

# Comprehensive Examination in Sociological Theory

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## Questions

### **Part A:**

The notion of “agency” has a long and troubled history in both sociology and evolutionary theory. Why has this idea caused so much intellectual grief? What, in your opinion, are its most intractable issues? And where, in your view, would we have to look for possible solutions? [**Response on page 2**]

### **Part B:**

A variety of meanings have been associated with the phrase “the social construction of x” in both the sociological and the philosophy of science literatures. Discuss what some of these have been. Moreover, the works of some theorists who do not use or at least emphasize the phrase might be considered “constructionist” by some of those definitions. Briefly, give one or more examples. Finally, in your view, how useful has this concept been in sociological theory? [**Response on page 13**]

### **Part C:**

Critically compare and contrast the different conceptions of the role of ideas vs. material forces in the work of a representative selection of classical and contemporary theorists. [**Response on page 25**]

**Bibliography on page 36**

## **Part A**

*The notion of “agency” has a long and troubled history in both sociology and evolutionary theory. Why has this idea caused so much intellectual grief? What, in your opinion, are its most intractable issues? And where, in your view, would we have to look for possible solutions?*

### ***Introduction: The Problem of Agency***

“Intellectual grief” is an understatement when one considers the vast amount of pages spent trying to fit the study of agency into the established cannon of sociological theory. There is certainly no shortage of schemes, components, and processes used to describe how human thought and reflection should be understood vis-à-vis larger social structures. Borrowing from Freudian theory, Giddens claims that agency incorporates three different components: a “basic security system”, “practical consciousness”, and “discursive consciousness” (Giddens 1984:41). Hitlin and Elder (2007) argue that there are four different types of agency which arise at different moments: existential, pragmatic, identity, and life course. Further still, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) break agency into a time sequence involving habitual, projective, and practical moments. And in contrast to all three, Fuchs (2001) declares that agency is simply “a residual, consisting of that portion of variance unaccounted for by social structure” (p.34).

Putting aside these complex schemes for now, the term agency, as it is generally used, refers to some form of self-determination. As the term suggests, self-determination involves (1) a self, or mind, and (2) determination or some kind of causal power that is irreducible to other sources such as social structure or biology. There are a variety of ways in which self-determination can be further conceptualized, and in this paper I will be drawing on two. The first I would call *agency as power*, which specifies that any explanation of human action must take into account the power of the mind to have chosen

that action out of other possibilities (Giddens 1984; Bourdieu 1977). According to this perspective, agency is seen as being present even when actors are conforming to social norms and expected behaviour, as long as we understand that the actor is the “perpetrator” of their conformity, and has the potential to “have acted differently” (Giddens 1984:9). The second perspective on agency I will call *agency as deviation*, which conceptualizes agency as the mind’s ability to produce new and unpredictable courses of action (Baldus 2009; Luhmann 1995; Fuchs 2001). Through this conceptualization, agency is distanced from social structure to a far greater extent than it is with *agency as power*, since conforming to structure would be predictable and non-agentic.

Both *power* and *deviation* perspectives conform to the definition of self-determination in that they both give the human mind some causal power in the course of human history. However, the perspectives have different implications for many of the “intractable issues” that surround the problem of agency. In this response, I will be considering two broad issues. First, is the issue of what directs acts of agency. On this issue I will consider the role of rational choice and reflexivity. Second, I will consider the issue of how we connect agency back to social structure. Is social structure purely a constraining force on agency, or is it also enabling? Throughout this discussion I will critically assess the extent to which various sociological perspectives sufficiently account for agency and highlight major insights that can be seen as possible solutions to the problem of agency. I will begin this response, however, with a brief historical consideration of agency in sociological theory.

### *Some Historical Background*

The problem of agency in Western social thought can be traced back well before the origins of sociology. However, I will start this discussion by focusing on the contradictory treatment of agency in the first explicit formulations of sociology by Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte. When we look specifically at the “positive philosophy” that these thinkers advocated, we see on one hand, a society in which we are destined to follow laws that are naturally given rather than socially produced, and on the other hand, knowledge of these laws providing new forms of self-determination and practical mastery on the part of humans. Comte sums up this contradictory view by stating “true liberty is nothing else than a rational submission to the preponderance of the laws of nature” (quoted in Zeitlin 2001:83). I would argue that these tensions are not just a product of Saint-Simon and Comte’s positivism, but are part of the larger rationalized approach to social life that characterizes modernity and of which sociology is a part. In the shadow of Newtonian physics, sociology began as an attempt to exert scientific control over society as a way of eliminating contingency and uncertainty for better or worse. Sociology, like rationalization in general, promises freedom while threatening subjugation.

Although eventually abandoning the explicit reference to “natural laws”, 19<sup>th</sup> century sociology remained characterized by a mission to find the essence of society – the social dynamics that determine our existence, as a means of taking control ourselves. We see the legacy of this contradictory agenda continued in the work of Karl Marx. In this respect, the discontinuities in Marx’ theory are well documented (Williams 1977; Sahlins 1976). On one hand, Marx provided sociology with one of the most influential conceptualizations of human agency in the notion of “species-being”. Marx defined the

human species by our ability to labour in novel and creative ways. To illustrate, Marx famously compared an architect to a bee:

What distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. (Marx and Engels 1978:344-345)

What is important in this comparison is not only that the architect's building is partially the result of a creative mind (agency as *power*). Also noteworthy is the fact that the outcome of the architect's labour will be quite unpredictable in comparison to the bee, which makes its hive perfectly every time. The tradeoff of the human ability to imagine new realities and attempt to enact them in the material world is that the results are never guaranteed. Humans must accept failure, unforeseen consequences, unexpected success, unpreventable change, etc (agency as *deviation*).

