

## **Constructionist Dialogues and the Vicissitudes of the Political**

*Kenneth J. Gergen*

Active dialogues devoted to the social construction of self and world are now everywhere apparent. Constructionist writings currently span the full range of human sciences; they have generated active exchange between these sciences and wide ranging inquiry in the humanities (most notably, literary theory, romance languages, philosophy, and rhetoric); they have fostered important new ranges of scholarship in traditional sciences such as biology and geography; and they have played an essential role in a variety of newly developing areas of study (for example, women's studies, cultural studies, and media studies). Further, constructionist conceptions are now making their way into a variety of practical settings (especially therapy, counselling, social work, and organizational development). Although there is not always full agreement on what is entailed or implied by constructionist dialogues, there is little doubt concerning its impact on contemporary scholarly and practical affairs.(1)

Contemporary debates are certainly prefigured in works of earlier times (from Vico to Nietzsche), and within the present century constructionist ideas have long been long extant in the academy (most notably in sociology). However, the present dialogues are scarcely a recapitulation of these earlier lines of argument. Significant new elements have made their way into the arena, and it is to these that the current watershed can most significantly be traced. Notably, these entries begin to make their way into prominence in the late 1960s, a time of enormous political unrest. The present volume invites special attention to the political ramifications of the emerging dialogue. In what senses, then, did the political climate give rise to the academic transformation; what internal harmonies and discords can be discerned; and what now are the political implications of constructionist dialogues? Although such questions are without bounded answer, the present effort is an attempt to open discussion on the political lodgement and implications of the developing discourses.

### **The Weakness of the Word: Cradle of Constructionism**

There is a pervasive tendency to view current constructionist inquiry as a unified front, with broad antipathy for the various forms essentialism, realism, foundationalism, and structuralism, that have served to rationalize and sustain traditional claims to truth beyond perspective, transcendent rationality, universal morality, cultural superiority, and progress without limit. Or, in a broad sense, social constructionism is congenially identified as a constituent of postmodern as opposed to a modern cultural perspective. The more judicious view, however, is

that there is no unified or canonical constructionist position, but rather, a range of variegated and overlapping conversations and practices that draw from various resources and with varying emphases and combinations. Further, in many of these conversations there remain distinct commitments to one or another form of all the above elements of modernism. Nothing is legislated and nothing is fixed - including the meaning of constructionism itself.

However, if we are to strive for historical intelligibility, and a means for understanding current affinities and tensions, it is useful to draw several broad distinctions. In particular, we may distinguish among three major movements of recent decades, each formed within differing contexts and each with differing political sensibilities. These movements can be roughly identified in terms of their choice of explanatory fulcrum: ideological, literary-rhetorical, and social. Each now contributes substantially, and in certain respects virtually circumscribes, the current range of constructionist conversation. In an important sense these movements also gain their primary affinity through their critical impulse. I am not pointing here only to a mode of intellectual and political comportment; critique itself would scarcely serve to distinguish this particular confluence of movements. Rather, what is most significant and unifying about this critique is its selected site of vulnerability. Each, in its own way has brought into critical focus a linchpin assumption within longstanding intellectual (and political) institutions.

This principle point of vulnerability concerns the function of language. Regardless of the modernist aspiration - essentialist, realist, foundationalist, structuralist - or the site of application - science, education, business organization, governance - there has been a broadly shared belief in the capacity of language to represent or depict the world in an accurate and objective manner. For scientists in particular, the assumption is of no small moment, for as philosophers of science have long been aware, it is primarily in the degree to which there is correspondence between theoretical language and real-world events that scientific theory acquires value in the marketplace of prediction. If scientific language bears no determinate relationship to events external to the language itself, not only does its contribution to prediction become problematic, but hope that knowledge may be advanced through continued, systematic observation proves futile. More generally, one may question the fundamental grounds for authority - scientific and otherwise. The claim to objectivity has furnished a chief basis for authority - in the academy, policy-making circles, business, and elsewhere. With the truth bearing capacity of words thrown into question, so is authority in the modernist state.

In one way or another, each of the constructionist movements grows out of a reconsideration of the representational duties traditionally assigned to language. The potential for such critique was already well in place. Earlier in the century logical empiricist philosophers were keen to establish a close relationship between language and observation. At the heart of the positivist movement, for example, lay the "verifiability principle of meaning" (in revised form called "meaning realism"), to wit, the meaning of a proposition rests on its capacity for verification

through observation. As ventured, propositions not open to corroboration or emendation through observation are unworthy of further dispute. The problem was, however, to account for the connection between propositions and observations. Schlick (1934) proposed that the meaning of single words within propositions must be established through ostensive ("pointing to") means. In his early work, Carnap (1928) proposed that thing predicates represented "primitive ideas", thus reducing scientific propositions to reports of private experience. For Neurath (1932), propositions were to be verified through "protocol sentences", which were themselves linked to the biological processes of perception. Russell (1924) proposed that objective knowledge could be reduced to sets of "atomic propositions," the truth of which would rest on isolated and discriminable facts. In the end, none of these proposals proved viable, leaving the philosophy of science open first to the attacks of Popper (1935) on the lack of an inductive base for scientific description, and then Quine (1960) on the impossibility of pure, ostensive definition of scientific terms.

