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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

"Truth," "lies," and beyond: epistemological prerequisites for a constructive political discourse

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Abstract Building on methodical constructivism, the paper examines the differences between trans-subjectively founded (objective) reality, merely intersubjectively agreed (social) reality, and subjective reality in the narrow sense, and refutes the social constructivist view according to which every representation of reality only offers a distorted image of reality, so that all representations of reality stand side by side on an equal footing. Admitting that socially constructed reality is necessarily selective and therefore an interpreted (meaningful) reality, the paper argues that truth vs. falsehood is not the only criterion by which a construction of reality can be measured. Although the discourse about meanings cannot be a discourse about whether they are true or false, constructions of reality can nonetheless be questioned for their appropriateness for constructive problem solving. Political discourse, however, is all too often not about problem solving, but about gaining power, maintaining power, and using power in order to enforce one's own positions. Appropriateness then gets replaced by mere expediency, and populist politicians drive this to a perfection in which their careless handling of truth is only the tip of the iceberg. At the base of the iceberg, there is the refusal of coexistence and the destruction of reasonable common ground, and the primary question that arises for social research is that of social pathologies that help populists' (subjective) reality to become shared by (at least) parts of society.

Keywords Social constructivism · Methodological constructivism · Appropriateness for constructive problem solving · Reasonable common ground · Coexistence

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„Wahrheit“, „Lügen“ und Mehr: erkenntnistheoretische Voraussetzungen für einen konstruktiven politischen Diskurs

Zusammenfassung Aufbauend auf dem methodischen Konstruktivismus untersucht der Beitrag die Unterschiede zwischen transsubjektiv begründeter (objektiver) Wirklichkeit, lediglich intersubjektiv vereinbarter (sozialer) Wirklichkeit und subjektiver Wirklichkeit im engeren Sinne und widerlegt die sozialkonstruktivistische Auffassung, nach der jede Wirklichkeitsdarstellung nur ein Zerrbild der Wirklichkeit bietet, sodass alle Wirklichkeitsdarstellungen gleichberechtigt nebeneinander stehen. Indem er einräumt, dass die sozial konstruierte Wirklichkeit notwendigerweise selektiv und daher eine interpretierte (bedeutungsvolle) Wirklichkeit ist, argumentiert er, dass Wahrheit vs. Unwahrheit nicht das einzige Kriterium ist, an dem eine Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit gemessen werden kann. Obwohl der Diskurs über Bedeutungen kein Diskurs darüber sein kann, ob sie wahr oder falsch sind, können Wirklichkeitskonstruktionen dennoch auf ihre Angemessenheit für konstruktive Problemlösungen hin befragt werden. Im politischen Diskurs geht es jedoch allzu oft nicht um Problemlösungen, sondern um Machtgewinn, Machterhalt und Machtausübung zur Durchsetzung eigener Positionen. An die Stelle von Angemessenheit tritt dann bloße Zweckmäßigkeit, und populistische Politiker treiben dies zu einer Perfektion, bei der ihr sorgloser Umgang mit der Wahrheit nur die Spitze eines Eisbergs ist. An der Basis des Eisbergs steht die Verweigerung des Zusammenlebens und die Zerstörung vernünftiger Gemeinsamkeiten, und für die Sozialforschung stellt sich vor allem die Frage nach den sozialen Pathologien, die dazu beitragen, dass die (subjektive) Realität der Populisten von (zumindest) Teilen der Gesellschaft geteilt wird.

Schlüsselwörter Sozialer Konstruktivismus · Methodologischer Konstruktivismus · Angemessenheit für konstruktive Problemlösungen · Vernünftige Gemeinsamkeit · Koexistenz

1 Introduction

The idea that reality is relative is not exactly new. As early as 1958, Harold Pinter, who later won the Nobel Prize for Literature, wrote:

> “There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false” (Pinter 2005, p. 1).

Understanding reality as a construction, however, opens up new perspectives that go beyond mere relativism and which also allow a workable answer to the dilemma in which Pinter finds himself trapped almost 50 years later when he confesses in his Nobel Prize speech:

> “I believe that these assertions still make sense and do still apply to the exploration of reality through art. So as a writer I stand by them but as a citizen I cannot. As a citizen I must ask: What is true? What is false?” (ibid.)