In contrast to this creativity and uncertainty that is connected to the very nature of humanity, Marx' macro-level descriptions of history take on a far more deterministic tone – sometimes reminiscent of the natural laws described by Saint-Simon and Comte (Baldus 2009:225; Williams 1977:60). This is particularly true in his description of the rise of class consciousness in the *Communist Manifesto*, which does not depend on creative minds, but rather is set off when the proletariat reaches a certain size (Marx and Engels 2002). There are countless things that could be said to further critique and defend the work of Marx. For my purposes, however, it is sufficient to say that the debate over historical materialism in the generations that followed Marx speaks to the unsettled state of structure and agency in his theory.

In the work of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim we see the beginnings of a major divide between structural and individualistic approaches to sociology. In Durkheim's sociology there is a return to the power of natural law, conceptualized as "social facts" that exert an external force on us even if we try to resist (Durkheim 1982:51). In contrast to Durkheim's realism, Weber adopts a nominalist approach by emphasizing the "ideal" nature of sociological concepts (Weber 2002b). Although there are certainly deterministic aspects to Weber's theories, his historical analyses illustrate the causal power that he invested in the individual human mind to alter history in haphazard and unpredictable ways. Capitalism, for instance, depends not only on law-like historical forces, but also on very mundane acts of agency such as Martin Luther's choice of words (*Beruf*) and John Calvin's theological views (Weber 2002a).

In the contemporary era (post-WWII), the tensions between structure and agency have come to be articulated more explicitly than ever before. Margaret Archer (1988) has argued that "the problem of structure and agency has rightly come to be seen as the basic issue in modern social theory" (quoted in Ritzer 2000:387). Due in part, perhaps, to the work of Anthony Giddens (1984), Pierre Bourdieu (1977), and Archer herself, contemporary sociological theory is often understood through the frame of structure and agency. Conventional descriptions of contemporary theory in America pit the Functionalist theories deriving from Parsons (1949, 1951), which invest social causality in the functional requirements of social systems, against the Symbolic Interactionism that was derived from the work of Mead and the other American Pragmatists, which emphasizes the reflective power of the human mind to recognize and communicate in

symbolic gestures (Blumer 1969; Zeitlin 2001). In Europe, similar divisions were recognized between structuralism and phenomenology.

Thus, the problem of structure and agency has been a fundamental one for the study of sociology and has manifested itself on a wide range of sociological issues. In the analysis below, I touch on a few of these topics.

### ***Rationality***

The first issue that needs to be addressed is what exactly directs acts of agency? One of the most common ways in which social scientists have “predicted” the actions of human agents has been through the concept of “rational choice” (Joas and Beckert 2002). Though rational choice is often seen in conflict with the value-oriented nature of sociology, social actions are frequently (if implicitly) attributed to rational, self-interested, utilitarian intentions (Joas and Beckert 2002). Perhaps the most famous manifestation of the rational choice has been in Weber’s concept of “instrumental-rational” action, in which actors establish clear ends, and calculate the means that most effectively achieve those ends (Weber 1978:24). Joas and Beckert (2002) point out three assumptions that underlie instrumental-rational action:

First, they assume the actor as being able to act in a purposeful manner. Second, they assume the actor as being able to control, to dominate, or to instrumentalize his or her own body. Third, they assume the autonomy of the individual actor toward his or her fellow actors and toward the environment. (Joas and Beckert 2002:272)

There are two major criticisms that can be made of rational choice approaches to human action. First, it over exaggerates the ability of the human mind to isolate specific goals and calculate means to achieve them. And second, it is tautological in that it

explains actions by imposing a false certainty on their future outcomes (Joas and Beckert 2002; Alchian 1950). To expand on the first criticism, it must be stressed that our ability to establish clear goals and calculate the means to achieve them is highly limited, or at least influenced, by our own psychology and social position:

Choices necessarily occur within the flow of activity, not abstracted from it (like in rational models of social action). We are not dispassionate, analytical actors. We make choices within the flow of situated activity, and emotions and personality traits—along with idiosyncratic personal histories, moral codes, and predispositions—influence the choices we make in emergent situations. (Hitlin and Elder 2007:178)

Furthermore, it is unclear where exactly “rational” ends come from or how we decide upon them. If by “rational” ends, we mean self-interest, then how do actors decide what they are interested in? Weber is very vague in distinguishing between the ends of “instrumental-rationality” and “value-rationality”. He writes that the ends of instrumental-rationality can either be determined by “a system of values” (which would make it value-rational), or “simply taken as given subjective wants” (Weber 1978:26). Leaving the question of ends unspecified opens up the possibility that ends will be characterized as “rational” if they conform to the observer’s expectations (such as the desire to make money). However, they may be labelled irrational and value-oriented if they strike the observer as bizarre or unexpected (such as trading pigs in the *moka* exchange of Papua New Guinea (Strathern 1971)). This leads to the criticism that rational choice theorists study “people like themselves” (Macy 2006:79). This criticism is echoed by Bourdieu (1971) who points out that social science often reserves notions of strategic action to explain modern Western societies, while relying on cultural

structuralism in ethnographic work – ignoring the strategic nature of much of the actions we consider to be irrational or at least not self-interested.

The second criticism – that rational choice is tautological and based on unrealistic certainty – is also worth expanding on. Luhmann argues that social life necessitates complexity reduction. Agents cannot possibly hope to understand everything that goes on in their environment, so they are forced to simplify by selecting the few things that they will pay attention to, and pushing everything else out into a contingent, unpredictable environment (Ritzer 2000:186). The result is that even in the best situations, every action an agent takes will have a range of potential outcomes (Alchian 1950).

