

## ФРАГМЕНТЫ БУДУЩИХ КНИГ

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**D. G. Podvoyskiy**

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**IN THE LABYRINTH OF THE MATRIX:  
LEARNING SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM**

*Denis G. PODVOYSKIY*<sup>1,2</sup> — *Cand. Sci. (Philos.), Associate Professor; Leading Researcher*

*E-MAIL: dpodvoiski@yandex.ru*

*<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7396-1828>*

<sup>1</sup> Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), Moscow, Russia

<sup>2</sup> Institute of Sociology of FCTAS RAS, Moscow, Russia

**Abstract.** The Publishing Department of WCIOM is currently finalizing the translation of the book “Social Constructionism: Sources and Stirrings in Theory and Practice” by social psychologists Andy Lock and Tom Strong. In Russian, the book will be published under the title “How Does the Matrix Work? Social Construction of Reality: Theory and Practice”. The Public Opinion Monitoring Journal releases an introductory article written exclusively for The Russian-speaking readers. This piece not only contains an introductory commentary on the book, but also presents a detailed analysis of the complex of constructionist and constructivist ideas that have been having a significant impact on the development of social sciences and humanities throughout the world.

**Keywords:** social constructionism, social constructivism, social construction of reality, the Matrix, agency, consciousness, social institutions, social theory, interpretive methodology, history of the social sciences and humanities

**ЛАБИРИНТАМИ МАТРИЦЫ: ОСВАИВАЯ  
СОЦИАЛЬНЫЙ КОНСТРУКЦИОНИЗМ**

*ПОДВОЙСКИЙ* Денис Глебович — кандидат философских наук, доцент кафедры социологии, Российский университет дружбы народов, Москва, Россия; ведущий научный сотрудник, Институт социологии ФНИСЦ РАН, Москва, Россия  
*E-MAIL: dpodvoiski@yandex.ru*

*<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7396-1828>*

**Аннотация.** В настоящее время Департамент издательских программ ВЦИОМ завершает подготовку к публикации перевода книги социальных психологов Э. Лока и Т. Стронга «Social Constructionism: Sources and Stirrings in Theory and Practice». На русский язык книга выйдет под заголовком «Как устроена матрица? Социальное конструирование реальности: теория и практика». Журнал «Мониторинг общественного мнения» публикует вступительную статью к этому переводу, написанную специально для русскоязычного читателя. В представленном тексте содержится не только вводный комментарий к указанной книге, но и развернутый анализ комплекса «конструкционистских» и «конструктивистских» идей, оказывавших и продолжающих оказывать значительное влияние на развитие социальных и гуманитарных наук во всем мире.

**Ключевые слова:** социальный конструкционизм, социальный конструктивизм, социальное конструирование реальности, Матрица, субъект, сознание, социальные институты, социальная теория, интерпретативная методология, история социально-гуманитарных наук

## Oh, this Ubiquitous Matrix again! Or Waiting for the Fourth Episode

First of all, we dare to weaken the intrigue embedded in the Russian title of this book. In its original title, the word *matrix* is not present. The joint work of Andy Lock and Tom Strong (which might be considered a textbook, although one can probably argue on its suitability in this capacity) was published in 2010 by *Cambridge University Press* under the title *Social Constructionism: Sources and Stirrings in Theory and Practice*.

And what does the Matrix have to do with it? How can we justify this excessive freedom of translation? Is this the desire of the Russian publisher to attract a wider audience of readers through a semantic reference to the mass-cultural and mass-media image of the Matrix formed in virtue of the cult movie trilogy<sup>1</sup>? It is quite possible that a book with a more neutral and purely scientific title would gain less attention. Well, is this just a marketing ploy? Partly, yes, but not purely! The book has substantive reasons for being named this way. So, a reader bribed by its title, most likely, will not be deceived in his or her expectations. Why so? Let's figure it out...

The word *matrix* was lucky and unlucky at the same time. Over the last twenty years, thanks to the movie of the same name, it went into circulation and rushed into the public discourse. The 'biography' of the word experienced a more or less random semantic twist turning it from a specific term of exact sciences and engineering into a strong, albeit rather ambiguous metaphor of an invisible and mysterious Power, or Control. This Control is carried over the Earth population by means of physical, psychological and social engineering — virtuoso but not at all harmless.

Not that these plots have not been explored before. They have been, and not only by science fiction writers, but also by writers in general, as well as by political columnists, intellectuals of all kinds, philosophers and sociologists. However, the word came in handy just now — a semantic transfer took place, and the Matrix became a kind of a symbol with multiple cultural connotations, not just a technical or mathematical term, for millions of our contemporaries.

To be incorporated in the Matrix means to be a pawn in someone else's game, to be controlled, and even more — as someone would say now, to be effectively controlled living in the world of illusions and getting one's share of the 'surrogate of happiness'. The Matrix is not just a dungeon where everyone languishes and suffers. or a habitat where iron bars and evil overseers hinder 'living like a human being'. The Matrix has tamed human, domesticated him — the walls in prison cells are covered with wallpaper, they are warm and comfortable, and all the prisoner's drives, desires and needs are colonized. As a result, the prisoner has lost the urge to escape and refuses to recognize his home as a prison.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2019, the authors of the trilogy announced the fourth episode of the movie to be released in 2021.

Clearly, this is also not a new discovery. Over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the history of thought has repeatedly manifested similar trends. We have all kinds of dystopias in the style of *Brave New World*, the concept of hegemony by Antonio Gramsci, Heidegger's *man*, *One-Dimensional Man* by Herbert Marcuse, the warnings of philosophers and sociologists of technology, Western neo-Marxism and post-Marxism of all kinds, existentialism, humanistic criticism of managerialism and technocracy, Lewis Mumford, Jacques Ellul, *The Society of Spectacle* by Guy Debord, the society of consumption, *Simulacra and Simulation* by Jean Baudrillard, McDonaldization of George Ritzer, countless talks about the role of the mass culture industry and the media, etc. All of these are just examples reflecting 'soft and warm' despotism of the Matrix as a sign of the era of high modernity.

Naturally, you do not need to read all these books, some of which are rather abstruse, to get acquainted with the Matrix. One can confine oneself to the products of false (or sincere?) self-reproach maintained in the modern audiovisual culture which brings pop-style philosophy to the masses. On the other hand, it is not surprising that the cover of Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, stylized as a Bible, appears in the frame of the Wachowskis' movie.

Without pretending to an orthodox interpretation of the *genuine* (if there is any) or *deep* essence of the matrix concept in conversational practices in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we will try to point out some of the semantic fragments, so to speak, 'lying on the surface'. Evidently, the word *matrix* has become running in its figurative meaning, and it circulates far beyond the circle of connoisseurs and fans of the Wachowskis' trilogy. Many watched the movie inattentively, but they still use the word, that gained its popularity because of the movie, trusting their own linguistic intuition.

In the image of the Matrix, one can trace many socially typical and at the same time psychologically disturbing anxieties and fears of a person of the coming digital era.

The word itself almost 'smells' of mathematics and computer sciences — even, or primarily, for those consuming benefits of digital civilization without knowing much of these sciences; these people are ready to worship them as a miracle changing the world (in this regard, we recall the early modern Kant's Philosophy, where in any doctrine there can be only as much proper science as there is mathematics to be found therein).

Unlike a digital layman, a computer scientist or an IT specialist acts as a keeper of secret knowledge, a priest of the newest technological age, a knight balancing the fate of mankind on the edge of his electronic sword. He is no longer a scientist experimenting in a laboratory or an engineer working in production (these are heroes of the recent past), but a guy with program codes running back and forth in his head, capable of saving the universe at the push of a button, without going outside to fight dragons or angels. The intervention

of his computer genius at least partially controls that strange force which is usually visualized by numerous symbols running across a computer screen. This is exactly what the Matrix looks like, or rather, its visible phenomenal dimension.

Whether there is anything at all behind these flickering symbols is unclear, just as it is unclear *whether there is in fact anything at all*. In other words, modern human lives with the thought that the perceived world is probably nothing more than on big phantasmagoria, a large-scale product of computer modeling, a great chimera, an illusion that can instantly disappear when someone's hand (God's, devil's or someone else's — in any case, it is not clear where it is) pulls the cord out of the socket.

Naturally, one cannot surprise or frighten a reader familiar with the history of world philosophy with any kind of 'illusionism'. However, in this case, we are dealing with a special kind of illusionism mixed with the statement of universal power of electronic, computer, information and technological systems (and here we wonder — in what kind of world do they exist, *illusory* or *real*?).

As some of the most daring science fiction fantasies enter our everyday life and change it, eternal questions, primarily ontological ones, arise with renewed urgency. What can be considered *genuine reality* if the ominous Matrix seems to be everything and everywhere? Yet, the Matrix's ontological status is also questionable. Therefore, we have to ask for the thousandth time: where is the genuine reality and what kind of reality is it — material, spiritual, hybrid, or are there many of them? Probably, all of them are bogus? And what is the role of human consciousness, human activity, human relations? It is absolutely clear that one cannot expect a single intelligible, and especially 'objectively true' answer here.

At the same time, we are witnessing the boundaries of familiar experiences — real and imaginary, objective and subjective, artificial and natural, physical and mental, living and nonliving — to be gradually blur. Cyber intelligence, artificial intelligence, smart home, Robocop, terminators, conversations, consultations and correspondence with bots, the world of humans and the world of things do not just interact, they are mixed up, and this mixture sometimes turns out to be explosive.

