

Excerpts Encyclopedia of Social Theory I

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Title: Postsocial

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POSTSOCIAL

Postsocial analysis attempts to develop an understanding of current changes of social forms and of sociality in general. Broadly speaking, what postsocial theory aspires to is the analysis and discussion of an environment in which the social principles and structures we have known hitherto are emptying out and other elements and relationships are taking their place. While it may be correct that human beings are by nature social animals, forms of sociality are nonetheless changing, and the change may be pronounced in periods of cumulative historical transitions. The term *postsocial* shines an analytic light on contemporary transitions that challenge core concepts of human interaction and solidarity and that point beyond a period of high social formation to one of more limited sociality and alternative forms of binding self and other. Postsocial developments are sustained by changes in the structure of the self; these changes are captured by models that break with Meadian and Freudian ideas proposed during a period of high sociality and that emphasize the autoaffective side of the self and its nonsocial engagements. The notion *postsocial* refers to the massive expansion of object worlds in the social world and to the rise of work and leisure environments that promote and demand relations with objects. A postsocial environment is one where objects displace human beings as relationship partners and embedding environments, or where they increasingly mediate human relationships, making the latter dependent upon the former. Postsociality also implies a shift in the collective imagination from social and political preoccupations to other topics. We no longer seek salvation in society but elsewhere—in the biological sciences, in financial futures, in information knowledge. What some of these areas promise can be captured by the idea of life rather than by that of society and by the notion of enhancement rather than that of salvation.

SOCIALITY AS A HISTORICAL PHENOMENON: EXPANSIONS AND RETRACTIONS

The current retraction of social principles and structures is not the first in recent history. One of the great legacies of classical social thought is the idea that the development of modern society involved the collapse of community and the loss of social tradition. Yet what followed was not an asocial or nonsocial environment but a period of high social formation—a period when the welfare state was established, societies became societies of (complex) organizations and structures, and social thinking took off in ways that stimulated institutional changes.

The first region of expansion of social principles during the course of the nineteenth century and throughout the early decades of the twentieth was that of social policies, and this was linked to the rise of the nation-state. Social policies as we know them today derive from what Wittrock and Wagner (1996) call the "nationalization of social responsibility" (p. 98ff.)—the

formulation of social rights alongside individual rights and the positing of the state as the "natural container" and provider of labor regulations, pension and welfare provisions, unemployment insurance, and public education. A second region of expansion, connected to the first, was that of social thinking and social imagination. A corollary of the institutionalization of social policies were new concepts of the forces that determine human destiny: They were now more likely to be thought of as impersonal, social forces. Rather than assuming the automatic adaptation of individuals to changing environmental conditions, these ideas focused on the prevailing imbalances and their social causes: the social causes of occupational accidents would be an example (Rabinbach 1996). Sociology played an important role in bringing about the shift in mentality through which individuals came to be seen as the bearers of the individual costs of collective structures. When Mills (1959) argued for a "sociological imagination," he tried to capture in one concept the phenomenon of societal processes that individuals do not recognize but that affect and change their lives. A third area of expansion of social principles and structures was that of social organization. The rise of the nation-state implied the rise of bureaucratic institutions. The growth of industrial production brought with it the emergence of the factory and Page 586 the modern corporation. The advent of universal health care became embodied in the clinic, and modern science in the research university and laboratory. Industrial, nation-state societies are unthinkable without complex modern organizations. Complex organizations are localized social arrangements serving to manage work and services in collective frameworks by social structural means. A fourth area of expansion was that of social structure. The class differentiation of modern society is itself an outgrowth of the Industrial Revolution and its political consequences as well as of processes of social and political measurement and categorization.

It is central to our experience today, however, that these expansions of social principles and of socially constituted environments have come to a halt. In many European countries and in the United States, the welfare state, with all its manifestations of social policy and collective insurance against individual disaster, is in the process of being "over-hauled"; some would say "dismantled." Thatcherism in Britain and "neo-liberalism" in general could be viewed as a partially successful attempt to contest some of the social rights acquired in the previous half century (Urry 2000:165). Social explanations and social thinking run up against, among other things, biological and economic accounts of human behavior against which they have to prove their worth. The mobilization of a social imagination was an attempt to identify the collective basis for individuals' predicaments and dispositions to react. This collective basis is now more likely to be found in the similarity of the genetic makeup of socially unrelated members of the population. Social structures and social relations also seem to be losing some of their hold. The individual of industrialized society had already been portrayed as a "homeless mind"—an uprooted, confused, and inchoate self, whose predicaments contributed to the expansion of social principles discussed before (Berger, Berger, and Kellner 1974). But well into the twentieth century, this self appeared to be sustained by traditional family relations. What analysts see dis-integrating today are these "primordial social relations" (Lasch 1978). When complex organizations are dissolved into networks, some of the layered structural depth of the hierarchically organized social systems that organizations used to represent gets lost on the way. The global architecture of financial markets, for example, is enabled and supported by complex technological rather than social organizational systems. The expansion of societies to global forms does not imply further expansions of social complexity. The installation of a "world-society" would seem to be feasible with the help of individuals and electronically mediated interaction structures, and perhaps becomes plausible only in relation to such structures. The concept of society itself, geared as it is to the nation-state and to horizontal concepts of social structure, loses much of its plausibility in an era of globalization.

Postsocial transitions of this kind imply that social forms as we knew them have become flattened, narrowed, and thinned out; they imply that the social is retracting, in all of the senses just described. What sociologists have posited, accordingly, is a further boost to individualization (e.g., Beck 1992). This interpretation is not wrong in pinpointing subject-centered rather than collective structures as being on the rise in contemporary cultures. But it is nonetheless one-sided in looking at current transitions only from the perspective of a loss of human relationships and received forms of the social. What postsocial theory offers in the stead of the scenario of simple "desocialization" is the analysis of alternative forms of binding self and other, changes in the structure of the self that accommodates these forms, and forms of social imagination that subordinate sociality to new promises and concerns.

SOCIAL AND POSTSOCIAL SELVES: FROM THE INNER CENSOR TO STRUCTURES OF WANTING

The core model of the "social" self of the period of high sociality is the idea of the self as composed of an ego and an internalized "other" that represents society and functions as an inner censor. In Mead, the inner censor is called the "generalized other"; it is closely coupled to the intrasubjective conformist past of the self and the self as an object, which Mead calls the "me." At the opposite end of this side of the self lies the "I," the spontaneous, unpredictable, disobeying self. The "I" has the power to construct reality cognitively, and by redefining situations, can break away from the "me" and the norms of society. The "me" and the "generalized other" can be likened to Peirce's "you"; Peirce held the "you" to be a critical self that represented society and to which all thought was addressed. These notions are also roughly similar to Freud's "super-ego," the rule-carrier that functions as a regulative principle in an internal dynamic of morality and deviance. In Mead's theory, the self first originates from such a dynamic. It arises from role taking, from taking the perspective of the other first interpersonally, when engaged with a close caretaker, and then also intrapersonally.

This "I-you-me" system of the social self and its most sophisticated version (Wiley 1994:34ff., 44ff.) can be contrasted with a second model that understands the self not as a relation between the individual and society but as a structure of wantings in relation to continually renewed lacks. This notion of the self can be derived from Lacan, among others (Wiley 1994:33). Like Freud, Lacan is concerned with what "drives" the subject, but he derives this wanting not as Freud did from an instinctual impulse whose ultimate goal is a reduction in bodily tension but rather from the mirror stage of a young child's development. In this phase, the child becomes impressed with the wholeness of his or Page 587 her image in the mirror and with the appearance of definite boundaries and control—while realizing that she or he is none of these things in actual experience. Wanting or desire is born in envy of the perfection of the image in the mirror (or of the mirroring response of the parents); the lack is permanent, since there will always be a distance between the subjective experience of a lack in our existence and the image in the mirror, or the apparent wholeness of others (Alford 1991:36ff.).

The two conceptions may seem similar in that both emphasize the discrepancy between the "I" and a model, but they are in fact quite different. From the idea of the self as composed of an inner censor results an ego subjected to feelings of guilt, experiencing rebellion, and attempting to "live up to" social expectations. In contrast, the self as a permanently reiterated lack gives rise to the desire, also permanent, to eliminate the lack. The former model would seem to result in actions that are perpetually curtailed as an ego attempts to adapt them to internalized norms; it will also result in deviant actions that transgress boundaries of which

the actor is well aware. The second model yields actions spurred on by the unfulfillability of lacks, or by new wants opening up simultaneously with the (partial) fulfillment of old ones. In the first model, the actors' free fall from society is continually broken as they catch themselves (or are caught by others) in compliance with social rules and traditions, and return to their ontological security. In the second case, no society of this sort is in place any longer to provide ontological security. The "you" is the idealized self in the mirror or the perfect other. The actor would seem to be freed from guilt complexes; but he or she is like a vagrant perpetually searching, stringing together objects of satisfaction and dismantling the structure again as he or she moves on to other goals.

This search system is autoaffective and self-sustaining, indeed self-energizing; as a structure of wanting, the self is extended through continually renewed and discovered lacks that renew its motivation and affectivity. The Meadian "I-you-me" system neglects the autoaffective side of the self, which is not its self-love but its willingness to become engaged in circuits that renew wanting. What we need to retain from the Lacanian "mirror" stage is the idea of a self that is susceptible to such autoaffective pursuits. We need not find the mirror stage itself plausible as a description of what actually happens to the infant when it first recognizes itself in a mirror. In contemporary society, the mirror is exteriorized in a media, image, and knowledge culture; it is no longer either a physical mirror or the caretakers' activity of "back-projecting," their activity of "reflecting," like a mirror, the child's being in relation to parental idealizations and expectations. Instead, the mirror response is articulated by the media and professional image industries that project images and stage "wholeness." The mirror is also present in the "cathedrals of consumption" Ritzer (1999:8ff.) analyzes in the shopping malls and other places that offer enchanted displays of possible selves.