It is interesting to note that while these two criticisms of rational choice could be made from either a *power* or *deviation* perspective of agency, the two perspectives reach very different conclusions. For *agency as power*, rational choice provides actors with too much agency. Intentions and choice making are not sufficiently tied to the external structures which enable them to be made in the first place. On the other hand, for *agency as deviation*, rational choice does not provide enough agency. Rationality imposes an artificial determinism on action by tying it to predictable outcomes rather than a process of creative, irrational, chance-taking.

### ***Reflexivity***

In response to these shortcomings in rational choice theory, it may be wise to consider human action as being “reflexive” rather than rational (Giddens 1983:78). Reflexivity, which is often associated with American Pragmatism and Social

Interactionism, bypasses many of the dichotomies that often frame rational choice theory. In opposition to the ends/means dichotomy, the Pragmatists proposed a stream of consciousness with a “knife’s edge” present, where all actions and thoughts bleed into each other (Zeitlin 2001; Hitlin and Elder 2007: 177). As well, rather than trying to categorize actions as either utilitarian and self-interested, or as value-oriented, reflexivity frames all of human reality as being “necessarily constructed out of social meanings and values” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998:968).

Approaching agency as a reflexive process means that we do not explain action by its outcomes, but rather on knowledge that the agent derives from “cumulative experience” (Macy 2006). In other words, agency is tied to biography. This biographical orientation of agency is perhaps most famously represented through Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus”, which is a “system of durable, transposable dispositions”, or tacit knowledge that an agent develops over their lifetime (particularly at an early age) (Bourdieu 1977:72). These dispositions become the basis for strategic action and competition among agents who draw on them often spontaneously and unconsciously as they face new situations and dilemmas. What Bourdieu perhaps does not emphasize enough, however, is the possibility that these dispositions and tacit knowledge will at times be ambiguous or conflicting, mistakenly employed in the wrong situation, or subject to new and unfamiliar environments (Sewell 1992). In such cases, the agent is forced to become innovative, creative, and experimental. These moments, in turn, then become part of the “cumulative experience” that informs future actions.

### ***Intersecting with Structure: Constraining vs. Enabling***

A second sticking point in the problem of agency is connecting agency to social structure. As we have seen, sociology has been primarily concerned with explaining the patterns and regularities in social life – often relating these to macro-level laws or “social facts” (Durkheim 1982), or systemic requirements (Parsons 1951). One of the most important questions, therefore, is whether or not agency exists because of, or in spite of, these regularities. Restated, we must ask whether social structure is a constraining or enabling force for agency.

If we approach *agency as deviation*, then social structure can be seen as playing primarily a constraining role – reducing an infinite range of arbitrary and unpredictable social actions into relatively predictable systems (Luhmann 1995). If the human mind is seen as being naturally able to generation variation – either through purposeful creativity or unintentional consequences – then social structure plays a *selective* role by allowing some acts of agency to be replicated while others are abandoned (Balduz 2009; Alchian 1950). Alchian (1950), for instance, emphasizes the role of the capitalist market structure in *selecting* only certain economic actions from among many attempts. Acts of agency become replicated and incorporated into social structure when they receive some form of positive feedback (whether or not this was the original intention of the actor) (Arthur 1990).

*Agency as power* requires us to conceptualize social structure in a different way. If agency is defined as the self-determined ability to act, then it is both limited as well as enabled by the rules, resources, dispositions, knowledge, etc. that makes up social structure. Giddens (1984) makes the enabling quality of social structure a major

emphasis in his theory of structuration, arguing that “structure is implicated in the very ‘freedom of action’ which is treated as a residual and unexplicated category in the various forms of ‘structural sociology’” (p.174). In other words, agency is incapacitated without the resources of language, material objects, codes of conduct, etc. For Bourdieu (1977) as well, the capacity of humans to take part in strategic, intentional social action relies on the tacit practical knowledge that makes up their “habitus”, which Bourdieu defines famously as “structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (p.72). Thus, for *agency as power*, there is no agency without structure.

### ***Conclusion***

Throughout this response I have tried to distinguish two conceptualizations of agency (*power* and *deviation*) and demonstrate how they differ on key issues (rational choice and social structure). However, I think it is important to emphasize that these two approaches to agency are not necessarily in competition. First of all, we should assert the irreducible *power* of the mind in all social situations. Human action, even that which seems completely predictable and in conformity, can never be fully explained without relying on the causal power of the mind. However, it is because we must rely on the human mind to explain social action that so much *deviation* exists. After all, the human mind does not just have the power to have acted otherwise; it frequently does act otherwise – whether because of failure, misunderstanding, creativity, unintended consequences, etc. Thus, while certain theorists may conceive of agency as *power*, and other as *deviation*, I think the two approaches are inextricably linked.

## **Part B**

*A variety of meanings have been associated with the phrase “the social construction of x” in both the sociological and the philosophy of science literatures. Discuss what some of these have been. Moreover, the works of some theorists who do not use or at least emphasize the phrase might be considered “constructionist” by some of those definitions. Briefly, give one or more examples. Finally, in your view, how useful has this concept been in sociological theory?*

### ***Introduction: What is a Social Construction?***

For a phrase that has gained such popularity within the social sciences over the past few decades (Saioud and Blute 2006), it is surprising that there is very little agreement over what exactly it means for something to be “socially constructed”. In fact there is a great deal of literature dedicated to sorting out this question and mediating between the various potential answers (Searle 1995; Hacking 1999; Murphy 2002, 2004; Blute Forthcoming). What we can say in general is that social constructionism concerns the extent to which an object or phenomenon – or our at least our knowledge of an object or phenomenon – is dependent upon collective social actions and beliefs. In other words, when something is socially constructed it is, at some level, subjective: dependent upon human subjectivity, rather than external, objective reality.

