
2

(Post-)POSITIVISM, SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM, CRITICAL REALISM: THREE REFERENCE POINTS IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE

In this chapter we will discuss three overarching philosophies of science: positivism and post-positivism, social constructionism, and finally, critical realism. We take up the three orientations as a conceptual, terminologic, and thematic general background to the qualitative methodologies that follow. All three cut across the quantitative/qualitative dividing-line. Although the main thrust of positivism is quantitative, there have been cases of qualitative positivism, for instance in historiography. Conversely, social constructionism is mainly qualitative, but quantitative social constructionist studies do exist. Finally, critical realism bridges quantitative and qualitative studies – there is no tendency for critical realists to favour either of these type of studies.

During the twentieth century, *positivism* became, and remained for a long time, the dominating philosophy of science. Theory and data, induction and deduction, law-like statements, verification and falsification, were key words. In the second half of the century, positivism came under increasing attack from internal sources – the post-positivists – as well as external opponents; and in the last third of the century, philosophical positivism rapidly deflated. Positivism has some similarities to the data-oriented methods discussed in Chapter 3, especially grounded theory; what is perhaps less well known is that it has also been alluded to by Foucault, and has some paradoxical traits in common with postmodernism; important ideas in post-positivism have been influential to postmodernist thought (see Chapter 6).

Social constructionism has increasingly emerged as an important perspective within social science and has even become predominant in some areas. Generally it can be said that for social constructionism, in contrast to positivism, reality is precisely *socially constructed*. (What this means in more detail, we will return to.) The important thing for research therefore becomes to explore how these social constructions happen. This approach is not particularly theory-oriented; the focus is rather on the ‘disclosure’ of how social phenomena are socially constructed. As we shall see, social constructionism is very rich and multi-faceted, so what has been said thus far is only a first indication of direction. Social constructionism has quite often been associated with postmodernism, and this may be true at a more superficial plane, although their roots and basic tenets are different; social constructionism has also made an inroad in grounded theory, and has been linked to hermeneutics and

critical theory (sometimes called ‘critical hermeneutics’) as well. Feminism often emphasizes gender as a social construction.

According to *critical realism*, both positivism and social constructionism are too superficial, unrealistic and anthropocentric. For social constructionism, all knowledge is linked to our social constructions and should not rise – at least not too high – above these. For positivism, all knowledge comes to us as single sense-data, and theories are just human-made linkages between these single data. Critical realism, in contrast, asserts that there is a world independent of human beings, and also that there are deep structures in this world that can be represented by scientific theories; the latter therefore become central for this orientation. Critical realism has been presented as a possible successor to social constructionism, but if this will transpire remains to be seen. In its emphasis on underlying patterns, critical realism shares some tangential points with hermeneutics and critical theory; in its searching for some kind of scientific laws, and in its view of the commonality of social science and natural science research, it shares ground with positivism.

Rooted in other traditions, social constructionism and critical realism constitute two important alternatives to positivist and post-positivist conceptions of science. In particular social constructionism but also critical realism presently draw great and increasing attention. They are often used as contrasts and as points of departure for debate and criticism.

In what follows, we present the orientations in chronological order. Initially launched in the nineteenth century, positivism was first out; social constructionism was introduced in the late 1960s; and critical realism in the 1970s. We shall give the most space to social constructionism since this is by far the most utilized orientation of the three in social science.

Positivism and beyond

The concept of ‘positivism’ has been central in the philosophy-of-science debate since the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Comte (1844) introduced the term, and through the twentieth century when logical positivism (later called logical empiricism) was topical. The sense of the positivism concept has often varied depending on who was doing the describing. The term ‘positivism’ has often been used in a derogatory sense, serving as a general invective. There is, though, a conceptual core. More concise and inclusive is perhaps Nietzsche’s (1901: 267) description of the approach as the doctrine that ‘halts at phenomena: “there are only *facts*”’. To which Nietzsche promptly retorts: ‘No, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations’. A little more elaborately, Feyerabend (1981: 16) describes positivism as ‘any interpretation of science (and of theoretical knowledge in general), which applies an assumption equivalent to’ the statement by the well-known positivist Hempel, ‘Science is ultimately intended to systematize data of our experience.’

Etymologically, the word positivism comes from the Latin *positum*,¹ the supine form of *pono*, put, set, place or lay. Thus, something is put, set, placed or laid; this something is given facts or data, and the one they lie in front of is the researcher.

Data are consequently something that *exists, is (already) there*, and the task of the researcher thus becomes to gather and systematize them. The underlying harvest metaphor is palpable. The researcher, as it were, collects the crops of the earth which are already there, and then prepares them into a tasty dish. Various positivist approaches have put different emphasis on these two processes, the gathering and the systematizing, and have also described them in different ways. For positivist historians in the nineteenth century, data collection was more important than systematization, a systematization that was never allowed to lead as far as to theory, since this would mean the abandonment of facts in favour of speculation. In contrast, for Comte and also for the logical positivists in the twentieth century, theory, the systematization of data, was central.

Current social science positivists focusing on statistical analysis are found somewhere in between these positions: theory, seen as a summing of data, is accepted, but the theoretical propositions are both less encompassing and less systematized than the logical positivists' prescriptions of universally valid, formalized axiomatic systems (prescriptions that the positivists' later inheritors in the philosophy of science have sharply criticized, see Suppe (2000)).

Data or facts should, according to positivism, be observable, and here is the link to empiricism (Harré, 1981). For modern positivism, what is observable also includes what is measurable or possible to register through some kind of instrument (Braithwaite, 1953: 8n). One approach within positivism, operationalism, even went as far as to reduce facts to measurable phenomena. A critical point against identifying observability with measurability is of course that this is all right when we talk about telescopes or microscopes; but even for these, a lot of interpretation beyond normal seeing is required. For other instruments, for instance a survey, the element of observation appears more distant or problematic. The logical positivists made a sharp distinction between theoretical language and observation language (reflecting the dichotomy between theory and empirical facts). The former was supposed to be translatable to the latter through so-called correspondence rules. As we shall see, this distinction was put in doubt by critics of positivism, who pointed out that all facts are theory-laden. If we talk about results of measurements, this already presupposes both theories about the instruments that measure and theoretical preconceptions of what we measure (otherwise we would not know what to measure). For surveys, for instance, statistical theory lies at their basis, and the variables that are part of the measurements presuppose various social-scientific theories. The correspondence rules were also criticized for being a 'heterogeneous confusion of meaning relationships, experimental design, measurement, and causal relationships, some of which are not properly part of theories', while on the other hand more vague or diluted interpretations were criticized for being logically inconsistent (Suppe, 2000: 103).

Critics of positivism

In the post-war era, the positivist approach, and particularly logical empiricism, long dominated the scientific-philosophical discussion in the Anglo-American sphere. From the end of the 1960s, however, positivism was the target of strong and growing

criticism, in particular from the Marxist left. The criticism did not diminish but rather increased in strength after the Marxist wave had ebbed away in the political disillusion of the 1970s. Structuralism, hermeneutics and phenomenology became the new banners under which many social scientists and humanists gathered. For the proponents of change, not as least important was the access to something of a fifth column in the very camp of the enemy: Kuhn's ideas of paradigms and paradigmatic revolutions – ideas that had emerged from within a positivist environment. Kuhn's contributions, however, have somewhat unfairly come to obscure other important authors in the post-positivist tradition. Names like Feyerabend (1975), Hanson (1958) and Toulmin (1953, 1961) deserve to be mentioned in this context. Kuhn, Feyerabend, Hanson and Toulmin have been given the umbrella term 'historical relativists' (Suppe, 1977), since they held that scientific knowledge is historically and socially conditioned, and so is not absolutely true but relative in character.

The 'heart' of logical empiricism stopped beating on the 26 March 1969 at the opening day of a symposium in Illinois, when one of its foremost standard-bearers, Carl Hempel, openly admitted that he no longer accepted the basic theses of this approach (Suppe, 2000). (This does not of course prevent several of these theses from surviving *post mortem* in the social sciences.) Kuhn himself, even though his ideas are very topical in social science, has become more or less superseded by later developments in the philosophy of science: post-Kuhnian critics of positivism have turned away from historic relativism and, for good or bad, instead tried to form more general, timeless principles for theoretical knowledge (Preston, 2004).

If there is any common feature to be found in the just mentioned various alternatives to positivism, it is the following. The purpose of scientific activity no longer stands out as a statistical putting together of surface phenomena in an observed reality. The important thing rather becomes to conceive this reality as an expression for, or a sign of, deeper-lying processes. For Hanson and Toulmin in the post-positivist school, the latter took the shape of law-like 'patterns' lying behind and explaining the manifestations of observed reality. The structuralists sought to trace structures that made their imprints on the matter of reality. The hermeneuticians interpreted the meanings that form the backdrop to and bring understanding of our language and actions. The Marxists and other dialecticians focused their interest on the hidden driving forces and mechanisms that in the form of in-built laws of movement, generated by contradictions, govern and develop the systems.

Thus, a transcending tendency is characteristic of the approaches critical of positivism: the observed reality is not all there is – and the researcher can reach behind it and reveal more fundamental layers, of which what we 'see' is a kind of projection or reflection. Such a way of looking at things was almost by definition excluded by the positivists, since (knowledge of) empirical reality was all that existed for them, and everything else was subjective constructions. Even scientific theories were conceived as complex of statements (systems of axioms) about generally observed relationships between surface phenomena. The parentheses around the words 'knowledge of' indicates the existence of differences in nuances between positivists in their attitudes to so-called theoretical entities, i.e. what we have called underlying patterns or deep structures. On the one hand, there is the far-reaching

opinion that these do not *exist*; on the other hand there is the opinion that we cannot *know* whether they exist or not (McMullin, 1982: 19). In both cases the attitude leads to a resistance to the use of theoretical entities as part of the scientific process. One might argue that at least the former kind of positivists would accept the use of such entities as a heuristic aid to find their theories. The theoretical entities could thus serve as a kind of useful fiction for the construction of theories. As an extension of this line of reasoning we might ask what the difference is in practice between positivists and their critics here. It is difficult to see why a positivist should take the roundabout way via deep structures and underlying non-observable tendencies, when it is much simpler and less time-consuming just to summarize data, which is the goal anyhow. The critics on their side aim precisely at theories that are *not* compilations of data.

The positivists' reduction to that which is observable (or even stronger, measurable) in reality is, in the view of the critics, not very justified. If there are hidden patterns, underlying rule formations, which govern the observed parts of reality, and whose exploration can contribute to explaining these observed parts, then this seems to be a legitimate area for research. Rather than beginning with survey-based measurements of large amounts of empirical data, or with guesses of what the connections are between such data – both positivist approaches – another way becomes more reasonable: to carry out intensive studies of a small number of cases in order to retrieve through analysis the underlying patterns that are arguably reflected in the surface structures. These lines of thought have been held by post-positivists (Hanson, 1958; Toulmin, 1953), structuralists (Chomsky, 1968; Lévi-Strauss, 1962) and dialecticians (Marx, 1967).

Later orientations such as different forms of postmodernism and poststructuralism (see Chapter 6) to a certain extent hark back to positivism by rejecting the idea of deep structures or underlying patterns. There are only surfaces (which can perhaps 'fold' – the fold metaphor is common in postmodernism/poststructuralism). In, for example, the case of Foucault (1972), this look in the rear-view mirror happens explicitly, since he refers to himself as a 'positivist'. Even Latour (1996) can be mentioned in this context. A counter-reaction against surface thinking and a contention that underlying structures exist is found in the topical 'critical realism', which we discuss later in this chapter.

