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working paper

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It is all in the word:

Constructivism and constitutionism

Constructivism is one of the most successful paradigms within the social and human sciences at the beginning of the new millennium. But it is a very disputed paradigm, and critical accounts of this dominating –ism are proliferating. Recently, the critics have become more visible, and the paradigm is now challenged seriously. Being critics of constructivism ourselves we welcome this tendency. However, we are also critical of the critique since it tends to dichotomise the debate to an unnecessary degree, and, at times, does not admit the very fertile insights that are also part of the constructivist approach. In the following we shall join the critique, but in doing so we will point towards a moderated view of the ways in which the world becomes meaningful to us. Our aim is to sketch out a theoretical perspective that benefits from both the insights of constructivism and its critics, and thereby is able to realise the full explanatory potential of both.

1. Introductory considerations about (social) constructivism

Reality is socially constructed, as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann famously said (Berger & Luckmann, 1966/1991). This proposition is common knowledge for social constructivists and constructionists of all hues;[1] as they see it, our understanding of the world cannot be separated from the contexts and processes in and through which it is perceived. In a manner of speaking, the world is reduced to the social context and cognitive process of the observer. At the theoretical level, constructivism sees itself as presenting an alternative to the positivist theory of knowledge with its ideal of scientific objectivity (Gergen, 2001, p. 7). Taking this insight as the starting point for scientific investigations has a number of consequences: most notably, constructivists focus on the processes of social interaction whereby the understanding of a certain phenomenon comes about and leave aside the question of what the phenomenon 'really' looks like.

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[1] Although some scholars attempt to distinguish between constructi*vism* and constructi*onism* and see them as two separate modes of studying social construction (Burr, 1995, p. 2) no clear demarcation has been achieved, and the two terms are often used interchangeably, even synonymously (Lynch, 1998, n. 12). In the following we shall refer to (social) constructivism, as the use of this term seems to be on the rise (Andersen, 2001, p. 101).

While constructivists take for granted that the human understanding of the world is never given, it is a matter of dispute how deep the construction goes. That is, social constructivists disagree as to whether it is only the human understanding of the phenomena or also the phenomena themselves that are constructed, and they diverge on what consequences the constructivist stance should have for research. First, all constructivists agree that inherently social phenomena such as money or art are constructed, but not all would concede that objects of the physical world such as gravity or biological sex are social constructs as well (Hacking, 1999, pp. 24-25). Second, all constructivist research aspires to show that the phenomenon under study, or at least our understanding of it depending on the type of studied phenomenon and the radicality of the researcher, is contingent. That is, the phenomenon needs not exist in its present form or, perhaps, exist at all. Some constructivists then go on to claim that the phenomenon is bad or wrong as it is and to suggest ways of doing away with or changing it (Hacking, 1999, p. 6).

In the following we shall concentrate on the presuppositions, arguments, and consequences that are common to social constructivism. We focus attention at the level of theoretical foundations and investigate the benefits and limitations of the constructivist perspective. One characteristic feature of the constructivist view is that it neglects that which is given to our senses and does not explain how the encounter of sensory stimuli and cognition constitutes meaning. We argue that constructivism thereby makes the contradictory claim that the importance of the outer world is, at best, secondary to the social sphere in which meaning is constructed. Contrary to this position we claim that without the reality of the outer world there would be no sociality, only self-absorbed, tautological perdition. Having substantiated this argument about the ontological weakness of constructivism we shall present an alternative approach, constitutionism, which we believe retains the explanatory potential of constructivism while avoiding its inherent disadvantages. By installing constitutionism as the fundamental theoretical perspective, the concept of constructivism may also be preserved and reserved for the practical and analytical functions we believe it performs well.

2. A false alternative: constructivism versus essentialism

At the core of the constructivist program are the claims that objective knowledge is unattainable and that no phenomena are naturally given, at least not to our meaningful recognition. Thus, social constructivism is contrasted both with the positivist goal of achieving certain knowledge and with the essentialist ambition of discovering what lies behind the appearance of a phenomenon. However, in a number of ways social constructivists actually reproduce positivistic and essentialistic notions of the world and our being in it instead of presenting alternatives to it.