### **Convergencies of Critique**

With the Achilles heel of the modernist promise of truth in language laid bare - along with the rationalization of authority - the way was open for the marginalized, dispossessed, and politically active scholar to generate ferment. It was in this context that constructionist inquiry found an eager audience. In a certain sense, each of the constructionist critiques can be traced to a political base. However, in my view, the way in which these movements was political was dramatically different. Let us consider then the emergence of ideological critique, in which motivational unmasking is the dominant means of undermining the authority of language, and scholarship was most purposefully political; literary-rhetorical critique in which authority is reduced through linguistic reductionism and the primary battles were internecine; and social critique, in which authority is converted to communal expression and the implicit commitment was to democratic liberalism.

### **Ideological Critique and Political Commitment**

For the better part of the century a strong attempt has been made to cut the modernist institution away from moral debate. Whether it be science, education, public policy formation, or national planning, the hope was to escape the ideological and religious influences, and to reach decisions through objective and rational means. The institution of science served as a prominent icon. The task of the sciences, as commonly put, is to furnish objectively accurate accounts of "what is the case;" matters of "what ought to be" are not principally matters of scientific concern. When theoretical description and explanation are suffused with values, it is said, they are untrustworthy or prejudicial; they distort the truth.

However, during the 1960-70s the fallacy of the fact-value dualism became excruciatingly apparent. In particular, the moral outrage of the Vietnam war raised

significant questions concerning the many complicit institutions (business, the university, science, etc.). The claims to scientific neutrality seemed, at best, to be a cheap means of escaping political deliberation; at worst, neutrality was just another word for legitimating unjust and exploitative policies. Not only was there nothing about the scientific outlook that gave reason to reject the imperious brutality of the West, but the scientific establishment often lent its efforts to enhancing the technologies of aggression. The impulse to refurbish and revitalize the language of "ought" gained further momentum from other political enclaves. Marxist critique of capitalist institutions was well in place in the academic sphere, and gained striking new momentum in critical and dialectic movements of the period. Class based critique formed an active if not symbiotic relationship with civil rights and early feminist activism.

In order to achieve their goals - peace, justice, equality and the like - it was essential to locate a means of discrediting the authority of the major institutions. The weakness of the word served as a chief lever. Given the lack of philosophical justification for claiming "truth through language," the ideological critic focussed primarily on the motives underlying language. The ideological critic removes the authority of the truth claim by shifting the focus from the claim itself to the ideological or motivational basis from which it derives. By giving an intelligible account of the motives of the truth teller to suppress, to gain power, to accumulate wealth, to sustain his/her culture above all others, and so on, the suasive power of truth as presented is destroyed. In effect, the language of description and explanation is reconstituted as motive language; claims to neutrality are viewed as "mystifying," and factual talk is indexed as "manipulation." In this way the authority's claims to language as truth bearing are reduced to mere propaganda.

In important respects, the grounds for this form of critique were already well in place. The 1930's writings of the so-called Frankfurt School - Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Benjamin, and others - were most immediately available. Critical school writings effectively traced a broad spectrum of social and individual ills to the Enlightenment quest for a historically and culturally transcendent rationality. The commitments to positivist philosophy of science, capitalism, and bourgeois liberalism - contemporary manifestations of the Enlightenment vision - lent themselves to such evils as the erosion of community, the deterioration of moral values, the establishment of dominance relationships, the renunciation of pleasure, and the mutilation of nature. In this respect the neo-Marxist writings of the 1960-70s - borrowing from the Critical tradition - furnished a model for many other scholars whose political interests were not in themselves Marxist. The process of motivational unmasking could be employed for sundry political purposes. Emblematic is R.D. Laing's *Politics of Experience*, a volume that is not itself Marxist, but employs the device of demystification for broader political ends. Laing's charge that, "The choice of syntax and vocabulary is a political act that defines and circumscribes the manner in which 'facts' are to be experienced. Indeed, in a sense it goes further and even creates the facts that are studied." (p.39) is without a bounded target. Additional expansions of the

boundaries of political critique, employing much the same logic, include, Gouldner (1970), Apfelbaum and Lubeck (1976), Sampson (1979) and much of the writing in the anti-psychiatry movement.

Deconstruction through motivational unmasking has now become widespread. In terms of its extensity, sophistication, and intensity it reaches its zenith in the feminist movement. It is represented in a host of recent works that extend the range of targets to include the authoritative voices of biological science (Martin, 1987), empiricist philosophy (Harding, 1985), the natural sciences more generally (Keller, 1985). This same form of critical analysis now flourishes across the humanities and sciences. It is used by Afro-Americans, for example, to discredit implicit racism in its myriad forms, by gays to reveal homophobic attitudes within common representations of the world, by area specialists concerned with the subtle imperialism of Western ethnography. In effect, the form of critique calls attention to the constructed character of authoritative discourse, and does so for explicit political purposes.

