

## ONTOLOGICAL REALISM AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY\*

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### **The fact of all facts**

Empirical science cannot be ontologically neutral. It must accept the claim, which the world presents to common human experience, the claim that it is real because human experience is fallible, it must be skeptical as to the specifics of that claim. However, no doubt can logically pertain to the basic principle. The fact of all facts, that the world is there, cannot be ignored without self-contradiction. Trying to avoid the pitfalls of human fallibility makes sense only if one accepts some version of ontological realism.

What does ontological realism mean with regard to the specific reality of the social world?

Two positions stand out. One side argues that one must look at the cosmos, including the human world, objectively and that "objectively" means a view from the "outside". The other side, although essentially accepting the empiricist perspective, argues convincingly that the "outside" of the human world has an "inside", that it is a world, which was built up in social interaction.

To be sure, the social sciences investigate a world in which the laws of mass, energy, gravitation, and, more specifically, the laws of evolution and genetics, are valid. However, taken by themselves, these laws do not explain what we want to know about human affairs. When we see a person falling from a building, we want to know whether it is suicide, murder or a jump to escape a fire. The laws of nature determine the conditions, under which human reality functions: no gravitation, no suicide, no murder. However, the laws of gravitation do not help us when we want to explain why people jumped from buildings, e.g., during the Great Depression.

Social reality is not simply presented to observation. "Objectivity" and "measurement" in the social sciences do not mean precisely the same thing as in the physical sciences. The latter seek to explain a cosmos, which has nothing to say - except in a purely metaphorical sense. The social sciences, on the other hand, investigate a world, which has something to say, which, in fact, was saying something long before there were any scientists listening. That world is

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naturally artificial, to use a term introduced by Plessner<sup>1</sup>. The traditions of life, by which human societies are organized, and the institutions associated with them, are the cumulative result of long chains of what “naturally artificial” human beings have been and are doing. This is what ontological realism means for the social sciences.

The universe, the earth, life on earth, including *homo sapiens*, have a natural “history”. However, the human social world is historical in a more specific sense. To be sure, the human species emerged in evolution. Yet the human social worlds are not a direct evolutionary product; they are self-made, the products of something that emerged from evolution and is subject to its own level of causation. Traditions and institutions are not genetic programs. Once they have been constructed in social interaction and become established in a collective memory, they are again transmitted in interaction. Traditions and institutions may appear less tangible than buildings and artifacts but they are equally real: Historical stocks of knowledge and historical institutions are constructed, maintained, transmitted, transformed and occasionally destroyed in social interaction. Obviously, social interaction is more than individual action, but it presupposes action that is meaningful to the individuals engaging in them, whether it leads to results that were intended, or when the consequences painfully differ from those that were originally anticipated.

The meaning of individual action, essentially subjective, is mostly derived from social stocks of knowledge. These, of course, do not arise by themselves. They are built up in communicative social interaction.

The idea that social reality is a human historical “accomplishment” was anticipated by a long line of philosophers and historians, from Aristotle and Thucydides, to Vico, Montaigne and Montesquieu, and further to Adam Smith and Marx. Nonetheless, a comprehensive formulation had to wait until the twentieth century. Max Weber, and after him Alfred Schutz and others took up the main epistemological and methodological issues connected with this idea<sup>2</sup>. Building upon their views, I present a view of the relationship between individual and collective levels of reality, describing the links between action, knowledge and the construction of social worlds.

Before coming to that, I may briefly anticipate the elementary methodological conclusion that is based upon the principle of ontological realism: that social realities are the result of human activities and that because they were constructed in meaningful social actions in a historical social world, they are to be reconstructed as data for the social sciences in a way that preserves rather than destroys their essential meaningfulness and historicity<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Plessner, H. Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch, Einführung in die philosophische Anthropologie. Berlin, 1928; Plessner, H. *Conditio Humana*. Pfullingen, 1964.

<sup>2</sup> Halbwachs, M. *La Topographie légendaire des Évangiles en Terre Sainte*, Paris 1941; Halbwachs, M. *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire*, Paris, 1925; Halbwachs, M. *La Mémoire Collective*, Paris 1950; Childe, G. V. *Society and Knowledge*. London, 1956.

<sup>3</sup> Luckmann, Th. “On the Evolution and Historical Construction of Personal Identity”, in Peter von Moos (ed.), *Unverwechselbarkeit. Persönliche Identität und Identifikation in der vormodernen Gesellschaft*. Köln, Weimar, Wien, 2004, pp. 185-205.