In a media, image, and knowledge culture that continually reactivates a lack-wanting dynamic, the reflexive (mirror image) self may describe contemporary selves better than the "I-you-me" system and may in fact be in the process of displacing and reshaping it. In this sense, a media, image, and knowledge culture is also a postsocial culture that stimulates and sustains postsocial selves. The seeming fit of the lack-wanting model with contemporary life may also result from the problems of primordial social relations, which no longer offer the kind of normative guidance and tight structures of control that are needed to give rise to an inner censor and a dynamic of guilt and rebellion, compliance, and transgression. The liberalization of partnership and family life that Lasch (1978) and Beck (1992), among others, describe, the detraditionalization of education and the individualization of choice, all conspire to prevent a strong "I-you-me" dynamic founded on the internalization of a censor. Mead, Freud, and others who contributed to the "I-you-me" model were not only proposing abstract theories of the self. Their conceptions were also rooted in existence, in particular patterns of attachment and socialization that are no longer dominant in contemporary society.

BINDING WORK AND THE BINDING OF SELF AND OTHER

If a media and image culture plays into postsocial trends, so does a knowledge culture. The self that is caught in a lack-wanting dynamic can easily be tied to the "wanting" objects of knowledge-oriented environments. This extends questions of postsocial development to contexts of work and brings up the issue of nonhuman objects.

A knowledge society is characterized by professional work that can hardly be seen as corresponding to the Marxian notion of alienated labor. Industrial ("instrumental," "alienated") labor has been characterized in terms of its machinelike functionality where the

action of the worker becomes an intrinsic part of a machine process, its lack of uniqueness or general reproducibility by anyone with comparable training, its measurability, the divisibility of the work into components that seem freely exchangeable, and the separation of means from ends such that the work is abstract and divorced from the product (Berger et al. 1974:24, 39). The logic of the production process may also dictate the management of social relations and cause the identity of others at the workplace as well as one's own identity to become divided and anonymized. But in today's Western societies, under 20 percent of the workforce are employed in the production sector. An increasing percentage of employees work in knowledge-based industries and services that include the image industries and science and Page 588 education. These industries and services are marked by a complexification of the work process rather than by job simplification and rationalization: sophisticated instruments replace simple machines, performance criteria relate not so much to speed, quantity, and large volume than to quality, innovation, and personalized service, there are fewer specific rules and room and demand for human agency, and an emphasis on information seeking and the upgrading of knowledge (Hage and Powers 1992:50ff.). The objects of this work are not only the goal and output of activities but things to which workers relate; they make relational demands and offer relational opportunities to those who deal with them. As objects of innovation and inquiry, they are characteristically open, question-generating, and complex. They are processes and projections rather than definitive things (Rheinberger 1992). Work with them reveals them by increasing rather than reducing the questions they raise. In this sense, they are the polar opposite of tools like hammers and drills. These tools and instruments are like closed boxes. Objects of knowledge-based work, on the other hand, are more reminiscent of open drawers filled with folders extending indefinitely into the depth of a dark closet. Since objects of knowledge are always in the process of being materially defined, they continually acquire new properties and change the ones they have. But this also means that these objects cannot quite ever be fully attained, that they are, if you wish, never quite themselves. What we encounter in the work process are stand-ins for a more basic lack of object.

The open, unfolding character of such objects uniquely matches the "structures of wanting" by which the postsocial self was characterized: Objects provide for the continuation of a chain of wantings through the signs they give off of what they still lack, and subjects (experts) provide for the possibility of the continuation of these objects by attempting to define and articulate them. This basic mutuality binds self and object. Object relations of this sort imply a level of reciprocity, perspective-taking, and at times solidarity (exemplified in Knorr Cetina 1997) between human subjects and nonhuman objects. Intimate object relationships of this sort may also be realized in industrial work, but they would seem to be far more of a structural requirement—and a source of innovation—of knowledge-based work. It is difficult to imagine a successful scientist or a high-tech specialist who is not intimately involved with his or her object of work. These involvements illustrate object relations as forms of binding self and other. As the respective work environments expand and encroach upon home life, object-relations may substitute for and mediate human relations. Objects may also be the risk winners in the context of the increased relationship risks in human relationships. Empirical studies suggest that for many in these industries, work is by no means a negative experience, but rather the place where they feel emotionally more at home than in their actual home life (Hochschild 1997).

Object relations have expanded into the domain of consumption, an area that takes us back to the working of the media and image industries but that can also be considered in the light of the objects involved. Objects that are acquired to be used also make relational demands, offer

binding sites for desires, and display similar qualities to those in knowledge-based work environments. Many consumer objects have a dual structure in that these objects can simultaneously be ready-to-hand usable things and, absent objects of inquiry, developed further by technological research (cars, computers), artistic design (fashion, commercials), or analysis (finance). This duality repeats itself when a device like a computer is on the one hand "ready" to be used but also retains an interior indefiniteness of being—a potential for further discovery and exploration involving a relational engagement of the subject with the object. In addition, a subject that develops an intrinsic relationship with a consumer object like a car, a computer, or a fashionable outfit will be lured into further pursuits by the referential nexus of objects and their continuous transmutation into more attractive successor versions. Thus, consumption illustrates the sense in which objects not only attract a person's desire but allow wanting to continue, by giving it its serial, chainlike structure.

Object relations tend to involve more than a formal correspondence between a self as a chain of wanting and the transmutational character of postindustrial objects. They are enriched by a semiotic dimension (an object signaling what it still lacks and a subject interpreting these signals), role-taking (subjects putting themselves in the position of the object), crossover (objects occupying a subject's mind), and flow experience (the subject becoming a "flow" of concentrated object experience). All these dimensions together account for the lure of object relations. The different relational components are marked by an interspecies reciprocity of a subject doing one thing and an object "reciprocating" with another. Postsocial binding is a form of liminal sociality, when compared with human binding.

THE CULTURE OF LIFE AND THE RISE OF A LIFE-CENTERED IMAGINATION

Object relations as construed above point away from a human-centered picture of society and back to nature and the material world. On the subject's side, they point not only to a temporalized self—pursuing wants in object worlds—but also to the possibility that this self is closer to material objects and to "nature" than the enlightenment concept of humans, that has been foundational for sociology, suggested. As assumptions about rationality give way to research into human cognition, homo sapiens loses IQ and gains emotions and visceral definition (Elster 1998). He or she also gains openness and "transmutability"—through technological, biological, genetic, and surgical as Page 589 well as psychological enhancements and alterations. Just as the notion of an object in a knowledge and media era no longer fits in with received concepts of objects as fixed material things, so the notion of a subject no longer fits in with received notions of humans as defined by reason, intentions, and agency and perhaps inner conflicts, as the main characteristics of interest to the social sciences. The postsocial subject is also a posthumanist subject. Yet it is part of a "culture of life," by which is meant a culture capacitated by and centered on material, technological, and informational processes.

The expansion of a social imagination had involved, since the Enlightenment, hopes for the perfectibility of human society in terms of equality, peace, justice, and social welfare, with the high point being Marxist visions of a socialist revolution. These ideas have not disappeared with the retraction of social principles and the collapse of Marxism. But the promise and hope and the excess imagination that went into visions of social salvation have been extended to other areas where they find progressive inspiration. What has become thinkable today is the perfectibility of life—through life enhancement on the individual level, but also through the biopolitics of populations, through the protection and reflexive manipulation of nature, through the idea of intergenerational (rather than distributional) justice. The notion of life can

serve as a metaphor and anchoring concept that illustrates a cultural turn to nature and how it replaces the culture of the social. "Life" bridges divisions between the natural, the human, and the information sciences and stands for an open-ended series of phenomenological, biological, economic, and other significations and processes. In the social sciences, "life" thinking is illustrated by those areas that have turned the individual and its search for Ego and "I"-related pleasures and affirmations into topics of investigation. But from a broader perspective, many areas focusing upon the subject can be seen to play into life-centered thinking—and in the social sciences today, the phantasized unit is more the subject than society. Theories of identity and identity politics and of the self and subjectivity provide examples of such trends, as do ideas embodied in the vast numbers of self-help books derived from psychology that counsel individuals about how to enhance their lives. Hope and promise in reference to individual life also come from finance, where excess imagination—supported by the profession of financial analysts—is invested in financial scenarios as ways of enriching the self and the life course. What feeds into this situation are institutional changes in pension schemes that have moved from solidarity-based principles, where income from the working population is redistributed to retirees, to personal investment schemes where one plans and pays for one's retirement benefits over the course of a lifetime. One massive source of life-centered thinking is the life sciences themselves. They produce a stream of research that inspires imaginative elaborations of the human individual as enriched by genetic, biological, and technological supplements and upgrades. These ideas relate to the enhancement of life through preimplantation genetic diagnosis and screening, germ-line engineering (genetic changes that can be passed down to an individual's offspring), psychotropic drugs that improve emotions and self-esteem, biotechnological means of enhancing the life span, and human cloning. The ideas suggest the perfectibility of individual life, but they also strongly implicate unrelated populations, those sharing particular genes, exposures, or histories of adaptation to environmental conditions, and benefiting in the aggregate from genetic measures and drugs. On a more conceptual and theoretical level, a return to human nature-based theories of rights and justice can be associated with life-centered ideas (Fukuyama 2002), as can Heidegger's temporal notions of human existence as "being towards death" and vitalist concepts (Lash 2003) that can be linked to Bergson and Tarde. The lack-wanting temporalized self and its processual, transmuting objects captures dimensions of this vitality. A theoretical notion used in several fields is that of flow. Though authors define flow differently, with concepts ranging from flow as a state of consciousness and experience to that of information as flow, the notion captures the dynamic dimensions and temporal structuring that "life" suggests.

