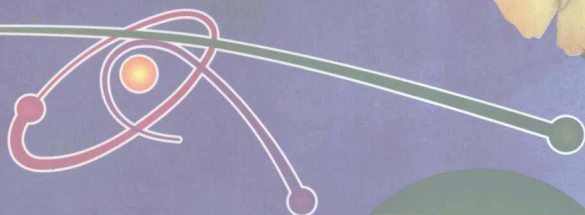
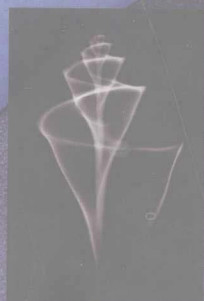
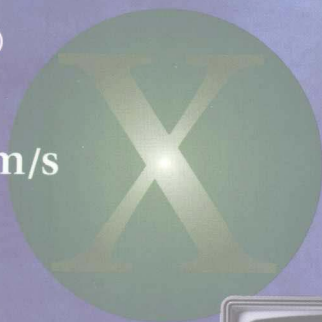


IAN HACKING

THE SOCIAL  
CONSTRUCTION  
OF WHAT?



$$v = \frac{1}{\sqrt{\mu_0 \epsilon_0}} = 3 \times 10^8 \text{ m/s}$$



IAN HACKING

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Social construction is one of very many ideas that are bitterly fought over in the American culture wars. Combatants may find my observations rather like the United Nations resolutions that have little effect. But a lot of other people are curious about the fray going on in the distance. They are glad to hear from a foreign correspondent, not about the wars, but about an idea that has been cropping up all over the place.

I have seldom found it helpful to use the phrase “social construction” in my own work. When I have mentioned it I have done so in order to distance myself from it. It seemed to be both obscure and overused. Social construction has in many contexts been a truly liberating idea, but that which on first hearing has liberated some has made all too many others smug, comfortable, and trendy in ways that have become merely orthodox. The phrase has become code. If you use it favorably, you deem yourself rather radical. If you trash the phrase, you declare that you are rational, reasonable, and respectable.

I used to believe that the best way to contribute to the debates was to remain silent. To talk about them would entrench the use of the phrase “social construction.” My attitude was irresponsible. Philosophers of my stripe should analyze, not exclude. Even in the narrow domains called the history and the philosophy of the sciences, observers see a painful schism. Many historians and many philosophers won’t talk to each other, or else they talk past each other, because one side is so contentiously “constructionist” while the other is so dismissive of the idea. In larger arenas, public scientists shout at sociologists, who shout back. You almost forget that there are issues to discuss. I have tried to get

some perspective on established topics in the field. More interesting are some openings to new ideas that have not yet been examined.

Labels such as "the culture wars," "the science wars," or "the Freud wars" are now widely used to refer to some of the disagreements that plague contemporary intellectual life. I will continue to employ those labels, from time to time, in this book, for my themes touch, in myriad ways, on those confrontations. But I would like to register a gentle protest. Metaphors influence the mind in many unnoticed ways. The willingness to describe fierce disagreement in terms of the metaphors of war makes the very existence of real wars seem more natural, more inevitable, more a part of the human condition. It also betrays us into an insensibility toward the very idea of war, so that we are less prone to be aware of how totally disgusting real wars really are.

And now for acknowledgments. Usually I work for years on something, pretty much by myself, aided by interested students at my own university. These chapters, first presented as lectures or seminars, are, for me, unusual, because the ideas have been worked out in public, above all with students at the University of Toronto. My first thoughts about social construction were written down for Irving Velody, who asked me for a piece to go in the book of an English conference that I did not attend. A much revised version now serves as Chapter 2. Then I was asked to talk about social construction in its former heartlands, the New School of Social Research in New York, and Frankfurt University, where the nonlecture Chapter 2 became a real lecture. I ended up doing lectures all over the place: as Henrietta Harvey lecturer at Memorial University, Newfoundland (Chapter 1); the George Myro lecture, Berkeley, California (Chapter 3); two lectures (Chapters 3 and 4) at the Institut de l'Histoire des Sciences et Philosophie et Technique, Paris I (Sorbonne). Chapter 4 is an extended version of the John Coffin Memorial Lecture, in London, and Chapter 3 was given as a follow-up seminar. In Tokyo, Chapter 1 served for a seminar at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Humaines, Tokyo, and Chapter 3 for research workers at Fuji Xerox, Tokyo, and also at Kyoto University.

