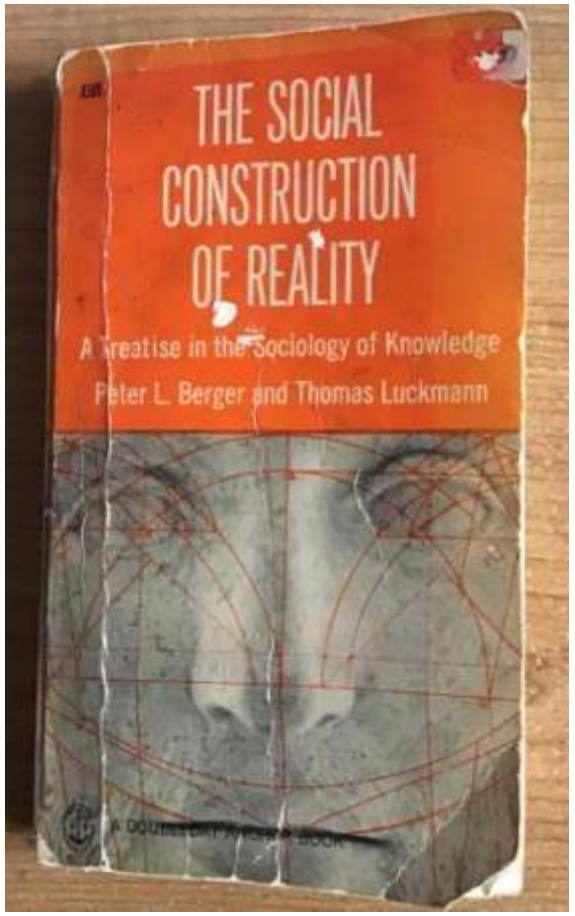
The Social Construction of Reality

--Thomas Berger and Peter Luckmann , 1967

Social Constructivism

How much of what we take for "real" and self-evident is *objectively* so, and how much is social construction, social conditioning, nurture, habit, convention, linguistic representation, ideology...?



Metaphysical Question: What's most or most ultimately real?

Sophists' Answer:

"Man is the measure of all things..."

--Protagoras 485-410 BCE

"Custom is the king of all."

-- Herodotus (quoting Pindar), 484-425 BC

Presented by Howard Leznoff, June 23, 2020

Main Idea:

Berger and Luckmann examine **"the reality of everyday life"** and how *material* human products, *institutions* and *language* largely determine what we take to be "objective reality".

These **social constructions constitute reality** and provide meaning and stability, and in so doing often press themselves upon the everyday man/woman in "massive" and "coercive" ways.

The authors remind us, however, that this reality is ultimately **a human product,** that human **subjectivity** is stubborn and that collectively – we continue make our world and thereby "make ourselves".

(The process of social construction is an on-going three-step dialectic involving **externalization, objectivation and internalization**. More detail later…)

What does 'The Social Construction of Reality' Mean? - by Dr. Dennis Hiebert

The social construction of reality

= the process whereby people continuously create, through their actions and interactions, a shared reality that is experienced as objectively factual and subjectively meaningful

0:24 / 14:44

Scroll for details

(Berger and Luckmann examine **"the reality of everyday life"** and how ***material*** human products, ***institutions*** and ***language*** largely determine what we take to be "objective reality".)

Consider this “sign”, as a **material**, **institutional** and **linguistic/symbolic** product.

What embedded socially-constructed “realities”, typifications, meanings and values inhere in it?

“How much of what we take for “real” and self-evident is objectively so, and how much is social construction, social conditioning, nurture, habit, convention, linguistic representation, ideology...?”

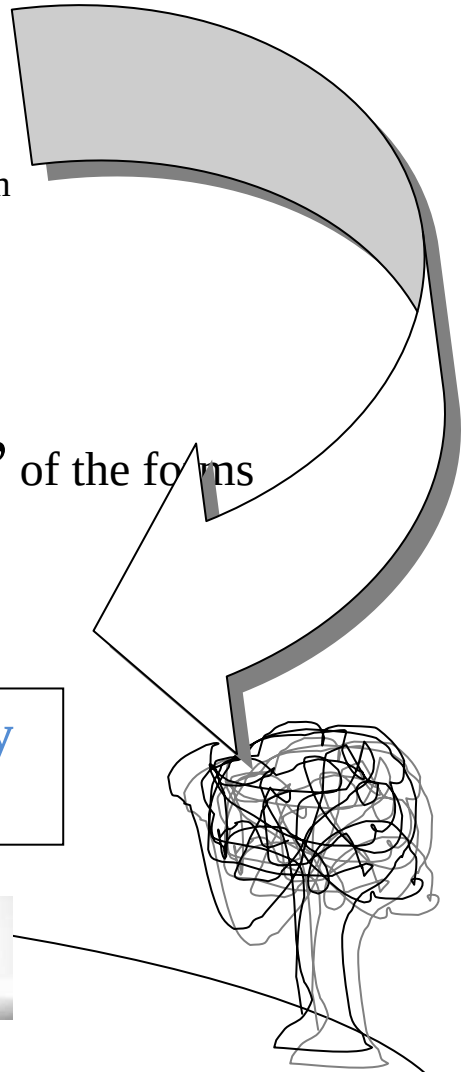
METAPHYSICAL IDEALISM: The **immaterial, conceptual, spiritual realm** is most real.

Plato: The Forms are primary reality.