LIMINAL SOCIALITY

For neo-Marxist thinkers, post-Fordist knowledge-based systems appropriate workers' lives rather than their labor, with work encroaching upon and difficult to distinguish from free time and coinciding with the individual's lifetime. The life-enhancement literature, bioethical controversies about the rights to genetically and technologically enrich lives and gene lines, and the literature depicting individuals lured into object pursuits and searching for optimal experience would suggest individuals and populations deeply involved in the appropriation of their lives and those of their offspring. Conflicts over the "appropriation of life" (Lash 2003) rather than over the appropriation of surplus value—between economic agents, individuals, *and* the state and nonhuman objects (such as viruses)—may well be what defines postsocial environments. But the divides may not run along traditional lines; for example, many of the individuals mentioned pursue their wants in structural cooperation and collusion with (rather than in structural opposition to) their corporate environments—with the knowledge firms and

services in which they work, or with the media, image, and aesthetic industries that collect individual pursuits in sports, fashion, and design into marketable lifestyles. In knowledge areas, the new constellation is one of knowledge workers empowered by object relations and finding additional embeddedness in epistemic communities that collect Page 590 around object worlds. In areas of self-testing "edgework" (extreme sports, high-speed trading, etc.), individuals also appear to gain empowerment from their engagements and show a similar tendency to aggregate in object-focused groups. Human relations may take second place vis-à-vis these engagements. The welfare state, with its goals of social solidarity and redistribution, also operates in terms of a logic orthogonal to a culture of life. It is geared to horizontal social structural divisions rather than to intra- and intergenerational life, skeptical vis-à-vis some of the newly feasible life advantages, and dedicated to the provision of services that often seem deficient in the light of projected and phantasized technological possibilities and the powers of collective human, nonhuman, and hybrid agents.

Postsocial systems include sociality, but in reconfigured, specialized, more mediated, and limited ways, as liminal forms of sociality. Postsocial relations are human ties triangulated with object relations and forming only with respect to these relations. A postsocial system may be one where information structures have replaced previous forms of social coordination, as when sophisticated hardware and software systems substitute for social networks and enable expanded, accelerated, and intensified global financial markets. Postsocial is what one might call a level of intersubjectivity that is no longer based on face-to-face interaction and may in fact not involve interaction at all but rather "communities of time" formed by the joint observation of common, electronically transmitted content. Postsocial systems may arise around the sort of relatedness enabled by the Internet, for which the characteristics that have traditionally defined human relationships (feelings of obligation and trust, etc.) are not constitutive or even relevant. Postsocial forms are not rich in sociality in the old sense, but they may be rich in other ways, and the challenge is to analyze and theorize these constellations.

—Karin Knorr Cetina

See also [Actor Network Theory](#) ; [Consumer Culture](#) ; [Freud, Sigmund](#) ; [Identity](#) ; [Individualism](#) ; [Latour, Bruno](#) ; [Mead, George Herbert](#) ; [Self and Self-Concept](#) ; [Social Studies of Science](#)

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SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

Symbolic interaction is a perspective in sociology that places meaning, interaction, and human agency at the center of understanding social life. This perspective grew out of the American philosophical tradition of pragmatism, an approach developed in the late nineteenth century by Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. Challenging the assumptions of classical rationalism, these thinkers regarded people as actors rather than reactors, treated "reality" as dynamic and pluralistic, linked meanings to social acts and perspectives, and viewed knowledge as a key resource for problem solving and reorganizing the world.

George Herbert Mead brought pragmatist philosophy to sociology, working its assumptions into a theory and method for the social sciences. Drawing on the ideas of the pragmatist founders, as well as the theories of Charles Horton Cooley, Charles Darwin, and Wilhelm Wundt, Mead developed a distinctly sociological account of human consciousness, selfhood, and action. He presented this perspective in a series of social psychology lectures that became the basis for his best-known book, *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934). Mead's insights impressed many of his students, notably Herbert Blumer, who later became a distinguished sociologist at the University of California at Berkeley and president of the American Sociological Association. Blumer's compilation of writings, *Symbolic Interactionism* (1969), is still widely acknowledged as the major statement of the symbolic interactionist perspective. Mead and Blumer belonged to a group of other early sociologists, including Robert Park, W. I. Thomas, and Everett Hughes, who studied related topics such as roles, selves, social definitions, and socialization. Because most of these scholars were affiliated with the University of Chicago, symbolic interactionism is often referred to as the Chicago School of Sociology, even though another variant of the perspective emerged later at the University of Iowa.

Blumer coined the label "symbolic interactionism" in 1937 while writing an essay on social psychology for a social science textbook. In that essay, Blumer emphasized how Mead's work could provide the basis for a new social psychological approach that would transcend the deterministic theories of the time. Mead is usually credited as the originator of symbolic interactionism, even though Blumer's analysis drew heavily on the ideas of other theorists and, according to some critics, differed in important respects from Mead's writings.

Blumer, along with Everett Hughes, influenced cohorts of graduate students he taught at the University of Chicago in the 1940s and early 1950s. These students, including Howard Becker, Fred Davis, Elliot Friedson, Erving Goffman, Joseph Gusfield, Helena Lopata, Tamotsu Shibutani, Gregory Stone, Anselm Strauss, and Ralph Turner, further developed the symbolic interactionist perspective and shaped a number of its subfields, such as deviance, social problems, self and identity, and collective behavior. They have since become recognized as the Second Chicago School.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND ASSUMPTIONS

Blumer (1969) articulated the core premises of symbolic interactionism: The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings those things have for them.... The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he [or she] encounters. (p. 2)

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Other related assumptions inform and guide this perspective:

1. Human beings are unique in their ability to use symbols.

Because people rely on and use symbols, we do not usually respond to stimuli in a direct or automatic way; instead, we give meanings to stimuli and then act in relation to these meanings. Our behavior is different from that of other animals or organisms, which act through instincts or reflexes. We learn what things mean as we interact with others. In doing so, we rely heavily on language and the processes of role taking and communication it facilitates. We learn to see and respond to symbolically mediated objects—objects that have names such as water, ground, student, professor, book, and library. These objects become part of the reality we create and negotiate through interaction.

2. People become human through interaction.

Through social interaction, we learn to use symbols, to think and make plans, to take the perspective of others, to develop a sense of self, and to participate in complex forms of communication and social organization. Interactionists do not believe that we are born human. They argue instead that we develop into human beings only through interaction with others. Interactionists acknowledge that we are born with certain kinds of biological "hardware" (e.g., a highly developed nervous system) that gives us the potential to become fully human, but they contend that involvement in society is essential for realizing this potential.

3. People are conscious, self-reflexive beings who shape their own behavior.

The most important capacities that we develop through our involvement in social interaction are the "mind" and the "self." By developing the capacity to see and respond to ourselves as objects, we learn to interact with ourselves, or think. As we think, we shape the meaning of objects in our world, accepting them, rejecting them, or changing them in accord with how we define and act toward them. Our behavior, then, is an interplay of social stimuli and our responses to those stimuli. In making this assertion, interactionists embrace a voluntaristic image of human behavior. They suggest that we exercise an important element of autonomy in our actions. At the same time, interactionists understand that a variety of social factors, such as language, culture, race, class, and gender, constrain our interpretations and behaviors. Thus, interactionists can be characterized as "soft determinists"; they presume that our actions are influenced but not determined by social constraints.

4. People are purposive creatures who act in and toward situations.

For interactionists, we don't "release" our behavior, like tension in a spring, in response to biological drives, psychological needs, or social expectations. Rather, we act *toward situations*. Our actions are based on the meaning we attribute to the situation in which we find ourselves. This "definition of the situation" emerges from our interactions with others. We determine the meaning of a situation (and our subsequent actions) by taking account of others' intentions, actions, and expressions. We select lines of behavior that we believe will lead to our desired ends. Our predictions may be wrong; we do not necessarily act wisely or correctly. Nor do we always pursue goals in a clear-cut or single-minded way. Once we begin acting, we may encounter obstacles and contingencies that may block or distract us from our original goals and direct us toward new ones. Our actions and intentions, then, are dynamic and emergent.

5. Society consists of people engaging in symbolic interaction.

Following Blumer, interactionists conceive of the relationship between society and the individual as both fluid and structured. This relationship is grounded in individuals' abilities to assume each other's perspectives (or "role take"), to adjust and coordinate their unfolding acts, and to interpret and communicate these acts. In emphasizing that society consists of people interacting symbolically, interactionists part company with psychologistic theories that see society as existing primarily "in our heads," either in the form of reward histories or socially shaped cognitions. Interactionists also depart from structuralists who conceive of society as an entity that exists independently of individuals, dictating our actions through imposed rules, roles, statuses, and structures. We are born into a society that frames our actions through patterns of meaning and rewards, but we also shape our identities and behaviors as we make plans, seek goals, and interact with others in specific situations. That which we call "society" and "structure" are human products, rooted in joint action. Thus, "'society' and 'individual' do not denote separable phenomena" (Cooley 1902/1964:36–37). People acquire and realize their individuality (or selfhood) through interaction and, at the same time, maintain or alter society.

6. Emotions are central to meaning and behavior.

Since the late 1970s, interactionists have attended more to the importance of emotions in understanding social life. Although other sociologists have bracketed emotions, relegating them to the psychological or biological realm, interactionists have recognized that "social factors enter not simply before and after but *interactively* during the experience of emotion" (Hochschild 1983:211). Arlie Hochschild, Candace Clark, Spencer Cahill, Sherry Kleinman, and other interactionists have studied feeling rules—guidelines for how we are expected to feel in particular situations—and the emotion work we do when our feelings do not measure up to situational norms. Feelings may also put our moral identities into question: Can we believe we are good people if we have feelings that violate our ideals? Groups and organizations have different cultures of emotions; participants expect members to experience Page 823 particular emotions and to display them. In their research, interactionists ask not only what objects mean to participants but also how they feel about them and whether those feelings fit with or challenge the norms of the group.

7. The social act is the fundamental unit of analysis.

Interactionists contend that the social act, or what Blumer referred to as joint action, is the central concern of sociology. A "social act" refers to behavior that in some way takes account of others and is guided by what they do; it is formulated so that it fits together with the behavior of another person, group, or social organization. It also depends on and emerges through communication and interpretation. This covers a diverse array of human action, ranging from a handshake, a kiss, a wink, and a fistfight to a lecture, a beer bash, a funeral, or a religious revival. Whenever we orient ourselves to others and their actions, regardless of whether we are trying to hurt them, help them, convert them, or destroy them, we are engaging in a social act. We align our behaviors with others, whether acting as individuals or as representatives of a group or organization.

In focusing on social acts, interactionists are not limited to examining the behavior of individuals or even small groups. They also consider the social conduct of crowds, industries, political parties, school systems, hospitals, religious cults, therapeutic organizations, occupational groups, social movements, and the mass media. Inspired by Herbert Blumer (1969), they regard the domain of sociology as "constituted precisely by the study of joint action and the collectivities that engage in joint action" (p. 17).