First, the claim that something is socially constructed is as absolute as the proposition that it is objectively given, and, thus, is quite essentialistic in its very denial of essence (Kjørup, 2001, p. 13). That is, the statement about the constructed nature of (social) phenomena must be substantiated if it is to represent a viable alternative to objectivism; its correctness cannot simply be assumed, as many constructivists tend to do. Second, constructivists do not present any alternative to the positivistic ideal of discovering truths that exist independently of our representations of them, wherefore this ideal is conserved in the rejection of its attainability (Kjørup, 2001, p. 16). Again, constructivists must argue their case positively if an alternative to the rejected position is to arise; as it stands, constructivists must return to existing norms of falsifiability and reproducibility when looking for standards with which to judge their own truth claims.

Third, both reproductions of the positions that constructivism claims to counter result from the insistence that we are dealing with exclusive alternatives of either/or instead of inclusive positions of both/and. Dichotomous thinking is in itself a strong and seemingly convincing way of conceptualising the world, be that the world of science or that of daily life. As Richard J. Bernstein points out:

> "From a manifest perspective, many contemporary debates are still structured within traditional extremes. There is still an underlying belief that in the final analysis the only viable alternatives open to us are *either* some form of objectivism, foundationalism, ultimate grounding of knowledge, science,

philosophy, and language *or* that we are ineluctably led to relativism, scepticism, historicism, and nihilism" (Bernstein 1983: 2).

Social constructivists operate within the same basic thought pattern as do essentialistic positivists. Adherents to both positions concede that phenomena are either given or contingent, nominal or essential, and the list of exclusive alternatives continues: phenomena and the experience of them are either natural or social, agential or structural, individual or collective (Powell, 2001, pp. 302-303). Ultimately, these exclusive dichotomies mean that constructivists, having rejected one term of an oppositional pair, are stranded with the second and equally criticizable option.

The basic problem, which we shall explore in the following, is that constructivism by pitting itself against essentialism both creates and becomes a false alternative. We shall first look into the unfortunate implications of the exclusive stance, and then seek to explain constructivism's reliance on the dichotomous and in our opinion restricted explanatory mode through an examination of the limitations we believe are embedded in the constructivist terminology.

3. Unfortunate implications of 'construction'

The constructivist focus on how human knowledge is formed fosters two main points of critique and debate: allegations of idealism, for one, and, secondly, accusations of relativism. Even though the critique of constructivism at times becomes rather one-dimensional, we find that the charges of idealism and relativism are generally substantiated.[2]

3.1 Idealism

While realism and idealism are presented as each other's opposites, constructivists, contrary to their usual practice, acknowledge that the two terms form the extremes of a scale, and most constructivists explicitly position themselves near the middle of the scale rather than at the extreme ends. Thus, most constructivists avoid the trap of posing idealism as the false alternative to realism, and the problem-

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[2] There is intense awareness of these problematic aspects on both sides of the debate-line, see for instance Parker (1998), Bredsdorff (2002), Kjørup (2001), Hacking (1999).

atic position that nothing is real, which in reality amounts to much the same as claiming that everything is real, is only held by a few (extravagantly radical) members of the field.[3] However, the distinction between the natural and the social is rigorously maintained and provides the foundation for the constructivists' division of the world into the given and the constructed.

The existence of physical reality is usually not questioned, but the human perception of it always is. Thus, the great majority of constructivists would concede that the earth has a certain shape regardless of the form we attribute to it, but they do not think it possible to determine that shape independently of the processes of language-borne culturation. Very often constructivists conclude from this dependency on cultural forms that humans are unable to perceive anything but these very forms. In short, the earth might very well have a particular shape regardless of our attributions, but we shall never be able to perceive it. Consequently, the physicality of the earth, allegedly, is of no interest, and we should even restrict ourselves from holding any opinions on the matter.

