

# Rethinking the theoretical base of Peter L. Berger's sociology of religion: Social construction, power, and discourse

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## Abstract

Peter L. Berger (1929–2017) was one of the most influential sociologists of the last sixty years. In the sociology of religion, his publications are among the key works of the discipline. This paper is a “positive critique” of three aspects of Berger’s theoretical work in the sociology of religion: (1) an inconsistent application of the idea of social construction, (2) a lack of focus on power and ideology, and (3) an insufficient operationalization of language as a vehicle of world-construction. Augmenting Berger’s field-defining work with insights from contemporary theories of ideology and discourse, the article provides an outline for a critical constructionist approach to the sociology of religion.

## Keywords

Peter L. Berger, sociology of religion, power, discourse, social construction

Peter L. Berger (1929–2017) needs few introductions. His classic works, *Invitation to Sociology* (1963), *The Social Construction of Reality* (with Thomas Luckmann [1966] 1967), and *The Sacred Canopy* (1967) have reached millions of readers and have been cited thousands of times (Hjelm 2018). Although often describing himself as marginal to

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the discipline, Berger's work in social theory and religion continues to inspire. In the sociology of religion, *The Sacred Canopy* remains a constant source for citations. This is remarkable in a time when few scholarly works are remembered by their fiftieth anniversary. It is unclear, however, how much of this citing is done ritualistically, as a reference to an acknowledged classic in the field. Most citations of Berger refer to his work in the 1960s, and a minority of these engage properly with his original ideas. I have myself (Hjelm 2018, 167) confessed to doubts as to whether his latest work (2014) will become the "new paradigm" for the study of religion it purports to be.

So, why bother in 2019 with Berger's work in the sociology of religion? The answer: The so-called "return of religion." Much ink has been spilt—with Berger himself showing the way—over how the world is as "furiously religious as it ever was" (Berger 1999, 2): Secularization theory is supposedly dead (Stark 1999) and we're allegedly witnessing the dawn of a "post-secular" age (e.g., Moberg et al. 2012). While there are very good reasons to doubt whether this triumph of religion scenario presents a full view of the issue, the celebrationist view is correct in one sense: there is—at least in "the West," traditionally considered the fount of secularization—more *talk* about religion than in a long time. Nilüfer Göle captures the spirit of this change with reference to Islam, which is the source of much of this renewed talk. She also shows how talk has tangible social consequences:

Veiling in the public schools and Muslim candidates in the parliament, mosques near the churches and the cathedrals, praying in the streets, all are examples that make 'indifference' impossible for Europeans who find themselves in a passionate debate over the presence of Islamic signs in public life. However, these confrontational controversies around Islam reveal the tumultuous transition and recognition from the status of an invisible migrant to that of a visible Muslim citizenship. (Göle 2011, 388)

What I am suggesting here is a refocusing of the sociological gaze from debating whether religion is in decline or just changing character—a debate where, again, Berger has been a pivotal reference on both sides of the debate—towards how the boundaries of religion and the secular are constructed in discourse, and what the consequences of these constructions are. Sociologists of religion are gradually recognizing that talk is doing, discourse is social practice (Wuthnow 2011; Hjelm 2014a), and in today's context of the increased visibility of religion (Hjelm 2015), we need approaches that complement more traditional concerns regarding measurements of practice and belief. Somewhat paradoxically, I think a way forward in this endeavor can be found in Peter Berger's work on religion. Paradoxically, this is because most of the elements for an approach taking the role of discourse in society seriously are to be found in Berger's original contributions. Yet, these are not the primary elements Berger himself or most of his followers have employed in their empirical analyses and subsequent developments of theory in the sociology of religion.

