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# The Social Construction of Reality: *Implications for Future Directions in American Studies*

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R. GORDON KELLY

AS ORIGINALLY PLANNED, *The Social Construction of Reality* was to have been a collaboration among three sociologists and two philosophers and would presumably have been addressed to an audience composed of practitioners in both disciplines.<sup>1</sup> As written, however, it is a work of "systematic theoretical reasoning"<sup>2</sup> addressed to sociologists by sociologists. Although Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman may have anticipated a somewhat wider audience for their argument, they locate themselves and their theoretical position firmly within the history and discipline of sociology.

Their argument is informed by two purposes. They seek, first, to redefine the task of the sociology of knowledge and to broaden its scope so as to move that relatively obscure subspecialty "from the periphery to the very center of sociological theory" (*SCR*, p. 18), not, it must be said, because they hold any brief for that specialty as such but because their very understanding of sociological theory has led to the sociology of knowledge and shaped their redefinition of it. Second, they seek to specify and describe those pancultural processes in and through which the members of any given human society construct and maintain their world, their "social reality." As a consequence, their argument has relevance even in those realms where sociology is rarely spoken—and then only in whispers. Moreover, *The Social Construction of Reality* is a notable formulation of an intellectual position that is now widely diffused and that, in my view, offers the best promise for the future of American Studies, a point to which I shall return after briefly summarizing Berger and Luckmann's argument, the principal sources for it, and the challenge of that argument to structural functional sociology and Freudian psychology.

At the heart of Berger and Luckmann's argument is an insistence on the essentially dialectical nature of the relationship between man and society.<sup>3</sup> Society is a human product. "It has no other being except that

which is bestowed upon it by human activity and consciousness. There can be no social reality apart from man."<sup>4</sup> It is equally true, however, that man is, in some essential sense, the product of society. The individual is born into an ongoing social world, and it is in the context of a particular social reality that he achieves and maintains his identity. Consequently, society cannot be "understood in terms that are adequate to its empirical reality" without the recognition of its dialectical character.<sup>5</sup>

Berger and Luckmann's argument rests on a particular concept of man's nature.<sup>6</sup> Rejecting the notion that cultural variability is determined by, or closely linked to, genetic structure, they develop two crucial contrasts between man's nature and animal nature. Compared with that of the higher mammals, man's instinctual structure is underdeveloped (*SCR*, p. 48). As a consequence, man "has no species-specific environment, no environment firmly structured by his own instinctual organization" (*SCR*, p. 47). Moreover, "man is curiously unfinished at birth."<sup>7</sup> "Important organismic developments, which in the animal are completed in the mother's body, take place in the human infant after its separation from the womb" (*SCR*, p. 48). These developments occur in a concrete historical sociocultural environment and specifically at the hands of those significant others that chance has made the first, hence the most influential, agents of the individual's socialization. "The same social processes that determine the completion of the organism produce the self in its particular, culturally relative form" (*SCR*, p. 50). These processes are peculiarly dependent on language, to which the authors accord unique importance in their theory. Indeed, as they make explicit in their concluding remarks, their conception of the sociology of knowledge presupposes a sociology of language, which, regrettably, they fail to develop systematically.

Language, in their view, plays a crucial role in constituting and maintaining both social reality and individual identity. "Everyday life is, above all, life with and by means of the language I share with my fellowmen" (*SCR*, p. 37). Everyday knowledge, "recipe knowledge," is knowledge objectified and accumulated in linguistic categories and "typificatory schemes" (*SCR*, p. 43). In addition to having a constitutive function, language plays a crucial role in the maintenance of social reality: "The common objectifications of everyday life are maintained primarily by linguistic significance" (*SCR*, p. 37). Moreover, "legitimation"—the process of explaining and justifying, as distinct from designating, social phenomena—is carried on almost exclusively by means of language (*SCR*, pp. 92–97).

