The social construction of social construction: implications for theories of nationalism and identity formation

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Although most contemporary theories of nationalism and identity formation rest on some form of social constructivism, few theorists of nationalism and identity formation interrogate social constructivism as a social construction – a social science concept “imposed” on the non-self-consciously constructivist behaviors of people, who generally do not believe they are engaging in construction. Since social constructivism – unless it is a metaphysics about what is real – is really about the concept of social construction, the first task of constructivists is to ask not how various populations have engaged in social construction but how social construction should be defined. As this article shows, constructivism is at best a run-of-the-mill theoretical approach – perfectly respectable, but no different from any other theoretical approach in the social sciences. It is only when social constructivism makes outlandishly radical claims – that all of reality or all of social reality is constructed – that it is unusual, exciting, and wrong.

Keywords: social construction; theories of nationalism; identity

What’s in a name?

Let us imagine three sets of people living many centuries ago. The first group calls itself the Herers. They live in a territory they call “here,” they pursue a variety of simple economic activities, possess a coherent social structure, speak a language and practice a culture they call “ours,” and are ruled by their elders. The Herers love “here” and they cannot imagine life elsewhere; they also love what is “ours.” They term the people who live “there” Therers and they recognize that Therer language and culture are “theirs” and definitely not “ours.” The Therers actually call themselves something else – Pemons. They possess a strictly bounded territorial homeland, a language replete with abstruse terminology, a culture that mystifies the Herers, a coherent political order with genuinely participatory characteristics, and an elaborate system of myths, beliefs, and norms they consider to be the essence of Pemoness. Finally, there are the Rationalists, a fanatical sect of like-minded individuals dedicated to the exaltation of reason and the rational pursuit of individual utility. Utterly committed to these goals, they abandoned their homes and, although speaking different languages and possessing different cultures, established a liberally ruled “trading state,” perhaps on an island or in some region tucked away beyond here and there.

Let us also imagine that all three groups have, up to this point in the thought experiment, been sealed off from the age of nationalism. They are, in other words, completely unaware of the nationalist terminology that is being crafted in Europe. Naturally, their
innocence cannot last and, sooner or later, they too are exposed to the ideas circulating among self-styled nationalists. A particularly incendiary nationalist pamphlet appears in the Herers’ midst. The Herers are swept off their feet by its message. They see themselves mirrored in the analysis and decide forthwith to be a nation. Unfortunately, the age of print capitalism is not without its imperfections, and a typographical error mars the text: natio appears as ratio – Latin, evidently, is not quite dead – and nationalist appears as rationalist. Henceforth, the Herers call themselves the Herer ratio and the Herer elders call themselves rationalists.

The same pamphlet appears among the Pomos, but this one, a later edition carefully proofread by a meticulous nationalist, bears no typographical errors. The Pomos read the text; they, too, see themselves reflected in the analysis, but are aghast. Nations, they conclude, are absurd human constructions and nationalists are evil connivers. To make this point to the world they decide to abandon the Pomo name and describe themselves as the very antithesis of the age of nationalism. Henceforth, they will be known as the Antination and the Antinationalists.

The Rationalists are especially avid readers, mostly of economic texts, and one day they stumble upon a pamphlet that profoundly affects them. It is a carefully reasoned statement of their principles, a systematic compilation of all the beliefs they claim as their own. The Rationalists are both astounded by and immensely pleased with their own cleverness. Unfortunately, they too are the victims of the vagaries of print capitalism. A typographical error appears in the pamphlet: ratio – this author, evidently, also had a penchant for Latin phrases – appears as natio and rationalism appears as nationalism. Puzzled, but also persuaded that changing their appellation holds no costs and may offer some benefits – perhaps a free subscription to subsequent pamphlets – they proceed to call themselves a natio as a group and nationalists as individuals.

Of the three imagined communities described above, which are the nations and the nationalists and which are not? The Herers possess many of the “objective” characteristics of nationhood – common territory, economy, language, and culture – but they call themselves rationalists, not nationalists. The Pomos possess both the “objective” and “subjective” characteristics of a nation, but they insist on calling themselves an Antination. Finally, the Rationalists, who appear to be anything but a nation, call themselves just that.