This article offers a sympathetic but critical analysis and development—a "positive critique" (Giddens 1993, viii)—of the theoretical core of Berger's sociology of religion, in three areas in particular. First, the role of social construction—Berger and Luckmann's key contribution to sociological vocabulary—in Berger's sociology of religion is unclear. My analysis and critique points to a discrepancy between Berger and Luckmann's original ideas about the sociology of knowledge approach to sociology of religion and Berger's later work. Reading Berger against Berger, I discuss the consequences of taking "social construction" seriously in the sociology of religion. Second, I move further from Berger's own theoretical

scheme by adding questions of power into the equation. The critique still remains within the bounds of Berger's own theoretical influences, of which Marx was one of the main ones. I point, however, how (and why) Berger sidesteps, and later completely abandons, crucial questions of power in his work. I argue that Berger's insistence on order as an anthropological necessity is not incompatible with an approach that puts power center stage. Finally, and here I move rather decisively beyond Berger's original contribution; I suggest Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a methodological approach for a sociology of religion that focuses on processes of social construction, and the role power plays in those processes. What this kind of Critical Discursive Study of Religion (CDSR) offers for sociology of religion inspired by Berger is not just a methods toolkit, but an operationalization of Berger's focus on meaning in terms of the empirical study of discourse.

In the above endeavor, I am guided by none other than Berger and Luckmann themselves. Quoting Parsons, they describe their work as "systematic theoretical reasoning" and a "study in social *theory*, not *theories*" (Parsons 1949, v, quoted in Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1967, 17–18). This means that

[W]e are not and cannot be faithful to the original intentions of these several streams of social theory themselves. But, as we have already stated, our purpose here is not exegetical, nor even synthesis for the sake of synthesis. We are fully aware that, in various places, we do violence to certain thinkers by integrating their thought into a theoretical formation some of them might have found quite alien. (Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1967, 17)

Considering Berger's aversion to everything falling under "critical sociology," the last sentence above is no doubt the case with my critique and reworking of Berger's theory. Yet, it is exactly in this spirit that I think Berger's theoretical thinking in the sociology of religion should be rethought and rejuvenated for contemporary purposes.

## Social construction

It is probably no surprise that anyone writing extensively about any topic over many decades contradicts him- or herself and changes their point of view. One could argue that this is a sign of healthy scientific progress, where evidence and new theoretical ideas supersede old patterns of thinking. Moreover, interpreters of a scholar's work read it differently from each other, creating new ways of positioning the scholar. This is certainly the case with Berger. First, his early work has been characterized as "simplistic" and "crudely functional," only later replaced by the more nuanced approach of *The Sacred Canopy* (Wilson 1969, 425–426).<sup>1</sup> His "middle" work, including *The Sacred Canopy*, might be best characterized as a combination of sociology of knowledge, Weberian comparison, and phenomenology of religion. This, according to some (e.g., Turner 2008, 496), has been later supplanted by a focus on order and perhaps a return to a more functionalist approach. Second, Berger has changed his mind about secularization (Berger 1999). Finally, his work has been interpreted as sociologically reductionist (Wuthnow 1986, 136; Goode 1969, 352), but also his "framework has received more use for *appreciating* religion than for studying it" (Wuthnow 1992, 31, emphasis in the original). Most fundamentally, I would argue, Berger has not been consistent about the idea of social construction in his work on religion. Further, this is certainly the case with most studies that have taken inspiration from *The Sacred Canopy*.

Early on in his career, Berger and his collaborator, Thomas Luckmann, outlined a sociology of knowledge approach to the sociology of religion (Berger and Luckmann [1963] 1969), which was later incorporated into the *Social Construction of Reality* (Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1967). In this approach, religion is a “symbolic universe,” that is, “a body of tradition that integrates a large number of definitions of reality and presents the institutional order to the individual as a symbolic totality” (Berger et al. 1973, 109; see Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1967, 104). Symbolic universes are, hence, vehicles of world-maintenance, where the order of everyday reality is legitimated with reference to a reality beyond everyday experience. The world is a human product, but needs to be continuously shielded against intrusion by relativizing events and ideas. Religion explains the social order on a cosmic scale. Berger, although famously prickly about defining religion (2014, 17; 1967, 175), does so anyway at one point in the *The Sacred Canopy*:

