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Construction versus Realism? The Unrealized Potential of Communicative Constructivism

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Abstract

The ideas linked to the formulation "Social Construction of Reality" (SoCo) have spilled over from the Social Sciences and Humanities to public discourses, e.g. on gender and truth, and form in epistemic terms the crossroads of the polarization of liberal and anti-liberal world views par excellence. By focusing on the "academic debate" about the theory of Social Construction of Reality we argue that the polemical misuse of "social construction," quite common in public and political discourse, also characterizes New Realism. This recent philosophical movement frames its innovative character first by reframing the problem of the social construction of reality from social theory to philosophy and such failing the basic idea of the entire approach, and second, by referring not to Social Construction of Reality but to a specific understanding of "Social Constructionism." However, the numerous critiques of SoCo over time have led to Communicative Constructivism (CoCo) as a comprehensive reformulation within Sociology of Knowledge. As an empirically grounded theory, CoCo relates to new forms of realisms constituted in their opposition to SoCo.

Keywords: Social construction of reality; social constructionism; new realism; critical realism; polarization.

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1 Introduction

In this paper, we focus on the contribution of what we consider to be one of the most recent and comprehensive reformulations of the debate on the Social Construction of Reality (SoCo): Communicative Constructivism (CoCo). More specifically, we investigate how CoCo relates to new forms of realism that are constituted in their opposition to SoCo.[1]

In our opinion, the debate about the "social construction of reality" often referred to a polemic caricature of this approach or to subbranches and authors that do not properly represent it. We argue that this polemical use, quite common in public and political discourse, also characterizes the recent philosophical movement of New Realism. Beyond its polemic function, however, the critique of SoCo has also led to corrections, adaptations, and reformulations within the field of social theory.

In order to address the general relationship between realism and constructivism, we sketch some of the major paths taken by the discussion on SoCo over the last few decades (1). Particularly in the Anglo-Saxon context, as well as in Scandinavia, Social Constructionism became the dominant branch for understanding SoCo, as we go on to show (2). This emphasis on discourse provides a link to poststructuralist theories. In addition, SoCo has also been taken up by philosophical approaches, such as Critical Realism, that connect it to realism in ways we shall outline generally (3). After sketching the main arguments of the critique of SoCo in the social sciences (4), we turn to the reaffirmation of realism by the movement labelled "New Realism," which has gained prominence since the beginning of the 2010s, and argue (5) that New Realism misrepresents the problem of social construction in a way that appears to draw on the public understanding of social construction rather than the academic discussion in the social sciences to present its realism as an obvious solution. As a conclusion, we briefly summarize the approach of communicative constructivism and its understanding of reality (6).

2 The Many Social Constructions of the "Social Construction"

There have been various attempts to systematize the varieties of constructivism (e.g., Knoblauch & Wilke, 2016; Eberle, 2019). We, too, have already contributed to the reconstruction of the academic debate on the Social Construction of Reality (e.g. Pfadenhauer & Knoblauch, 2019). Diagram 1 identifies the main genealogy of the most important branches of constructivism and its major opponents, which we will briefly outline.

Originally, constructivism had been known as a movement in the arts since the 1920s. Within the social sciences, the concept of "construction" emerged as a *terminus technicus* in the work of Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, for example in his 1937 published book *La construction du réel chez l'enfant* (*The Child's Construction of Reality*), and was taken over by American developmental psychologist George Kelly around 1955. Piaget's and Kelly's writings formed the basis for the movement that came to be called "(Psychological) Constructivism."[2] This movement includes *Developmental Psychology* (Brunner & Haste, 1987), *Contextual Constructivism* (Cobern, 1993), and the highly popular volume *The Invented Reality*, edited by Paul Watzlawick (1984). Constructivism became even more popular in its "autopoietical"

1. We shall refer to the ideas formulated in the "Social Construction of Reality" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) as "SoCo" in order to distinguish them from labels like "constructivism," "social constructivism," or "social constructionism" (see also Knoblauch, 2020, Chapter II.3).

2. As Stern (1985) notes, the psychologist Trevarthen used the label "constructionist" to distance himself from these approaches.