Clearly, if a group can be a nation only if it explicitly terms itself a nation, then the Herers cannot be a nation, even though their style of life and their explicit commitment to the ideas of nationalism would appear to qualify them for national status. If the explicit acceptance of nationalist ideology is a necessary condition of nationhood, then the Pomos, although satisfying most definitions of a nation, cannot be one. Last but not least, if a group is a nation once it conceptualizes itself as a nation – that is, if the appellation is a sufficient condition of nationhood – then the Rationalists are a nation, even though they explicitly reject everything that real nationalists stand for. By this logic, even the Pomos might have to be deemed a nation on the grounds that an antination is just an awkward terminological variant of a nation.

The moral of this exercise in imagination is, I suggest, that the terms employed by nations and nationalists are at best of marginal relevance to theories of nations and nationalism. Nations may call themselves blue or they may follow Nelson Goodman’s terminology and call themselves “grue” (Fact, Fiction, and Forecast); nations may be for or against nationalism; and nonnations may call themselves a natio or they may call themselves a ratio. Why certain groups call themselves this or that may be interesting and important questions if, like Leah Greenfeld, we are interested in how and why words circulate or how and why people appropriate terms and to what ends. But a focus on the actual
names tells us little about whether the groups involved should be viewed as constituting nations. Only students of nations and nationalism – the scholars, and not the nations or the nationalists – can answer that question (just as they, the scholars, typically define every other social science term). If a nation, according to our definition, is a set of people with defining characteristics A, B, and C, then any set of people with just these characteristics is a nation, regardless of how it calls itself and what its elites think. By this standard, the Herers appear to be a nation; the Pomos are definitely a nation even though they would prefer to think of themselves as something else; and the Rationalists remain rationalists even though they call themselves nationalists.

This argument has important implications for the study of nations and nationalism. If the term nation is irrelevant to answering the question of whether or not a set of people is a nation, then there is no reason to think that nations must be confined to the age of nationalism that burst on the world in – take your pick – 1688, 1776, or 1789. Because nations exist whenever a set of people can be identified as having defining characteristics A, B, and C, then nations can in principle exist before, during, or after the term nation and the language and logic of a worldview called nationalism exist. Did group X in the year 1000 possess characteristics A, B, and C? Did group Y in the year 1900 possess these same characteristics? If yes, then X and Y are nations. If no, then they are not.

Abandoning the stipulation that entities can be nations only if they use the language and logic of the age of nationalism has two important side benefits. First, we avoid falling into the nationalist trap. By consciously rejecting nationalist assumptions regarding nations and states, we avoid thinking, however inadvertently, as nationalists and thereby remain open to a variety of theoretical perspectives. Second, we also avoid violating the most rudimentary rules of concept formation and theory building. Building causal propositions into definitions and then using the latter to prove the validity of the former is an exercise in circularity. If nations can be defined only in terms of the age of nationalism, we should not be surprised to learn that they can be explained only in those terms as well.

Rather than constructing one’s own definitions, why not just appropriate those used by historical agents in general or nations in particular? There are two reasons that make such an approach impossible. First, this approach assumes that social scientists, in some specific here and now, can come to understand all the concepts employed by historical agents – in some other there and then. Although approximations are surely possible, complete comprehension is impossible, as we can never fully penetrate the linguistic world of others. Because we can never imagine what it was like to be a statesman in nineteenth-century Europe or a nationalist in twentieth-century Africa, the turn to historical agents inevitably results in concepts that are no less fuzzy and inexact than those employed by the social scientists who reject this technique. Moreover, as Arthur Danto points out, the more the lifeworlds of the others approximate ours, the more likely – and less necessary – is comprehension, while the less their lifeworlds approximate ours, the less likely – and more necessary – is comprehension (287–97). In other words, we can understand what we understand anyway, and we cannot understand what we cannot understand anyway.

Second, the turn to historical agents is also premised on the belief that, in order to understand or explain certain social facts (the state, the nation, etc.), the discourses employed by the people implicated in those social facts are best suited to such an undertaking. It is unclear why that should be the case. Naturally, if our goal is to understand their discourses, then it makes sense to employ as much of their discursive terminology as possible. If the goal is to understand their actions in terms of their discourses and other social facts, then again it makes sense to use their terminology. But if the goal is to explain how discourses affect social facts or how social facts affect discourses, then there is simply no
alternative to employing concepts (for instance, such as “discourse” and “social facts”) that are ours and not theirs. In any case, regardless of the theoretical undertaking, it is impossible not to employ our own concepts at some point. We could, for instance, employ the definition of nation or of sovereignty of historical agents, but sooner or later those definitions will have to be supplemented with such concepts as discourse and identity. We could perform the maneuver once again and use their definitions of discourse and identity, but then again, sooner or later, our own language and our own concepts would creep in – perhaps in the form of speech or self-definition. But these two notions are also ours, and not theirs, and so we would presumably have to embark upon a further translation and contextualization. And so on. Even if we stop short of infinite regress, sooner or later definitional circularity will set in as later concepts are based on earlier concepts.

