

CONSTRUCTIONISM: THE MAKING OF MEANING

What of a truth that is bounded by these mountains and is falsehood to the world that lives beyond?

Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, *Essays*

Constructionism is well removed from the objectivism found in the positivist stance. In some areas it seems to have replaced objectivism as the dominant paradigm. If this is indeed the case, and to the extent to which it is the case, we are witnessing the end of a very long tradition. Objectivism—the notion that truth and meaning reside in their objects independently of any consciousness—has its roots in ancient Greek philosophy, was carried along in Scholastic realism throughout the Middle Ages, and rose to its zenith in the age of the so-called Enlightenment. The belief that there is objective truth and that appropriate methods of inquiry can bring us accurate and certain knowledge of that truth has been the epistemological ground of Western science. While it would be extremely premature to sound the death knell of this centuries-old tradition, foundationalism⁵ of this kind has certainly come under heavy attack and constructionism is very much part of the artillery brought against it.

What, then, is constructionism? It is the view that *all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context.*

THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANINGFUL REALITY

In the constructionist view, as the word suggests, meaning is not discovered but constructed. Meaning does not inhere in the object, merely

waiting for someone to come upon it. As writers like Merleau-Ponty have pointed out very tellingly, the world and objects in the world are indeterminate. They may be pregnant with potential meaning, but actual meaning emerges only when consciousness engages with them. How, such thinkers ask, can there be meaning without a mind?

Accepting that the world we experience, prior to our experience of it, is without meaning does not come easy. What the 'commonsense' view commends to us is that the tree standing before us is a tree. It has all the meaning we ascribe to a tree. It would be a tree, with that same meaning, whether anyone knew of its existence or not. We need to remind ourselves here that it is human beings who have construed it as a tree, given it the name, and attributed to it the associations we make with trees. It may help if we recall the extent to which those associations differ even within the same overall culture. 'Tree' is likely to bear quite different connotations in a logging town, an artists' settlement and a treeless slum.

What constructionism claims is that meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting. Before there were consciousnesses on earth capable of interpreting the world, the world held no meaning at all.

You may object that you cannot imagine a time when nothing existed in any phenomenal form. Were there not volcanoes, and dust-storms and starlight long before there was any life on Earth? Did not the sun rise in the East and set in the West? Did not water flow downhill, and light travel faster than sound? The answer is that if you had been there, that is indeed the way the phenomena would have appeared to you. But you were not there: no one was. And because no one was there, there was not—at this mindless stage of history—anything that *counted* as a volcano, or a dust-storm, and so on. I am not suggesting that the world had no substance to it whatsoever. We might say, perhaps, that it consisted of 'worldstuff'. But the properties of this worldstuff had yet to be represented by a mind. (Humphrey 1993, p. 17)

From the constructionist viewpoint, therefore, meaning (or truth) cannot be described simply as 'objective'. By the same token, it cannot be described simply as 'subjective'. Some researchers describing themselves as constructionist talk as if meanings are created out of whole cloth and simply imposed upon reality. This is to espouse an out-and-out subjectivism and to reject both the existentialist concept of humans as beings-in-the-world and the phenomenological concept of intentionality. There are strong threads within structuralist, post-structuralist and postmodernist thought espousing a subjectivist epistemology but constructionism is different. According to constructionism, we do not create

meaning. We construct meaning. We have something to work with. What we have to work with is the world and objects in the world.

As Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty repeatedly state, the world is 'always already there'. The world and objects in the world may be in themselves meaningless; yet they are our partners in the generation of meaning and need to be taken seriously. It is surely important, and liberating, to distinguish theory consistent with experienced reality from theory that is not. Objectivity and subjectivity need to be brought together and held together indissolubly. Constructionism does precisely that.

In this respect, constructionism mirrors the concept of intentionality. Intentionality is a notion that phenomenology borrowed from Scholastic philosophy and in its turn has shared with other orientations. It was the renowned nineteenth-century psychologist and philosopher Franz Brentano who invoked the Scholastic concept of intentionality. Brentano's student and acknowledged founder of phenomenology Edmund Husserl went on to make it the pivotal concept of his philosophy.

Brentano recalls (1973, p. 88) that, in medieval philosophy, all mental phenomena are described as having 'reference to a content, direction toward an object'. Consciousness, in other words, is always consciousness of *something*. 'In presentation something is presented, in judgment something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired and so on.'

It is important to note that 'intentionality' and 'intentional' as used here have nothing to do with purpose or deliberation. The root stem of these words is the Latin *tendere*, which means 'to tend'—in the sense of 'moving towards' or 'directing oneself to'. Here 'in-tending' is not about choosing or planning but about *reaching out into* (just as 'ex-tending' is about *reaching out from*). Intentionality means referentiality, relatedness, directedness, 'aboutness'.

The basic message of intentionality is straightforward enough. When the mind becomes conscious of something, when it 'knows' something, it reaches out to, and into, that object. In contrast to other epistemologies at large towards the end of the nineteenth century, intentionality posits a quite intimate and very active relationship between the conscious subject and the object of the subject's consciousness. Consciousness is directed towards the object; the object is shaped by consciousness. As Lyotard expresses it:

There is thus no answer to the question whether philosophy must begin with the object (realism) or with the ego (idealism). The very idea of phenomenology puts this question out of play: consciousness is always consciousness of, and there is no object which is not an object for. There is no immanence of the object to consciousness unless one correlatively

assigns the object a rational meaning, without which the object would not be an object for. Concept or meaning is not exterior to Being; rather, Being is immediately concept in itself, and the concept is Being for itself. (1991, p. 65)

Later phenomenologists, working within the context of an existentialist philosophy, make the process far less cerebral. Not only is consciousness intentional, but human beings in their totality are intentionally related to their world. Human being means being-in-the-world. In existentialist terms, intentionality is a radical interdependence of subject and world.