Beyond this general conceptualization of social constructionism, we need some way of framing the variety of theories that have fallen under the constructionist heading. Therefore, I suggest two axes for understanding social constructionism: *strength* and *scope*. Social constructionist arguments vary in *strength* between those that claim that an object under study has no extra-social basis for existence whatsoever (strong constructionism), and those that attribute the current state of an object only partially to social forces (weak constructionism) (Murphy 2002; 2004). There is also variation in the *scope* of what it means to be socially constructed. In the most general definition, a social

construction is anything that is fully or partially dependent on social processes. More restricted definitions, however, frame social constructionism as a very specific form of argumentation that is defined both by its empirical as well as political aims (Hacking 1999).

In framing constructionism around these two axes, I will critically compare and contrast a variety of constructionist approaches. I will then present a brief historical account of constructionism in sociological theory. Finally, to conclude the analysis, I will consider the utility of constructionism by addressing both criticisms of the perspective, as well as its unique insights.

### ***Strength: Strong vs. Weak Constructionism***

Strength refers to the extent to which a social constructionist argument acknowledges extra-social causal powers. I distinguish between two forms: strong and weak constructionism. Strong constructionists argue that the object or phenomenon under study is completely dependent on the subjective perspectives of people and has no extra-social basis for existence. Strong constructionist arguments have often been controversial, particularly when they are used to challenge things that are typically seen as the result of biological or other non-social forces. The “science wars” within Science and Technology Studies is a good example of this controversy (Hacking 1999). To claim that scientific discoveries are completely dependent on subjectively-oriented social actions discounts any determining role of nature or other extra-social forces, implying that there is no external basis for establishing truth.

There are, however, many strong social constructionist assumptions that are relatively uncontroversial among sociologists. The artistic value of a painting, for instance, is seen in the sociology of culture as being the product (or “construction”) of general consensus and collective action among a group of people. Whether it is seen as a neutral empirical observation (Becker 1982), or as the basis of political critique (Bourdieu 1983), the notion that artistic value is “socially constructed” is widely held and rarely challenged. The same can be said about many other objects of sociological study such as crime and justice (Durkheim 1933), and ideology (Mannheim 1954). When it comes to these abstract ideals, referring to them as “subjective” – primarily the result of human struggle, consensus, and other collective action – is far less controversial than making similar claims about natural phenomena such as scientific discoveries, nature, or disease.

In contrast to strong constructionism, the weaker variation does not dispute that the object or phenomenon under study has some extra-social basis for existence. What weak constructionists do argue, however, is that the object could not exist in its current form without being sustained by collective social action or beliefs. Weak constructionists can be quite diverse in their approach to the role of extra-social processes. Some may explicitly acknowledge the extra-social causality, while choosing to only focus on the social. In outlining his weak constructionist approach to environmental problems, for instance, Hannigan (1995) states “social constructionism as it is conceptualised here does not deny the independent causal powers of nature but rather asserts that the rank ordering of these problems by social actors does not always directly correspond to actual need” (p.30). Here Hannigan acknowledges that the environment and even “actual need”

correspond to something extra-social, but instead chooses to focus specifically on the social process of identifying and ranking “problems”.

Other weak constructionists may demonstrate far more hostility to the possibility of extra-social forces, and even seek to delegitimize extra-social explanations, but nonetheless avoid directly refuting or disproving these forces and explanations. For example, social constructionist working in obesity studies have often attempted to demonstrate how our understandings of fatness have changed over time and are intimately connected to subjective notions of beauty and morality. They have also argued that the label obesity has been used in power struggles by dominant groups to stigmatize subordinate groups (Saguy and Almeling 2008; Guthman and DuPuis 2006). However, while they express deep political opposition to the concept of obesity, constructionists have rarely attempted to actually disprove the medical literature that justifies the use of the concept.

### ***Scope: Empirical Observation vs. Political Critique***

The second axis, *scope*, represents how restrictive we are willing to be in defining social constructionism. In its most general definition, to call something a “social construction” implies that the object is “a product of sociocultural rather than biological processes”, or other non-social processes (Blute Forthcoming). Under this general definition, social constructionism may include any explanation that incorporates social causality or a social “independent variable”. According to this definition, the central aim of social constructionists is primarily empirical: to substitute, or at least supplement, an extra-social explanation with a social one. The problem is that this definition is far too

general to explain why social constructionism has achieved so much popularity among sociologists. Indeed, identifying phenomena that have a social basis for existence was how sociology was founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see historical analysis below). Thus, some writers have opted for a far more restricted definition of social constructionism (Hacking 1999; Blute Forthcoming)

Under the restricted definition, social constructionism is considered to be a very specific line of argumentation that has both political as well as empirical aims. Unlike the general definition, restricted social constructionism does not only involve demonstrating that the object or phenomenon under study has social *origins* or causes. It also involves demonstrating that the object has social *consequences* or implications. Usually these consequences are seen as negative, which implies that the object or phenomenon should be subjected to criticism or even political opposition.

Adopting this restricted definition, Hacking (1999) argues that social constructionism should be seen as a method for *debunking* certain phenomena or objects. “Social constructionist work”, Hacking argues,

...is critical of the status quo. Social constructionists about *X* tend to hold that (1) *X* need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. *X*, or *X* as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable. Very often they go further, and argue that: (2) *X* is quite bad as it is. (3) We would be better off if *X* were done away with, or at least radically transformed. (Hacking 1999:6)

In Hacking’s definition, we can see an emphasis on both *politics* and *empiricism*, and on both the social *origins* and *consequences* of the object or phenomenon under study.

By identifying the political aim of “debunking”, we are able to better understand why discovering the social origins of an object or phenomenon is an important task.