Arguing that the resulting believes all too often obliterate the processes by which they come about, constructivist researchers seek to draw attention to and explain these social and creative processes. Since constructivists contend that we cannot expect any truthful insight through the perception of the given, wrapped as we are in our cultural contingency, they believe we must search for the truth in this very culture – and they find the road to truth in deconstruction. They conclude that it is by means of the deconstruction of culturally determined cognitive structures that we reach or – at the very least – aim at reaching the pure and irreducible ideas.

Whereas social constructivists give the world of nature and physical objects a special status – they exist prior to their construction, so to say – they believe that other phenomena belong exclusively to the realm of social reality. The broad categories of cultural practices and political institutions present themselves as examples of such thor-

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[3] Jean Baudrillard's postmodernist denial of the existence of reality with its corresponding celebration of the simulacrum, the simulation of the real, exemplifies this position (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 139).

oughly social phenomena, and although these do have physical manifestations – theatre buildings and parliaments – they can be studied as social constructs without remainder. In this sense, social phenomena gain their very reality in and through their creation, and even when there is a material base to the processes of social construction the study of these processes is valid and worthwhile in its own right.

The charge of idealism, then, can be overcome by pointing out that social construction is a prerequisite for the existence of the human world, and that the analytical tool of deconstruction is well suited to explaining the processes through which the culturally contingent structures we usually call reality are erected.

3.2 Relativism

The charge of relativism, as we see it, is potentially more damaging to the constructivist position than is the accusation of idealism. Constructivists assert, and rightly so, that such phenomena as social norms and political practices are conditioned by the circumstances in which they arise, take on various shapes in different contexts, and can be altered within the specific contexts in which they arise. Thus, the objectivist longing for a certain and eternal truth is discarded, especially if that means *one* universal truth. However, leaving certainty behind does not necessarily lead to relativism, and most constructivists have sought to tackle the weaknesses of the relativist stance, but none have been able to overcome them altogether. For some constructivists the sensitivity to the dynamic and contextual character of knowledge has fostered a naive cherishing of all norms and practices as being good in their context, while others have come to harbour a constant suspicion that no society is ever good enough.

'Multiculturalism,' a popular approach to intercultural encounters in the face of the plurality of norms and values, provides an apt example of the first constructivist option and its limitations.[4] Zygmunt Bauman presents the problem pointedly:

> "…the invocation of 'multiculturalism' when made by the learned classes […] means: *Sorry, we cannot bail you out*

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[4] For a more thorough presentation and critique of multiculturalism see Just (2004).

of the mess you are in. Yes, there is confusion about val-
ues, about the meaning of 'being human', about the right
ways of living together; but it is up to you to sort it out in
your own fashion and bear the consequences in the event
that you are not happy with the results. Yes, there is a ca-
cophony of voices and no tune is likely to be sung in uni-
son, but do not worry: no tune is necessarily better than the
next, and if it were there wouldn't at any rate be a way of
knowing it" (Bauman, 2001, p. 124).

Thus, some constructivists claim that no one is able to understand
norms and practices that originate in contexts other than their own,
and thereby abandon questions of truth and right. The idea is that
even though a certain practice may look utterly despicable from my
place of perception, it may be perfectly acceptable in another con-
text, and I am in no position to know. This sort of relativism not only
disallows engagement and learning between differently situated in-
dividuals, but also has the slightly ironic twist of making each posi-
tion anything but relative to its occupants. If we are not able to come
to an understanding of any other positions than our own, how are we
ever to learn that some of our current practices and beliefs may be
less than perfect, and how are we going to be able to change them?
If we are unable to distance ourselves from the contexts in which we
live and learn, how are we to know that these contexts are con-
structed and contingent rather than given and necessary?