Because of the essential relationship that human experience bears to its object, no object can be adequately described in isolation from the conscious being experiencing it, nor can any experience be adequately described in isolation from its object. Experiences do not constitute a sphere of subjective reality separate from, and in contrast to, the objective realm of the external world—as Descartes' famous 'split' between mind and body, and thereby between mind and world, would lead us to imagine. In the way of thinking to which intentionality introduces us, such a dichotomy between the subjective and the objective is untenable. Subject and object, distinguishable as they are, are always united. It is this insight that is captured in the term 'intentionality'.

To embrace the notion of intentionality is to reject objectivism. Equally, it is to reject subjectivism. What intentionality brings to the fore is interaction between subject and object. The image evoked is that of humans engaging with their human world. It is in and out of this interplay that meaning is born.

It may be helpful to consider what literary critic and linguistics exponent Stanley Fish has to say. In a well-known essay (1990), Fish recalls a summer program in which he was teaching two courses. One explored the relationship between linguistics and literary criticism. The other was a course in English religious poetry. The sessions for both courses were held in the same classroom and they followed one after the other.

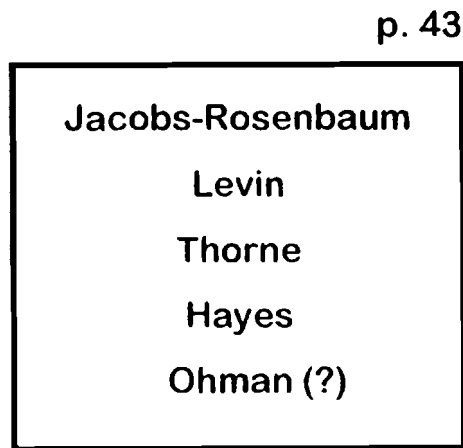
One morning, when the students in the first course had left the room, Fish looked at a list of names he had written on the blackboard. It was the assignment he had set for the students. The people listed were authors whose works the students were expected to consult before the next class. One of the names listed had a question mark after it, because Fish was not sure whether it was spelled correctly.

Fish went to the board, drew a frame around the names and wrote 'p. 43' above the frame. When the students in the second course filed

schema formation
a signification

into the room for their class, what confronted them on the blackboard was what we see in Figure 4.

Figure 4



Fish began this second class for the day by drawing the students' attention to the list of names. He informed them that it was a religious poem of the kind they had been studying and invited them to interpret it.

The students were equal to the task. The first student to speak commented on the shape of the poem. The poem was a hieroglyph, he surmised, but was it in the shape of an altar or a cross? After this promising start, other students were not slow to follow suit. 'Jacobs' came to be related to Jacob's ladder, an Old Testament allegory for the Christian's ascent into heaven. It is linked in the list to 'Rosenbaum'—*rose tree* in German and surely an allusion to the Virgin Mary, who is often depicted as a rose without thorns and promotes Christians' ascent into heaven through the redemptive work of her son, Jesus. Redemption is effected above all through Christ's suffering and death, symbolised in his being crowned with thorns (corrupted to 'Thorne?'). The reference to Levi (see 'Levin') is not surprising: the tribe of Levi was the priestly tribe and Jesus, after all, is the Great High Priest of the New Testament. 'Ohman' could be given at least three readings (hence the question mark?): it might be 'omen' or 'Oh Man!' or simply 'Amen'. The students also noted that both Old and New Testaments are represented in the poem, three of the names being Jewish, two Gentile, and one ambiguous.

Perhaps this ambiguity is the reason for the question mark after it. And so on.

In the wake of this exercise, Fish asks the question that he uses to shape the title of his essay: How do you recognise a poem when you see one? In this case, the students are not led to recognise the poem as a poem because of particular distinguishing features. The act of recognition comes first. They are told it is a poem. They are invited at the start to address the list on the board with 'poetry-seeing eyes'. Having done that, they are able to detect particular significances in the object as a poem. Fish concludes that reading of any kind is along these same lines, that is, not 'a matter of discerning what is there' but 'of knowing how to produce what can thereafter be said to be there' (1990, pp. 182–3).

'Just a moment!', some might want to argue. This list does have a meaning and the members of the first class did, in fact, discern 'what is there'. The list is an assignment.

Fish remains unimpressed. 'Unfortunately, the argument will not hold because the assignment we all see is no less the product of interpretation than the poem into which it was turned. That is, it requires just as much work, and work of the same kind, to see this as an assignment as it does to see it as a poem' (Fish 1990, p. 184).

All right, then. It is not an assignment either. But it is a list of names. We can read it as a list of names and that, surely, is to discern 'what is there'. No, not even that, Fish assures us. 'In order to see a list, one must already be equipped with the concepts of seriality, hierarchy, subordination, and so on' (Fish 1990, p. 186). These have to be learned and one cannot see a list without learning them. The meaning of list, as of anything else, is not just 'there'. Instead, making meaning is always an 'ongoing accomplishment'. 'The conclusion, therefore, is that all objects are made and not found and that they are made by the interpretive strategies we set in motion' (Fish 1990, p. 191).

In Fish's story we find human beings engaging with a reality and making sense of it. Obviously, it is possible to make sense of the same reality in quite different ways. Not that we need to be taught that lesson. Moving from one culture to another, as no doubt most of us have done at one time or another, provides evidence enough that strikingly diverse understandings can be formed of the same phenomenon. Yet there are always some who stand ready to dismiss other interpretations as merely quaint viewpoints that throw the 'true' or 'valid' interpretation into clearer relief. What constructionism drives home unambiguously is that there is no true or valid interpretation. There are useful interpretations, to be sure, and these stand over against interpretations that appear to serve no useful purpose. There are liberating forms of interpretation too;

they contrast sharply with interpretations that prove oppressive. There are even interpretations that may be judged fulfilling and rewarding—in contradistinction to interpretations that impoverish human existence and stunt human growth. ‘Useful’, ‘liberating’, ‘fulfilling’, ‘rewarding’ interpretations, yes. ‘True’ or ‘valid’ interpretations, no.

