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On Hacking and Social Construction Arguments

Introduction:

From gender, technology, and science, all sorts of things are claimed to be “socially constructed.” Not all of them are necessarily academic. For example, Ian Hacking in his *The Social Construction of What?* points out that Rom Harre’s *The Social Production of the Emotions* was changed by the publisher to *The Social Construction of Emotions*, under the belief that it would sell more books with the edition of “social production” to “social construction” (18). Also, according to Hacking, some use the phrase “social construction” to make friends or admonish enemies. “The phrase has become code. If you use it favorably, you deem yourself rather radical. If you trash the phrase, you declare that you are rational, reasonable, and respectable” (vii).

Yet aside from some of the extra-theoretical uses of social constructionism, Hacking attempts to boil down the essentials of social construction arguments in a coherent, non-polemical manner. He observes two apparently distinct conceptualizations of social construction, one that is lengthy in detail, the other being much shorter. The short definition talks about causal social processes while the longer definition deals with contingency, nominalism, and the stability of scientific knowledge—his three “sticking points.” Bridging the two concepts

together gives Hacking trouble as he tries to explain how a thing can be both socially constructed and real with his notion of “interactive kinds.” However, as John Searle would argue in his *The Construction of Social Reality*, the apparent dichotomy between social construction and external realism cannot even coherently arise because the background assumption of the latter is required to make sense of the former. Thus, Hacking’s proposed solution in trying to resolve the apparent dichotomy between social construction and external realism is incomplete. In other words, in order to coherently maintain a social constructionist position, one needs to assume external realism first in order to make sense.

Hacking and Social Construction: The Short Definition:

The interesting aspect of Hacking’s short definition is that it is only mentioned once and never applied again throughout his book. Here, Hacking defines social construction as

various sociological, historical, and philosophical projects that aim at displaying or analyzing actual, historically situated, social interactions or causal routes that led to, or were involved in, the coming into being or establishing of some present entity or fact (48).

Yes, this is the “short” definition. Essentially, all Hacking means is that constructionists argue that things are not as they seem. They tend to take aim at what most people often take for granted and surprise them. They are implicitly relying on the dichotomy between appearance and reality that dates back to Plato and his Forms (49).

The Long Definition:

The long conceptualization of social construction involves three parts: four theses, six different grades of commitment, and three sticking points.

The Four Theses:

In a way analogous to the later Wittgenstein's "meaning is use" doctrine, the meaning of "social construction" for Hacking is defined primarily by how social constructionists actually use the term in their arguments. In answering "What is the point of social construction arguments?" Hacking notices a familiar pattern in social constructionist argumentation. Social constructionists about X (where X can be things, ideas, and classifications) tend to hold:

- 1) 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.
- 2) X is quite bad as it is.
- 3) We would be much better off if X were done away with, or at least radically transformed (6).

Yet even within this skeletal framework, social constructionists have different grades of commitment. As an example, feminists would adopt some combination of theses 1, 2, or 3 about gender—i.e. gender is not inevitable; it's bad; it needs changing. However, it is possible to stop at thesis 1 by maintaining that X is not inevitable, but is just fine the way it is. But if thesis 1 represents the minimal commitment to social constructionism, it essentially only says "X could have or might have been otherwise than it is right now," which does not seem like a very controversial or interesting claim at all. The game of chess, for example, is a case in point. The movement of pawns could have been made different. Again, this is not a very interesting claim for most people. Thus, for thesis 1 to have any point, it must have a precondition to give it a point. Hacking formulates

precondition 0: “In the present state of affairs, X is taken for granted; X appears to be inevitable” (12), but it really is not. While the claim “chess could have been different” may not be controversial, the claim “everyone takes the rules of chess for granted, but they are not inevitable” is more interesting. The point, the meaning of social constructionism, for Hacking, is to encourage us not to take something for granted, to shake us up a little. Insofar as social constructionism can be defined by how it is actually used, one can reduce its meaning to what kind of reaction or effect it is supposed to elicit to those that read social construction arguments about X.

Different Grades of Commitment:

That there are different grades of commitment was mentioned earlier and is worth fleshing out in more detail as it will help locate Hacking’s own personal stance on social construction. Hacking identifies six grades of commitment to social construction arguments: historical, ironic, unmasking, reformist, rebellious, and revolutionary social constructionists about X. The historic social constructionists only accepts thesis 1. The ironic social constructionist likewise argues that X is not inevitable, but nonetheless heavily influences our current way of thinking about things—we are stuck with it. The rebellious and revolutionary types accept theses 1, 2, and 3, but conclude 3 by arguing, respectively, that change in general and concrete political action are needed.