The mutual intentionality of interaction must be reciprocated in order
to be performed. From an ethical standpoint this is where the multi-
cultural relativism fails. In its rejection of an ethnocentric necessity it
denies 'the other's' truth claim. This means, firstly, that 'the other's'
truth is localised and ultimately becomes irrelevant to 'the I' since it
has its own equally valid localised truth. Secondly, the idealisation of
'the other's' right to an inviolable local truth may lead to a negligence
of 'the I's' truth claim, which weakens reciprocity. 'The other' and
'the I' are not bound to relate to each other, and thereby the relativist
position harbours the very asymmetry between different subject po-
sitions that it set out to avoid. The position of extreme contextualism
contradicts the theoretical foundations of social constructivism and
undermines the very possibility of constructivist research.

The second possible constructivist take on relativism seeks to avoid the weaknesses of the first by focusing on the shortcomings of existing situations and emphasising how things could be different. Many modes of discourse analysis and particularly the influential approach known as critical discourse analysis (CDA) exemplify this suspicious constructivism. While not all constructivists are discourse analysts, language certainly plays a central role in the social construction of reality, and all forms of discourse analysis take this and other social constructivist insights as their starting point (Bredsdorff, 2002, p. 89).

In CDA the constructivist foundation is formulated as an interdependent relationship between the social world and our talk about it. "…Discourse is socially *constitutive* as well as socially shaped: it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people" (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258). When studying the relationship between discursive action and social structures (Wodak et al., 1999, p. 9) CDA tends to focus on the dark side of discourse. The purpose is to highlight discursive features that usually pass unnoticed but contribute significantly to the creation of social reality. Moreover, it is commonly accepted that the dominant discourses are usually bad; CDA reveals oppressions and inequalities embedded in the way we discursively construct our society (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, pp. 4-6).

CDA seeks to avoid the weaknesses of relativism by focusing on the relationship between discourse and society and emphasising how discourses may hide or even excuse social injustices. That is, CDA aims to explain the communicative construction of the social world and to criticise the forms and contents we usually take for granted. Thereby, CDA becomes able to pass critical judgement on current assumptions and to create possibilities for change, but in doing so it also betrays its own foundational insight that discourse is socially constitutive as well as constituted. In order to perform its critique CDA must operate with a notion of what is 'really' going on behind the discourse and grant itself a privileged position. Thus, CDA must

operate with a distinction between the discursive expression of the social order and society as it actually is.

In order to perform its critical function CDA must deny its own theoretical starting point and reinstall a category of objective reality against which the discursive constructions of society may be tested. However, if the idea that social reality is discursively constituted as well as constitutive of discourse were to be taken seriously, there would be no way of circumventing the mutually constitutive dimensions of discourse and society. There would be no recourse to a truer understanding of the present social order with which the predominant discursive constructions could be compared, and there would be no way of generating change except from within the current situation and with the presently available discursive means.

In its eagerness to avoid the charges of relativity and to endow its normative position with critical bite, CDA risks belying its theoretical foundation in the constitutive nature of discourse that in our opinion is its greatest asset. Thereby, CDA displays the weakness that is inherent to the choice of a constructivist perspective; even if there are occasional references to interdependent constitution, the dichotomous understanding of things as being either constructed or given, and of people as being either active or passive saturate the reasoning. The very terminology of social constructivism prevents its adherents from releasing the full explanatory potential of the perspective.

4. Problem: terminology

A main argument of this working paper is that some of the major confusions concerning the constructivist paradigm are due to the lack of conceptual distinction between the two terms 'construction' and 'constitution'. It is our claim that much of what goes under the name of construction should rightly be termed constitution. Certainly, both terms are employed by constructivists, but it seems very unclear whether they refer to different phenomena or if the terms are used randomly representing more or less the same things.[5]

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[5] The examples are abundant. We mention but a few: Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Burr, 1998; Putnam & Cooren 2004; Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004.

The very use of the term 'construction' partially accounts for the weaknesses of the constructivist stance. The concept of construction implies the idea of engineering. Even though one cannot construct anything out of nothing the idea is still that of a material, which lends itself to the constructing actor as a virginal, uninterested and unconditional resource to be built up according to the imagination of the actor. Construction, in other words, leaves the actor with the whole initiative; he or she is the inventive, creative, active and autonomous part working with an inactive and defenceless material.