There is another lesson that Fish’s example drives home, even if Fish does not make it explicit. It is something we have already noted. The object may be meaningless in itself but it has a vital part to play in the generation of meaning. While Fish’s students are innovative in making sense of the list of names conceived as a religious poem, the particular names that happen to be on the list play a key role. The students, Fish observes (1990, p. 184), ‘would have been able to turn any list of names into the kind of poem we have before us now’. What he does not point out, though he would surely agree, is that they would make different sense of a different list. With different names to engage with, the religious significances they develop would not be the same. It is therefore not a question of conjuring up a series of meanings and just imposing them on the ‘poem’. That is subjectivism, not constructionism. The meanings emerge from the students’ interaction with the ‘poem’ and relate to it essentially. The meanings are thus at once objective and subjective, their objectivity and subjectivity being indissolubly bound up with each other. Constructionism teaches us that meaning is always that.

No mere subjectivism here. Constructionism takes the object very seriously. It is open to the world. Theodor Adorno refers to the process involved as ‘exact fantasy’ (1977, p. 131). Imagination is required, to be sure. There is call for creativity. Yet we are not talking about imagination running wild or untrammelled creativity. There is an ‘exactness’ involved, for we are talking about imagination being exercised and creativity invoked in a precise interplay with *something*. Susan Buck-Morss (1977, p. 86) finds in Adorno’s exact fantasy ‘a dialectical concept which acknowledged the mutual mediation of subject and object without allowing either to get the upper hand’. It is, she insists, the attention to the object that ‘separated this fantasy from mere dream-like fabrication’.

Bringing objectivity and subjectivity together and holding them together throughout the process is hardly characteristic of qualitative research today. Instead, a rampant subjectivism seems to be abroad. It can be detected in the turning of phenomenology from a study of phenomena as the immediate objects of experience into a study of experiencing individuals. It is equally detectable in the move taking place in some quarters today to supplant ethnography with an ‘autoethnography’.

Description of researchers as *bricoleurs* is also a case in point. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) have made ‘researcher-as-bricoleur’ the *leitmotif* of the massive tome they have edited. They devote some columns to it in their opening chapter, refer to it in each of their introductions to the various sections of the book, and return to it in their concluding chapter. Denzin’s own chapter ‘The art and politics of interpretation’ also invokes the notion of the researcher-as-bricoleur.

Denzin and Lincoln begin their treatment of the researcher-as-bricoleur by citing Lévi-Strauss’s *The Savage Mind*. This is to the effect that the *bricoleur* is ‘a Jack of all trades, or a kind of professional do-it-yourself person’ (Denzin and Lincoln 1994, p. 2). Now the idea of a Jack (or Jill?) of all trades or a do-it-yourself person certainly puts the spotlight on the multiple skills and resourcefulness of the individual concerned. This is precisely what Denzin and Lincoln seek to emphasise from start to finish. *Bricoleurs*, as these authors conceive them, show themselves very inventive in addressing particular tasks. The focus is on an individual’s ability to employ a large range of tools and methods, even unconventional ones, and therefore on his or her inventiveness, resourcefulness and imaginativeness. So the researcher-as-bricoleur ‘is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks’ and ‘is knowledgeable about the many interpretive paradigms (feminism, Marxism, cultural studies, constructivism) that can be brought to any particular problem’ (Denzin and Lincoln 1994, p. 2).

Given this understanding of *bricoleur*, it is not surprising that Denzin and Lincoln should characterise *bricolage* as ‘self-reflexive’, a description they draw from Nelson, Treichler and Grossberg (1992, p. 2) writing about cultural studies. When the Jacks and Jills of all trades learn that a job has to be done—they have just finished their carpentry around the door and have painted the ceiling, and now they learn that the toilet is blocked and requires some rather intricate plumbing work—yes, such *bricoleurs* would tend to be self-reflexive. ‘Can I do it?’ becomes the burning question.

Interestingly, the *bricoleur* described by Denzin and Lincoln is not the *bricoleur* described by Claude Lévi-Strauss, even though he is the principal reference they give for the notion. The words they quote to describe the *bricoleur*, ‘a Jack of all trades, or a kind of professional do-it-yourself person’, come from a translator’s footnote (Lévi-Strauss 1966, p. 17). In that footnote, the sentence cited is preceded by the statement, ‘The “bricoleur” has no precise equivalent in English’. And the sentence quoted is not given in full. The rest of the sentence reads: ‘but, as the text makes clear, he [the *bricoleur*] is of a different standing from, for instance, the English “odd job man” or handyman’.

What we find in Lévi-Strauss's text, in fact, is a very different understanding of *bricoleur*. Consequently, the 'analogy' drawn from it (to use Lévi-Strauss's term) carries a very different message. In *The Savage Mind*, the *bricoleur* is not someone able to perform a whole range of specialist functions or even to employ unconventional methods. It is the notion of a person who makes something new out of a range of materials that had previously made up something different. The *bricoleur* is a makeshift artisan, armed with a collection of bits and pieces that were once standard parts of a certain whole but which the *bricoleur*, as *bricoleur*, now reconceives as parts of a new whole. Lévi-Strauss provides an example. The *bricoleur* has a cube-shaped piece of oak. It may once have been part of a wardrobe. Or was it part of a grandfather clock? Whatever its earlier role, the *bricoleur* now has to make it serve a quite different purpose. It may be used as 'a wedge to make up for the inadequate length of a plank of pine' (Lévi-Strauss 1966, p. 18). Or perhaps it 'could be a pedestal—which would allow the grain and polish of the old wood to show to advantage' (1966, pp. 18–19).

Engaged in that kind of project, *bricoleurs* are not at all 'self-reflexive'. To the contrary, they are utterly focused on what they have to work with. The question is not, 'Can I do it? Do I have the skills?'. Rather, the question is, 'What can be made of these items? What do they lend themselves to becoming?'. And answering that depends on the qualities found in the items to hand. It is a matter of what items are there and what are not. It is a matter of the properties each possesses—size, shape, weight, colour, texture, brittleness, and so on. The last thing *bricoleurs* have in mind at this moment is their own self. Imaginativeness and creativity are required, to be sure, but an imaginativeness and creativity to be exercised in relation to *these* objects, *these* materials. An ice cream carton, two buttons, and a coat hanger—I'm supposed to make something of that? Self-reflexive? No, not at all. Nothing is further from self-reflexion than *bricolage*. There the focus is fairly and squarely on the object. True *bricoleurs* are people constantly musing over objects, engaged precisely with what is *not* themselves, in order to see what possibilities the objects have to offer. This is the image of the *bricoleur* to be found in Lévi-Strauss.