There are two implications to proving that an object has social origins. First, it implies

that the object is arbitrary or inessential. Among a different group of people, or at a different point in time, there is no guarantee that the object would still exist. The existence of the object is the result of historical contingency rather than some essential natural force. The second implication is that we potentially have the power to end the existence of the object. Since the object is dependent on our collective actions and beliefs, if we were to change our behaviour, the object might not survive. It is easy to see how arguments like these could be appealing when applied to phenomena such as racism, capitalism, gender discrimination, etc.

In this restricted definition, social *consequences* are also important. If the object or phenomenon is seen as negative and worth debunking, then the social constructionist is usually required to demonstrate that it has some negative consequence. One very important example is provided by the constructionist accounts of formalized knowledge that gained popularity in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century – accounts that are sometimes referred to as “post-modern” (Calhoun 2002; Harvey 1990). These theories are based on the notion that seemingly “objective” forms of knowledge, established by social and natural scientists, reinforce or make possible certain forms of domination.

The “knowledge-power” relationship is most often associated with the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault studied the historical development of “discourses” or systems of knowledge that developed in the areas of mental health (Foucault 1988; 1990) and governance (Foucault 1995; 2000), and sought to show how these forms of knowledge provided new and more effective ways of exerting control over large groups of people. For Foucault, formalized bodies of knowledge like psychoanalysis (Foucault 1990), and demography (2000), opened up areas of people’s everyday lives to domination that were

at one time considered private (sexual and economic activity, respectively). The psychiatrist who advises people on their sex life, and the welfare state that places new regulations on everything from food consumption to home renovation, represent new sources of domination. This domination is made possible by formalized systems of knowledge like psychoanalysis and demographics.

Foucault and other theorists (such as Gramsci 2008 and Althusser 2001) who have studied the relationship between power and knowledge have had a profound influence on the discipline of sociology. Feminist sociologists such as Dorothy Smith have adopted Althusserian insights to study her own discipline. Smith (1987) argues that conventional sociological knowledge is a social construction to the extent that its content is not based on pure “truth”, but reflects the dominant position of males in academic institutions. In keeping with the *debunking* notion of social constructionism, Smith identifies social *origins* of this construction (the dominant position of males), and its social *consequences* (objectification and justification of male experience, and the marginalization of female experience).

One final point should be made to connect this knowledge-power concept back to the issue of *strength* that was discussed earlier. In a strong constructionist argument, debunking implies that a non-social explanation for a phenomenon has been replaced with a social explanation. In this sense, strong constructionism involves replacing one objective theory for another. However, theorists like Foucault, who are suspicious of formal theories, are not interested in this strategy. Foucault’s approach to formalized knowledge operated “not by attempting to refute those claims directly and to install a new truth in their place but by attempting to expose and to delegitimize the strategies they

employ to construct and to authorize their truth-claims in the first place” (Halperin 2002:45). Thus, Foucault was attempting to debunk established theories of sexuality and mental health by demonstrating that they need not have existed and have some worrisome consequences, while avoiding the claim that they are objectively wrong.

### ***Brief History of Social Constructionism***

If we adopt the general definition, it becomes evident that constructionism has been a part of sociology since its foundation and was essential for carving sociology out as a new discipline. By showing how certain phenomena are the result of social forces, rather than natural or divine forces, the founders of sociology opened up new substantive areas to social inquiry. Durkheim, for instance, famously argued that crime could only be defined socially by identifying acts that “offend strong and defined states of the collective conscience” (Durkheim 1933:80). In *The German Ideology*, Marx argued that the societal ideals did not represent the unfolding of some divine truth, as Hegel suggested, but were the result of a socio-political struggle (Marx 1964; Zeitlin 2001). Finally, Weber demonstrated that capitalistic rationality was not something that came naturally to humans (as was suggested by the classical political economists), but developed culturally over several generations (Weber 2002). Thus, crime, ideals, and capitalism can all be said to be socially constructed in that they are the products of historically contingent, collective human action, rather than essential, naturally-given phenomena.

The work of Karl Marx has a particularly interesting relationship to social constructionism as we know it today. Although Marx “debunked” the bourgeois ideals that many of his era took for granted, his tendency to tie human consciousness and action

closely to the economic system of a society has been seen as essentialist in its own right (Sahlins 1976; Williams 1977). However, the theorists that followed Marx adopted perspectives that look far more like the constructionism we know today. The Critical perspective of the Frankfurt School, for instance, concerned itself with exposing “false necessity” – that is, social phenomena that are mistakenly attributed to external causes (nature, reason, etc) rather than internal causes (social factors) (Calhoun 2002). In addition, Karl Mannheim’s “sociology of knowledge” was premised on the assertion that there are no objectively true and false ideologies, and that all ideologies must be understood vis-à-vis their historical development and the social positions of those who create and hold them (Mannheim 1949).

The actual term “social construction” probably finds its origins in Berger and Luckmann’s *The Social Construction of Reality: a Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (1966). However, there is some controversy over how much this book reflects the social constructionist sociology that emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Berger and Luckmann’s argument was very much a product of the post-WWII debate between Functionalism and Conflict theory in American sociology. Their theory represented a third view that stressed the micro foundations of the macro social institutions that most interested the Functionalists and Conflict theorists. In this way, main contribution of *The Social Construction of Reality* was in outlining how people construct and sustain their social institutions through micro-level social interaction (a micro-macro argument), rather than in demonstrating how people construct their knowledge of the world around them (a social constructionist argument) (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Blute Forthcoming).

