The merits of constructionism are no longer an issue in the sociology of knowledge. The entire field, and especially the sociology of scientific knowledge, is dominated by that approach. Everyone agrees that the knowledge claims of science are human inventions, that they have been created, and their validity established, in contingent social, processes which need to be investigated as empirical phenomena. All the disputes and controversies are between varieties of constructionism. Even the present author is a constructionist of a kind, although the constructionism of the so-called “Edinburgh School” has been moved by interests and objectives very different from those of the currently most favoured varieties.

In so far as our understanding of scientific knowledge is concerned, the move to constructionism is often taken to be a major cognitive reorientation, of fundamental and far-reaching importance both for the sociology of science and sociology as a whole. It is worth questioning how far this is indeed the case. The instrumentalist view in philosophy of science, not to mention pragmatist and idealist positions in the mainstream of academic philosophy, has long defended many of the themes of constructionism. So have the case studies of many historians of science and technology. And in the social sciences themselves key ideas can be traced back to the work of the social theorist Alfred Schutz, and to other seminal figures in the sociology of knowledge, in the symbolic interactionist tradition, and in social anthropology.

It is hard to find anything new in the constructionist approach to justify the attention it now receives. Nor need one deny the quality and range of insight of many of the recent constructionist studies, in order to cast doubt on the view that this is where the answer lies. Quality and insight by no means ensure an audience. What did attract an audience for the constructionist account, and indeed the academic labour which (re)constructed it and applied it in the first place, is that constructionism offered a fundamental challenge to the conclusions of traditional epistemology, the epistemology which had hitherto provided the dominant account of the nature of scientific knowledge, the explanation of its pe-
cular efficacy, and the justification of its authority and institutional hegemony. The precise relationship of philosophy and sociology in this context is however far more complicated than this initial formulation suggests.

*Constructionism and traditional epistemology*

Traditional epistemology was characterised by individualism, realism and rationalism. These characteristics were incorporated into accounts of the evaluation of scientific knowledge which served to engender trust in science and its bearers. Social constructionism has been used as the basis for an uncompromising and comprehensive challenge to these accounts: that which allegedly is individual – observation, discovery, description, – is accounted a collective accomplishment, the outcome of social processes; that which is real – natural kinds, essences, the connections asserted by fundamental laws – becomes artefactual, not real, merely reified; that which is rationally compelling and logically implied – proof, deductive demonstration – becomes only contingently acceptable and the subject of local consensus. In this context constructionism serves as a point by point refutation of the traditional view of scientific knowledge, just as it was designed to be. But there is always a danger, when an existing position is opposed in detail point-by-point in this way, that the alternative perspective which emerges becomes imprinted with the overall pattern which it replaces, that the old acts as a mould for the new, that the very task of opposition to what has gone before profoundly conditions the structure of what follows. It is worth considering whether this has occurred here.

The description of science offered by traditional epistemology and systematically opposed by constructionism emphasises the role of the independent individual as observer of a given external reality, and as provider of reliable observation reports from which scientific knowledge may be built by processes of secure inference and logical reasoning. But traditional epistemology involves more than a mere description of science. It is an elaborate *evaluative* scheme. Individualism, realism and rationalism are the poles, the "positive" poles, of three sets of oppositions. In traditional epistemology, the individual is valued over the social or collective, the real is valued over the conventional or artefactual, the rational is valued over the contingent. And whilst there is no doubt that constructionism opposes the traditional view, in that it describes science as collective, conventional and contingent, it is far from clear that it rejects the pattern of oppositions characteristic of the older position or indeed the