### **Literary-Rhetorical Critique and the Politics of the Academy**

Let us contrast motivational unmasking with a second threat to the mirroring capacity of language. If statements about the world are not derived from essential differences in the world itself, as traditional wisdom would have it, then how are we to account for our modes of description and explanation? One possible answer to this question is implied by much continental semiotic theory. If, following Saussure (1983), we view language as a system in itself - connected to objects through arbitrary conventions - then we can understand the modes of description and explanation in terms of the demands of the linguistic system more generally. However, to the extent that description and explanation are demanded by the rules of language, then the "object of description" fails to impress itself upon the language. As literary requirements absorb the process of authoritative accounting, so do the objects of such accounts - as independent from the accounts themselves - lose ontological status and authority loses credibility.

In one form or another, this argument serves as the mainstay of much theory of literary criticism and rhetorical theory of recent decades. Unlike ideological criticism, which was (and is) political in its attempts to alter societal structures, the critique of linguistic reductionism was (at least initially) political in a more restricted sense. In my view, such critique served primarily to unsettle existing structures of power within the intellectual sphere. In the case of French "intellectual politics" in particular, the dominant motif was structuralist. For the structuralist, a major distinction is made between the overt and the covert, the observable and its underlying cause, manifestation and origin, or, as in the case of language, between the word and its underlying meaning. For the structuralist the given - overt and observable - furnishes the rationale for inquiry, the endpoint of which is an elucidation of the underlying cause or origin - typically (though not exclusively) viewed as some form of structure. Structuralist assumptions were

essential to most of the major intellectual traditions of the time. Marxist intellectuals were structuralist in their emphasis on material modes of production that underlie conditions of alienation and working class oppression. The psychoanalytic movement stressed the use of the spoken word ("manifest content") as providing clues to the structure of unconscious desire ("latent content"). Even the dominant explorations of many semioticians presumed structures or organizing principles underlying local formations of language. Similarly, the celebrated work of anthropologist, Levi-Strauss, traced various cultural forms and artifacts to an underlying binary logic (see especially Levi-Strauss, 1963).

Interestingly, for those holding to truth through language, structuralist thought already began to pose a challenge. To the extent that so called "objective accounts" are driven not by events as they are but by structured systems - internal systems of meaning, unconscious forces, modes of production, inherent linguistic tendencies and the like - then it is difficult to determine in what sense one can lay claim to an objective or accurate analysis. Description and explanation thus seems to be structure- rather than object-driven. Yet, this challenge to the concepts of truth and objectivity was little developed within structuralist circles themselves. Most structuralists were modernists in their claim a rational or objective basis for their knowledge of structure. Simultaneously, however, they left themselves vulnerable to the reflexive critique: structuralist analysis itself is under the thrall of linguistic determination.

This vulnerability provided the opportunity for aspiring intellectuals to wreak havoc with the dominant intellectual movements in the academy. Most fully aspiring in intent and profound in its consequences, were the post-structuralist writings of Jacques Derrida and the deconstruction movement. For Derrida (1976, 1978) the structuralist enterprise (and indeed all Western epistemology) was infected with an unfortunate "metaphysics of presence." Why, he asked, must we presume that discourse is an outward expression of an inward being (thought, intention, structure or the like)? On what grounds do we presume the presence of an unseen subjectivity behind the words? The unsettling implications of such questions is enhanced by Derrida's analysis of the means by which words acquire meaning. For Derrida, word meaning depends not only on differences between the auditory or visual characteristics of words, but on the process of deferral. That is, each word depends for its meaning on other words, for example, oral and written definitions, formal and informal usages, furnished on various occasions over time. The meaning of each of these words and phrases depends on still other deferrals to other definitions and contexts, traces of uses in countless other settings.

If there is "nothing outside of text," as such an analysis suggest, then a vast range of semiotic and literary analytic techniques become available for the more general discrediting of textual authority. In philosophy, for example, Rorty's (1979) significant attack on traditional philosophy of knowledge was grounded in literary analytics. The entire history of western epistemology, proposed Rorty, results

from the unfortunate metaphor of mind as mirror, a "glassy essence" reflecting events in the external world. In effect, the longstanding debate between empiricists and rationalists is not about a realm existing outside the texts, but it is a combat between competing literary traditions. Remove the central metaphors and the debate largely collapses. Resonant with this deconstruction of philosophy were explorations into the literary basis of historical reality (White, 1973; 1978), legal rationality (Levinson, 1982), and other intellectual domains. These internecine pyrotechnics also proved a stimulus for what might be called "the revenge of rhetoric." This 2,500 year old tradition had come upon hard times. Modernist scholars had drawn a sharp distinction between the content of a given text (its substance) and its form (or mode of presentation). Science and other truth generating disciplines, it was argued, are concerned with substance - with communicating content as accurately as possible. The form in which it is presented (its "packaging") is not only of peripheral interest, but to the extent that persuasion depends on it, the scholarly project is subverted. Within this context, rhetorical study was thrust to the margins of the academy. However, as the truth bearing capacity of language is threatened by post-structural literary theory, the presumption of content - an accurate portrayal of an independent object - gives way. All that was content stands open to critical analysis as persuasive form. In effect, developments in rhetorical study parallel those in literary criticism: both displace attention from the object of representation (the "facts," the "point of the argument,") to the vehicle of representation.