- º **Absolute** (pure, untainted by baser matter)
- ° **Eternal**/ Immutable, timeless, never changing
- º **Immaterial: not** made of matter or physical stuff.
- º **Objective:** are "real" independent of human consciousness
- º **Universal** (true everywhere, and not *culturally relative*)

-- are also the bases of an **absolutely true, objective & universa**l moral and ethical system

-- are understood by **reason**/dialectic, **"rationalism"**, rather than sense perception/empiricism



For Plato,: the stuff of the **material**, concrete, physical world: **"imperfect copies"** of the forms

-- these "**objects of perception"** that are **"less real"** because:

- ° they are in constant flux, constantly changing, and eventually "cease to be"
- º they can be known only by **sense experience "empiricism"**-- which is flawed

SOPHISTS (& social constructivists): Primary reality is physical-biological and socio-cultural.

Philosophy and Sociological Perspective

Berger and Luckmann make clear that when they refer to "reality" they are often side-stepping the bigger metaphysical/philosophical questions.

Instead, they examine:

- **"reality"** from the *sociological perspective* --as phenomenon, reality *as experienced in* **everyday life** by everyday people.

- **the processes** by which "human knowledge is developed, transmitted and maintained in social situations" and taken as **"reality".**

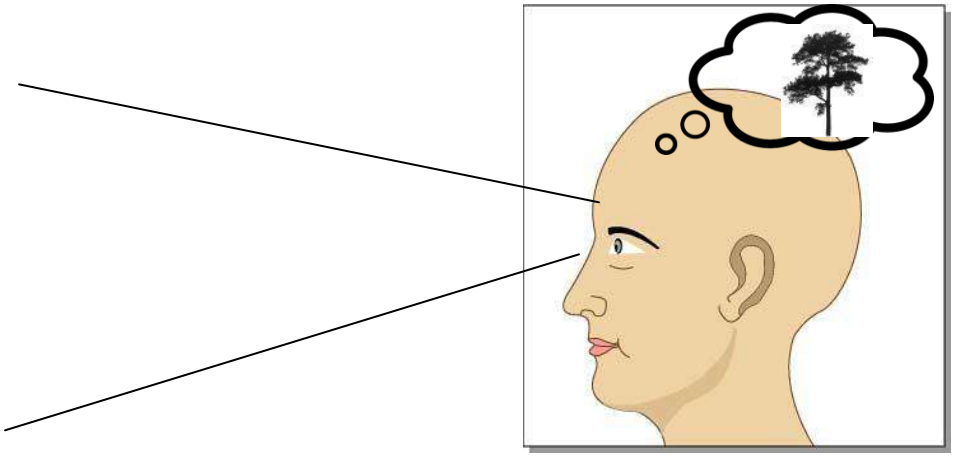
"[W]e describe 'reality'... but do so within phenomenological brackets" (20)

"[W]e describe ‘reality’... but do so within **phenomenological** brackets” (20)

Noumena and Phenomena

Noumenon: The thing-in-itself, existing independent of human perceptions/*experience* of it.
Phenomenon: **The thing “as experienced”, filtered through *sensory apparatus* and *consciousness*.**

“Tree in itself”



Some noted elements in formation of consciousness:
Neurology/neuro-chemistry
Biography
Language
Knowledge Systems (science, logic, mediation....) Society/Culture/Ideology
God-consciousness/“Original Mind”

Sociological Perspective: The Reality of Everyday Life

"Consciousness is always intentional": it is directed toward **an object**: I can't (consciously) "just think"; I must think *of something.*

"I am conscious of the world as consisting of multiple realities" (21), but the reality of everyday life is paramount, "reality *par excellence."*

Finite provinces of meaning: "enclaves" or "pockets" of meaning (dreams, mystical experiences, theoretical/philosophical journeys) that, according to authors, *are ultimately secondary to the "reality of everyday life"* –are in fact "enveloped on all sides" by the "reality of everyday life".

".... dreamer, physicist, artist, mystic-- also live in the reality of everyday life. **Indeed, one of their most important challenges is to interpret the coexistence of this reality with the enclaves into which they have ventured.**"

Of all the different spheres of reality, “the reality of everyday life” is experienced most often and most acutely as “most real”.

The Reality of Everyday Life is:

-Organized around the here and now, especially around the **"pragmatic motive"** and **"manipulative zones”**

I may be *conscious* of plans to send a space ship to Mars, but this is "less real" to me than the rush of traffic as I’m trying to cross a busy street or the bicycle that I must fix by four o’clock this afternoon.

-Ordered by time: Time as "coercive" facticity: "All my existence in this world is continuously ordered by time." (27)

Daily and long- term schedules "order reality" as everyday life: calendars and clocks....

Are *8:20 p.m.* and *June 23rd* objective realities?

The Reality of Everyday Life is:

-Ordered in space and by objects many of which "have been designated as objects before my appearance on the scene." (22)

“Roosevelt Statue to be Removed from Museum of Natural History”

A ringing phone might pull us out of a reverie and back into the reality of every life.