Consider him at work and excited by his project. His first practical step is retrospective. He has to turn back to an already existent set made up of tools and materials, to consider or reconsider what it contains and, finally and above all, to engage in a sort of dialogue with it and, before choosing between them, to index the possible answers which the whole set can offer to his problem. He interrogates all the heterogeneous objects of which his treasury is composed to discover what each of them could 'signify' and so

contribute to the definition of a set which has yet to materialize. (Lévi-Strauss 1966, p. 18)

A dialogue with the materials. Interrogating all the heterogeneous objects. Indexing their possible uses. This preoccupation with objects is mirrored in Lévi-Strauss's assertion that the *bricoleur* 'might therefore be said to be constantly on the look out for "messages"' (1966, p. 20).

In their last page of text (1994, p. 584), Denzin and Lincoln come to acknowledge just a little of all this. They state that '*bricoleurs* are more than simply jacks-of-all-trades; they are also inventors'. They write of *bricoleurs* having to 'recycle used fabric', to 'cobble together stories'. Even here, however, the emphasis remains on the *bricoleur*'s inventiveness as 'the demand of a restless art'. In this further exposition of the *bricoleur*, there is still no hint of Lévi-Strauss's preoccupation with objects.

Why such preoccupation with objects? Because they are the limiting factor. They are, warns Lévi-Strauss, 'pre-constrained'. The possibilities they bear 'always remain limited by the particular history of each piece and by those of its features which are already determined by the use for which it was originally intended or the modifications it has undergone for other purposes' (Lévi-Strauss 1966, p. 19). The uses to which they might be put must accord with what they are. The ability needed by the *bricoleur* is the ability to 're-vision' these bits and pieces, casting aside the purposes which they once bore and for which they were once designed and divining very different purposes that they may now serve in new settings.

In short, the image of the researcher-as-*bricoleur* highlights the researcher's need to pay sustained attention to the objects of research. This is much more to the fore than the need for versatility or resourcefulness in the use of tools and methods. Research in constructivist vein, research in the mode of the *bricoleur*, requires that we not remain straitjacketed by the conventional meanings we have been taught to associate with the object. Instead, such research invites us to approach the object in a radical spirit of openness to its potential for new or richer meaning. It is an invitation to reinterpretation.

It is precisely this preoccupation with the object that we find in Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. In Benjamin's form of inquiry, Adorno claims (1981, pp. 240–1), 'the subjective intention is seen to be extinguished' and the 'thoughts press close to its object, seek to touch it, smell it, taste it and so thereby transform itself'. Benjamin, in fact, is driven to 'immerse himself without reserve in the world of multiplicity'. Adorno is the same:

What is ultimately most fascinating in Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* is the incessantly formulated appeal that thought be conscious of its non-sovereignty, of the fact that it must always be molded by material that is by definition heterogeneous to it. This is what Adorno calls the 'mimetic moment' of knowledge, the affinity with the *object*. What interests him most of all is to impose on thought respect for the nuance, the difference, individuation, requiring it to descend to the most minuscule and infinitesimal detail. (Tertulian 1985, p. 95)

A focus of this kind on the object is hardly characteristic of our times. 'No age has been so self-conscious', writes E.M. Cioran. What he calls our 'psychological sense' has 'transformed us into spectators of ourselves'. He finds this reflected in the modern novel, wherein he finds 'a research without points of references, an experiment pursued within an unfailling vacuity'. It does not look outwards to an object. 'The genre, having squandered its substance, no longer has an object.' (Cioran 1976, pp. 139-40).

To the narrative which suppresses what is narrated, an object, corresponds an *askesis*⁶ of the intellect, a meditation *without content* . . . The mind discovers itself reduced to the action by virtue of which it is mind and nothing more. All its activities lead it back to itself, to that stationary development which keeps it from catching on to *things*. (Cioran 1976, p. 141)

Far removed from what Cioran is describing here, constructionism does not suppress the object but focuses on it intently. It is by no means a stationary development. It is meditation *with content*. It well and truly catches on to things.

Constructionism is not subjectivism. It is curiosity, not conceit.

'SOCIAL' CONSTRUCTIONISM

If seeing interpretation as a making of meaning does not condemn us to subjectivism, it does not condemn us to individualism either. We have to reckon with the social origin of meaning and the social character with which it is inevitably stamped.

Fish emphasises that 'all objects are made and not found' but adds at once that 'the means by which they are made are social and conventional'. These means are institutions which 'precede us' and in which 'we are *already* embedded' and 'it is only by inhabiting them, or being inhabited by them, that we have access to the public and conventional senses they make'. Functioning as 'a publicly available system of intel-

ligibility', these institutions are the source of the interpretative strategies whereby we construct meaning (Fish 1990, p. 186).

Where Fish invokes 'a publicly available system of intelligibility', anthropologist Clifford Geertz speaks of 'a system of significant symbols'. Geertz is talking, of course, about culture and he presents the meaningful symbols that constitute culture as an indispensable guide to human behaviour. What, in Geertz's view, would we be without them? Certainly we would not be 'clever savages', as in Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Nor would we be the 'nature's noblemen' who in Enlightenment thought lurk beneath the trappings of culture. Nor, again, would we be 'intrinsically talented apes who had somehow failed to find themselves', as classical anthropological theory seems to imply. We would be none of these, Geertz insists. Rather, we would be 'unworkable monstrosities' (Geertz 1973, p. 49).