To take up the thread of postmodernism again, things are not that simple in this line of thought. As we shall see in Chapter 6, many proponents of postmodernism denies or brackets the existence of anything real outside language, to which linguistic statements would refer: texts only refer to other texts, not anything 'out there' (at least not accessible for research), as the jargon goes. If there is no extra-linguistic reality, there are also no hidden patterns to which the statements might refer. At the same time the postmodernists focused on tracing hidden but decisive cracks in the seemingly solid texts they studied: the so-called 'deconstruction'. The focus on the hidden behind the immediately familiar, palpable, is thus obvious even here.

Post-Kuhnian theoreticians (e.g. Suppe, 2000) in the influential 'semantic conception of science' have gone rather far in rejecting the idea of theories as direct reflections of reality. They introduce a third or middle term: *models*, which for them are more central than either theory or empirical data, and even constitute a kind of 'autonomous agents' (Morgan and Morrison, 2000). According to these 'model theoreticians', as

they have also been called (Chakravarty 2001), researchers never directly compare theory and empirical data, as the logical empiricists argued; they compare *one the one hand* theory with models and *on the other hand* models with empirical data. For this line of thought, theories are almost kinds of Platonic 'non-linguistic' entities soaring over models and empirical data (Suppe, 2000). That theories contain non-observables – references to entities that cannot be observed – becomes nearly self-evident from such a stance. (The view of theories as non-linguistic has been criticized, for instance, by Hendry and Psillos (2004) and Chakravarty (2001).)

Beside the semantic conception of science there is also another post-Kuhnian orientation worth mentioning, the 'evolutionary' conception, in which the formation of theories are seen as a kind of Darwinian natural selection – the false or less true theories are weeded out by a kind of natural selection process. Through its evolutionary aspect, this orientation retains the time perspective on the scientific generation of knowledge that characterized Kuhn and other historical relativists, but without the relativism, for example Kuhn's idea that later paradigms are hardly more true than those they replace. Evolution and natural selection are thought to favour (ever) truer theories.

Theory vs empirical 'facts': verification, falsification and beyond

The clash between verificationists and falsificationists (or Carnapians and Popperians) in the philosophy of science is well known. Equally well known are Kuhn's paradigms. Lakatos's research programmes and Feyerabend's methodological anarchism are also important ingredients in post-positivist thinking, as are Toulmin's ideas. Less well known outside the philosophy of science as an academic field, post-Kuhnian approaches deserve more attention from social scientists.

With Carnap (1962) in the forefront, the logical empiricists had asserted the necessity of 'verifying' theories and hypotheses with positive examples. As against this, Popper's (1934) ideas had a delayed but very strong impact, inverting everything and stating that theories, on the contrary, can only be 'corroborated' by repeated attempts at falsification. With his criticism, Popper directed a fundamental blow against logical empiricism, and theoretically refuted its most central theses.

Later critics, however, have had at least as strong objections to Popper's ideas. Kuhn (1970) showed in his analyses of scientific history that even the falsifications Popper had advocated as alternatives to the verifications he rejected, never occur in real research processes. He distinguished between two types of research. On the one hand the so-called 'normal research', where everything is focused on solving 'puzzles' within the frame of a thought structure – a 'paradigm' dogmatically regarded as given and the truth of which is beyond questioning. On the other hand the so-called 'paradigm shifts', scientific revolutions when one thought structure substitutes another, not on the basis of falsification, but for quite other reasons, including the capacity to attract supporters, who in time will come to dominate the research community.² Imre Lakatos (1970) tried to reconcile falsificationism with Kuhn's ideas, using his concept of 'research programmes'. These are reminiscent of complicated systems of fortifications, the aim being to protect the 'hard core' of the theory by

different kinds of 'immunization strategies'. Such strategies were just what Popper had criticized. According to Feyerabend (1975), even great scientists sometimes act like a kind of skilful con man or Machiavellian politician, who are good at hoodwinking the general public and their peer researchers by manipulating and forging data in various ways, and using micro-political tactics. This, too, is of course contrary to Popper's ideas of falsification.

An even earlier critic of positivism than Kuhn, Feyerabend and Lakatos was Stephen Toulmin. Avoiding the sometimes irrational overtones of the three other 'historical relativists', Toulmin (1953) held that theories are entities that are *used*, rather than entities that are *tested*. According to Toulmin, theoretical propositions can be compared with descriptions of rules. For rules, we first delimit the general area – here called the *domain*, indicating the type of cases for which the rule is valid. We do not say that the rule must necessarily hold for all these cases. In this way we stake out the rule's *area of application*. At American universities, there can, for example, be a general prohibition to walk on the lawns (the domain) – but not for 'Fellows', who fall outside the area of application. To deprive other people of liberty is generally forbidden – but not if they have committed crimes that lead to prison, something which falls outside the area of application. To kill is generally prohibited – except in war, which falls outside the area of application. And so forth.

In theoretical propositions, which thus express a kind of rules according to which reality functions, we first delimit the general domain, that is the types of cases in which the rules are applicable, and then successively try to map out the area of application within the domain, or, in other words, the cases within the general type for which the rule really is valid, and the cases that are exceptions. (Toulmin gives many examples of how this is done in scientific practice.) Positivism, on the contrary, regarded (in its deductive-nomological model) theoretical propositions as simply statements of universal relations like the prime example 'all swans are white'. If the statement is valid, it is true, otherwise false. As we have seen, matters are not as simple as that. Toulmin shows in many ways how positivism has ended up beside the road of scientific practice by failing to distinguish between domain and area of application for theoretical propositions. In particular this has been the case with physics, even though the latter has been the ideal model for positivism. Instead of verification/falsification, a procedure that, as we have pointed out (Kuhn, Feyerabend) seldom occurs in scientific practice, this research strategy therefore involves something else: *the successive establishing of a theory's area of application within a certain domain*. Concerning a *rule*, nobody asks 'it is true or false', but '*when does it apply?*'

Is it possible to generalize beyond the empirical base? Generalization of qualitative case studies is often called into question or regarded as unfeasible, something which has been seen as a weakness compared to quantitative setups. However, this depends on the epistemologic point of view. It also depends on what is meant by generalization. If we only accept surface regularities, there is of course no reason why a pattern that has previously been established should hold true for more occasions. Only a statistical study that can establish the probability that the findings have not emerged by chance is then justified to make a generalization – with stated probability. In a perspective that accepts non-observables in the form of patterns

and tendencies, common to and underlying several surface phenomena, *successive expansions of the empirical area of application within a certain domain* are both possible and desirable, even in qualitative studies. (For concise arguments in favour of generalizing qualitative case studies on the basis of knowledge realism, see also Tsoukas (1989) and Danermark et al. (2002, Chapter 5).)

Many difficulties of the social sciences appear to be caused by importing a positivist view of how science 'should' be practised, a view that in its turn has been based on an erroneous picture of how natural sciences really work. This is true of the issue we are discussing here, as well as of the issues of theory legitimation vs theory generation and the structure of explanations. The battle will then be for or against this supposed natural-science picture of scientific practice, whereby a lot of 'anti' approaches will ensue. This polarization risks losing what is really common to various branches of science, despite different subject matters. It is to the credit of the philosophy of science that emerged after logical empirism – for instance in the shape of post-positivism (Hanson and Toulmin) – that it has increasingly focused on how real research processes happen, contrary to previous, more prescriptive approaches.

In other words, positivism, by prescribing a formal logical form for theoretical propositions (universal judgements) has simply, as Toulmin (1972 and 1974, *passim*) points out, followed its tradition to *identify the rational with the logical*. (Something which also manifests itself in other ways, for instance in the requirement of theories to be formalizable as axiomatized systems.) But everything that is rational does not need to be formally logical even though the reverse is the case. If the research process is ensnared in a formal logical straitjacket, there is a risk that the qualitative counter-currents which necessarily will follow as a reaction, in the most extreme case, take on irrational overtones.

Among post-Kuhnians, adherents of the 'semantic conception of science' have particularly strongly, as we have seen, maintained that theory is never compared directly with empirical data, but with models; and models with empirical reality. There is also a two-way traffic between, on the one hand, theory and models and, on the other hand, models and empirical data: theories can be adjusted if they do not fit the results of the model, or the model can be adjusted; models can also be revised if they do not correspond to empirical results, and new empirical results can be sought out for further checking if the current ones do not agree with the model (errors in instruments, registrations, etc. can occur).

This conception of science, however, is 'methodologically naturalistic', i.e. it presupposes natural science (and especially experimental physics) as the paragon for all science; the models should, for example, be mathematically formulated and the theory be expressible in terms of state (or phase) spaces (Suppe, 2000), whence the semantic conception of science seems less applicable to qualitative method in social science. McKelvey (2003) gives examples of why organization theory could be reformed from the semantic conception, and this seems rather quantitative. However, it should be kept in mind that the problematic is not unambiguous or simple; there is indeed qualitative mathematics (set theory, abstract algebra and topology are examples). The *basic* ideas in the semantic conception of science should also be applicable in qualitative research. What first comes to mind is of

course qualitative models, but other ideational artefacts should also be considered. Metaphors, analogies and narratives often seem to play a similar role in qualitative research as quantitative models in quantitative research, pointing out a way to appropriate the semantic conception of science *malgré lui* for qualitative purposes. Such artefacts, re-presentations of, on the one hand empirical 'reality', and, on the other hand, theory, should then be considered as entities in their own right, irreducible to and potentially more important to the research process than either of these two, yet playing a mediating role between them.

The semantic conception of science claims to be epistemologically neutral, that is to be compatible with both realism and non-realism. Thus, the individual researcher can adhere to one or the other, in line with personal preferences, without either of them being at variance with the semantic conception of science. In particular when it comes to realism, one advantage is said to be the avoidance of the problems relating to the language–reality linkage (the problematic of representation), since theories are said *not to be linguistic* (and language includes also mathematical language). The argument for scientific theories' 'non-linguistic' character is that a theory can be expressed in different languages, and therefore it must be something that, so to speak, lies behind language. The argument seems doubtful – were it true, fiction in literature, for instance, would not be linguistic either, since it can be translated (albeit not always perfectly). Moreover, the problematic of representation with language is not avoided, since theories must always be expressed in some language (Japanese or Mathematese or ...) and the same goes for models, whose representations of reality, even if these are visual, must always be expressed in words (Chakravarty, 2001).

The semantic conception of truth seems, despite its asserted neutrality between a realist and a non-realist view, to have clear preferences for the former. Its compatibility with a non-realist view is open to question, since the very root to the conception is a correspondence between theory and reality, based on Tarski's correspondence theory for truth.

Social constructionism

Social constructionism has been associated with all the orientations that we take up in Chapters 3–6 below. Its roots are in phenomenology, but it has more recently been related to postmodernism. There are also attempts to launch a social constructionist grounded theory, and sometimes both critical theory and hermeneutics have been associated with social constructionism, which also shares tangential points with ethnomethodology and with Foucault. As social constructionism is thus a very broad and multi-faceted perspective and furthermore has often been contrasted to, compared to, and seen as an alternative to, on the one hand, positivism, on the other hand, critical realism, we treat it together with these two in the present chapter. For social constructionism, reality – or at least selected parts thereof – is not something naturally given. The study of how reality is socially constructed therefore becomes crucial for social constructionists.

The basic thrust of social constructionism can be described in the following four steps Hacking taken from (1999: 6, 12; we have changed Hacking's numbering):

- 1 In the present state of affairs X is taken for granted; X appears to be inevitable.

Social constructionist texts regularly begin with something that is regarded as self-evident, a taken-for-granted truth. The very point of social constructionism is then to prick a hole in this self-evidence by going further and showing that:

- 2 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.