[Religion is] the establishment, through human activity, of an all-embracing sacred order, that is, of a sacred cosmos that will be capable of maintaining itself in the ever-present face of chaos [...] Every human society is, in the last resort, men banded together in the face of death. The power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men as they stand before death, or more accurately, as they walk inevitably towards it. (Berger 1967, 51)

This definition is remarkable, because it bridges Berger’s main work on religion with the earlier work on the sociology of knowledge *and* provides a rather traditional functionalist definition of religion. A detailed close reading of the different approaches to religion in *The Social Construction of Reality* and *The Sacred Canopy* is beyond the scope of this article, but of the two potential approaches to religion—constructionist and functionalist—provided in the above definition, it was not the constructionist one that took off after the publication of *The Sacred Canopy*.

Whether it is fair to call Berger a crypto-functionalist or not is not the issue here (he distanced himself vocally from the functionalism of Luckmann’s sociology of religion later (1974)). Rather, the question is: what happened to social construction? I’ll offer three tentative answers.

First, as Knoblauch and Wilke (2016) show, both Berger and Luckmann abandoned “social construction” and have continued to insist that they are not “constructivists” (Berger 2011, 95; 2001, 454). As mentioned above, Berger’s trajectory has been to emphasize order at the expense of construction and its contingencies. One could argue that Berger’s last work in the sociology of religion, *The Many Altars of Modernity* (2014) is a return to the original sociology of knowledge approach espoused in his earlier work, but as in his previous work, Berger does not give us an outline of a research program, but rather a broad approach. Whether it will be operationalized in a constructionist vein remains to be seen.

Second, it could be argued that Berger’s theological inclinations led him to think less reflexively about religion as the constructionist premise suggests. In *The Rumor of Angels* (1969), Berger outlines the consequences of the sociology of knowledge for theological thinking. He discusses how the sociological phenomenon of plausibility structures—the human community without which the maintenance of particular beliefs would be impossible—undermines theological thinking by showing that “the community of faith” is at heart a “constructed entity—it has been constructed in a specific human history, by human beings” (Berger 1969, 38). Religion is reduced from a divine revelation to a human creation.

However, paradoxically, this relativization “bends back upon itself” because, if logically applied, the “relativizers are relativized”:

We may say that contemporary consciousness is such and such; we are left with the question of whether we will assent to it. We may agree, say, that contemporary consciousness is incapable of conceiving either angels or demons. We are still left with the question of whether, possibly, both angels and demons go on existing despite this incapacity of our contemporaries to conceive of them. (42)

Having so established that sociology of knowledge does not invalidate theology, Berger progressively in his later work eschews the sociological relativity still present in the *Rumor of Angels*. In *The Heretical Imperative* ([1979] 1980)—which, again, in the tradition starting from *The Precarious Vision* (1961), combines sociology and theology—Berger conclusively shrugs off his mantle of sociological bystander and ends up arguing that the most viable religious response to the challenge of pluralism is what he calls the “inductive tradition,” that is, “the line of liberal Protestantism that originated with Schleiermacher” (1980, 154). This means a “mellow” middle ground between traditionalists and those who would modernize religion—Christianity in particular—beyond recognition. Here Berger wears his theologian’s hat, but speaks *for* a particular type of religion using a sociological argument (cf. Douglas 1982). This demonstrates rather unreflexive certainty from a thinker who has been keen to praise uncertainty (Berger and Zijderveld 2009).

Finally, while constructionism/constructivism (etc.) has been appropriated in the social sciences widely enough to talk about a “constructionist turn,” there is little evidence of that in the work inspired by Berger. A crude summary of the work citing *The Sacred Canopy* would include studies that assess religion’s impact on other social issues (the sacred canopy effect), studies that assess the impact of social belonging on religious belief and practice (plausibility structures), and studies that debate the virtues and vices of secularization. The operationalization of plausibility structures has been, however, more often than not reduced to testing the significance of a particular sociological factor instead of examining an interactive process. Secularization in turn has been even more reduced to a numbers game: we know so much more about frequencies of belief and attendance than we know about the actual practices of building and maintaining a religious or a secular worldview and practice (see e.g., Roof 1978; Chaves and Gorski 2001).