These implications of the constructivist terminology are, however, at odds with the constructivistic claim that the actor is constrained by the social contexts in which he or she acts. When employing the language of construction constructivists actually create a different meaning than they claim to intend. While constructivists claim to pay equal attention to the roles of actors and structures and to view people as both constructive and constructed, their formulation of the position does not allow them to focus on both issues at once. Either the actor constructs society or society constructs the actor; there is no room for interaction between the categories, no way of articulating their mutual constitution.

5. Constitution as a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach

The concept of constitution as we fragmentarily outline it in the following is inspired by hermeneutics and, as a consequence, also draws on phenomenological ideas. Constitutionism, in our opinion, is an approach to meaningful being that does not present an alternative, but a corrective to generally held assumptions of the constructivist paradigm. There is a basic lexical distinction between the concepts of construction and constitution, and we advocate that applying this difference to the epistemological categories of constructivism and constitutionism will enrich the paradigm that is now labelled (social) constructivism.

5.1 Truth and language

The problem of construction is, in its essence, a problem of rationality, which means that it is concerned with the quality of the scientific

truth claims one can make about the world. As such the constructivist paradigm is part of an ongoing debate in the social and human sciences. In *The Contingency of Language* Richard Rorty (1995), on the basis of the idea that truth is neither found nor made, argues beyond the either-or of the objectivism-relativism dichotomy. Truth, he states, is not to be found 'out there' in the world; it does not lie there waiting to be discovered. With Rorty in mind, we can argue the impossibility of evaluating the truth quality of our understanding by its representational accuracy. The only accurate representation of the world is the world itself but this statement, despite its logical undeniability, makes no sense. The unmediated form of world relation – or being-in-the-world if one likes – is only found outside the realm of language and therefore outside the sphere of the meaningful. "Being that can be understood is language" as Gadamer says in one of his most famous aphorisms (Gadamer 1989).

Sometimes this Gadamerian statement is mistakenly taken to mean that being *as such* is language, but this, obviously, is not the point. The point is that being insofar as it is meaningful – what can be understood is that which makes sense, that which provides meaning – is being in language. The sentence does not deny the existence of non-linguistic being, nor does it discard the possibility of a world independent of humans; it only refers to a reflection on human meaningful being. Being in language is being in which the world is mediated[6] through the abstractions of metaphoric symbolism: meaningful life through metaphor as Paul Ricoeur would say (Ricoeur 1975). Consequently, the world cannot be perceived 'accurately' in the objectivistic one-to-one-relational sense. The unmediated being in which we find accuracy is possible only when the world represents itself, but in that case we must resign from meaningful reflection on that which is represented.

Hence, we adhere to Rorty's claim that "only sentences can be true, and that human beings make truths by making language in which to

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[6] For the sake of argument we use the term of mediation here in spite of Rorty's explicit critique of the idea that language should be conceptualised as a medium, which connects the two intrinsic natures of the world 'out there' and the self 'in here'. Most probably it would be more appropriate to see both the world 'out there',the self 'in here,' and language as instances of human being.

phrase sentences", but discarding the representational truth criteria does not lead to constructivism:

> " … (T)he idealists confused the idea that nothing has such a nature with the idea that space and time are unreal, that human beings cause the spatiotemporal world to exist. We need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that truth is out there. To say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states. To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations" (Rorty 1995: 108-9).

This statement, of course, begs the question of the qualities of the relation between world and language. The constitution of meaning takes place in a dialectical dynamic between the sensory appearances of the world and the elastic adaptability of the symbolic forms. We do not hereby maintain that the symbols, in a manner of speaking, wrap themselves around the appearing phenomena resulting in a mere print of them – that would bring us back to the representational truth. On the one hand, symbolic forms are socio-culturally and historically conditioned and characterised by an active and shaping adaptability. On the other hand, the symbolic forms are still directed towards an object – the appearing world – which always orientates the shaping. The practice of using symbolic forms is intentional and therefore directed and biased, but nevertheless motivated and guided by the spatio-temporal immediacy. Even the most subtle and sophisticated form has a relation to the world; the constitution of meaning is contingent in the sense that the specific form is possible, but not necessary. Contingency, thus, is not random, since what is possible is limited both by the appearances of the world and by the socio-cultural specificity of the symbolic forms.

