communicative action.

A fourth modification is, finally, that the structures of the lifeworld as elaborated by

Schütz and Luckmann (1973; 1989) are not considered as universal only by legitimation of phenomenological analysis. As each phenomenologist egologically analyzes his or her own experience, which is historically, socially and culturally contingent, the validity and universality of these structures must also be triangulated with two other poles, namely the socio-historical developments and changes and physical-anthropological insights (Knoblauch, 2015). Knoblauch (2020b) also suggests a "relational phenomenology" and pursues a simultaneous phenomenological analysis by both subjects while they relate to each other in a face-to-face-relationship.

What concept of realism does communicative constructivism adopt? Obviously, its ontological assumptions are much more comprehensive and elaborate than, for example, those of ethnomethodology. In the vein of Berger and Luckmann, processes of socialization, institutionalization, legitimation, and power are theoretically conceived and empirically studied, as are the processes of digitization and mediatization and the communication society with its institutional and communicative structures and material objectifications. This requires a broader concept of realism. Institutional structures and communicative processes must be continually reproduced in order to display stability, and they certainly can be changed over time, but they are currently materialized as a certain facticity (that is independent of our volition and cannot be wished away, as Berger and Luckmann put it). Reality is fundamentally social as it is, due to reciprocity, shared with others. Furthermore, reality is more than concrete actors perceive and construct in a social situation; it also consists of all the communicative actions of other actors and all of the objectifications which are out of their sight. Hence, those actions and objectifications also display impact and power "behind their backs," as Marx proclaimed (Knoblauch, 2020a).

Knoblauch and Pfadenhauer (2023) express a certain sympathy for positions of critical realism, for a certain "epistemological relativism" which acknowledges the relativity of knowledge, both common-sense and scientific. Knowledge is based on social activities and remains "at least in part, dependent on the historic-cultural community in which debates about competing claims are staged" (Al-Amoudi & Willmott, 2011, p. 30). This implies that there is no social ontology that cannot be challenged by future empirical research and new theoretical developments. Therefore, communicative constructivism employs a reflexive methodology: it integrates different sorts of data and methods of analysis, but also analyzes them as social processes and critically reflects on them. Good research requires critical reflection upon its own methods of construction and remains open to future developments (Knoblauch, 2020b).

7   Conclusion

Proponents of "realism" insist that there is an objective external reality. They portray constructivism as their antipode and criticize it for its alleged relativistic position. Speculative realism, as discussed above, dismisses phenomenology without offering any alternative for all of the epistemological topics phenomenology has dealt with. It glorifies the realism of cosmological science and forgets to discuss the methods by which it arrived at its results and, furthermore, overlooks the social processes in which the results were achieved and their plausibility assessed. For sociology, speculative realism is absolutely irrelevant. But there are also realists who deal with social reality. Searle (1995), for instance, outlines an ontology of social facts with the title *The Construction of Social Reality* and argues for realism and truth. He does not make any reference to Berger and Luckmann (1967) who, with a telling difference, spoke of "the social construction of reality." Both books emphasize the importance of language and institutions,

but curiously, Searle's "realist" concept of social reality appears to be a reality without human beings (see the careful critique by Endreß, 2016).

While Searle's critique of constructivism remains implicit, a thorough discussion is presented by Hacking (1999) in his book, *The Social Construction of What?*. Hacking references Berger and Luckmann's original book but does not further consider it. He rather treats social constructivism as a whole and focuses on different phrases of "the social construction of X." He attempts to clarify the different meanings of such phrases and states that they often imply either that X need not be as it is, or that X is quite bad as it is, or that we would be much better off if X were done away with (p. 6). Interestingly, this applies to only one type of constructivism discussed above, the postmodern version of Gergen.

My analysis has demonstrated that a *general opposition of realism vs social constructivism is misconceived*. Realism could at best be confronted with radical constructivism (which was skipped here). All variants of *social* constructivism that I have discussed above imply some concept of reality. All of them pursue empirical research in one way or another, and this makes only sense if one assumes to investigate a reality that is independent of one's own will. As we have seen, the ontological assumptions vary considerably. They can be minimalist as in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, or as combined with an action research stance, as in Gergen's postmodern discourse analysis, or they can be much more comprehensive, as in Berger and Luckmann's approach or in Knoblauch's communicative constructivism.

While realism and new realism are discussed above all in philosophy, some outlets have also reached sociological debate. A recent example is Bruno Latour, who came from ethnomethodology and developed Actor-Network Theory. He adopts a realist position and criticizes social constructivism — again, as a whole — because it allegedly lacks a concept of material things. Hence it cannot explain, he argues, how social constructions become empirical facts (Latour, 2010). As we have seen, however, this was one of the core questions of Berger and Luckmann's approach, and it is not surprising that Latour does not take notice of this at all. Meanwhile, Steets (2016) has convincingly demonstrated that on the basis of Schütz and Berger and Luckmann, a theory of architecture and of the built environment can be created.

Realism and social constructivism are not in contradiction. As Elder-Vass (2012) also states, a non-constructivist naïve realism is as ill-conceived as a non-realist constructivism. It was the goal of my contribution to carve out the different concepts of realism in various social constructivist approaches in order to avoid further misconceived, generalized debates. Communicative constructivism is so far the theoretically best developed approach which has integrated the material turn as well as other turns (such as the "performative," "body," "sensory," and "affective" turns). Future debates should avoid further general discussions and focus instead on this novel approach.

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