In sum, the conceptual apparatus of historical agents, even if fully understood, can be employed only if embedded in the language of contemporary social science. For the turn to historical agents to work, one would have to adopt their entire language and understand it, and all its cultural and social and other nuances and connotations, completely. But that is as impossible as to imagine what it would be like to have been a nineteenth-century peasant or, for that matter, a bat – even if we possessed perfect knowledge of the past.

The ideal chronicle

Let us engage in a thought experiment inspired by Danto. In *Narration and Knowledge* he imagines an ideal chronicle that consists of descriptive present-tense sentences regarding every event in history (149–82). Would such a chronicle make history superfluous? After all, it contains all the facts about everything. What else is there for a historian to do? Paradoxically, Danto concludes that the historian’s task would be unaffected, precisely because the historian interprets the past in light of the future. As a result, an exhaustive collection of present-tense sentences would serve only as raw material for the historian writing from the perspective of the future.

Let us imagine that the ideal chronicle is even more exhaustive than Danto’s. Let us imagine that it consists not only of a complete description of every event in every place and every time; let us also imagine that it consists of every statement uttered by every person in every place and every time. And let us also imagine that the ideal chronicle also consists of every thought had by every person in every place at every time. In short, the ideal chronicle would amount to a completely exhaustive data bank – one including information of interest to all social scientists, from those inclined to natural-science explanations to those inclined to constructivist explanations. Would such a wealth of data validate or invalidate any of the extant approaches? More generally, what implications would such a data bank have for the different approaches?

Several conclusions suggest themselves. First, and foremost, all our social scientists would find themselves in exactly the same position as Danto’s historians. This massive amount of present-tense data would still have to be ordered in some way in order to produce something in the nature of either a “significant narrative,” to use Danto’s term for a historical account that provides some explanation for events, or a “theory” – a more rigorously constructed series of causes and effects. The ideal chronicle in and of itself would just be a mountain of inert data. The task of the social scientists would therefore begin after their encounter with the mountain. They would still have to “scale” it.

Second, there is no reason to think that they could not all scale it. With such an enormous mound of data, one can easily imagine that any number of perfectly persuasive theoretical accounts would be possible – no less possible than now, under conditions of
scarcity of data. In other words, the absence of reliable data has nothing to do with the fact that there are many different theories that account for them more or less equally well. Indeed, theoretical pluralism would be unavoidable under conditions of perfect information, because it is just then that every possible causal connection and correlation could be demonstrated and every possible anomaly or deviance could be explained away.

Third, a perfect data bank would have one equally important implication for all social science approaches. Under conditions of perfect information, no approach could possibly make any headway without clear and distinct concepts. If we agree with Philip Kitcher and think of theories as maps, then concepts are the units into which maps are divided – be they states or geographical zones or transportation networks or population centers. In this sense, a map can work, and serve its purpose as a map, if and only if the units are clearly defined and delineated, so that we can tell where one unit ends and another begins. In other words, the units of a map, like concepts, are about boundaries, about distinguishing one object from another object, about telling where one object ends and another begins.

Seen in this light, the two most popular theoretical approaches in today’s social sciences – rational choice theory and social constructivism – would have to proceed along the same exact lines before they would be able to do anything with the reams of data they confront. Both would first have to develop their own language. Only then would they be able to make the data “talk.” Rational choice theory, for instance, would do exactly what it does now – use the language of individuals, preferences, utility maximization, collective action, free riders, and the like. Some of these terms will, of course, be found within the ideal chronicle: after all, it will encapsulate everything said and thought by rational choice theorists of the past and immediate present. But the important point is that, while rational choice theory can draw on some of this social scientific language to refine its concepts, it will have to develop an intersubjective language of its own – one understood by rational choice theorists here and now and one enabling them to comprehend the data contained in the ideal chronicle. That language will probably have to be refined as the data bank grows – as it does with every second – and the current language of rational choice theory enters the bank and becomes part and parcel of the raw data. But the important point is that, at any time, rational choice theorists will have to have a language of their own appropriate to the task of explaining the data contained in the ideal chronicle.