The constructivist social pessimism – the relativistic idea that meaning is only understandable within specific language games and con-

sequently unreachable from other language games – seems to stem from the conviction that man is trapped in language. Since language, logically, can only make reference to language, man's life can only consist of the logical structures of language. Once a person is introduced to one language game he or she is determined by it and not only out of reach of the non-linguistic, but also out of reach of the 'other' linguistic. But as Geertz put it, some 30 years ago, "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun." This insight is *the* pivotal correction to the language-logic-trap: the logical structure of language does not produce significance in itself; it is not until the structure meets the given in immediacy that meaning is produced. Language without a semantic dimension does not make sense, so to speak. So human beings are un-trapped by language, since it is through language that the world becomes meaningful and opens itself to us.

The deconstructivist position gives the impression of an attempt to break free of the bonds of language by demonstrating the limitations of language. While this, for obvious reasons, takes place in language, it can be characterised as using language against language. The consequence is infinite regress. Language must be seen as a game, a game that we both need and cannot escape. Nevertheless we can overcome the determination of language, and indeed we do all the time in the very use of it. Of course this is also what the deconstructivist position does, but at the same time it defends a dead alley ideology that is hostile towards its own medium. One must surrender to the game and play, and it is in playing that creativity opens the world to us. But at the same time we must admit that this creativity was given to us in the first place by/in language.

Truth, then, is the consistent understanding of something. What gives a given understanding consistency is its appropriateness as being in the world within the framework of a specific language tool. This hermeneutic conception underlines the interdependence of truth, the understanding subject and the understood: "Es ist für die Wahrheit des Verstehens konstitutiv, dass der Verstehende zu dem gehört, was er versteht" (Grondin 2001: 71). The Heideggerian terminology of 'Geworfenheit' forms the backdrop of this statement, and one must keep in mind the underlying point of thrownness *into*

something in order to avoid the relativistic idea of self-absorbing linguistic structures able to construct their own truths independently of the world. On the contrary, the hermeneutic truth advocated here with strong allusions to Heidegger and Gadamer The constitutionist understands truth as the uncovering of something. As a product of intentionality, the discovery is a constitutive structuration of the material, which lends itself as object for our uncovering activities, and this material will always be partially resistant to the structuration. Thus, experiencing truth, in a matter of speaking, is experiencing the sensation of being familiar with a certain meaning. In a sense, truth is when language transcends itself and makes us feel at home in the world. We apply meaning in the Gadamerian sense (Gadamer 1989) incorporating it into our immediate situation and acting accordingly (Nørgaard 2002). Incorporating in this context means appropriating:

> "(T)o understand is not to project oneself into the text; it is to receive an enlarged self from the apprehension of proposed worlds which are the genuine object of interpretation (…) Thus appropriation ceases to appear as a kind of possession, as a way of taking hold of (…) It implies instead a moment of dispossession of the narcissistic ego" (Ricoeur 1981: 182-93).

We could consider the symbolic forms, the signs, as constructed entities, but in coherence with Rorty's claims we must emphasise that the fact that language is a construction does not mean the world is constructed too. And, more importantly, it does not make our meaningful symbolic representations a construction in their relation to this world. As system language may be compared to the castles we make out of sand on the beach during summer; both the significance given in language and that given in the sandcastle constitutes our relation to the world. We might not have any entrance to the world – insofar as the world is meaningful – except that of linguistic construction, but the relation between world and language is one of constitution, not construction. Using a common metaphor we can say that even though we perceive the world through our historically and culturally conditioned lenses, the world as such is not the lenses, it takes form through them. The lenses do not construct form out of nothing; there must be sensory impression of the world to

provide elements for the form, and as such the very perceiving itself bears witness to the existence and dynamics of the world.