Reasoning in this manner, rhetorically oriented scholars were furnished ammunition for a full-scale assault on the bastions of authority. Consider the case of "human evolution," a seeming fact of biological life. As Misa Landau (1991) proposes, accounts of human evolution are not governed by events of the past (and their manifestation in various fossils), but forms of narrative or story telling. Major inquiries were also launched to understand the rhetorical basis of economics (McCloskey, 1985), psychology (Bazerman, 1987; Leary, 1991), and the human sciences more generally (Nelson, Megill and McCloskey, 1987; Simons, 1989, 1990). The authority claimed by traditional academic disciplines is displaced; rhetorical study holds trump.

### **Social Critique and the Liberal Tradition**

The force of the ideological and literary-rhetorical assaults on traditional authority is augmented by a third scholarly movement, one of pivotal importance for the emergence of social constructionism. One beginning to this story can be traced to a line of thought emerging in the works of Max Weber, Max Scheler, Karl Mannheim, and others occupied with the social genesis of scientific thought. In particular, each was concerned with the cultural context in which various ideas take shape, and the ways in which these ideas, in turn, give form to both scientific and cultural practice. It is perhaps Mannheim's 1929 volume, *Ideology and Utopia*, that carries with it the clearest outline of the assumptions of reverberating significance. As Mannheim proposed, 1) theoretical commitments may usefully be

traced to social, as opposed to empirical or transcendently rational, origins; 2) social groups are often organized around certain theories; 3) theoretical disagreements are therefore issues of group (or political) conflict; and 4) what we take to be knowledge is therefore culturally and historically contingent. Yet, with the bursting enthusiasm for empiricist foundationalism and its optimistic invitation for a unified science, the revolutionary implications of these views remained largely unexplored.

In certain respects the revitalization of the social view of knowledge can be traced to the same political ferment inciting the range of ideological critique discussed above. However, in this case the effects were, in my opinion, indirect. Japanese landscape designers make abundant use of a concept "borrowed scenery." By this they mean that the particular design in focus may often be enhanced by using attributes of the the ambient context - a distant mountain, a neighboring monument, or a nearby stand of trees. In similar fashion, the anti-institutional movements of the 1960-70s lent themselves strongly to a critical ethos in which the scientific knowledge industry, allied as it seemed with the "military-industrial complex," was viewed with scorn. The social analysis of science essentially filled a significant political need.

It is interesting to consider the alternative course that history might have taken if Thomas Kuhn had not entitled his 1962 volume, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. The political climate in which this title was secreted virtually ensured that its reading would be charged with far more energy than the specifics of the book could warrant. With such plausible titles as *Social Factors in the Copernican Controversy*, or *Paradigms and Progress*, I suspect that neither the social studies of science nor social constructionism would be flourishing as they are. Peter Winch's, *The Idea of a Social Science* (1958) had demonstrated the ways in which social theories are constitutive of the phenomena they purported to represent; Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) had effectively replaced scientific objectivity with a conception of socially informed subjectivity; Georges Gurvitch's *The Social Frameworks of Knowledge* had traced scientific knowledge to communal frameworks of understanding. Yet, by comparison, these works simply lingered in the shadows of the Kuhnian controversy.

This is not to say that the social conception of knowledge was otherwise lacking in political consciousness. In my view, there are many ways in which these arguments are consistent with the liberal tradition in the social sciences more generally, a tradition in which primary value is placed on individual expression and well-being, progress by merit, and freedom from tyranny. From the seminal contributions of, for example, Herbert Spencer, William Graham Sumner, G. Stanley Hall, William James, John Dewey, and Max Weber, to the present, the social sciences have been identified as prominently liberal in posture. This same orientation is reflected in much of the social critique, aimed as it is in removing what seemed the tyrannical yoke of empiricist foundationalism in general and

natural science authority in particular, and restoring voice to those otherwise dispossessed by the scientific establishment. The implicit politics are made explicit in Feberabend's, *Science in a Free Society*, where scientific specialists are said to be, "using tax money to destroy the traditions of the taxpayers, to ruin their minds, rape their environment, and ...turn living human beings into well-trained slaves of their own barren vision of life." (p.10) For Feberabend, as for many socially oriented constructionists, scholarly work should strive to create "a free society...in which all traditions have equal rights and equal access to the centres of power." (p.9) In this sense, the social emphasis in constructionism is politically allied with the middle, or bourgeois class (see Rorty, 1983); this is in contrast to the ideological critics just discussed, where the needs of the lower or marginalized classes are often paramount.