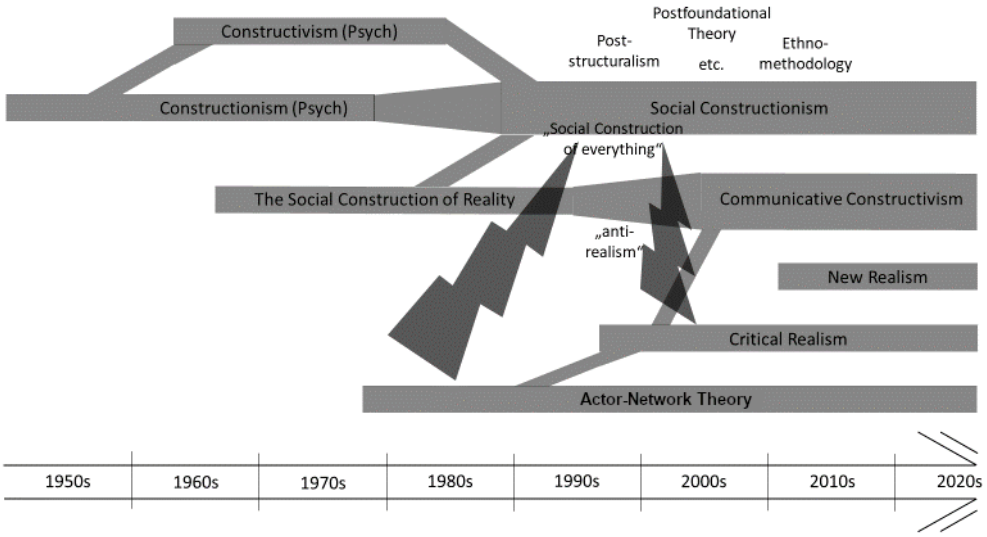

Diagram 1: Genealogy of Constructivism since 1950.

form as expressed in biologist Humberto Maturana's (1970) *Biology of Cognition*. It is this usage that Ernst von Glasersfeld (1974) labeled "radical constructivism" in 1974.[3] Radical constructivism is characterized by the assumption that the individual, the individual mind, or, more radically, the individual brain and its biological processes, contain all the mechanisms for the construction of reality.[4]

The term "social construction," although in loose use previously (Knoblauch & Wilke, 2016), entered the social sciences as a *terminus* coined by Peter L. Berger's and Thomas Luckmann's seminal book, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966). Berger and Luckmann's understanding of "construction," however, differed decidedly from previous understandings in that its emphasis was almost exclusively on the epithet "social" and that it was concomitantly elaborated within a sociological theory: The term "social construction" stressed that reality does not result from biological or psychological processes within the brain (or at least not only or not predominantly), but from social processes, including social action, knowledge, and institutions.[5]

Berger and Luckmann's book received an enormously wide reception in sociology and the social sciences as well as in the humanities (e.g. religious studies) and disciplines beyond (e.g. geography, biology). This led to a rapid diffusion of social construction as a metaphor (Sismondo, 1993) and, with it entering public discourses, as a formula (Knoblauch & Wilke, 2016). In the

3. Luhmann's (1984) reference to "radical social constructivism" is an exception in this series as he transferred radical constructivism to social phenomena and considered the autopoiesis of social systems to be the core of the social construction.

4. The sudden biological relevance of the brain for the definition of reality may be the result of the re-definition of life and death. The success of heart transplantation in the late 1960s led to a redefinition of death, which was no longer defined by the non-functioning heart but by the ceasing of brain activity.

5. As Luckmann recalled (personal information), the notion of construction has been deliberately chosen in order to stress the distance to the "constitution of meaning," as is the literal title of Schütz' book. As both, Berger and Luckmann (1966) stress the role of materiality in SoCo, construction is by no means a "metaphorical" notion as Hacking (1999) and DeLanda (2006) claim.

social sciences and the humanities, it thus became part of what Lynch (1998) called the "constructivist revolution" (p. 29). Particularly in the social sciences, the concept triggered a series of new approaches, such as the "Social Construction of Technology" (SCOT) or the Social Construction of Social Problems, and found entry into a series of theoretical approaches in the study of gender, politics, organizations or science. On the level of social theory, it was most explicitly taken up by "Social Constructionism." This label goes back to psychologist Kenneth Gergen (1985), who stressed that social construction differs categorically from psychological constructivism in that the psyche must not be considered the basis of the process of the construction of reality but rather the result of processes of social constructions.