The relation between the world and the language game could be characterised as a constant insistence by the world if it were not for the possible assumption that the world generally is intentional, which we would not claim. Nevertheless, the world is always there as a correctional factor regarding our language game, whereby language is dynamised and continually restructured. Language, then, does not result in some kind of alienation. It does not move us out of or away from the world, quite the opposite. It follows that language is not arbitrary, it is contingent as stated by Rorty. Unfortunately, we cannot prove the arbitrarity of language wrong, since the necessary evidence will be lost in pre-history. How did the cow come about being labelled 'cow'? Contemporary dynamics and changes in language show that such movements are always in one way or another motivated by what they refer to and not only a function of the system, e.g. the 'langue', to which they pertain. Language and truth constitute each other as that which can meaningfully be said about the world.

6. Constitution as a moderation of constructivism (and as mediator in the false alternative)

Constructivism, in its broadest sense, has contributed with very valuable insight about the hermeneutic fact that "worldviews do not merely duplicate reality as it is in itself, but are instead pragmatic interpretations embraced by our language-world" (Grondin 1994: 18). Moreover, constructivism has sharpened scientific practices and methodologies with a wide range of research designs, regarding empirical analysis as well as abstraction. Still, constructivism is far from being a uniform approach to the study of the social and meaning, and as a paradigmatic program its character is more that of an attempt to present an ontological premise than an epistemological consideration. We see this glide from epistemology to ontology as the prime cause for critique, and we see it as the reason why constructivism should be modified through the introduction of constitutionism as its theoretical abstraction. We consider the problematic gliding to be a consequence of an unawareness of the lexical specificities of 'construction' and 'constitution.' It is this blurring of con-

cepts that we have aimed at overcoming in drawing on key-insights from philosophical hermeneutics.

Human beings are, as inherent parts of their daily lives and routines, constructive. This we could call the intuitive instrumental being, which relates not only to the physical world, but also to the mental. The experience of being constructive, nevertheless, presupposes interpretation and understanding, a specific world constitution. The problem with provocation of the concept of construction lies in its hipostasization: when construction as an explanatory aspect of human cognition and being becomes paradigmatic the concept is stretched further than it reaches. It is in the transmission of the logic of instrumental construction that the erroneous move is made.[7]

However, we cannot entirely substitute constitution for construction. While constitutionism as a philosophical implication might be relatively convincing it is difficult and complex to methodize. The concept of construction has the seducing feature that it is easier to make analytically operative than constitution. When we apply construction in the analytical approach, what we do is to deconstruct. The construction is necessarily something created, e.g. something constructed, which in our perspective is something 'accumulated' by someone, and the analysis, consequently, must be the opposite; that is, an attempt to decompose or to part. This is, in principle, a straightforward process during which the analysed elements become increasingly fragmented, and in spite of its never-ending character this work has practical advantages.[8] The concept of constitution does not offer this straightforwardness. A constitution, form or shape, is not basically a construct, it is an appearance, and it is not an intrinsic quality of the appearance that it can be dissolved in its basic elements. Naturally, we can choose, analytically, to describe the form as being composed by a number of characteristics, but it is not in the nature of form to be composed. While the approach to construction is dissection, the approach to constitution is partaking; to grasp the form one must let oneself be grasped by it, and that, of course, requires a bigger investment than distanced deconstruction.

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[7] Language's obvious lacking ability to perform any absolute notion about the given motivates constructivism to turn its back on the world; constructivists make a virtue out of necessity and detach language from external reality.

[8] Admittedly, this is extremely put, and naturally the description can only be justified in principle.

Although this poses a great analytical challenge, we believe that the relativist weaknesses of the constructivist stance can be avoided without hampering the basic insight that human understanding is a contextually bound social process from which there is no escape. Such a strong theoretical position must accept the contextually constrained nature of all human interactions as its starting point. We are beings of space and time always facing each other and the world in the concrete here and now, but while the context limits our actions it is also what enables us to act in the first place. Without limitations there would be no possibilities; human action is facilitated by the prior existence of structures and frameworks, norms and expectations that give us guidance on what to do and how to do it. Only by means of our preceding understanding can we make sense of the specific situations in which we must act, and it is only when the situation has become meaningful that it is possible to act in ways that may change our world.