Constructivist theorists – and especially those who employ the social constructivist conventional wisdom in their theories of nations, nationalism, and identity formation – will face the same exact challenge. Thus, their language, like that of rational choice theory, is theirs and not that of the people they are studying. Terms such as discourse, identity, social construction, inside–outside, polity, norms, and the like are intrinsic to their language, and as such are no less of an imposition on the discursive practices of the agents they are studying than the language of rational choice theory is an imposition on the strategic choices made by the individuals it is studying. Just as most people at most times do not consciously set out to maximize utility, so too they do not consciously set out to transform their identities into discursive practices. People may believe all sorts of things about their beliefs and behaviors, but there is no reason whatsoever to suppose that they are self-consciously engaging in “social construction.” Indeed, it would be utterly bizarre if the hundreds of millions of people who have lived on Earth – from peasants to workers to intellectuals to capitalists to socialists to fascists to Muslims to Catholics to Jews – actually believed that they were “socially constructing” anything at all. It takes very self-conscious and very self-reflexive intellectuals to believe that about
themselves, and, even then, I wager that the vast majority of such intellectuals do not believe – or are completely unconscious of – engaging in social construction for most of their waking days.

No less important, constructivism faces an especially difficult task – one even more complex than that faced by rational choice theory – inasmuch as it must maintain the integrity of the discourse of agents while employing its own language to pull off the trick. After all, one of constructivism’s central claims is that agents construct their own social reality. But how can constructivism go beyond this bald assertion of a metaphysical possibility to an actual demonstration of the claim? How can constructivism demonstrate that the language of agents – whether now or in the past, whether here or elsewhere in the world – actually constructs their world, and not our interpretation of their world, without using the language of interpretation, construction, and the like to make the claim? The answer, of course, is that constructivism cannot. In that sense, constructivism resembles a dog chasing its own tail. Constructivism claims that agents construct reality in their language, but the assertion of this claim and the demonstration of this claim can only be effected by the use of constructivist language, which by definition is alien to the language of the agents concerned and could not possibly have figured in their construction of social reality.

The conundrum of theories of social constructivism is that social construction is a social construction, that is to say, a social science concept “imposed” on the non-self-consciously constructivist behaviors of people, who by and large do not believe that they are engaging in construction. Social constructivism – unless it is a metaphysics about what is real – is thus really about nothing more than a concept, in this case the concept of social construction, as it applies to social reality. If that is indeed the case then the first task of constructivists is to ask not how various populations have engaged in social construction but how social construction should be defined. And that means that their focus should be on the traditional tasks of analytic philosophy. Indeed, seen in this light, constructivism is transformed into a run-of-the-mill theoretical approach – perfectly respectable, but no different from any other theoretical approach in the social sciences. It is only when social constructivism makes outlandishly radical claims – about all of reality being constructed or all of social reality being constructed – that it is unusual and exciting and, of course, absurd.

**The social construction of what?**

In a nutshell, social constructivism argues that, of all the entities that exist in the world, a certain class thereof is created by human beings. As products of some kind of human process, these humanly constructed entities may be referred to as artifacts. But which of the many entities that exist in the world are artifacts? If we assume for the sake of argument that there exist non-humanly constructed entities – let us provisionally call them “nature” – then socially constructed artifacts encompass everything else – from paintings to cars to stone axes to languages to culture to concepts to games. In a word, everything that is not specifically a part of nature is an artifact and everything is therefore socially constructed. If we assume, as some idealist scholars do, that even reality is a construct of human thought, then the realm of socially constructed artifacts expands to fill the entire known universe. What seems at first glance to be a triumph of constructivist thought turns out, on closer examination, to be a fatal flaw. At best, the concept of social construction helps differentiate the world of nature from the world of humanity – a distinction that is obvious and which could surely have been made without the
assistance of the concept of social construction. At worst, social construction is just another word for the universe. Either way, the concept is much too broad to be of any use to theorizing about the world.

Is there any way of redeeming the concept – perhaps by narrowing its scope or differentiating among its referents? We can follow Ian Hacking’s example and ask about “the social construction of what?” It is clear from the above discussion that artifacts – that is, humanly constructed entities – can be found in at least four realms of reality. I shall call the first theory, the second discourse, the third social facts, and the fourth the natural world. In making these distinctions, I am not, at least for the time being, suggesting that these four areas are or are not causally related. Nor do I wish to suggest that these four realms are completely independent of one another or that they suffice to describe all of reality. This fourfold division is a crass and crude simplification, but some such simplification and division – and this one has the merit of corresponding to social scientific use and common sense – is imperative if the concept of social construction is to be rescued from oblivion.

