

Stories, Models, Images: Constructing the World

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A change in world-view

My understanding of reality has changed significantly in the last couple of years.

Already in High School I have come in contact with some strands of constructivism, mainly when Paul Watzlawick was mentioned in our philosophy textbook. "How Real is Real?" was the question asked; and it seemed totally irrelevant to me. Reality is real enough, I thought, we move around in it every day, and it works. If anyone wishes to speculate about smokescreens and mirrors let them do so. I did not see any relevance of what had been suggested; I did not see what implications or consequences it might have on my everyday life.

Now I do.

Constructivism (as I understand it) has become a very important part of my life and of my understanding of reality. It does influence how I understand myself, how I move around in the world, and how I see my options for political action.

What, then, did this change entail?

Images

I used to think that the world is there, as an external reality, or rather just as reality. Things are as they are, and it is my task to find out how they are, so that I can orient myself and know what to do. This used to hold true both for the individual level of everyday life as well as for the political level. There, too, my task and that of my political group would be to understand how the world works, to gather information, to analyse it, and from there, to identify possibilities for action. My academic studies were guided by essentially the same logic.

The world, in that understanding, was there before I began to look at it and to talk about it. It was neither created nor changed by my act of talking about it. If it was changed, then that was only through my consequent action, but certainly not through the act of looking and talking and understanding alone.

In my current world-view, that is no longer so.

Now I would rather say that reality as we experience it is by and large an experience.

That does not necessarily mean that an independent, "objective" reality does not exist. That, however, is no longer the main question.

The reality we live in is always the reality we experience; it is never reality "as such". Looked at with human eyes, a landscape looks one way; with insect eyes, another. Without eyes, we can not see. It is not possible to look without having a perspective.

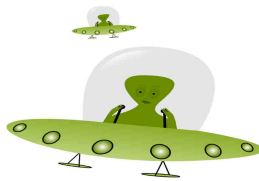
An infra-red camera renders yet another image of the same landscape, radar yet another. A camera can zoom in on one particular object, or zoom out to show the whole continent from above. There is no neutral, and no "right" perspective. Or, perhaps, there are many "right" perspectives.

The image the human eye gives of the landscape is correct in its own way. It is reliable and useful. I can walk around in the world using this image. If I come to the same place, it will look the same to me, and I will recognise it. I will be able to see where there's a path and where there's an obstacle. I can base my decision on where to walk on that image, and it will work. I may say that what my eyes told me was true, right, correct, because it correlates with my experience of moving about and not running into objects.

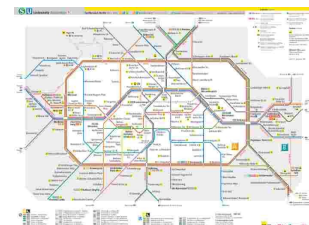
An insect perhaps gets a different image. The insect can see frequencies that my human eye can not capture, yet they are there, and the image the insect eye sees is also true, right, correct. And it is a good image; it allows the insect to fly, to live, to find flowers; it is reliable and helpful. The infra-red image is also right, and so is the radar. Whether one image is more helpful than the other depends on who I am and what I am trying to do.

I would like to refer to a metaphorical story here that was originally meant to illustrate our possibilities to know God, but that I believe can well be used to illustrate our possibilities to know the world.

The story is of three extra-terrestrial beings who have never seen a human city. Somehow, one of them has got hold of a map of the Berlin underground; another of a satellite photo of the Berlin area; the third one of a picture postcard of a monument in Berlin. Now they sit together arguing about the true nature of Berlin.



images: Berlin?ⁱⁱ



It seems worth noting that if these extra-terrestrials were to land on earth and to physically be in the streets of Berlin, that would not solve the question either. The view one gets standing on a street corner is not "the Truth" either. It is just one perspective. Not necessarily the best one; the satellite photo or the underground map do have their merits. Indeed, people standing at street corners often do look at underground maps to orient themselves. Does that mean the underground map is closer to Truth than the view of a street corner? No. In fact, the best question may not be what is "Truth", but what is helpful for me in my current situation. Sometimes, that will be the underground map. Sometimes, it will be a look across the street. It depends on where I am and what I wish to do.