The flowering of the movements variously indexed as the history of science, the sociology of knowledge, social studies of science, and the social studies of science is well documented, and needs little further elaboration here. Particularly significant for contemporary social constructionism were elaborations of the micro-social processes out of which scientific meaning is produced. It is in this vein that sociologists have explored the social processes essential for creating "facts" within the laboratory (Latour and Woolgar, 1979), the discursive practices of scientific communities (Mulkay and Gilbert, 1982), scientific knowledge claims as forms of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1977), the social practices underlying inductive inference (Collins, 1985), group influences on the way data are interpreted (Collins and Pinch, 1982), and the locally situated and contingent character of scientific description (Knorr-Cetina, 1981). Such work has also proved highly congenial with the simultaneously developing field of ethnomethodology. For Harold Garfinkel (1967) and his colleagues, the essential defeasability of descriptive terms was demonstrated in studies of what counts as a psychiatric problem, suicide, juvenile crime, gender, states of mind, alcoholism, mental illness, or other putative constituents of the taken-for-granted world (see Garfinkel, 1967; Atkinson, 1977; Cicourel, 1968; Kessler & McKenna, 1978; Coulter, 1979; McAndrew, 1969; Scheff, 1966). In all cases there is a sense of liberation from the grip of the institutional taken for granted.

### **After the Deluge: Scintillating Schisms**

We find, then, three major sources of contemporary construction, each sharing in their critique of traditional views of language and authority, but differing in their mode of critique and their political investments. Together these lines of argument lay the basis for a profound shift in the academic temper, and resulting visions of knowledge, scholarship, pedagogy, and indeed, the shape of society. For many of those engaged in these efforts, there is no return to traditional scholarly life. At the same time, because of their disparate roots, these otherwise converging lines of argument harbor substantial tensions. Of particular concern to us here, are the political dynamics set in motion by their interpenetration. Let us attend, then, to problems growing out of the incipient fear of falling away from tradition, issues

stemming from mutual appropriation of discourses, and finally, emerging doubts concerning the very possibility of politics.

*Tradition in Jeopardy.* At the outset, while many scholars were drawn to certain constructionist arguments, they were also deeply unsettled by the political uses - both academic and societal - to which constructionist dialogues were put. They wished to contribute to the flow of ideas, but scorned the "abuses" of the movement by otherwise like-minded colleagues. Or, more broadly, they were committed to various causes or traditions that were placed in severe jeopardy by extensions of constructionist thought. Constructionist critique might be embraced for its challenge to empiricist determinism, for example, but chastised for its deconstruction of humanist assumptions of subjectivity and human agency; it could be lauded for its undermining of social science authority but dismissed for its challenge to the natural sciences (see, for example, Searle 1995). Two politically significant polarities deserve special attention.

One of the most prevalent conflicts in constructionist writings centers around the status of individual psychological processes (subjectivity, cognition, agency, the emotions). On the one hand many constructionists remain committed to individual process as the primary site of construction. Such commitments boast a strong lineage, including Berger and Luckmann's (1966) grounding of constructionism in phenomenology, Kuhn's (1962) tracing of paradigm shifts to Gestalt shifts in perception (p.111), and Hanson's (1958) arguments for observer determined basis of scientific realities. This lingering commitment is politically conservative in at least two important ways. On the one hand, it allies constructionist inquiry with long-standing traditions in the academy. Most of the social sciences are lodged in individualist forms of explanation; a psychologically based constructionism would form a felicitous extension of these traditions. In addition, however, an individually based constructionism is also congenial with central political and moral traditions of western culture, lodged as they are in beliefs in individuals as the originary sources of their own actions. Included here, for example, would be the institution of democracy, claims to human rights, and the judicial system. At the same time, for many other constructionists, such individualist tendencies are to be strongly resisted. Not only would constructionism fail to do any significant work within the academy - simply supporting the status quo - but it would sustain a deeply flawed tradition of self-contained individualism (see Sampson, 1977; 1988). On this side, many constructionists favor an emphasis on community (interdependence, negotiation, dialogue) over the individual as the site of moral and political action (see, for example, Shotter, 1993; Gergen, 1994).

A second site of political tension derives from constructionist leanings toward relativism. Much constructionist writing lends itself to some form of relativism - in both ontological and moral realms. Once entering the critical corridors, it is very difficult to accept any particular reality posits, truth claims, or moral principles as transparent, foundational, or beyond construction. In this sense, constructionist thinking tends to remove the grounds for any strong claims to the

real and the good. At the same time, for many who participate in constructionist dialogues, such implications are nihilistic if not societally disastrous in consequence (see, for example, Smith, 1994). The work of Rom Harre is illustrative, as it indicates the existence of strong competing tendencies even within the same individual. While Harre has been a vital contributor to constructionist conversations (for example, Harre, 1986), there is also a strongly conserving stance in much of his work. He fears, as he puts it, the "slide into relativism" (Harre, 1992). Thus, Harre resists abandoning commitments to rational foundations of science (Harre, 1988), essentialist statements about human functioning (Harre and Gillett, 1994), and liberal tenets of moral action (Harre, 1992). More broadly, then, we detect a political split within between those favoring retention of certain traditions - both academically and societally - and those advocating more radical change.

Appropriation for Political Purposes.