On his own terms, Hacking seems to be an unmasking-reformist social constructionist. The difference between the unmasking and reformist is “not much, a matter of attitude, perhaps” (19), but what

Karl Mannheim called ‘the unmasking turn of mind’ which does not seek to refute ideas but to undermine them by exposing the function they serve. The idea is that once one sees the ‘extra-theoretical function’ of an idea, it will lose its ‘practice effectiveness.’ We unmask an idea not so much to ‘disintegrate’ it as to strip it of a false appeal or authority (20).

Again, Hacking emphasizes the point of social constructionist arguments, which he uses its “extra-theoretical function” to ground its meaning. Indeed, even Hacking himself confesses that he dislikes the phrase “social construction” because it is “obscure and overused” (vii). As a result, he confesses in the beginning of his work that “When I have mentioned [social construction in my own work] I have done so in order to distance myself from it” (vii).

Three Sticking Points:

For Hacking, the three sticking points—contingency, nominalism, and stability of scientific knowledge—are age-old philosophical debates that are manifested in social construction arguments. The three sticking points center around debates that are seemingly irresolvable in character as many well-meaning people disagree on intellectual grounds with one another as opposed to political grounds. This fact often becomes lost in many heated debates involving social construction arguments.

Sticking Point One: Contingency:

Contingency, as discussed earlier, involves the claim that X could have been different. X is not determined by the nature of things. For example, Andrew Pickering’s book *Constructing Quarks* argues that high-energy physics could have been different and equally successful, if certain advances in instrumentation had not taken place or had taken another course. The main point of Pickering’s

argument is that high-energy physics is not inevitable. It could have turned out differently.

Opponents, on the other hand, would say that the current status of science had to develop the way it did. It was, in a sense, determined by the nature of things. Except for some catastrophic disaster that altogether stopped the progress of science, the current status of science was inevitable.

Sticking Point Two: Nominalism:

According to Hacking, nominalists contend that our conceptual categories that we use to organize and make sense of our universe is a product of our cognitive and social abilities and not of an intrinsic structure of an external, objective reality. Their opponents—what Hacking terms “inherent-structuralists” (83)—claim that our conceptual categories, like tables and trees, reflect an objectively real and external reality that is independent of our minds. Such metaphysical debates about reality go back as far as Plato and Aristotle.

Sticking Point Three: Explanations of Stability:

Social constructionists hold that “explanations for the stability of scientific belief involve, at least in part, elements that are external to the professed content of the sciences” (92)—i.e. social climate, personal interests, funding issues, politics, etc.... An inherent-structuralist, however, contends that science gains stability because of the content of science. That is, scientific theories, such as Maxwell’s Equations or the Second Law of Thermodynamics, gain stability over time “because of the wealth of good theoretical and experimental reasons that

can be adduced for them” (92). Thus, inherent-structuralists implicitly do not lend much, if any weight, toward external factors in science.

Tying it All Together:

Commenting on Maxwell’s Equations, Nobel Laureate Steven Weinberg claims

That is the sort of law of physics that I think corresponds to anything as real as we know....The objective nature of scientific knowledge has been denied by Andrew Ross and Bruno-Latour and (as I understand them) the influential philosopher Richard Rorty and the late Thomas Kuhn, but it is taken for granted by most natural scientists (88).

Hacking points out that Weinberg, an eminent physicist, illustrates his three sticking points well. When Weinberg says that Maxwell’s Equations are as real as anything we know, he is implying that it is inevitable (non-contingent), an accurate representation of an inherent, objective reality (anti-nominalist), and gains its stability over time because of the contents of the theory itself rather than extra-scientific factors like politics and money. Hacking is trying to make explicit what is often implicit in heated debates centering around social construction and claims of scientific objectivity.

Perhaps the most common context in which the phrase “social construction” gets used is with regard to science. Hacking notes:

Constructionists tend to maintain that classifications are not determined by how the world is, but are convenient ways in which to represent it. They maintain that the world does not come quietly wrapped up in facts. Facts are the consequences of ways in which we represent the world...[the constructionist view] is countered by a strong sense that the world has an inherent structure that we discover (43).

A helpful way of phrasing this involves a picture. As Sergio Sismundo describes in his article “Some Social Constructions” (1993), external realists would think that our representation of an object is dependent upon a real object, or, in the case of science, that our scientific knowledge is dependent upon a real natural

world “out there” to discover and represent accurately. The social constructionist, on the other hand, would hold it is our social constructs which shape our perception of reality.