8. Sociological methods should enable researchers to grasp people's meanings.

Blumer noted that people act on the basis of the meanings we give to things. Interactionists believe it is essential to understand those meanings, seeing them from the point of view of the individuals or groups under study. To develop this insider's view, researchers learn to empathize with—"take the role of"—the individuals or groups they are studying (Blumer 1969). In addition, interactionists observe and interact with these individuals or groups in their "natural" setting. This in-depth approach enables researchers to learn how social actors accept, defy, or reconstruct their everyday worlds.

RECENT TRENDS AND NEW DIRECTIONS IN INTERACTIONIST ANALYSIS

Critics contend that interactionists' emphasis on how people make roles, define situations, and negotiate identities leads them to ignore or downplay how our individual behavior is constrained by social structure. Yet analysis of the link between individual agency and social structure has a long history in interactionist thought, especially in the writings of Mead, Cooley, Blumer, and Goffman. In recent years, it has become the focus of interactionist studies of social organization and collective action, power and inequality, and the nature and foundations of the self.

Social Organization and Collective Action

Symbolic interactionism addresses issues that extend beyond microsociological concerns. Even in the early years of interactionism, Herbert Blumer wrote about organizations in his studies of collective behavior, industrial relations, and race relations. As a professor at the University of Chicago, Blumer served as a labor negotiator and deeply appreciated the power of unions, corporations, and interest groups. During the past couple of decades, interactionists have addressed macrosociological issues through the concept of *mesostructure*, an intermediate level of analysis between the microstructural concerns of social psychology and

the macrostructural concerns of organizational theory (Maines 1977). Mesostructure refers to the level of organization within which interaction occurs.

In examining mesostructure, interactionists analyze how power relations and social constraints play out in organizational actors' behaviors. For example, Harvey Farberman studied how the practices of used car dealers are shaped by the structure of their relationships with car manufacturers. The manufacturers impose a system of sales on the dealers that force them to operate with a small profit margin. Consequently, the dealers have to squeeze every dollar they can from their customers, exploiting them through a variety of money-making "rackets," including "charging for labor time not actually expended, billing for repairs not actually done, replacing parts unnecessarily, and using rebuilt parts but charging for new parts" (Farberman 1975:457).

Since the late 1970s, interactionists have used mesostructural analysis to study a wide array of organizations, including hospitals, churches, restaurants, court systems, the mass media, the arts, welfare agencies, scientific groups, athletic teams, educational institutions, and even civilizations. They have used concepts such as meaning, frame, network, career, metapower, and negotiated order to examine the links between "micro" and "macro" levels of social reality.

They have shown how interactions in local organizations, such as a business, emerge from and are influenced by the structural conditions in which they are embedded. For example, restaurants strive to fit into a market niche. Every owner wants to develop a strong and loyal customer base so that the restaurant will be predictably profitable. To do this, the owner must consider likely customers, their culinary desires, and how much they are willing to spend. These factors influence how much the owner or manager spends on food, how many cooks he or she hires, and how much he or she pays them. Ultimately, the restaurant as an organization depends on its customers and on the owner's need for profit. As a result, many dishwashers or "potmen" are high school students, undocumented immigrants, or Page 824 individuals with developmental disabilities. In each case, the restaurant management hires those who are willing to work for minimum wage, largely because of their structural position in our society. Thus, although a restaurant is an interactional arena, it is also an organization that operates within the structural parameters of a market economy. The dynamics of this economy shape the structure and interactions that occur within the organization (Fine 1996).

In addition to studying how people reproduce structure within the interactional arena of organizations, interactionists have turned their attention to the dynamics of collective action and social movement organizations. David Snow and his colleagues (1986) have illustrated how social movements are organized through "frames" and frame alignments that shape the outlooks and behavioral choices of participants. Members of social movements search for frameworks of meaning to answer the question, "What is going on here?" Some frames legitimate violent protest (the frame of oppression), whereas other frames (the frame of moral justice) diminish the probability of violence.

Interactionist analyses of social structure and collective action have revealed how organizational relations are shaped and reproduced by means of symbolic negotiation, thus sharing common features with smaller-scale, face-to-face negotiations. Even large-scale organizations—governments, multinational corporations, and international social movements—depend on symbolic meaning and are grounded in and sustained through patterns of interaction.

POWER AND INEQUALITY

Some interactionists analyzed power and politics over 30 years ago, but others were slow in following their lead. During the past decade, interactionists have done more extensive research on political power, conflict, and negotiation, especially when examining the construction of social problems. In exploring how issues get defined as social problems, interactionist scholars have studied the interpretive, claims-making activities of social problems of entrepreneurs. Scholars have pointed out how these activities unfold in a context of competing and conflicting claims—a context in which some actors are privileged over others for various political and structural reasons.

This approach to social problems has led interactionists to analyze broader sociohistorical changes in U.S. society, such as the medicalization of deviance. Interactionists have examined how people use metaphorical images and rhetorical strategies to define certain phenomena as social problems and to build consensus that action needs to be taken to constrain the behaviors of others. Studies of social problems have enabled interactionists to integrate macrosociological questions more fully into their analyses and, in so doing, to develop the foundations for a "critical interactionist" approach to social life.

Perhaps the best example of a critical interactionism is found in the work of Michael Schwalbe, who has blended the insights of Marx and Mead in studying the labor process, identity work, and the reproduction of inequality. Recently, Schwalbe and his colleagues (2001) have identified four generic social processes through which inequalities are created and sustained. These include (1) *oppressive othering* (how powerful groups seek and sustain advantage through defining members of less powerful groups as inferior), (2) *boundary maintenance* (how dominant groups protect their economic and cultural privileges by maintaining boundaries between themselves and subordinate groups), (3) *emotion management* (how groups suppress or manage potentially destabilizing feelings, such as anger, resentment, sympathy, and despair), and (4) *subordinate adaptations* (how members of subordinate groups adapt to their unequal status and, in some cases, reproduce it). These four social processes provide links between local, everyday interactions and larger structural inequalities.

Peter Hall has integrated neo-Marxist and interactionist perspectives in analyzing power, politics, and the organization of the policy process. Hall has examined how politicians, including U.S. presidents, manage impressions and manipulate symbols to "reassure" the public, promote the public's quiescence, and discourage people's participation in the political process. In his investigations of policymaking, Hall has revealed how and why the organizational context of policy shapes and mediates the policy process.

Another variant of critical interactionism is found in analyses that blend feminist and interactionist perspectives. What distinguishes these analyses is their focus on how everyday practices sustain or disrupt gender inequalities. For example, Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) used feminist, interactionist, and ethnomethodological insights to explain how people "do gender" through their routine conversations and interactions. West and Zimmerman highlight how people perform and reproduce gender, individually and institutionally. By showing that gender is a performance, West and Zimmerman acknowledge that people can change or undermine the gender order.

Scholars adopting a feminist interactionist approach have also analyzed power relations, studying how men exercise and maintain conversational advantage through interruptions, topic changes, and language style. In addition, they have studied the "sexual politics" that characterize family relationships, organizational life, and a wide range of face-to-face communications.

Feminist interactionism has had a large impact on the sociology of emotions. Research conducted at airlines, law firms, power plants, police departments, alternative health care clinics, and weight loss associations reveal how organizations manufacture sentiments and regulate emotional display while requiring women to engage in unrecognized and devalued work.

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THE NATURE AND FOUNDATIONS OF THE SELF

Interactionists have always emphasized the social nature and roots of the self. As Mead noted, people develop the capacity for reflexive selfhood through interacting with others. It is through interaction that we learn to take the role of others and see ourselves as social objects, much like other social objects. Moreover, it is through interaction that we experience, sustain, and transform our sense of who we are. Our sense of selfhood, then, is inextricably linked to our relationships with others. It is both a social product and a social process.

Interactionists generally agree about how the self emerges and develops, but they differ in the relative weight they accord to the structure of the self, on one hand, and the processes through which the self is created and enacted, on the other. Scholars who place emphasis on the structure of the self are sometimes referred to as "structural interactionists." They focus on the nature and relevance of the "self-concept," or the overarching view that an individual has of himself or herself. In analyzing the self-concept, structural interactionists highlight its contents and organization and consider how it shapes a person's behavior across different situations. They also propose that it is best to study and measure the self-concept through traditional quantitative methods (e.g., survey questionnaires or laboratory experiments).

Interactionists who emphasize the self-as-process focus on how people create and enact selves; they also assert that the self is best studied through ethnographic methods. Some of these "processual interactionists" embrace Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective. In this view, there is no "real" self, only a set of masks and situated performances that a person enacts. Instead of carrying a core self from situation to situation, the person fashions a self anew in each social interaction, generating expressive cues and managing the impressions of an audience to realize desired identities and outcomes. Other processual interactionists adopt a less situational perspective on the self. They acknowledge that people bring fairly stable self-concepts to social situations while also recognizing that these self-concepts change over time. Some analysts focus on the broad changes in American culture that have produced differences in the places where people anchor their fundamental images of self. In the 1950s and 1960s, Americans had relatively enduring and consistent conceptions of self that were anchored in the social institutions to which they belonged, such as families, workplaces, churches, or schools. More recently, Americans have developed a "mutable" sense of self, anchored more in impulses than institutions and flexibly adaptive to the demands of a rapidly changing society (Turner 1976).

