

Introduction

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Writing a book is always an adventure—and what an adventure it must have been writing *The Social Construction of Reality* published 50 years ago (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Several times Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann have recalled the context in which the essay was written in the early 1960s: the outline, the discussions on each chapter, the anecdotes, but also the hard work behind the writing and the numerous texts revisions (for example Berger 1992, 2016; Luckmann 1992, 2016). Nevertheless, the adventures of what appears to be one of the most cited work in sociology did not stop after its publication in 1966. On the contrary, it is a book that changed, to a certain extent, the image of sociology, and opened fascinating sociological horizons for multiple interpretations, applications, and developments. The diagnosis of Ian Hacking on the fiftieth anniversary of Thomas S. Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* holds true for Berger’s and Luckmann’s classic as well: “it is a great book, it can be read in endless ways and put to many uses” (Hacking 2012: viii).

In an autobiographical way, Peter L. Berger remembers what he recalls as the “grandiose sentence” of a draft written at the beginning of his scholar endeavors with Thomas Luckmann: “The project is designed for the purpose of theoretical codification in the sociology of knowledge” (Berger 2011: 81). Indeed, beyond this introductory and somehow technical description, the discipline was about to engage itself in one of its most fascinating renewals. Initially written to ground a particular sociological perspective, i.e., the sociology of knowledge, the *Social Construction*

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soon developed into an innovative synthesis of sociological classics from Marx and Schutz via Durkheim, Weber, and Mead written in the tradition of the philosophical anthropology of Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen.

Besides the wideness of its influence (see Endreß and Srubar 1997; Wolff 1997; Gross 2007: 214ff.), even though mostly indirect, one also has to face the fact that Berger's and Luckmann's book has been ignored or very seldom referred to in sociological theory debates. Thus, the wished impact of their work to "move the sociology of knowledge from the periphery to the very center of sociological theory" (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 18), which motivated them to entitle the book's conclusion "The Sociology of Knowledge and Sociology Theory" (1966: 185ff.), has up to this day still little resonance within the discipline's development (Endreß 2008). Hence, many aspects of the book remain to be discovered for future investigations.

Celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Berger's and Luckmann's classic, the present volume collects interviews from both authors, essays on certain aspects of the *Social Construction's* heritage, personal memories, and systematic discussions on certain aspects of the general argument of *The Social Construction of Reality*. Nevertheless, accounting for 50 years of intense debates, criticisms, and intellectual dialogues on Berger's and Luckmann's book could hardly be accomplished within the given frame of this Special Issue. Some themes prevail over others, some aspects are overseen, while many arguments are also only incidentally discussed. Following the author's basic intuition, one can say with respect to the *Social Construction's* general aim: it is all about perspectives. Overall, the contributions focus on three thematic stances:

- The editors were interested in the reconstruction of the particular historical and scientific context in which *The Social Construction of Reality* emerged. What were the dominant questions and the leading sociological paradigms in the 1960s, and in which ways the project of Berger and Luckmann answered and referred to these challenges? This particular inquiry not only better reposition *The Social Construction* in the intellectual history of the discipline, but it also brings attention to the pivotal point of this book, i.e., between classical approaches and contemporary discussions.
- The historical interest of our volume brings us to a second topic: the meaning of "social construction" itself. We were interested in bringing later sociological perspectives drawing on terms such as "construction," "constructivism," or "constructionism" in a fruitful dialogue with Berger's and Luckmann's initial formulations on the terms. This led to important—and in our opinion necessary—clarifications and specifications for both *The Social Construction* and contemporary approaches.
- Being convinced that a classical book—such as Berger's and Luckmann's is—should not only find its place in museums or sociological handbooks, the contributions also accentuated possible, and in some cases actual developments of *The Social Construction*. In both theoretical and methodological aspects, the authors of this volume convincingly point to the relevance and potential avenues

ahead for both American and German sociology of knowledge grounded in the work of Berger and Luckmann.

The volume opens with two interviews from *Peter L. Berger* and *Thomas Luckmann*. In his interview with Silke Steets, Berger mainly focuses on his interest in applying the perspective developed in *The Social Construction of Reality*, whereas *Thomas Luckmann*, in his interview with Jochen Dreher and Andreas Göttlich, provides detailed analyses of major steps in his intellectual development and his most important research areas.

“Social construction” has nowadays become key to many theoretical and methodological perspectives. Moreover, the “social construction” terminology and lexicon have encouraged developments of cross-disciplinary dynamics drawing on Berger’s and Luckmann’s initial project. In their contribution, *Hubert Knoblauch* and *René Wilke* shed light on the diffusion of the basic concept of social construction in distinct disciplines, and on its specific relationship with regard to the varieties of (social) constructivism in contemporary sociological debates. As Knoblauch and Wilke argue, *Social Construction* turns out to be the “lowest common denominator” in social sciences, basically providing conceptual resources for contemporary radical constructivist as well as post-constructivist sociological approaches.