3 Social Constructionism

The term "social constructionism" only began appearing in 1986, shortly after Kenneth Gergen (1985) had published his article on "The Social Constructionist Movement in Modern Psychology," whereas "social constructivism" surfaced a few years later in 1992 (Knoblauch & Wilke, 2016). Yet in their *Handbook for Constructionist Research*, Holstein and Gubrium (2008) largely neglect the question of how the two notions relate to one another and suggest: "Rather than inviting a deconstruction of the competing terms and their implied realities or provoking a debate over the utility of the distinction, we simply have asked the contributors to adopt the generic term constructionist whenever possible" (p. 8). Nevertheless, some authors have tried to clarify the relationship between the two terms; one of these was Samra-Fredericks (2008), who, following Fletcher (2006), sees the major distinction between the two in the decisively cognitive bias of "constructivism" (p. 131) — probably because of the term's association with the "Sociology of Knowledge."[6] In the same book, Gergen and Gergen (2008) — who observe that "the term constructivism is sometimes used interchangeably with constructionism" (p. 173) — also maintain that basic distinction. Nevertheless, they concede that "it is increasingly difficult to sustain the distinction between constructivism and constructionism. Constructivists increasingly find mental practices to be reflections or embodiments of social process." Accordingly, Restivo and Croissant (2008) contrast the difference between Social Constructionism and Social Constructivism: "One final view of social constructionism is that it is opposed to 'constructivism' by virtue of being more critically and politically engaged" (p. 224).

Social Constructionism became a massive academic movement, producing its own introductory books (Burr, 1995; Hjelm, 2014) and handbooks (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008). The success of this movement was due to the fact that it bridged the gap between the Social Sciences and the humanities while integrating growing social scientific and intellectual movements, such as "ethnomethodology, social studies of science, feminism, poststructuralism, narrative philosophy and psychology, postfoundational philosophy and post-positivist philosophy of science, and more" (Stam, 2001, p. 294) into social constructionism. This way, various poststructuralist and postmodern theories, as well as approaches in the social sciences, came to be labeled as "social constructionist," and all of them could use the phrase "social construction" as a general formula without the necessity to refer to its origin, as in *The Social Construction of Reality* by Berger & Luckmann (1966).

6. It is interesting that the Anglo-American debate ignored the broad discussion of the bodily dimension in the frame of SoCo, which builds to a great extent on Philosophical Anthropology and which significantly preceded the "body turn" in the 1980s.

There was certainly an important reason for this lack of reference: While Berger and Luckmann started from a phenomenological notion of subjective consciousness, Social Constructionism conceived of subjectivity as the "emergent, socially and discursively structured embodied product of activity" (Stam, 2001, p. 707). Subjects are therefore seen in Social Constructionism as effects of discourses that can be understood without reference to intentionality and consciousness (Parker, 1998; Velody & Williams, 1998), while discourses came to be considered the most important process in the construction of reality.[7]

Because of its stress on discourse, Social Constructionism has been explicitly designated "antirealist"; for this same reason, it could also integrate some post-structuralist elements. As a consequence, Social Constructionism came to be linked to post-structuralism, deconstructivism, and postmodernism in ways that, at least in the Anglo-American context, were not only associated with Social Constructionism but to the notion of social construction and constructivism in general. As Stam (2001) states, this "marriage of social constructionism to postmodernism [...] led to many of the more severe charges and countercharges" (p. 574). One can understand the rise of Critical Realism as a reaction to this "marriage," which, at the same time, removed it from social theory and moved it towards philosophy.