By theory I mean nothing more than the concepts that social scientists, philosophers, critics, and other professional thinkers employ in their attempts to explain or understand the world. By discourse – a term I employ without any of the Foucauldian baggage that is usually attached to it – I mean only the way in which entities in general or specific entities in particular are thought and talked about in some society. By social facts I mean all human institutions, organizations, and behaviors, from war to marriage to money to ordering beer in a French café. The natural world, if one exists independently of human thought, consists of those entities identified in the natural sciences and ranging from the things we call trees to the things we call galaxies. Naturally, the concept of social construction obviously refers to the first three sets of entities and, depending on the extent of one’s commitment to the constructionist program, possibly even to the fourth.

Further distinctions with a difference are also possible. One may believe that all, some, or none of the content of any realm of reality is socially constructed. It is perfectly possible, for instance, to believe that all of theory, much of discourse, some social facts, and no part of the natural world is socially constructed. It is just as possible to insist that all fours realms are constructed to an equal degree – all, some, or not at all – or to variable degrees. Naturally, there are internal limits to the number of possible permutations and combinations, as it may indeed be the case that the degree of social construction at one level presupposes a minimal degree of social construction at another level or levels. The most obvious example of this would be the claim that the natural world is socially constructed. Such a claim would appear to be absurd without the concomitant claim that theory, discourse, and social facts are also socially constructed. By the same token, the claim that social facts are socially constructed presupposes that theory and discourse are also, at least to some degree, socially constructed. Note, however, that the social construction of social facts need not presuppose – while certainly accommodating – the social construction of the natural world. In sum, a claim of extensive social construction for any realm appears to presuppose claims of social construction for the realms “above” – but not “below” – it. Thus, theory may be socially constructed, but, if it is, none of the other three levels need be as well. Alternatively, if the natural world is believed to be socially constructed, then the three levels above it – theory, discourse, and social facts – must be socially constructed as well. Each level is, thus, embedded or nested in those that follow it.

To say that the realms of reality are logically connected in terms of social construction is not to say that they are causally connected. That is to say, although the social
construction of, say, discourse presupposes at least some social construction of theory, there is no reason to think that either realm causes or brings about the other realm. For all we know, theory, discourse, social facts, and the natural world may arise for any number of natural or political, social, cultural, economic, religious, or ideological reasons – only one of which could be social construction by human agents. Indeed, there is no way of claiming a priori that social construction is, or must be, the sole cause of any realm. That may be the case, but that is a claim that has to be demonstrated and not assumed. We can, of course, define theory as being inseparable from discourse and both to be inevitably “instantiated” in just these social facts and no others, but such a definition is, as I have already suggested, tantamount to saying that the entire world is socially constructed and is thus useless.

Moreover, we also have no way of knowing a priori whether or not theory, discourse, social facts, and the natural world are or are not causally related. It may be the case that there is one and only one causal arrow moving, say, from theory to discourse to social facts to the natural world. It may be the case that only pairs of these realms are causally related. It may also be the case that some causal connections exist between and among all four realms – but only in addition to any number of other causal factors, to be found within realms. And, of course, it may be the case that there are no causal connections between and among these realms. A priori, therefore, it is an open question of just how these four realms are causally related. What is clear from these reflections, however, is that the number of possible causal connections is enormous.

All of this is obvious, of course. We know that reality is complex. My reason for stating the obvious is, however, to emphasize the following points. First, to claim that theory, discourse, social facts, and the natural world are all the product of one particular kind of social construction or that any one component of some realm is necessary and sufficient for all the others is an exceptionally strong and radical claim, one that is tantamount to a “theory of everything.” But the problem with theories of everything is that, in claiming to have discovered some one factor that accounts for all of reality – i.e. everything – they become tantamount to either natural laws or metaphysical beliefs. They cannot be natural laws – partly because there do not seem to be any such claims in the social sciences and mostly because such a status can be attained only after, and not before, extensive empirical testing and flawless corroboration. They can be belief systems – something on the order of basic ontological assumptions or religions – but then they are not theories, and however interesting it may be for some people to believe such things, there is little point in debating the content of the belief. Constructivism therefore fails if it hopes to explain all of reality. On the other hand, there is no reason that constructivism could not be useful in explaining any one realm – theory, discourse, social facts, or the natural world. (Natural scientists would, of course, dispute the ability of constructivism to say anything meaningful about the natural world.) That is, constructivism may work, if it is modest; constructivism fails, if it is bold.