Chapters 1, 2, and 4 formed a final set of lectures at Green College in the University of British Columbia. The idea of three talks came at the beginning of these travels, when Richard Ericson, the President of Green College, in a single conversation, both suggested I give a set of lectures at the college a couple of years later, and said that my book on multiple personality, *Rewriting the Soul*, was a classic of social constructionism.

I was as taken aback by the second remark as I was honored by the first, so it is fitting that the final version of this evolution was delivered a couple of years later, at Green College, in January 1998. I wish particularly to thank Ernie Hamm for ensuring that everything went smoothly there.

Chapters 1–4 are, then, extended versions of four lectures on fairly different aspects of social construction.

Chapter 2 is substantially revised from “On Being More Literal about Construction,” in *The Politics of Constructionism*, ed. I. Velody and R. Williams (London: Sage, 1998), reprinted by permission of Sage Publications Ltd. Parts of Chapter 4 appeared as “Taking Bad Arguments Seriously,” *London Review of Books*, 21 August 1997. Chapter 5 is shortened and adapted from “World-making by Kind-making: Child Abuse for Example,” in *How Classification Works: Nelson Goodman among the Social Sciences*, ed. Mary Douglas and David Hull (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992). Chapter 6 appeared in essentially its present form as “Weapons Research and the Form of Scientific Knowledge,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* (1997), Supplementary Vol. 12: 327–348. Chapter 8, revised here, first appeared as “Was Captain Cook a God?,” *London Review of Books*, 7 September 1995. I thank the various publishers for permission to use the texts.

Chapter 7 has been adapted from a lecture for high school science teachers in Portugal, organized by Fernando Gil, under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. It is more old-fashioned than the other chapters because it explains some traditional philosophy of science, though it also introduces contemporary science studies. It is old-fashioned in another way too. Dr Johnson refuted Bishop Berkeley’s immaterialist philosophy by kicking a rock, and today one reads that Maxwell’s Equations are as real as—rocks. I could not resist taking that seriously. Why not think about geology and social construction? The example is built around a very common kind of rock, dolomite. Happily the example, based on current research done in Zurich by Dr Judith McKenzie and her collaborators, manages to touch on many a topic, including early forms of life, and maybe, if you want to speculate a little, life on Mars.

My ideas have not so much changed during the travels that produced chapters 1–4 and 7, as been clarified. Every single talk exposed many things that I had not thought about. Ignorance and confusion remain, but the time has come to stop wandering. Collectively my audiences were participants in the making of this book. Some contributions from

individuals are flagged in the notes, but to all a hearty thanks. Some people say that the culture wars have temporarily destroyed the possibility of friendly discussion and scholarly collaboration. What do I think about that? I have always wanted to use in print a word I learned from long-ago comic strips, so now I can. *Pshaw!*

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## WHY ASK WHAT?

What a lot of things are said to be socially constructed! Here are some construction titles from a library catalog:

Authorship (Woodmansee and Jaszi 1994)  
Brotherhood (Clawson 1989)  
The child viewer of television (Luke 1990)  
Danger (McCormick 1995)  
Emotions (Harré 1986)  
Facts (Latour and Woolgar 1979)  
Gender (Dewar, 1986; Lorber and Farrell 1991)  
Homosexual culture (Kinsman 1983)  
Illness (Lorber 1997)  
Knowledge (MacKenzie 1981, Myers 1990, Barrett 1992,  
Torkington 1996)  
Literacy (Cook-Gumperz 1986)  
The medicalized immigrant (Wilkins 1993)  
Nature (Eder 1996)  
Oral history (Tonkin 1992)  
Postmodernism (McHale 1992)  
Quarks (Pickering 1986)  
Reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966)  
Serial homicide (Jenkins 1994)  
Technological systems (Bijker, Hughes, and Pinch 1987)  
Urban schooling (Miron 1996)  
Vital statistics (Emery 1993)  
Women refugees (Moussa 1992)  
Youth homelessness (Huston and Liddiard 1994)  
Zulu nationalism (Golan 1994)

