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Social Construction of Reality

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I remember Berger and Luckmann's book—its dustcover with its orange-red title on an olive-green background—because it was always there on my shelf, in 1970–1971, when I was doing my Master's degree at the University of Essex. Of course, it was still on my shelf for years after that, but it is from that time that I have clear visual recall. It was the title written on the spine of the book that I remember—*The Social Construction of Reality*—because, to tell the truth, I never got much from reading it. Indeed I can't remember what was in it. The book certainly provided inspiration but for me the direct inspiration came from what was written *on* it not *in* it. There was also, of course, an indirect inspiration: this is what the book did for the thinking of the community that set the standards for my work and helped me to talk freely of the social construction of scientific knowledge without ridicule.

AO1

Now, this lack of direct inspiration is not quite such a negative thing as it may appear. First, there are only a few things that I can remember from 45 years ago; second I am a terrible scholar; and third, and I think most important, I read and use material in a very particular way. Most weeks in Cardiff the Centre for the Study of Knowledge, Expertise and Science (KES) holds a seminar and in yesterday's (Friday, 20th November, 2015), one of the things we talked about was how we use the literature. The first thing that became clear was that particular books have particularly strong impacts on people according to the state of the world and where particular people are in their lives and academic careers. Remember, most of what Kuhn said had already been said in the 1930s by Ludwik Fleck in *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* but compared to Kuhn's book, Fleck's book had negligible influence. Thus, the received model of an academic book considers its influence to be a function of its content but it is far from being as simple as that.

It is not entirely untrue that what's in a book affects its influence because one can certainly establish that the large majority of academics books, and papers, have no potential to be significantly influential leaving only a small proportion that might or might not have influence; I could write an uninfluential book any time you ask me. The point is, however, that how those few that do have influence become separated out from the larger number with what remains only *potential* influence depends on all manner of contingencies and timings. Which ones have influence on 'you'; and 'me' in particular is the upshot of another set of contingencies. Of course, most of those that could have an influence won't have an influence just because of the sheer numbers of books and papers out there. For example, I have written about 200 papers and 18 books nearly all of which *I believe* are potentially influential but even if I am right, 200 papers and 18 books are just too many for people to read in the kind of depth that is needed if a book is to change your life rather than lead to a ritual citation.

That *the contents* of 'Berger and Luckmann' had no direct influence on me was contingent on the fact that the big moment in my cognitive life, at least in so far as social constructivism was concerned, had happened in 1967 when I read Peter Winch's, 1958, *The Idea of a Social Science* under circumstances that caused me to read and re-read it over and over for 3 months until I believed I understood it (you see, no-one has time to read lots of books in that way). That, neo-Wittgensteinian book, gave me the idea of 'form of life' and the place I went from there was back to Wittgenstein's, 1953, *Philosophical Investigations*, which, I concluded, I could easily understand in the light of my understanding of Winch, even though philosophers treat the book as a bit of a mystery and argue about what it means to this day.

I was going to wind up studying the sociology of science but I did not know that at the time because I would not do any kind of research until 1971. But I was already fascinated by the philosophy of science and that caused me, probably in 1968, to pick off the shelf of a bookstore a little hardback with the intriguing title, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. As I read that I immediately saw it as an application of Winch/Wittgenstein to science and that the central point of what Kuhn was saying has already been anticipated

by Winch—see Winch’s discussion of the development of the germ-theory of disease around page 120. Thus, by the time I got around to doing my first piece of research, which was my little dissertation at the end of my Master’s thesis (entitled ‘The Sociology of the CO₂ Laser’¹), I already had quite enough theory to be going on with. But, when I got to my PhD, which involved among other things, the beginning of my studies of gravitational-wave physics and led, in 1975, to the publication of what I consider to be my key paper: ‘The Seven Sexes: A Study in the Sociology of a Phenomenon, or The Replication of Experiments in Physics’, I knew what to call the kind of overall approach to science that grew out of it. I could call it ‘the social construction of science’ and that was because of what was written *on* Berger and Luckmann’s book and was therefore on every sociologist’s lips from the 1960s onwards. That is to say, the book had an influence on me via its influence of the form-of-life of sociology as it was developing in the 1960s and 70s and for that to happen I did not have to know what was in it given that I had already got to a similar place from a different starting point.

Let me now return to the peculiarities of me as a social science academic with a philosophical bent. When people grow old it is said that they more and more ‘grow into their personalities’. That’s a nice way to say it: a less nice way is to say that their peculiarities become more and more salient to the point of eccentricity. From the point of view of someone inside that set of peculiarities, what it feels like is that you are coming to understand the world better and better and finally beginning to see it for what it really is, and you can say what it is out loud because you no longer have anything to lose or anyone to defer to.

The understanding that has crept up on me after a lifetime in this game is that for social scientists and philosophers there are two quite distinct ways of relating to the literature. This is very hard to grasp because the early part of every academic career and most of the rest of that career allows only one way of relating to the literature. As an undergraduate your essays had better handle and meld together all the relevant sources; your PhD had better contain a discussion of every relevant reference; and as a teacher you had better know the literature much better than those you are teaching and it is

likely that you will naturally fall into assessing your students' work in the same way as yours was assessed—'have they understood and handled the sources properly'. I think the large majority of social science and philosophy academics stick with that model and one can see that large amounts of academic writing in sociology and philosophy are extended essays in something like the history of ideas. To put a positive gloss on this, stealing from one of the contributors to our recent KES seminar, this kind of writing is to take part in a 2000 year-long conversation. That is what I'll call 'the humanities approach'.

