

Review of Ian Hacking,
The Social Construction of What?
Harvard University Press (2000)
Herbert Gintis

My introduction to postmodernism was at a liberal-artsy conference at the University of California at Davis, where an attractive and stylishly dressed woman, Donna Haraway, gave a talk, her voice seething with disdain and hostility consisting of slides of ads from Nature magazine selling complicated biological equipment using women and animals as models. I was completely flabbergasted. During question and answer period, I asked here, "If you took a picture of a native with a bone in his nose on South Sea tropical island, would you make fun of him? Of course not---that would be the height of impropriety. So why do you mock the culture of Nature magazine? What are you trying to prove?" Her answer was very simple. "I'm not trying to prove anything." That was it!

During coffee break I was told by others that Haraway was a "postmodernist" who was "deconstructing" modern biology, showing that biological theory is "socially constructed." I was still confused, because obviously all of modern science is "socially constructed." What else could it be? The next speaker was the formidable Professor Stanley Fish, now a brilliant commentator for the New York Times, but then the guru of the postmoderns, told us that even arithmetic is socially constructed. His example was the venerable denizen of the lumber yard, the two-by-four, which was in fact one-and-a-half by three-and-a-half. He concluded that "two" means "one-and-a-half" sometimes, so numbers don't mean what they say. During question and answer, I confronted him not with a question but a statement: the "two" in "two by four" refers to the unmilled size of the stock, not the milled size, so "two" does really mean "two." Similarly, the "four" really does mean (unmilled) "four."

I came home from Davis only to find a paper written by an old anthropologist friend asserting that smallpox vaccination in India was an "imperialist social construction" perpetrated to weaken Indian culture. My cozy world of rational intellectual exchange had been turned completely upside-down.

Ian Hacking's goal in this book is to explain and criticize the notion of "social construction" using the traditional tools of the professional philosopher. He begins by explaining the concept in everyday academic discourse, and then seeks its philosophical roots. He notes that when the postmodernist calls X a "social construction," he means that "X need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. X, or X as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable." (p. 6) Hacking adds that usually the critic adds that "X is quite bad as it is. We would be much better off if X were done away with or at least radically transformed." So, for instance, gender, race, emotions, mental illness, modern science, and many other things are "social constructions" and thus subject to the above critique. "Constructionists," says Hacking, "tend to

maintain that classifications are not determined by how the world is, but are convenient ways in which to represent it." (p. 33)

Now of course there are social constructions that perfectly fit this definition. Social ideologies that justify racial, ethnic, sexual, and religious discrimination, or that suppress scientific truth in the name of a religious creed, are clearly social constructions, and in my view social constructions of the worst sort. But the general categories of race, ethnicity, religion, and science are not social constructions, but rather have a substantive reality independent of our wills.

Truth? The postmodernists are fond of denying any absolute notion of truth. Rather, there is truth-for-me and truth-for-you, and there is no secure way to adjudicate between our truths. For this reason, Hacking argues that constructionism is a form of philosophical nominalism, but he does not pursue this issue far, and it seems wrong to me. Nominalism vs. realism is a metaphysical issue dealing with the existence of universals, whereas postmodernism asserts that one can build up more than one total view of the world, and these views are hermetically sealed and incapable of cross-communication. This is a little like Willard van Orman Quine's theory of the indeterminacy of translation, but that also is not what the postmodernists mean. What they mean is that there is no realm of truth with which we poor humans have sufficient contact to overcome our tendency to build world-views that are to our liking, and to defend these world-view however deficient they may be in really explaining the world.

Phrased in this way, postmodern social constructionism harbors some powerful, self-critical insights. Whole books have been written validating that people can build world-views with only the slimmest relationship to reality and without any serious empirical support, and defend these views blindly in the face of the facts. Hacking, however, does not deal with this sociology of knowledge issue, but rather focuses on one critical area, natural science, where he argues forcefully against the social construction position. I will not go over his arguments, because it is clear to any reasonable person that natural science is not a social construction in the above sense, however forcefully the social constructionists have argued the opposite position. Rather, I want to consider two less clear-cut areas: public opinion and social science.