Nonetheless, *The Social Construction of Reality* is still subtitled “A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge” and is introduced with reference to the work of Mannheim. Whereas “Mannheim’s key concern was with the phenomenon of ideology”, Berger and Luckmann argued that the “problem of ideology constitutes only part of the larger problem of the sociology of knowledge, and not a central part at that. The sociology of knowledge must concern itself with everything that passes for ‘knowledge’ in society” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:9,14-15). Thus, in demonstrating how people construct their macro-institutions, they are also demonstrating the cycle of how we construct the world around us based on our knowledge, and derive our knowledge based on the world around us. In this sense, almost everything that humans come in contact with on a daily basis can be at least partially explained by reference to social processes and collective human action. This reading of *The Social Construction of Reality* is more in line with current understandings of the term.

Whether or not this was the dominant reading of Berger and Luckmann at the time, in the following decades the term “construction” came to signify a view that humans (including social and natural scientists) are active in producing their knowledge, rather than passively accumulating it. In 1973, for instance, Clifford Geertz referred to ethnographic knowledge as “really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to” (Geertz 1973:9). Geertz’s words seem quite compatible with current understandings of social constructionism.

### *Critiques of Social Constructionism*

In assessing the utility of constructionism, there are two major critiques that should be considered. I refer to them as the “realist” critique, and the “black-box” critique. The realist critique is aimed primarily at the stronger version of social constructionism, and relies on the philosophical realist position that “the world has an inherent structure that we discover” (Hacking 1999:33). Exemplifying the realist critique, Doing (2006) argues that while social constructionist approaches to laboratory studies have outlined the social processes that occur within laboratories, they have never shown that any scientific discovery has been entirely dependent on these social processes.

In general terms, the realist critique of social constructionism contends that there is no way to explain the stability of scientific knowledge if it is significantly dependent on social processes (Hacking 1999, Doing 2008). The fact that major scientific discoveries often stand the test of time demonstrates that they are reflective of non-social mechanisms – even if these mechanisms are discovered by socially-engaged scientists. Summing up this point, Bhaskar argues that while “science is a social product, ...the mechanisms it identifies operate prior to and independently of their discovery” (Bhaskar 1998:xii). In other words, social processes allow us to gain knowledge, but they do not determine the content of that knowledge – at least not entirely.

The “black-box” critique is aimed primarily at weak constructionism. It has often been advocated by theorists who refer to themselves as “critical realists” after the philosophy of science advocated by Roy Bhaskar (1975; 1979) (Frauley and Pearce 2007). The black-box critique argues that because nature is an active force, rather than a passive environment, social constructionism is limiting itself by choosing to focus only

on social processes. Murphy, for instance, criticises Hannigan's constructionist approach to environmental problems, by arguing that nature can actively force people to recognize certain problems. For instance, when a flood hits a city, it almost automatically becomes conceived as an environmental problem – not because it was “constructed” as such, but because the streets are filled with water. This black-box critique has led theorists like Latour (1993, 1999) and Murphy (2002, 2004) to conceive of objects and phenomena as nature-social “hybrid” constructions rather than either social or natural.

### ***Conclusion: The Utility of Social Constructionism***

While these criticisms identify the limits of the constructionist perspective, I want to end this response by pointing out one important contribution of social constructionism that I think was best articulated by the Frankfurt School (who I consider to be weak constructionists). The point is this: criticism is a powerful tool both politically and empirically. When we question ask “what sorts of social organization are ‘objectively’ possible and why have some rather than other possibilities become real” (Calhoun 2002:91), we are potentially opening new avenues social scientific progress, as well as socio-political progress. Social constructionism, as a form of critical theory, encourages us to focus on the internal reasons for particular social phenomena – how they are sustained through collective social action and beliefs – rather than relying on external causes that render them essential and/or unchangeable. I think that this sociological task will endure, even if the term “social construction” does not.

## **Part C**

*Critically compare and contrast the different conceptions of the role of ideas vs. material forces in the work of a representative selection of classical and contemporary theorists.*

### ***Introduction – Culture as Necessary and Active in Social Life***

In order to narrow down this discussion, I want to focus specifically on the role of culture in social theory rather than ideas in general. For this task, I turn to Clifford Geertz' "semiotic" approach. Geertz (1973) defines culture as "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (p.89). Furthermore, Geertz argues that culture is something that is known to the social scientist primarily through interpretive methods aimed at understanding the meanings that our research subjects attribute to the outside world (p.5). While narrower than "ideas", this definition of culture is broad enough to discuss a wide variety of theories on ideology, norms and values, schemas and rules, etc.

Additionally, to provide some structure to the discussion, I begin by staking out my own position on the issue of culture vs. material forces, which will then serve as a reference point for my critical examination of other theories and perspectives. The position I adopt is this: Culture is not only a necessary part of social life, but is also an irreducible causal force (i.e. not simply an effect of, or reducible to, other explanatory factors). Therefore, culture can never be disqualified completely from explanations of social phenomena. However, the utility of incorporating culture may vary according to the particular phenomena we wish to explain. Thus, I regard the distinction between cultural explanations and material explanations to be analytic rather than empirical.

Furthermore, I would argue that when we choose to adopt materialist explanations for certain phenomena, it is often because the cultural forces at work appear to be natural, given, or constant. Often this is the case when the culture of those we study is similar to our own. However, culture becomes problematic (that is, something that must be accounted for) when the people we study appear to act in unexpected, unfamiliar, or irrational ways. With this position laid out, I will discuss two types of sociological explanations: social action, and historical social change. In doing so, I will describe and evaluate various sociological approaches to culture and material conditions.

## PART I: SOCIAL ACTION

### *The Possibility of Non-Cultural Social Action*

There are many idealist-materialist dimensions social action. However, for this response, I am most interested in the motivations of social action. Where do the “ends” of action come from? From the material environment, or from culture? In order to demonstrate the essential and active role of culture in the motivation of social action, I will first begin by considering the possibility of non-cultural social action. The Weberian definition, from which the term social action is derived (Joas and Beckert 2002:269), regards “action as ‘social’ insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course” (Weber 1978:4). Already the attachment of *subjective* meaning to social action implies the presence of a mind and disqualifies some of the most extreme versions of materialism, particularly those associated with Behaviouralism and B.F. Skinner, which contend that human action can be explained completely by physical stimuli originating from the material environment (Ardila 2000).