That is a conclusion I would like to apply to our approaches to reality.

Perhaps the question to ask is no longer what is Truth, but what is helpful for the current situation?

We could of course still try to get closer to "objective reality". We might start adding all kinds of different pictures: underground map and satellite photo; the human eye, the insect eye, radar and infra-red camera. And to then get all possible levels of zoom, looking from all positions in space into all directions. And then the same for sound and all other kinds of waves, particles or radiation.

I don't know if that is possible. I don't know if it is a helpful endeavour. In any case, it is not the kind of endeavour I would like to undertake and suggest here.

What I am concerned with is the reality that we live in, the reality we experience; the reality that frames our lives, that we orient ourselves by, that we feel we are part of, and that we feel we influence through our actions.

I take it that the reality I experience is always partial; it is a selection, a representation; a model, an image, a perspective. And that is all right. There is nothing wrong with the circumstance that my subjective reality is not objective reality. We can live with that. Indeed, we can live well with that, and perhaps this is even the only way we can live: creating models, stories and images. The road ahead, to me, seems to lie in understanding how exactly we are doing that, and what it is that we might wish to do.

For instance, once I have come to understand that what I perceive as reality is just one way of seeing it, other avenues may open to me. I can now know several images, and combine them or choose between them, depending on what seems most helpful for the situation at hand. Perhaps I can even create new images, the likes of which have not been around before. To the underground map and the satellite photo I can add oil paintings, for example, or water colour sketches. They might again capture an aspect of reality that has not been so clearly visible to the human or the insect eye; yet that turns out to be very meaningful to many people, and help them to live and enjoy their lives.

Making sense of things

The argument so far has largely taken things from the physical perspective, of how what we see is determined by our sensory organs.

From our sensory organs onwards, the construction of meaning continues. The human eye renders, at first, a huge mass of coloured dots. It is the human brain which then makes connections between these dots.

We may all have consciously experienced this process when given a picture that largely consists of dots, and where we need to look at them for some time until we see the pattern and the image in them. Or we may be familiar with pictures that can be interpreted in two different ways.



image^{III}: change of scenery

So from the perception rendered by our sensory organs, we go on to create images. We draw certain dots together, consider them a unit, give them a name. Name-giving, and language generally, seem to play a particularly important role in our process of ordering our world and orienting ourselves in it. The concepts we use, the shapes against which we check in our mind when we are trying to connect the dots, are embedded in them.

Therefore, one frequent type of reference I will make throughout this text is to the use of language. One may say we are living in images and models; one may also say we are living in stories.

Stories

I am using the term "stories" here for the way in which we make sense of a more complex series of situations or events. We tie objects and images together in stories. We tell ourselves who we are, where we are, and approximately what sort of world we live in. We tell ourselves that other people exist, how we can relate to them, how they might act and how to interpret it once they do. We tell ourselves stories, and the things that feature in them are things that possibly can happen or exist. Things that never feature in any of them at all, not even as a negation, are probably unspeakable, unthinkable, not potentially part of this world, unimaginable.

Our stories are very powerful. They shape our universe, our reality. They determine what is seen as existent and what is not; what is seen as potentially possible and what is not. They make sense of everything we see, name it, interpret it, put it into context. I am thinking of very basic things here; for instance, I may say to myself "this is a chair". By that, I already tell myself that it is an object, it is solid, it does not speak nor move around by itself, one can sit on it. The story may continue into more complicated layers and into symbolic interaction with other people. For instance, I might say "this is a throne", so while it is still a sort of chair (solid object, doesn't talk, etc.) I can not sit on it because only queens sit on it and I am not a queen. That story already involves an idea of what a queen is, and who is one and who isn't, and what forms of behaviour result from that distinction. So our whole life, as I see it, is embedded in stories about the world and ourselves, about meaning and possible actions. They include not only intricate webs of social interaction, but also very very simple and basic assumptions (such as: there are inanimate objects in this world).

An important point for me here is: there are always several different stories that could be told. Each situation, each general circumstance of life, fits into a number of different stories. There probably also are always some stories which do not fit, which are not possible. But among those possible, we do have a choice. That is one of the most important conclusions for me, both personally and for my political work.