But even if we grant that a modest constructivism may be useful, is it the case that constructivism is really about the social construction of reality? Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann, and John Searle really do talk about how reality is constructed originally, as it were in the time before institutions existed. Their intellectual experiments relate to the emergence – i.e. the actual construction – of social reality under conditions in which social reality was absent. In the world inhabited by constructivists and all other scholars, on the other hand, social reality already exists. Inasmuch as reality already exists, it is false to say that agents are, at any time after its original construction, actually constructing it. Rather, they may be engaged in one of two possible alternative modes of behavior:
reproduction or alteration. That is to say, after time \( t \), when reality was constructed, all that we can do is either reproduce that reality or change it. But these are very different things from actually constructing reality. Reality construction involves, presumably, just those kinds of inter-human, intersubjective engagements discussed by Berger and Luckmann, and Searle. There is no reason to think, a priori, that a similar kind of process is involved in reproducing and changing reality. Of course, it may just be the case that construction, reproduction, and change involve the exact same processes. But that is a question that cannot be assumed; it has to be demonstrated, either theoretically or empirically.

**Can constructivism be salvaged?**

Social constructivism is obvious. The fact that artifacts are socially constructed – and not eternally present or natural occurrences – is obvious. After all, that is the very premise of the social sciences. Hence, to make the claim for constructivism is uninteresting – until and unless one also answers two more important questions: (1) what is constructed? and (2) how is it constructed? The first question is obviously logically prior. It permits several simple answers: everything, including the world of nature; everything but the world of nature; or some, but not all, artifacts. The first view is obviously the most radical, and it entails a rejection of the mind-independent reality of the real world: it is akin to Goodman’s radical endorsement of “ways of worldmaking.” The second view insists that all social reality – everything, that is, that is not strictly speaking physical, biological, chemical, and so on – is constructed socially. The third would limit social constructivism to only some area within the social universe.

The second question – how are things constructed socially? – is equally important, and it, too, permits of several answers. The first, and the most radical, is that consciously and willfully acting constructivist elites construct reality. The second is that elites construct reality, but that they do so unconsciously and unwillfully. The third is that “people” – or agents in general – construct reality. And the fourth insists only that social forces, historical forces, and the like somehow construct social reality. We can combine both questions to produce a matrix.

**Forms of social construction**

As I have argued elsewhere, the only theoretically interesting claim concerns the first column of Table 1, the action of conscious elites (89–94). Forces, people, and non-conscious elites are all agents of sorts, but they are really tantamount to life, to history, or to some such generality. As such, while non-conscious elites, people, and forces are to be legitimately distinguished from forces of nature and hence from the claim that social reality is the natural product of forces of nature, these three factors do little to make the claims of constructivism interesting. Indeed, inasmuch as these three factors do not act consciously to construct reality, they resemble forces of nature and, in this sense, give the alternative view some consolation and legitimacy. Thus, unless we argue for the

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primacy of consciously acting elites engaged in construction, I submit we are pursuing trivials and restating the obvious — that people matter, that history matters, and that life is the product of living people living.

So what exactly can self-consciously constructivist elites do? That they may be able to reproduce or change some artifacts would appear to be beyond dispute. That they reproduce or change all artifacts, on the other hand, is an unsustainable claim — as a quick look at social behaviors and cultures suggests. Some things do, after all, just happen. Do self-consciously constructivist elites also reproduce or change natural reality? Or, to put the question differently, is there a natural reality that is not socially constructed, and if there is, is it possible that it has some impact on social reality — the realm that is more obviously under the influence of human constructivist efforts? One can, of course, withdraw into a stubborn insistence that nothing exists outside of one’s mind, and one can even insist that nothing has ever existed in the past, but such a move seems at best inutile and at worst ridiculous. It is useless because it logically implies either silence — something social constructivists never engage in — or no difference from a world that would be objectively real. It is ridiculous because it seems absurd to deny the reality of the objects and the people around us. Again, there is no ultimately absolute reason for not engaging in such radical skepticism, but there are also no good or even bad reasons for engaging in it. At best, a skeptic’s world looks exactly like this one, except, of course, that it is not really real; at worst, the skeptic is just plain wrong.