A more popular materialist explanation for social action, and one that fits into Weber's definition, is rational choice or instrumental-rationality. Rational choice is materialist in the sense that it is oriented toward the maximization of utility of certain resources (Joas and Beckert 2002:271), and that it is not dependent on any particular culture. Since Immanuel Kant, social action has often been conceived as deriving from either rational utility, or adherence to irrational cultural values (Emirbayer and Mische 1998:965). Culture is seen as irrational to the extent that it is based on convention, rather than necessity. To connect this back to the semiotic approach, the shared symbols which make up culture have no "intrinsic connection" to what they signify (Blute Forthcoming), thus making culture arbitrary, unpredictable, and irrational.

Weber's typology of action maintains the Kantian distinction between rational utility and adherence to values, though it is complicated by a "logic of gradual abandonment" (Joas and Beckert 2002:271). Weber specifies *instrumental* action as rational, and gradually shifts toward more irrational, culture-dependent forms of action: *value-rational*, *affective*, and *traditional* (Weber 1978:24-26). The question then becomes, without the norms and values provided by culture, what guides instrumental-rational action? Or, to use Weber's own "means/ends" terminology, where do instrumental-rational ends come from, if not culture? Weber is quite vague on this subject. In elaborating on instrumental-rationality, he states that the ends may come from values (which would collapse them into value-rationality), or "simply...as *given* subjective wants" (Weber 1978:26; italics added).

The notion that instrumental-rationality is oriented around *given* ends is important. What I understand Weber to be saying is that ends are instrumentally-rational

when they require no explanation. Value-rational ends on the other hand are more problematic – they require us to delve into an interpretive analysis of the actor’s culture or worldview in order to understand what exactly they value. But under what circumstances do we not require some interpretive understanding of what a social actor values? In what circumstances are ends simply given?

I can think of two cases in which ends are attributed to social actors with minimal explanation. The first is when a particular end is seen as human nature. Michels’ “iron law of oligarchy” is a good example of this case. Michels’ rests his law “on certain innate human tendencies which urge man to transmit his material possessions to his legitimate heir or other kin” (Zeitlin 2001:317). The second case is when an end is derived from the social system within which action takes place. Thus, a capitalist pursues money because he is a capitalist (*homo economicus*) and a politician pursues office because she is a politician (*realpolitik*). Once we identify the social roles of these actors, we can attribute ends to them without having to resort to any interpretive analysis of how they see the world.

The latter case of this instrumental-rationality is exemplified by Marx, not only in his more economically reductionist statements<sup>1</sup>, but also the general causal linkage he draws between the development of capitalist relations of production and the emergence of a class interest on the part of the proletariat (Marx and Engels 2002). I will examine this linkage more closely later on.

Having outlined these two sources of instrumental-rationality, I would argue that neither human nature nor placement within a social system is sufficient for producing

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (Marx 1977).

non-cultural ends. First, action within social systems requires a “system of cultural pattering” (Parsons 1951). Without some shared system of meaning, any attempts at action or communication between actors would be completely arbitrary – a problem that Luhmann (1995) refers to as “double contingency”. In order to explain action within a social system, the sociologist requires some interpretive understanding of the rules and goals that govern the system. Second, it is only at the most abstract level that human nature can dictate ends. Certainly humans have basic material necessities such as food, but these necessities never attach themselves automatically to material objects as use value. Use value “is always particular and historical” (Sahlins 1976:152). Supporting this view, Geertz argues that in the absence of genetically-based instincts, humans rely on evolved cultural schemes to accomplish the basic tasks required for survival (securing food, shelter, etc.) (Sewell 1997). Thus, culture is an essential part of directing even the most basic materialistic social action. Alexander sums up this view:

Every action, no matter how instrumental and reflexive vis-à-vis its external environments, is imbedded in a horizon of meaning (an internal environment) in relationship to which it can be neither instrumental nor reflexive. (quoted in Edles 2002:8)

### ***Beyond Utility vs. Normative Action***

To say that cultureless social action is impossible does not mean we should abandon notions of self-interest and material utilitarianism completely. Rather, we should resist the urge to think of these forms of action as either/or. Strategic action exists, but it is entangled in “webs of significance” (Geertz 1973:5). Bourdieu’s theory of practice illustrates a synthesis of “rational” self-interest with adherence to arbitrary cultural norms. Social actors, according to Bourdieu, are constantly looking for ways of

improving their position and gaining advantage over those around them. This kind of strategic action is not limited to economic institutions; it pervades all of social life. Thus,

Bourdieu argues that we should...

abandon the dichotomy of the economic and the non-economic which stands in the way of seeing the science of economic practices as a particular case of a general science of the economy of practices, capable of treating all practices, including those purporting to be disinterested or gratuitous, and hence non-economic, as economic practices directed towards the maximizing of material or symbolic profit. (Bourdieu 1977:183)

For Bourdieu it is not that the economic actor is more strategic and more self-interested than non-economic actors. Rather, it is the rules that govern resources and rewards in the economy that differ from the rules of other institutions. In the case of the economy (particularly modern economies) the rules tend to be more explicit – making us more aware of self-interest and competition.

A similar synthesis of utilitarian self-interest and norms is demonstrated in Goffman's notion of "presentation" (Goffman 1959). The "ends" of presentation are quite self-interested in the sense that they are aimed (explicitly or implicitly) at securing some kind of reward or avoiding punishment. They are also very materially oriented, involving the careful management of physical bodies, material objects, the orientation of space, etc. However, the performances are necessarily tied to complex systems of meanings that connect ideals to material actions and objects (e.g. white lab coats mean professionalism, and ticks mean nervousness).