The Reality of Everyday Life is:

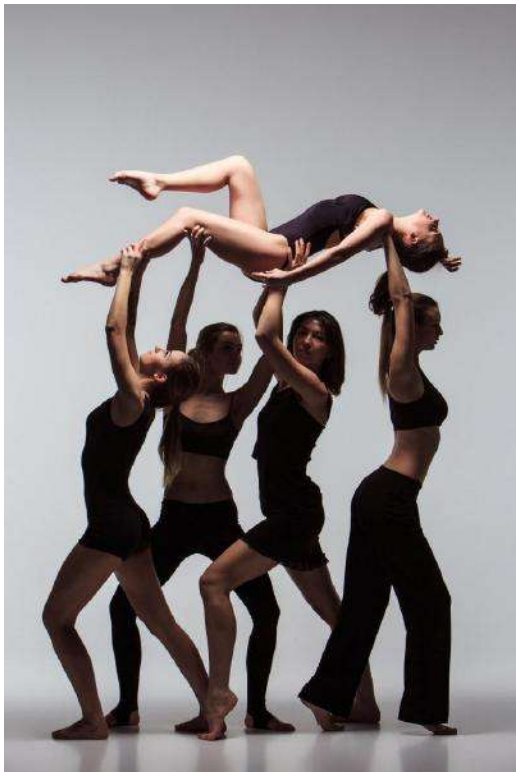
-Taken for granted as ultimate reality, experienced as **objective**.
Everyday life "is simply there, as self-evident and compelling facticity..."

-Experienced as "objective" as well because of shared **language**. *"Here's the toonie I borrowed from you."* *"Another Wednesday [sigh]"* or *"Is Canada a just society?"*

-A world of intersubjectivity. "I am alone in the world of my dreams... we share a common sense of its reality…There is an ongoing correspondence between *my* meanings and *their* meanings in this world." (23)

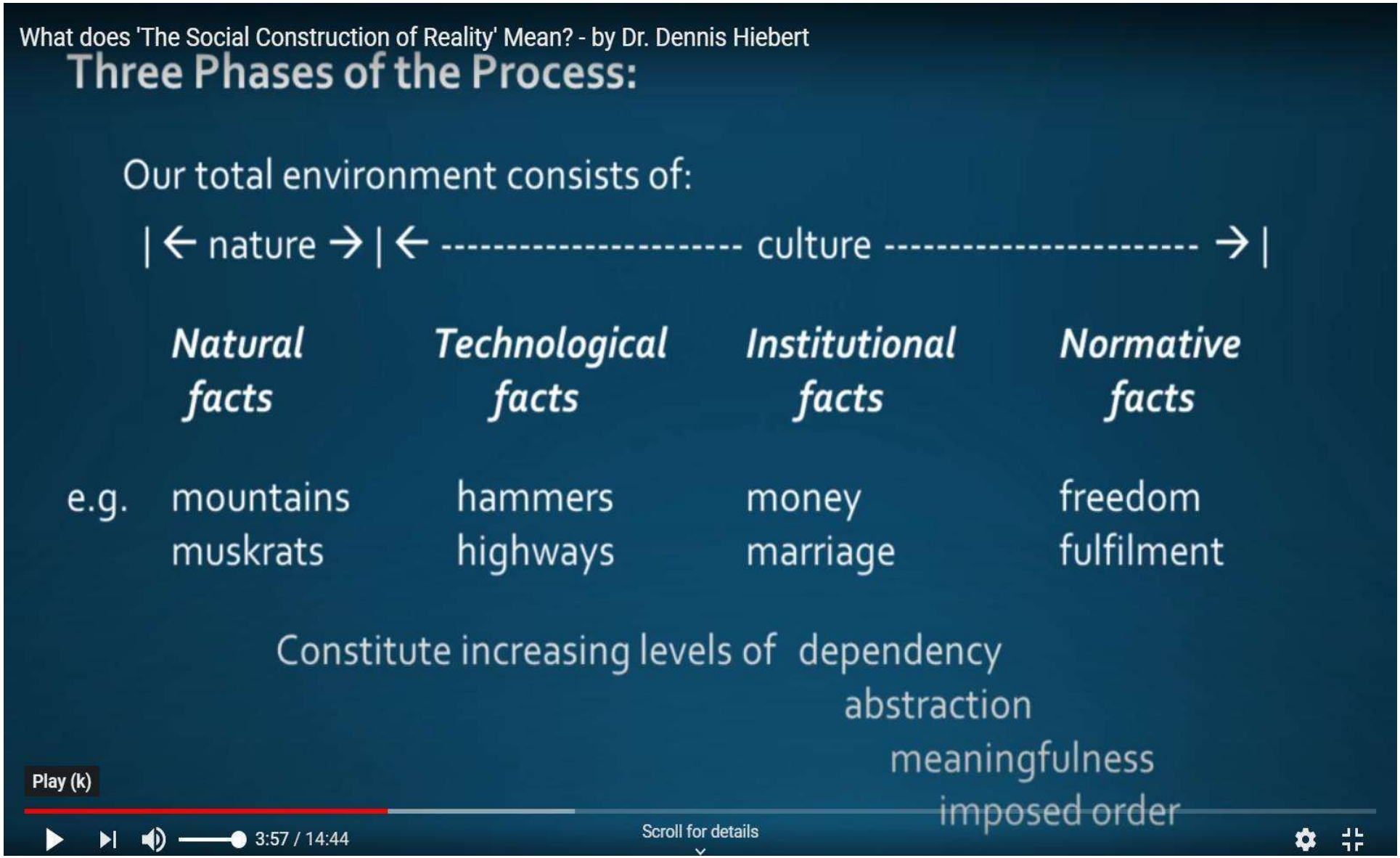
The Reality of Everyday Life is:

-Circumscribed by divisions of labour: the daily "realities of the accountant, the soldier, the mechanic, are somewhat different… they use **specialized languages** in the course of their everyday lives"



-Shaped and maintained by Institutions: through institutions, social relations and roles of all types are formalized to varying degrees.

Connection to Hiebert Video: (*Material*, *Institutional, and Symbolic* "Constructions")



For Berger and Luckmann, the process of social construction is an on-going *three-step* dialectic involving **externalization, objectivation and internalization**.

