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**a debate
on discourse**

False Dilemmas in Organization Theory: Realism or Social Constructivism?

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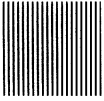
The question often arises as to whether one should take a realist or a constructivist approach to explaining organizational phenomena. I think this is an unhelpful question which can only arise within the context of a representationalist notion of knowledge; outside such a context the question ceases to be interesting or important.

We have learned from Dewey and Wittgenstein not only what questions to ask but, more crucially, what questions we should *not* ask. One of the questions we should not be asking is whether our social investigations get to the truth of the matter; whether or not they capture what is 'really going on out there'. Such questions are unhelpful, largely because they are undecidable: we lack the conceptual resources to answer them.

Realists typically make the mistake of thinking that there is an extra-linguistic reality, in the sense that there are 'intransitive objects' and 'real structures' in the world which are independent of actors' descriptions of them (Bhaskar, 1978, 1979). On the other hand, some social constructivists typically make the opposite mistake: all there is is what actors think about the world (Gergen, 1992; Parker, 1992). As said earlier, this dichotomy arises only within a representationalist view of knowledge which asserts that our knowledge represents the world as it is. As I will try to show below, if this view is dropped, the dichotomy disappears.

Both sides of the argument do have a point. Realists are right in saying that there is a social world outside our heads. Constructivists are right in claiming that the social world is constituted by language-based distinctions which are socially defined and established. Both sides can be reconciled if it is accepted that social reality is causally independent of actors (hence realists have a point) and, at the same time, what social reality is depends on how it has been historically defined, the cultural meanings and distinctions which have made it this reality as opposed to that reality (hence constructivists also have a point). Thus, bearing in

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mind that the causal independence of the world is different from the latter's description helps us uphold both the ontological existence of, and the epistemological diversity towards, the world.

In what follows, I would like to argue the case against the dichotomy between realism and constructivism. To do this it is necessary that I discuss the problems facing the representationalist view of knowledge because, as suggested, it is the metaphysical bedrock upon which the dichotomy rests in the first place.

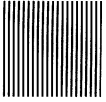
Against Representationalism

In some sense the notion of knowledge corresponding to the world is true, albeit trivially true. Admittedly, some simple statements such as 'the cat is on the mat' or 'Scotland is anti-Tory' are true by virtue of simply confronting them with a relevant chunk of reality. Moving, however, beyond such immediate, low-level correlations to putting forward more complicated explanatory statements, the pairing off between such statements and chunks of reality is not easily made.

The reason is simple. The number of features which can figure in such correlations or pairs off is theoretically indefinite. An object or a phenomenon can be classified in multiple ways. And of those features only a few will yield correlations which will be of explanatory force. What are those features? Are they the most obtrusive? Historians of science tell us that this is not necessarily so. Distinctions that may appear to be obvious in a particular epoch may be discredited in another. At the end of the day it depends a great deal on the system of thought that is dominant in a particular period (Taylor, 1985: 61).

For Aristotelians, for example, the heavens formed as orderly and comprehensible a system as for Newtonians. The theories of both schools break the world up, albeit differently, and postulate explanatory relations between its parts. But which one broke it up the right way (Doyle and Harris, 1986: 28–30)? Similarly, which of the different theories in psychology gets closer to the nature of intelligence? What is intelligence? More generally, does our language, at any point in time, to use Aristotle's famous phrase, 'cut reality at the joints'? How could one ever know?

Now, it might be remarked that although scientists and social scientists alike may not be able to make claims to the truth, they nevertheless deal with 'brute facts' (Searle, 1969: 50–3), freed from interpretation, which can help us adjudicate between rival theories. Is that so? Consider the following example suggested by MacIntyre (1985: 79). A modern observer looks into the sky and sees stars and planets. Compare this with what a medieval observer would see: chinks in a sphere through which the light beyond may be observed. Do both observers see the same thing? Well, to the extent that there is the pressure of light waves on both observers' retinas, it could be said that there is a brute outside world out there causing them to see small light patches against a dark surface. However,



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as Rorty (1991: 81) remarks, there is no way of ‘transferring this non-linguistic brutality to facts, to the truth of sentences’. In other words, the world causes us to have beliefs but it cannot tell us what to believe. As Rorty (1989: 6) again explains, ‘the world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak. Only other human beings can do that’.