Contributing to these conflicts, is a second scholarly development stimulated by early constructionist critique. As participants in these various movements became increasingly aware of their affinities, so did they also begin to appropriate the neighboring forms of argument. In particular, scholars committed to a various political causes, and relying primarily on a strategy of ideological unmasking, rapidly became aware of the assets offered by the literary-rhetorical and social critiques. Not only could the prevailing powers be challenged on grounds of ideological subterfuge, but it became possible to demonstrate the linguistic and rhetorical artifice with which the dominant ideologies were sustained, and the cultural and historical contingency of their truth claims. In this context, for example, feminist critics demonstrated ways in which androcentric metaphors guide theory construction in biology (Hubbard, 1983; Fausto-Sterling, 1986), biophysics (Keller, 1984) and anthropology (Sanday, 1988). Psychologists challenged the ideological repercussions of their discipline by probing the field's broad reliance on mechanistic metaphors (Hollis, 1977; Shotter, 1975), along with the socially constructed character of its empirical findings (Kitzinger, 1987; Sarbin, 1986). Yet, it would also be shortsighted to view the process of interpolation as travelling in a singular direction, with the politically engaged garnering discursive moves from their less committed colleagues. One must also suppose that there was a reciprocal influence, with the broader political implications of constructionist arguments gradually reaching consciousness. Here the pivotal role must be attributed to Foucault's writings - especially *Discipline and Punish*, and the *The History of Sexuality*, V.1. For Foucault, there is a close relationship between language (including all forms of text) and social process (conceived in terms of power relations). In particular, as various professions (e.g. the sciences government, religion, the courts) develop languages that both justify their existence and articulate the social world, and as these languages are placed into practice, so do individuals come under the sway of such professions. Most pertinently, Foucault's writings single out individual subjectivity as the site where many contemporary institutions - including the academic professions - insinuate themselves into ongoing social life and expand their dominion. "The 'mind'" he writes, is a surface of inscription for power, with semiology as its tool." (1977, p.102). With the broad circulation of these ideas, scholars everywhere were given

to reflexive pause. If scholarly work is inevitably participation in relations of power, then in what fashion is such power to be used or defused?

It is partially in this vein that one may appreciate the increasingly political character of discourse analysis, for example, a movement that has important roots in the social studies of science. One locates strong societal critique, for example, in the discourse analytics of Billig et al. (1988, 1991), Edwards and Potter, 1992), and Potter and Wetherell (1989), and in the journal, *Discourse and Society* more generally.

The Possibilities of the Political. A third dynamic, born of intersecting dialogues from the past, sets an important agenda for the future. In this case, we find that the constructionist inquiry throws the very intelligibility of political action into question. The stage is set for this critical colloquy by the differing political bases for the three forms of critique. Specifically, for those engaged in ideological critique, significant social change is paramount. Emancipation, a term freighted with emotional significance, is the very *raison d'être* of scientific analysis. From this standpoint, scholars engaged in literary and rhetorical deconstruction or in the social analysis of science, seem politically puerile, if not egregiously blind to (or secretly supportive of) injustice and inequality everywhere apparent. Marxists, feminists, African American, and gay activists, for example, often scorn those who seem only to play effete literary games, or gain professional stature by producing obscure works on scientific procedures. For many activists, the disclosure of the Nazi sympathies of deconstructionist doyen, Paul de Man, only verified suspicions of political bankruptcy.

At the same time, such antipathy has rendered the ideological critic vulnerable to redoubt of profound consequence. While engaging in wholesale disparagement of knowledge claims saturated with ideological interests, ideological critics have by necessity clung to some form of realism. Emancipation occurs when one understands the true nature of things - class, gender, and racial inequality, for example. Yet, for both the literary and social analyst, there is little room for a true or objective account of social conditions. All tellings are dominated by textual-rhetorical traditions, in the former instance, and social process in the latter. In effect, ideological criticism loses any claim to veracity, and seems itself to be the product of ideological invested and dangerously totalitarian impulses. The intensity of such conflicts is most readily apparent in the feminist movement. Deploying the full range of constructionist critique, certain feminists have set out to undermine the empiricist movement in the social sciences, including those feminists who employ empirical methods for studying inequality. At the same time, so-called feminist standpoint epistemologists (see Harding, 1986), while decrying empiricism as hopelessly androcentric, claim privileged access to the truth based on marginal and oppressed position in society. Yet, these groups are simultaneously viewed with suspicion by a range of minority feminists - women of color, lesbians, the poor - who see ideological forces at play in such claims. Further, so-called postmodern feminists (see for example, Butler, 1990), find the

literary-rhetorical and social constructionist arguments compelling, and search for means of justifying politics without ultimate commitment. The result has been profound fragmentation within the movement.

### **Politics as Relationship by Other Means**

As we find, largely owing to the diverse contexts giving rise to social constructionist dialogues, an array of political dynamics have been set in motion. Not only has constructionist thought become increasingly politicized in recent decades, but numerous schisms have developed within the ranks of those who otherwise share a common discursive base. Although some may despair over such tensions, there are also reasons for welcoming such an outcome - even from a constructionist standpoint itself. As a metatheoretical outlook, constructionism is deeply pluralistic. There are no foundational grounds for discrediting any form of discourse, and because discursive practices are embedded within forms of life, to obliterate a language would be to threaten a form of humanity. In effect, there is a place for all entries into intelligibility, even those that would militate against constructionism itself. Thus, in the political domain, any attempt at full amalgamation - the realization of a unified political front - would be reason for suspicion. In this sense, the very existence of political disagreements among constructionists may be viewed as a vital sign.