Any situation I am in could be understood in several different ways. I may have an instantaneous interpretation of that situation, probably based on my previous experiences and the general matrix I have in the past created for myself in order to understand the world and categorise what happens.

That interpretation I have, because it is instantaneous, immediate, and involuntary, automatic, faster than thought, may often seem obvious to me, "right", the most appropriate if not the only way to describe it. I may find it difficult, even when I stop to think about it, to come up with a significantly different description or interpretation that also feels valid to me.

Yet, such an alternative always exists. Even several of them. At least that is my postulate and the working hypothesis with which I now wish to approach my life and my political work.

That changes the kind of question I am asking myself. The question used to be what reality is like. Now, it is more a question of how I would like it to be and whether there is a story that would support that view and make it viable.

A new starting point

Starting with what you would like to see and then trying to look at reality accordingly is, in my old paradigm, the essence of cheating. It is very much what one is not supposed to be doing. Rather, one would have to look reality in the eye, face it "as it is", however unpleasant or disagreeable it may be.

In my new paradigm, reality is never "as it is"; there are always several different ways of looking at it, and each will give a different image, and each of these images will have some sort of consistent correlation with my other experiences. There are a number of different stories I can tell, and each of them will have validity within its own frame of reference. Being conscious of the choice I have between them, and of the possibility to create new stories and ways of seeing, becomes a major source of power for me, in my personal life and my political work.

I will expand on that possibility, on the ways it can be utilised, and on some limits I think have to be observed later on, especially in the chapter on vision.

For the moment, let me just point out that a shift in our understanding of the nature of reality is likely to include a shift in our ideas about how we can shape and influence reality. That, in turn, is the essence of our ideas for political work: how we can shape and influence reality.

Therefore, a shift in world-view as large as the one towards constructivism and post-modernity could be expected to create new possibilities, new perspectives and new avenues for political work. While I believe that to some extent that implication has been noticed, the translation into political practice within civil society seems still to be nascent. A much deeper and more varied exploration of possibilities in this respect seems promising.

Traditions

Ideas similar to the ones described above have been developed by many people and in various contexts; I am not developing anything new or unheard of here; I am merely picking up on what has been around in my (sub-) cultural environment in many forms. These forms, and the people representing them, are far too numerous for me to even attempt to give an overview here. I would just like to point to a few of these strands here.

Radical constructivism seems one helpful point of reference to me, in particular authors such as Paul Watzlawick, Heinz von Förster or Ernst von Glasersfeld. Apart from a very simple, pleasant and understandable use of language, there also are some attempts to sketch conclusions as to what our actions might look like if we adopt this worldview. Paul Watzlawick has also worked as a therapist, and while I do not always agree with the position he takes, I still find that there is a lot of inspiration to be drawn from his approach.

I also find it interesting to compare conclusions Watzlawick comes to with recommendations made by New Thought literature, where the idea of the power of definition and construction/creation by the power of thought is also central; although of course radical constructivism makes none of the metaphysical assumptions often to be found in New Thought.

A number of academic authors who do not use the term constructivism also elaborate very similar ideas on the influence our thought and language structures have on the reality we find. David Bohm would be an example^{iv}; another author, by the way, who proceeds to make practical suggestions on what we could do next to practice using new forms of thinking and of communicating in our everyday life and political approach, albeit in this case more in the direction of connectedness and collective intelligence than personal power of creation.^v

Feminist epistemology is another strand that has developed elaborate ideas on what constructivist approaches might mean for academic writing, and in consequence for political action, including thoughts on universality, relativism, subjectivity and speaking from one's own perspective or standpoint.^{vi}

Deconstruction

An area that has had a great influence on my thought is one that could perhaps broadly be labelled deconstruction. I have come across that approach mostly in its application in fields such as gender studies, post-development, cultural studies or critical whiteness studies, often referring to authors such as Michel Foucault or Jaques Derrida as an original source of inspiration.