Unworkable? Yes, unworkable. Without culture we could not function. Culture has to do with functioning. As a direct consequence of the way in which we humans have evolved, we depend on culture to direct our behaviour and organise our experience. In the past, Geertz points out, we have tended to see culture as 'complexes of concrete behaviour patterns—customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters'. To view culture primarily in this light is to consider it the outcome of human thought and action. We need to reverse this way of viewing culture. Culture is best seen as the source rather than the result of human thought and behaviour. It is 'a set of control mechanisms—plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call "programs")—for the governing of behavior' (Geertz 1973, p. 44).

In this view of the role of culture, human thought emerges as 'basically both social and public'.

Thinking consists not of 'happenings in the head' (though happenings there and elsewhere are necessary for it to occur) but of a traffic in what have been called, by G.H. Mead and others, significant symbols—words for the most part but also gestures, drawings, musical sounds, mechanical devices like clocks, or natural objects like jewels—anything, in fact, that is disengaged from its mere actuality and used to impose meaning upon experience. (Geertz 1973, p. 45)

Fish has told us that the institutions constituting our publicly available system of intelligibility precede us. We come to inhabit this pre-existing system and to be inhabited by it. Similarly, in describing culture as a system of significant symbols, Geertz emphasises that, from the point of view of any particular individual, 'such symbols are largely given'. They are already current in the community when the individual is born and

they remain in circulation—with some changes, to be sure—after the individual dies (Geertz 1973, p. 45).

Thus, while humans may be described, in constructionist spirit, as engaging with their world and making sense of it, such a description is misleading if it is not set in a genuinely historical and social perspective. It is clearly not the case that individuals encounter phenomena in the world and make sense of them one by one. Instead, we are all born into a world of meaning. We enter a social milieu in which a 'system of intelligibility' prevails. We inherit a 'system of significant symbols'. For each of us, when we first see the world in meaningful fashion, we are inevitably viewing it through lenses bestowed upon us by our culture. Our culture brings things into view for us and endows them with meaning and, by the same token, leads us to ignore other things.

The social constructionism we are talking about here is all-encompassing and we need to be careful not to restrict its ambit. For one thing, it is not to be taken here in an ideational sense only. It is not just our thoughts that are constructed for us. We have to reckon also with the social construction of emotions (Harré 1986). Moreover, constructionism embraces the whole gamut of meaningful reality. All reality, as meaningful reality, is socially constructed.⁷ There is no exception.

Not everyone agrees. There are some who take social constructionism to mean that social realities, and only social realities, have a social genesis. Natural or physical realities do not. In other words, they understand social constructionism as denoting 'the construction of social reality' rather than 'the social construction of reality'. The wording used by *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Sociology* to describe social constructionism suggests this standpoint. Social constructionists, we are told, 'emphasize the idea that society is actively and creatively produced by human beings', social worlds being 'interpretive nets woven by individuals and groups' (Marshall 1994, p. 484). An even more explicit account is offered by Greenwood:

Physical and social phenomena . . . differ in one essential respect. Chairs may exist independently of our knowing that they do; our knowledge of the existence of chairs is not constitutive of their existence. In contrast, social phenomena do not exist independently of our knowledge of them . . . Social realities, therefore, are constructed and sustained by the observation of the social rules which obtain in any social situation by all the social interactors involved . . . Social reality is, therefore, a function of shared meanings; it is constructed, sustained and reproduced through social life. (1994, p. 85)

That social realities are socially constructed is something of a truism. The most ardent positivist would find that hard to contradict. What distinguishes constructionism, setting it over against the objectivism inherent in the positivist stance, is its understanding that *all* meaningful reality, precisely as meaningful reality, is socially constructed. The chair may exist as a phenomenal object regardless of whether any consciousness is aware of its existence. It exists *as a chair*, however, only if conscious beings construe it as a chair. As a chair, it too 'is constructed, sustained and reproduced through social life'.

The 'social' in social constructionism is about the mode of meaning generation and not about the kind of object that has meaning. The object involved in the social constructionist understanding of meaning formation need not involve persons at all (and therefore need not be 'social' in that sense). The interaction may be, say, with the natural world—the sunset, the mountains, a tree. Natural these objects may be, but it is our culture (shorthand in most cases today for a very complex mix of many cultures and sub-cultures) that teaches us how to see them—and in some cases *whether* to see them. 'A way of seeing is a way of not seeing', feminist author Ann Oakley sagely advises (1974, p. 27). Accordingly, whether we would describe the object of the interaction as natural or social, the basic generation of meaning is always social, for the meanings with which we are endowed arise in and out of interactive human community.

Accordingly, not only the social scientist but equally the natural scientist has to deal with realities that, as meaningful realities, are socially constructed. They are on an equal footing in this respect. British sociologist Anthony Giddens appears to disagree. He makes the following distinction between the natural world and the social world:

The difference between the social and natural world is that the latter does not constitute itself as 'meaningful'; the meanings it has are produced by men in the course of their practical life, and as a consequence of their endeavours to understand or explain it for themselves. Social life—of which these endeavours are a part—on the other hand, is *produced* by its component actors precisely in terms of their active constitution and reconstitution of frames of meaning whereby they organize their experiences. (Giddens 1976, p. 79)

What is Giddens postulating here? He is asserting that, while humans do not create the natural world but have to make sense of a 'world always already there' (Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's phrase, not Giddens's), the very existence of social phenomena stems from human action. Consequently, the process of bringing these social realities into

being is one with the process of interpreting and reinterpreting them. Unlike the natural world, then, social realities are meaningful by virtue of the very act that brings them into existence. Natural realities are not.

Giddens's purpose in making this distinction is to offer a basis for his concept of the 'double hermeneutic' in which social scientists have to engage. Social scientists have the task, first of all, of 'entering and grasping the frames of meaning involved in the production of social life by lay actors' as well as the subsequent task of 'reconstituting these within the new frames of meaning involved in technical conceptual schemes' (Giddens 1976, p. 79). Natural scientists, he believes, do not have the same task to face. They merely construct a 'theoretical metalanguage, a network in which the meaning of scientific concepts is tied-in to the meaning of other terms'. That is all they have to worry about. They are faced with a 'single level of hermeneutic problems'. Social scientists are not so lucky. They have two interpretative levels to face. They must contend with a double hermeneutic. 'There is a two-way connection between the language of social science and ordinary language', writes Giddens (1979, p. 12). 'The former cannot ignore the categories used by laymen in the practical organization of social life.'