So, what would a Bergerian sociology of religion look like if it took the idea of social construction seriously? The answer, for me, lies in bringing *The Social Construction of Reality* and *The Sacred Canopy* back together more closely, as Berger himself originally said he would. Berger and Luckmann set themselves a clear task regarding the sociology of knowledge: it “must concern itself with whatever passes for ‘knowledge’ in society” (Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1967, 3). If we replace “knowledge” with “religion,” we get the core of a constructionist sociology of religion: *the sociology of religion must concern itself with whatever passes for “religion” in society*.

In some ways, this is not a new suggestion, of course. “Social construction” as a term has permeated sociology of religion and the broader study of religion for a while now. For example, the study of New Religious Movements has also utilized the idea of social construction widely, although the influence in that field can be traced more to constructionist sociology of social problems than to Berger. NRM scholars showed, especially, how some

religious groups became labeled as “bad” religion, and the dynamics of these processes of social construction.

There is, however, little agreement on what “social construction” exactly means and how it should be operationalized. The monolithic constructionism of its detractors does not simply exist (Hjelm 2014b). Recovering “social construction” as the task of sociology of religion is a novel endeavor in the sense that there has been surprisingly little theoretical development beyond a fashionable catchphrase regarding social construction. Perhaps the most eloquent representative of a constructionist approach to the sociology of religion has been James A Beckford, who argues that “it would be better to abandon the search for, and the assumption that there are, generic qualities of religion and, instead, to analyze the various situations in which religious meaning or significance is constructed, attributed or challenged” (Beckford 2003, 16). This, as we have seen above, is a rather different task from what Berger’s definition of religion gives rise to. The other key figure to adopt a constructionist approach to religion is Robert Wuthnow (1992; 2011), who has emphasized the role of discourse as social action since his early work, and again recently. However, Bergerian insights regarding social construction need, as I will argue in the next two sections, to be augmented by a position regarding power and ideology, and an operationalization of Berger’s focus on meaning in terms of discourse.

## Power

As with any popular theoretical concept, the idea of social construction soon attracted critics. One of these was Anthony Giddens, whose theory of “structuration” was fully outlined in his book *The Constitution of Society* (1984). Berger and Luckmann are not featured in that book, despite the similarity with their title. However, in an earlier book developing structuration theory Giddens does discuss the relationship between his work and Berger and Luckmann’s. Although sympathetic to the idea of social construction as such, Giddens (1979, 267, n.8) comments that *The Social Construction of Reality* “completely lacks a conception of the critique of ideology.” Giddens uses “ideology” here in its Marxist sense, as the ways in which ideas relate to social power. Therefore, put differently, Berger and Luckmann’s work lacks an account of power—and the same criticism can be extended to *The Sacred Canopy*. As Beckford (1983, 13) puts it in his assessment of the use of power in the sociology of religion, for Berger power “seems to refer ultimately to the background ‘noise’ of the social system...Berger pays little or no attention to power in human relationships.”

Where *The Social Construction of Reality* mentions ideology, it does so on a very general level, best understood as a “worldview” (Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1967, 123–125). Theoretically, the discussion of ideology in the book is guided by Mannheim’s (1936) use of the concept. An endnote explains that “the term ideology has been used in so many different senses that one might despair of using it in any precise manner at all” (Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1967, 204, n.100), hence their “narrow” use of the term (although one could argue that the “neutral,” worldview sense of ideology is anything but narrow). *The Sacred Canopy* mentions “ideology” only twice, again in the neutral sense of a worldview. The only explicit discussion of power that I have been able to find in Berger’s corpus is in an introductory textbook, written with his wife Brigitte (1975), where they offer a standard Weberian view of power as domination of one social actor over another. Berger’s response



to Giddens' critique (as suggested by Horrell 2001) is worth quoting in length, because it demonstrates how particular his understanding of "ideology" is:

Already in the early book with Thomas Luckmann there is the recognition that not all definitions of reality are equally powerful. . . . It is possible, of course, that Giddens and Horrell have in mind ideologies that I have not paid attention to, but that is not a methodological issue. . . . I don't know what Horrell means when he recommends that my approach be augmented by a 'critical theory'. If he means by that phrase what it was meant in Frankfurt School and other neo-Marxist circles, then I would heartily disagree—not least because these people have always exercised their critical acumen in dealing with the ideologies of others, hardly ever turning it back on their own ideology. (Berger 2011, 197)

The response is rather astounding coming from a scholar who by any measure is familiar with his Marx. It is no surprise that Giddens' suggestion does not make sense when ideology is understood in the neutral sense of a worldview. One could also question whether Berger and Luckmann truly pay enough attention to power, despite what Berger says here. In any case, since this aim of this article is to do exactly what Horrell suggests, it is sensible to discuss why Berger would choose to ignore ideology in the critical, Marxist sense, before I offer suggestions for augmenting his work with a critical approach (although one only tangentially related to the Frankfurt School).

It would be easy to credit Berger's consistent and often-voiced contempt for critical sociology to his political conservatism, expressed in his post-1968 academic work and his campaigns against "political correctness" (Berger 1992; 2001, 191–192; 2011). However, it is clear for anyone reading *The Social Construction of Reality* and *The Sacred Canopy* that Berger is intimately familiar with Marx. The former book contains more references to Marx than to Weber—a rather interesting accomplishment for someone describing himself as "an orthodox Weberian" (Berger 2001, 197). In *The Sacred Canopy* the ratio is, understandably, reversed. It is, hence, rather a dislike of *Marxism* and the "destructive disorder of the late 1960s" that Berger (2001, 191) attributes to Marxism and other progressive movements, than aversion to Marx himself that explains his anti-critical view. Refocusing Berger by using Marx and the critical conception of ideology is not therefore as alien an endeavor as a surface reading of Berger would suggest.

As Berger himself admits (2001, 191), his interests have shifted from "a sort of existentialist celebration of freedom. . . to a greater appreciation of the importance of social order" (cf. Turner 2008, 496). Berger's "order" is not, however, the sociological order of Durkheim, and even less of Parsons and his school, but an anthropological necessity, an inbuilt trait common to all humanity. This foundational philosophical anthropology, derived primarily from the work of Arnold Gehlen (Berger and Kellner 1965), and the consequent need for nomization—the ordering of a chaotic universe—is present in *The Social Construction of Reality*, but even more prominently so in the theorizations of religion in *The Sacred Canopy*.

Even if one wanted to retain this foundationalism—and some have argued that it is superfluous for a constructionist sociology of religion (Beckford 2003, 16)—the question one should ask is: *whose* order? Nazi Germany had order, but few would argue it was the kind of order that Jews and other minorities thought of as just or, even less, "natural." An anthropological need for order is an insufficient explanation for the constitution of particular social orders. Should Berger have taken issues of power more seriously, Marx and Engels' discussions about ideology could have provided the tool to fill the current lacunae.

It is in this tradition that I would like to add a focus on power to Berger's theoretical sociology of religion, and to combine that with the renewed focus on social construction discussed in the previous section. I call this approach "contemporary critique of ideology" (cf. Newman 2001), drawing especially from the work of John B Thompson (1990) and Norman Fairclough (1992).