Is public opinion swayed by the facts in such contentious areas as global warming, the safety of nuclear power, and the possession of hand guns? Dan Kahan and his coauthors, in "Cultural Cognition of Scientific Consensus," Yale Law School Working Paper 205, 2011, for instance, conclude that "scientific opinion fails to quiet societal dispute...not because members of the public are unwilling to defer to experts but because culturally diverse persons tend to form opposing perceptions of what experts believe. Individuals systematically overestimate the degree of scientific support for positions they are culturally predisposed to accept." In other words, on contentious issues, people believe there is less scientific consensus than there really is, and place high regard for those scientists who agree with their position.

The phenomenon isolated by Kahan et al. is of course a very powerful one indeed. Moreover, there have been widely accepted yet incorrect scientific theories, often accepted without serious evidence in favor of them. For instance, social psychologists overwhelmingly supported "repressed memory" theories of child molestation as the cause of adult mental dysfunction for many years, yet the theory never had a factual basis. Similarly, autism was for decades treated as the effect of poor mothering, again without supporting evidence. Thus it is healthy for the public to take a skeptical stance with respect to scientific orthodoxy, although obviously this can be carried too far, as when parents reject vaccinations for the children even after exhaustive and thorough research has assured their overwhelmingly net positive contribution to the health of children.

Social constructionism is thus a useful theory for us to add to our box of tools for interpreting social events relating to science, although it is ultimately a fully self-destructive doctrine: if people entertain the possibility that the "authorities" are building sand-castles in the air, their critical capacities will ensure that in the long run the truth, unsullied by ideology, will win out. We should thus never underestimate the wisdom of the public in a free society where the public has access to all the facts, in addition to the pseudo-facts and non-facts.

The second area worth discussing is the behavioral sciences. Although all the behavioral disciplines pay serious attention to the gathering and analysis of the facts, most support several or even many alternative theoretical frameworks that cannot or do not talk to each other, and which one accept according to personal taste. This is true of sociology, social psychology, and anthropology, and biology, the latter taking the form of alternative models of the evolution of human society. While these disciplines refer to the facts, the facts never seem to convince proponents of one view that this view is wrong and an alternative view is correct. If one is a true scientist, one should not accept a theory as more than a working hypothesis, unless warranted by the facts. This is broadly violated in the above disciplines. Two stars for social construction theory.

Economics used to be in the same position as the other behavioral sciences, but there has been a "shake-out" in recent years that has left neoclassical economics the only game in town. This is not because the evidence supports neoclassical economics, but rather because neoclassical economics supports capitalism and capitalism has become the only game in town. But if you read neoclassical economic theory, it is often bizarre in the extreme, far from the facts, and the major neoclassical theorists are frequently arrogantly dismissive of those who point out its weaknesses. Practitioners and policy analysts care little about Grand Theory, use a small subset of basic neoclassical principles, supplemented by practical knowledge of what has worked in the past and what has not. To the extent that there are "paradigms" of social policy (free markets, limited interventionism, social democracy, etc.), they do fit the social construction theory. Free market enthusiasts, for instance, work on pure ideology, as there has never been a successful modern economy without a strongly interventionist state.

I am not happy to say that the behavioral sciences fit the social constructionist model. Note that I am not asserting that the behavioral sciences are riddled with sexism, racism, greed, self-aggrandizement, or some other fatal ingredient to good science. Rather, the behavioral sciences are rather young, and I expect them to graduate from social construction to science in coming decades. Certainly most behavioral scientists are motivated by the standard values of scientific research, including the belief that there is a single reality out there, that it is our job to discover it, and that we should be as free from personal bias as possible in our research activities. If there is a single major fatal flaw in postmodern social construction theory, it is the assertion that success in this endeavor is *prima facie* impossible.