Not to mention Deafness, Mind, Panic, the eighties and Extraordinary science (Hartley and Gregory 1991, Coulter 1979, Capps and Ochs 1995, Grünzweig and Maeirhofer 1992, Collins 1982). Individual people also qualify: at a workshop on teenage pregnancy, the overworked director of a Roman Catholic welfare agency said: "And I myself am, of course, a social construct; each of us is."<sup>1</sup> Then there is experience: "Scholars and activists within feminism and disability rights have demonstrated that the experiences of being female or of having a disability are socially constructed" (Asche and Fine 1988, 5f).

My alphabetical list is taken from titles of the form *The Social Construction of X*, or *Constructing X*. I left *X* out of my alphabet for lack of a book, and because it allows me to use *X* as a filler, a generic label for what is constructed. Talk of social construction has become common coin, valuable for political activists and familiar to anyone who comes across current debates about race, gender, culture, or science. Why?

For one thing, the idea of social construction has been wonderfully liberating. It reminds us, say, that motherhood and its meanings are not fixed and inevitable, the consequence of child-bearing and rearing. They are the product of historical events, social forces, and ideology.<sup>2</sup> Mothers who accept current canons of emotion and behavior may learn that the ways they are supposed to feel and act are not ordained by human nature or the biology of reproduction. They need not feel quite as guilty as they are supposed to, if they do not obey either the old rules of family or whatever is the official psycho-pediatric rule of the day, such as, "you must bond with your infant, or you both will perish."<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately social construction analyses do not always liberate. Take anorexia, the disorder of adolescent girls and young women who seem to value being thin above all else. They simply will not eat. Although anorexia has been known in the past, and even the name is a couple of hundred years old, it surfaced in the modern world in the early 1960s. The young women who are seriously affected resist treatment. Any number of fashionable and often horrible cures have been tried, and none works reliably. In any intuitive understanding of "social construction," anorexia must in part be some sort of social construction. It is at any rate a transient mental illness (Hacking 1998a), flourishing only in some places at some times. But that does not help the girls and young women who are suffering. Social construction theses are liberating chiefly for those who are on the way to being liberated—mothers whose consciousness has already been raised, for example.

For all their power to liberate, those very words, “social construction,” can work like cancerous cells. Once seeded, they replicate out of hand. Consider Alan Sokal’s hoax. Sokal, a physicist at New York University, published a learned pastiche of current “theory” in *Social Text*, an important academic journal for literary and cultural studies (Sokal 1996a). The editors included it in a special issue dedicated to the “science wars.” In an almost simultaneous issue of *Lingua Franca*, a serious variant of *People* magazine, aimed at professors and their ilk, Sokal owned up to the mischief (Sokal 1996b). Sokal’s confession used the term “social construction” just twice in a five-page essay. Stanley Fish (1996), dean of “theory,” retorted on the op-ed page of the *New York Times*. There he used the term, or its cognates, sixteen times in a few paragraphs. If a cancer cell did that to a human body, death would be immediate. Excessive use of a vogue word is tiresome, or worse.

In a talk given in Frankfurt a few days after the story broke in May of 1996, I said that Sokal’s hoax had now had its fifteen minutes of fame. How wrong I was! There are several thousand “Sokal” entries on the Internet. Sokal crystallized something very important for American intellectual life. I say American deliberately. Many of Sokal’s targets were French writers; and Sokal’s own book on these topics was first published in French (Bricmont and Sokal 1997a). That in turn produced two French books, both with the French word *impostures* in their titles (Jenneret 1998, Jurdant 1998). The European reaction has, however, remained bemused rather than concerned. Plenty of reporting, yes, but not much passion. In late 1997 Sokal had little prominence in Japan, although the most informative Sokal website anywhere had just opened in Japanese cyberspace.<sup>4</sup> Students of contemporary American mores have an obligation to explain the extraordinary brouhaha that Sokal provoked in his own country. My aim is not to give a social history of our times explaining all that, but to analyze the idea of social construction, which has been on the warpath for over three decades before Sokal. Hence I shall have almost nothing to say about the affair. Readers who want a polemical anthology of American writing siding with Sokal may enjoy Koertge (1998).