Speaking in Bruno Latour's jargon, *actants* turn into *actors* and vice versa. Non-humans in the guise of nice ladies and qualified experts from different industries look at you from the screen and *gladly answer any of your questions* with their snow-white smiles. You do not need to type anything; Siri recognizes your speech. The virtual assistant becomes an irreplaceable partner and advisor. It does not understand you? Communicate your needs more clearly, think and speak more simply, stereotypically, according to a template. Anyway, its 'empathic' abilities are improving daily — not only it masters more and more intricate communication requests, but it will soon learn to sympathize and

empathize, or even shed an artificial tear where necessary. So, *OK Google...* Let's make friends! However, it does not cancel a legitimate question: is it possible to be friends with a robot, even a very advanced and 'empathic' one?

If the Matrix is seen as a kind of demonic cyber reality or hyperreality producing various kinds of 'bogus existence', simulacra and simulations, so it is something artificial and created, then we face the question about its genesis and location. The most naive answer may be to consider the Matrix as a product of someone's malicious will, individual or collective, and this is a fast track to interpretations in the spirit of conspiracy theories — the world is run by the puppeteers, some influencers behind the scene, or certain elite groups using the Matrix as their means. This answer is not only naive, but also relatively optimistic, since it implies a possibility of defeating 'evil' forces with the forces of 'good' (which is a typical plot for science fiction movies with a happy ending).

The situation gets more complicated if we assume depersonalized nature of the Matrix along with the anonymity of its power — it is everywhere and at the same time nowhere in particular. Even if it was created by someone at some point of time, now it works in computer logic, in accordance with the principles of instrumental rationality.

It is clear that all these horrors consisting of semi-realistic, semi-fictional narratives fascinate and interest people. Therefore, in fact, the word *matrix* still remains one of the casual and recognizable metaphors of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Non-cinematographic associations generated by the use of the word *matrix* in a free metaphorical context to mark the special qualities of social relations could also frustrate rather than inspire someone looking for the 'pitiful remains' of freedom in the technetronic world. Comparison with a typographic matrix is not too inspiring either: stamping, replication, standardization, conveyor, pressing... The objects of these processes, the 'output product', are not exclusively goods or material objects in general, but also information, as well as human beings. From this point of view, the society works as a gigantic molding shop continuously producing people, or casting psychological units with given qualities. An eerie picture, is not it?

Semantic references to the image of a matrix in mathematics lead us to the same steppe — if the matrix is an array of digital data organized in a certain way, which we can operate on, and we are put into matrix cells, then we are nothing more than some numerical values in rows and columns, and we can be multiplied, added or divided, raised to a power, swapped, deleted or replaced... Oh God, but we are people! However, such exclamations do not seem to bother a matrix society: people, their feelings and emotions, attitudes and interactions — everything is subject to mathematical algorithmizing, modeling and programming in a technological format, and this equates people and things.

As a result, the metaphor of the Matrix once again addresses us to a classic topic for the entire modern civilization — Man of the modern era as an ingen-

ious conqueror of Nature and a happy possessor of instrumental Mind turns out to be a hostage of his own outlook and action modus. The technocratic rationality gets mad and turns against its creator — he is no longer its master. Creation dominates the creator, relegating him to the level of mere means.

For the abstract, deindividualizing, or ‘machine’ logic of the Matrix’s functioning, everything around is just material that can or must be processed, or the energy required for such processing. A human makes no exception in this model, he can actually be both — serve as raw material, resource, an object suitable for manipulation, or produce the energy (just take a look at such well-known connotations like *human capital*, *human* or *labor resources*, *manpower*, etc.).

It is this process that Martin Heidegger described in his own untranslatable language, saying that *Gestell*, as a specific type of consciousness, turns the whole world, including human, into *Bestand*. It is in this process that the notorious (and full of socio-historical tragedy) *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is revealed, the broken vector of which was fixed and conceptually decoded by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno back in the middle of the last century.

## **We construct, we are constructed...**

### **How often does it bother us?**

Some contexts of the use of the word *matrix* in the everyday life of millennium peers are quite remarkable. This is the generation of people who, in their own words, consider Wachowskis’ fantastic epopee pure classics. Two students dressed in the same sweaters despite the general fashion for diversity enter the classroom. An attempt to stand out in a motley crowd by similarity, when the differences are paradoxically no longer distinguished, turns out to be a success. The instant reaction of fellow students is expressed in a remark that already sounds like an idiom: *The Matrix failed!*

One can wonder, how should we interpret this joke? The explanation turns out to be the following: the insidious and virtuoso Matrix normally produces people with visually and illusory different parameters; however, sometimes it fails, and the similarity becomes apparent, revealing signs of the stamping process and the standardization of human material.

Apparently, such a tempted audience... cannot be surprised by any constructivist or constructionist metaphors. And yet...

Now we need to take a step aside from a somewhat conventional concept of the Matrix, which served as a starting point in this discourse, to the social construction of reality as a fundamental process described by many theories from different angles. The connection between these two semantic fragments of the book title is probably intuitively clear to the reader.

If we eliminate all fiction and fantasy details that accompany conversations about the Matrix and employ a more rigorous language of social sciences, we can simply say that the word *matrix* is casually used as a substitute for the



word *structure*. Or rather, one should even speak not about *structure* (in the singular) but about *structures* — there are many of them and they are different.

What are these structures and where are they located? They are everywhere: in society, in thinking, in language, in the body. All these structures are interconnected in a strange way, although they are not identical; there is certain amount of isomorphism, consistency and mutual determination between them, but there is also a significant amount of their autonomy and inconsistency. To a certain extent, they work together, harmoniously, but not completely.

Structure, form, pattern, rule, norm, habitus, frame... There are many general and special terms used to state and explain the fact that human experience — behavioral, interactive, linguistic, communicative, cognitive (both theoretical, or scientific, and casual) — is somehow organized, structured (from the outside and from the inside), normalized, regulated, patterned, framed, ordered (although not ideally), is non-chaotic (although it sometimes allows a significant range of individual variations), is more or less routine, is traditionalized, habitualized, institutionalized...

On the one hand, this means that a person is a product of all these objective and subjective structures. On the other hand, a person creates these structures (which is morphogenesis) and reproduces, supports or modifies them in his or her activity (morphostasis). This is not done solo, but always in a group, in cooperation or in conflict with others, relying on the results obtained by previous generations or modifying them. These results are encountered as given reality at the 'public construction site' where this person's life goes from dawn to dusk, and where he or she stays even during the night sleep.

This incessant construction, partly going according to the plan and partly — without any plan, and never completely predictable (we often have *unintended consequences*), in fact, is called the *social construction of reality*.

Where do structures come from? They do not exist without people and they are the result of the permanent behavioral, creative and cognitive activity. At the same time, these structures frame these very activities, they are a condition and a prerequisite, largely determining the direction, nature and content of any activity. They are both *natura naturans* (creative) and *natura naturata* (created).

Structures are produced by individuals and produce individuals themselves. Anthony Giddens calls this feature *the duality of structure* and describes it with a term *structuration*. Here, social construction of reality is an eternal dialectical process of generating stable forms of social relations in the context of countless interactions between people. People and structures generate each other within an inseparable chain of mutual determination, and its items can be isolated only analytically.

Individuals externalize structures in their activities daily and hourly. For example, they regularly pay taxes, set the table in a certain way, or use conventional grammatical forms of their native language in communication. At the



same time, structures are internalized in the minds of individuals, breeding typical ways of responding to a certain situation through social learning process, assimilation of cultural norms and behavioral patterns.

The general logic of the process stays in place when structures are modified — people can intentionally or unintentionally change or even destroy certain structures (for example, legalize same-sex marriages, abolish racial discrimination, enrich language with neologisms). However, at the very same time their collective ideas will be rewritten in a way that will gradually turn them into new structurally organized complexes.

Such reasoning is almost a classic of the genre for social theory. At the least, this is how it might have been perceived over the last fifty years, since *The Social Construction of Reality* by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann was published and accepted by the scientific society. Later, there were more attempts to take a panoramic theoretically based look at the process of collective co-creation of the social (and not only social) world by various actors endowed with individual consciousness and will. The concepts of Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens are just two of the most famous and noteworthy examples dating back to the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

However, the very rhetoric of the discussion on the social construction of reality acquired a specific inertia, producing all sorts of constructivist, constructionist, or critical deconstructionist approaches. This process was accompanied by the well-known vulgarization, distortion and even discrediting of a number of productive ideas underlying these approaches. Therefore, the 'patriarchs' had to renounce their 'offspring' — for example, Thomas Luckmann publicly called the constructivists fools [Luckmann, 2002].

Again, the point here is mostly in the power of words and their semantic connotations. Speaking about the construction, reconstruction, deconstruction of something, or seeing something as a construct, in one way or another, we refer to the architectural vocabulary and use the words like *assemblage*, *demolition*, *reassembly*. Architects, designers, engineers, superintendents, foremen and workers at the construction site erect a building, construct a structure as something artificial, usually according to a certain plan, although plans may change over time, and the construction process may take hundreds of years — like it used to be with medieval cathedrals. But is this how people construct their world?