Natural science, as Giddens sees it, can do what social science cannot do. It is able to ignore the categories used by people in everyday life and avoid or minimise ordinary language, using its own scientific metalanguage instead. The natural scientist comes to the task of studying nature with something of a *tabula rasa*.

Blaikie (1993, p. 36) warmly espouses these views of Giddens. He says that the natural scientist studies nature 'as it were, from the outside'. The scientist then has 'to invent concepts and theories to describe and explain'. Contrasting with this, in Blaikie's view, is the study of social phenomena. Here we are talking about 'a social world which people have constructed and which they reproduce through their continuing activities' and which they are 'constantly involved in interpreting'. 'They develop meanings for their activities together', concludes Blaikie. 'In short, the social world is already interpreted before the social scientist arrives.'

How sustainable is this understanding of things?

Our discussion to this point suggests that our knowledge of the natural world is as socially constructed as our knowledge of the social world. The world of meaning into which we are born is a world of trees as much as it is a world of kinship, law, finance or nationalism. Understanding of trees is not something we come to individually 'in the course of our practical life'. As we have already considered, we are taught about trees. We learn that trees are trees and we learn what trees should mean

to us. In infancy and childhood we learn the meaning of trees from the culture in which we are reared. Trees are given a name for us and, along with the name, all kinds of understandings and associations. They are a source of livelihood if the setting for our childhood is a logging town. They constitute a focal point of lively aesthetic pleasure if we grow up within an artists' colony. They are the subject of deep reverence, fear perhaps, if we come to adulthood within an animist community. They may have very little meaning at all if we come from a slum neighbourhood in which there are no trees.

So the natural scientist does not come to the study of trees with a clean slate. To be sure, scientists have to lay aside much of the baggage they bring with them so as to study trees in a 'scientific' manner. They come to view trees, or whatever other natural phenomena they happen to be studying, within a particular horizon. But their starting point, inevitably, is the everyday understanding abroad in their culture. Blaikie talks of scientists inventing concepts and theories to understand and explain natural phenomena. In fact, they bring many of the concepts and much of the theory with them to the task. The so-called theoretical metalanguage is not a language existing in itself, distinct from the language spoken in the streets. It is ordinary language adapted to serve a specific purpose. What Blaikie says of the social world is true of the natural world too: people develop meanings together and it is already interpreted before the scientist arrives.

The social world and the natural world are not to be seen, then, as distinct worlds existing side by side. They are one human world. We are born, each of us, into an already interpreted world and it is at once natural and social.

CONFORMISM OR CRITIQUE?

It would seem important to distinguish accounts of constructionism where this social dimension of meaning is at centre stage from those where it is not. Using 'constructionism' for the former and 'constructivism' for the latter has echoes in the literature, even if the terminology is far from consistent. For example, after referring to the objectivist view that the facts of the world exist independently of us as observers, Schwandt (1994, p. 125) states that constructivists 'are deeply committed to the contrary view that what we take to be objective knowledge and truth is the result of perspective'. Constructivists, he adds, 'emphasize the instrumental and practical function of theory construction and knowing'.

This constructivism is primarily an individualistic understanding of the constructionist position and Schwandt contrasts it with a genuinely social constructionism:

Kenneth and Mary Gergen also challenge the idea of some objective basis for knowledge claims and examine the process of knowledge construction. But, instead of focusing on the matter of individual minds and cognitive processes, they turn their attention outward to the world of intersubjectively shared, social constructions of meaning and knowledge. Acknowledging a debt to the phenomenology of Peter Berger and Alfred Schutz, Kenneth Gergen (1985) labels his approach 'social constructionism' because it more adequately reflects the notion that the world that people create in the process of social exchange is a reality *sui generis*.

Contrary to the emphasis in radical constructivism, the focus here is not on the meaning-making activity of the individual mind but on the collective generation of meaning as shaped by the conventions of language and other social processes. (1994, p. 127)

It would appear useful, then, to reserve the term *constructivism* for epistemological considerations focusing exclusively on 'the meaning-making activity of the individual mind' and to use *constructionism* where the focus includes 'the collective generation [and transmission] of meaning'.

We might apply this distinction to the views of Giddens and Blaikie which we have just been discussing. In these terms, Giddens and Blaikie seem to have a constructivist view of scientific knowledge of the natural world but a constructionist view of scientific knowledge of the social world. The natural scientist constructs knowledge of the natural world by engaging with it in scientific mode, but the social world is already interpreted 'before the social scientist arrives'. What our considerations to date support is a constructionist view of both.

Whatever the terminology, the distinction itself is an important one. Constructivism taken in this sense points up the unique experience of each of us. It suggests that each one's way of making sense of the world is as valid and worthy of respect as any other, thereby tending to scotch any hint of a critical spirit. On the other hand, social constructionism emphasises the hold our culture has on us: it shapes the way in which we see things (even the way in which we feel things!) and gives us a quite definite view of the world. This shaping of our minds by culture is to be welcomed as what makes us human and endows us with the freedom we enjoy. For all that, there are social constructionists aplenty who recognise that it is limiting as well as liberating and warn that, while welcome, it must also be called into question. On these terms, it can be said that constructivism tends to resist the critical spirit, while constructionism tends to foster it.

Developing a critical spirit *vis-à-vis* our inherited understandings is no mean feat. For a start, there is the phenomenon of *reification* to be reckoned with. We tend to take 'the sense we make of things' to be 'the way things are'. We blithely do that and, just as blithely, hand on our understandings as quite simply 'the truth'. Understandings transmitted in this way and gaining a place in our view of the world take deep root and we find ourselves victims of the 'tyranny of the familiar'. Inherited and prevailing understandings become nothing less than, in William Blake's time-honoured phrase, 'mind-forg'd manacles'.