This gives the 'aha experience' which is the main point of social constructionist texts. Many – though far from all – social constructionist texts then take one or two steps further, first to:

- 3 X is quite bad as it is.

And then to:

- 4 We would be much better off if X were done away with, or at least radically transformed.

Since social constructionism is so multi-faceted, these overarching characteristics are important in order to see, as it were, the forest and not just the single trees of the approach. (As to steps 3 and 4 above, it should be added that social constructionists are generally less systematic and confrontational in their criticism of societal phenomena than, for example, critical theorists (Chapter 5). Some try to be neutral or are only mildly sceptical. We will now look in more detail into Berger and Luckmann's classical work, which has become something of a cult book within the movement. After this we take up two more recent important authors: Gergen and Latour. This is followed by a presentation of the variety of social construction. Finally we present a few critical reflections and points of discussion.

Berger and Luckmann: reality as a social construction

Central author duo and pioneers for social constructionism,³ Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in 1966 published their classical book *The Social Construction of Reality*. The main inspiration for Berger and Luckmann was phenomenological (see Chapter 3 below). It was mediated by the Austrian Alfred Schutz, who in the 1930s became strongly influenced by the father of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl. Schutz, fleeing from nazism, emigrated to the USA, and in his philosophy applied phenomenology to the common-sense world of everyday life. Berger and Luckmann developed this thinking in the area of sociology.

They were also influenced by other authors who have anticipated or been active within the area of knowledge sociology, such as Marx, Nietzsche, Scheler and Mannheim. All these, who from the present perspective can be regarded as a kind

of 'forefathers' to social constructionism, called into question the existence of a purely rational, objective knowledge, arguing instead that knowledge arises from processes more related to ideology, interests, or power.

Yet other sources of inspiration for Berger and Luckmann included sociological 'mega classics' like Durkheim, Weber and Mead. Durkheim presented as his basic rule that it was necessary to view 'social facts as things'. Weber, on the other hand, held that the subjective meaning content in social actions was the central issue. In their social constructionism, Berger and Luckmann wanted to join together these two polarized standpoints between objective macro relationships and subjective micro relationships (a polarity that has been something of a leading theme in much social science). Their solution laid the emphasis on the individual level and the social facts; the institutions remain secondary.

Berger and Luckmann held that:

common-sense 'knowledge' rather than 'ideas' must be the central focus for the sociology of knowledge. It is precisely this 'knowledge' that constitutes the fabric of meanings without which no society could exist. The sociology of knowledge, therefore, must concern itself with the social construction of reality. (1966: 27)

Through this, the at first sight unsolvable conflict between Durkheim's and Weber's sociological position might be solved

The central question for sociological theory can then be put as follows: How is it possible that subjective meanings *become* objective facticities? ... How is it possible that human activity ... should produce a world of things ...? In other words, an adequate understanding of the 'reality sui generis' of society requires an inquiry into the manner in which this reality is constructed. (1966: 30)

The authors begin to solve this question by first 'attempt[ing] to clarify the foundations of knowledge in everyday life, to wit, the objectivations of subjective processes (and meanings) through which the *intersubjective* common-sense world is constructed' (1966: 34). The 'phenomenological analysis' they hereby use is termed 'descriptive' and 'empirical', not 'scientific' (1996: 34). All consciousness is intentional – i.e., it is always directed against some object. But these objects can present themselves for us in different spheres of reality, for instance in dreams or the waking state. We live in several different realities – among others in that of the dream – but the basic one is the usual everyday world. This is experienced as in various ways pre-structured, objectified. It also presents itself for us as an 'intersubjective world, a world [we] share with others.' (1966: 37). We continually remove ourselves from the everyday world to other, more secondary realities, or 'finite provinces of meaning' in Berger and Luckmann's terminology (taken from Schutz). These exist in unlimited numbers but a few important examples can be mentioned – theoretical science, art, religion, and the previously mentioned state of dreaming.

We share the everyday world with others. These others are experienced most characteristically in face-to-face situations. We '*typify*', according to Berger and Luckmann, (Part 1, Chapter 2) these others in various ways, for instance as English, Brazilian, man, woman, child, grown-up, professor, nurse, police officer, etc. Everyday

life is also filled with 'objectivations' (Part 1, Chapter 3). In these, a certain meaning content is given a material expression, which then becomes more permanent and transcends the immediate, concrete face-to-face relationship. Signs, symbols and language are examples of such objectivations. (We return to the objectivation concept below.) Language is of course especially important in the building-up of 'a social stock of knowledge' (1966: 56). A prominent role in this social stock of knowledge is played by the build-up of routines for acting in various situations, something which functions as a sort of 'recipe knowledge' for actions (1966: 56).

Human beings differ from other animals in their less developed instinctual behaviour and in their great flexibility. In order not to become chaotic, human acting must therefore be confined by some form of stability. This happens through a 'social order'. Human beings are social in their nature, and Berger and Luckmann argue (inspired by the father of social interactionism, Herbert Mead) that even the experience of a 'self' is developed in meaningful interaction with others. The social order is thus a human product, or more specifically 'an ongoing human product'; it is not something inherent in the 'nature of things', nor does it express any 'natural law'. People alienate, or *externalize*, themselves by necessity in their actions, and the social order is an expression of this (1966: 69–70).

Central to the social order is the process through which institutions emerge – *institutionalization*. What, then, is an institution? Berger and Luckmann mean that the forming of habits and routines, 'habitualization', happens continually in human acting. All the time, we develop habits, through which a certain way of acting can be repeated in similar situations. Berger and Luckmann describe institutionalization as 'a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions. Put differently, any such typification is an institution' (1966: 72). In every institution, actions of a certain type are supposed to be carried out by a certain type of actor. For example, our legal system as an institution stipulates certain penalties for individuals above a certain age who are aware of the consequences of their actions and commit certain crimes. Academic institutions stipulate certain rules of admittance for certain types of actors (students) and conditions of employment for others (researchers, teachers, administrators). And so forth. Through institutionalization, we are subject to social control, for example the incest prohibition forbids certain kinds of sexual action. But this social control is already preceded by the typification whereby we define certain kinds of sexual action as incest and not others. This typification will of course vary between different cultures and societies.

We create within our social relations all the time new habits and routines in our actions, as well as new categories in our observing of others and their actions. Or in Berger and Luckmann's terminology, we habitualize and typify; these habitualizations and typifications – these habits, routines, and categorizations – spread between actors, and as they do this, institutions, that is fixed patterns of thought and action, emerge: institutionalization occurs, for instance in the shape of family, religion, legal systems, sports, school systems, health care, hunting, etc. These institutions, originally created by people, by and by begin to be perceived as something external, objective, and given, that is, there occurs also an *externalization* and an *objectivation* (1966: 78).⁴ Berger and Luckmann here draw on Hegel's and Marx's concept of alienation, in

which people are viewed as estranged from their own activity, their praxis, which has been separated from them and therefore falsely comes to be understood as something external to themselves.

Through the need for meaningful mutuality in the social interaction, and for a coherent life – a ‘biography’ – there arises a need for coherence and unity, for integration, not only within but also between the institutions. Still, this integration, as different forms of ‘institutional logic’, is created by people, and is not the expression of any functionality or effectivity in the institutions themselves. Such institutional logics are the legitimizations of institutions, and a particularly important means for legitimizations is language. Whole ‘bodies of knowledge’ develop in this way, for instance theoretical formations in science, but there are also pre-theoretical bodies of knowledge that integrate knowledge in various areas on a pre-theoretical basis. The knowledge that is in this way alienated – externalized – from individuals will then be carried back to them, be internalized:

Knowledge, in this sense, is at the heart of the fundamental dialectic of society. It ‘programmes’ the channels in which externalization produces an objective world. It objectifies this world through language and the cognitive apparatus based on language, that is, it orders it into objects to be apprehended as reality. It is internalized again as objectively valid truth in the course of socialization. Knowledge about society is thus a *realization* in the double sense of the word, in the sense of apprehending the objectivated social reality, and in the sense of ongoingly producing this reality. (1966: 83–84, note omitted)

This knowledge is then transmitted not only between the individuals in society at a certain time, but also over time between generations, which is how traditions arise.

More specifically, experiences and knowledge are stored as memory layers in and between individuals, or as Berger and Luckmann (1966: *passim*) say with a geological metaphor, inspired by Husserl, they are ‘*sedimented*’. Language, through its intersubjective transferring of meaning, is an important means for collective sedimentation. The transferring of institutional meaning is an important aspect of this. Knowledge of the sense and meaning of institutions is transferred by special typifications – for example teacher and pupil – and by special control apparatuses. Rituals and symbols of various kinds are used as carriers of institutional, sedimented knowledge, for example ‘fetishes and military emblems’ (1966: 88). The sediments of knowledge in a society are legitimized, but these legitimations can differ from time to time. For example, at one time prisons can be legitimized from their punishment function, at another time from their reforming function. Under a certain epoch universities can be legitimized from their educational function, under another epoch from their economic role in society.

In their typifications, individuals create different *roles* for themselves and others. Institutions cannot exist without being realized by human enactments in roles. Conversely, roles represent institutions. Institutions are also represented by many other things, like linguistic symbols, physical artefacts, and so on. But only human enactment in roles make the institutions, so to speak, come to life. ‘The institution, with its assemblage of “programmed” actions, is like the unwritten libretto of a drama’. (1966: 92)⁵ Roles are very important for the development of the individual’s self,

since they are internalized and together will form a whole self, a subject. The roles further illustrate and mediate the basic dialectics between the institutional and the individual level of society. 'By playing roles, the individual participates in a social world. By internalizing these roles, the same world becomes subjectively real for him [sic!]' (1966: 91).

The extent of institutionalization can vary between different societies and times. Some societies are more or less pervaded by institutions; in others the institutionalization takes place mostly around a core. The institutionalization can also be segmented, so that, for instance, a certain institution is reserved for certain people or groups and is closed to outsiders. Cults are of course the extreme case of this. Institutions can also vary in the degree that they are '*reified*', that is are perceived as physical things. (Berger and Luckmann here took their inspiration from Marx and his concept of 'Verdinglichung', which would translate as something like 'thingification'.) The reification is described as an extreme case of objectivation, but it is not always easy to see the difference, for example when the authors describe overarching theoretical formations as reifications – which originators would see these as physical 'things', one wonders?

Legitimization constitutes another layer in the objectivation of meaning. It integrates disparate meanings to a connected whole. This takes place both at the level of the single individual's biography and at the level of institutions. Legitimization becomes necessary when meaning is to be mediated to new generations for which it is no longer self-evident. Explanations and justifications therefore become possible, and this is the process of legitimization. Legitimization is therefore both cognitive and normative. Four levels of legitimization can be discerned: The first and the most rudimentary level is built into language: our very vocabulary, the words we use, legitimize ('counter-terrorism' instead of 'oil war', 'subprime loans' instead of 'reckless loans', for instance). The second level consists of proverbs and sayings, maxims, legends, etc. The third level contains explicit theories. The fourth and most important level creates entire *symbolic universes*. Such a symbolic universe orders and integrates within its framework '*all* socially objectivated and subjectively real meanings' (1966: 114).

Thus, individuals create their reality, the institutions and their legitimizations, but this created reality in turn creates the individuals. This happens through socialization, the social influence through which individuals internalize social norms and knowledge. In the primary socialization, the child learns the basics of what is important in society, and in the secondary socialization, the process is fine-tuned for the grown-up. In the primary socialization, the child learns via 'significant others'. The identity is built up through role-taking – another term from social interactionism – we see one another with the eyes of significant others, reflect over this, and successively generalize the experiences.