The deconstructivist writings I have come across have largely been in a mode of critique: of debunking myths of things being "natural", of deconstructing what has been presented as "given". I have found deconstruction very helpful in the sense that it can open up space. It shows that what has been perceived as given, fixed, is constructed and could therefore be constructed differently. However, there may be a focus on the negative that is a little hard to move on from, and that can have a number of detrimental effects.

Ian Hacking has examined a number of essays, articles and books bearing titles like "Constructing X" or "The Construction of X". He finds that in many of these texts, it is implied that X is quite bad, and that we would be much better off if X were done away with, or at least radically transformed.^{vii}

Living with constructs

It would be unfortunate, I believe, if we were to give ourselves the impression that constructs as such are a bad thing. It is understandable, perhaps, if we are upset when we first notice that what's been presented as "the Truth" is socially constructed; we may be disoriented, or anxious; or angry, if we assume someone else is responsible for the construction and for treating it as Truth, or has somehow done it on purpose.

Who participates in the construction of reality and in which way, and what avenues would be open to who and what role conscious and unconscious purpose plays in that is vast area of questions.

The point I would like to come back to at the moment is the notion that we can not live without constructs, and that that is quite all right. The world "as such", a form of objective reality, is not possible to grasp with human senses, and its limitless, shapeless nature is not something that we can use as a frame for our everyday lives. I do not wish to comment here on the possibility to see all reality or nirvana in deep meditation, or to indeed live in that state of enlightenment on an ongoing basis. For the comparatively down-to-earth life I am leading, and the kinds of political work I wish to discuss here, reality needs to be made comprehensible by the use of concepts, and thus constructs.

Therefore our aim, as I see it, is not to rid the world of constructs, but to create the kind of constructs we like, and fill our world with them.

In that perspective, it is very sensible to point out how many things we thought fixed can indeed be shown to be constructs, and as such, changeable. It is also sensible to point out that certain constructs may be undesirable the way they are at the moment. And then it would be important not to try to abolish all constructs, but to turn to the creation of alternatives, and that also means alternative constructs.

Reconstruction

The creation of alternative constructs, or constructs as we wish to see them, is one of the main approaches to political work that I would like to suggest here. This will need a closer examination of what it takes to create constructs. It will take an idea of what they should be in terms of contents, of course. Arriving at such an idea is in itself is a major act of creativity. In addition, it probably needs something else; a construct is not just an idea. Constructs, when they are viable, feel like reality to us. Even when we are aware that we are living in a world of constructs, we will still be moving around in something that we experience as reality on an everyday basis; at least that is my understanding of how it can work. Constructivism as a world-view may give us greater leverage than we had before in creating our world. But we can't do it with a wave of our hand; constructs need a firm basis. They can be changed, but not overnight. That is partly because we have little practice as yet; but partly, I assume, it is because humans need or like some sort of stability in the main parameters of their world, and because societies are large and complex and diverse entities needing time to adapt to change.

What reconstruction as a means of political work may look like, and how exactly we could go about it, seems an area where a lot more exploration is possible. Some ideas and nascent examples pointing in that direction shall also be indicated in later chapters.

i Watzlawick, Paul (1977): How Real is Real?: Confusion, Disinformation, Communication, New York (Random)

ii sources of images:

flying saucers: www.pixelio.de: 288229 by benM-design

air photo: www.pixelio.de: 45513 by Dirk.S

Brandenburger Tor: www.pixelio.de: 226291 by P.Kirchhoff

Subway Map: www.bvg.de [8 Jan 2009]

iii source of image: www.pixelio.de: 198932 by Th.Jüling, after a painting by Robert Gonsalves

iv Bohm, David (1994): Thought as a System, London (Routledge)

v Bohm, David (2004): On Dialogue, London (Routledge)

vi see, for example:

Singer, Mona (2005): Geteilte Wahrheit. Feministische Epistemologie, Wissenssoziologie und Cultural Studies, Wien (Löcker)

Helduser, U.; Marx, D.; Paulitz, T.; Pühl, K. (Hg.) (2004): Under construction? Konstruktivistische Perspektiven in feministischer Theorie und Forschungspraxis, Frankfurt/New York (Campus)

vii Hacking, Ian (1999): The Social Construction of What?, Cambridge, Mass (Harvard University Press), p. 6.