Although differing in the relative weight they accord to the structural and processual aspects of the self, the vast majority of interactionists acknowledge the influence of social structural factors (e.g., race, class, gender, and culture) on the development and expression of selves. Their disagreements revolve around the degree of agency that people have in addressing and negotiating these structural constraints. Even postmodern interactionists, who are less structural in orientation than many interactionists, link the expression of the self to the dynamics of late capitalist or "postmodern" societies. For example, Gergen argues that the faster pace of life and communications in postmodern societies has overwhelmed people, leaving them with selves "under siege." Consequently, identities have become fragmented and incoherent. Under postmodern conditions, the concept of the self becomes uncertain and "the fully saturated self becomes no self at all" (Gergen 1991:7). People face a daunting challenge in building and sustaining an integrated sense of self because the social structures that surround the self are fleeting and unstable. As James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium (2000) observe, contemporary times are challenging for the self because it is being produced in a rapidly growing, widely varying, and increasingly competitive set of institutions. Self-construction has become a big business, characterized by the proliferation of institutions that make it their stock-in-trade to design and discern identities for us. Gubrium and Holstein call for interactionists to shift the focus of their analyses beyond the situational construction of selves toward the institutional production of selves. By doing so, interactionist scholars can continue to push their perspective beyond traditional social psychological concerns and toward the domains of macrosociology.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

Symbolic interactionism is likely to maintain an influential voice in sociology, especially through its academic journal (*Symbolic Interaction*) and its ongoing contributions to various substantive areas and theoretical debates. Given recent trends, interactionist researchers will place greater emphasis on the development of macrolevel concepts and analyses, attending not only on mesostructural phenomena but also on the construction, dynamics, and interrelations of large-scale social structures. Interactionism will become characterized by even greater theoretical and methodological diversity in the next few decades, making it necessary to abandon the old (and somewhat illusory) distinction drawn between the Chicago and Iowa Schools and to speak of interactionist sociologies rather than interactionist sociology. And symbolic interactionism may become a victim of its recent and continuing theoretical successes, hastening its "sad demise" and eventual disappearance within sociology (Fine 1993). As the concepts of interactionism become the concepts of sociology, its voice will become increasingly integrated with, and indistinguishable from, the other voices that make up the Page 826 discipline. This has already become evident in the analyses that can be found in many prominent sociological books and journal articles.

Symbolic interactionism's prospects in the twenty-first century will be determined largely by its central mission. If interactionists decide that their key mission is to continue formulating a pragmatic approach to social life—the power of symbol creation and interaction that is at the heart of the sociological imagination—then the future of interactionism will be bright. Guided by this goal, interactionists can expect to build on and extend the inroads they have gained within sociology in recent years. They can also expect their work to have a growing impact on related disciplines, such as gender studies, communication studies, cultural studies, education, and psychology.

—Kent Sandstrom and Sherryl Kleinman

See also [Blumer, Herbert](#) ; [Dramaturgy](#) ; [Goffman, Erving](#) ; [Mead, George Herbert](#) ; [Negotiated Order](#) ; [Self and Self-Concept](#) ; [Social Interaction](#) ; [Strauss, Anselm](#)

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SOCIAL INTERACTION

Social interaction is the process through which two or more social actors reciprocally influence one another's actions. Although it may involve corporate actors of varying size, from pairs of individuals acting in concert to complex organizations, it commonly refers to processes of mutual influence among individuals. Individuals always influence one another's action in some form when in one another's immediate physical presence but may also do so through varied media of communication when spatially and temporally separated. However, until recently, the study of social interaction or what is commonly called *microsociology* has focused primarily on its face-to-face varieties.

Social interaction is the critical link between the individual and society. It is the medium through which culture and society directly influence individuals and through which individuals collectively produce and reproduce culture and social arrangements. However, social theories vary greatly in the relative emphasis they place on social interaction. Many suggest that patterns of social interaction directly reflect participants' psychological characteristics, internalized cultural values and social norms, or the influence of larger social entities and structures. Although these theories generally recognize that processes of social interaction constitute and uphold social arrangements and systems, they imply that the processes and outcomes of social interaction are largely predictable from anterior or other external factors. In contrast, other social theories argue that social interaction cannot be deduced from anterior or external factors and requires direct investigation.

Erving Goffman was the strongest advocate for treating social interaction as a subject in its own right. Goffman repeatedly argued that the orderliness of social interaction could not be reduced to the psychology of participants. Whatever is in individuals' minds, according to Goffman, they must make their behavior understandable to others. That requires an orientation to expressive conventions and consideration of the meanings one is likely to convey to others through either upholding or violating those conventions. For Goffman, social interaction involved not a meeting of minds but moves in an orderly game of collective definition.

Goffman also argued that what are commonly called social structures, such as diffuse social statuses or organizational positions, influence patterns of social interaction only indirectly. He maintained that social interaction consists of processes and structures specific to it. According to Goffman, there is only a "loose coupling" between interactional practices and encompassing social structures. The introduction of social structural factors into social interaction requires their translation and transformation into interactional terms. Hence, patterns of interaction cannot be directly deduced from social structural factors without consideration of the rules of their transformation into interaction specific processes and structures.

Goffman's own analyses of social interaction focused on the dramatic character of its definitional dynamics and its ritual order or structure. Goffman argued that social actors reach

a working consensus about the definition of the situation that governs their interaction by mobilizing a variety of expressive resources, such as their appearance, voices and bodies, physical objects, and the fixed equipment of the setting. They thereby enact characters, stage scenes, and play through social narratives using techniques similar to those used by theatrical actors. Goffman also argued that an implicit but complex code of ritual conventions governed the interactional dramas of everyday social life. According to Goffman, much expressive conduct is ritual in both the ethological sense of being stylized and virtually automatic and, borrowing from Émile Durkheim, in the religious sense of expressing respect and regard for objects of ultimate Page 745 value. Goffman argued that interactants ritually express respect and regard for each other's self or "face," as if it were sacred. He demonstrated how social actors do so by avoiding intrusion on one another's various self-territories, such as personal space and private information, and by celebrating their past or anticipated relations with one another.

Goffman's analyses of social interaction provide a compelling answer to one of the central questions of social theory: What is the basis of social order? Individuals who hope to influence one another must make their actions understandable to one another. To do so, they must subject their conduct to the constraints of mutually understood expressive conventions, such as the grammatical rules of spoken language or the ritual prescriptions and proscriptions of interpersonal conduct. Failure to do so results in misunderstanding or not being understood at all. Hence, engagement in effective social interaction and enlistment of others in one's own endeavors necessarily involves an implicit commitment to an expressive order that is the foundation of all social order.

To demonstrate the anchorage of social order in interaction rituals, Goffman concentrated much of his attention on interaction in public places. The individuals who populate such places, at least in contemporary urban settings, often have widely varied personal and social characteristics and little, if any, knowledge of and, hence, grounds for trusting one another. Yet as Goffman illustrated time and again, their public encounters are commonly orderly, routine, and unremarkable. Such routine and orderly public interaction demonstrates that individuals, despite their many differences and lack of familiarity with one another, are mutually oriented to similar expressive conventions and committed to upholding what Goffman came to call "the interaction order."

According to Goffman, "the interaction order" is not a product of blind conformity to informal norms of public interaction. He recognized that public actors routinely violate the ritual conventions of social interaction both inadvertently and for a variety of practical reasons. Yet he showed that violations are commonly followed by apologies and explanations or what he called "remedial work." The seeming offender thereby acknowledges the potential offense and demonstrates his or her understanding of and commitment to the ritual conventions of interaction, despite the apparent evidence to the contrary. In addition, Goffman demonstrated that the ritual expectations governing interaction serve as enabling conventions that render both conformity to and violations of them mutually meaningful. For example, the implicitly understood prohibition against staring at strangers makes stares from strangers menacing, flirtatious, or otherwise meaningful. The ritual prescriptions and proscriptions of interaction are not invariant norms but constitute a common idiom of expression that social actors strategically use for a variety of expressive purposes.

Those whom Goffman inspired have primarily focused their attention on strategic uses of the ritual idiom of interaction in public places. Following Goffman's advice to study the varied

ways individuals treat and are treated by others and then deducing what is implied by them through that treatment, many have concentrated on how patterns of interaction both express and reproduce cultural conceptions of different categories of people and relations among them. For example, they have shown how adults commonly deny children the same expressions of respect and regard in public places that they grant one another. Adults thereby imply that children are less than full-fledged persons, and the young commonly respond to that treatment in ways that confirm adults' unflattering conceptions of them. Others have documented the varied ways that men publicly harass women by violating their self-territories and right to be let alone. Men thereby expressively assert their dominance over public places and situationally disadvantage women who must tolerate men's uninvited overtures, evaluative remarks and gazes, and attempts to extract personal information. Still others have shown how whites tend to respond to African Americans, especially younger males, with obvious suspicion and fear in public places, often provoking hostile and intimidating responses. The result is a kind of interactional choreography of the tension and misunderstanding that embodies the state of race relations in contemporary American society, both expressing and reproducing those strained relations.

Other students of social interaction have examined how individuals infuse usually impersonal and anonymous public encounters with sociality and intimacy. For one, Lyn Lofland has detailed how public encounters are not limited to fleeting relations, as when one stranger asks another for directions or the time, or routinized ones, such as those between taxi drivers and their fares or the panhandler and potential donor. What has been called quasi-primary relations of transitory sociality are also common in public places when strangers recognize that they share a common interest, a common social identity, a common focus of attention, or territory. For example, unacquainted dog owners often stop for a friendly chat about their canine companions, gay men may mutually recognize their special "kinship," unacquainted onlookers sometimes exchange critical commentary on street art and performances, and seatmates on buses and users of laundromats may engage in conversation for the duration of their time together. Longer-lasting intimate-secondary relations are also common among those who routinely encounter one another in public places. The regular customers and staff of diners, bars, and coffee shops; regular riders of bus or subway routes; and regular shoppers and retail clerks may begin to exchange personal information and, over time, a degree of intimacy, however circumscribed. In any case, this diversity of relations in public arguably provides residents of urban settings Page 746 at least some of their sense of belonging, place, and community.

Those who followed Goffman's lead into the study of public interaction have also demonstrated, in a variety of ways, that the social glue of what Durkheim called collective ideas and sentiments is anchored in ritual patterns of interaction. In both public and less accessible places, individuals dramatically enact presumed differences among people and reproduce collective conceptions of stages of life, gender, race, and other social distinctions. They honor one another's privacy but seek out and celebrate sociability with others. Each encounter that goes beyond the fleeting and routine creates what Durkheim called collective effervescence, fellow feeling, and collective identification.