The international response to Berger’s and Luckmann’s book is further explored by *Silke Steets*. Her paper presents an analysis of the important historical, institutional, but also personal aspects of the US-American reception of *The Social Construction*. Hence, Steets’ investigation does not simply compare the relevant developments of Berger’s and Luckmann’s legacy in the American sociology with that of the German reception of the essay, it also particularly underlines the “theoretical-historical soil” of *The Social Construction*. Outlining the major trends of the institutional background of the 1960s, Steets carefully reviews the biographical conditions of their authors’ position as scholars of the New School for Social Research, and reconstructs in the vein of a reflexive sociology of knowledge the outset of the “new sociology of knowledge”.

Complementing both previous contributions, *Sandro Segre* introduces Burkhardt Holzner’s study on *Reality Construction in Society*, completed in 1966 but only first published in early (1968). Appearing 2 years after *The Social Construction* with a “Preface” claiming to be in line with Berger’s and Luckmann’s basic argument, Holzner’s book gained less attention in the discipline. Thus, Segre’s contribution aims at doing justice to Holzner’s study in the field, pointing at some similarities as well as differences between his book and that of Berger and Luckmann.

The direct, and especially indirect influences of *The Social Construction of Reality* are countless. Nevertheless, salient traces of this influence are palpable in theoretical questions coming from the Science and Technology Studies and the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge, as well as that of certain philosophical discussions. With regard to these fields, one acknowledges at the same time different yet vivid levels of dialogue in respect with the main propositions of Berger and Luckmann in their reading of *The Social Construction*.

Michael Lynch discusses the relationship between the understanding of “social construction” in Science and Technology Studies, and Berger’s and Luckmann’s original conception of the concept. Different and, as Lynch put it, “indiscriminating uses” of constructivism are contrasted within Berger’s and Luckmann’s methodological consequences. Doing so leads the author to a critical perspective on the contemporary proliferation of different ways of viewing constructivism as well as its explanatory aims. Important differences to Knoblauch’s and Wilke’s argument are due to Lynch’s particular focus on Berger’s and Luckmann’s project. Lynch identifies *Social Construction*’s basic argument as follows: “human stable social institutions emerge from highly flexible possibilities at the individual and interactional level, which become externalized and objectivated.” Whereas for Knoblauch and Wilke, the ideas of the *sociality* of reality and the *social* processes of its *construction* “are to be seen as its central claim”. In the light of the latter suggestions, cross-references between these papers promise fruitful insights for a future comparative analysis of the different receptions of *The Social Construction of Reality*.

Remembering his initial reading of Berger’s and Luckmann’s work, *Barry Barnes* engages in a dialogue merging personal memories and critical reflections on *The Social Construction*. Arguing from the perspective of the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge, the author focuses on, in his terms, “tactical disagreements” with Berger’s and Luckmann’s exposition (especially concerning the first part of their book and the epistemological claims it involves) as well as similarities of both approaches in treating individualism in the social sciences.

Berger’s and Luckmann’s formulation of “social construction” was often critically addressed in sociological reflections—especially in the works of Hacking (1999) and Searle (1995). Although their contribution to the transdisciplinary discussion on the meaning of social construction is already mentioned in the essays of Michael Lynch, Hubert Knoblauch, and René Wilke, *Martin Endreß* directly addresses both books of Hacking and Searle by providing a critical discussion of their misreadings and misunderstandings of social construction. Taking up the leading philosophical standpoints of Hacking and Searle, Endreß’ contribution argues for understanding the *Social Construction* as presenting a sociological perspective.

Reflections on religious pluralism received important impulses from *The Social Construction of Reality*, and remained up to this day a dominant research interest of Peter L. Berger. In her paper, *Michaela Pfadenhauer* is primarily concerned with the conceptual relevance of Berger’s argument regarding the simultaneity of religiosity and secularity for the actual discussions within German-language sociology about “social hybridity” and “hybrid sociality”. Pleading for “in-between” positioning rather than strict dichotomies, Pfadenhauer underlines a “processual understanding” of hybridity, which is both theoretically and methodologically rewarding to analyze contemporary social phenomena.

The volume concludes with a paper by *Harry Collins* combining personal memoirs and reflections on modes of relating to literature in sociology and philosophy, and hence, on the influence of scientific books on intellectual biographies. In this light, Berger’s and Luckmann’s essay played an important

and seldom acknowledged role in sociology. It is Collins's conviction that *The Social Construction of Reality* had "an influence on me via its influence of the form-of-life of sociology as it was developing in the 1960s and 1970s".

Although different in their theoretical profile, and displaying a great range of nuances brought to light through different degrees of analysis, the contributions of this Special Issue convey a common impression: 50 years after its publication, the sociological potential of Berger's and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* is far from being fully exhausted. On the contrary, many avenues remain to be explored, numerous questions are yet to be raised and answered, as well as analyses to be undertaken. *The Social Construction of Reality*, hence, not only deserves the gratifying title of a classical work of sociological theory, it remains on its 50th anniversary a lively text, and an eloquent masterpiece that will influence further inquiries for years to come.

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