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Target article: Ernst von Glasersfeld, "Who Conceives of Society?"

Society, Social Construction, and the Sociological Imagination

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1. The issues raised by Ernst von Glasersfeld's paper, "Who Conceives of Society?", reflect long standing debates about the status of the social sciences among the scientific disciplines. There is still, indeed, an ongoing debate in the social sciences on whether there exists an entity that we could call society (cf. Mayhew 1968). Is the very idea of "society" rooted in the ideology of a particular class structure? Is "society" at the outset, as von Glasersfeld contends, the "handful of people we have learned to recognize" and then "extended" (§39)? His approach in general is rooted in cognitive, psychological, individualistic thinking. This is so alien to how sociologists think that it is hard to find the right standpoint from which to comment on von Glasersfeld's paper. The atomistic individual that von Glasersfeld grounds his views on is, from the sociological perspective, an ontological fabrication. One could imagine stepping back from both my sociology and von Glasersfeld's philosophy to argue that both the "individual" and "society" are ideological constructs and not natural kinds. The argument that societies and individuals are too mutable to be natural kinds can be countered in at least two ways: one is to adopt the Aristotelian notion of a second nature; the second is to view society, culture, and humans as part of nature. Von Glasersfeld claims that socialization arises from drives, interests, purposes, and inclinations (§41). These are all functions of intelligence, and none of these is a social phenomenon. The concept of society, he claims, "has to be formed by each individual by means of generalization from his or her own experiences" (§42). This sort of methodological individualism views the individual as a natural kind and society as an artificial construction. In the wake of the new sociology of science, which has demonstrated the dangers of trying to distinguish immutable facts from our descriptions of the world, methodological individualism is doubly problematic. It violates the fundamental perspective that drives sociology, and it ignores the empirical results of the new sociology of science.

2. Nonetheless, von Glasersfeld's effort seems like a reasonable undertaking because the realm of the social is widely assumed to be transparent to any undisciplined gaze. In fact, it is no more transparent to the non-sociologist than is the realm of quantum reality to the non-physicist. I have no competence as a physicist simply because I can "see," "feel," "taste," "smell," or "hear" features of the physical world that are the starting point for training, education and research in physics. So even before the substantive problems addressed in von Glasersfeld's paper come into focus, we are faced with the problem of what to make of remarks that begin by eliminating the very credibility of the sociological perspective. Unlike von Glasersfeld, I do not believe that "everyone is free to invent his or her own metaphysics" (§32). What is one to make of his assertion that he is "...not well versed in sociology, but..."

(§40)? This “but” is an invitation to an implausible suspension of disbelief. Would such a “but” not sanction a social scientist to follow up the assertion, “I cannot claim to be well versed in physics, but...” with ungrounded, untutored, and incredible remarks on everything from geometrodynamics to tensors and from black body radiation to string theory? And even then we must note that for sociologists, intellectual styles and metaphysics are properties of social networks, social institutions and cultures, and not of individuals.

3. I am at a great disadvantage here since every effort I make to correct von Glasersfeld’s conception of how sociologists understand society and social construction plays directly into his critique. Von Glasersfeld says X, Restivo says Y, but Y can only reiterate what von Glasersfeld objects to. Given this impasse, is there any way in which this paper contributes to or reflects almost two hundred years of systematic and cumulative sociological theory and research? This is hardly possible given that von Glasersfeld has restricted his sociological grounding to two classical thinkers, Simmel and Schutz, who, for all of their brilliance, have long been incorporated or surpassed, and from our own period, to Niklas Luhmann. Luhmann, one of the most advanced theorists in modern sociology, is hardly the place to go for help if you are not well versed in sociology.

4. All of von Glasersfeld’s claims are grounded in the sociologically untenable view of the “individual” as a real identifiable entity, something that is independent of society and manifests “subjectivity.” By contrast, I view “society” as an adaptive strategy and a discoverable unit of scientific analysis that emerged on the evolutionary landscape long before humans did. That is, social organization is a mechanism for survival and adaptation, a mechanism already visible in cellular cooperation and grouping behavior in pre-mammalian evolution. When humans “arrived”, they arrived already social, not as a collection of atomistic individuals. Every time von Glasersfeld uses the term “individual” or “subjective experience”, he takes for granted what must be interrogated and what has in fact been made problematic by sociologists (not to mention philosophers such as Nietzsche and Wittgenstein). Sociologists simply do not describe the way we come to conceive “society” in individualistic terms. Karl Marx (1958, pp. 104) offers one of the first and most concise statements of the sociological view of self, mind, and consciousness:

Even when I carry out scientific work, etc., an activity which I can seldom conduct in direct association with other men – I perform a social, because human, act. It is not only the material of my activity – like the language itself which the thinker uses – which is given to me as a social product. My own existence is a social activity.