The interactional production and reproduction of collective identity is most apparent among those who establish relations of continuing interaction. Using the example of little league baseball players, Gary Alan Fine has shown how members of interacting groups create distinguishing styles of appearance, their own argot or specialized language, inside jokes, and collective myths that constitute a distinctive group culture that Fine terms "idioculture." Those

distinctive cultural practices expressively mark the group's boundary, distinguish those who are "us" from "them," and encourage a sense of personal identification with the group. This and other examples illustrate that social interaction is the source of cultural creation and change and of social solidarity, whether among small groups of friends or larger communities.

The apparent connection between social interaction and solidarity has led some students of interaction to consider how built environments encourage or discourage casual contacts. Most have concentrated their attention on how suburbanization, the policies that promote it, and the consequent demise of corner stores, neighborhood bars, and other urban gathering places have diminished opportunities for unexpected encounters and casual interaction among residents. Although largely speculative, they argue that the diminishment of those opportunities also diminishes residents' sense of community identification and solidarity.

Inspired in part by Goffman but more significantly by *ethnomethodology*, conversation analysts have conducted more detailed studies of social interaction than other followers of Goffman's lead. Conversation analysts extend the ethnomethodological concern with the taken-for-granted but methodical procedures of everyday social life to the study of conversational interaction. They maintain that an adequate understanding of the methodical procedures of conversational interaction requires studious attention to its empirical detail. They argue that those details are often lost in and concealed by the glosses and summaries of observational field notes and insist on the necessity of audio and/or video recording and detailed transcription of social interactions. Conversation analytic transcripts include interactional details such as phonetic representations of pronunciation and notations of simultaneous talk, inhalations and exhalations, and length of silences, often in fractions of seconds.

Conversation analysts have identified a number of processes and structures of conversational interaction based on these empirical materials. They include the procedures of opening and closing conversations, of introducing and developing topics, and of turn allocation in conversation. The study of turn taking in conversation has been particularly revealing. It demonstrates that speakers commonly demonstrate some understanding or appreciation of the prior turn or turns of talk in their current turn. That allows the previous speaker or speakers to assess how well she or he has been understood and to attempt clarification of any misunderstanding in subsequent turns of talk. The turn-taking structure of conversational interaction thereby serves as a general mechanism for the continual achievement and maintenance of mutual understanding, providing, in the words of one conversation analyst, the very architecture of intersubjectivity.

Conversation analysts have also studied what they call the preference format of conversational interaction, using the expression "preference" in a precise and peculiar sense. They use that expression to refer not to conversationalists' motivations or to statistical regularities but to the way responses to certain kinds of turns at talk are delivered. Preferred responses are delivered in a straightforward manner and without delay while dispreferred responses are delayed, qualified, and/or explicitly explained or justified. Conversation analysts' investigation of such "preference formats" tends to confirm Goffman's observations about the ritual and cooperative character of social interaction. For example, acceptance of invitations, offers, and requests is the preferred response, while refusal is dispreferred. The delay, qualification, explanation, and/or justification of a refusal are mechanisms of avoiding insult and conflict. Hence, conversational interaction exhibits a systematic bias in favor of cooperation, social solidarity, and order.

Conversation analysts initially limited their attention to the organization of mundane, everyday conversations but have more recently investigated the distinctive features of conversational interaction in particular institutional settings. These studies suggest that the ways conversational organization in such settings diverge from that of mundane conversation serve "to talk" those very institutional contexts of interaction into being. For example, in mundane conversations, any conversationalists can select himself or herself as the next speaker when the current speaker approaches the end of her or his turn at talk, but participants in classroom discussions usually honor the teacher's right to allocate turns at talk by waiting to speak until recognized by the teacher. It is in large part that restrictive organization of turn taking that distinguishes classroom discussion from Page 747 the casual conversations that commonly occur in classrooms before and after classes and that makes it possible for students easily to disrupt classroom discussions by speaking "out of turn."

—Spencer E. Cahill

See also [Conversation Analysis](#) ; [Dramaturgy](#) ; [Ethnomethodology](#) ; [Goffman, Erving](#) ; [Symbolic Interaction](#)

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Title: Social Constructionism

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SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

The argument that *social constructionism* proposes, with more or less insistence, about objects of social and cultural inquiry is in some sense the "other" to essentialisms of all sorts. To wit: Things—including even nature—are not simply given, revealed, fully determined, and as such, unalterable. Rather, things are made, and made up, in and through diverse social and cultural processes, practices, and actions. Much of the force of social constructionist argument is in this irony—its proposal that some assumedly taken-for-granted phenomenon not only could be otherwise but that its "local" form has a history that can be written to show a collection of interests, actions, and flows of power that have created and that sustain it. It seeks typically to show how some arguably social or cultural thing came about, how it is maintained, and, often by implication, how it might be changed. Social constructionist argument offers critique as a resource against all analyses that say, in effect, "This simply is the way things are and/or always have been." This emphasis on critique becomes particularly pronounced in work where the line between constructionism and *deconstruction* blurs.

BERGER AND LUCKMANN'S SOCIOLOGY

In *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) build their argument on "classic roots" of Western sociology: the work of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Schütz, and Mead. But classic roots for some are minor literatures for others, and Berger and Luckmann intended their book as a corrective to what they saw as an overemphasis on "purely structural" argument in the then-popular versions of structural-functionalism in U.S. sociology. They "correct" by forefronting acting and interacting human(ist) beings as the primary agents in the constitution, maintenance, and change of the social.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) contend that "reality is socially constructed and that the sociology of knowledge must analyze the process in which this occurs" (p. 1). They treat this project as one equally relevant to academic philosophy and to everyday life, but their constructionism is distinct from philosophical argument and analysis. Rather than asking ontological and epistemological questions such as "What is real?" and "How is one to know?," Berger and Luckmann shift attention to more specifically pragmatic considerations appropriate to an empirical, by which they mean "scientific," sociology. Central among these are the following: What does a collection of people located at a particular time and in a particular place take to be "real," and how is this construction to be understood as something they do? How are their conceptions linked to relevant social and historical contexts? How are differences in social realities/constructions/worlds across different collections of people understood as implicating those varying contexts? The very existence of difference in such social realities and contexts, they argue, underwrites the need for studying the *social processes* through which such difference has come about and by which it is maintained as well as changed. They assert that the sociology of knowledge "must concern itself with

whatever passes for 'knowledge' in a society, regardless of the ultimate validity or invalidity (by whatever criteria) of such 'knowledge'" (p. 3).

Berger and Luckmann (1966) credit Marx with the clearest statement of the social construction of reality argument in that "man's consciousness is determined by his social being," specifically through the human activity of laboring together and the social relationships that emerge and are inextricable from that labor. For them, Marx's famous concepts of substructure and superstructure are seen most accurately "as, respectively, human activity and the world produced by that activity" (p. 6).

Berger and Luckmann (1966) propose their theory as a major redefinition of the sociology of knowledge, making Page 725 it and the study of the social construction of reality central to sociological theory. They cite what they call two "marching orders" for modern sociology as at the heart of their argument: Durkheim's advice to "consider social facts as things" and Weber's statement that "both for sociology... and for history, the object of cognition is the subjective meaning-complex of action" (p. 18). These "orders" might be restated in their version of social constructionism as follows: Treat socially constructed realities as things, as objective; and see the meaning and action in social life that are these realities as mutually constitutive and contingent. That is, the objects that emerge in and through situated, meaningful social action can come to have precisely the "obdurate" quality that Durkheim used to describe "social facts." These then become habituated and typified in individuals' understandings of themselves, others, and their worlds and are used as resources to create, sustain, and change those objects. "Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man [sic] is a social product" (p. 61). This, they say, is the essence of the social construction of reality.

Also central to Berger and Luckmann's social constructionism are the *phenomenology* of Alfred Schütz and the *symbolic interactionism* of George Herbert Mead. From Schütz, the authors take a stated focus on the natural attitude of *everyday life* and the knowledge therein and attention to how these are taken up, reiterated, and changed in and through the routine interactions and taken-for-granted understandings of the people whose lives are lived in a given locale. For Schütz, this concept of the everyday was an analytical resource with which to focus attention on how the social is continually accomplished by human beings pursuing practical but mundane projects. From Mead comes a sense of the absolute importance of human *social interaction* as symbolic interaction, suffused with and by shared meanings in language that feed back into and shape the ongoing lines of joint and always open action as well as the selves at the center of that action.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) underline the importance of processes of historically situated legitimation in carrying forward and sustaining all such social realities, realities that illustrate what they call institutionalization. *Language* and knowledge are the coordinating and integrating symbolic resources that bring a coherence to the diverse lines of situated human interaction. While the paramount or everyday realities thus constructed are mostly taken for granted by those who produce and are produced by them, "every symbolic universe is incipiently problematic" and routinely requires conscious "maintenance work" by embodied individuals who make it up (pp. 106, 116). From the analyst's view, then, as Berger and Luckmann note, "Says who?" is a critical question: "What remains sociologically essential is the recognition that all symbolic universes and all legitimations are human products; their existence has its base in the lives of concrete individuals, and has no empirical status apart from these lives" (p. 128).

FOUCAULT'S POSTSTRUCTURALISM

The name and work of Michel Foucault are often linked to social constructionism. While, like Berger and Luckmann, Foucault wrote in conversation with a legacy of Western European, *humanist* thinkers, unlike them Foucault mostly wrote against that legacy—at least as it typically is read in the origin stories of U.S. sociology—and toward what he hoped would be a new way of thinking about human beings in social and historical terms. The proto-heroic humanist subject at the heart of Berger and Luckmann's story—and most other sociological stories—has a much less glorious role to play in the social construction work proposed here.