Instead of a broad worldview, contemporary critique of ideology defines ideology as "meaning in the service of power" (Thompson 1990, 8). In the plural, rather than referring to "isms" (nationalism, socialism, etc.), ideologies refer to "constructions of reality (the physical world, social relations, social identities), which are built into various dimensions of the forms/meanings of discursive practices, and which contribute to the production, reproduction, or transformation of relations of domination" (Fairclough 1992, 87). Hence, power does not reside (as a Weberian approach would have it) only or mainly in recognizable institutions that wield it (e.g. law, military), but is an integral part of the interactions which construct social reality. Although retaining the Marxist terminology, the Foucauldian influence on this reformulation is clear (Fairclough 1992).

This kind of approach fits the Bergerian focus on social construction seamlessly. If the social world is an outcome of routinized interactions that become "sedimented" in institutions, then the question is who has the power to define the substance of these institutions. Berger and Luckmann give lip service to the idea that institutional positions provide individuals with power in the form of roles (Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1967, 65, 123). This is power in the Weberian sense. However, considering that language plays such an important part in Berger's thinking, it is significant that—despite his familiarity with Marxist concepts such as alienation, reification, and false consciousness—he practically ignores the power that resides *in* language, or more accurately, language use (*parole*) itself. This is, possibly, a disconnect that is an outcome of the focus on ideas rather than language in both Marx and phenomenology. In any case, "meaning in the service of power" fills a vacuum in Berger's work, and does so in harmony with his theoretical underpinnings. The alleged incompatibility of Berger and contemporary critique of ideology is not based on theoretical grounds.

Furthermore, there are no theoretical reasons why the focus on order—in the axiomatic sense used by Berger and Luckmann—could not be combined with an equally important focus on power. For example, where Berger and Luckmann see routinization as an outcome of the dialectical process of world-building driven by the need for order, a critical approach would argue that whatever we come to regard as "common sense" is "itself an *effect of power*" (Fairclough 1989, 92, emphasis in the original). Put differently, the naturalization of a particular social order is the "recognition of legitimacy through misrecognition of arbitrariness" (Bourdieu 1994, 163). This is particularly pertinent in light of the general task Berger and Luckmann ([1963] 1969, 414) set for sociology: "Sociology must be concerned with everything which, already on the *commonsense* level, is taken as social reality" (emphasis added). In a way, then, the focus on power also foregrounds the constructedness and contingent nature of the social world, complementing the renewed focus on social construction.

## Discourse

The final "augmentation" I would like to offer to Berger's theorizations is theoretical and methodological. The starting point of this is Wuthnow's (1992, 32) critique of Berger's focus on individual meaning: "the subjective emphasis on reality construction and personal meaning has pointed towards inner moods and motivations—phenomena that elude the usual methods



of documentation and verification in the social sciences.” One could argue that the same critique applies more generally to the phenomenological emphasis on “consciousness,” which Berger inherits from his teacher Alfred Schütz, and which is very much at the heart of Berger’s lifelong endeavor. Indeed, Berger’s whole “Weberian” sociology should in many ways be seen as a continuation of Schütz’s project of augmenting Weber’s sociology with the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (Schütz [1932] 1967). In this vein, as a phenomenological sociologist, Berger seems to pre-empt the critique of inaccessibility by referring to consciousness as *shared* consciousness, which is accessible: “Although consciousness is a phenomenon of subjective experience, it can be objectively described because its socially significant elements are constantly being shared with others” (Berger et al. 1973, 14). The main vehicle for sharing consciousness is of course language, which for Berger is “the basic form of objectivation” (Berger and Luckmann [1963] 1969, 414), and “the most fundamental human institution” (Berger 2011, 91). Yet, there are few signposts in his work as to what to do with language.

Having made the critique, Wuthnow (1992, 32) suggests a way out of the impasse: “an emphasis on symbolism and discourse offers a way of identifying observable, objective materials for analysis.” Wuthnow has been vocal about taking “talk” seriously in the sociology of religion. Yet, his most important methodological statement regarding the issue (Wuthnow 2011) mainly rehashes basic epistemological arguments which are familiar from broader discussions about qualitative vs. quantitative methods in the social sciences. Considering the number-heaviness of American sociology of religion, this is understandable, but leaves the reader without many practical pointers towards operationalizing “talk.” As a comment and remedy to Berger’s work in particular, Wuthnow’s emphasis on talk is curiously ambiguous about the role of social construction in the analysis of narrative and discourse. Further, curiously power is equally absent from his otherwise commendable exhortation to take talk seriously.