### *The Utility of Cultural Explanations of Social Action*

As I have mentioned, the distinction between material explanations and cultural explanations is not empirical, but analytical. Although we should never delude ourselves into thinking that *homo economicus* actually exists as a non-cultural actor, this does not mean that every sociological analysis of capitalists must explicitly take into account the system of meanings upon which capitalism relies. I would argue that non-cultural explanations of social actions tend to hold analytical value when we have sufficient knowledge of our research subjects' worldviews as to understand their ends or interests. This is made particularly easy, for instance, in modern economic and political systems where the rules and reward structures are relatively explicit and do not force us to adopt any substantial interpretive approach.

On the other hand, when we are confronted by behaviour that seems odd to us, such as the *moka* exchange in Papua New Guinea or Totem worship in Australia (Strathern 1971; Durkheim 1995), we must develop at least a minimal interpretive understanding of the situation in order to draw connections between notions of honour or divinity, and the material activities we witness. Geertz, who sees the job of the ethnographer as developing interpretive understandings of culture, emphasizes the unfamiliar and bizarre:

Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of "construct a reading of") a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour". (Geertz 1973:10)

Sometimes the behaviour of our research participants does not seem unfamiliar or bizarre, and we are tempted to assume that we understand their interests and ends. In

many cases we may be right, but there are times at which our assumptions are wrong and we are compelled to re-evaluate our interpretive understanding of how our research participants see their world. Marx, for instance, was convinced that with the “masses of labourers crowded into the factory [and] organized like soldiers”, that the proletariat would come to see revolution as the most desirable end (Marx and Engels 2002:227). I think it is telling that in the absence of a proletarian revolution, the consciousness and culture of the working class became a central concern of Marxism (Gramsci 2008; Adorno 1975; Althusser Williams 1977; Hall 1986).

## PART II: HISTORICAL SOCIAL CHANGE

### *Does Culture Stabilize or Transform Society?*

Marx provides a good transition point from micro social action to macro historical social change. As I have tried to show above, there is no way to derive actions directly from the material environment – even economic action requires a system of meaning that attaches use value to material objects (Sahlins 1976). However, when we move up to the level of historical change, we must ask whether culture (systems of meanings) tend to force actors to conform to the status quo, prompt them to change the status quo, or potentially do both.

Putting culture aside briefly, the fact that the material environment and economy is capable of prompting social change should not require much proof. At the very least, the disappearance of resources either through over consumption or natural disaster can set off profound social changes (Murphy 2004; Diamond 2005). In less extreme ways, Marx and his followers have emphasized the dynamic and unstable character of capitalism

which prompts economic actors to find ever more ways of generating economic growth, and every now and then breaks down into crisis (Marx and Engels 2002; Harvey 2005). When these environmental and economic events occur, systems of meaning are often thrown into question and need to be reorganized to account for the new material reality (Murphy 2004; Sewell 1992:18).

The question then becomes, do systems of meaning simply reflect and absorb these material changes, or can causality work the other way? I think the answer to this question hinges on whether or not we are willing to adopt a realist approach to culture – to conceive of it as an autonomous entity that has the potential of exercising causal power on the way humans act, and by extension, on the way they shape their material world. Tocqueville certainly conceived the “love of equality” to be a causal force (Tocqueville 1990:94). Weber, as well, demonstrates a willingness provide causal power to culture. Although he is often considered a nominalist, he gave great causal influence to religious systems of meaning. Even if the results were unintended, religious beliefs have inspired social activity that has significantly influenced the world’s various economic systems (Weber 2002; Weber 1946).

In contrast to Weber, who reduces macro cultures down to values and then into individual social actions, Foucault adopts a far more realist approach. For Foucault, the “discourses” (or systems of knowledge) are the primary object of study, rather than individuals or social groups. Foucault’s work often demonstrates how discourses emerge independently of their present material or institutionalized manifestations. The idea that the sovereign should concern himself with the family and economic lives of his subjects, for instance, emerged centuries before the development of statistics made this idea

possible to enact (Foucault 2000). This realist, discursive understanding of culture is somewhat reflected in the “strong program” of Alexander and Smith (2002), who advocate approaching culture as a “text” and an autonomous causal agent.

To return to the question of whether or not culture forces people to conform to the status quo, change the status quo, or both, it should be noted that conceptualizing culture as an autonomous entity precludes us from accepting that culture only forces people to conform to existing material conditions. Although culture may often be seen as a stabilizing force in society, if it is autonomous and not subject to the economic order, then we must be open to the fact that culture may at times lead people to act in ways that will upset the status quo (intentionally or not).

### ***Institutions***

As we move to a more concrete level of analysis, it gets harder and harder to isolate the purely material and ideal causal forces that drive social change. If we argue that history is driven by the mode of production, we must also take into consideration that productive forces include *knowledge* (Godelier 1978:763). Likewise, if we adopt an autonomous cultural explanation, we must account for the fact that culture requires some material foundation to sustain itself – be it a human voice or a printing press. Thus, I am inclined to agree with Godelier (1978) who argues that the debate over historical materialism is usually a debate over which *institutions* drive history, and not a debate over materialism vs. idealism. Unfortunately, there is no room to go into this new issue.

## ***Conclusion***

To briefly conclude my response, I will just reassert my view that culture is a necessary part of all social life, and that social action is impossible without some system of meaning. Because of this, the *ultimate* causes of social change are neither material nor ideal. Rather, any historical transition will involve a complex web of meanings attached to a variety of material objects and processes. In many cases deciding whether to focus on the material or cultural factors in explaining change will be an analytic rather than empirical decision.

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