Social realities are continually constituted by the sense people make of them, and the processes of meaning formation are in turn constituted by structures and expectations that exist prior to the specific interaction. Social constitution contains its own dynamic whereby change becomes possible as a consequence of existing understandings. Our situatedness is what allows us to move beyond existing horizons; we are enabled by our limits. And it is in the idea of situatedness that we find one of the meeting points between the constructed and the constituted. We are situated not only in relation to our historico-cultural tradition and language game, but also in relation to the immediately given. This is where we should look for the intersubjectively experienced world and the possibility of encountering the 'other' language game.

The understanding of the interdependence of limits and possibilities provides a correction to the constructivist approach; this understanding is the foundation of the perspective we propose to label constitutionism. The constitutionist position is based on the claim that the world and our being in it only become meaningful through processes of social interaction. Furthermore, constitutionism focuses on the continual production and reproduction of meaning based on guide-

lines and norms that exist prior to any given interaction, but are only articulated in concrete interactions. Continual meaning formation is the process that constitutes our social reality; such meaning formation is, of course, connected to phenomena that are not purely communicative, but these phenomena only become meaningful through communicative interaction.

7. Outroduction

The world is not socially constructed; our understanding of the world arises from our experience of it, and our experience of the world becomes meaningful through our communicative interaction in it. Meaning is constituted in and through language, but the phenomena of which we speak are not constructed linguistically. In the social world – the only world available to human beings, the world we always already inhabit – words and things are interdependent. The same mutually constitutive relationship exists between present constraints on human actions and future possibilities for them, between the free agent and the predetermined structure, between individual and society. When the starting point for human and social scientific investigations of meaning formation becomes constitutionist rather than constructivist, the traditional dichotomous foundations are abandoned. The division of the world into the given and the constructed and of utterances about worldly phenomena into categories of true and false are then replaced by a presupposition of interdependency and an ideal of intersubjectivity. That is, our being in the world is simultaneously a *fait accompli* and an ongoing process of becoming, and our utterances about the world should not be judged on their objective truthfulness – as if we ever had access to the world independently of the utterance – but on its intersubjective meaningfulness.

The focus of attention for constitutionist research is the question of how meaning arises in and through communication. Emphasis is placed on specific utterances and their relationships with other utterances, the constitution of common understandings in communicative networks. By focusing on communicative norms and expectations and the creative use of these to create new meanings in specific situations the constitutionist researcher seeks to explain how

the contexts in which we interact become stabilised while they remain changeable. The analytical practice of explaining the communicative constitution of meaning from within may be more difficult and less logically compelling than the deconstructive endeavour of taking peoples' utterances apart. However, the constitutionist approach is truer to the utterances that it interprets, the phenomena with which the utterances relate, and the theoretical foundations on which it claims to be based than are constructivist analyses, which in practice rely on the positivistic dichotomies that are theoretically discarded.

Constitutionism offers an alternative to the constructivist starting point, which today informs most humanistic and social scientific studies of meaning formation. The constitutionist foundation enables the researcher to realise the explanatory potential that is inherent in constructivism's theoretical recognition of the interrelationship between the world and our being in it. A potential that constructivism itself does not fulfil because it bases its analyses on dichotomous categories that are easy to handle, but disable the study and explanation of interdependencies. The constitutionist perspective, then, closely resembles constructivism, but an important difference is inserted with the insistence of the both/and at the expense of the either/or as the basic analytical tool. With the present paper we hope to have contributed to the ongoing debate about the benefits and limitations of (social) constructivism. We also hope to have presented the outline and basic argument for an alternative approach – constitutionism – that may spark new discussions. Many points in the constitutionist program need to be substantiated, and in particular the constitutionist mode of analysis must be detailed before the explanatory promise can even begin to be realised. However, we believe to have made a good start and are looking forward to continuing the conversation.

8. Works cited

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