4 Critical Realism

Critical Realism is a position in the philosophy of science that was shaped by Roy Bhaskar and later adopted by sociologists such as Margaret Archer. Because it is designed to bridge the gap between positivist conceptions of reality on the one hand, and hermeneutic and social constructivist on the other, it has also been called post-positivism (Ruslin, 2019, p. 191). According to Bhaskar (1998), Critical Realism assumes that a clear concept of being, knowledge, and logics of reference has two dimensions: a transitive, artificial dimension constituted by the concepts we use as reference to the world, and another intransitive one constituted by the world qua referent. On this basis, ordinary actors can distinguish between the "real," the "actual," and the "empirical." By the "real," they mean whatever exists regardless of whether we can perceive it or not. The "actual" is what happens when powers of the real are activated. The "empirical" is the domain of experience, which can either refer to the real or the actual (Ruslin, 2019, p. 194). Bhaskar (1998) insists that social structures are also transitive and can be independent of people as, in the case of generative mechanisms that have their grounds in the ontology of nature and society and "are not subjective classifications of an undifferentiated empirical reality" (p. xvi).

With its stress on the intransitive, Critical Realism does not introduce an independent reality; rather, it looks for the ontological presuppositions of social and natural sciences. To describe certain objects or features as intransitive is merely to indicate that they exist at least in part independently of any knowledge claims of which they are "referents" (Lawson, 2003, p. 162). On these grounds, Critical Realism relates to Social Constructionism in quite explicit ways. Thus, advocates of Critical Realism incorporate the "epistemological relativism" they ascribe to constructionism, which is what they consider to be the relativity of knowledge implied in SoCo.[8] This relativity has been extended to science and scientific explanations, which

7. In reaction to this post-structuralist interpretation of subjectivity, a strand of discourse analysis emerged in the sociology of knowledge that theoretically argues and empirically substantiates the active part of the subjects in discursive processes (Bosancic et al., 2022).

8. Epistemological relativism "expresses the idea that our categories, frameworks of thinking, modes of analysis, ways of seeing things, habits of thought, dispositions of every kind, motivating concerns, interests, values, and so forth, are affected by our life paths and socio-cultural situations, and thereby make a difference in how we

are, "at least in part, dependent on the historico-cultural community in which debates about competing claims are staged" (Al-Amoudi & Willmott, 2011, p. 30). As in SoCo, Critical Realism considers science to be a social activity that uses specific means and produces preliminary knowledge, while, on the other hand, Social Constructionism would adapt to "realist" positions and attempt to integrate neurology (Cromby, 2004).

5 The "Social Construction" in the Critics' Eyes

The massive spread of the phrase "social construction" resulted in an increasingly arbitrary use that Hacking (1999) polemically designated as the "social construction of everything." The attempt at its delegitimization has been supported by Sokal and Bricmont (1997), who attempted to debunk the language of de-constructivist and poststructuralist philosophy as "fashionable nonsense." While this attack is related to the idea of social construction only because of its implied association with postmodern philosophy, the most serious and fundamental criticism within the social sciences has been voiced by sociologists like Latour in the framework of the "material turn."

Originally representing the "social constructivist" branch of science studies, Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar argue that the concept of social construction had become so self-evident that it is not worth mentioning anymore; therefore, they changed the title of their joint study from *The Social Construction of Scientific Facts* (1979) to *The Construction of Scientific Facts* (1986) in the second edition. Latour's major objection against (social) constructivism concerns its supposed lack of "objectivity": How can construction become a social fact and/or an empirical fact? (His criticism concerning the lack of recognition of materiality will be addressed below). Where does the "materiality" of reality arise from if the process of construction is only accomplished socially? Constructivism fails to answer this question because of its ostensible lack of a concept of "things." "Constructivism," as Latour (2010) polemically argues, is therefore "the poor man's creationism" (p. 64).

Next to the materialist argument, Latour raises another, much more political issue against (Social) Constructivism: Because of a lack of acknowledgement of objectivity, ("social") constructivism would be "arbitrary" and relativistic:

> entire Ph.D. programs are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives. (Latour, 2004, p. 227)[9]

It is quite surprising that Latour's critique focuses on SoCo's lack of materialism, even though it is exactly the materialist character that Berger & Luckmann (1966) considered to be one of the basic arguments in SoCo.

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can and do 'see' or know or approach things, and indeed they bear on what we seek to know" (Lawson, 2003, p. 162).

9. Berger (2011), for example, emphasized that there is "a robust reality beyond our desires" (p. 95) and Luckmann (1999) explicitly calls social construction materialistic. However, even though Berger and Luckmann (1966) expressly refer to Marx, admittedly they have not spent any effort on explaining what this materialism means in detail.