In secondary socialization we appropriate 'sub-worlds', rather than 'base-worlds' as in the primary socialization (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 158). The secondary socialization, for instance the school system, involves less of significant others, and is more formalized and abstract; the people included in this are often interchangeable (for instance teachers, as compared to parents). Yet, even here life partners, for instance, can take on the role as significant others, maintaining the person's subjective

reality, a reality that is always fragile and threatened by experiences that do not seem to fit in. More peripheral others function as a sort of 'choir' around the central, significant others. Another important means to maintaining a person's subjective reality is conversation. Through conversation with others, and perhaps above all through what is *not* said in conversation but is implied, we continually confirm our picture of reality. The need to maintain a subjective reality of course also means that it can change. The change can be continuous in the secondary socialization, when the present is interpreted in terms of the past. The change can also be radical, transforming, when instead the past is interpreted in terms of the present. Examples of such radical changes are said to be religious conversion, political brainwash and therapy.

Socialization can fail. One extreme case is stigmatized individuals: lepers, pedophiles, mentally ill people, etc., under various periods. Less conspicuous examples can occur because of discrepancies in the socialization. The discrepancy can take place between significant others, so that for instance father and mother or parents and nursemaid convey different messages. It can also take place between primary and secondary socialization, for instance between parents and teachers. If several discrepant worlds for socialization are accessible in a society, then this paves the way for individualism and relativism.

Berger and Luckmann see the human organism as a 'biological substratum', which sets limits to the individual's sociality – the need to feed, sexuality, death, etc. But the social world also sets limits to the individual's biology, in how we eat, how we have sex, when and how we die, etc. Socialization itself constitutes an ongoing invasion of the sociological world in the biological one, by regulating time and space, against the spontaneous tendencies or active resistance of the organism.

The authors conclude by saying that they view their contribution primarily as a re-definition of knowledge sociology. Beyond this, they hope that their book will eventually become an important complement to structural analyses in sociology. They do not want to deny the importance of these analyses, or maintain that social constructionism must always be a part of them; however, despite a certain ambivalence, they are not enthusiastic over macro sociological approaches like structuralism, functionalism and systems theories, which they see as always running the risk of reification. Berger and Luckmann maintain that the dialectic between society and individual that Marx already pointed out 'in fact and generally, does exist' (1966: 209), but that it is necessary to move on and develop this dialectic on the basis of sociological tradition. In this work, they have sought to integrate other classical theories such as Durkheim's macro sociology, Weber's focus on individuals and understanding, and Mead's interactionist social psychology. (It should be added that this integration is done with a pervading phenomenological colour.) Finally, Berger and Luckmann hold that sociology is a humanistic discipline that must be carried on in a dialogue with philosophy and historiography.

Berger and Luckmann's book is very well written and its theses are unfolded with verve and enthusiasm. Its often suggestive terminology – 'finite provinces of meaning', 'symbolic universes' and so on – contribute to its rhetorical power. It integrates elements from major social-scientific classics such as Marx, Durkheim, Weber and

Mead. This integration is not just an eclectic putting together, but gains its unity through the philosophic canvas it is painted on, more precisely the phenomenology that was introduced by Husserl and further developed by Schutz in the area of everyday life. The book includes a whole spectrum of topical approaches in social science at the end of the 1960s. It is also a micro sociological protest against various macro sociological trends dominating at the time the book was written. It is an attempt to solve a basic problematic of social science: the contradiction between micro and macro, individual and society.

That said, several basic aspects of Berger and Luckmann's book are problematic and can be called into question. We will leave these critical comments until the end of the present section on social constructionism. For now, we turn to two newer social constructionist thinkers, stemming from different national cultures and academic disciplines – the American social psychologist Kenneth Gergen and the French sociologist of knowledge Bruno Latour.

Gergen: a persistent critic of positivism

Gergen (1978, 1996, 2004) strongly emphasizes the importance of language, and in this respect his thinking borders on that of the postmodernists. Influenced, among others, by philosophers like Gadamer, Kuhn and Rorty, Gergen has struggled for many years against the dominating positivist orientation of his discipline. According to Gergen, knowledge is never abstract, objective and absolute, but always concrete, situated and tied to human practice. There is no Truth, only local truths.

The important theories that have formed everyday thought and defined the problems of social science have, as Gergen (1982) shows, contained very little data, the most obvious example being Freud's works. These important theories have instead offered persuasive conceptions and ideas about central issues of life, often calling into question both prevailing assumptions and predominating values. They have often led to intense and long-lasting debates. This should not come as a surprise, since Kuhn has pointed to roughly similar conditions within the natural sciences. There are reasons why certain theories are accepted rather than others, but this is not just a question of facts. The extension and the use of certain theories, and even the results of these, is better explained by popularity cycles, boredom, career needs, and social and economic relationships. It is important for a theory to challenge established conceptions and question assumptions in previous theories to appear interesting and (reasonably) surprising, which is central to becoming influential (Davis, 1971). Empirical support is less important.

Gergen (1978, 1982), Rorty (1979) and many others have pointed out the insufficiency of theoretical claims for representation and of the hypothetical-deductive model as a way to think about the choice of theory. The various assumptions that are made – about the primacy of objective facts, the requirement of verification, the goal to reach universal atemporal results, and the impartial spectator – hide the nature and values of theories (Gergen, 1978, 1982). 'Facts' mean either the end or a suppression of a conflictual negotiation process which includes different interests and participants in the research process. A 'scientific procedure' often suppresses

the element of negotiation and prevents us from investigating its character. The testing of hypotheses becomes, to a certain extent, self-fulfilling over time since the theory shapes that towards which the attention is directed and people react interactively in testing situations. All results are historical artefacts, both because of the theory and because people, partly as a consequence of social-scientific reports, change over time. The question is only if we accept the conditions and practices that are required to create the scientific artefact. Every theory carries with itself the values of a research community which often lets its concepts and interpretations substitute for those that are lived by the research subjects.

Gergen seems to us to have fought so long – four decades! – against positivism in psychology that he, in contrast to Latour for instance, risks becoming a bit negatively dependent on it – something of an inverted mirror image. With some justification, he has been criticized for relativism, rather angrily by Ratner (2005) – a proponent of the older type of psychology that Gergen (2004) compares with dinosaurs on their way to extinction. (For a counter-reply to Ratner, see Zielke (2005)).

Gergen strongly advocates qualitative methods, which he believes have often been marginalized in favour of quantitative methods. He emphasizes the importance of a reflexive dialogue to set in motion hardened taken-for-granted assumptions which have emerged through collective processes of knowledge. Contrary to modernism, but like postmodernism, Gergen also very much emphasizes the instability and fragility of the human self, which he thinks has become particularly accentuated in our time of ever faster technological development and its influence on the individual. For Gergen (1989), this is a question of the ways in which human beings present their own (and others') inner self and gain credibility and legitimacy: 'What we take to be the dimension of self ... are symbolic resources for making claims in a sea of competing world construction' (1989: 75). Within more recent social constructionism, Gergen provides a contrast and represents something of a counter pole to Latour, to whom we now turn.

Latour and ANT: the 'second wave' of social constructionism

Within the sociology of knowledge, social constructionism has been particularly influential. Here, Bruno Latour with his investigations of scientific knowledge is incomparably the most known name. He has been responsible for what can be characterized as a second wave of social constructionism, in which also non-human actors such as technical artefacts and the like can play an active role in the construction. By using social constructionist lines of thought on natural-science activities, Latour has aroused fury in some quarters, especially among American scientists, and strongly contributed to the so-called 'science war' between, on the one hand French social constructionists and postmodernists, and on the other hand American natural-science realists, for whom the laws of nature are absolute, objective truths. A good early example of this is Latour and Woolgar's (1979) famous and controversial study of how knowledge is constructed socially in a laboratory. There are predecessors – already at the beginning of the 1930s, Ludwig Fleck (1934), who was a physician himself, investigated how medical knowledge is constructed; but Fleck's book is

long forgotten and it is Latour who made the great breakthrough. Latour followed *Laboratory Life* up with a book on the *Pasteurization of France* (1988), in which he showed that the reception and success of Louis Pasteur's pathbreaking ideas about micro organisms were socially constructed.

Latour has launched a very successful methodological programme, 'the actor-network theory' (ANT), where the actors do not only need to be humans. This idea is inspired by Greimas's (1983) semiotic theory of 'actants', a kind of generalized actors who do not need to be people but can be artefacts, etc. The idea of non-human actors can at first sight seem a bit fantastic, almost science fiction, but on a closer look it appears less bizarre. In the context of organizations, for example, most of us know that organizations, organizational subunits, groups, etc. take on something of a life of their own. The same is true of technical systems such as IT systems in organizations or plans and projects: they have a life of their own and are not mere passive products. Machines and devices of various kinds can also be actants. To take a simplified illustration: when we stop at a red traffic light, we are influenced by the device on the street corner, which is thus not only a passive receptor of impulses from human subjects in its initial construction but also in its turn influences human subjects. Actor-network theory is also sometimes called the 'actant-network theory'. For example, in Latour's (1996) book *Aramis* the main actor is a futurist personal rapid transit system which was later axed, and the question becomes, 'Who killed Aramis?'

In his extensive account of ANT, Latour (2005) strongly argues for a micro sociological 'bottom-up' perspective where the single actors, events and processual aspects play a decisive role. He rejects both macro sociology of the Durkheimian type (in which 'society' becomes a kind of metaphysical substance according to Latour) and postmodern deconstructionism. The latter is described as ruins built on ruins. Instead ANT aims at following the traces of associations between actants; associations that are always in the process of dissolving and re-emerging. Latour describes himself as a social constructionist, on the condition that the word 'social' should not be misunderstood as some sort of macro phenomenon which is already there, instead of being created at the micro level. Other authors related to ANT are Callon (1980; 1986), who seems to be the one who first published the idea, and Law (1994). As to method, ANT uses various ways of following the actor through interviews and ethnographic observation; there is also work with 'inscriptions', that is texts and the like (for instance data bases and graphical material). For current applications of ANT, see Czarniawska and Hernes (2005).

Compared to the perspectives of his first studies, such as *Laboratory Life*, Bruno Latour (2004a and b) has later developed in a (more) realist direction. He describes himself as being in permanent change and transformation, and provocatively refers to himself as a realist and a positivist⁶ – even though he puts partly different meanings into this than the usual ones. The actants can be both human and non-human, and it would then seem strange to claim that the latter do not exist or can be 'reduced' to constructions. Moreover, reality is not neutral to operations on it, but resists, so its existence cannot be disregarded. However, reality is fluid, since the construction work continues all the time. Latour is extremely critical of postmodernism, seeing it as a sterile and destructive nihilism. But he is also critical of more theoretical ambitions, such as those of Bourdieu. Instead, it is crucial to keep to pure

descriptions of how the actants create their networks; not even explanations should enter the picture, since the research subjects know better than the researcher what goes on. The researcher must not get up on any high horses but must be humble and let the actants speak. Latour's approach is in this way reminiscent of the empirically oriented lines of thought which we take up in Chapter 3 – in particular ethnomethodology, for which he has sympathies.

Latour problematizes conventional interpretations and conceptions of both terms in 'social constructionism'. The 'social' does not mean that the constructions are *made* by, *consist* of, something social – whether that be insubstantial phantoms of the brain or manifestations of overarching societal power structures à la Bourdieu – but that the *construction process itself* is social, with several actants participating, co-constructing. However, also, the word construction is problematic at least as it has been conceived, and this has to do precisely with the participation of several, even non-human, actants. The constructor is not a god who blows his spirit into a material. The construction is real, no chimera, and what we have is, thus, a *realist constructionism*.