We can say: we assemble this world from separate parts, and at the same time we ourselves are assembled from the parts of this world (culture and society, agents of socialization and institutions, global and local social environment, politicians, media, advertising, tastes of the era, family, school...)! In the understanding of a modern man who values his freedom, the first part (to assemble the world) is good, while the second part (to be assembled) is rather bad. If we want to minimize the negative impact of this second nexus,

we must deal with deconstruction<sup>2</sup> — carry out the procedure of demolition of actually and potentially dangerous structures that can encroach our genuine (?) self, interests, drives, feelings or autonomy. Though, if we go even further, we can conclude that, in fact, everything mentioned above is also a product of construction and does not belong to us; when we consistently deconstruct everything to the very end, we find nothing or almost nothing left from a person, except of a biological membrane devoid of any social or cultural individuality or identity.

When someone says, 'this is just a construct', it means that if something was constructed, then it can be deconstructed or reconstructed — that is, it can be different, at least in principle. Here, one of the possible positions is the denial of the value of each and every construction (institutions, traditions, practices), or alternatively, their utmost pluralization and equalization. Following this logic, we can conclude that we can construct, deconstruct and reconstruct anything we want by critically considering the objects of the social and cultural world.

This point of view, however, seems to be too radical — at the very least, the social construction of reality<sup>3</sup> cannot be literally compared to the construction of a building. Certainly, we can say that society is a man-made structure — but too many hands (and minds) are involved in this construction, and there is no chief architect to blame. The erection of the building itself stretches over centuries and millennia representing an ecumenical long-term construction. Finally, the process of society construction is not entirely deliberate — there is no 100% control over the construction site, and the observed results usually differ from the expectations and initial plans of designers.

*The structures of social groups are not planned [or rather, not always planned — D.P.], but emerge as a consequence of the 'unplanned' actions of individuals that create institutions. Institutions make demands on people, position them in certain ways, and constitute norms they must abide by. This does not happen by some extrinsic, transcendent power, but from the consequences of the developing set of social relations between people: institutions, naturally, generate constraints upon individuals; and institutions are 'unwittingly' constructed. <...> The outcomes of human interactions, and hence the developmental movers that enable rationality to be constructed, are themselves very often not what those involved*

<sup>2</sup> However, the mental deconstruction of historically determined systems of the social universe implemented on the basis of the analytical potential of science, can be useful, at least, when it explicates the power of structures, especially not obvious ones. It makes this power visible, shows how the structures work and what functions they perform, assesses their invariance and stability, on the one hand, and their flexibility and mobility — on the other. In other words, the deconstruction distinguishes between the load-bearing walls and the parts of the building that can be demolished and rebuilt without the risk of turning the whole building into ruins. At the same time, science, which recognizes the variability of the structures organizing the live experience in different groups, usually confirms that without such structures, the existence of people in a society of their own kind would be difficult, if not impossible. Science regards obeying the rules as a tool to escape from chaos.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, the terms *social construction of reality* and *construction of social reality* are not permutable in all possible semantic contexts; they mark overlapping but not identical processes. The first concept clearly indicates that it is not only social reality that is being socially constructed.

*in these interactions intended to happen. Institutions have come out of human history that are 'superior to what which men have proposed to themselves'. [Lock, Strong, 2010: 22, 27]<sup>4</sup>*

Another important point is that people, as constructors of social reality, have to deal with a solute that solidifies very quickly: the emerging, spreading and entrenching forms of relations crystalize, while scaffolding merges with the building and starts setting the manner of working with the material of walls and building floors. Habitualized and routinized practices are then institutionalized and reified, and new habits and routines are almost never born out of nothing, but fit into the already existing institutional and cultural traditions — or rather, overlay them. In other words, people construct their world and at the same time they live by their own constructions, most of the time treating them as if they were not constructions at all.

Today the word *construct* is trendy in some circles. In Russia, constructivist terminology was fancied just recently, and now we are actively making up for the lag (although the West is still clearly in the lead in this area). Many things are declared to be constructs: forms of rationality, etiquette and manners, gender, ethnicity, corporeality, historical memory... In feminist discourse, elaborating from different points of view the principle '*one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman*' by Simone de Beauvoir, constructivist optics is in great demand (for example, in the 1980s and 1990s, in the Sage series we published, among others, *The Social Construction of Anorexia Nervosa* by Julie Hepworth and *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* by Celia Kitzinger). Social constructivism, in its shocking research, has come to scientific knowledge, including natural science, and is knocking at the door of philosophy; it even got to the human body by invading the fields of biology and medicine. What comes with such expansion?

It seems that everything is not that scary. It is just that the liberty of casual utilization of words gives its fruits, bringing together the variety of meanings emanating from the words *matrix* and *construct*, *construction*, *constructivism*, *constructionism*. If everything (or almost everything) is a construct, and the construct is associated with something artificial, created, fake, unreal, chimerical, fictional, existing only in our minds, then the ground is slipping from under our feet — and if the construction process is not limited to the world of social and cultural phenomena, then this happens not only with social scientists.

A construct is usually ascribed to a specifically discursive nature, that is, it is seen as a mental or linguistic phenomenon par excellence. This means that a construct is, first of all, that we *think* and say about one or another element

<sup>4</sup> As Lock and Strong precisely point out, no one specifically planned capitalism [Lock, Strong, 2010: 22]. And really, whom we could single out? Not Luther, not Calvin, not Leon Battista Alberti, not Fuggers, not Medici, not even Benjamin Franklin... It somehow emerged by itself (this refers to the semi-spontaneous nature of the emergence of a new socio-economic relations type in the West at the turn of the Renaissance and the New Age).

of the reality, or a label, verbal mask put on some part of reality, a subjective image, a myth, a stereotype, nomination, a fragment of the catalogue of 'signed' and 'recognized' objects, but not the object itself; linguistically speaking, it is either a thought, or a symbol, but not a referent.

Such constructs exist in our minds, and they control our attitude towards things and people: representatives of 'southern' nationalities, for example, the 'Caucasians', are impulsive and hot-tempered, and their men prefer blonde women, the Finns are measured, phlegmatic and disciplined, the Italians are musical, talkative and they gesticulate a lot, the Germans are hardworking and responsible individualists, while the Chinese are hardworking collectivists, the Russians drink vodka, the Chelyabinsk men are harsh, the French are mannered and aesthetic, all women want to get married and have children... But what if it is not true? What if the constructs mislead us about actual characteristics of society and the world of nature?

The recognition of something as a social construct itself is useful from the individual policy of freedom point of view, since it becomes an 'antidote' to all sorts of statements claiming to be axioms: like certain patterns (which might be very unpleasant and traumatic for some people) are inevitable, requiring reconciliation and obedience, they arise from the very nature of things, the nature of human, the spirit of the people, or the peculiarities of the group psychology (those are claims like 'a woman is supposed to surrender', 'a man is a hunter, a woman is a home keeper', 'stealing is in gipsy blood', 'eating with a fork and a spoon, and not with your hands, is right', 'homosexual unions are unnatural', 'the Russians are hopeless, and Russia cannot be reformed'...<sup>5</sup>).

In this respect, comparative sociological, ethnological, anthropological and historical studies are very enlightening, since they demonstrate a high level of diversity and variability in the world of social institutions and cultural conventions. At the same time, refusing to hypostatize all kinds of unreliable truths as fundamental entities does not negate the possible recognition of the nature of their emergence and existence as a special kind of socially constructed phenomena to be studied, and the readiness to perceive their functional role in maintaining the order of the social interactions at micro, meso and macro levels. That is, conventions are conventions, but without them life goes awry.

However, the mechanisms of social construction of reality are not limited to the production of social consciousness phenomena, many of which can be labelled with a semi-phantom status. Socially formed subjective pictures of the world, filled with the social and cultural content of the categorization and typologization systems, leave an imprint on human activity. We construct the world not only through thinking, but also through our behavior.

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<sup>5</sup> Judgements of this kind are fundamentally different from the statements like 'a human is mortal'; 'a man cannot give birth to a child'; 'with age, people with normal vision develop farsightedness'; 'baby teeth are replaced by permanent ones at certain age', etc.

For example, gender or ethnic identities do not just exist in our heads, come up in private conversations, newspapers, radio, television and social media, they are objectified in actions: in the decisions to choose a marriage partner in 'your' or 'alien' ethnic group, have more or less children, or not to have children at all, gather a dowry or kalym, invite relatives and friends to a wedding, vote for nationalist parties and attend their rallies, clash with other ethnic elements, hang flags on memorable historical dates, visit memorials, keep relics, learn the language of ancestors, celebrate local holidays, join the feminist movement (or not to do anything of the mentioned above), accept or reject the terms of the gender contract common at a certain stage of the society development, wear traditional clothes, etc.

There is no simple, or linear, mechanics of determination between the subjective and objective dimensions of the social construction of reality processes. The morphology of institutions and the morphology of collective representations are not identical, but they are interrelated. Therefore, social institutions, as historically established solid forms of human relations consisting of status and role structures, as well as systems of subjective orientation and navigation (that is what Bourdieu called *habitus*), are the product of the social construction of reality, which is, in fact, long-running social constructs. They change over time following emergent breakthroughs in human thinking and activities, but at the same time they have significant inertia, conservative energy and the potential for self-reproduction (obviously, involving people's actions). They are objectified and reified, and as a result the 'light cloak' often turns into a 'steel-hard casing' ('Iron Cage' or 'Stahlhartes Gehäuse')<sup>6</sup>.

Such a view of the process of collective creation of society leads to a well-founded doubt: is there indeed such a big gap between the eternally conflicting sides of the dispute — constructivism and realism, that is, those who say that social reality is created (intersubjectively), and those who claim that it (objectively) exists *sui generis*?