Like the reality of everyday life, the individual's identity is intrinsically dependent on language. Language is both the most important content and the principal instrumentality of socialization (*SCR*, p. 133). The child becomes what he is addressed as, and he continues to be what he is by participating in an ongoing "conversation" with significant others: "The subjective reality of the world hangs on this thread of conversation."<sup>8</sup>

The centrality of language for Berger and Luckmann's theory is virtually given in their insistence on the intentionality of consciousness: "Consciousness is always intentional; it always intends or is directed toward objects" (SCR, p. 20). To put it differently, we are always aware of something *as* something. Perception in the world of everyday life is generally an effortless matching, a "recognition" that something is what it is.<sup>9</sup> Since the "objects" of everyday life are designated in and through the categories and "typificatory schemes" provided by a particular language, it follows that perception is directed and structured by language and that social reality is ordered principally by language. "An understanding of language is thus essential for any understanding of the reality of everyday life" (SCR, p. 37), as well as of the processes that create, maintain, and modify that reality. The proper task of the sociology of knowledge, then, as Berger and Luckmann redefine it, is to "*concern itself with everything that passes for 'knowledge' in society. . . . Only a very limited group of people in any society engages in theorizing, in the business of 'ideas.' . . . But anyone in society participates in its 'knowledge' in one way or another*" (SCR, pp. 14–15). Commonsense knowledge, not "ideas," then, ought to be the central, though not exclusive, focus for the sociology of knowledge because "it is precisely this [commonsense] 'knowledge' that constitutes the fabric of meanings without which no society could exist" (SCR, p. 15).

Berger and Luckmann ground the necessity for redefining the sociology of knowledge so as to emphasize the primacy of everyday reality and the processes of its construction in the work of the emigré German phenomenologist Alfred Schutz, who had come to the United States in the 1930s and there continued his inquiry into the phenomenological foundations of the social sciences and into the structure of "social reality."<sup>10</sup> When *The Social Construction of Reality* appeared in 1966, Schutz and Luckmann were readying for publication *Die Strukturen der Lebenswelt*, on which Berger and Luckmann had drawn heavily for their prolegomena "The Foundations of Knowledge in Everyday Life." They also had drawn heavily on the classic figures of European social theory—especially Marx, Weber, and Durkheim—and on the work of the American social psychologist George Herbert Mead.<sup>11</sup> Although it would be unfair to call *The Social Construction of Reality* a work of Marxian theory, Berger and Luckmann acknowledge Marx's work at key points in their argument. Their anthropology, their insistence on the dialectical relationships between man and society and between knowledge and its social base, and their emphasis on the *social* nature of man's "self-production" are owed principally to Marx.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, they credit him with giving the sociology of knowledge the "sharpest formulation of its central problem," as well as some of its key concepts such as "ideology" and "false consciousness."<sup>13</sup> They do little more than remark in passing, however, Marx's analysis of the relationship between material power and conceptual success,<sup>14</sup> although it is clear that they are in general agreement

with him. More significantly, they decline to develop the concept of "false consciousness."

Berger and Luckmann also rely extensively on the work of Durkheim and Weber, both substantively and symbolically. They conclude their Introduction by appropriating "two of the most famous and most influential 'marching orders' for sociology"—Durkheim's injunction to "consider social facts as things" and Weber's emphasis on the "subjective meaning-complex of action"—and asserting that taken together, the two statements lead to the "central" question for sociological theory: "How is it possible that subjective meanings *become* objective facticities?" (*SCR*, p. 18). The sociology of knowledge, as they redefine it, addresses itself to precisely that question. "An adequate understanding of the 'reality *sui generis*' of society requires an inquiry into the manner in which reality is constructed," they conclude (*SCR*, p. 18).

For reasons I shall come to in a moment, Berger and Luckmann reject the claims to universality made by Freudian psychology, choosing instead to ground their analysis of socialization and identity formation in George Herbert Mead's work on the "social genesis of the self" (*SCR*, p. 196). Freudian psychology plays almost no role in Berger and Luckmann's formulation for two reasons. There is, they maintain, a "fundamental dichotomy between the conception of man as a self-producing being [the view derived from Marx] and a conception of 'human nature.' This [dichotomy] constitutes a decisive anthropological difference between Marx and any properly sociological perspective on the one hand (especially one that is grounded in Meadian social psychology) and Freud and most non-Freudian psychological perspectives on the other" (*SCR*, pp. 195–96). Second, they argue that theories of identity are social phenomena; they are always embedded in more comprehensive theories about reality. "Put simply, psychology always presupposes cosmology" (*SCR*, p. 175). Freudian psychology, as a consequence, has only very limited explanatory and therapeutic applicability, both historically and culturally.<sup>15</sup>

*The Social Construction of Reality* also constitutes a challenge to "mainstream" American sociology by calling into question a central tenet of structural functional theory. Rejecting the view that an institutional order can be understood as a "system," Berger and Luckmann maintain that "functional integration" is not a property of social order. Rather, "reflective consciousness superimposes the quality of logic on the institutional order" by means of various legitimating procedures (*SCR*, pp. 199, 64–65). Moreover, "a purely structural sociology is endemically in danger of reifying social phenomena" (*SCR*, p. 186), in danger, that is, of obscuring the fundamental dialectical character of social reality as an "ongoing human production" (*SCR*, p. 198). Since the reified world is "by definition, a dehumanized world" (*SCR*, p. 89), functionalist sociology is incipiently deterministic in their view.