But this does not mean that there is a 'both-and' of construction and reality. Then we are just building further on a false opposition. Discourse and reality, 'words and worlds' are not dichotomic pairs but end points on a continuum consisting of practices carried out by (human and non-human) actants. Instead of getting stuck in this opposition, Latour holds, we should pose the question whether the construction is *good or bad*, something which is usually at the centre for questions concerning constructions in general, for example architectonic ones. (We might of course wonder: 'Good or bad *in relation to what?*') In any case, Latour's basic slogan, for which all other considerations must give way is: 'Follow the actants' (Latour, 1999). Latour plays with the idea of substituting 'composition' for '(social) construction'; but he inclines towards after all keeping the term construction since it is well established. Latour's reflection over, and problematization of, the concept and the term social constructionism thus results, after due deliberation, in his decision to keep it.

Generally, we find Latour's ideas exciting, for instance the view of artefacts as more active than is usually assumed. Yet, like some other more recent French thinkers, he seems to have a tendency to overdramatize his own lines of thought, in his case so that the artefacts are almost transformed into living entities and tend to assume a science-fiction character. A certain coquettishness with one's own position, a kind of hide-and-seek towards the reader, is another part of the style. Latour is also among the most antitheoretical of the social constructionists, which is based in his reductionist catchphrase about following the actants – everything else is to be rejected. As is the case with grounded theory, we wonder how it is possible to do research – or any mental activity – without theoretical preconceptions, and what the point is with pure descriptions. Books like *Aramis* can be fun to read – for a while. Then the amount of describing voices becomes a bit wearying.

The variation of social constructionism

Social constructionism has successively spread to most areas of social science and in many cases – where not everybody follows Latour or Gergen – has become more or

less dominant. An alliance, or convergence, with the postmodern orientation and *Zeitgeist* has contributed to its success – even though the coupling between these two lines of thought is not unproblematic, as we have seen. We will not try to list encyclopedically all conceivable authors in the social constructionist domain, since they are legion. Ian Hacking has playfully exemplified the host of social constructionist texts with an alphabetic sample. Thus, there are texts about The Social Construction of:

- Authorship
- Brotherhood
- The child viewer of television
- Danger
- Emotions
- Facts
- Gender
- Homosexual culture
- Illness
- Knowledge
- Literacy
- The medicalized immigrant
- Nature
- Oral history
- Postmodernism
- Quarks
- Reality
- Social homicide
- Technological systems
- Urban Schooling
- Vital statistics
- Youth homelessness
- Zulu nationalism

(Hacking, 1999: 1, references omitted)

Further examples can be entered ad lib for most letters of the alphabet. Hacking comments that he has not been able to find a title with ‘The Social Construction of X’, but that was before the era of Googling. We found ‘The Social Construction of X-rated films’ (Kurti, 1983). There is great variety not only in the empirical examples authors use but also in their theoretical approach. Sometimes all possible orientations that can have any point in common with social constructionism are included in the latter, such as deconstructionism, Foucauldianism, grounded theory, poststructuralism, discourse analysis, etc. (see, for instance, Burr, 2003). Most social scientists probably adhere to the idea that society and its institutions are not given, but in some (wide) sense socially created. In this way, most of us are social constructionists. We have, however, wanted to conceive social constructionism as a fairly delimited approach. Nonetheless, it is necessary to point out the considerable variation even within the rather diffuse core area(s) of social constructionism. We can discern – with an increasing degree of radicality – social construction as a critical perspective, a sociological theory, a theory of knowledge and a theory of

reality (Barlebo Wenneberg, 2001). This makes four degrees of radicality within social constructionism: a critical, a social, an epistemological and an ontological. The critical variant is the mildest, and means impugning the 'natural' in what has previously and commonly been regarded as self-evident and natural, and instead showing that this is socially constructed. Youth or race can serve as examples. It is obvious that conceptions of these vary a lot, and that they tend to create the phenomena in question. The social variant means arguing that society is in some sense produced and reproduced by shared meanings and conventions and thus socially constructed. The epistemologic variant means as the name indicates that knowledge is socially constructed. In the ontological variant, finally, reality itself is a social construction.

Barlebo Wenneberg now contends that these four degrees of social constructionism make a kind of inclined plane, where it is easy to slip or glide inconspicuously from the first, relatively innocuous position, all the way to the most radical position, that reality, including natural reality is nothing but a social construction. From a relatively trivial remark that certain phenomena do not occur naturally but are social creations, we are driven to reflect over how these constructions in their turn have emerged. We are then into some kind of social theory such as, for example, Berger and Luckmann elaborate in the later part of their book (1996). But a theory of society must to be consequent, must also tackle the issue of knowledge in society and how it is created. Then we have taken the step to the third variant of social constructionism, the epistemological one, in which knowledge is maintained to be a social construction. But if that is the case, it is a close step to start considering whether or not the object of knowledge, reality itself, is a social construction. Then we have taken the step to the fourth, ontological position, in which reality is a social construction.

*

Social constructionism is, as we have said, complex, varied and the overall picture is fragmented. One could probably say in today's use of social constructionism there is a shift of emphasis from the former to the latter poles within the three mentioned areas, that is from critical perspective to ontology, from cognition to language and from constructions of social phenomena to construction as a central aspect of research projects and claims. This coincides with an increased interest in postmodernism during recent decades, even though this interest has dropped during the last decade.⁷

Critique of social constructionism

Social constructionist texts and studies have the great merit of often being both fun to read and interesting, as well as exciting in their contents. They challenge common sense and not infrequently surprise the reader. Their value of attraction is usually higher than the mostly boring, not to say tinder-dry statistical investigations on the quantitative side, to which they have often been presented as the major qualitative alternative; but they are also more alluring than, for instance, texts in grounded theory generally are. This has probably contributed to the success of this orientation. But the success has its price, and we now come to our concluding critical points.

The Social Construction of Reality (Beger and Luckmann, 1966), to start with the basic book of the movement, has, as we noted above, considerable merits and is a pioneering work, but critical reflections are possible at several points. To begin with, the central second part of the term 'social construction' remains not only undefined but unexplained. What is 'construction'? The authors never give any answer to this; the term is just abruptly introduced in the text, like many other suggestive terms of the book. Etymologically, the term comes from the Latin *con-struo*: staple, pile or order together, build. 'Construction' is a metaphor associated with planned activities such as those related to the erection of a building. The result of the building or construction process is an artefact, and the result of the social construction analogously would be a kind of social artefact, a social 'building' – an institution. Here, though, the metaphor limps, because social constructions, especially in the social constructionist sense, are not planned activities. According to Hacking (1999), the very point of social constructionism and that which has brought the approach such success is that it shows how various, seemingly 'natural' phenomena are not at all natural but social. This recurs time and again in Berger and Luckmann's book. But through the metaphor of 'construction' they actually take one step further: the terminology suggests that various natural phenomena are in fact not just social but intentionally planned, thus almost manipulatively created: they are, as it were, human *fabrications*, and the *disclosure* of these manipulatory or arbitrary fabrications becomes an important part of social constructionism's enticement.

It is also possible to question the very starting point of the book, which becomes something of an axiom for the authors, namely the primacy of the individual, the individual as the one where everything begins and ends. The basic problem for Berger and Luckmann was how it is possible that subjective meanings become objective facticities. From this point of departure, and using the construction metaphor, they go on to think that the study of society must focus on how individuals construct society. As we have seen, the metaphor is skewed. But also, the primacy of the individual is anything but a matter of course. The authors seem to experience it as self-evident, but it is not. How do we know, for example, that the individual is not secondary and that overarching structures are the primary constructors – or rather creators – of individuals in the first place? But this cannot possibly be so? Well, Fuchs (2001), among others, has presented an elaborate theory of how individuals and individuality are created – or as he says, 'constructed' – by networks. Networks are, in this theory, the place where everything begins and ends. And there are other examples of approaches where individuals do not have primacy. For postmodernists and poststructuralists, individuals are created by texts or discourses; the text/discourse is thus primary. Individuals and cognitions are seen as the 'result' of language (which is also a main point for non-cognitivist constructionists like Gergen). For more recent (alethic) hermeneutics (see Chapter 4), the very situation of understanding is primary, and the individual is a result of this. As to the macro–micro problematic which has permeated so much of social science, many attempts have been made to solve it, both before and after Berger and Luckman. Among the most successful are Bourdieu's (1979) theory of practice and Giddens's (1984) theory of structuration. Both introduce a third element – a processual aspect which mediates between individual and society.

Even were we to accept the basic axiom of Berger and Luckmann that society and its institutions are built out of individual meanings, it does not follow that social science must necessarily be limited to studying how society is constructed. To take the analogy with houses: we can research into many other things than how the house was built, for example, architecture, strength of materials, plumbing, ventilation, price of the house, rents, how people behave in the house, etc.

A problem in any form of critical discussion of social constructionism more generally is that the orientation includes so many different positions, in between which advocates often move rhetorically under the pressure of various critiques and counter arguments (Barlebo Wenneberg, 2001). This is a common immunity strategy against critics. In addition there seems to be quite a lot of 'genuine' confusion and indecisiveness (Fleetwood, 2005). Correspondingly, there are many different versions of what people mean by 'construction' as well as 'social'. This means that any critique of social constructionism risks not 'sticking' as a consequence of the ambiguity and slipperiness of the target, and the critique may only be relevant for minor parts of the intended goal. What follows should therefore be read with some caution, as we also have problems in 'fixing' our object of critique.

Social constructionists hold that since social reality is a social construction, the only thing worth investigating is how this construction is carried out. This has profound consequences in that it leads to anti-theoretical tendencies (descriptivism and to a reduction to the individual level of analysis). But since knowledge is always theory-laden and we never 'observe' anything (including social constructions) without theories, this neglects the decisive role of our theories in research. Theories that tell us anything about social phenomena 'beyond' the construction of these, hardly become possible. Reflection over our theories, and the ensuing development of them, in order better to understand what we study, is an integrating part of research.

For this reason it can even be argued that theory is the most important aspect of research. Social constructionists tend, unfortunately, as Bourdieu has pointed out about micro sociologists generally, to stop where the real fun begins, instead of posing questions such as: 'Why do people construct society in the way they do?' and 'How do these constructions function, as patterns of social reality, once they have been constructed?'⁸

While some constructionists 'neutrally' and, at times, amusedly seek to point at construction processes, others often tend to put on a more sceptical perspective, regarding the patterns studied as something basically bad or evil, which we should not study as given (other than how they are *constructed*), just change or abolish. '[M]ost people who use the social construction idea enthusiastically want to criticize, change, or destroy some X that they dislike in the established order of things' (Hacking 1999: 7). The abolishment is rather easy, since the patterns do not truly exist but are, so to speak, only make-believe; that is they are constructions – hence a penchant for voluntarism.⁹

Social constructionists pursue, to a greater or lesser degree, a nominalist line of thought, according to which reality is amorphous, without qualities, and is only provided with arbitrary patterns by the researcher (see, for instance, Hacking, 1999).¹⁰ This anti-realism, more or less adhered to, is self-destructive, implying as it does that

social constructionism itself is just an arbitrary pattern, invented by researchers. If everything is a social construction, then social constructionism is too, and there is no reason to believe in it, rather than any other taken-for-granted assumption. (See, for instance, Willmott's (1994b) criticism of the waverings and paradoxes this gives rise to, in his comments to Shotter and Gergen (1994).) The interesting thing, following social constructionism itself, would instead be to study how social constructionism has been socially constructed or how specific social constructionist studies construct others' constructions. For some reason, though, such studies are conspicuous by their absence.