## RELATIVISM

For many people, Sokal epitomized what are now called the “science wars.” Wars! The science wars can be focused on social construction.

One person argues that scientific results, even in fundamental physics, are social constructs. An opponent, angered, protests that the results are usually discoveries about our world that hold independently of society. People also talk of the culture wars, which often hinge on issues of race, gender, colonialism, or a shared canon of history and literature that children should master—and so on. These conflicts are serious. They invite heartfelt emotions. Nevertheless I doubt that the terms “culture wars,” “science wars” (and now, “Freud wars”) would have caught on if they did not suggest gladiatorial sport. It is the bemused spectators who talk about the “wars.”

There is, alas, a great deal of anger out there that no amount of light-heartedness will dispel. Many more things are at work in these wars than I can possibly touch on. One of them is a great fear of relativism. What is this wicked troll? Clear statements about it are hard to find. Commonly, people suspected of relativism insist they are not haunted by it. A few, such as the Edinburgh sociologists of science, Barry Barnes and David Bloor (1982), gladly accept the epithet “relativist.” Paul Feyerabend (1987), of “anything goes” fame, managed to describe some thirteen versions of relativism, but this attempt at divide-and-rule convinced no one.

I think that we should be less highbrow than these authors. Let us get down to gut reactions. What are we afraid of? Plenty. There is the notion that any opinion is as good as any other; if so, won't relativism license anything at all? Feminists have recently cautioned us about the dangers of this kind of relativism, for it seems to leave no ground for criticizing oppressive ideas (Code 1995). The matter may seem especially pressing for third-world feminists (Nanda 1997).

Then there is historical revisionism. The next stage in the notorious series of holocaust denials might be a book entitled *The Social Construction of the Holocaust*, a work urging that the Nazi extermination camps are exaggerated and the gas chambers fictions. No one wants a relativism that tells us that such a book will, so far as concerns truth, be on a par with all others. My own view is that we do not need to discuss such issues under the heading of relativism. The question of historical revisionism is a question of how to write history.<sup>5</sup> Barnes and Bloor (1983, 27) make plain that relativist sociologists of their stripe are obliged to sort out their beliefs and actions, using a critical version of the standards of their own culture. Feyerabend's last words (1994) were that every culture is one culture, and we ought to take a stand against oppression

anywhere. And I ended my own contribution to a book on rationality and relativism by quoting Sartre's last words explaining why the Jewish and Islamic traditions played no part in his thought: they did not for the simple reason that they were no part of his life (Hacking 1983).

There are more global bogeymen. Intellectuals and nationalists are frightened of religious fundamentalism in India, Israel, the Islamic world, and the United States. Does not relativism entail that any kind of religious fundamentalism is as good as any kind of science?

Or maybe the real issue is the decline of the West (in the United States, read America). Decline is positively encouraged by some social constructionists, is it not? Sometimes people focus on the loss of tradition and resent "multiculturalism." That is one fear that I cannot take seriously, perhaps because the word was in use, in a purely positive way, in Canada long before it got taken up in the American culture wars. My goodness, where I live my provincial government has had a Minister of Multiculturalism for years and years; I'm supposed to be worried about that?

Relativism and decline are real worries, but I am not going to address them directly. It is good to stay away from them, for I cannot expect successfully to dispel or solve problems where so many wise heads have written so many wise words without effect. More generally, I avoid speculating further on the profound malaise that fuels today's culture wars. I am at most an unhappy witness to it, saddened by what it does.