Another aspect of the process can be described as *sedimentation*. Layers of interpretation get placed one upon another like levels of mineral deposit in the formation of rock. No longer is it a question of existential engagement with realities in the world but of building upon theoretical deposits already in place. In this way we become further and further removed from those realities, our sedimented cultural meanings serving as a barrier between us and them. For this reason, Ortega y Gasset describes inherited and prevailing meanings as 'masks' and 'screens' (1963, pp. 59–63) and warns us that, instead of engaging with the world, we find ourselves 'living on top of a culture that has already become false' (1958, p. 100).

Culture, the purest product of the live and the genuine, since it comes out of the fact that man feels with an awful anguish and a burning enthusiasm the relentless needs of which his life is made up, ends by becoming a falsification of that life . . .

Thanks to culture, man has gotten away from himself, separated himself from himself; culture intervenes between the real world and his real person. (Ortega y Gasset 1958, pp. 99–101)

Kurt Wolff agrees: our received notions blind us to reality (1989, p. 326). For Gabriel Marcel they are 'closed systems in which thought imprisons us' (1964, p. 35). John Wild, using the same metaphor, speaks of our 'imprisonment in a world of our own construction' (1955, p. 191). As we shall see in the next chapter, it is awareness of this restrictiveness inherent in cultural understandings that drives the phenomenological endeavour to go 'back to the things themselves'.

The critical tradition, encountered today most markedly in what we know as critical theory, is even more suspicious of the constructed meanings that culture bequeaths to us. It emphasises that particular sets of meanings, because they have come into being in and out of the give-and-take of social existence, exist to serve hegemonic interests. Each set of meanings supports particular power structures, resists moves

towards greater equity, and harbours oppression, manipulation and other modes of injustice and unfreedom.

Not everyone acknowledges the restrictive and oppressive aspects of our cultural inheritance. Many rest content with celebrating the boon without recognising the burden. For some, in fact, the social origin of our ways of understanding the world and living within it is enough to guarantee their objectivity and validity. Nurse researcher Patricia Benner writes in this vein:

No higher court for the individual exists than meanings or self-interpretations embedded in language, skills, and practices. No laws, structures, or mechanisms offer higher explanatory principles or greater predictive power than self-interpretations in the form of common meanings, personal concerns, and cultural practices shaped by a particular history. (1985, p. 5)

Such an optimistic reading of culture stands in sharp contrast to the suspicion of culture found in the critical tradition and in large segments of the phenomenological movement. John Brenkman draws our attention to the 'restless consciousness . . . that senses in every work of culture the fact and the effects of social domination' (1987, p. 3). Here Brenkman is expressly reflecting the attitude of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's own language (1969, p. 256) is even more trenchant: 'There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism'.

Already we are seeing the bifurcation that occurs within constructionist social science and in research emanating from it. We shall be exploring the interpretivist paradigm in the next two chapters. Notwithstanding the critique immanent in some hermeneutics and central to the traditional phenomenological movement, interpretivism is overwhelmingly oriented towards an uncritical exploration of cultural meaning. In contrast, critical theory, along with many streams of feminist and postmodernist research, invites us to a much more critical stance.

This tension within constructionist research reflects its tortuous history.

The term 'constructionism', particularly 'social constructionism', derives largely from the work of Karl Mannheim (1893–1947) and from Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967). The ensuing development took the form of a 'sociology of knowledge'. Nevertheless, the idea already had a long history when Mannheim, Berger and Luckmann took it up and can be found, for example, in both Hegel and Marx.

Marx's premise is to the effect that ideology is linked to the economic 'base' of society. Those who own the means of production in any society

have the power to effect the kind of consciousness that obtains in that society. In his 1859 *Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx insists:

The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society—the real foundation, on which legal and political superstructures arise and to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond. The mode of production of material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness. (1961, p. 67)

Social being determines consciousness. Marx's focus on economic power imbues his maxim with a note of radical critique. This critical spirit continues in the phenomenological movement emerging around the turn of the twentieth century. Of this movement Franz Brentano was the precursor, Edmund Husserl the founder, and Martin Heidegger an eminent exponent. Thoroughly imbued with—indeed, predicated upon—the spirit of social constructionism, the phenomenological movement declared itself from the start a philosophy of radical criticism, albeit with none of the economic determinism with which orthodox Marxism is so often charged. Phenomenology became existentialist in purpose and orientation after it was taken up by Ortega y Gasset, a self-professed existentialist (O'Connor 1979, p. 59) and Heidegger, who consistently denied that he was existentialist but presented human beings in existentialist terms for his own purposes. Existential phenomenology, spearheaded in France by Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is militantly anti-objectivist and thoroughly constructionist.

The critical thrust of constructionism was also maintained with vigour in parallel developments on the other side of the Atlantic. The early exponents of American pragmatism—Charles Sanders Peirce, William James and John Dewey—were constructionist and critical. Unfortunately, pragmatism came to be popularised in forms that may have left it constructionist but effectively obscured its critical character. So effectively, and so quickly, was this accomplished that at various points the earlier pragmatists themselves came to be charged with the sins of their followers.

Thus we find Lewis Mumford describing the pragmatism of James and Dewey as an 'attitude of compromise and accommodation'—as 'pathetic' acquiescence, even (1950, pp. 39, 49). Social critic Randolph Bourne, himself a pragmatist and an associate of Dewey, similarly deplores the uncritical character he sees pragmatism assuming in his contemporaries, including his erstwhile mentor. He wants pragmatism's openness,

optimism and progressivism to be tested 'inch by inch'. It is not enough, Bourne claims, merely to clarify the values we hold. We 'must rage and struggle until new values come out of the travail' (Bourne 1977, p. 345). In Bourne's view, as Walzer makes clear (1989, p. 58), 'mere eagerness for action and effectiveness, the realist's search for "influence", is a vulgar pragmatism'. Mumford too looks for 'the values that arise out of vision' and deplores the inability of a pragmatism like Dewey's 'to recognize the part that vision must play'. The lack of vision and the consequent lack of values mean 'a maceration of human purposes', Mumford claims (1950, p. 48). 'We are living on fragments of the old cultures, or on abortions of the new.'