### **Right You Are (if you think so)**

In a way, provocative attractiveness, aesthetic allure, or charm of constructivism as an intellectual enterprise lies in the fact that it multiplies, or pluralizes, worlds, revolts against naive realism, correspondent theories of truth, the understanding of knowledge as a reflection of characteristics of *real* world, or, perhaps, it would be more precise to say — it teases the realists with its anti-fundamentalist and relationist statements. In the meantime, constructivism is inventing stars and constellations in the sky<sup>7</sup> shocking astronomers, or questions the objectivity of medical diagnoses (especially psychiatric) getting under the skin of medics.

<sup>6</sup> See: [Weber, 1990: 206].

<sup>7</sup> See the paper with an ingeniously shocking (for realists) title *On Starmaking* by Nelson Goodman.

What is the intrigue here? It would be boring for everyone to live in the same world. There can be, if not an infinite number, then, in any case, several projections of the world we 'render habitable' — the projections claiming to be theoretically, logically, empirically, pragmatically and instrumentally sound. This orientation towards creating worlds brings constructivism closer to art, and it is not just an intellectual hooliganism.

The naughty and wayward princess from *The Twelve Months*, who was a very careless student, shocked her gray-haired mentor, believing in the inviolability of the universe and the objective nature of the natural life rhythms, with statements like 'six times six equals seventeen', 'eight times eight equals three' or 'I will issue a new law of nature (so that snowdrops will bloom in December)'. Constructivists differ from this eccentric person: they only insist that the world looks different from different points of view, and this plurality of perception optics should not be neglected, at the very least, for the sake of perceiving the world in its complexity.

For the theory of art, the idea that the line between fantasy and reality is nominal is by no means new. Any artist, throwing a scarf over his or her neck with a spectacular hand movement and fixing a beret, can say: 'That's how I see it!' And the artist will be right in his own way. The same logic, in its essence, applies to 'ordinary' people.

At the same time, this does not negate the need to somehow agree on collectively shared and acceptable ways of interpreting events and approaches to ordering empirical data, because otherwise the organized existence of the human race would be impossible. Achieving the minimum necessary level of mutual understanding between individuals who perceive the world (partly in the shared way, partly — in their own) and who are located in different parts of the social space (but who are capable of exchanging prospective<sup>8</sup>) is probably one of the basic prerequisites for social life itself. Individual constructors of the world have to find a common language and reckon with similar strategies of other actors, as well as take into account the naturally arising rules of this joint work (after all, the construction of reality is *social* in its essence).

The plurality of alternative pictures of the world obviously discourages and often becomes the subject of reflection not only in philosophy or humanities, but also in literature, drama, art and cinema. Last season, Adolf Shapiro staged a play with a manifestly constructivist title *Right You Are (if you think so)* by Luigi Pirandello at the Moscow theater *Et Cetera*. The general plot and idea of the play are the following:

A family of three moves to an Italian city. They are an official who was transferred to a new job position, his wife, whom no one has ever seen, and his

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<sup>8</sup> This — apparently universal — ability, which constitutes intersubjective human experience, is analytically described in phenomenological sociology basing on the concept of the so-called 'idealization of the reciprocity of perspectives'. See, for example: [Schütz, 2004: 15].

mother-in-law, settling separately from the married couple. The mother-in-law regularly visits the official's wife (her daughter?), and she never comes up to her apartment, but stands in front of the building, while the wife goes out to the balcony to have a conversation. The situation seems to be very awkward to the local society. The official and his mother-in-law spread different versions of the family collision plot and preceding events (as if in secret) among the interested citizens. The citizens start suspecting that every one of them is hiding something — but what? Moreover, the explanations given by the official and his mother-in-law make them assume that one of the two is mad. But who is, he or she?

Throughout the play, curious locals try to find out *the truth*, bring the main characters out of the bushes, reveal the *real* situation about this mysterious family. However, it turns out to be impossible to learn the actual state of affairs, and since the stories of the main characters contradict each other, the only available option is live with one of the interpretations. The provocative constructivist statements of the uncle — Lamberto Laudisi, who voices the thoughts of the author — simply irritate and infuriate pry observers: they want to know *the truth*, and it keeps slipping away. They reject the idea that all the events are only seen on someone's interpretation, because it deprives them of a solid ground under their feet. At the same time, the classic interactionist, or socio-dramatic formula — we are different in different situations and for different people — is also not accepted. Indeed, the poorly-reflective individuals assume that they are always the same, self-identical at all times.

The actual course of events cannot be restored, since the information is only given in the interpretations of participants and observers. However, the recognition of this fact throws social life out of balance, because people feel the need to understand what exactly happened 'in reality'. But in fact, this *reality* does not seem to exist at all.

Does such a perspective make the world around us (both physical and social) completely illusory? Most probably, not. It only complicates the vision of the world, makes us include views from different spots and reveals the 'pillars' holding the platform of our shared everyday life (seemingly solid and reliable, but, in fact, very vulnerable).

The individually and socially imaginary does not just hover over the elusive reality or camouflage it, it becomes an active constitutive element. 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' — says a worn out sociological wisdom (of course, not supposing that any human fantasies and illusions might be easily and simply brought to life, but meaning that they affect the real course of events, changing not only the images in people's minds, but also the actual status of affairs). In this context, the words of the Soviet pioneer Vasya Petrov (who might be seen as local Sancho Panza) complaining about the incaution and quixotism of his friend Petya Vasechkin — 'Though



an *imaginary* giant, but a *real* disaster!' — acquire new meaning. The danger coming from the windmills may be ephemeral and far-fetched, yet the fight against them bears real fruits, in many ways discrepant from those expected by the Knight of the Sad Countenance.

### **The spectre of constructivism: “seek-and-destroy”**

The next inevitable step into the ‘swamp’ of conceptual uncertainty is an attempt to understand the meaning (including finding similarities and differences) of the two nominations: *constructivism* and *constructionism*. Are these verbal markers synonyms, overlapping, or fundamentally different concepts? Are there any specific research schools and traditions of thought behind them? There seems to be no way to offer a completely satisfactory (for everyone) and comprehensive answer to these questions. Nevertheless, we can highlight some fundamental nuances that will help us to use these terms responsibly and meaningfully.

Firstly, we should put aside constructivism as an architectural style, we are not talking about it.

Secondly, the adjective *social*, which is often omitted for the purposes of linguistic economy both in spoken and written languages, is essentially fundamental: regarding the processes of *social* construction of reality, or, in a narrower sense, [social] processes of constructing *social* reality, we find out that those who should be called social constructivists or constructionists (even if the word *social* is sometimes not pronounced) apply to study them.

Essentially, we can speak of a fundamentally constructivist position, where the social nature of the construction of reality will not come to the fore — for example, in such areas of philosophy or psychology that study the processes of construction of reality in the individual consciousness (and / or in the individual mind) and by the individual consciousness (and/or by the individual mind), as if they were taking place ‘in vacuum’, that is, if we deliberately eliminate any social context for analytical purposes.

This group of positions (formally) should also include biological explanations that focus on the nervous system operation and adaptive strategies, specified by the neurosomatic constitution of the living organism (of a certain type) who perceives the world and builds up relations with different elements (organic and mineral) of its environment. According to the apt expression of Jakob von Uexküll, ‘Every animal is surrounded with different things, the dog is surrounded by dog things and the dragonfly is surrounded by dragonfly things’ [von Uexküll, 2001/1936, as cited in Lock, Strong, 2010: 136], and the organism’s environment is constructed by its sensory-perceptual abilities.

Again, how are these abilities, mechanisms and strategies formed — in the process of the species evolutionary development, consisting of individual and group interactions, when these individuals coexist in changing environmental

conditions, or in some other way — this is another question deserving special attention and putting the organism under review out of the analytically imagined cognitive isolation. The image of the world is ontogenetically constructed by the individual in accordance with the rules that were formed and fixed in the phylogenetic history of the species (that is, to some extent, ‘socially’, not ‘individually’).

If we only consider the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the construction of reality in a similar manner is interpreted in such a heterogeneous interdisciplinary concept as radical constructivism (Ernst von Glasersfeld, Paul Watzlawick and others)<sup>9</sup>, and in particular, in its neurobiological version — in the theory of self-referential autopoietic systems by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela<sup>10</sup>. The adjective ‘social’ is usually not added to the name of this concept.

Thirdly, one can study, describe and analyze the processes of social construction of reality or the construction of social reality, as well as the construction of reality in general, without using such words and marker expressions, and (even more so) without classifying oneself as either constructivist or constructionist. This terminology has spread in philosophy, social sciences and humanities only in the last half of century, although the history of the ideas relevant to the latest constructivist agenda counts more than millennium and goes back to at least the Protagoras’ sophistry and Pyrrho’s and Sextus Empiricus’ skepticism. Obviously, many of you have heard that *Man is the measure of all things*.

If you do not stick to specific terms and eras, then the scope for ‘associations’ and ‘reminiscences’ turn out to be wide:

While reading the modern European philosophy texts with a certain optics, one can argue that rationalists and empiricists in their disputes disagreed on what primarily constructs a subjective image of the world: sense or sensibility. However, both of them have a largely autonomous ability to shape our vision of the world.