For radical constructionists view the many more 'conventional' social constructionists as a target for critique, when these only focus on the social constructions of the society being investigated. That also the researchers in their knowledge could be seen as an example of social constructions in operation is hardly considered. Some critics here talk of 'trivial construction' (von Glasersfeld, 1991). Potter (1996: 13) suggests, for example, that Berger and Luckmann have a view on their own knowledge contributions as free from the studied citizens' social constructions, remarking that even though the authors spend considerable time considering the assumptions of the experienced reality of, for example, a car mechanic, Berger and Luckmann themselves seem to be able to look around the corner without any difficulties. Radical proponents of this direction are then also eager to indicate their own social constructioning. This increases consistency and awareness in the research approach but at the cost of reduced opportunities to say something of social phenomena 'as such', that is beyond the construction work of the researcher.

Social constructionists – in all variants – strongly object to what is called the 'essentialism' of other approaches. By essentialism is meant the opinion that various phenomena have some kind of immutable core of properties, their 'essence' (Latin *essentia*). As against this, social constructionists argue that everything is instead constructed. The question is, however, whether social constructionism itself does not adhere to such an essence, one that is marred by real existence and is not just constructed but is 'out there'. We are thinking of the *construction*. This is something which is said to be perpetually ongoing, and to be central to what happens; the mystical force behind the curtain, to allude to Hegel. Without a continually ongoing construction, no social constructionism. The construction has, in fact, obvious characteristics of a social constructionist 'essence', an inherent, unchangeable, constant property of our reality. The social constructionist criticism of essentialism thereby has a boomerang effect; its fundamental views become self-destroying here too. This essentialism has its roots in the phenomenology which is the ideational background to social constructionism. An important ingredient of phenomenology was the so-called 'intuition of essences' (*Wesensschau*) behind phenomena, and in a corresponding way, social constructionists try to intuit hidden constructions-essences behind social phenomena.

A possible counter-picture could be that construction of a specific phenomenon happens sometimes, but that for a major part of our time we do not indulge in construction of the world in terms of men and women, competence, leisure time or whatever it may be. On the other hand, one might always argue that it is typical of

essences precisely that they do not always come to expression, so in that sense, the counter-picture is not a counter-picture but rather a confirmation.¹¹

The question is also if social phenomena, which are always dependent on mutual, subjective attributions of meaning, cannot have a real, objective existence. Must they, as (inter-)subjective phenomena be mere collective creations of our mental processes, chimera of our imagination ... social constructions? Even if we agree that all social phenomena inevitably depend on mental processes and are infused with meaning, it is still possible to regard them as objectively, really, existing. For example, Searle has shown how there can 'be an objective reality that is what it is only because we think it is what it is' (1998: 113), through the 'collective attribution of status functions'. By this is meant that we, through collective intentions, assign to physical entities various symbolic functions. Take for instance money. When we have agreed that a certain type of paper slip, or a certain pattern of signs on a computer screen, represent money, we can heap all kinds of complex monetary functions on top of this. And we can – and do – link money to many further status functions, such as corporations, markets, governments, etc. This is a never-ending game, with real pieces from social life.

Critical realism

Critical realism, originated in writings by the philosopher Roy Bhaskar and in part inspired by Marx's view of science, has the ambition to be a more theoretical but also more realistic substitute for positivism and social constructionism in offering principles and ideas for science. Critical realists consider positivism and social constructionism as too superficial and non-theoretical in their way of doing research; analysis of underlying mechanisms and structures behind phenomena is what it takes to create theories that are not just concentrates of data. This orientation also has a radical vein: what is important is not just to explain the world but also to change it.

Overview

Critical realism is more and more often suggested as a counterweight and alternative to social constructionist ideas, and its increasing popularity can, to a large extent, be seen as a reaction against the spread of social constructionist and (overlapping with these) postmodernist ideas. Critical realism provides a ground for critique of social constructionism, in a time when positivism has lost its appeal for most scholars. Some see critical realism as an attractive alternative, at least to the more radical versions of social constructionism. Critical realism is sometimes used as a stick to beat what is taken to be the ambiguous, confused and imprecise mixture of standpoints characterizing social constructionism and postmodernist thinking (e.g. Fleetwood, 2005).

Although critical realism has received a certain international attention, it is still, primarily, a British tradition, The English philosopher Roy Bhaskar, who is considered

its founding father, has been developing the approach since the 1970s. It is intended to provide a philosophical grounding for science as well as an alternative to positivist and interpretive/constructionist approaches. The original target of critical realism was positivism, but nowadays more radical versions of social constructionism have become a main target of criticism, at least within the social sciences.

Critical realists stress the generalizing task of scientific activity. However, their stand is not to be confused with that of positivism, with its interest in predictable patterns. Instead, critical realism seeks to identify those deeper lying mechanisms which are taken to generate empirical phenomena. Bhaskar describes this as a shift from epistemology to ontology, and within ontology, as a shift from events to mechanisms. He thus turns against what he understands as misleading and antropocentric views, which give priority to epistemology, that is, questions concerning what and how we are able to know. Bhaskar refers to this as the 'epistemic fallacy'; by which he means the tendency to couple ontology and epistemology and to confuse that which exists with the knowledge we have about it (what we believe). These things should be kept separate, according to Bhaskar. Now, of course, science is a product of the social – moulded by a range of social, ideological and political conditions – 'but the mechanisms that it identifies operate prior to and independently of their discovery' (Bhaskar, 1998: xii).

The notion of reality as consisting of three domains – the empirical, the *actual* and the real – is a central one within critical realism. The empirical domain includes that which we can observe – things that happen and exist according to our immediate experience. The *actual* domain is a broader one, and refers to that which transpires independently of the researcher or any other observer who might record it. Finally, the domain of the real includes those mechanisms that are productive of different events and other 'surface phenomena'. According to critical realism, the task of science is to explore the realm of the real and how it relates to the other two domains. The empirical domain is more narrow and can be seen as a site of expression of the other two domains. 'Scientific work is instead to investigate and identify relationships and non-relationships, respectively, between what we experience, what actually happens, and the underlying mechanisms that produce the events in the world' (Danermark et al., 2002: 21).

It is the interest in mechanisms of a 'deeper dimension', which distinguishes critical realism from other traditions. It shares the interest of positivism in the objective world, patterns, generalization, and in finding causalities, but it also diverges from this tradition in claiming that the study of the observable is too superficial, as it disregards the unobservable mechanisms that produce the phenomena that positivists seek to measure and explain. It is not possible to reduce the world to observable objects and facts, critical realists argue. Moreover, they do not accept a distinction between theory and observation, nor the interest in finding all-encompassing laws. Instead critical realism takes an interest in complex networks of theoretical and observable elements characterizing efforts going beyond the surface of social phenomena. It shares with a great number of qualitative approaches an interest in synthesis and context, but it also strongly emphasizes the objective nature of reality, and it argues that a focus on social constructions is insufficient and misleading.

Indeed, most aspects of interest transpire beyond individuals' conception and definition of situations. Social structure entails things that lie behind individual consciousness and intention. In other words, causal mechanisms operate largely independently from the mind and action of individuals.

Critical realists emphasize strongly the reality as such, as distinct from our conceptions of it. They talk about an intransitive dimension – the object of scientific inquiry – and a transitive – that is our conceptions of that object. Many versions of social constructionism assume that such distinctions are artificial, and that societal phenomena are integrated with our conceptions of these, including those expressed by the research community, which contributes to the production of social reality. For critical realists, however, reality exists independently from researchers' ideas and descriptions of it.

The relevance of knowledge is dependent on the nature, power and mechanism of the objective reality. However, this is not to say that research, if it only has good intentions and methodology, is flawless or stands in an unproblematic relation to that which is researched.

While it is evident that reality exists and is what it is, independently of our knowledge of it, it is also evident that the kind of knowledge that is produced depends on what problems we have and what questions we ask in relation to the world around us. (Danermark et al., 2002: 26)

Social constructions, while they are acknowledged to exist by critical realists, are framed in an objectivist manner, and are granted a rather limited role. Constructions are taken to be constructions of something, for example a discourse, a social practice, or physical reality, a reality that exists independent of how the constructions look like. The fact that it is socially defined and produced does not make a societal phenomenon any less real, critical realists argue. The way they see it, there *are* sellers, buyers, men, women, entrepreneurs, paid workers, carers, social outcasts, the unemployed, etc. Put differently, constructions are objective phenomena. A contrasting view, embraced by constructionists and many interpretive researchers, would be to approach constructions as volatile processes, which are then understood in terms of their subjective grounding. Focus is then placed, not on discourses or physical phenomena as such, but rather on the interpretation of these. Research is no exception here. According to this (constructionist) view, objects of knowledge are constructed by researchers through different procedures and tactics, not least discursive ones. To Bhaskar, however, the question is rather: What characteristics of societies make them possible as knowledge objects?

The real is central to critical realism. There is a strong conviction regarding the real and the possibility of identifying it. Something is real if it has a causal effect, that is, if it affects behaviour and makes a difference. Reality does not just consist of material objects. Ideas and discourses are real and can have causal effects. Ideas about, for example, race, men and age can explain patterns in the labour market, and they are real in the sense that they exist and work as mechanisms with causal effects. It is possible to identify at least four different types of realities; material, ideational, artefactual and social. A given entity can consist of several of these realities.

Artefactual reality, for example, refers to a synthesis of the physically, ideationally and socially real. The socially real 'refers to practices, states of affairs or entities for short, such as caring for children, becoming unemployed, the market mechanism, or social structures' (Fleetwood, 2005: 201). Social structure is used to capture configurations of causal mechanisms, rules, resources, powers, relations and practices. Causality refers to the nature of an object, which tells us what a certain object can or cannot do in terms of its effect. And a causal account 'does not deal with regularities between distinct objects and events (cause and effect), but with what an object is and the things it can do by virtue of its nature' (Danermark et al., 2002: 55). Objects have power connected to their structure; the mechanisms which produce effects are outcomes of this structure. But sometimes the effect of mechanisms does not show on the level of the empirical, that is, as an observable event.

Critical realism emphasizes the ideal and possibility of causal explanation. However, as noted earlier, the approach is still different from that of positivism, which seeks to establish predictable patterns and the exact relation between cause and effect. To critical realists relations are complex and causality can exist on different levels. They generate tendencies rather than inevitable, specific and measurable conditions. Critical realism examines the different mechanisms which have implications in terms of different effects and events, the forces and characteristics that mechanisms produce, and the intricate connections between different structural levels, that contribute to the complexity of causal forces, and that make possible the treatment of these as single, isolated factors. Causality should thus not be understood in terms of universal, predictable patterns, but rather as contextual and emergent, in changeable societies. According to critical realists, social reality is often slow in changing, but still emergent and varied as a consequence of the different processes that are part of producing it. As part of the project of accounting for typical patterns, while avoiding the misconception of statistical regularity and predictability, critical realists sometimes use the expression semi-regularity, which indicates 'the occasional, but less than universal, actualization of a mechanism or tendency, over [a] definite region of time-space' (Bhaskar and Lawson, 1998: 13).