Bourne made his comments in the context of the United States' entry into World War I. Much later, during World War II, Frankfurt School theorist Max Horkheimer accused pragmatism of being ineffective and accommodating even *vis-à-vis* the Holocaust. Horkheimer directed this 1944 diatribe at Dewey in particular, as the source of the 'most radical and consistent form of pragmatism' (1974, p. 48). According to Ross Posnock, Horkheimer succeeded in 'creating a rift that has reified into a general assumption among historians that pragmatism and critical theory are irreconcilable' (1991, p. 79).

These charges against pragmatism are harsh and, insofar as they are levelled against the founders of pragmatism, betray a simplistic and distorted reading of pragmatism. Still, it needs to be noted that many followers of Peirce, James and Dewey have themselves been simplistic and distorting in what they put forward in the name of pragmatism. In their case, allegations of conformism and compromise can be said to be well founded. It must also be said that the rhetoric of some of the earlier pragmatists readily lent itself to misinterpretation.

One of the great names in the history of pragmatism is philosopher and social psychologist George Herbert Mead (1863–1931). It is from the thought of Mead that symbolic interactionism was born. Symbolic interactionism is pragmatism in sociological attire. In Mead's thought every person is a social construction. We come to be persons in and out of interaction with our society. The 'Me'—the self as constructed via the 'generalised other'—plays a central role in the process. Mead's social behaviourism embodies a thoroughly social point of view. In the Meadian analysis, human behaviour is social in origin, shaped by social forces, and permeated by the social even in its biological and physical aspects. Consequently, Mead wants us to 'see the world whole'. Our ability to do that is developed socially through 'entering into the most highly organized logical, ethical, and aesthetic attitudes of the community' and coming to recognise 'the most extensive set of interwoven conditions

that may determine thought, practice, and our fixation and enjoyment of values' (Mead 1964, p. 337). While Mead's thought is carefully nuanced, it has proved only too easy for his followers to slip from this account of the social genesis of the self to the grateful, unquestioning stance towards culture adopted by most interpretivist researchers today.

Here, then, is the dichotomy we discover within constructionist research. Whatever Mead's own thought, the symbolic interactionism that derives from him envisages a world far removed from that of critical inquirers. The world of the symbolic interactionist, like that of pragmatism as commonly conceived, is a peaceable and certainly growthful world. It is a world of intersubjectivity, interaction, community and communication, in and out of which we come to be persons and to live as persons. As such, it contrasts with the world that the critical theorist addresses. The world of the critical theorist is a battleground of hegemonic interests. In this world there are striking disparities in the distribution of power: some people have dominant power; others have far less power; most have no power at all. This is a world torn apart by dynamics of oppression, manipulation and coercion. Research methodologies basing themselves on the one and the other of these two envisaged worlds will be very different methodologies addressing very different purposes.

It may need to be re-emphasised that the chasm in constructionist thought being pinpointed here is between the critical approach and *popularised* versions of pragmatism. In its origins and its high points, pragmatism has more than enough in common with both phenomenology and critical theory for fruitful dialogue to take place. There are signs that a dialectic of this kind is emerging.

REALISM AND RELATIVISM

Social constructionism is at once realist and relativist.

To say that meaningful reality is socially constructed is not to say that it is not real. As we have noted earlier, constructionism in epistemology is perfectly compatible with a realism in ontology—and in more ways than one.

Stanley Fish underlines the reality of our social constructions when commenting publicly on the so-called Sokal Affair of 1996.⁸ It is no contradiction, Fish points out in the *New York Times* (21 May 1996), to say that something is socially constructed and also real. He draws an example from baseball. 'Balls' and 'strikes' are certainly socially constructed. They exist as such because of the rules of the game. Yet they

are real. Some people are paid as much as \$3.5 million to produce them or prevent their production! They are constructions, and may change in their nature tomorrow if the powers-that-be decide to change the rules, but they are real, nonetheless.

Accordingly, those who contrast 'constructionism' and 'realism' are wide of the mark. Realism should be set, instead, against idealism. Idealism, we have already noted, is the philosophical view that what is real is somehow confined to what is in the mind, that is, it consists only of 'ideas' (to use the word employed by Descartes and his contemporaries). Social constructionism does not confine reality in this way.

Secondly, we should accept that social constructionism is relativist. What is said to be 'the way things are' is really just 'the sense we make of them'. Once this standpoint is embraced, we will obviously hold our understandings much more lightly and tentatively and far less dogmatically, seeing them as historically and culturally effected interpretations rather than eternal truths of some kind. Historical and cross-cultural comparisons should make us very aware that, at different times and in different places, there have been and are very divergent interpretations of the same phenomena.

A certain relativism is in order, therefore. We need to recognise that different people may well inhabit quite different worlds. Their different worlds constitute for them diverse ways of knowing, distinguishable sets of meanings, separate realities.

At the very least, this means that description and narration can no longer be seen as straightforwardly representational of reality. It is not a case of merely mirroring 'what is there'. When we describe something, we are, in the normal course of events,⁹ reporting how something is seen and reacted to, and thereby meaningfully constructed, within a given community or set of communities. When we narrate something, even in telling our very own story, it is (again in the normal course of events) the voice of our culture—its many voices, in fact—that is heard in what we say. A consideration of central importance, surely. Yet not all approaches to social inquiry and analysis professing to be constructionist have been equally successful in keeping it in view.

It has become something of a shibboleth for qualitative researchers to claim to be constructionist or constructivist, or both. We need to ensure that this is not just a glib claim, a matter of rhetoric only. If we make such a claim, we should reflect deeply on its significance. What does it mean for our research to be constructionist and constructivist? What implications does being constructionist/constructivist hold?

Important questions these. Being constructionist/constructivist has crucial things to say to us about many dimensions of the research task. It speaks to us about the way in which we do research. It speaks to us about how we should view its data.

We will do well to listen.