For Berkeley and Hume, the image of ‘reality’ is created through impressions and perceptions (and the question of the ‘objective’ source of these impressions and perceptions can be omitted as ‘metaphysical’). Kant’s Pure Reason constructs reality with the help of a priori forms of contemplation and categories of mind, he claims people’s inherent aesthetic ability to construct the world of the beauty and sublime, and practical reason — to construct the world of morality; in all three cases, the construction is carried out according to some specific rules located in the actor him- or herself. This consideration develops and becomes more complicated in various schools of neo-Kantianism, including the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms by Ernst Cassirer.

In the classical German philosophy, I/transcendental consciousness/the Absolute Spirit (switching to the language of any specific personality will require

<sup>9</sup> See classic book on the topic *Die erfundene Wirklichkeit* [Die erfundene Wirklichkeit, 1998] (ed. by Paul Watzlawick), which withstood many editions, as well as a high-quality Russian review and anthology: [Tsokolov, 2000].

<sup>10</sup> See complete overview of the concept in popular manner in the book: [Maturana, Varela, 2001].

multiple clarifications and qualifications) construct ‘Not-I’, positions in it, is objectified and reified, ‘externalized’ in the world of nature.

In Husserl’s phenomenology, intentional consciousness as ‘consciousness toward [something]’ inhabits its world with objects and other entities, organizing the experience of the actor within the framework of the natural attitude — with its axioms, prerequisites and the *epoché* principle. The classics of pragmatism and interactionism talk about the instrumental functions of cognitive activity, about the activity of consciousness, which fits experience into convenient and practical problem-solving schemes. At the same time, interactionists especially emphasize that these schemes and models of ordering the experience are intersubjective, that is, they are developed in the process of communication or coexistence of the *I* and *Others*. Following Husserl, Alfred Schütz describes the basic ‘idealizations’ of everyday consciousness, without which any interactions of people and things would be doomed to failure, and points to the exceptional value of ‘typification’ as a special procedure of sorting, screening and archiving information that forms our experience.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, psychologists — from Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky to Jerome Bruner and George Kelly — tried to solve similar problems with their own means, basing on the experimental base. Cognitive psychologists have investigated, among other things, categorization mechanisms that allow people not to drown in an endless variety of facts, events, situations, names and things that appear on our distant or very near life horizon daily, and with which we have to deal constantly — react, adapt, somehow get along with or feud, love ignore, manipulate...

George Kelly, who made the connotation *personal construct* central in his theoretical model, sought to study the following questions: how do people use these very constructs to organize their experience — as a kind of patterns for orientation or ways of predicting events; why some constructs help them live, while others interfere with living; whether it is possible to rebuild existing systems of constructs, for instance, with the help of psychotherapeutic procedures.

While solving problems of typification and categorization of objects, people do not limit themselves to their perceptual, logical and cognitive abilities (the ability to compare, notice similarities and differences, look for relationships, generalize, predict, etc.). They also use language which functions as a special symbolic system. Language can be considered as one of the most powerful tools for constructing reality, and it is a tool of social origin. We can also assert quite confidently that the modern philosophy of language is imbued with a constructivist spirit — from Ludwig Wittgenstein to John Searle<sup>11</sup>.

If the picture of the world in any human community is constructed through the language, and languages are different, then we can conclude that the

<sup>11</sup> In particular, the latter is the author of the work with the precedent for us title — *The Construction of Social Reality* [Searle, 1997].

images of reality for speakers of these languages can also be different: this topic appears in the bold and somewhat controversial concepts of linguistic relativity by Sapir — Whorf.

Even Kant, in 18<sup>th</sup> century, understood that knowledge, including scientific one, is not just a reflection. And if it is a reflection, the specifications of the mirror are of great importance: that is, what we see in the mirror depends on the reflecting surface no less than on the object itself. This became even clearer in the 20<sup>th</sup> century — both prior to the sociological expansion of science (for example, in the conventionalism of Henri Poincaré and Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz) and after it (for example, in the sociology of science, in the school of David Bloor and in the works of Michael Mulkey, Karin Knorr Cetina, Bruno Latour, Steve Woolgar, and others). The conceptual apparatus, theoretical models, logic and methodology, methods of interpretation, processing data and setting experiments — all these parameters of scientific process are fundamental for the research results and can differ in various paradigmatic traditions and scientific communities. Thus, the principle of the theory-laden observational evidence says, that the scientists do not just get ‘naked’ facts from the storeroom of nature or society, they immediately ‘dress’ them, pack and present them to their colleagues and external audience, complying with certain rules (often latent) adopted in their community. Therefore, sociologically thinking researchers of science have every reason to talk about ‘epistemic cultures’ or ‘the social construction of a scientific fact’, no matter how crazy it might sound to someone.

Historians of constructionist thought find similar intentions in the works of authors who lived centuries apart — from Giambattista Vico to Harold Garfinkel:

*...Harold Garfinkel <...> turned in his later career to studying science as institution <...> An example of his studies occurred in observing the practices and language used by astronomers in ‘discovering a pulsar’. In the course of his transcribed observations, he noted how, using the instruments, scientific conventions, specific discourse and ‘institutional memory’ of astronomy as a discipline, the astronomers ‘discovered’ a new pulsar. If you bristle at this example because there is something ‘there’ where the telescope found ‘it’, note that Vico and most discursive thinkers are not claiming there is nothing ‘there’: rather, they are suggesting that a phenomenon’s meaning — even our means of discerning ‘it’ — are human constructions. Remember, Vico said ‘let fully understanding nature be God’s business; our task, as humans, is to understand how we, through our institutions, create visions of truth’. Garfinkel’s pulsar example shows how humans extend their institutions as they name and assign meaning to realms of experience. That such meanings should be treated as singular and objectively true makes about as much sense as saying that trees should be only seen as ‘harvestable biomass’ because that is how one human institution (the forestry industry) sees things. [Lock, Strong, 2010: 24—25]*

However, a world suitable for cognitive and practical mastering both for modern people and their distant ancestors is constructed by all types of consciousness — scientific and everyday, and in any era. Over a hundred years ago, Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, in their classic work on ‘primitive classification’, on rich anthropological material, showed how the collective representations of people living in preliterate societies, which are isomorphic to the social structure of a particular group (tribe, clan, phratry, etc.), ‘mark’, ‘cut’ and organize the universe of an aborigine by creating gods, sacred objects, luminaries and cardinal points, inhabiting it with ‘their people’ and ‘strangers’, friendly and hostile elements, animals and plants, determining the view of causality, regularities of the life cycle, the logic of birth and death, health and illness — in other words, forming a ‘matrix’ of categories projected onto the world.

Are there more constructivisms in the world? Evolutionary epistemology, some versions of analytical philosophy, the already mentioned radical constructivism, Nelson Goodman, Rom Harré, foucaultians and critical discourse analysts, many first-line theoretical sociologists like Berger, Luckmann, Elias, Bourdieu, Giddens, Goffman — each one of them in its own way and meaning<sup>12</sup>. The list of these constructivisms, or quasi constructivisms, derived from the ideological genealogies of different disciplines, can be expanded even further.

One might wonder — why giving this very fragmentary tour here? Is its aim to leave the very nomination *constructivism/constructionism* senseless as excessively broad, conditionally covering and only superficially characterizing an extremely heterogenous set of theories, research directions and thoughts? Probably not!

Indeed, using a certain approach, one can probably present a third of works in history of philosophy, social sciences and humanities in a constructionist way, although there is no need to do so. One conclusion can be derived from the excursus given above: constructivist motives can be found in a variety of theories in different fields of knowledge (the very use of terms *construction* and *to construct* is neither obligatory nor paramount here).

In any case, the terms *constructivism* and *constructionism* cannot be used with the same relative clarity as, for instance, concepts such as positivism, Marxism, Freudianism, behaviorism, interactionism, existentialism, etc., since they do not name any specific (albeit possibly a very broad) school of thought. In this case, we are dealing with a terminological frame, which has extremely extensible boundaries, and this does not mean that it does not make sense to use it at all, as well as, on the contrary, that it can be used anywhere.

It is quite natural, however, that the supporters of constructivism are fighting for their own history. The book by Lock and Strong is one prime example of this fight. Since in the ‘serious scientific circles’, to a greater extent tending to

<sup>12</sup> As it was shown above, in the field of sociological theory with certain limitations (if wanted), you can be a *constructivist* and *structuralist* at the same time.

scientific realism, constructivism is sometimes treated uncomplimentary and seen as a tribute to lightweight fashion and a kind of intellectual hooliganism, constructivists have to defend themselves.

As we have already seen, in the case of constructivism, the biography attributed to it looks no less respectable than its current state. The more noble and solid the genealogy, the better — the more grounds for self-affirmation and the easier it is to resist opponents. The list of classics and reputable persons who are seen as allies and whose useful ideas might be taken, affects the current level of respect for constructivism as a specific style of theorizing and a strategy of research practices.

### **Constructivism versus constructionism**

Any interested reader or the World Wide Web user eager to independently figure out how [social] constructivism differs from [social] constructionism will most likely be disappointed, discouraged, or even annoyed. Appeals from some well-known information resources not to confuse these concepts can only increase the level of dissatisfaction. This confusion might be found not only in the Russian-speaking segment of the global information space. In many cases, these terms are actually interchangeable, and when it is not the case, it is mainly a matter of lexical taste. Since the history of constructivism/constructionism, including the very recent one, resembles a fate of a broth, spoiled by too many cooks, naturally, we end up with discrepancies even in the official name of the concept.