### **Constructing and reconstructing**

To repeat: the social sciences reconstruct in the form of 'data' something, which had been already constructed as a historical social world. They reconstruct it in small parts as well as larger wholes, in shorter or longer stretches. The common constructions of ordinary folk were from early on influenced by literary (epic, fictional, etc.) transformations and representations of the human world. In addition, in the modern period social science reconstructions are increasingly diffused into the common (sense) constructions of social reality.

Certainly, not all human activity consists of communicative interaction in the usual sense of the word. Animals are hunted, fields are tilled, shelters are built, children are nurtured, enemies are fought. Yet, as these simple examples show, even what is not primarily communicative interaction is usually facilitated and often accompanied by it. It follows that the human social world is already mainly constructed in communicative interaction. It hardly needs to be pointed out that the reconstructions of social realities are communicative by definition.

Reconstructions are an essentially narrative kind of a activity. Outside of the strict rules of evidence that govern such activities in the context of science, narrative reconstructions, both literary and, most basically, those that occur in verbal interaction, are part of a common, pre-scientific level of social discourse. They feed the collective memory of families, social groups and classes, institutions and entire societies.

I have spoken of constructions of reality as social action. For a relevant explanation of social structures, institutions, organizations and social classes, one must turn to their historical formation in social interaction. In some way 'history' is the necessary background for any human action. But institutions do not account directly for individual actions. One must to allow for something that mediates systematically between them and individual actions, a principle of behavioral integration, which takes into account the 'location' of individual life-courses in the temporal dimension of history, a personal identity,

### **Social interaction and communication**

Action can be best defined as a form of behavior as well as non-behavior, which is meaningful to the actor. Although ordinary experiences are, of course, meaningful to the individual, action is meaningful in an additional way. It was originally projected. It has a subjective purpose. Action proceeds in accordance with the project<sup>4</sup>. Evidently, not all behavior is action; some behavior may be a simple reflex without awareness on the part of the organism; many experiences are meaningful, although they had not been projected. On the other hand, not all projected behavior is action; some of it may remain mere fantasy. And, of course, not all non-behavior is action: only abstaining from behavior is, provided that the abstention was planned by the actor.

Social actions may be actions in which the concrete fellow beings are ex-

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<sup>4</sup> This way of analyzing action was developed by Alfred Schutz. See especially his *Collected Papers*, vol. 1, and II, The Hague, 1962.

perceived directly in face-to-face situations, or they may be actions oriented to people who are not present. In the first case, the reaction is perceived immediately, in the latter case, it is perceived with delay, if at all. Furthermore, social action may be oriented to people who are taken exclusively in their typicality or social function.

In face-to-face interaction overt behavior comes to the notice of others and can be interpreted by them and reacted to on the spot. Such social action is not only oriented to others in the original project but is influenced by others in its performance. Social action is characterized both by the two-dimensionality of meaning that is constitutive of action in general, and by the specific structure of experiences that involve others as concrete persons or as social types, either face-to-face or in recollection and anticipation. The meaning of social action is thus co-constituted by the meaning which others have for the actor. And in addition to this 'determination by anticipation', others influence social action directly by action and communication in face-to-face situations, and indirectly by the anticipation of their potential responses.

Most of the time we 'interpret' actions of others routinely. When we observe them, the 'meaning' of their actions presents itself 'automatically' to us. We do not normally stop to think about it. If the course of an action does not fit what we expect, however, it presents a problem of some sort, and its typical routine 'meaning' must be replaced by another. This requires interpretive acts.

#### **Acquiring and transmitting knowledge<sup>5</sup>**

An individual acquires knowledge whenever he stores away an experience. However, adults learn little that is new from many experiences. The same situations occur again and again, and the problems that they may have originally presented were solved long ago. The solutions were stored in the stock of knowledge, and, upon the individual's being faced with a similar situation, they are used to master it. The oftener the solutions were applied successfully, the more reutilized the application.

Whenever a situation 'resists' the application of old routines, one must begin to think. Reviewing the available and potentially relevant elements of one's stock of knowledge, one applies them to the situation, testing whether they fit. Thinking in problematic situations proceeds until the problem is adequately resolved. What represents an 'adequate' solution is a function of several factors. One is the individual's subjective system of relevance, another is his pragmatic interest in the situation, still another external requirements of the situation. Finally, if the problem is a social one, the 'adequacy' of solutions also depends upon the social definition of the situation. The results of such problem-solving activities contribute significantly to the individual stock of knowledge by changing existing typifications, and by formulating new strategies of action.