Objective Reality → Scientific Knowledge of Reality [external realist position]

Social Constructs → Scientific Knowledge of “Reality” [social constructionist]

Such a reading can have at least two possible interpretations. First, we might read this as saying that unless we have social constructs or representations, we do not know of any objects; or at least we do not have any independent access to that realm without our concepts of objects. But clearly this is incorrect for surely no one would hold that since we need microscopes to see bacteria that bacteria are created by microscopes (538).

The second, more charitable interpretation holds that objects, like America, acquire meaning in a social context through agreed upon representations of it, but clearly America was not materially “created” by those representations (539). Essentially, there are real objects out there, but they are given meaning to us by creating representations that are commonly agreed upon by society. This reading leans closer to a realist position than a social constructionist bent.

Hacking later explains:

Rationalists think that most science proceeds as it does in the light of the good reasons produced by research. Some bodies of knowledge become stable because of the wealth of good theoretical and experimental reasons that can be adduced for them...The constructionist holds that explanations for the stability of scientific belief involve, at least in part, elements that are external to the professed content of science. These elements typically social factors, interests, networks, or however they be described (92).

Hacking tends to cast social constructionists as being epistemologically opposed to a scientific realist position. In other words, he understands the proponents and

opponents of social constructionist arguments as not only being opposed to one another, but in some sense speaking past each other as well. Looked at another way, what Hacking describes as the crux of the conflict between social constructionists and external realists is the age-old Platonic school of thought and the sophistic school of thought where, as Gorgias once claimed, “man is the measure of all things.”

Resolving a Dichotomy:

Further, Hacking seems to think that this debate presents a false dichotomy in that social constructions are not real. Though how Hacking himself uses the word “real” is interesting.

To illustrate, Hacking gives a few examples in his book. Child abuse, for instance, is both a real phenomenon but how we view the epidemic of child abuse in the media is itself socially constructed at the same time. Another example: attention deficit disorder (ADD) is a real phenomenon but how we choose to classify it is socially constructed. It could have been otherwise. Where one might make a value judgment about the social construction of ADD, for example, ties into what Hacking thinks of as “real” consequences of those social constructions. Hacking formulates a distinction between “interactive kinds” and “indifferent kinds.” Interactive kinds are

...classifications that, when known by people or by those around them, and put to work in institutions, change the ways in which individuals experience themselves—and may even lead people to evolve their feelings and behavior in part because they are so classified (104).

So, because of how the medical field might choose to classify children diagnosed with ADD, that will not only affect how society views them, but what kind of

policies or political changes will affect children with ADD, and also how ADD children experience themselves as people. In contrast to interactive kinds, indifferent kinds, such as quarks, are not behaviorally affected by how we choose to classify them.

However, Hacking's formulation of interactive and indifferent kinds is not entirely clear, and he admits as much. In the future we might develop technology where we can in some sense control quarks as we can do with bacteria. It is at least conceivable even if it is improbable. With bacteria, which is the better example, depending on how we choose to classify bacteria and its properties we can affect it as though it were also an interactive kind. Hacking admits of a problem with his classification scheme:

Microbes, not individually but as a class, may well interact with the way in which we intervene in the life of microbes. We try to kill bad microbes with penicillin derivatives. We cultivate good ones such as the acidophilus and bifidus we grow to make yogurt (105).

Hacking's scheme seems to be a distinction without much of a difference in such borderline cases.

Furthermore, Hacking's definition of interactive kinds is very broad. Almost any type of human interaction imaginable where classifications are made, then made known to those classified, can and will affect how the classified people experience themselves as human beings. The results of opinion polls are a good example of this. Even people who experience biological disorders like anorexia will experience themselves differently depending on the socio-political one finds him or herself in. An anorexic today might be treated differently than an anorexic a hundred years ago because of how they are classified.

Trying to find the third alternative in the social constructionist versus external realist battles that he describes clearly gives him trouble ascertaining that middle position. He at least makes a valid attempt. And perhaps it is driven by his own bipartisan desire to expose or unmask a middle ground between the two sides. That something can be both a social construct and real at the same time is an interesting proposition, but if we don't adopt Hacking's explanation completely or view it as incomplete, then how can the two sides be reconciled?

How to Reconcile Social Construction and External Realism:

External realism, according to John Searle, can be defined as the view that "the world (or alternatively, reality or the universe) exists independently of our representations of it" (Searle 150). Those that oppose realism, anti-realists, would contend that the world exists dependently of our representations of it. However, we should distinguish external realism further, and then later we will see that social construction requires some form of external realism as a necessary background assumption in order to make its arguments. Thus, the apparent dichotomy between a thing being a social construction or a real entity or fact will be seen as nonsensical, not even arising.