Psychologists, including practitioners who try not only to study the processes of social construction of reality by various actors, but also to optimize them following the interests of their clients and trying to ensure personal mental health, personal growth, family harmony, organizational development, improvement in the level of mutual understanding, better communication, more effective conflict mitigation and elimination of dysfunctions in group relationships — they prefer the term ‘social constructionism’.

This applies, among other things, to certain consolidated communities of experts in the field, including both theorists and methodologists, as well as consultants, psychotherapists and trainers. The Taos Institute can be considered an example of such a professional community of confederates, geographically scattered around the world; its inspirer and ‘ideologist’ Kenneth Gergen is an American social psychologist, and his views are discussed in one of the chapters of this book. Actually, Andy Lock and Tom Strong are affiliated members of this community and followers of Gergen, so it is not quite surprising that the title of their book contains the term ‘social constructionism’ — with an important remark that their work will not be just theoretical (constructionism as a research topic purely), but it will also cover practical questions in the above-described sense.

In many other cases and contexts, the terms *constructionism* and *constructivism* have turned out to be confused (without any dire consequences) or overlapping. The complexes of ideas hidden behind the terms *constructionism* and *constructivism*, as well as these collective terms themselves, are similar to communicative vessels standing in different rooms, but fed partly from a common and partly from separate water supply systems. Adherents of different versions of constructivism / constructionism have different educational backgrounds, disciplinary identity, reading experience and professional contacts. However, this does not hinder neither their dialogue, nor the circulation of a number of valuable ideas in the transdisciplinary intellectual field.

There is no correct, unified, end-to-end translation of the terms *[social] constructivism* and *[social] constructionism* from one language to another, which could provide a clear conceptual and lexical distinction between the first and the second. Long-term observations of the existence of these two words in the vocabulary of the Russian humanities indicate, in our opinion, the dominance of the term *constructivism*, which has become more familiar and recognizable for local readers (apparently, at least in part due to the greater prevalence of certain translation choices) and, consequently, more common in use.

### **Finally, on the book by Andy Lock and Tom Strong**

This book acquaints the reader with the contribution of theorists and scientific schools, which in different periods formed the ideological foundation of social constructionism as a ‘paradigm’<sup>13</sup> in the social studies and humanities. Why constructionism? Andy Lock and Tom Strong are convinced of its heuristic potential for analyzing human societies facing cultural clashes and misunderstandings caused by globalization processes.

The book is a kind of guide through the key concepts that theoretically or methodologically develop a constructionist understanding of social reality. On this path, we encounter philosophers (coming from very different schools), psychologists, sociologists, linguists, and biologists; however, the main emphasis is still put on psychology, since both authors specialize in this area and represent the corresponding departments of the universities in New Zealand and Canada — although culturally close, but geographically located almost on the opposite parts of the globe. Indeed, the constructionist discourse itself is today, in a sense, a global spiritual fashion.

It is precisely the needs of psychology, as a ‘mother’ discipline for the authors, that dictate the two main aims of the book. On the one hand, the authors long to correct a number of simplified, in their opinion, mechanistic concepts of man and human activities, and, on the other, try to show how constructionist ideas

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<sup>13</sup> The question of whether social constructionism can be considered a ‘paradigm’ (in a specific scientific or ‘Kuhnian’ sense) is, of course, debatable. Further on, in the final section of this preface, where we will talk specifically about the book by Lock and Strong, we will primarily use the term *social constructionism* (not *constructivism*) — following the authors who use it as a key concept.



can help overcome the problems of modern psychological research practices. Seventeen chapters of the book solve these problems in a diachronous mode. On this way, the authors have such companions as Giambattista Vico, Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Alfred Schütz, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricœur, Mikhail Bakhtin, Lev Vygotsky, George Herbert Mead, Jacob von Uexküll, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Gregory Bateson, Harold Garfinkel, Erving Goffman, Anthony Giddens, Norbert Elias, Michel Foucault, Rom Harré, John Shotter, the Gergens couple, and others.

One can argue about the representativeness of this glorious list, but the names were undoubtedly chosen with taste and... knowledge of the matter. Addressing such a diverse and multidisciplinary intellectual iconostasis guarantees a breadth of exposition for the topic and forces the reader to make sure once again that the spectre of constructivism/constructionism (completely regardless of the use or disuse of this 'difficult' and semantically illegible term as a specific conceptual nomination) is by no means a new and very influential character on the stage of the historical evolution of social and humanitarian knowledge. The main thing for a commentator or an attentive reader is the capacity to recognize specific incarnations of the mentioned many-sided spectre, the ability to pull it by its tail from the depths of the history of ideas, and to attribute its specific characteristics.

Andy (Andrew) Lock is a professor at Massey University, Tom Strong is a professor at the University of Calgary. Geographically, the co-authors are separated by the not-so-shallow Pacific Ocean, but like-minded people sometimes find seas to be knee-deep, because they need to stick together. Probably, constructionist psychologists are relatively more consolidated when compared to their counterparts from related disciplines, where supporters of the constructionist ideas are distributed more sparsely. The reason here is that, although calling them a 'sect' would be a bit of exaggeration, they are in the minority. In order to confront mainstream trends in psychological science and the academic establishment more effectively, it is important, among other things, to 'honor the ancestors' and strengthen one's position by appealing to the legacy of friends and neighbors in the academic world, even if they have or had a different disciplinary identity.

The constructionist ancestry presented within the book was written by psychologists and appears to be addressed primarily to a psychological audience. If it had been written by, let's say, sociologists or philosophers, the emphasis would have been different, as well as the set of the mentioned names and the composition of the material. However, this does not mean that this is a book on psychology. There are not so many psychologists among the heroes of the historical chronicle of constructionism created by Lock and Strong. The authors of the 'chronicle' themselves are dedicated constructionists associated with the Gergen — Shotter school, that is why the book is somewhat apologetic

in its nature: they do not only talk about their subject, but also campaign for constructionism of a quite specific kind.

The selection of personalities involved in the '[acquittal] case of constructionism' presented by the authors is conditioned by their special preferences, reading experience and is largely inspired by John Shotter and Kenneth Gergen, who are a kind of senior comrades, teachers and mentors. Lock and Strong themselves, complaining that the book has already turned out to be too voluminous, honestly admit that many scientists and things were left outside — the concepts of postcolonialism (Edward Said and Homi Bhabha), feminism (Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva), and postmodernism (Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard), Jacques Derrida, Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School.

Probably, it is not worth talking about the 'exhaustive' completeness of this gallery. In the area of pragmatism and interactionism the choice fell on George Herbert Mead, although in a similar vein one could analyze the works of William James (who falls into the category of philosophers and psychologists) or Charles Horton Cooley (sociologist). A high estimate of the contribution of Russian research can become a pleasant surprise for our readers: in the book, one can find the views of Lev Vygotsky and Mikhail Bakhtin, as well as the ideas of a less famous scientist of Bakhtin's circle, Valentin Voloshinov; these ideas were published in the book *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* and in the critical essay on Freudianism. At the same time, the authors bypass, that is, move forward without the basic for modern cognitive psychology research direction of Jean Piaget, Jerome Bruner, and George Kelly, and also without Paul Watzlawick and the interdisciplinary group of 'radical constructivists' associated with him (although a whole chapter is devoted to the work of Gregory Bateson, who collaborated with Watzlawick). Among biologists, preference is given to Jacob von Uexküll (who, by the way, originated from Russia). Although Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, or not so 'shocking', but still authoritative Konrad Lorenz, could easily have been in his place.

The phenomenological tradition is presented in a standard way, but the authors do not come to a detailed discussion of the socio-constructionist synthesis proposed by Berger and Luckmann. The selection of large-scale sociologists is based on the alphabetical logic — they come with the capital 'G', and the choice is worthy: Garfinkel, Goffman, Giddens. Pierre Bourdieu<sup>14</sup> is clearly missing in this company, although his absence is partially compensated by the presentation of the views of Michel Foucault and the critical discourse analysts. Naturally, we note this to identify some gaps, not in terms of criticism.

This ideological and conceptual kaleidoscope, projected on the pages of the book, looks impressive, since the task of subtracting constructionist motives relevant to modern discussions from the heritage of very dissimilar scientist

<sup>14</sup> It is no coincidence that Bourdieu's integral approach to the study of social reality is called genetic (or constructivist) structuralism.

and thinkers cannot be considered trivial. And here it is not necessary to prove that Martin Heidegger or Mikhail Bakhtin, Norbert Elias or Gregory Bateson were 'in fact' exemplary or inveterate constructionists.

### **The 'noble truths' of social constructionism.**

#### **Striving for dialogue or rocking the boat?**

What is social constructionism for Lock and Strong, what grounds does it rest on? Constructionism is not a solid research school, but rather a 'conglomerate of approaches' held together by a 'frame' of interrelated statements, which can be explicated as follows:

**Firstly**, human activity contains 'irreducible' semantic dimension. Speaking in the Schützian manner, the reality of human life is 'the world enlightened with meaning'. The circulation of *meanings* in this reality presupposes the possibility of *understanding* them, while the meanings themselves are linguistically fixed, that is, they are given to us and other similar beings in the forms of language as a special symbolic system.

**Secondly**, 'meaning and understanding have their beginnings in social interaction' [Lock, Strong, 2010: 7]. Translation of meanings (with numerous limitations) is made possible by establishing a certain level of *agreement* about what, how and by what means we aim to understand. In other words, the processes of converting meanings in cultural context have fundamentally intersubjective, that is, social nature.