<u>1. Externalization</u>/ *Homo Faber*: Humans are "makers"; we construct our environments

a) Materially: we physically alter our environments and construct tools and artifacts.

b) Socially: we **externalize** and formalize **social relationships** in **institutions** **(typified/habitual behaviors, social roles…)**

c) Symbolically/Linguistically we make "stories" about the world and our place in it: family lore, national mythologies, cosmological explanations...
[–"symbolic universes"]

Needless to say: ***these* three types of social constructions are inter-related and often integrated into a coherent totality.**

(Social Construction Through: Externalization, Objectivation, Internalization)

2. Objectivation: Human-made constructions take on the character of "objective realities" as taken-for-granted, unalterable "givens".

Reification: "the apprehension of the products of human activity *as if* they were something other than human products." Humans experience the human-made world "as something outside of themselves… the objectivated world loses its comprehensibility as a human enterprise and becomes fixated as a non-human, non-humanized inert facticity" (89)

Institutions and Objectivation:

Institutions are *experienced* as objective reality: "The institutions, as historical and objective facticities confront the individual as undeniable facts. They are there, external to him, persistent in their reality whether he likes them or not. He cannot wish them away…All institutions appear as given unalterable and self evident" (59, 60)

"Chicago cops face reprimand for 'taking a knee' in Instagram photo" -- 2017

By Andy Grimm@agrimm34 Sep 25, 2017, 9:04pm CDT
Chicago Tribune

(Social Construction Through: Externalization, *Objectivation*, Internalization)

-Language: B & L repeatedly emphasize the central role that language plays in **objectivation/reification**:

"The common objectivations of everyday life are maintained primarily through *linguistic signification*. Everyday life is above, all, life with and by means of the *language* I share with my fellowmen." (37)

"The most important vehicle of **reality-maintenance** is *conversation*… the greater part of reality maintenance in conversation is implicit not explicit." (152)

"Excuse me Officer,
Where's the men's restroom?

..And did you see the size of that chicken?"

(Social Construction Through: Externalization, Objectivation, *Internalization*)

3. **Internalization**: the process by which, through **socialization**, one "takes into" oneself (as real) the meanings --and institutional, cultural, normative "givens"-- of one's society.

Kids playing "house"

"…the process by which the objectivated social world is retrojected into consciousness in the course of socialization..." (61)

Institutions and Social Control

"Additional control mechanisms [such as punishments, reprimands, sanctions] are required only insofar as the processes of **institutionalization are less than completely successful**....

Children must be 'taught to behave' and once 'taught' must be kept in line. So, of course, must the adults." (55)

Photo from:

"What's Wrong with Timeouts?"
-- from Aha*! Parenting*

"Parenting 'experts' these days are united in their opposition to physical punishment
…
research shows that timeouts don't necessarily improve behavior"

Internalization…

As reality is a social construction, so consciousness is socially – and, of course, linguistically—formed through internalization.

"Homo sapiens is always, and in the same measure, homo socius." (51)

"I think therefore I am" is a problematic *first principle*

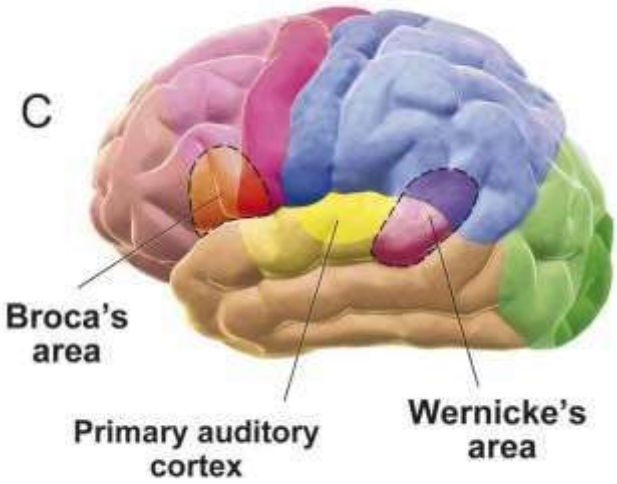
because, the arguments go, there is no "I" without first a *"We"*, and is no "thinking" without the social-symbolic system that is *language*.

"Solitary human being is being on the animal level… Man's specific humanity and his sociality are inextricably intertwined."

(Social Construction Through: Externalization, Objectivation, *Internalization*)

Human consciousness, selfhood, identity, personhood – the things that make us distinctly human-- are realized **socially** and **linguistically**.

Organismic and Neural plasticity:
Much of human **neural development** occurs—and can *only* occur-- **outside the womb** in interaction with socio-cultural environments.



"How language shapes our brains...and our lives"
https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/324529

(Social Construction Through: Externalization, Objectivation, *Internalization*)

"Not only is the survival of the human infant dependent on certain social relationships, the direction of his organismic development is socially determined.... While it is possible to say that man has a nature, it is more significant to say that man produces himself " (48, 49)