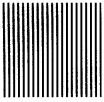
To put it differently, there are relations of causation (but no relations of representation) holding between non-linguistic items and our beliefs; and there are relations of justification holding between our beliefs. Thus, as said earlier, although it is conceded to realists that there are objects which are causally independent of human beliefs and desires, it is also conceded to constructivists that one can never be certain whether one has got into the ‘nature’ of an object of study. Moreover, we would benefit if we did not ask such questions. Rather, since beliefs can be compared only with other beliefs, what we should be asking is whether our beliefs cohere and, if not, we should try to re-weave them so that they do (Rorty, 1989, 1991).

In this view, therefore, objects retain their causal independence. They are, to use realists’ favourite phrase, the loci of ‘causal powers’ (Harré and Madden, 1975), providing the stimuli for manifold uses of language. But the moment we ask for facts about an object, we are asking how it should be described in a particular language, and that language is inevitably an institution (Rorty, 1989: 15–57; 1991: 84). To talk about an object of study, whether natural or social, is to talk about something which is already invested with certain language-based distinctions, with a place within a language game.

An Illustration

Let me illustrate the above with an example from economic sociology. What is the market? How should it be described? Whatever answers are provided, one thing is clear: the market causes us—business organizations, governments, managers, consumers, citizens—to have beliefs. But as far as how a market is to be described, there is no uniform way which can apply across time and space. Indeed, if one goes back in time, what one sees—that is why history is so instructive—is different understandings, different conceptions of, and, therefore, different attitudes to the market in different periods.

Dobbin’s (1995) work on the historical evolution of industrial strategy in the rail industry in the USA, Britain and France is highly illuminating. For example, in 19th-century America, the rail industry was successively seen as an organic market (1825–1906), a co-operative market (1871–1896), and a competitive market (1897–1906). What is even more interesting is that, in each period, the economic principles that were derived



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were taken to be entirely 'natural' and perfectly logical. The rail market was seen, respectively, as 'evidently' organic, 'naturally' co-operative, and 'naturally' monopolistic. Dualistic pricing, for example—charging rates according to how much competition there was in a route—was considered natural and fair during the organic market period, whereas, when suspicions grew that too much power had been concentrated into the hands of railway companies, it ceased to be seen as such.

In other words, as Dobbin (1995: 280, 300) points out, ideas about efficiency are derived from historically situated experiences and, thus, vary over time and across space. Economic experience caused actors to have beliefs in 19th-century America about underlying American social life at different points in time.

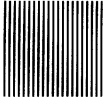
Similarly, phenomena such as trust, loyalty, authority, motivation, leadership, and so on are constituted by inter-subjective meanings articulating sets of socially established qualitative distinctions (Taylor, 1985; Tsoukas, 1998). What we should be searching for is not regularities revealing allegedly fundamental truths, but the institutional origins and contingency-shaped development of behaviour patterns (Dobbin, 1995: 279; Granovetter, 1992: 25–6, 32–5).

Conclusions

To conclude, what I have suggested here is that we should reject the epistemological rivalry between realism and social constructivism—it leads nowhere and is philosophically flawed. An anti-representationalist account of knowledge, such as that provided by pragmatists and interpretive philosophers, retains the causal independence of the world, while upholding the manifold descriptions the world lends itself to. We are realists simply because reality is where it has always been, outside our heads. Insofar as we create structures through patterns of sustained interaction, from the micro-level of the small group right to the macro-level of global economic systems, we are confronted by real structures which we only partially and often indirectly and unintentionally have helped create. Such structures cause us to form beliefs about them. In turn, our descriptions of these structures (more precisely, how we describe them), are matters which depend on the language-based institutionalized meanings a community of actors have historically adopted. It is processes of (history-shaped) social construction, unfolding in time and space, that we, as organizational researchers, should seek to study.

Acknowledgement

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