The more important point is this. Once we accept the reality of a mind-independent reality, we cannot a priori claim that all social reality is exclusively the product of social construction. After all, that natural reality could in fact be producing some of the social reality we encounter all around us. It may be doing so directly or indirectly, but we have no way of being able to exclude that possibility. Michel Foucault’s claim that man is an invention may therefore be true if and only if by man one means the concept of man or the concept of person or some such thing (307–19). That concept surely is a human invention and a social construction just like every other concept. If, alternatively, one believes that “man” as Homo sapiens is an invention, then one is either making a statement of faith — something along the lines of man being created in the image of God — or one is plain wrong. Wrong, that is, if one believes in a real world and the capacity of some of the social sciences to produce meaningful generalizations about the entities and processes that occur within it. For man to be an invention, we would have to deny modern genetics, modern microbiology, and all the other natural sciences. And no amount of insisting that the body is the field on which social forces inscribe themselves can change the fact that, even if that claim is true, the underlying reality is that the body is also a biological organism subject to certain kinds of biological, neurological, and physical laws. We can deny that too, of course, but then we may as well deny that there is any reality at all and, to be consistent, should also deny the possibility of airplanes, medicine, and promotion the next time we need to travel, our heads hurt, and tenure is at stake.

In sum, constructivism appears to be useful if it is about self-consciously constructivist elites engaging in the reproduction or alteration of some human artifacts. But who could possibly disagree with the observation that there are indeed self-consciously constructivist elites who engage in the reproduction or alteration of some human artifacts? Indeed, it is unclear what the alternative to constructivism, as construed in this minimal manner, can possibly be. If constructivism is not a theory but an “approach” that can be utilized by every theoretical perspective, then constructivism amounts to little more than the injunction that attention should be paid to people and ideas and culture and the large social entities in which they are embedded. Once again, who could possibly disagree?
Understanding national identity

I began this paper with comments on Herer, Therer, and Pomo national identity, and it may be appropriate to end with some theoretical reflections on identity – all the more so as identity figures prominently in the constructivist literature and in contemporary theories of nations and nationalism. It is not difficult to see why. Once we stipulate that people consciously construct reality, it is imperative that they have something resembling a blueprint according to which that reality will be constructed. If they desire to transform X into Y or A into B, they need to “see” X and A, desire Y and B, and believe that X and A can in fact be transformed into Y and B. That is to say, people need to know what they want and how to get it, and that is, in essence, what many theorists seems to believe that identity is – the norms, values, and beliefs of actors that impel them to construct reality in the same way that Goodman’s concepts lead him to engage in worldmaking. But such a view of identity is grossly inadequate. I am not disputing the importance of norms, values, and beliefs, but it is important to realize that identity is presumably about those norms, values, and beliefs that pertain to “who I am.” I may have many norms, values, and beliefs – and all of them may figure in my attempts to construct reality – but it is only those norms, values, and beliefs that actually define me in some way that actually relate to my sense of identity.

I submit that identity in general and national identity in particular is nothing other than the answer to the question: who am I? Naturally, that question does not emerge in a vacuum. It may be posed by what I call an interrogator; it arises and is answered within a certain kind of social context; and it is presumably reflective of certain features that I do indeed possess or believe I possess. That last point is, as we shall see, critical. For imagine that my identity is exclusively a function of interrogator and context: were that the case, then it would change with every minute of every day. Surely, it makes no sense to call all those millions of different combinations of interrogator and context different forms of identity – if only because that would reduce, necessarily, the notion of multiple identities and malleable identities to the absurd. However we imagine it, the concept of identity has utility only if it is something that persists. If so, then it cannot only be a function of interrogator and context. Identity has to be a persisting quality or dimension of me, as I am, and not as I am defined by others or as I appear to them in different contexts.

Is identity therefore some kind of essence? That would be a simple solution to the problem, but if we want to avoid essentialism it seems clear that identity must be, first and foremost, a function of something like a repertoire of possible identity-features that we possess independently of others and other contexts. These identity-features cannot, in the final analysis, merely be functions of the same cultural background or social setting or some such contextual feature, as that would bring us back to the dead end that we had just evaded. These features could be the product of certain physical or biological factors – genetic codes, chromosomal characteristics, and the like come to mind – or they could be the product of cultural, social, political, and economic settings that molded me as the “person” I am. That is to say, my identity repertoire (IR) at any time t consists of the following repertoire of potentially usable features: B(iological) + C(ultural) + S(ocial) + E(conomic) + P(olitical). Biological features are presumably constant, but all the others are presumably the accumulated results of years of socialization and growth starting at birth (0) and ending with time t. Thus, IR/t = B + (C + S + E + P)/0–t.