**Thirdly**, 'ways of meaning-making, being inherently embedded in socio-cultural processes, are specific to particular times and spaces. Thus, the meanings of particular events, and our ways of understanding them, vary over different situations' [ibid.: 7]. This means that fragments of intersubjective human experience — forms of theoretical and everyday knowledge, customs, traditions, beliefs, institutions — are highly historically variable (in diachronic optics) and highly differentiated (in synchronous one).

As the forerunner of constructionism Giambattista Vico, whose forgotten wisdom the authors constantly appeal to, taught: 'the case that, in understanding people, what they do and produce, must be approached by taking account of the terms and practices that are relevant to their location in their worlds, and not in terms of any universal standards and timeless principles' [ibid.: 19].

Languages, as well as cultures, are different, although this should not be understood in the spirit of pure relativism (like Spengler's). Adequate knowledge of the meaning of what has been said and done is potentially possible, but primarily within the framework of a specific socio-historical 'here and now'. The plurality and diversity of culturally constructed codes, patterns and linguistic rules often confuses participants of the social, including verbal, interaction. The difficulties, that arise in the process of intercultural communication, empirically clearly indicate a similar plurality of norms and traditions, as well as socially legitimate habits and customs.

There are thousands of examples here. Let me name a couple given by the authors of the book. The Chinese leaders wanted to treat Richard Nixon with the best pieces of the dish from a common plate, but the American president refused for some reason, showing no appreciation of the high respect given to him. The adjective *bad* in English can mean opposite things in different situational contexts and linguo-cultural environments, and only competent readers of meanings — practical users of the symbolic systems arsenals — are able to determine whether they were praised or scolded, extolled or humiliated in a specific case of the verbal form application. The girl who called her friend 'a real bad guy' in a conversation with her girlfriend probably paid him a compliment (although we can be sure of it only taking into account the whole complex of the said and implied, as well as the circumstances of the conversation)<sup>15</sup>.

**Fourthly**, the previous statements produce the 'anti-essentialist' attitude of constructionism: 'If people fashion who they are within varying socio-cultural traditions, then they are instrumental in creating the discourses they use to define themselves. Thus, people are self-defining and socially constructed participants in their shared lives' [ibid.: 7]. Arguments about the 'essence' of people and their 'unchanging nature' always put constructionists on guard. Human nature, whatever this poorly defined concept means (needs, inclinations, ways and means of their satisfaction and realization), is very flexible. A comparison with clay is very appropriate here: the structure of the clay itself does not contain what will be molded from it — an amphora, a pot or a children's toy. In this sense, people can be themselves in different ways.

Finally, **fifthly**, constructionism is characterized by more or less clearly expressed 'critical orientation' as a specific feature of the view of the social world. It is associated with the understanding that this world, unlike the world of nature, could be different, since it is ultimately created by people. The fundamental principle of the *New Science* by Giambattista Vico says: history is created by man himself. In any historically established forms of human relations — not only at the level of institutions, but also at the level of discourse, in symbolic systems — certain structures of power and domination are reproduced, some individuals and groups win in these institutional and linguistic games (and battles), while others lose, usually being in unequal conditions in this process. And none of these dispositions can be considered set 'forever and ever'.

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<sup>15</sup> In this regard, we can recall a similar example from the recent history of informal corporate language in one of the Russian academic institutes: in the jargon of its most authoritative employees, who could not be suspected of rudeness or familiarity, the situationally correct use of the word 'fool' meant the highest degree of praise and equaled by its meaning to the expression 'a person truly and unconditionally devoted to science'. All initiates easily gasped the semantic message of this word play, since they actually possessed the skills of the 'correct' symbolic encoding used for the elements of the social world order in this environment (despite the apparent inconsistency between some of the adopted word usage practices and the averaged norms existing for the same units in a broader linguistic field).

The position of constructionism is quite consistent with the principles of ‘critical’ theory, which opposes itself to the ‘traditional’ theory (in the terminology of Horkheimer and Marcuse). There is no great benefit in simply explaining the intricacies of the social relationship ravel! Therefore, not only old Karl and his comrades with their Eleventh Thesis, but also constructionists, would like to change the world for the better...

Of course, not every character in the story told by Lock and Strong will fully conform with all five of the named ‘noble truths’. This is just an idealization of the general picture, and the devil and God are, as you know, manifested in the detail, that is, the details in the approaches under consideration matter, and they should not be neglected.

For example, the idea of historical relativity of any rules does not necessary calls for the expediency of their demolition. The conventional and discursive nature of social norms (language, morality, law, etiquette, decency, etc.) does not make them meaningless. If we recognize the conventional nature, social, cultural and historical conditionality, variability, constructive origin of something, this does not mean that we propose to destroy it. The world is based on conventions — this is normal, as well as, on the other hand, it is normal that these conventions can change over time.

It has already been emphasized more than once, that the absence of effectively working forms of regulation of human actions and the corresponding systems of subjective orientation in the world, in the minds of actors would instantly turn the social life of the human race into a nightmare, very similar to the Hobbes’s ‘war of all against all’. That is why we have to talk about the striving for agreement as a fundamental (albeit constantly escaping) prerequisites for a social order or organized human community as such. Therefore, the logic of argumentation of social constructivism can be both ‘revolutionary’ and ‘conservatively’ oriented. And the main character of the eighth chapter of this book — Ludwig Wittgenstein — as we recall, claimed that philosophy should leave everything as it is.

Following Kenneth Gergen, Lock and Strong highlight the proximity of many of the starting aspirations of constructionism and postmodernism. Sympathy for postmodernism as a broad ideological trend is understandable in constructionist circles. If we represent the ideological polemics of recent decades very roughly, we can state: constructionists and postmodernists, reproached by their opponents for being relativists and striving to undermine the foundations of the universal order, are on one side of the barricades; realists and essentialists, who in their own turn are reproached for fundamentalism and attempts to preserve the status quo (teeming with all sorts of manifestations of social injustice, explicit or hidden) under the guise of a struggle against anarchy and protection of the ‘natural order of things’, are on the other side.

As Kenneth Gergen notes, ‘authoritative claims about the nature of the world are now widely questioned; examples of the “social construction of something”

ubiquitously emphasize the cultural and historical significance of what would otherwise be taken for granted' [Gergen, 2016: 19—20]. And his spouse Mary calls for 'to question — but not to deny — all linguistic categories, and especially to resist the reification of universal, atemporal ones, including gender' [Gergen, 2001, as cited in Lock, Strong, 2010: 304]. However, the desire for dialogue in these difficult conditions of 'the end of grand narratives' should only intensify. In modern globalized world, no one has the exclusive right to possess the truth. 'Under postmodern conditions, persons exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction; it is a world where anything goes that can be negotiated' [Gergen, 1991, as cited in Lock, Strong, 2010: 302]. And, alas, we have to negotiate.

We have already tried to show that [social] constructionism and [social, scientific] realism in their logical, empirical, pragmatic, moral senses are not irreconcilable. (Quasi) 'subjective' social constructs and (quasi) 'objective' social structures are made of the same material, albeit given to us in partly dissimilar aggregate states: feelings, thoughts, judgments, moods, words that turn into actions and vice versa, ideas, opinions, emotions. In both cases of these mutual transitions, there is a routinization, crystallization and institutionalization of the social substance.

Social constructs can act as more or less reliable means of agreement and as a connecting force in situations of interaction only when they were 'objectified'. If we want to achieve something together, we need to somehow coordinate joint activities, for example, through the default (or specially discussed) uniformity of symbolic forms and norms used in practical life: if you are a pilot, you need to speak with the air traffic controller in one professional language, otherwise you risk provoking a disaster<sup>16</sup>.

Constructionist and realist discourses coexist, intersect and expand each other's boundaries in practical life. Gergen finds good images to confirm this relationship:

*The most ardent constructionists will rely on the realistic tradition to teach their children that "this is a dog" and "this is a cat". And if a constructionist saw his house on fire and shouted "Run, there is a fire!" — he would hardly want his family to look at him suspiciously and say "Oh, this is just your construction of what is happening". The constructionist would like his warning to be perceived according to the realistic convention. Likewise, those who have embraced the principles of realism often turn to an arsenal of constructionist arguments. Would the most devoted realist want to remove from his repertoire such conversational moves as "This is just your version", "This is a cultural myth", "They make it all up", "This news report is distorted in favor of the state" and "You speak too harsh on this point"? Even an empiricist who is not familiar with the constructivist theory may want to say: "Given their theoretical beliefs, I can understand how they came to this conclusion" or "Physics, biology and psychology are different ways of conceptualizing the world". [Gergen, 2016: 42]*

<sup>16</sup> Here we reproduce the example given by Gergen [Gergen, 2016: 45].

## Resuming *Methodenstreit*: Vico's line vs Descartes' line

A very sensitive thematic area for constructionist psychologists is the sphere of methodological reflection, which can be partly explained by their 'wounded' position in the structure of the professional community: if they are not outright outsiders, then at least they feel they are in the opposition to the dominant research tradition in the psychological studies. None of the scientists want to feel marginalized in the development of their scientific area.

In this regard, Lock and Strong repeatedly recall the famous 'method dispute', the so-called *Methodenstreit*. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a schism arose in the methodology of still relatively young social and behavioral research. The very intensified methodological reflection of that time became a natural reaction, on the one hand, to the emancipation of the human sciences from philosophy, which was already quite an established scientific direction, and on the other — to the temptations introduced by positivism.

In the minds of scholars in the humanities and sociologists, concerned with methodological problems, two strategies were shaping — obviously, not real, but rather ideally-typical.