Recent years have witnessed a surge of interest in applications of discourse theory and discourse analysis in the study of religion and the sociology of religion (see Moberg 2013; Hjelm 2014a). The emerging field is far from unified in terms of its definitions of “discourse,” the ontological assumptions regarding reality beyond discourse, and the levels of analysis it purports to advance. But there is an approach within the broader field that draws from Bergerian insights into social construction and combines those with a focus on power and a clear operationalization of discourse. I have called this approach “Critical Discursive Study of Religion,” or CDSR (Hjelm 2016).

There is bewildering variety of definitions of “discourse” and guidelines to doing discourse analysis. Hence, every study needs to be clear about its understanding of the term (Hjelm 2011). There are, however, two characteristics—constitutiveness and action orientation—that could be said to be common to all discourse analytical approaches. The third, ideology, is specific to CDA from which CDSR draws.

First, discourse is considered constitutive: it does not simply represent a world “out there,” but constitutes—or constructs, if you will—it. The link with Berger and Luckmann’s ideas about the role of language in the dialectical process of world-building is obvious. CDSR is also more “Bergerian” than some more postmodern approaches to discourse, because it acknowledges an extra-discursive world of nature and social structure that enables and constrains discourse. Discourse does not construct *ex nihilo*. An analysis of the debate regarding Berger’s ontological assumptions is not possible here, but I tend to concur with commentators who argue that his social world “looks a great deal like the ordinary mundane world” (Collins 1994, 272) and that Berger and Luckmann’s “approaches to cultural phenomena had a clear understanding of the concreteness of everyday reality”

(Turner 2000, xv; see Hacking 1999, 25). A scholar's assessment of their own work is not necessarily the most accurate one, but Berger himself has been scathing about what he sees as the excesses of "constructivism": "as to the most radical formulation of this 'postmodernism'—that nothing really exists but the various 'narratives'—this corresponds very neatly with a definition of schizophrenia, when one can no longer distinguish between reality and one's fantasies" (Berger 2011, 95).

What exactly does discourse construct, then (Hacking 1999)? Fairclough (1992) has usefully listed three main foci for CDA: (1) social identities, (2) social relationships, and (3) systems of knowledge and belief. A narrow view of CDSR would concentrate on the last one—as has been the case in much of religious studies. A more sociological approach would, however, include all three, and interrogate the points where the constructions intersect and either confirm or contradict each other. It is in these intersections that CDSR finds its most interesting material, and retains the Bergerian focus by considering "text" in a broad sense, as a component of contextualized human interaction. This is indeed required by the focus on power both as a characteristic of discourse itself, and as an indicator of social positioning. Thus, when governments talk about religion, they wield a distinctly different type of power than individual representatives of religious communities. What is being said is the focus, but who says it also matters.

The second shared characteristic of theorizations of discourse is its action orientation (Edwards and Potter 1992). Discourse does things and things are done with discourse (cf. Austin 1962). It is a social practice in itself (Wuthnow 2011; Potter 1996, 105). This is an important reminder for the sociological skeptics who tend to see discourse analysis narrowly as analysis of text. Simply describing or typifying how something is talked about is not yet discourse analysis (although admittedly sometimes description passes for such). Proper discourse analysis also accounts for the potential consequences of particular ways of talking about things. As the effects of text cannot be inferred from the text itself—Thompson (1990, 105) calls this the "fallacy of internalism"—CDA is always contextual, requiring an ability to position discourses into the wider framework of social practice (Locke 2004, 42).