If identity is then the product of interrogator and context and features, then, at time t + 1, my identity represents some amalgam of B + (C + S + E + P)/0–t as they are reinterpreted and selected and mixed by me in response to the interrogator and context at t + 1.
At \( t + n \), the reinterpretation and selections that took place at \( t + 1 \) become part of the identity repertoire. In this way, we can reconcile continuity and persistence with the originary importance of self-identifying features and the importance of interrogators and contexts. Identity is thus a lasting, if not actually permanent, self-definition. I am X if and only if I define myself as X for a lengthier period of time.

Note that, if this account is persuasive, it means that identity, while malleable, is malleable only within limits. If identity changes, it does so only over time and in response to both external stimuli and internal realignments. And, last but not least, some elements of my identity, those designated as biological, do not change. There are, in sum, real limits to identity change and to the extent of identity change. Identity is thus situational, but rooted in certain intrinsic characteristics that are not situational. The answer to the question of who I am cannot be provided in the absence of an interrogator and a context. At the same time, the question cannot be answered in the absence of a repertoire of possible answers at the person’s disposal. We cannot therefore be anything at any time or at any place. We can be different things, but we can only be those things that are designated as possible by the identity repertoire. Thus, I cannot claim to be a 3000-year-old giraffe; nor can I claim to be a Hungarian prima ballerina. As much as I might want to be either or both of these things, they are simply not within my repertoire and thus beyond my reach.

Are there hierarchies of identities? The approach outlined above suggests that the answer has to be yes – unless we assume that identities are inert and have no impact on behavior. If, alternatively, identities do matter to living, then it makes little sense to think that a person with a bounded identity repertoire and facing a limited set of contexts and interrogators – and a person will always face a limited, if not indeed very limited, set of contexts and interrogators – will not persistently favor certain identities over others in the arduous task of living. People do not actively engage in every form of politics implied by their many possible identity configurations. That is, if a person has \( n \) possible identities, that person does not pursue with equal vigor and dedication \( n \) forms of political activity. Quite the contrary, the forms of political activity one pursues are usually some number far smaller than \( n \), and even that number, \( n - x \), is usually arranged in some order of priority: one pursues a above all, then b, and then perhaps c. How can we account for such behavior? Obviously, if political action is exclusively a function of context, then we would expect equally engaged action to take place in every context. But, of course, it does not. If action is a function only of identity, then here too we would expect as much engagement as there are identities; but this too is not the case.

There are only two ways of accounting for the hierarchy of action and the limited number of actions. First, it might be that some identities are more intensely held or felt or rooted than others, and it might then be the case that we act on just those more intensely held identities. Second, it might be that some identities are more prone to activation by the context or interrogator. The result in both cases is a strategic hierarchization of identities. Holders of a repertoire of potential identities either evaluate them and come to the conclusion that some matter more than others – which is to say, an ordinal ranking takes place very similar to that presupposed by rational choice theory’s ordinal ranking of preferences – or holders of the repertoire take note of how contexts or interrogators activate and rank-order identities. In both instances, some kind of more or less self-conscious ranking appears to take place, and identities do not automatically arrange themselves in some hierarchy.

We are now in a position to answer the question of whether self-consciously constructivist elites construct – that is, reproduce or change – identity. A radical constructivist
would say: yes, always and everywhere and to any extent desirable. My answer is: no, they can affect the interrogator or the context or the repertoire, but only partially, only marginally, and only fleetingly. By the same token, can I – as a putative member of some self-consciously constructivist nationalist elite – construct my national identity? I may be able to rank order my repertoire but I am unlikely to be able to affect the interrogator and context to any significant degree. In a word, yes – but only up to a point.

**The social functions of social constructivism**

The concept of social construction is a social construction that is largely confined to the realm of theory. One is hard pressed to find instances of social construction-speak in institutional sites that are not dominated by social scientists. Why would radical versions of an otherwise banal theoretical approach be so appealing to so many scholars? I suggest that the answer lies in radical constructivism’s claim to be a theory of everything. On the one hand, radical simplifications are appealing because they promise immediate and comprehensive solutions to the world’s many ills, about which intellectuals are genuinely concerned. On the other hand, radical simplifications that emphasize discourse are especially appealing to intellectuals in general and modern intellectuals in particular. Lacking prestige, wealth, and power, unlistened to and ignored by the population in general and policy makers in particular, intellectuals have a strong interest in ideologies that position them at the center of the universe, trump their ability to speak arcane above everything else, endow them with esoteric knowledge, and explain their inability to communicate with people in terms of the people’s false consciousness. Constructivism is, in brief, the opiate of the intellectuals.

**References**