Drawing on their own intellectual and personal relationships with Foucault, philosopher Hubert Dreyfus and anthropologist Paul Rabinow offer a careful reading of Foucault's difference from the dominant traditions of Western European thought in the social and human sciences. They argue that Foucault was neither a *structuralist* nor an advocate of *hermeneutics*—what they call the two "poles" of the human sciences—but that he sought to develop a "new method" that would preserve "the distancing effect of structuralism, and an interpretive dimension which develops the hermeneutic insight that the investigator is always situated and must understand the meaning of his cultural practices from within them" (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983:xii). Deeply influenced by Marx but not Marxist or Hegelian, Foucault's new method would eschew the dialectic as explanatory device in favor of a view of history as discontinuous, marked by epistemic breaks rather than linear development. More Nietzschean than Husserlian, Foucault would dismiss the search for deep meaning and truth behind social formations and practices ("texts") characteristic of hermeneutics, seeing the history of Western thought as revealing nothing to give a deep interpretation of (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983:xxiii–xxv, 123–24, 180–83). Relying on methods that he called archeology and *genealogy*, Foucault sought—especially in his later books—not to provide a new theory of anything but, rather, to encourage a critical understanding of, "a history of," as he put it, "the present." Indeed, the human sciences themselves, and the objects and subjects that populate and define them, became prime targets for this critical and ostensibly new kind of analysis.

If Berger and Luckmann bring forward the importance of the acting and interacting individual in the context of the everyday to better understand how social realities are constructed, Foucault might be seen to diminish considerably what he called the "anthropological" theme that individual people are the prime sources of movement and force—especially through the operation of rational choice and Page 726 intentionality—in society and in history. Although he later moved away from claims that the person is fully an effect of discourse, he retained through his last books on the care of the self the view that while not fully determined by prescribed cultural and institutional practices, the space of the resisting and "creative" subject should not be framed in terms of the humanist fantasies of "freedom" or "free will." Indeed, Foucault's skepticism about the optimistic stories in the legacy of humanism sets off his contributions from those carried forward by Berger and Luckmann and others who wrote more from within that tradition (and that also is apparent in the pragmatism of Richard Rorty).

In some of Foucault's most widely read books, we might say that the sources of the social construction about which Foucault writes are differentially distributed across particular *discursive practices*, their objects and subjects, and the individual, acting human beings who both take them up/are taken up by them and who give them life/are given life by them in real time and place. The distinction implied here between the body or bodies acting in time and space, on one hand, and the nature of the objects and subjects given life thereby, on the other

hand, is, arguably, one of Foucault's most enduring contributions. In the focus on disciplinary practices, Foucault may be said to show us, in fine-grained empirical detail, the social and cultural machines through which docile and useful bodies and subjects were/are made into objects in service of "society." In his analysis of sexual subjects, he shows us how, through expert knowledge and discourse, culture and society create a "deep inside" essence—sexuality and the desire for sex—as the condition for the discovery of true, "healthy," and useful knowledge about each and every one of us. Here, especially, we see that which was thought to be prior and fundamental proposed, rather, as product and resource for the operation of power and "social good."

In these images of social construction, the individual still acts and interacts, but the choices are circumscribed in advance to serve and reinforce the structures that define the everyday. Although he professed very little interest in a study of the everyday realities so produced or in the meanings they had for those who enacted them—topics of central interest to Berger and Luckmann and "interpretive" philosophies and theories they wrote—Foucault was far from resigned to despair about the possibilities for change and *resistance* in the face of such structures. Most particularly, he did not see the human being in society as fully determined by the subjectivities that serve to embody that being. Perhaps particularly in his distinct but not always fully elaborated conception of *power* as always dynamic and relational, not as a commodity-like thing that some have and others do not, can we see the sense in which Foucault granted the acting individual within a constraining/enabling *subjectivity* or "self" a notable importance in society and history. For Foucault, one is "in" power as long as one is "in play" in relational dynamics with others in social and cultural sites that hierarchically allocate prerogatives, responsibilities, and duties. While there is constraint both from the subjectivities through and in which one takes up/is given an identity in such settings and from the prerogatives and responsibilities that define and link these entities together, the fact that the individual, as human individual, has the capacity to act and thus to act otherwise and in some degree of resistance to those constraints is critical to Foucault's vision. Even in social arrangements that appear to offer one party no power—for example, a woman in an abusive heterosexual relationship—Foucault's concept of power would encourage us to see how her "local" subjectivity could provide resources for possibly effecting change. While he emphasized social construction as operating beyond, around, in, and through the individual—as social and cultural processes and practices—Foucault allocated to the acting individual the possibility for both doing and thinking otherwise, something to which he himself aspired.

Beyond the notion of resistance, in his books on the care of the self, Foucault focuses attention on what he calls a "genealogy of ethics" based on careful study of life in ancient Greece. The problem of ethics there, which for Foucault is the problem of how to develop, how to craft, one's relationship with one's self, is not about resistance and power but, rather, about the ways one might put together a life. That framing does not imply, of course, an absence of social and cultural constraint, but it does bring forward the acting individual, using and adapting, applying, social and cultural codes to the mundane details of life, the space, of course, in which a life is made and made up in countless reiterations.

SUBSEQUENT LINES OF WORK

Constructing Social Problems

Against the commonsense and often social scientific wisdom that social problems exist as obviously undesirable conditions threatening social and cultural stability, health, and

happiness, Malcolm Spector and John I. Kitsuse ([1977]2001), in their *Constructing Social Problems*, propose a definition of social problems and a kind of empirical analysis that draws on many of the themes in Berger and Luckmann's work and that have come to exemplify a certain kind of social constructionist theory. Both lines of work might be read in part as humanist responses to the then dominance of structural and functional analysis of social systems apparent in U.S. sociology and the corresponding de-emphasis on situated, ongoing, social interaction. Parallel work in psychology, often referred to as "constructivist," marks similar reactions against a dominant positivism there (see Burr 1995).

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Social problems, Spector and Kitsuse ([1977]2001) wrote, are "the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions" (p. 75). The inquiry should focus on what they called *claims-making and responding activities* by specific persons at and in particular times and places and about things they do not/do like and hope/hope not to change. Here, the analyst is not concerned with evaluating or examining the validity or truth of the claims made about the things in question, which of course has been the conventional sociological assignment. "Even the existence of the condition itself is irrelevant and outside of our analysis. We are not concerned whether or not the imputed condition exists" (p. 76). It is, rather, the viability or "life" of such claims and responses that interest Spector and Kitsuse.

Social problems—and, by extension, all of what can be called "moral work" or "morality" understood as the making of evaluations and judgments—are thus seen as accomplishments that exist in and through claims-making, responding, and related activities. Although this gives prime place to actual language in use and the strategies those who press such claims or respond to them might adopt, Spector and Kitsuse's view also incorporates activities that participants pursue that seem to the analyst to be clearly premised on member definitions of the objects, arrangements, and theories that they imply. Attention thus is given not only to language and *discourse* but to the individual and joint activities that appear to be premised on these member understandings and interpretations.

Spector and Kitsuse's constructionism contains an explicitly *reflexive* flavor. Sociologists themselves are seen as among the primary champions of various definitions of social problems—in both the public and professional arenas in which they can be found—and these definitions easily become topic for the theory and strategy of analysis this constructionism encourages. Indeed, professional and official claims-makers of all sorts have been among the most commonly studied participants in constructing social problems in the large body of research and writing this work has stimulated. Much of the early empirical research using this perspective—studies by Stephen Pfohl on child abuse, by Peter Conrad on hyperactivity, by Joseph Schneider on alcoholism, and by Conrad and Schneider on the medicalization of deviance—focused on such professional and medical claims-makers and their interactions with various lay populations (see Conrad and Schneider 1992).

Sexuality: Identity and Body Constructed

Foucault's writing on the disciplining of the body and the shaping and embrace of subjectivity has had an enormous effect on subsequent research and theory on various aspects of sexuality across the human sciences. Among the clearest of these lines of influence are those found in the argument that *sexual identity* is socially constructed and that "the body"—and the *sexual*

body in particular—and sexuality are "inscribed," "performed," and thus, too, constructed. This work offers examples of the two different ways in which social constructionism seems to be read: as at the more or less rational and intentional direction of an individual self or subject, on one hand, and as the operation of constraining but not fully determinative social, cultural, and historical processes that more or less shape/constitute subjects and their activities, on the other.

Before Foucault—and in U.S. sociology—an early and notable example of the former kind of social constructionist argument dealing with what might be called "gender identity" is Harold Garfinkel's famous case study of Agnes. Arguably paradigmatic of ethnomethodological analysis, Garfinkel drew on detailed interviews with and observations of a male-to-female transsexual to reveal the mundane practices or "methods" that Agnes had to learn and then use in order to be, to exist in the world as, a taken-for-granted, "bona fide" female and woman in society. Garfinkel shows how Agnes worked to achieve this mundane ontology and, in doing so, makes clear just how much all normalized gender identity is an accomplishment produced by and through an ongoing set of intentional practices that are the seen but unnoticed stuff of social and cultural reality. Garfinkel's ethnomethodology and subsequent work in *conversation analysis* helped us see the material real as an achievement in which human beings in local settings put society and culture together using the mundane practices that every society/culture makes available to them. (A parallel kind of analysis that is not particularly about sexual identity and is not seen as ethnomethodological but is, arguably, constructionist in a similar sense, is found in Erving Goffman's work on the presentation of self.)

Against this kind of constructionism, elements of which also can easily be found in writing on the social construction of sexual identity linked to gay and lesbian identity and social movement politics, some feminist scholars have taken up from Foucault and from poststructuralism more generally an analysis of how sexuality and sexualized bodies are inscribed and performed in and through social and cultural regulatory practices that simultaneously produce the very subjects or subjectivities through and in which human beings are said to "have *agency*." Indeed, the very possibility of "agency"—not to mention "rational choice"—is seen here as a cultural and social resource with various but circumscribed possibilities that are always politically charged. The writings of Judith Butler and Elisabeth Grosz, in their emphasis on performativity, materiality, the psyche, and the volatility of bodies have been among the most influential here. In this work, we can see a critique of the version of constructionism that highlights the intentional, choosing, and rational subject. While not erasing the significance of a moving, acting human individual, Page 728 this work resituates the notion of human agency within a complex of forces that can be said to "construct" the social and cultural objects under study. Poststructural influence in scholarship on gay and lesbian sexuality has produced congenial analyses, sometimes referred to as queer theory, that aim to deconstruct sexual identity as itself a social construction that regulates and serves that which it seems to critique. In all these latter works, the emergence, force, and consequences of categories of knowledge and their related practices, never simply "used" or "directed" by the familiar humanist subject, are at the center of attention.