#### DON'T FIRST DEFINE, ASK FOR THE POINT

Social construction talk has recently been all the rage. I cannot hope to do justice to all parties. I shall take most of my examples from authors who put social construction up front, in their titles. They may not be the clearest, most sensible, or most profound contributors, but at any rate they are self-declared. So what are social constructions and what is social constructionism? With so many inflamed passions going the rounds, you might think that we first want a definition to clear the air. On the contrary, we first need to confront the point of social construction analyses. Don't ask for the meaning, ask what's the point.

This is not an unusual situation. There are many words or phrases of which the same thing must be said. Take "exploitation." In a recent book about it, Alan Wertheimer (1996) does a splendid job of seeking out necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of statements of the form

"A exploits B." He does not quite succeed, because the point of saying that middle-class couples exploit surrogate mothers, or that colleges exploit their basketball stars on scholarships—Wertheimer's prized examples—is to raise consciousness. The point is less to describe the relation between colleges and stars than to change how we see those relations. This relies not on necessary and sufficient conditions for claims about exploitation, but on fruitful analogies and new perspectives.

In the same way, a primary use of "social construction" has been for raising consciousness.<sup>6</sup> This is done in two distinct ways, one overarching, the other more localized. First, it is urged that a great deal (or all) of our lived experience, and of the world we inhabit, is to be conceived of as socially constructed. Then there are local claims, about the social construction of a specific *X*. The *X* may be authorship or Zulu nationalism. A local claim may be suggested by an overarching attitude, but the point of a local claim is to raise consciousness about something in particular. Local claims are in principle independent of each other. You might be a social constructionist about brotherhood and fraternity, but maintain that youth homelessness is real enough. Most of this book is about local claims. That is why I began with the question, "The social construction of what?" and opened with a list of whats. The items in my alphabetical list are so various! Danger is a different sort of thing from reality, or women refugees. What unites many of the claims is an underlying aim to raise consciousness.

#### AGAINST INEVITABILITY

Social construction work is critical of the status quo. Social constructionists about *X* tend to hold that:

- (1) *X* need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. *X*, or *X* as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable.

Very often they go further, and urge that:

- (2) *X* is quite bad as it is.
- (3) We would be much better off if *X* were done away with, or at least radically transformed.

A thesis of type (1) is the starting point: the existence or character of *X*

is not determined by the nature of things. *X* is not inevitable. *X* was brought into existence or shaped by social events, forces, history, all of which could well have been different. Many social construction theses at once advance to (2) and (3), but they need not do so. One may realize that something, which seems inevitable in the present state of things, was not inevitable, and yet is not thereby a bad thing. But most people who use the social construction idea enthusiastically want to criticize, change, or destroy some *X* that they dislike in the established order of things.

## GENDER

Not all constructionists about *X* go as far as thesis (3) or even (2). There are many grades of commitment. Later on I distinguish six of them. You can get some idea of the gradations by thinking about feminist uses of construction ideas. Undoubtedly the most influential social construction doctrines have had to do with gender.<sup>7</sup> That was to be expected. The canonical text, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, had as its most famous line, *On ne naît pas femme: on le devient*; "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir 1949, II, 1; 1953, 267). It also suggested to many readers that gender is constructed.<sup>8</sup>

Previous toilers in the women's movements knew that power relations needed reform, but many differences between the sexes had a feeling of inevitability about them. Then feminists mobilized the word "gender." Let *X* = gender in (1)–(3) above. Feminists convinced us (1) that gendered attributes and relations are highly contingent. They also urged (2) that they are terrible, and (3) that women in particular, and human beings in general, would be much better off if present gender attributes and relations were abolished or radically transformed. Very well, but this basic sequence (1)–(3) is too simplistic. There are many differences of theory among feminists who use or allude to the idea of construction.<sup>9</sup>