Given their critique of structural functionalism, we may properly regard *The Social Construction of Reality* as an exercise, at a high level of

abstraction, in "dereification," as an effort, that is, to restore to modern man the necessary and saving sense in which he is rightly understood to be the author of himself. Although Berger and Luckmann nowhere say it so baldly, their argument appears to lead ineluctably to this conclusion: If reality is socially constructed, men can *restructure* it—on the basis of an understanding of the processes in and through which the reality of everyday life is maintained.<sup>16</sup> For reasons that Berger discusses elsewhere, however, it must also be said that the argument proposed in *The Social Construction of Reality* was in no way intended to warrant any radical restructuring of social reality. The argument leads instead to a "paradoxical, but by no means irrational stance: *the stance of a man who thinks daringly but acts prudently*,"<sup>17</sup> as Berger puts it in his Introduction to *Facing Up to Modernity*.

In turning now to the relevance of Berger and Luckmann's argument for American Studies, I should like to begin with a remark or two about my own encounter with *The Social Construction of Reality*—admitting ruefully, with Thoreau, that "I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well." I first read *The Social Construction of Reality* as a graduate student in 1967. It had a substantial impact on my thinking for a number of reasons, not least of which was that it chimed with "personal knowledge," the authority for which lies beyond reason in that illusive residue of felt experience that shapes consciousness. Its emphasis on human activity and creativity was—and remains—a useful foil to the passivity inherent in a reflective model of literature (books as the "mirror" of society). Rather, literature, in the broad sense, could be approached as a meaning-making, meaning-sustaining, or meaning-subverting activity, in useful contrast to the mirror analogy and affording a means, as well, to circumvent the invidious distinction between great works, so called, and less valued cultural products consigned to the opprobrium of "mass culture," "popular literature," and the like. Moreover, literary commentary—whether reviewing or literary criticism—could be explored as a "literature"-making, "literature"-sustaining activity undertaken in the name of values that on close examination are not always (are perhaps only *rarely*) literary or aesthetic *au fond* but are, rather, political, social, or philosophic. Additionally, Berger and Luckmann's account of the dialectical process of society promised to be more fruitful than an idealist position, which typically assigns unpersuasive social significance to books or ideas, on the one hand, or a materialist position, which reduces literature to an epiphenomenon, on the other.

More particularly, demonstrating the inherent precariousness of belief systems and the difficulties attendant on transmitting a group's world view to its young, their argument enhances the evidential significance of books for children, which are, in contrast to those for adults, trivialized by a critical orthodoxy that values especially complexity and ambiguity. By extension, *The Social Construction of Reality* makes the analysis of

socialization crucial to culture studies for reasons that are neatly summarized by James Spradley when he suggests: "The richest settings for discovering the rules of a society are those where novices of one sort or another are being instructed in appropriate behavior."<sup>18</sup>

Second, Berger and Luckmann's theory permits the formulation of at least the outlines of a thoroughgoing sociocultural approach to literature, one that is empirical and interpretative and that "brackets" the question of the epistemological validity of evaluative statements about literary works in the same way that a sociological theory of religion would bracket "questions of the ultimate truth or illusion of religious propositions about the world."<sup>19</sup> This bracketing procedure permits analysis of works of literary history and criticism as forms of legitimation—that is, as sources of second-order meanings imposed on literary works by critics situated in specific social contexts<sup>20</sup>—and warrants the creation of that sociology of criticism urged recently by Jeffrey Sammons as well as in analyses such as A. P. Foulkes's *The Search for Literary Meaning*.<sup>21</sup>

More broadly, *The Social Construction of Reality* makes it possible to conceive of literature in its several ongoing phases—its creation, publication, distribution, consumption, evaluation, and selective transmission—as an important institution for the production of meaning and the maintenance of social reality in society. Notwithstanding the brilliance of Raymond Williams's *Marxism and Literature*,<sup>22</sup> *The Social Construction of Reality* offers a richer and more suggestive argument for constructing a thoroughgoing sociocultural approach to literature because of Berger and Luckmann's discussion of institutionalization. The need for such an institutional approach can hardly be denied. We will not significantly increase our understanding of the role of literature in American life *until* we (1) examine literary criticism as a form of legitimation in much the way that Frank J. Sulloway has examined the politics of the psychoanalytic revolution,<sup>23</sup> (2) analyze the categories of critical evaluation and the relationship of literary "knowledge" to its social base in the university,<sup>24</sup> or (3) analyze the body of commentary of the canonical figures of American literature as symbolic appropriation of "heroic" lives for a variety of personal and political ends.