6 From Essentialism to New Realism and the Misrepresentation of SoCo

Given that Social Constructivism and particularly Social Constructionism had until then been linked to liberal, feminist, and postcolonial positions, Latour implies an emerging connection with fundamentalism, and therefore in a way anticipated its association with other rightist movements, such as the "fake news" arguments offered by populists in recent decades. We need to bear in mind, however, that Latour's critique refers to political arguments in a political and popular discourse, that is, in what Gertenbach (2015) calls "the jargon of constructivism" (p. 297, authors' translation). In any case, Latour represents the move from constructivism to realism,[10] which would only some years later be taken up in academic, and mostly philosophical, debates. While Latour's philosophical basis is to be found in Deleuze and other similar anti-subjectivist ontologies, the origins of this "new realism" can be traced back to the analytic philosophy of Russell and Rickert (Ferraris, 2016).

One of the major features of New Realism is its opposition to what it considers (social) construction. We have to bear in mind that this opposition is part of the reframing; SoCo did not address the problem of realism per se. As a social scientific movement, its major opponent had been positions such as essentialism and positivism. Thus, as Vance (1989) argued in one of the basic texts on Gender Theory, "social construction theory" has been mainly opposed to a position called "essentialism," by which Vance (1989) terms the "belief that human behavior is natural" (p. 34). Essentialism is a notion originally defined more exactly by Popper (1962) as a scientific position that assumes (a) that the best, the truly scientific disciplines describe the "essence" or the "essential natures" of things — that is, the realities that lie behind the appearances — and (b) that science establishes "truth beyond all reasonable doubt" (p. 103). With respect to Gender and Sexuality, this position is articulated in biological essentialism or determinism, for example in Sociobiology, Evolutionary Theory, Genetics, or Neurology, as well as in cultural essentialism, as in the case of feminist positions that assume female gender is essentially different from male (De Lamater, 1998).

The plausibility of biological essentialism as a scientific approach is likely to have waned in the face of "radical constructivism" in biology and psychology. Demonstrating that the brain and the psyche are "autopoietic systems," "radical constructivism" illustrates that the presumed essence is a result of processes that depend on interactions with others as well as with the reality they contribute to construct. The debate in the first decade of the twenty-first century had been framed by the opposition to "positivism"[11], while serious attacks against SoCo had been launched by materialist approaches such as the Actor-Network-Theory.

While SoCo challenge of essentialism and positivism had been part of the discourse in the social sciences, New Realism's contestation of SoCo took place within philosophy. This discussion took off about a decade ago when scholars of "New Realism" positioned their approach as the opposite of "social construction."[12] In his "brief history of new realism" (2016), Maurizio Ferraris claims the "realist turn" — and thus "new realism" (Al-Almoudi & Wilmot, 2011,

10. "While we spent years trying to detect the real prejudices hidden behind the appearance of objective statements, do we now have to reveal the real objective and incontrovertible facts hidden behind the *illusion* of prejudices?" (Latour, 2004, p. 227).

11. An example of this is the 2002–2005 debate between Kenneth Gergen and Carl Ratner, which focused on issues such as positivism, social constructionism, and the political implications of psychological theories; a 2015 sequel between Carl Ratner and David Pavón-Cuéllar focuses on the contradiction between realism and social constructionism (Ratner et al., 2020).

12. The move against social construction had been initiated by Searle, who opted for a realism that considers the external world to exist independently of our representations of it (Searle, 1995).

p. 32) — to have started in 2011, initiated by himself and Markus Gabriel. According to this narrative, New Realism was quickly adopted in disciplines such as architecture, literary theory, political theory, media studies, and the social sciences.[13] The concept even entered the public intellectual discourse, where it has been opposed to the popular understanding of "constructivism," particularly in a series published in the widely read German intellectual weekly *Die Zeit* (April through July 2013). Despite its broad reception, the disciplinary home of New Realism certainly is philosophy.