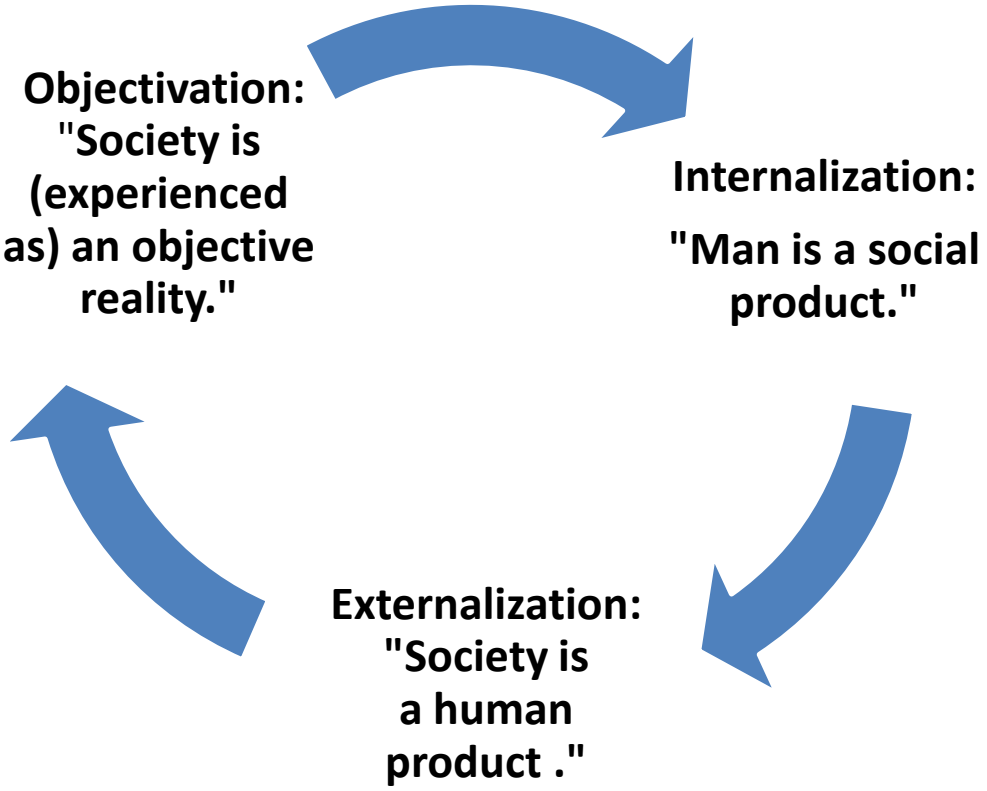
‘…The organism and, even more, the self, cannot be adequately understood apart from the social context in which they were shaped.” (52)

Oaxa Malaya: Feral children provide clear examples of how human “organismic development” in humans, and perhaps “selfhood”, are dependent on social and linguistics contexts.

Externalization, objectivation, and internalization are moments in an on-going dialectic:

“Society is human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product."

The paradox:"man is capable of producing a world that he then experiences as *something other than a human product.*" (60)



INSTITUTIONS are central to the social construction of reality.

We **externalize objectivate** and **internalize** social relationships through **institutions** which feature:

Hunting Party as "Institution"

· routinized, **typified**, sometimes ritualized **behaviours and norms**

· **social roles,** (often) with **authority structures**

·corresponding systems **of knowledge, meaning and value**

The Paradox: Institution both Liberate and Circumscribe

·**Institutions Liberate:** Human life becomes manageable and can evolve/progress only within a background of **order and stability**-- which emerges when human behaviour becomes **predictable.**

Institutions Restrict: "Institutions…control human conduct by setting up predefined patterns of conduct… The institution posits that actions of the type X will be performed by actors of the type X." (54-55)

Social roles yield expected behaviours, order, stability and often efficiency.

(Social Construction Through: Externalization, *Objectivation*, Internalization)

Social roles, central to **institutions**, become **objectivated/reified**:

"*I have no choice in the matter: I have to act this way because of my position* –as husband, father, general, archbishop, chairman of the board, gangster or hangman, as the case may be.

…

The reification of roles narrows the subjective distance that the individual may establish between himself and his role playing." (91)

"Chicago cops face reprimand for 'taking a knee' in Instagram photo" -- 2017

By Andy Grimm@agrimm34 Sep 25, 2017, 9:04pm CDT
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Institutions as Socially Constructed, Objective Realities

While institutions are powerful in circumscribing reality, their ability to **"maintain reality" is never absolute**, and thus change is inevitable.

Three main factors undermine the solidity of any given social-institutional reality:

1. Institutional socialization --especially from one generation to the next-- is never complete, absolute. There is always some "slippage".

2. Exposure to "alternate symbolic universes", world-views, through cross cultural exposure (i.e. the popularity of Eastern philosophy in the West during the 60's.)

3. Ideas from groups with contending minority world-views (including intellectuals) migrates from the "margins" to become a "movement" (e.g. Suffragette movement of early 20 century…

Legitimation, Reality Maintenance and Symbolic Universes

Notwithstanding objectivations of social constructed realities, tensions are inevitable; "every symbolic universe is incipiently problematic." (106)

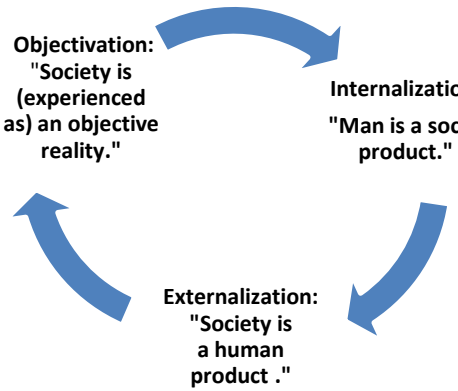
Institutional orders, especially as they expand, are precarious.