Yet, it is my hope that as constructionist dialogues play out, they will move beyond a contentious politics. As I have proposed, present-day constructionism was nurtured in the soil of conflict; it gained its initial momentum from the dynamics of opposition. Similarly, as tensions have developed among constructionist enclaves, so has a critical posture prevailed. We have learned well the skills of deconstructive critique, and as we have come increasingly to speak among ourselves (as opposed to the rear guard skirmishes of previous years), so have we continued to rely on these skills. However, as I have proposed elsewhere (Gergen, 1994a), there are serious limits to the rhetoric of critique. Most frequently, it serves to breed hostility as opposed to change, encourages a self-satisfied sense of superiority, and further fragments and isolates the socius. The problem, then, is not in having political positions; virtually all action is political in implication. The major problem is our inheritance of a tradition of argumentation that favors critique as its major mode of addressing "the opposition." In my view, the constructionist dialogues contain the seeds for radical alteration in the mode of politics.

In particular, as we extend the social emphasis of much constructionist writing, "the word" is removed from the foreground of concern. Rather than focussing on political or rhetorical content, we are drawn rather to the forms of relationship which bring content and rhetoric to life. This includes the relational implications of critique itself and the possibility that alternative forms of relationship might prove more adequate in determining the collective future. The challenge, then, is to explore the relational frontier for practices that may facilitate the co-habitation

of a multiplicity of disparate voices. What forms of dialogue, for example, are likely to yield more acceptable outcomes than those those produced by argumentation? Attempting to deal with the foibles of identity politics, I have elsewhere outlined the basis for a relational politics (Gergen, 1995), that is an orientation to political interchange that emphasizes the interdependent basis of meaning, the defusing and diffusion of blame, and the possibility of collaborative as opposed to agonistic practices. However, this work serves as but an invitational entry into a more extended discussion of broad potential.

### References

- Antaki, C. (1981). *The psychology of ordinary explanations*. London: Academic Press.
- Apfelbaum, E. & Lubek, I. (1976). *Resolution vs. revolution? The theory of conflicts in question*. In L. Strickland, F. Aboud & K. J. Gergen (Eds.). *Social psychology in transition*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Atkinson, J. M. (1977). *Discovering suicide: Studies in the social organization of sudden death*. London: Macmillan Press.
- Bazerman, C. (1988). *Shaping written knowledge*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Bergen, P., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality*. New York: Doubleday/Anchor.
- Billig, M. et al. (1988) *Ideological dilemmas: a social psychology of everyday thinking*. London: Sage.
- Billig, M. (1991) *Talking of the royal family*. London: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1990) *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Carnap, R. (1928). *Knowledge, theory of ontology*. Berlin: Schlachtensee.
- Cicourel, A. V. (1968). *The social organization of juvenile justice*. New York: Wiley.
- Collins, H. M. (1985). *Changing order*. London: Sage.
- Collins, H. M. & Pinch, T. J. (1982). *Frames of meaning: The social construction of extraordinary science*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Coulter, J. (1979). *The social construction of the mind*. New York: MacMillan.
- Derrida, J. (1976) *Of grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Derrida, J. (1978) *Writing and difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- de Saussure, F. (1983). *Course of general linguistics*. London: Peter Owen.
- Edwards, D. and Potter, J. (1992) *Discursive psychology*. London: Sage.
- Fausto-Sterling, A. (1985). *Myths of gender: Theories about women and men*. New York: Basic Books.
- Feyerabend, P. K. (1978). *Science in a free society*. London: Thetford Press.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *The history of sexuality, Vol. 1: An introduction*.

New York: Pantheon.

- Foucault, M. (1979). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Random House.
- Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Gergen, K.J. (1994). *Realities and relationships*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Gergen, K.J. (1994a). The limits of pure critique. In H. Simons and M. Billig (Eds.). *After postmodernism: Reconstructing ideology critique*. London: Sage.
- Gergen, K.J. (1995) *Social construction and the transformation of identity politics*. Paper presented at the New School for Social Research. Spring, 1995.
- Gouldner, A. (1970) *The coming crisis in western sociology*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gurwitsch, G. (1971). *The social frameworks of knowledge*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Hanson, N. R. (1958). *Patterns of discovery*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harding, S. (1986). *The science question in feminism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Harre, R. (1988) *Varieties of realism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harre, R. (1986). The social constructionist viewpoint. In R. Harre (Ed.) *The social construction of emotion*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Harre, R. (1992). What is real psychology; a plea for persons. *Theory and Psychology*, 2, 153-158.
- Harre, R. & Gillett, G. (1994). *The discursive mind*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hollis, M. (1977) *Models of man*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Hubbard, R. (1988). Some thoughts about the masculinity of the natural sciences. In M. Gergen (Ed.). *Feminist thought and the structure of knowledge*. New York: New York University Press.
- Keller, E.F. (1984) *Reflections on gender and science*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Kessler, S. & McKenna, W. (1978) *Gender: an ethnomethodological approach*. New York: Wiley.
- Kitziner, C. (1987) *The social construction of lesbianism*. London: Sage.
- Knorr-Cetina, K. D. (1981). *The manufacture of knowledge*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Kuhn, T. S. (1970). *The structure of scientific revolution*. (2nd revised edition). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. (Originally published 1962).
- Landau, M. (1991) *Narratives of human evolution*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Latour, B. & Woolgar, S. (1979). *Laboratory life, the social construction of scientific facts*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