This disciplinary relocation of the debate on SoCo is quite significant insofar as prior debates about different forms of constructivism had been hardly taken up by philosophy, "at least as it is practiced within the mainstream analytical philosophy departments within the English-speaking world" (Boghossian, 2006, p. 7).[14] This takeover by philosophy is made explicit by the definition from Ferraris (2016): "New realism is the claim that such ontological commitment shouldn't leave the issue of reality to science, thereby limiting philosophy to a merely educational function" (p. 591). The fact that the discourse on SoCo has been taken up in philosophy is tantamount to a reframing, as there has been "a growing alienation of academic philosophy from the rest of the humanities and social sciences" (Boghossian, 2006, p. 8). This holds particularly for the analytic approaches of philosophy that are close to New Realism. The most evident new frame introduced by "New Realism" is that the guiding opposition between "essentialist" and (social) constructivist positions has been substituted by an opposition between realism and anti-realism (Gabriel 2015). Thus, Nightingale and Cromby (2002) identify the conviction that "there are no grounds for necessarily postulating a reality independent of the knower" (p. 702) as the defining feature of antirealism. Similar to antirealism, it tends to mix up the different problems of realism, such as the problem of realism (i.e., if there is an essential structure to reality independent of what we perceive), the epistemological problem (i.e. if and how we know about it), and the semantic problem (i.e., how we can make true statements about reality).

On this background, realists consider SoCo to be a sub-form of antirealism focused on a single aspect of antirealism, "if something is real or constructed" (Gabriel, 2018, p. 46, authors' translation): "Real means untainted by human construction" (Harman, 2015, p. 126). Another antagonism that realists associate with SoCo is said to be postmodernism (Eberle, 1995). In fact, as shown above, it is the *relativity* of truth that is ascribed to a position in the philosophy of science reconstructed from various sources of SoCo (often including the history and sociology of science). Within philosophy, it is Rorty in particular who is considered to be representing postmodernism. Thus Ferraris (2016) asserts that Rorty considers reality as depending on representations, and that "objects are but the vocabulary we use to designate them" (p. 596).[15] As opposed to the idea that language or, in the postmodern version of Foucault and Gergen, "discourse" is constructing reality, New Realism claims that there is a world before language. But New Realism also defies the radical constructivist position holding that there is

13. In his rather "monumentalist" (as Nietzsche calls it) drawing on "big men" historical reconstruction, Ferrari mentions a series of conferences in the various disciplines. With respect to the social sciences, however, he refers to a book already published in 2011 by Maccarini, Morandi and Prandini on Sociological Realism — the manuscript of which has been obviously published before the date Ferrari (2016) claims to be the "birth date of New Realism" (p. 599).

14. This also holds for Searle, who, even in his book on the *Construction of Social Reality* (1995), did not even mention the "Social Construction of Reality."

15. For a subtle critique of Rorty's "deflationist" realism in favor of their "pluralist robust realism," see Taylor & Dreyfus (2016).

a world outside the mind — "there is a way things are that is independent of human perception" (Boghossian, 2006, p. 130) — and even more, that we can gain knowledge of the world (Harman, 2015). On these grounds, New Realists also argue against "relational" approaches, which are said to ignore that subjects differ from objects. As realists stress, it is therefore more than just knowledge and epistemology that are at issue: New Realism also concerns ontology, which includes the "reality of society." "While on a causal level it is obviously true that human society was constructed by humans, this does not entail that human society is equivalent to what humans say or know about it" (Harman, 2015, p. 138). This claim becomes elaborated in DeLanda's (2006) "realist theory of society," in which he argues that "social constructivists" failed to realize the "objectivity of society."

As plausible as the realist arguments sound, their major problem lies paradoxically in their "constructivist" character: The "constructivism" or "constructionism" they are constructing as a negative foil against which they present their own position either refers to issues not related to SoCo in any particular way (such as Rorty's pragmatism), only relates to certain branches of Social Constructionism or Psychological Constructivism, or builds on the basic misconceptions derived from secondhand references or no references at all.[16] This "abuse" of the label "social construction" by many researchers has been demonstrated by Haslanger (2012). In fact, many textual references of New Realism do not even distinguish between the quite different varieties of psychological and social constructivism that lies at the very basis of SoCo. Moreover, New Realists fail to notice the broad theoretical and empirical developments within the ideational scope of social construction — a failure that also holds for many authors writing in and about social constructionism. In fact, the ambivalences implied in the different forms of social/constructionism(ivism) and the new impulses by its critics have led to various reformulations of the approach, of which we will sketch the most recent one: Communicative Constructivism.