Third, and finally, CDSR (drawing from CDA) treats power as embedded in the ideological uses of discourse. Power manifests not only in the social status of a speaker or writer (although that is important too), but is an element of language use—grammar, narrative, rhetoric—itself. "Ideology" should hence be understood less as a noun than an adjective or adverb. When discourse "irons out" the variety of possible interpretations in favor of one hegemonic view, discourse is said to function ideologically (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999, 26). Equally, CDSR is interested in what is *not* said, that is, the implicit presuppositions of "proper" or "natural" ways of talking about things. Silencing alternative perspectives is as ideological as, for example, ideological word choices. Ideally, analytical practice balances analysis of meaning (on the sentence level) with a more detailed analysis of the linguistic aspects of text and talk (for an outline see Richardson 2007; Hjelm 2014a).

This necessarily brief outline should be sufficient to point to the influence of Marx's method in "unmasking" the workings of ideology. Indeed, Fairclough (1995, 17) at times talks about getting rid of "false consciousness," a key Marxian term. While Berger is hesitant to go down Marx's path entirely, he draws—especially in his early sociology of religion (Berger 1967, 85)—directly from Marx in his discussion on alienation. Typical of Berger's idiosyncratic treatment of the classics, alienation in his scheme becomes an issue of the sociology of knowledge rather than material oppression: "a theory of alienation with a constructionist twist" (Hjelm 2014a, 860). Contemporary critique of ideology combined

with the tools of discourse analysis provides Berger's theoretical sociology of religion with the missing link with power and a clear operationalization of the role of language in world-building and world-maintenance.

## Conclusion

Years ago, at a conference, I pointed out in my talk that Berger's concept of "desecularization" cannot be taken as a serious "counter-theory" to secularization as long as it does not respond to the original theoretical formulations made in *The Sacred Canopy*. At the time I was only beginning to suspect that perhaps there was also a more significant disconnect between Berger's work on religion and the *The Social Construction of Reality* than I had thought. In any case, for my troubles I was chastised by an older gentleman for "attacking" Berger. Perhaps that is what orthodox Bergerians (if there are any) think when reading this article. It has, however, been a positive critique, as promised. The idea of social construction is rightly considered revolutionary in the Kuhnian sense, and even if Berger hasn't been its first or only proponent, he has certainly been the most influential one. I have demonstrated above that a properly constructionist sociology of religion needs to rethink some of Berger's basic theoretical ideas. Whether or not Berger's followers like the proposed answers, they cannot avoid asking Berger the questions posed here.

The suggested revisions of Berger's sociology of religion are also vindicated by the shifting concerns in the empirical reality of contemporary religion, where discursive boundary-making and -maintenance are increasingly relevant. I'm not claiming that studies about effects of religion on other social factors and vice versa, or discussions of religious decline and change suddenly become superfluous. What I am suggesting is that in addition to these established approaches, sociology of religion would do well to look at how "religion" itself, and its variations ("spirituality," "sects," "cults," good religion, bad religion, etc.), are increasingly negotiated and struggled over in political, media, and private discourse. All over the world people are asking, for example: What is sharia law? What does the headscarf mean? Indeed, what is Islam? The way these things are talked about—is the headscarf religious or not?—have far-reaching consequences for life in pluralistic societies.

Analytical work taking talk seriously has been and is underway already, of course, but it is diffuse and struggling to find a place in the broader discipline. Peter L. Berger's work holds a promise of an approach that focuses on the construction of contemporary religion in (discursive) interaction. As I have shown, Berger himself falls short of this promise, and so does the corpus of work inspired by him. It is my contention that the above reformulations and additions are a step towards a critical constructionist sociology of religion that is not only currently rather absent in the sub-discipline, but which also caters to the needs of sociologists exploring the ways in which religion matters in the twenty-first century.

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## Note

1. I would argue that the seeds of the approach taken in *The Sacred Canopy* are present in different terminology already in *The Precarious Vision* [1961], but this is a matter of exegesis not central to the current argument.

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