The human and social sciences can follow the path of natural science, striving to resemble *Naturwissenschaften* (the science of nature) in everything. This is a positivist naturalistic line, which is 'objectivist', nomothetic, universalist and explanatory. Here, social, cultural, mental and historical phenomena are considered as sub-domains of the realm of mechanical causality. The use of mathematical methods, models and estimations of everything and anything is encouraged. And why, in fact, these methods should not be used if man is a machine? In psychology, behaviorism takes its shape — it is a view of a person as a complex laboratory rat.

Alternative option is to follow other way: your own, special, while maintaining the original status of the *Geisteswissenschaft* (the science of the spirit), or probably the *Kulturwissenschaft* (the science of culture). This is a 'subjectivist', humanistic, interpretive, hermeneutic, historicist and idiographic line. Science is immersed in a specific culture; we do not deduce any general laws. We do not 'explain' or object, but try to 'understand' or to interpret it, we study the subjective meaning and goal-setting, we practice either empathy and in-depth historical and psychological description and interpretation of cultural phenomena (Wilhelm Dilthey), or a complex rational reconstruction of socially and culturally conditioned motives of actors and unraveling of concrete historical constellations formed by sets of human actions and the following social relations, which are socially evaluated (Max Weber).

We emphasize one again: these are only imaginary extremes, since real researchers in the field of the human sciences usually managed to crawl through the strongholds that stood in their way and to pick approaches and analytical strategies basing on current cognitive needs.



Nevertheless, the method dispute set certain guidelines. For instance, most economists (although not all of them) preferred the first of the mentioned paths. The psychology also favored naturalism-scientism, although much less categorically (there are many exceptions). The path of natural sciences imitation has become the main road for the advancement of most research initiatives and projects in socio-behavioral studies, especially for collective and empirical projects that required strong institutional support from universities. This is how the academic mainstream was shaped. Over the last century, the research structures of the United States have been the flagship and the role model here.

However, there were also those who remained outside of the mainstream, and quite deliberately; the social constructionist psychologists belong to this group. The outlined situation to some extent reminds the essence of the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks split: the former were in majority and took the power, while the latter remained in the minority, becoming a kind of reproach for the victors in the history of the movement.

In sociology, the picture was somewhat similar, but still less dramatic. Different versions of methodological scientism — both theoretical and empirical — dominated world sociology, and above all American one, but this has never led to the disappearance of numerous methodological alternatives. For example, in recent decades, there has been a real boom of so-called *qualitative research*, and its producers and admirers do not look like a minority hunted by the scientific establishment. Qualitative researchers evidently have not defeated quantitative researchers, and they are unlikely to succeed in it in the foreseeable future, but they are by no means ‘in the corral’ in modern sociology.

However, in theoretical and historical perspectives, the arguments of the dispute between the dominant and competing, or alternative methodological strategies are important. And here, constructionist psychologists use moves and figures similar to those that have been repeatedly used in interpretive sociology, particularly in the sociology of knowledge.

A very remarkable (and questionable for the historian of science) fact: Lock and Strong derive the main methodological line, entrenched in the social sciences, from the legacy of Descartes, and the opposing line, which, in their opinion, the constructionists are developing, from the legacy of Vico. The Neapolitan thinker appears in the book as the true progenitor of constructionism. ‘The current intellectual landscape would be quite different had it had a Viconian rather than Cartesian heritage’ — complain the authors of the book [Lock, Strong, 2010: 19]. And later they clarify:

*...There is a counter-tradition to the one that has sedimented itself into mainstream psychology. <...> It appears to us that it provides a more adequate framework than the dominant tradition for conceptualizing and then exploring the meaning-sat-*

*urated reality of being human. Our meaningful reality is much 'messier' than the Cartesian heritage has had us believe, and much more mysterious. [Ibid.: 353]*

The question is, why is Descartes<sup>17</sup> so bad and what claims can be made against the Cartesian model of scientific knowledge? The view of the Cartesian science on the world is arrogant, monologue-based and authoritarian: there is a cognizing actor, and a reality that outstretches in front of him — one and the same, unchanging, the one he dissects in his mind with the help of certain 'sterile' tools. In this sense, mathematics is sterile and universal, but it is capable of killing all living things that it touches with its sterility. Subject is separated from its object by a perfectly transparent bulletproof partition<sup>18</sup>. But 'Descartes' singular notion of apodictic, objective truth' cannot stand up the criticism from the modern point of view, and the constructionists oppose him the Vico's position: 'truth was to be found within human institutions, plural' [ibid.: 24].

The authors express this position in more detail in the following words:

*How do we come to take things as singularly true, when variations on truth pertinent to human institutions as diverse as cultures, disciplines or even families abound? Where Descartes saw an over-arching, absolute truth, Vico saw many embedded in humanly created and historicized social relations. <...> Vico asks us to embrace the complexities of human meanings and relatedness and not buy fully into Descartes' seemingly elegant extra-human rationality. Descartes prescribed one humanly constructed model of rationality as **the** model by which knowing 'should' be known. Vico looked around and saw many models, historically and culturally developed. [Ibid.: 24—25]*

Even before Vico's birth, Blaise Pascal, a compatriot and younger contemporary of Descartes, had noted, that "The truth on this side of the Pyrenees, error on the other" (although this statement contained a clear ironic and sarcastic overtones).

Here, the motives of criticism are easily recognizable. For the part of the professional community represented by Lock and Strong, the canonical text is Kenneth Gergen's paper *Social Psychology as History*, which is available for

<sup>17</sup> The use of the Descartes as a kind of 'whipping boy' by the authors of the book may raise objections and is largely conditional (someone else could have been in his place). However, the same is true for his positive antagonist, Vico. Thus, Isaiah Berlin becomes a guide and assistant in the difficult task of interpreting Vico's authentic legacy.

On the other hand, Descartes with his *ego cogito* can also be considered the herald of a number of constructionist ideas. It is therefore not surprising that one of the key works of Edmund Husserl was named *Cartesian Meditations*. Although Descartes, obviously, was not the forerunner of the social or sociological version of modern constructionism precisely.

<sup>18</sup> Actually, claims to Descartes are not new: the radical separation of subject and object, carried out at the dawn of the New Age in the Cartesian model of science, can be considered as a metaphysical prerequisite for substantiating the unlimited power of the Subject over *just an object* — the world of things, inanimate nature and substance. And a proud person often falls into the category of 'objects' through his or her own oversight or someone else's initiative. Specific people and social entities (those who for some reason are unlucky) always are at risk of being put by one of their fellow minds in the category of 'insufficiently reasonable', not gaining the right to act as full-fledged Subjects. Thus, they acquire the status of passive elements of the objective world, subjects to manipulation, control, directing, processing, shaping, compulsory organization, coordination, regulation — that is, technological influences carried out in accordance with the logic of instrumental rationality in the name of some 'higher' values, for instance, Progress, national interests, party, people, state, future generations, national economy, market, efficiency, productivity, efficacy, speed, innovations, maximizing performance, improving competitiveness, etc.

to the Russian-speaking readers. The subject of the social sciences is deeply historical, therefore, the universalist ambitions of the Cartesian methodology, implanted in certain sections of social science, constantly fail. Moreover, if there are no timeless or universal ways of cognitive and practical exploration of the world, then the privileged status of science as a form of knowledge that cannot be wrong if we did everything right (counted, measured, studied, and analyzed)—it evaporates. Finally, an individual, actor, client, respondent, informant, interviewee, member of a control or experimental group or of any other social community is not just a ‘trivial machine’ (connotation of Heinz von Foerster<sup>19</sup>), he or she feels to be ‘not a number, but a free man’, and not without a reason.

The model of universal scientific knowledge as a product of absolutization of the methodological experience in the exact sciences arose in a certain historical period, namely in the era of early New Age in Western Europe, and it had specific socio-cultural roots. Over many centuries preceding this era, man could not dare to present such ‘universal insolence’. The hypertrophied individualism of the culture in the nascent modernity made a man, bearing the scientific and technical mind, the ruler of the world, who is able not only to discover its laws, but also to use the obtained knowledge as a tool for conquering it. This ideological breakthrough had numerous consequences, both positive and negative, and it largely influenced the formation of the social universe in which modern people live their lives. However, the very fact of socio-historical rootedness, and, in this sense, of the ‘relativity’ of the Cartesian picture of the world, is quite obvious not only for the newest constructionist psychologists, but also, for example, for the classics of the sociology of knowledge — Karl Mannheim and Max Scheler — who are, by the way, not mentioned in the book of Lock and Strong.

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Why reading a book on social construction of reality and the ‘matrix’ of social life today? The question is largely rhetorical. From a professional and didactic point of view, the joint work of the ‘trans-Pacific’ alliance of psychologists is, although not exhaustive, but at least problematically and thematically polychrome *Introduction to Social Constructionism*, and acquaintance with it can be useful both for practicing specialists in the field of social research and for those who are still studying. And from a general ideological position, constructionist metaphors and descriptions of social life help not only to appreciate the omnipresence and virtuosity of the work of the structures that surround us or are inscribed in us, to feel its stubborn and ‘factual’ nature, but also to realize that we ourselves produce them, and the flexibility of this process can be quite significant. This flexibility partly evens, although does not eliminate completely, the fundamental tension that is built into the relationship between structures (of very different origin and status) and human freedom.

<sup>19</sup> Who, by the way, is also a constructivist, but of a completely different school.

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