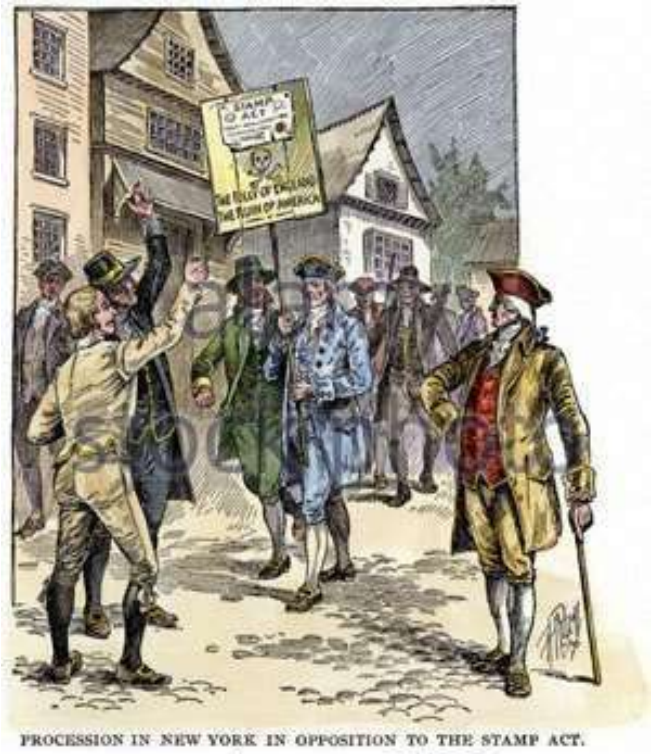
· **Socialization is never absolute**, complete

·**External influences**, cultures, can threaten symbolic universes—e.g. all those crazy "French" ideas….

·**Minority definitions** sub-realities—from within—pose challenges.

--Institutional knowledge, norms, values: more or less **cohesive/fragmented**, **unified/ segmented**, **wider /narrower** in their reach:

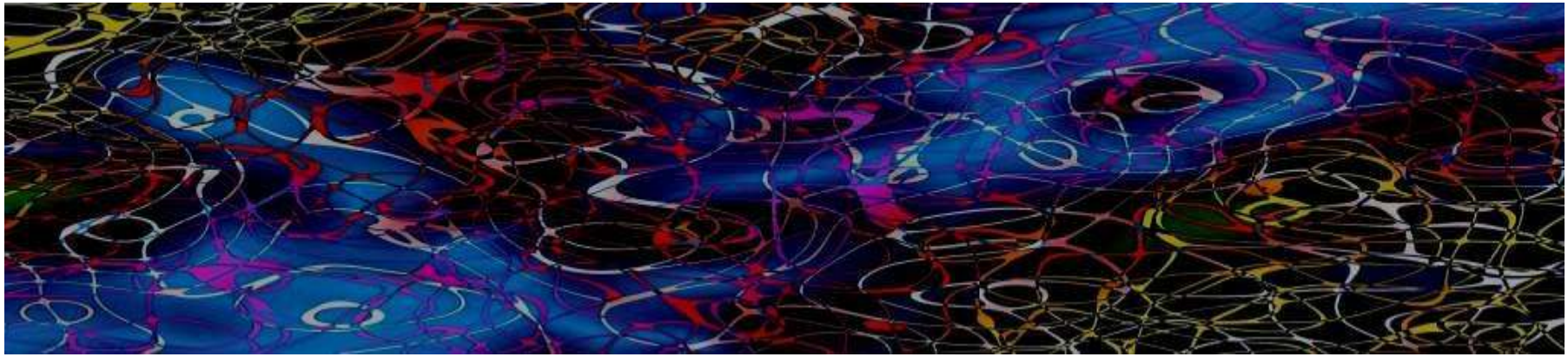



PROCESSION IN NEW YORK IN OPPOSITION TO THE STAMP ACT.

Precariousness, Legitimation, Universe Maintenance

"… the institutional order, like the order of the individual biography, is continually threatened by the presence of realities that are meaningless in *its* terms.

The legitimation of the institutional order is faced with the ongoing necessity of keeping chaos at bay." (104)