Three Distinctions:

Searle discusses three salient features of external realism that need to be distinguished first (Searle 154-155). The most salient feature of external realism is that it is a metaphysical theory rather than an epistemological theory. External realism is often and mistakenly associated with the correspondence theory of truth—i.e. the view that statements are true or false by virtue of their

correspondence to facts in the world. However, while a correspondence theory of truth presupposes external realism because facts must correspond to an external reality, external realism does not automatically imply one's commitment to a correspondence theory. External realism, as a theory about ontology, does not define "truth" at all, which is precisely what the correspondence theory attempts to do.

A second distinction is that there is nothing epistemic about external realism. External realism does not presume that there is a "God's Eye View" (or "a view from nowhere"). For instance, Immanuel Kant held an external realist position with his distinctions between the noumenal and phenomenal realms. But he claimed that we do not have access, no view, to this noumenal or externally real world of things-in-themselves.

The final distinction is that external realism does not imply that there is one best vocabulary or system of representation that accurately describes external reality. It is silent on this issue. One could have numerous, different, and even conflicting systems of representations of an external reality and still consistently hold an external realist position. In sum, external realism is a metaphysical view, not an epistemological theory of any sort. Thus, attacking external realism on epistemological grounds is like criticizing the ethical theory of classical utilitarianism because it is not deontological.

Reconciliation:

One of the main consequences of external realism as defined above is that because there is a reality independent of our minds, if all human beings were to disappear one day, say by aliens eating everybody en masse, all features of the world, except for some parts that are affected by our representations as described by Hacking's notion of "interactive kinds," would remain unaffected. The world would literally go on. The world, on this view, exists totally independent of our language, thoughts, and representations of it. This is not to claim, however, that we know what this real world looks like. Again, Kant is a case in point on this issue.

Sometimes social construction is leveled as an attack on external realism. It can take many forms. Social constructionists, according to Hacking, argue that our representations of reality are often contingent, that our representations of reality are largely human creations, and that efforts to obtain true and accurate representations of reality are very difficult, if not impossible, because humans are influenced by all sorts of factors—i.e. prejudice, culture, politics, economics, and so on. Thus, objectivity is difficult to achieve since many of our best attempts to get at reality, such as natural science, occur within the context of culture and history. Many see social construction arguments as opposing or denying the existence of an external reality.

However, not only can they be consistent, but social construction arguments actually require external realism to be assumed in order to make it intelligible. One way of demonstrating this is to make social construction arguments and try to deny external realism at the same time. If it still makes

sense, then external realism is not required by social construction. If, on the other hand, it does not make sense, then we can say that social construction requires external realism as a necessary background assumption in order for it to be coherent. As Searle notes,

There has to be something for the construction to be constructed out of. To construct money, property, and language, for example, there have to be the raw materials of bits of metal, paper, land, sounds, and marks, for example. And the raw materials cannot in turn be socially constructed without presupposing some even rawer materials out of which they are constructed, until eventually we reach a bedrock of brute physical phenomena independent of all representations. The ontological subjectivity of the socially constructed reality requires an ontologically objective reality out of which it is constructed (190-191).

Statements are representations of our world. When I say that my dog is brown with black spots or that there is snow on top of Mount Hobbs, I am making representative claims about the external world. These two examples are instances of mind-independent statements. Their existence as brute facts is not usually understood to fall within the purview of social construction arguments like mind-dependent statements are, such as "I earned \$100." But do mind-dependent statements make sense without assuming external realism? Take the following pair of statements:

(1) In a world that is like ours, except that representations have never existed in it, I earned a \$100.

AND

(2) In a world that is like ours, except that representations have never existed in it, it is not the case that I earned a \$100.

The first statement seems contradictory since if there was a representation-dependent system in place, such as the dollar system, it is impossible to ascribe any meaning to "I earned a \$100." This would be akin to claiming that the bishop

in chess moves diagonally in a world where the game of chess never existed. The second sentence is trivially true. Obviously, in a world where the dollar system is absent, it would not be the case that I earned a \$100.

In sum, assuming external realism provides the necessary conditions for social construction arguments to at least be coherent. In this way also, and perhaps most importantly, there is no real dichotomy between social construction and external realism. Thus, Hacking's formulation of interactive kinds to bridge the apparent gap between social construction and external realism, although useful, was incomplete as external realism is further required as a necessary background assumption to even make sense of social construction arguments.

Works Cited

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