7 The Potentials of Communicative Constructivism

Communicative Constructivism is a movement inspired by the attempt to study the social construction of reality empirically (Knoblauch, 2020, p. 32). It is, so far, predominantly present in the German-speaking social sciences, where it has become one of the most promising social theoretical developments (Hepp, 2020; Karstein & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2020). Even though SoCo is considered a theoretical approach, it has inspired a range of empirical research and innovations, particularly in qualitative methodology (Hollstein & Kumkar, 2020). Moreover, in assuming the intersubjectivity of data, SoCo applies a triadic pattern to methodology itself in a way that allows a triangulation of the social relationship between social subjects and data, thereby overcoming the social relativity of the "strong programme of science" (Bloor, 1976). That is to say that social theory, like any scientific statement, is not just relative to the social practices by which they have been produced, or the social structures resulting from them.[17] Rather, it is reflexively related by subjects to the objectivations we call data as a *tertium comparationis*, which, by way of given procedures (i.e., methods) allow them to be grounded, adjusted, or refuted em-

16. This holds true for, e.g., DeLanda (2006), whose major argument for the novelty of his materialist theory is based on some general and non-referenced claims on "social constructivists" and their alleged "neglect" of "materiality" or even "the objectivity of society" (sic!) — a basic thesis of Berger and Luckmann (1966).

17. This requires a reflexive methodology in data collection and analysis, which is linked to an Empirical Theory of Science (ETOS) (Knoblauch, 2021).

pirically.[18] In fact, the very transformation of "social" into "communicative constructivism" is linked to a broad range of empirical studies that were originally motivated and inspired by SoCo. Not only did these studies lead to the innovation of (mostly, but not exclusively) qualitative methods of social research[19], but their dispersion also led to the increasing use of the notion of communicative action, which seemed to grasp the subject matter of these empirical studies much better than "social action" (which had been inherited from Weber and was dominant in SoCo).[20] The move from social to communicative action as the basic notion within the construction of reality consequently demanded a reformulation of the remainder of the theory. As a consequence, Keller et al. (2012) suggested substituting the expression "social construction" with "communicative construction,"[21] which entailed the following theoretical modifications:

(a) The *shift from subjectivism to relationality*. The starting point of any social construction is not the individual subject as distinct from other individuals but subjects who are fundamentally related to other subjects as well as to their objectivations.

(b) The *move from language and discourse (back) to objectivation*. Communication, therefore, is not only about "meaning," but the materiality and corporality of the act of communication. Communication, of course, includes language and discourse, but depends, first of all, on bodies, their objectivations as well as senses, and the corresponding materiality of objectifications (Pfadenhauer & Grenz, 2017).

(c) The third central modification of social construction follows consequentially from the two prior arguments: If we move from subjectivity to relationality, we must also reformulate the notion of action or, since relationality already implies at least two subjects, social action into communicative action. It is for this reason that we suggest referring to the *communicative construction of reality*.

As a consequence, the problem of reality is addressed in a way that not only differs from the individualist approaches of New Realism, but, as Eberle (2023) shows, it even differs in significant ways from the methodological individualism represented by Berger & Luckmann. Reality is social *ab ovo*: It does not start with the individual confronting "the world"; rather, the world is encountered on the basis of social relationships, as for example between mother — or any significant other — and child. This relationship is neither ontologically given nor static but instead is the result of ongoing actions and activities. It is less important if and how these actions may be "driven" by instincts; rather, for a human sense of reality, it is decisive that these

18. This is part of the program of ETOS as elaborated in Knoblauch (2021).

19. Just to mention a few: Genre Analysis (Luckmann, 1983), Social Scientific Hermeneutics (Soeffner, 1992), SKAD/Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (Keller, 2005), and Phenomenology-based Ethnography (Lehn & Hitzler, 2015). For an overview — so far only in German — see Reichertz & Tuma (2017).

20. The notion has become famous through Habermas' (1987) *Theory of Communicative Action* (published in German in 1981), but it had been in use already by Schütz in the 1950s and by Schütz and Luckmann (1984; 1989) in their *Structures of the Life-World*, a book that was one of the major references in Habermas (1987). The notion of communicative action has been suggested with respect to empirical research by, e.g., Knoblauch (1995) and Luckmann (2013).