Third, *The Social Construction of Reality* warrants a broadening of the scope of intellectual history to include the content and social distribution of commonsense knowledge while (1) retaining the ideas, beliefs, and "knowledge" indispensable for both understanding and explaining human behavior and (2) insisting that ideas and knowledge have a determinate dialectical relationship to the social base of those who hold them. Arguably, Berger and Luckmann's views lead to essentially the same agenda for intellectual history that Murray Murphey sets out in the conclusion of "The Place of Beliefs in Modern Culture":

If we would overcome the fragmentation implicit in the histories of specialities, we must look to the ways in which in fact

these diverse sets of beliefs are integrated, and this means that we must focus on the social and psychological functions of ideas and on the social structures through which they are combined and utilized. This will mean a very different type of intellectual history than we have traditionally done. It will involve the history not only of ideas and men but of roles and institutions. It will mean analyzing a man's thought not only as the expression of a time and a place but as a socially useful product generated by an appropriately positioned actor and consumed by others for ends of their own. In short, the synthesis at which intellectual historians aim will not be found in the realm of ideas; it will be found by relating ideas to action, experience, psychological need, and social structure as components of a complex functioning sociocultural system.<sup>25</sup>

Fourth, *The Social Construction of Reality* offers a means of clarifying the notorious problem of "methodology" in American Studies. Put simply, that problem is less a matter of methodology—that is, loosely speaking, of procedures and techniques for carrying on research and validating inferences—than it is a matter of "theory." While Berger and Luckmann are not notably open in defining what they mean by "theory," at least this much is clear: They thought of themselves as doing theory rather than "methodology," which they understood to be the "philosophical investigation of the foundations of the empirical discipline."<sup>26</sup> *The Social Construction of Reality* is "theory" in the sense of being a series of interlinked propositions. How mutually consistent, and especially how well confirmed, these propositions may be need not concern us. The point is that theory entails methods, being in some sense logically prior to their stipulation. The problem of methodology, so called, in American Studies is less a matter of seeking a set of analytical procedures (still less, procedures expressive of a disciplinary "exceptionalism") than it is a matter of interpretation consciously informed by appropriate theory.

I conclude these remarks by returning to a point that I made at the outset, namely, that *The Social Construction of Reality* is a notable formulation of a widely diffused intellectual position—a statement calculated to both assert and qualify the significance of Berger and Luckmann's argument for the future of American Studies. I will be misunderstood if I am taken to mean that their argument *as such* is essential to that future. Rather, it is the theoretical position they espouse—and of which they provide so comprehensive, systematic, and compact a formulation—that is crucial, in my view. At the heart of that position, which Richard Bernstein calls an "emerging sensibility that . . . is leading to a restructuring of social and political theory," is the insight that human worlds are essentially webs of significance, structures of meaning imposed on the bloom and buzz of experience.<sup>27</sup> "Meaning," in the words of Alfred Schutz, "is not a quality inherent in certain experiences emerg-

ing within our stream of consciousness but the result of an interpretation of a past experience looked at from the present *Now* with a reflective attitude."<sup>28</sup> To what extent American Studies will participate in the emerging science of meaning remains to be seen.

## NOTES

1. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), p. vi. Citations are of the paperback edition published in 1967, hereafter abbreviated *SCR*.

2. The phrase is that of Talcott Parsons, "about whose theory we [Berger and Luckmann] have serious misgivings, but whose integrative intention we fully share" (*SCR*, p. 17).

3. Throughout *The Social Construction of Reality* Berger and Luckmann use "he" in the conventional generic sense. I have retained their usage because their intention is to describe processes, the structures of which are the same for males and females at the level of abstraction they employ. They are aware that the content of socialization is gender-specific.

4. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), p. 3. Published a year after *The Social Construction of Reality*, *The Sacred Canopy* (hereafter cited as *SC*) contains Berger's summary of the theoretical position elaborated in the earlier work. It thus provides a convenient condensation of Berger and Luckmann's formulation.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

6. I have used the phrase "man's nature" rather than "human nature" because of Berger and Luckmann's tendency to construe the latter as designating a biological "core" of instincts or whatever. See, for example, their rejection of Freudian psychology (*SCR*, pp. 195-96), which I discuss later in this essay. In his Introduction to *Facing Up to Modernity*, Berger elaborates on his view of man's nature, stressing the organismic need for a large measure of order, triviality, and continuity in everyday life; see *Facing Up to Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), pp. xiv-xv. The normative implications of this view of man's nature, largely obscured in *The Social Construction of Reality*, are more prominent in Berger's later writings.

7. *SC*, p. 4.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

9. The term "recognition" is Walker Percy's in his essay "Symbol, Consciousness, and Intersubjectivity," in *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975), esp. pp. 272-76.

10. For a compact and responsible summary of leading elements of Schutz's work, see Richard Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976). Bernstein also assesses the argument, to which Schutz was a party, concerning the ontological primacy of the *Lebenswelt*, or world of everyday reality. Schutz had a profound impact on the development of ethnomethodology, especially the work of Garfinkel and Cicourel. Berger and Luckmann acknowledge the insights of Goffman, a pioneer ethnomethodologist whose early works, such as *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, were available to them. Like the insights of Freud, however, Goffman's findings are considered by Berger and Luckmann to have severely limited sociohistorical applicability.

11. In their reliance on Mead, Berger and Luckmann follow both Schutz and

Arnold Gehlen, whose theory of institutionalization incorporated Meadian insights and decisively influenced Berger and Luckmann's treatment of that subject.

12. *SCR*, pp. 5–10, 49–51, 61, 86–89, 108–9, 187.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 108–9.

15. In their view, "Most psychological models, including those of contemporary scientific psychology, have limited socio-historical applicability," hence their conclusion "that a sociological psychology will at the same time have to be a *historical psychology*" (*SCR*, p. 207, n. 34). See also their discussion of the Freudian "reality principle" (*SCR*, pp. 175–80).

16. This implication of their argument raises the question of the validity of knowledge obtained through the methods of the sociology of knowledge. Berger and Luckmann understand sociology to be an empirical discipline, and they imply that "value free" sociological analysis is both possible and desirable. Since their purpose is theory construction, however, they do not address the question of how value-free analysis is to proceed or its results are to be evaluated. They have nothing to say on the methodological problem inherent in interpretative procedures, namely, how to adjudicate among divergent interpretations of the same phenomena. "Epistemological questions concerning the validity of sociological knowledge in the sociology of knowledge" properly belong to the methodology of the social sciences and not to the empirical discipline of sociology (*SCR*, p. 13).

17. Berger, *Facing Up to Modernity*, p. xvii. In this essay, originally given as an address on the occasion of his receiving an honorary degree, Berger discusses sociology as a "liberating" discipline and describes his views on "critique" as a form of value-free empirical analysis.

18. James Spradley, *Culture and Cognition* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1972), p. 21.

19. *SC*, p. v.

20. See, for example, from a Marxian orientation, Carol and Richard Ohmann, "Reviewers, Critics, and *The Catcher in the Rye*," *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn 1976, pp. 15–37.

21. For an affirmation of the possibility and desirability of reconstructing authorial intention, see E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1967). Sammons's remarks can be found in his essay "The Threat of Literary Sociology," in J. P. Strelka, ed., *Literary Criticism and Sociology* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1973). On the attribution of meaning to literary texts, see A. P. Foulkes, *The Search for Literary Meaning* (Bern: Herbert Lang, 1975).

22. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977).

23. Frank J. Sulloway, *Freud: Biologist of the Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), esp. pp. 419–95.

24. See, for example, Richard Ohmann, *English in America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976).

25. Murray G. Murphey, "The Place of Beliefs in Modern Culture," in John Higham and Paul Conklin, eds., *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1979), p. 164.

26. Berger and Luckmann's decision to refrain from following up the methodological implications of their conception of the sociology of knowledge is interesting in light of Schutz's rigorous concept of theory as described by Bernstein, p. 137. Certainly methodological hints are scattered throughout *The Social Construction of Reality*, one of the more notable occurring on p. 116: "Put a little crudely, it is essential to keep pushing questions about the historically available conceptualizations of reality from the abstract 'What?' to the sociologically concrete 'Says Who?'" Moreover, their argument as a whole implies *Verstehen*, an

interpretative method. For a work that combines a similar theoretical orientation with extensive methodological stipulations, see Julienne Ford, *Paradigms and Fairy Tales: An Introduction to the Science of Meaning* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975).

27. Bernstein, p. xiii.

28. As quoted in *ibid.*, p. 253.