The term mechanism is central within critical realism. A generative mechanism can be loosely defined as that which is capable of making things happen in the world. Mechanisms are taken to exist, even when they are not triggered (at work), or when their effect is impossible to trace, due to the effect of other mechanisms. Normally, mechanisms exist as part of complex compositions, whose outcome might vary or even fail to appear. Danermark et al. (2002) take the example of a match. It has the causal effect of being able to catch fire, if that mechanism is triggered, but for that to happen action has to be taken and in addition objects with other capacities must not intervene (e.g. by wetting the match). The same goes for social phenomena although it gets somewhat more complicated here, due to the dependency on human conceptions and actions (which of course, to some extent, goes for the match and its flaming capacity as well). To illustrate the point, Danermark et al. (2002) take the example of paid work. The structure of paid work is claimed to have the causal effect of forming the situation of people in our type of society, by making us reason and act in certain ways. It makes us want and apply

for jobs, and to acquire a suitable education, and it makes us go to work every working day. 'And each time acts in this way, the mechanism which reproduces the wage labour structure is triggered, which in turns generates new actions of the same kind, and so on' (2002: 56). At the same time there are other conditions that counteract the above mentioned mechanisms, for example the need to care for small children in the home, self-sufficiency, unsatisfactory work, or a football game on TV.

Supporters of critical realism look at the research process as a constant digging in the ontological depth of reality. In other words, reality is taken to be layered and research approaches which linger at a surface level are therefore discarded, be it social constructionism, hermeneutics, or positivism, which all depart from what is empirically given.

In terms of the explanatory programme, the stratified nature of reality introduces a necessary historicity (however short the time period involved) for instead of *horizontal* explanations relating one experience, observable or event to another, the fact that these themselves are conditional upon antecedents, requires *vertical* explanations in terms of the generative relationships *indispensable for their realization* ... (Archer, 1998: 196)

Critical realism distances itself from both methodological individualism (focus on the actor level) and holism (focus on the collective level), in emphasizing the social as relational and emergent. It is especially critical towards the former, arguing that 'actors' accounts are both corrigible and limited by the existence of unacknowledged conditions, unintended consequences, tacit skills and unconscious motivations' (Bhaskar, 1998: xvi). Or, as Archer puts it 'we do not uncover real structures by interviewing people in-depth about them' (1998: 199).

According to critical realists the experiment has much to command it, in terms of its capacity to generate elementary knowledge. (This is similar to the 'semantic science approach' that was touched upon in the previous chapter.) Through experiments it is possible to isolate and identify mechanisms. However, given the fact that objects of study in social science can be considered open systems and, in addition, very complex, experiments are still not considered that relevant and useful in the study of social conditions. Bhaskar goes as far as to say that in open systems: 'positivism's instrumentalist-predictive-manipulative approach to phenomena is completely out of place' (1991: 141). Examples of more suitable alternatives are:

- Counterfactual thinking, through which one tries to imagine what could be – 'What would it be like if X did not exist?'
- Social experiments, for example anticipating reactions in breaking norms, an approach that is also favoured by ethnomethodologists (to be addressed in Chapter 3 below).
- The study of pathological or extreme cases.
- Comparative analysis of different cases (Danermark et al., 2002).

In general, however, critical realism does not engage with methodological matters much. It is a philosophy that cannot directly contribute to the disclosure of structures and mechanisms that produce and impact a certain, chosen, object of study. Still it is a philosophy for and not about science. It is generally prescriptive and it can support

research by offering an overall frame of reference and by 'affecting the questions put to reality, and the manner in which this is done' (Bhaskar and Lawson 1998: 7).

Critical realism does not deny the value of definitions of the social reality that is produced. Of course, social phenomena are acknowledged to be different from those studied in the natural sciences, but the active construction of social reality by individuals, and collectives thereof, is still downplayed. It is argued that the structures that guide the reproduction and transformation of social activities should be studied in their own right. In addition, a division between structure and agency is emphasized. These two aspects should be studied separately rather than together, as suggested by structuration and action theories. Structural impact, it is argued, mediates an objective influence and thus forms actions and provides actors with guidance. Structures are consequently taken to precede and determine actions, which in turn are seen as capable of gradually changing the former. Proponents of critical realism look at the sharp distinction between structure and human action as important to the analysis and enlargement of a space for action, which in turn is connected to the critical agenda of critical realism.

Although the centrality of such agendas can be discussed, it is often argued that critical realism encourages the transgression of existing social patterns by placing emphasis on the emergent theme. The approach can contribute to an ideology critique by going beyond common conceptions and by showing the workings of mechanisms, as well as the predefinition of our space for action, by structures. The indebtedness to Marxist thinking of critical realism shows clearly in its central concepts (underlying mechanisms, the level of articulation of reality), even if critical realism does not necessarily imply Marxist theory (some critical realists firmly reject connection to Marxism). According to Archer (1998: 203) critical realism 'has a "cutting edge" through identifying contextual constraints upon our freedoms and specifying strategic uses of our freedoms for social transformation'.

Critique

Below we will raise two areas within critical realism that we find particularly open to critique. The first is the strong claim by critical realism to grasp reality. It is always problematic to say something about causes which are not visible to us. The second area concerns central concepts which tend to be somewhat broad and diffuse, and do not really support the strong claims that critical realists are making. We will, however, on the whole refrain from going into the more philosophical critique that radical constructionists direct towards critical realists (e.g. Willmott, 2005), although inevitably we will touch upon it in discussing the other two themes.

Objectivism and exaggerated claims

In reading critical realism one is struck by the confidence with which its proponents use the concept of objective reality, as a point of departure and reference for the knowledge that is produced. It is argued that 'it is the nature of the object under study that determines what research methods are applicable, and also what knowledge

claims one may have' (Danermark et al., 2002: 70). And a central task of researchers is to identify 'the necessary, constituent properties of the study object, since these characteristics define what actions the object can produce' (2002: 70). It is almost as if the object of study discloses itself and then tells the researcher how it is most appropriately studied. So by defining the objective reality one is informed about what method to use and what outcomes in terms of knowledge can be expected. And by the same token, the correct identification of the 'necessary constitutive properties' will assist the researcher in figuring out the events that can be anticipated.

An alternative – and by far more realistic – approach departs from the notion that we can never describe the object as such, because we are always framed by our paradigmatic and methodological assumptions, a certain vocabulary and political stances (as we will discuss in the next chapter, preunderstanding and interpretation are also always central in research activities). To assume that the object of study, if appropriately defined, will direct the analysis, is a naïve conception, and to see the researcher as having privileged access to the object, seems pretentious. Different researchers have different views regarding the 'necessary constitutive properties' and even if one had the good fortune to find researchers sharing the assumption about such properties, they would most likely come up with different ideas on the nature of such properties, and they would probably also disagree over the events that the objects can be seen as capable of producing. Uses of different perspectives would probably lead to different properties and different produced objects.

To clarify our critique let us consider some of the accounts offered by critical realists that they argue illustrate their approach. Take the following statement for example: 'Structures divide the population – although seldom completely so – in to those with a positional interest in retaining and those with an interest in changing their structural location' (Danermark et al., 2003: 146). 'Beyond the main resource distributions there are relations behind ownership and those without property, those in power and those without, powerholders and the powerless, those discriminating and those discriminated against (2003: 148). According to this view it is the 'structure' that divides the population into this and that category. One could, however, argue that it is the author who does so. Let us explain. Without necessarily denying or even problematizing the idea of positional interests – although the concept of interest is not without its problems – it should be noted that the division of people, into those seeking change and those trying pre-empt it, is questionable in relation to the notion of a domain of the real (or the structure that is assumed to exist in it). Of course groups can be more or less arbitrarily defined, but still a group is never internally homogenous; there are always different or even conflicting interests within a given group, and, in addition, a certain individual ambivalence is surely to be expected. In effect, the division according to 'structure' hampers empirical diversity. Moreover, it could be argued that the notion of 'structure', as a grand divider in society, is in fact just another guise of the researcher, who, albeit often unconsciously, has a certain interest in dividing the population in this or that way. Thus, a more or less successful attempt to describe an observed empirical pattern is mistaken for a causal explanation of that same pattern.

Possibly this mistake also informs the second argument paraphrased above, regarding the distribution of resources. It is argued that behind the distribution of resources, there are relations of power (between those in possession and those lacking resources). These relations of power referred to are almost by definition about the distribution of resources, and consequently cannot be used to explain that very same distribution. Perhaps it is more accurate to depict the distribution of resources as being 'in front of' (rather than behind) the distribution. In other words, first there is a certain distribution of resources, and from this follows certain relations of power. But even so the division remains problematic. No doubt there are large economic differences in society, however, it is not clear how many people in today's Western societies (which are the main concern of the critical realists discussed here) can be considered completely lacking property and power.

Our point is thus that, unlike the arguments of critical realists, it is not so easy to assert the existence of structures, mechanisms, constitutive properties of objects of study, and so on.

Modest claims are not the trademark of critical realism. Bhaskar (1991) himself, for example, speaks of the necessity to reclaim reality which has been kidnapped by dangerous forces, led by skewed ideas. This reclamation should happen in two ways. Firstly, from 'philosophical ideologies which have usurped or denied it – reclamation in the sense of lost property'. Secondly, 'from the effects of those ideologies that have – like stagnant and muddy water – covered it up – reclamation in the sense of land reclamation' (Bhaskar, 1991: 144). Bhaskar finishes by stating that once reality has been reclaimed it should 'be used, nurtured and valued in an ecologically sustainable and humane way for human emancipation, happiness and flourishing' (1991: 144). It is not totally clear whether he is being ironic or not, but most likely that is not the case, because unlike, for example, social constructionists and postmodernists, critical realists are not known for their light-hearted and humorous forms of expression; to them the mission is much too important. Having said that it is interesting to note that the most loyal and orthodox critical realists, having observed the later Bhaskar becoming drawn towards spirituality, have half-jokingly suggested that he himself ought to get his membership to the critical realist club suspended.

The unproductive concepts of structure and mechanism

Structure and mechanism are two of the most central concepts within critical realism. In fact, the merits of the approach can, to a certain extent, be judged on the basis of how well these two concepts function within the research process. The notions of structure and mechanism are related. 'The objects have the power they have by virtue of their structure, and mechanisms exist and are what they are because of this structure' (Danermark et al., 2002: 55). Structure is thus the key to it all. The structure can mobilize force given the right input. So what is structure then?¹² Structure is a collection of internally related objects, such as teacher–student or employer–employee. With social structure, positions, practices and roles become associated. Social structure is that context in which actions and social interaction transpire.

At a first glance this image is quite appealing. Through observations we can surely spot indications of relations, roles and positions, we can grasp some of their implications. Indeed, language invites us to. Have you established that there are such things as teachers and students and that they are related in language use? But how much does this tell us? With the concept of structure, critical realism aims to do more than merely describe certain regularities and relations (conventionally, the concept of structure refers to such regularities). In fact, in their critique of positivism critical realists reject the importance of evident regularities and relations, but the latter is actually what Danermark et al. refer to in establishing the factual existence. But let us rest this discussion and move on to consider those 'forces' that the structure produces. If we exchange the term structure with its definition, as phrased by Danermark et al. (internally related object), then we can read that objects have forces as an outcome of internally related objects. Internally related objects can trigger forces.

Let us now consider this in less abstract terms, taking the teacher–student example from above. The teacher–student relation, that is the structure (internally related objects), should, according to the logic suggested by critical realists, be capable of activating forces and mechanisms. But the question is then, does this 'structure' trigger anything automatically, and if so, what would that be – ambitious students, subordination to authority, or maybe daydreaming related to lack of interest in what the teacher has to say, or perhaps attempts to disrupt tediousness through pranks, absenteeism or unruly behaviour in class, which in turn might cause the teacher to accumulate sick-leave days? Maybe what goes on in school between teachers and students is far more precarious, varied and processual, than the images suggested by objects, forces and mechanisms. In other words, the idea of Danermark et al. (2003) that the mechanisms exist as they are as an effect of this structure does not sit well with the variety and complexity of student–teacher relations that are likely to exist in many contemporary schools.

