Phenomenology and Social Constructionism: Constructs for Political Identity

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Abstract
This essay explores the roots of social constructionism in the work of Alfred Schutz, the teacher of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann and, beyond Schutz, Edmund Husserl. It is described how pregiven things are logically formed and then ideal types or constructs with content are also constituted about them. Schutz begins in the egological perspective but goes beyond that to the intersubjective perspective to show how the world of everyday life has constructs received from predecessors as well as contemporaries and shared by in-groups. Common-sense constructs are constituted like cultural-scientific ones. Motivation in everyday life and the role of the ordinary vernacular in their transmission is shown. An analysis then focuses on how constructs have recently been received and/or reinforced by political election polling in the latest USA presidential election. These constructs involve results in percentages that can be understood qualitatively for Democrats and Republicans divided into gender groups, generations, races, regions, and by education, income or social class, religion. This account can be considered reflective, descriptive, and culture-appreciative and thus phenomenological. Similar constructing no doubt occurs in other industrialized countries and affects so-called common sense. Deeper understanding than this analysis reaches is called for at the end of this essay.

Keywords
phenomenology, constructionism, Husserl, Schutz, political identity

The social world is not essentially structureless. It has a particular meaning and relevance structure for the human beings living, thinking, and acting therein. They have preselected and preinterpreted this world by a series of common-sense constructs of the reality of daily life, and it is these thought-objects which determine their behavior, define the goal of their action, the
means available for attaining them—in brief, which help them find their bearings within the natural and socio-cultural environment and to come to terms with it. (Schutz, 1962, p. 6)

In previous essays I have explored some sociocultural dimensions of the USA, namely: ethnicity, generation, gender, nationality, and status. In those cases I analyzed what I call basic culture, which is to say how individual and collective selves, others, institutions, situations, and things have belief characteristics, values, and uses constituted subconceptually in habits and traditions of believing, valuing, and willing that are acquired from others as well as in personal efforts. To do that, I abstracted from the conceptual constructs that are additionally constituted in everyday thinking. In the present research, however, I will reverse that emphasis and focus on the origin and nature of a sort of current common-sense constructs.

The first part of this essay will draw on Edmund Husserl as well as Alfred Schutz in order to sketch a textual foundation that is plausible for so-called “social constructionism.” The second part of this essay will describe how political identity can currently be constructed and interpreted in the USA by use of results of an opinion poll conducted after the recent national election. This type of polling is now ubiquitous and a major source of common-sense constructs about segments of the electorate and their political tendencies structuring presentations in television, radio, and the blogosphere. Colleagues in other industrialized countries probably encounter a similar situation.

**Common-sense Constructing and Groups**

Social Constructionism has its immediate origin in *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967) by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, but their approach is derived from the work of Alfred Schutz (1899–1959) and, behind him, Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). Prior to taking this approach to a concrete case, it can be introduced through a brief study of their thought.

In Cairns’s English translation, Husserl writes in §38 of his *Cartesianische Meditationen* as follows.

In active genesis the Ego functions as productively constitutive, by means of [mental] processes that are specifically acts of the Ego. Here belong all