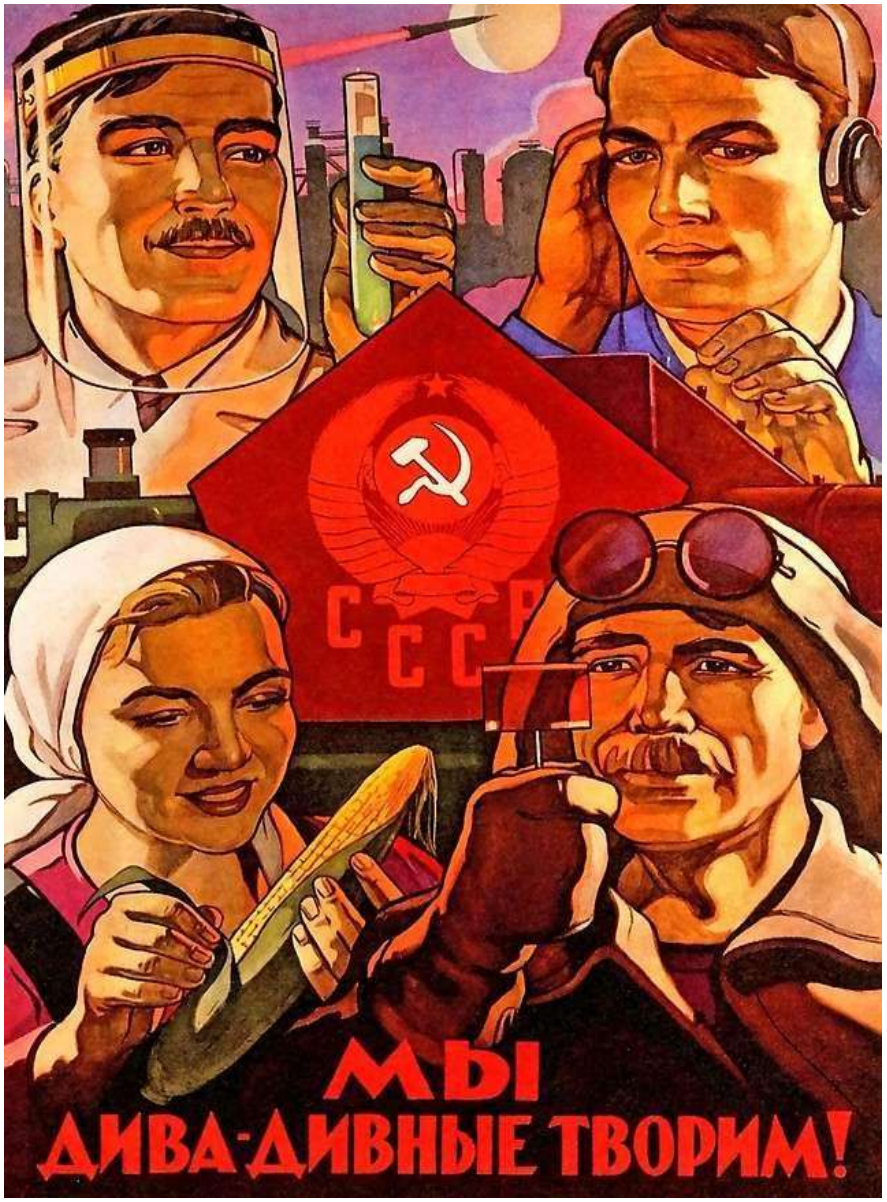


Some "historically dominant" though not exhaustive types of "conceptual machinery for legitimations, for universe maintenance" include the **mythological, theological, philosophical,** and **scientific**. (112)

Symbolic Universes

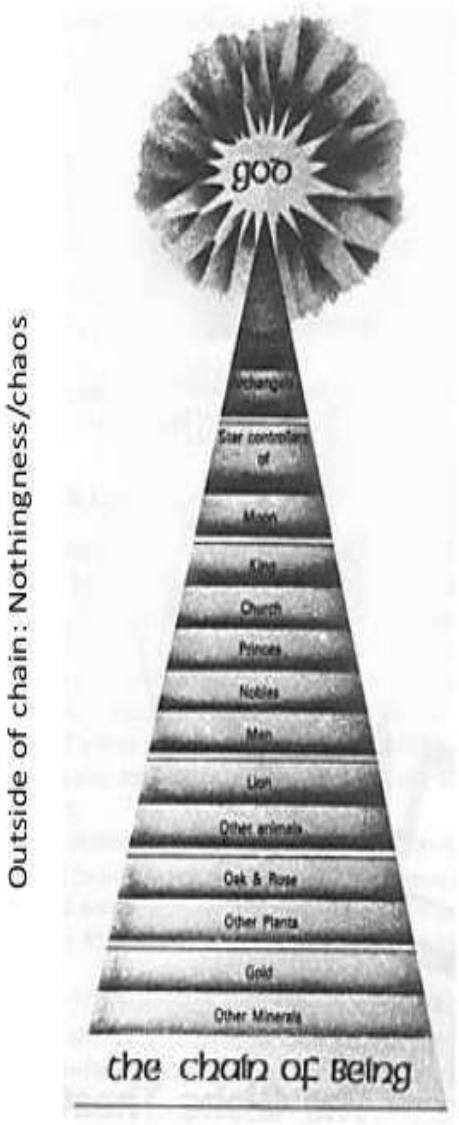
An expanding or vulnerable or stressed institutional order especially needs to develop a **"canopy of legitimations"** (62) – that would *unify* the symbolic order so that it "hangs together" cohesively.

"..All the sectors of the institutional order are integrated into an all-encompassing frame of reference… all human experience can be conceived of taking place within it [the symbolic universe] …. The entire historic society and the entire biography of the individual are seen as events taking place within it… the individual may locate himself within it even in his most solitary experiences" (96)



With Symbolic Universes…

"The entire society now makes sense. Particular institutions and roles are legitimated by placing them in a **comprehensively meaningful** world. For example, the political order is legitimated by a reference to a **cosmic order** of power and justice, and political roles are legitimated as representations of these cosmic principles." (103, my emphases)



God
Cherubs
Archangels, Angels
Star controllers of Destiny
Moon
King
Church
Princes
Nobles
Man
Lion
Other Animals
Oak and Rose
Other Plants
Gold
Other Minerals

Universe Maintenance, Legitimation: Theories of Deviance

Theories of deviance are one way to keep "chaos at bay". Contending universes, realities, values, are subsumed, explained away: with theories of deviance, the symbolic universe "puts everything in its place" (98)

Departures from the "socially shared universe of knowledge and values" can explained as **"moral depravity, mental disturbance or just plain ignorance"** (66)

Classification of gay, lesbian, and bisexual sexual orientations underwent major changes in different editions of Diagnostic and **Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)** published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). Designations were removed in 1973, at least partially.

The problem of **universe maintenance** "becomes accentuated if deviant versions of the symbolic universe come to be shared by groups of 'inhabitants'. [fear that] the deviant version congeals into a reality in its own right [and] challenges the reality status of the symbolic universe as originally constituted…the group becomes the carrier of an alternative definition of reality" ..(106-107)

Deviance and Universe Maintenance: Therapy

"**Therapy**… the application of conceptual machinery to ensure that actual or potential deviants stay within in the institutional definitions of reality… to prevent the 'inhabitants' of a given universe from 'migrating…."