On paper and in an objectivist analysis, there are teachers and students, but a closer look may reveal a very different image. At a closer inspection we might find guards and troublemakers, part-time marketers with the objective of producing satisfied 'customers', and students that have adopted a customer perspective on education, or collaborators in a job creation scheme (with school as a tool for reducing/hiding unemployment) – that is, things that have less to do with learning and more to do with keeping young people off the streets. Perhaps teaching and learning are less central aspects of what actually goes on in many schools. In cases of inadequate teachers and very competent students the labelling, as we know it, might even verge on being misleading.

Surely critical realists can account for such conditions, and they do, through emergent structures and mechanisms. But the general stance shows a strong tendency to arrange the world in objective and sturdy categories. And while these refer to internally related objects, on the level of language, a closer and more open-minded look of what seems to be going on typically reveals a much more ambiguous view of the world. In fact, this is often the point with qualitative research; to transcend

seemingly objective definitions of the world, and to show their limited value in trying to explain what is going on.

The concept of mechanism also poses certain problems. The flaming capacity of matches is one thing, because this capacity is quite easy to relate to a mechanism. But what are the mechanisms that follow from structure, which determine the force of objects? Danermark et al. (2003) take the example of the organization and positions of paid work. It is argued that the structure of paid work has the causal power of forming the life conditions of people. If this structure is about the relation of employer–employed there are by definition certain elements in these that are highly unspecific and do not say much about specific conditions. The life situation of people is determined by factual conditions, such as legislation, attitudes, labour market conditions, specific relations between different people involved, the work organization, the machines, the organizational culture, managers, regional conditions, and the social security system, etc.

Proponents of critical realism would probably not deny that this is the case, and most likely they would attribute causal forces and mechanisms to all of these things. But is it reasonable to assume that a mechanism which reproduces the structure of paid work is triggered every time someone goes to work or applies for a job? Conceptualized this way, the mechanism metaphor becomes somewhat futile, that is, of course, if we disregard its, no doubt unintentional, comical value. ‘I woke up this morning, feeling wretched not wanting to go to work. After some breakfast, with the feeling of agony still haunting me, I decided to activate (or the structure did so) the mechanism and reproduce the structure of paid work (= to go to work)’. It is our impression that critical realism uses the mechanism term in a much too literal sense. It appears to see the match example as a fairly good description of what is going on in social life. This point is, in our view, debatable.

Although critical realism acknowledges that social science, unlike natural science, mostly deals with open systems, a quite substantial part of the critical realist framework appears to be inspired by the world of physics. And when it leaves the realm of natural science and enters that of the social, the vocabulary of forces and mechanism does not work quite as well. Described in these terms, social phenomena come across as mechanical and often they run the risk of being overly simplified. They do not work quite as well in trying to explain complex matters, such as social relations in school or the organization of paid work.

To make the point even clearer, compare a recent comment made in an interview by Lisa Randall, one of the major names in theoretical physics at present, that it is simpler and easier to understand the universe than to understand the gender relations in a university organization.

Then again it is not always clear what mechanisms are, for instance as distinguished from underlying patterns (the latter are said to be revealed by abduction, the former via ‘retroduction’, and it is rather unclear what the difference really is). Not infrequently the hidden mechanisms in practical applications (for instance Danermark et al., 2003) become rather trivial and something that many positivists or social constructionists could well work with. The difference with, for example, Marx’s more through-going analysis becomes evident.

Finally, it is our view that critical realists make too grand claims. They are utterly convinced about their approach to (what they take to be) objective science. Now, of course, they are aware of the precarious nature of research (as inevitably problematic and arguable), however, little space is granted to such discussions, apart from occasional confessions that come across as highly peripheral to what they otherwise consider themselves to be doing. In many ways critical realism expresses a view of self as a deep-digging project, which exposes reality and frees it from the filth and mess caused by positivists, postmodernists and their like. But as a noble reality saving project the approach runs the risk of becoming rigid and lacking in terms of reflexivity, presenting subjective and arbitrary representations as self-evident and robust findings.

Some of these things can probably be explained by the orientation's underdog position against more established competitors and the need to use rather heavy polemics and simplifications. As an alternative to various antitheoretical currents, critical realism all the same constitutes a stimulating and provocative counter-picture.

So far then, quite a lot of critical comments, however, there are also merits to the approach. One is its position as a clear alternative to positivist and constructionist approaches. As a result, options within research become clearer and proponents of other frameworks are forced to think through their own perspectives. For too long anti-positivism has constituted a sufficient argument for choosing a qualitative approach, however, with the emergence of critical realism social science is faced with yet another option. This framework also offers a relevant critique against research that refrains from leaving the surface level; approaches that never go outside or beyond the empirical, to analyse other aspects that affect this level. Critical realism thus challenges social constructionists and wants to stimulate researchers to rise above and beyond the empirical, to move on to more daring and theoretical analysis.

Brief comparison

Postivism, social constructionism, and critical realism thus diverge substantially. Still one could say that they are all interested in reality, real facts in the first case, the social reality in the second, and the objective 'big' world in the third: the *factual* world is put against the social world, and against this, the real, deep reality stands.

Many current debates frame social constructionism and critical realism as two main alternatives in outlining the development of social science. (Fleetwood, 2005; Willmott, 2005). Two objections can be made against this argument. First of all, social constructionism is a very broad field, and the range of different approaches that fall under this label includes quite diverse viewpoints. Second, the range and influence of critical realism is still quite limited outside of Great Britain. Ideas of real, objective structures are perhaps not entirely in line with the contemporary sceptical spirit of our time (unless, of course, this is about to change).

Some commentators emphasize the similarities when comparing the orientations. For example, positivism and critical realism both maintain that natural science and social science can use the same philosophy of science. Critical realism accepts a

constructionist element in research. There are streaks of realism within positivism, even though these are not predominant (its mainstream ontology is a subjective idealism – to regard data as subjective sense data and theories as instrumentalist summaries of data). Somebody might argue that the opposite of realism is not constructionism but idealism, in which the ideational is emphasized. Constructionism focuses on some phenomenon or object that is being constructed (Crotty, 1998). However, the construction itself is not a material thing, and neither, then, is the phenomenon or object under construction; they are both (inter)subjectively ideational. Delanty (2005) thinks that the main line of division is not between social constructionism and critical realism but between more radical and moderate variants of the former. Only extreme constructionists, such as the early Latour, deny the existence of underlying structures. We can of course establish various basic lines of division and options as to structures, constructions, interpretations, and so on. Extreme vs moderate social constructionism is here definitively a ground for drawing a main line of division. Yet, an even more fruitful distinction is probably that between a main or classical variant of social constructionism (exemplified by standpoints like those of Berger and Luckmann) and critical realism. The emphasis on (inter)subjective construction processes and outcomes, where socially defined and negotiated realities are central, generates rather different studies and understandings than critical realism's toning down of these in favour of an exploration of objective deep structures and mechanisms.

Final words

In this chapter we have considered positivism and post-positivism; social constructionism, a perspective that has become a dominating one within several disciplines of social science; and critical realism, a framework that competes with and has named itself as the leading alternative to and successor of the other two. This last claim remains to be realized. It can be mentioned, for example, that the approach is not very well known in the US. Social constructionism, on the other hand, is doubtless a broad framework and there are different varieties and connections, many of these have much in common with, for example, hermeneutics and post-modernism, as well as some more recent versions of grounded theory. We have also raised some doubts regarding the term social constructionism and its, over time, more and more opaque (over)use (see also Fleetwood, 2005). This does not stop social constructionist thinking from being central to the social sciences of today, and it is important to consider how one relates to this approach. Social researchers also have reasons to consider their relation to critical realism, and its reflections regarding the deep dimensions of knowledge and reality, as an incipient alternative to positivism and social constructionism.

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So far in this first part of the book, we have focused the discussion on the concepts of surface structure, underlying patterns, perspectives, knowledge-sociological

conditions, relativism and dialogue. This is no coincidence; these concepts also point to the main emphases in the central chapters (3–6) of the book. Note that it is a question of emphasis; elements of the concepts appear in all these chapters. Even though the borderlines are of course fluid, the following generally is the case. In Chapter 3 about empirical orientations, empirical data and surface structures are at the forefront. Chapter 4 on hermeneutics contains an exploration of underlying patterns as its main aspect. The critical theory in Chapter 5 investigates various perspectives from a knowledge-sociological point of view, focusing on power and ideology. Postmodernism in Chapter 6, finally, takes up the problematic of relativism. Critical theory and postmodernism also emphasize, albeit each in different ways, the importance of dialogue. Critical theory strives for a rational dialogue, and to resist disturbances connected with power, ideology and dogma. Postmodernism emphasizes instead seminal clashes of meaning and disharmonies as a goal; in a wider perspective, the drift of this whole orientation is dialogue between texts, single individuals being seen as mere arenas for such dialogues.

Notes

1. See Heidegger's (1961) interpretation.
2. MacKenzie and House (1979) propose Popper's falsificationism with 'crucial experiments' as a 'paradigm' for social science in a Kuhnian spirit. This brave idea appears to put it mildly, neck-breaking, given that Kuhn among other things showed with his paradigm theory precisely that Popper's falsification method and 'crucial experiments' do not hold water.
3. There is a certain linguistic confusion about the concept itself; the terminology varies – sometimes the words 'social constructionism' are used, sometimes 'social constructivism'. We have chosen the former expression since 'constructivism' other orientations in, for example, mathematics and developmental psychology. In this, we join Kenneth Gergen (see below), who strongly advocates the use of 'constructionism'.
4. Berger and Luckmann here use the term 'objectivation' in a somewhat different sense than before (see above), when it referred to material objects as carriers of meaning.
5. Here the authors are carried away by their verbal drive. A libretto is, of course, not the basis of a drama in general but of a musical performance – an opera, operetta, musical, etc.
6. In this context, it is interesting to note with Hacking (1999) the subterranean connections between positivism and social constructionism. The main work of the central figure in logical positivism, Rudolf Carnap, has, for example, the title '*Der Logische Aufbau der Welt*', which would translate to '*The Social Construction of the World*'. This book has traits in common with the somewhat later ideas of one of the inspirers of social constructionism – T.S. Kuhn. As Hacking writes: 'The roots of social constructionism are in the very logical positivism that so many present-day constructionists profess to detest' (1999: 42–43).
7. This tendency does not hold true for Latour's influential ANT approach, where language and researcher are given a less dominating place and postmodernism is totally dismissed.
8. A social constructionist might reply that the constructions are never finished, but are a continually ongoing process. This may be true, as it is true of house constructions (houses are repaired, altered etc.), but, as in the latter case, there are zones of relative stability constituting patterns for research.

9. The constructions being social and rooted in collective contexts can, however, be difficult to change (Czarniawska, 2005).
10. If the researcher provides the world with patterns, then what is there to abolish, we might ask. The answer is that also 'common' people, not only researchers, provide the world with patterns, and that it is these patterns – illusory or damaging ideas and ideologies – that are to be abolished. At a more philosophical level, the problematic harks back to Hegel and Marx with their thinking about alienation. The social world, which has originally been created by human beings, progressively becomes alien to them, and towers over them as an external threatening phenomenon. For Marx, the solution was, as is well known, to revolutionize this inauthentic world.
11. According to Latour, however, construction goes on all the time, and it has, as we have seen, real constructors as well as results (even though the latter are changing all the time, just like a city landscape).
12. The structure concept can also refer to 'small' structures, as in a workgroup structure, personality structure or emotional structure, but here we limit ourselves to social structures.