5. This insight has been theoretically refined and empirically substantiated in the works of such sociological thinkers as George Herbert Mead (1967), Erving Goffman (1967), Mary Douglas (1986), C. Wright Mills (1959), Randall Collins (1998, 2005), Dorothy Smith (1999), and, in the sociology of mathematics in particular, Restivo (1992), David Bloor, (1976) and Donald MacKenzie (1981). This is the tip of an iceberg of research and literature that should be consulted and digested before one can credibly claim to say anything about what “society” and “social construction” are that does justice to the discipline of sociology. This illustrates the danger of imposing a “freely chosen” metaphysics onto the sociological landscape. If von Glasersfeld wishes to offer a philosophical critique of sociological ideas, he should be obliged first to capture those ideas in the native’s own terms. Sociologists do not arrive at “society” by way of individuals but rather by way of social units of analysis such as play, games, rituals, structures, and networks. Consciousness itself appears as a function of

networks of social relationships already in the works of the more insightful classical theorists, notably Nietzsche, Durkheim, Marx, and Mead.

6. Von Glasersfeld treats “social constructionism” as one of several possible philosophical background theories in sociology. My own view, supported by many but certainly not all sociologists (and herein may lie a rationale for offering a more congenial assessment of von Glasersfeld’s paper than I can offer), is that social constructionism is the fundamental theorem of scientific sociology. If one adheres to the lessons of the Durkheimian and Meadian traditions that run through the contributions of modern sociologists and anthropologists such as Mary Douglas, C. Wright Mills, and Randall Collins, then the view I offer here will be at one with at least this tradition. My view can and should be seen, then, as representing one tradition within sociology, but one with an extremely powerful pedigree and with substantial empirical support. Even before addressing this position, von Glasersfeld might have clarified the distinctions in the relevant literatures that separate various uses of “constructionism,” “constructivism,” “social constructionism,” and “social constructivism.” The significant distinction here is between “constructivism” and “social constructionism” according to Barbara Herrnstein Smith (2005, pp. 4–5). Smith views “social constructionism” as a critically and politically engaged set of views on knowledge and science. “Constructivism” is a broader set of views on the nature of knowledge and cognition. This conception of social constructionism plays into the philosopher’s notion that social constructionism is a philosophical concept. “Constructivism”, as Smith understands it, would clearly make an appropriate foil for a philosopher. The distinction between constructionism and constructivism is more arbitrary. In the science studies and cultural studies literature, these terms are used interchangeably. I prefer “constructionism” because it stresses “making” or “manufacturing”, the “doing” feature of social life (Restivo & Croissant 2008). Von Glasersfeld seems to think it is necessary to start this construction process at a psychological level; but it is precisely this level of analysis that has been eliminated by the emergence of sociology. Sociology has demonstrated that the psychologist’s “individual” is in fact a social structure, a set of social relationships.

7. What, then, does it mean to say something is socially constructed? It does not mean that something – for example, an idea, a concept, a theorem, a law of nature, or an object like the moon – is an arbitrary creation of human beings driven by certain religious, economic, political, ideological, or other similar interests or imperatives. It does mean that there is one and only one way that humans can come to be, to know things, and to build cultures, and that is through our interactions with others in our earthly contexts. This is the great discovery of the nineteenth century social theorists. Durkheim (1995: see especially his remarks on logic on pp. 433ff.) plays a crucial role in crystallizing this discovery and applying it to clarifying the nature of religion and logic as social constructions. It is at this crucial juncture that sociology begins to separate itself from philosophy. It is in the realization of Durkheim’s agenda in the application of sociological reasoning to scientific knowledge and in his rejection of transcendental and imminent reasoning that we locate the origins of the contemporary sociology of science and mathematics.

8. Let me bring my commentary to a close by returning to von Glasersfeld’s formulation of his problem: “How can constructivists speak of social interaction or communication with others, when, as they claim, their experiential world is their own construction? This question is frequently asked and is perfectly reasonable. The present paper is intended as an answer.” (§1). This is the classical philosophical way of logically undermining the very idea of the sociology of knowledge; the claim is that the sociology of knowledge is self-refuting. The

problem is a red herring and only makes sense if one assumes that because something is socially constructed, it is not “real.” Is the sociology of knowledge as much a social construction as the knowledge systems it analyzes as social constructions? Of course: we have no other way to do things, feel things, or think things than by way of our social interactions in their social and material contexts. For an elegant examination and refutation of the error at the root of the self-refutation argument see Bloor (1991, pp. 17–18).

9. Everything I have written so far is moot, given the most fundamental assumption underlying Glaserfeld’s paper. That is that philosophers stand on a “higher ground” from which they claim jurisdiction over the critical analysis and evaluation of the presuppositions, theories, and methods of all the other disciplines. This once widely-accepted conception of the philosopher’s role has become, at the very least, problematic and in my view must be rejected. Untutored social scientists claiming a philosophical or metaphysical “high ground” would find it impossible to publish a treatise on, for example, Bell’s theorem in any reputable scientific journal. It is clear from this paper that the struggle Durkheim carried out to establish sociology on a scientific footing against prevailing psychological and individualistic assumptions continues to require due vigilance and action.

10. Is it possible to imagine a resolution of the differences that separate Restivo and von Glasersfeld? Can this be done in a debate, in a series of conjectures and refutations, by refining the logics of our positions, or in some other rational manner? I do not think that any resolution is possible in these terms. The reason is, and here I follow the paradigm for comparing philosophical systems proposed by Clifford Hooker (1975), that our positions hide entire world views; it is those world views that must be compared, contrasted and criticized – element by element – not sociology and philosophy, and not one metaphysics versus another. And if it is indeed worldviews that are at stake here, we may be early witnesses to the demise of one or both of these two disciplines.

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