21. This move has recently been elaborated upon by various authors (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Keller et al., 2012; Knoblauch, 2020, Christmann et al., 2022).

actions are related to something else.[22] Following Berger and Luckmann, we can conceive of this something else as an "objectivation." Although objectivations include signs, language, and discourses, in order to avoid the fallacies of "discursive construction" (Keller, 2018), they also include bodies, materialities, and technologies, such as (e.g., when pointing) fingers, pointing sticks, or laser pointers.

Building on Mead (1910), Schütz (1962), and Habermas (1984), communicative constructivism therefore suggests the notion of "communicative action" as the basic process in the social construction of reality, adding to it the material dimension linked to the bodily performativity of these actions and their sensual experience. There is no doubt that, in order to understand the notion of materiality, the sensuality of experiences needs as much elaboration as does the link between materiality and communicative action — that is, objectivation. Yet while the former issue has been made subject a large range of studies within the interdisciplinary "sensory turn" (see, e.g., Vannini et al. 2012), the latter relationship becomes crucial for an understanding of the recent waves of digitalization, as Pfadenhauer (2021) demonstrates with respect to robots (see also Pfadenhauer & Lehmann, 2022).

This potential has been recently highlighted by Couldry and Hepp. Building on basic concepts of Communicative Constructivism in sociology, they have developed an approach to the "mediatized construction of reality" (Couldry & Hepp, 2017) and demonstrate that the notion of mediatization is quite crucial as it allows them to address the massive effects of digital media on the social world (Knoblauch, 2013). Instead of just subsuming the acknowledgement of materiality under "realism," however, Hepp and Couldry (2023) opt for a kind of middle position between realism and constructivism, which corresponds to CoCo: Reality is a social reality not only in terms of institutions, as Berger and Luckmann suggested, but it also implies materiality, depending on the bodies and their subjective positions in the world interrelated and processed by communicative action. Reality, therefore, is social *ab ovo*.

The link between the body and social positions of subjects within relationships or (as Berger & Luckmann's sociology of knowledge would call it) "standpoints" has, quite obviously, a spatial connotation. In fact, communicative constructivism exhibits quite some potential for the refinement of the social theory of space and its empirical research. In line with sociology of space from Löw (2016), communicative constructivism constitutes one pillar for the analysis of the Collaborative Research Centre 1265, including a large number of research projects working on a global level. As they address the role of the spatial dynamics of communicative actions, these approaches will enable an understanding of the recent transformation of what is often still referred to as "globalization" but is now better referred to as a "refiguration of space" (Christmann et al., 2022; Knoblauch & Löw, 2020). Instead of a substitution of globalized networked structures in politics, culture, and the economy by a "de-globalization" accelerated by neoliberalism and digitalization, we observe an ongoing conflict between trans-scalar networked figurations and territorial, linear, and local spatial figures of communicative action, resulting in new spatial arrangements.

8 Conclusion

In our opinion, the links between Communicative Constructivism and mediatization research and spatial theory discussed above hint at potentials for a modification and extension of SoCo.

22. Tomasello (2008) in particular has shown that the potential for a "shared intentionality" is realized in the enactment of, e.g., pointing in human early childhood.

This theoretical approach might contribute to an understanding and an explanation of socio-spatial processes as a refiguration rather than a "deglobalization," providing insights into the recent transformations linked with digitalization.[23]

At the level of social theory,[24] Communicative Constructivism distances itself both from the individualist approaches of New Realism, which misunderstands the notion of social construction and makes a reductionist critique of social constructivism, and from the methodological individualism still advocated by Berger and Luckmann. In contrast to New Realism's reassertion of reality, which appeals to the public's perceptions and misrepresentations of the problem of social construction, we argue that Communicative Constructivism can contribute to a reformulation of what we consider the subject matter of the social sciences: social reality.

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23. For a comprehensive understanding of (deep) mediatization, see for example Hepp & Couldry (2023).

24. In the German-speaking discourse, the notion of social theory is used in a more distinct way than in the anglophone debates, where it is often synonymous with sociological theory or even the theory of modern societies. For the reasons behind this expansion, see Knoblauch (2020, Chapter 1).

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