Posthuman Actant - Networks in Technoscience Studies

A third line of work that can be seen as social constructionist in yet another sense has grown up in the interdisciplinary field of technoscience studies, particularly as found in the work of Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway. Here we come almost full circle from Berger and

Luckmann's claim that social constructionism takes knowledge and its categories, their creation, history, complexity, and movement as its central topic of analysis. But this circle is not quite closed. Although Berger and Luckmann claimed that "whatever passes for 'knowledge' in society" should be subjected to constructionist analysis, they were not quite willing to subject their own kind of work—science—to a thoroughgoing or "radical" constructionism. The work referenced here does precisely that.

Pushing the decentered humanist subject even farther afield, this work might be characterized as a *posthuman* or postpersonal constructionism in which the human player does not disappear but, rather, becomes one of a diverse collection of "*actants*" linked together in a network that itself can be seen to construct facts and technoscientific knowledge. In no case is this network directed by the humans who participate in it, although they retain a special importance linked to their particular capacities as users of language and meaning and as those who can ask often difficult moral and ethical questions.

Grounded in early ethnographies of scientists at work at the bench, Latour, Steve Woolgar, and others contributed to what Latour calls an *actor-network analysis* of science. Eschewing much standard sociological explanation, Latour has seen the production of scientific knowledge and the actual work of science as collective accomplishments of a network of actants, only some of whom are human or even alive. Latour saw that scientists rely heavily on the action of the ever-expanding collection of writing machines ("inscription devices"), observations, and laboratory-sited events, and objects that ostensibly stand in for "nature" and on whose behalf the scientists hope to speak as they defend their claims to skeptical colleagues. Successful scientific knowledge becomes that which the scientist and other actant collaborators can defend against all attempts to undermine it as "subjective" or merely a human speaking for herself or himself alone.

Haraway has contributed importantly to this view of technoscience, although she writes as a socialist-feminist sympathetic to poststructuralism and who longs for what she calls a "successor science" that is networked, collaborative, partial, strongly objective, and that seriously seeks to make a better world, with less suffering and more "happiness," for all living beings. Writing explicitly against sexism, racism, and patriarchy, Haraway offers a constructionism that is considerably more open, messy, and unpredictable than versions that locate the rational human actor—historically almost always a white male European or North American—at the center of its story or that give "discourse" a determinative force. From her famous "cyborg manifesto" to later critical analyses of technoscience, Haraway urges an understanding and vision by human actants in this process—among other "material-semiotic objects"—that not only make explicit their own dependencies but that also speak their own implication in the shaping of and responsibilities for the local worlds being built. Haraway wants scientists to ask if the worlds they help to construct are worth living for, for whom this might be more or less the case, and what all life in these worlds is likely to be, being able to admit that while they know, they do not know for sure. Others have pursued work that reiterates and extends various themes of contingency, distributed cognition, and complexity in the networks that can be said to construct and embody technoscientific knowledge.

—Joseph W. Schneider

See also [Butler, Judith](#) ; [Conversation Analysis](#) ; [Discourse](#) ; [Essentialism](#) ; [Ethnomethodology](#) ; [Foucault, Michel](#) ; [Postmodernist Feminism](#) ; [Sexuality and the Subject](#) ; [Social Studies of Science](#) ; [Sociologies of Everyday Life](#) ; [Symbolic Interaction](#)

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Title: Latour, Bruno

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LATOUR, BRUNO

Bruno Latour (b. 1947), French social theorist of science, technology, and politics, was at the forefront of the development and refinement of actor-network theory (ANT) and the emergence of science and technology studies (STS) in Europe. His work has been influential in North American science studies, and many of his concepts have traveled across disciplinary divides. Latour was born in Beaune in the Burgundy region of France, to a family noted for their wine production. Educated in Dijon, he was trained in philosophy and received his PhD from the University of Tours in 1975. During his military service, which brought him to North Africa, Latour became interested in developing anthropological models to examine modern knowledge-producing institutions and practices. He has developed a critical perspective on not only the production of knowledge in the natural sciences but the social sciences as well. He is deeply concerned with rethinking the relationships between two of the central organizing concepts of modernity: Nature and Society. Latour argues that both the natural and the social are coproduced over different spaces and at different times, leading to the formation of what he terms "collectives." The collective is not synonymous with society, but rather provides the conditions of possibility for sociality and relations between humans and nonhumans. Latour is critical of the master narratives of modernity, such as progress and transcendence, but he is also skeptical of the claims of radical postmodernists, whom he sees as too pessimistic, and abdicating the work of producing new collectives that could create alternative futures.

Latour's work was introduced in English with the publication of *Laboratory Life* (1979). In this text, Latour and coauthor Steve Woolgar took on the perspective of a "naïve" anthropologist inside of a neuroendocrinological lab in the United States. By "naïve," the authors meant that they would pay close attention to the ongoing day-to-day work of scientists as forms of cultural practices. The authors focused on following the scientists across different domains of activity, including running experiments, writing papers, raising money, and speaking to different audiences. Latour and Woolgar argued that rather than being bounded by the traditional divide of science and society, which dominated functionalist sociological explanations of science (à la Robert Merton), scientists actively constructed the boundary between science and society and utilized either side as a resource, depending on the demands of the situation. Thus, "nature" emerges as a product of laboratory work, not as a precondition. However, the authors did not reduce scientific work to the subject; rather, scientists succeed through establishing links with other powerful actors and accumulating scientific credit (or capital), which must be continually reinvested in order to strengthen and expand their network of links. The network sustains and fortifies the actor, but the network is not reducible to static concepts, such as social structure. Latour and Woolgar pointed out that they are opposed to using the concept of "social factors" to explain science, since that replicates and reverses the very problem they are seeking to overcome, namely how to explicate the activity of science without recourse to nature (or society).

Laboratory Life was one of the first ethnographies of modern bench science. Latour's work at this point coincided with others who were also exploring the worlds of modern science

through forms of participant observation, such as German sociologist Karin Knorr Cetina. Knorr Cetina, influenced by symbolic interactionist and phenomenological theories of social action, argued that the scientific method must be understood as a locally produced social practice. Bench scientists produce temporary *stabilizations*, which are often deconstructed by scientists themselves, as they travel through different symbolic economies. Knorr Cetina's ethnographic work, *The Manufacture of Knowledge* (1981), argued for *methodological intersubjectivity*, or establishing a tight contact point with the social phenomenon under investigation, through close observations of lab practices and interactions. This position is closely aligned with Latour and Woolgar's anthropological naïveté.

In his next series of writings, including "Visualization and Cognition: Thinking with Hands and Eyes" (1986), *Science in Action* (1987) and *The Pasteurization of France* (1988), Latour began to examine the deep intertwining of science and politics, as well as to develop a rich conceptual lexicon to describe his epistemology. In revealing the contours of lab culture, Latour had placed emphasis on the processes of *translation*. Translation involves the processes of converting the cacophony of objects and materials used for experiments into relatively simple *inscriptions*, such as graphs or sequences. Inscriptions that are simple, portable, and obdurate, and can be recombined with other inscriptions, comprise what Latour called "immutable mobiles." Immutable mobiles are easily packaged, circulated and proliferated, and tend to accumulate in *centers of calculation*. Inscriptions, and the devices that produce them, are part and parcel of political methods of intervention in the world. In other words, the production of scientific knowledge is not solely a technical enterprise; rather, the processes of scientific knowledge production coconstruct both social and technical orders. In addition, Latour stresses the conflictual aspects of technoscience. Drawing heavily on military metaphors, he emphasizes how scientists must enlist allies and cut off opponents in the struggle over *obligatory points of passage*, or nodes that stabilize a network of *actants*, a term drawn from semiotics that is useful for Latour, as it covers whatever is represented within a network, including both humans and nonhumans.

Latour set out to clarify his politics of science by coining the term *technoscience*, which is a fusion of the words *technology* and *science*, in order to indicate that the disparate and motley collection of actants that make up scientific practice does not easily bifurcate into pure and applied research. This becomes a methodological point for ANT: Sociologists of science and others must not simply replace internalist explanations of scientific activity, such as great minds or transparent proof, with externalist arguments, such as the force of ideology or the power of capitalism. Since boundaries are constantly being modulated by humans and nonhumans, the analyst should not foreclose a boundary by explaining it through recourse to either social factors or natural facts. Technoscience operates precisely through the simultaneous production of an internal and an external, or both nature and society.

Latour elaborated his technoscientific politics in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993). Here Latour argues that we can think of modernity as a *constitution*; it is a mechanism for sorting and classifying, but also for power and control. He claims that the concept of "modern" refers to two separate processes: *translation*, which constructs hybrid objects, such as transgenic animals, and *purification*, which is the process that separates humans (Culture) from nonhumans (Nature). The process of translation has accelerated the creation of *quasiobjects* and *quasisubjects* that inhabit modernity. The use of the prefix *quasi-* is important for Latour because it represents the provisional nature of hybrids within networks before they become solidified (or *black-boxed*) as unyielding objects or volitional subjects.

We Have Never Been Modern appeared at the beginning of what was called the science wars, disciplinary (and individual) conflicts over differing representations of science. In a simple sense, the science wars pitted analytic philosophers of science and their allies in the history of science against theorists of knowledge and science (and its consequences) from cultural studies and sociology influenced by poststructuralism, feminism, and/or postmarxism. In response to this skirmish, Latour wrote a series of essays over the 1990s devoted to understanding what was at stake in these debates, compiled in *Pandora's Hope* (1999). Latour argued that the science wars were a symptom of the changing relationships within technoscience. He has continued in this direction with *War of the Worlds* (2002), in which he calls for a *multinatural diplomacy*. He claims that diplomacy is now necessary to acknowledge the war going on not over scientific facts but rather over *states of affairs*. Instead of bringing closure, facts have led to more intense squabbles over what constitutes reality. Latour also argues that the resolution will not be found through multicultural tolerance, since that perspective assumes a plurality of cultures undergirded by a singular Nature. Rather, he emphasizes that it is time to recognize and endorse many possible natures that are part of the process of building new collectives.

—Chris Ganchoff

See also [Actor Network Theory](#) ; [Merton, Robert](#) ; [Postsocial](#) ; [Social Studies of Science](#)

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