The proportion of reutilized "old" knowledge and unproblematic experi-

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<sup>5</sup> For an extensive analysis of the processes involved in the acquisition of knowledge, and for a typology of the structure of social stocks of knowledge see **Schutz, A. and Luckmann, Th.** *Die Strukturen der Lebenswelt*, II, Frankfurt, 1983 (*The Structures of the Life-World. Vol. II*, Evanston, Ill., 1989).

ences to "new" knowledge and problematic is historically variable. In archaic and traditional societies, the recipes that one has learned as a child tend to hold up for a life-time. In modern societies, marked by a complex social distribution of knowledge and rapid social change, people frequently encounter problematic situations, which can not be solved by old routines and which require the acquisition of "new" knowledge. In such societies, specialized knowledge increases enormously. How specialized knowledge is distributed and where and when it is to be found, is no longer known to everyone.

A striking feature of these societies is a certain opaqueness of the social world. While almost everyone is a specialist in something or other, he has difficulty in orienting himself outside a narrow area of competence. The increase in specialized forms of knowledge leads to various commercialized forms in its transmission, e.g., in the form of how-to-do books and more recently of the Googles, Yahoos and Wikipedias. The electronic media are taking an increasing share in the dissemination of knowledge, half-knowledge and bunk. What they do is largely uncontrolled for inaccuracy in capitalist and more or less democratic societies, and what they do is controlled against accuracy for political purposes in autocratic regimes. If such media functioned properly, however, if they made reliable information generally available, they could reduce the opaqueness of reality in the modern world.

**ԹՈՍԱՍ ԼՈՒԿՄԱՆ – Չոյաբանական ռեալիզմն ու իրականության սոցիալական կառուցակցումը** – Հոդվածում ներկայացված են 2012 թ. սեպտեմբերի 25-27-ը ԵՊՀ սոցիոլոգիայի ֆակուլտետում տեղի ունեցած միջազգային գիտաժողովում հեղինակի կարդացած «Իրականության սոցիալական կառուցակցումը» խորագրով զեկուցման հիմնադրույթները:

Շարադրելով իրականության մասին սոցիալական պատկերացումների ձևավորման Չոյաբանական հիմքերի իր ըմբռնումը՝ հեղինակը քննարկում է նաև այս բնագավառում մի շարք տեսաբանների հայացքները:

Համաձայն հեղինակի՝ անձի կողմից իրականության ընկալման և աշխարհայացքի ձևավորման գործընթացն իրականացվում է ինչպես սոցիալական կենսափորձի ընթացքում, սոցիալական կյանքի օրենքների և օրինաչափությունների ձևավորման (իրականության սոցիալական կառուցակցում), այնպես էլ այդ օրինաչափությունների յուրովի յուրացման միջոցով (իրականության սոցիալական վերակառուցակցում): Այդ իմաստով օբյեկտիվ իրականության սոցիալական ճանաչման գործընթացը սերնդեսերունդ դառնում է ավելի միջնորդավորված և հենվում է նախորդ սերունդների սոցիալական փորձի, այն է՝ արդեն իսկ սուբյեկտիվության տարրեր պարունակող, սուբյեկտիվորեն կառուցակցված գիտելիքների և պատկերացումների վրա: Տվյալ գործընթացում կարևորագույն գործառույթներ են իրականացնում սոցիալական հաղորդակցումն ու փոխգործողությունը:

**ТОМАС ЛУКМАН – Онтологический реализм и социальное конструирование реальности.** – Статья представляет собой ключевую лекцию классика социологии Томаса Лукмана на открытии международной конференции

“Социальное конструирование реальности“, состоявшейся 25–27 сентября 2012 г. на факультете социологии ЕГУ.

В лекции изложены взгляды Т. Лукмана на онтологические основы возникновения и накопления социального опыта в качестве системы представлений, развиваемых в социальных практиках; в частности, рассматриваются воззрения по данному вопросу ряда теоретиков.

Лукман различает социальное конструирование и социальное реконструирование реальности как первичный и вторичный опыт накопления знаний и представлений о ней, в определённой степени субъективных. Социальное реконструирование реальности происходит впоследствии, когда человек приобретает знания и представления, основанные на объективно-субъективных знаниях и представлениях предыдущих поколений. Этот процесс отмечен ещё большей степенью субъективности. Важнейшую роль в социальном конструировании реальности играют социальная коммуникация и интеракция.