But I discovered early on that among all the things I'm not good at—the higher reaches of mathematics, the kind of recall required of a top historian—I was no good at this scholarly stuff either. I found out during that Master's degree when, trying to make scholarly sense of my fascination with Wittgenstein I spent months comparing Wittgenstein's thinking with that of phenomenologists such as Husserl and wrote a 40-page essay arguing that the two led to the same place. I was told that the essay was no good, which decided me to cease pursuing that kind of exercise, but I also became convinced that I had wasted my time in a second way because if they led to the same place why not just use the Winchian/Wittgensteinian resource on which I had already expended so much energy in 'turning my cognitive head around'. Why not get on and do the work that could now be done with this reversed head rather than spend ages trying to 'scholar it up' (another phrase borrowed from the KES seminar), with more academic resources which would not change anything beyond giving more grandiloquence to what came out of the other end.

The point is this: if one takes the humanities approach, corralling the other academic resources is not 'scholaring up' or simply increasing grandiloquence, it is actually doing the work of taking part in the 2000 year old conversation and to miss people out of that conversation is to do the job badly—so you have to read and re-assemble everything. If, on the other hand you take what I am going to call the 'scientific approach', which is about using such resources as you need to do the work of understanding the world better, then reading sources that are only going to deliver you to the same substantive starting point and affect only the appearance of things is

not a good use of time. This is not to say that there is no need for lots of different ways of getting to the same starting point and therefore need for a variety of people to be taking part in the 2000-year long conversation at the same time (like Wittgenstein and the phenomenologists) and there is also need for new people to be entering the conversation as time passes, because each person and each generation begins the journey from somewhere slightly different. But if you are already where you want to be it does not make a lot of sense to be studying new generations' ways of getting there or even your own generation's alternative ways except as a matter of curiosity.

Let us briefly turn aside from the main point and consider how Berger and Luckmann's book bears upon the last paragraph or two. The last paragraph or two are reflections on the social construction of our own disciplines—sociology and philosophy. They are reflections on the different ways it is possible to do something which counts as sociology or philosophy: one way will involve starting with the literature and working ones way through it; one way will start with the world and use the literature only sparingly when and where it helps with understanding the world better. One accepts that the same help can be obtained from many and varied sources and there is no more need to use them all than to get ten people to help a child across the road, just because ten people could do it, when one will do. More and more, as the shape of my eccentricity sharpens, I am coming to believe that these two approaches to our disciplines are really very different and cause a great deal of harm by being confused with each other.

Sticking to the theme of the origins of the social construction of our own disciplines, we can see that a large part of the trouble has been caused, in sociology at least, by the hijacking of the term 'science' by that wing of the discipline that believes only social surveys and statistical analyses are scientific. That claim is readily acknowledged by the non-statistical wing which seems anxious to align itself with the more glamorous humanities and is more than ready to surrender the accolade of 'science', a trend which seems to have been accelerated and reinforced by the invention of the sociology of scientific knowledge. (Remember, this discussion can be happening only because of the existence of the world that Berger and Luckmann helped to bring into being). This is a shame because the

sociology of scientific knowledge should change our understanding of the meaning of science from a set of techniques (as the social statisticians take it to be), to a set of intentions, central to which is the intention to do work which others can replicate and confirm. There is absolutely nothing in the non-statistical, participatory, so-unfortunately-called 'subjective' approach that prevents its findings being replicated and confirmed; all that is needed is a determination to do it well and with integrity. Notice, however, that the humanities-style employment of the same methodology and the same subject matter would stress the personal qualities of the investigator and the many interpretations possible. In the case of the 2000 year old conversation, the idea of multiple interpretations are necessary to keep it going: were it not so I would be able to look up a table of sources (like a logarithm table) and read-off whether the phenomenologists, and various others, were saying the same as Wittgenstein or not and just pick one source from a list of sources with the same implications, saving a huge amount of trouble. Now there are polymaths and brilliant people who can handle both the humanistic approach and the scientific approach at once but they are few. Consider philosophy: I think most philosophers are essentially historians or analysts of ideas who spend most of their time pulling together the work of other philosophers rather than worrying about how the world is. On the other hand, though I do not know how good my hero Wittgenstein was at pulling together the work of others, I do know that when he decided to spend time sitting at the end of a Norwegian fiord in order to resolve certain problems that was not what he was doing because if it was he would have wanted to be near the library.

I've found that the insights I sweated to achieve in 1967 when I came across Winch have been good enough to sustain me throughout my academic life with only occasional extras. For example, I found Peter Berger's *Invitation to Sociology* terrifically useful and read it again and again. But I read it over and over because it told me how to practice and describe the kind of sociology I already knew I wanted to do. Nearly always these days, when I find the new ways of saying the old things my reading is designed just to make sure I am not missing anything and is not carried out in the expectation that I am going to learn anything fundamentally new beyond some helpful ways of saying things. And that, I can now see, applied as

long ago as 1970 when I kept opening that book with the intriguing title in orange-red on an olive ground and finding nothing vital in it. But, to repeat, this does not mean one should underestimate the impact of that book and its title on creating a academic world in which I could flourish—a world in which the notion of the *Social Construction of Reality* was a possibility. Berger and Luckmann to reiterate, helped to create that world.

To reinforce the point one more time, a book I did read pretty carefully was Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, but I didn't learn a great deal from that either because it to just led me back to Winch and Wittgenstein—though Kuhn showed me how to apply the ideas to science and without him I might not have noticed the importance of those remarks around page 120 of Winch's book. But mostly, Kuhn created the world of analysis of science in which I could do my work; Kuhn helped to create 'The Sixties' without which I do not think there would have been any sociology of scientific knowledge. That's what Berger and Luckmann did: help create 'The Sixties'.

[1](#)

Which led to my 1974 paper, 'The TEA-Set; Tacit Knowledge and Scientific Networks', which was to be reprinted in a collection 25 years later.