From exorcism to psychoanalysis, from pastoral care to personal counseling" therapy "requires a theory of deviance, a diagnostic apparatus and a conceptual system for the 'cure of souls' " (112-113)

"Reality is socially defined. But the definitions are always embodied, that is **concrete individuals and groups of individuals serve as definers of reality…**

…power in society includes the **power to determine decisive socialization** processes, and therefore the power to produce reality. (116)

External Challenges to The Symbolic Universe:

"A major occasion for the development of universe maintaining conceptualizations arises when a society is confronted with another society having a greatly different history

…

there is an alternative symbolic universe with an 'official tradition whose taken for granted objectivity is equal to one's own." (107)

An "alternative symbolic universe [poses a unique] threat because its very existence demonstrates that one's own universe is less than inevitable.' (108)

Therapeutic solutions are not typically a preferred option here.

The Social Construction of Reality is Determined by Power

"The success of legitimating machineries [or contending narratives]…is **related to the power** possessed by those who operate them...The confrontation of alternative symbolic universe implies a problem of power" (109)

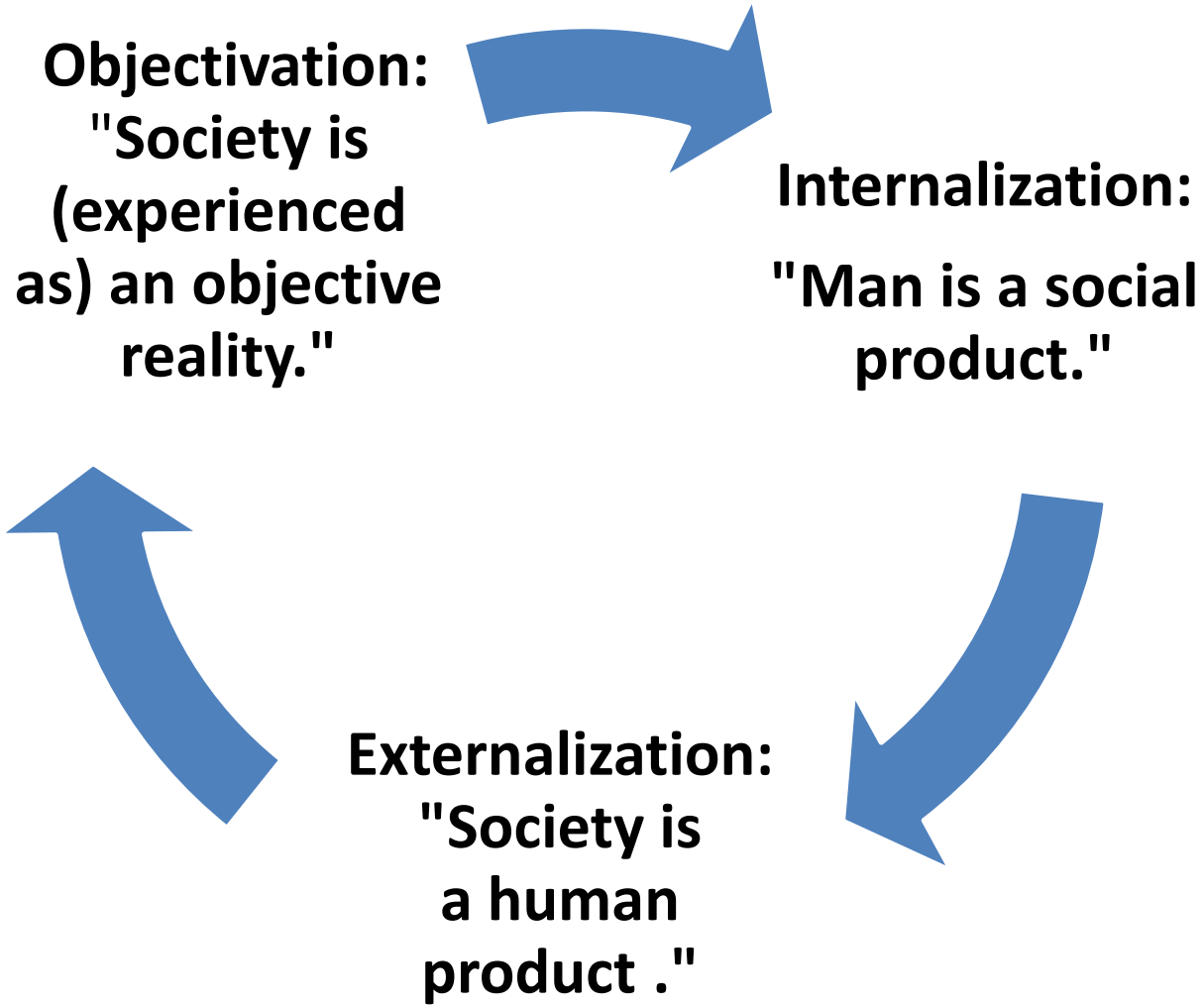
When universes collide:

-Syncretism, Cooperation (sharing or adopting aspects of culture)

- Pluralism Skeptical tolerance,

-Nihilation (conceptual): "assigning [to the others] an inferior ontological status and thereby a not-to-be-taken-seriously cognitive status… [they are] less than human… congenitally befuddled… subhuman… dwellers in hopeless cognitive darkness."

- Attempts at **Physical Liquidation**


Objectivation:
"Society is
(experienced
as) an objective
reality."
Internalization:
"Man is a social
product."
Externalization:
"Society is
a human
product ."