- Levi-Strauss, C.(1963) Structural anthropology. Tr. and published (1973). New York: Basic Books.
- Levinson, S. (1982). Law as literature. *Texas Law Review*, 60, 388-411.
- Mannheim, K. (1951). *Ideology and utopia*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Martin, E. (1987). *Woman in the body*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- McCloskey, D. N. (1985). *The rhetoric of economics*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Nelson, J.S., Megill, A. & McCloskey, D.(1987) *The rhetoric of the human sciences*. Madison: University of Wisconsin.
- Neurath, O. (1933). *Einheitsinssenschaft und psychologie*. Vienna: Gerold.
- Popper, K. R. (1959). *The logic of scientific discovery*. London: Hutchinson.
- Potter, J. and Wetherell, M. (1987) *Discourse and social psychology: Beyond attitudes and behaviour*. London: Sage.
- Rorty, R. (1979) *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Rorty, R. (1983) Postmodernist bourgeois liberalism. *Journal of Philosophy*, 80, 585-594.
- Simons, H. (Ed.) (1989) *Rhetoric in the human sciences*. London: Sage.
- Sampson, E.E. (1978) Psychology and the American ideal. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 35, 767-782.
- Sampson, E.E. (1988) The debate on individualism. *American Psychologist*, 43, 15-22.
- Sarbin, T. (1986) Emotion and act: roles and rhetoric. In R. Harre, (Ed.) *The social construction of emotion*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Shotter, J. (1975) *Images of man in psychological research*. London: Methuen. Shotter, J. (1993) *The cultural politics of everyday life*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Smith, B. (1994) Selfhood at risk: Postmodern perils and the perils of postmodernism. *American Psychologist*, 49, 405-411.

### Footnotes

For a more complete review of these and related developments, see Gergen, 1994.

- 1. Classic contributions include Adorno (1970), Horkheimer (1974), and Marcuse (1964). See also summaries by Jay (1973) and Benhabib (1986). For extensions of this perspective into contemporary scholarship see, for example, Eagleton (1990), Parker (1992), Scholte (1981), Sullivan (1984), Thomas (1993), and Tushnet (1984).
- 3. See, for example, Clifford and Marcus (1986), Fabian (1983), Gouldner (1970), Mitchell (1983), Rosen (1987), Said (1979, 1993), Schwartz (1986), and Stam (1987).
- 5. See Pinder and Bourgeois (1982) for an exemplary expression of this view.
- 6. For further treatments of the distinction between modernism and

postmodernism, see Lyotard (1979), Harvey (1989), and Turner (1990). For discussions of the postmodern turn in the social sciences see Rosenau (1992), Kvale (1992), and Seidman and Wagner (1992). For a treatment of the relationship between postmodern scholarship and transformations in cultural life see Foster (1983), Connor (1989), and Gergen (1991).

- 7. Nencel and Pels (1991) edited volume, *Constructing Knowledge, Authority and critique in social science* demonstrates the intensity of these disputes. For example, in reply to the emerging textual emphasis in anthropology, neo-Marxist anthropologist Jonathan Friedman writes, "Textual experimentation is the luxury of the postmodern minority...all of whom are in positions of 'institutional power,' or at least, who belong to groups controlling such positions, that is men, and people of no color...We have here the voice of the tired and bored occupants of an ivory tower of power. ...an elitist cynicism evidencing the compounding of personal and disciplinary narcissism..." (p.98). In the feminist terms of Annelies Moors (1991), "What is at stake for women is whether postmodernism's acceptance of difference has as its hidden agenda, and ultimate consequence, an indifference on the part of those in power towards women's claims for justice." (p.127)
- 9. While there is now an enormous corpus of critical literature congenial with the preceding account, and a phalanx of scholars practicing what we might term "social constructionist scholarship," discussions of the "constructionist successor" to traditional science have been less frequent. Especially useful for this project, however, are the works of Astley (1985), Edwards and Potter (1992), Lincoln (1985), Longino (1990), Shotter (1993), and Stam (1990).
- 13. Specific attempts to place constructionist views into practice now emerge in fields of pedagogy (Lather, 1991), sex and marital therapy (Atwood and Dershowitz, 1992), market research (Stratton, 1992), mediation and grievance proceedings (Millen, 1992; Salipante and Bouwen, 1990), television and press analysis (Carey, 1988), and legal proceedings (Frug, 1984). A discussion of constructionist inroads into the therapeutic field will be taken up in Chapter 10.