One core idea of early gender theorists was that biological differences between the sexes do not determine gender, gender attributes, or gender relations. Before feminists began their work, this was far from obvious. Gender was, in the first analyses, thought of as an add-on to physiology, the contingent product of the social world. Gender, in this conception, is "a constitutive social construction: . . . Gender should be understood

as a social category whose definition makes reference to a broad network of social relations, and it is not simply a matter of anatomical differences" (Haslanger 1995, 130).<sup>10</sup>

Many constructionist uses of gender go beyond this add-on approach. Naomi Scheman (1993, ch. 18) inclines to functionalism about gender. That is, she thinks that the category of gender is in use among us to serve ends of which members of a social group may not be aware, ends which benefit some and only some members of the group. The task is to unmask these ends, to unmask the ideology. When Scheman says that gender is socially constructed, she means in part that it motivates visions in which women are held to be essentially, of their very nature, subject to male domination.

Scheman wants to reform the category of gender. Judith Butler is more rebellious. She insists that individuals become gendered by what they do—a favored word is "performance." She rejects the notion that gender is a constructed add-on to sexual identity. Male and female bodies are not givens. My body is, for me, part of my life, and how I live that life is part of the determination of what kind of body I have. "Perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender . . . with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all" (Butler 1990, 7).

We may here be reminded, but only for a moment, of Thomas Laqueur's (1990) observations of how differently the sex organs have been represented in, among other things, Western medical texts of the past millennium. Butler is not discussing such systems of knowledge about the body. They have, of course, limned some possibilities for perception of self, and influenced possibilities for acting, living. But her concern goes far beyond Laqueur's. The systems of knowledge that he presents all assume that sex is physiological, a given prior to human thought. They differ about what is given. Butler questions how we get the idea of that given. Older notions of gender do not help answer such questions. "How, then," she asks, "does gender need to be reformulated to encompass the power relations that produce the effect of a prediscursive sex and so conceal that very operation of discursive production?" Thus she wants at least to revise early feminist notions of gender, and as I read her, wants to mature away from talk of construction and proceed to a more complex analysis that would, perhaps, shed the word "construction" altogether.

Butler cites as an ally an author whose work is revolutionary. Monique



Wittig (1992, 9) repudiates the feminist tradition that affirms the power of being woman. The entire set of sexual and gender categories should be overthrown. According to Wittig, the lesbian is an agent of revolution because she lives out a refusal to be either man or woman.

Scheman, to use a ranking I shall elaborate later, is a *reformist* constructionist who wants to *unmask* some ideology. Butler's published work is what I call *rebellious*, while Wittig's is *revolutionary*. But do not imagine that all feminists are hospitable to social construction talk. I suggested that Butler distances herself from it, preferring concepts of greater precision and subtlety. Jeffner Allen seems to have avoided it from the start. She thinks that too much of such talk gets caught up in banal and narcissistic postmodern fascinations with mere texts. It diverts attention away from the basics, like wage inequalities. Quite in opposition to Wittig, she suggests that it might be a good idea to refashion a specifically feminine sensitivity. She can be caustic about the idea that she, herself, is socially constructed. Which society did you have in mind? she asks (Allen 1989, 7).

## WOMEN REFUGEES

What is said to be constructed, if someone speaks of the social construction of gender? Individuals as gendered, the category of gender, bodies, souls, concepts, coding, subjectivity, the list runs on. I have used gender as an example to get us started. It is far too intense a topic to fit any easy schematism. So let me venture a small clarification using a less controversial item from my alphabetical list of titles—women refugees.

Why would someone use the title *The Social Construction of Women Refugees* (Moussa 1992), when it is obvious that women are refugees in consequence of a sequence of social events? We all think that the world would be a better place if there were no women refugees. We do not mean that the world would be better if women were simply unable to flee intolerable conditions, or were killed while so doing. We mean that a more decent world would be one in which women were not driven out of their homes by force, threats of force, or at any rate did not feel so desperate they felt forced to flee. When  $X = \text{Women refugees}$ , propositions (1), (2), and (3) are painfully obvious. What, then, could possibly be the point of talking about the social construction of women refugees?

To answer, we must, as always, examine the context. The discussion does not spring from an ideal: let no women be forced to flee. The per-