Today, as populist politicians, parties, and movements shout out loud "lying press" while simultaneously selling gross lies as "alternative facts," this question is more pressing than ever. The knowledge of reality is not an end in itself, but has a plausible practical goal. It serves to orient people in their environment and to ensure the success of their actions. Therefore, there is a practical interest in distinguishing between what is real and what is unreal. And for the same reason there is also a practical interest in distinguishing between what is true and what is untrue.

In this context, Kambartel (1968) pointed out that the distinction between true and false statements serves to keep the social institution of assertion functional. Only if we can rely on the truth of what has been asserted are we in a position to take into account the possibilities and limits of action that others have assured themselves for our own actions. Since we make use of this at any time, relying on the claims of others is an indispensable element of our own (social) life practice.

Under the influence of the social constructivism established by Berger and Luckmann (1969), however, even media scholars today hold the view that all facts are always selected from a universal context—and therefore always already interpreted (Schütz 1971). Authors such as Schudson (2003) or Hanitzsch (2004) finally sharpened this argument to the point that every representation of reality is necessarily selective and therefore only offers a distorted image of reality, so that no representation of reality stands out to the others.

This view needs to be straightened out.

No research is exempt from the question of how it can be understood and justified as human action. It therefore requires a consistent foundation through logic and epistemology, and constructivism also must consequently allow itself to be asked whether it can apply its basic epistemological position to its own actions.

If, however, any construction of reality is on an equal footing with all others (see above), then social constructivism as any construction stands among many and thus negates its own claim to validity.

2 Truth and reality

In order to be able to compare a reality of whatever kind with its representations (the images of reality), it must be clarified beforehand what is meant by the concept of reality and how to distinguish between this reality on the one hand and its representations on the other.

Radical and social constructivism, however, owe precisely such a clarification. Von Glasersfeld (1992, p. 30, emphasis in the original) asserts:

"Radical constructivism *by no means* denies an external reality,"

and Gergen (2002, p. 276) also admits that he does not want to deny this. However, what this external reality should consist of or what is to be understood by it is not explained. The authors only agree that it is fundamentally inaccessible to human knowledge.

In order to resolve these inconsistencies, it is necessary to 1) clarify the relationship between truth and reality, 2) differentiate between different forms of reality, 3) distinguish between facts and meanings, and 4) recognize that truth vs. falsehood is not the only criterion by which the viability of an assertion can be measured.

The path that leads there was mapped out by Wilhelm Kamlah and Paul Lorenzen, whose book *Logische Propädeutik*, published in 1967, formed the nucleus of methodical constructivism.

Similar to Gergen, Kamlah and Lorenzen (1967) also assume that the knowledge of reality is a linguistically written practice, i.e., a linguistically conveyed form of active engagement of humans with the reality surrounding them (Demmerling 1995). As such, it can both be criticized and justified, and it requires justification. Hence, the distinction between true and false statements is reconstructed in methodical constructivism as a distinction between statements that we want to use for our actions and those that we expressly do not want to use.

The meta-predication of a statement as "true" accordingly means nothing other than the express promise to meet the defense obligations associated with the assertion of the statement (Kambartel 1968). Whether a statement is true or false depends not only on the statement itself, but also on something else, namely on whether every other knowledgeable and unbiased member of the linguistic community would also come to the same result after appropriate verification (Kamlah and Lorenzen 1967).

Exactly this is what we promise when we call a statement true. And by doing this, we also assert that the facts presented in the statement are real: statements represent facts, true statements represent real facts.

By defining reality in this way as a quality that belongs to those facts that are represented in true statements, there is both the consequence that reality is a construction and that the experience of reality is guided by those typifications which language provides (Schütz 1970). It is therefore no coincidence that methodical constructivism began with the systematic and step-by-step establishment of a scientific terminology.

With the introduction of the terms truth and reality outlined above, it becomes obvious that our speaking about "reality" (about what is actually the case) is dependent on our ability to ascertain the truth of statements in advance. "It is not reality that decides the truth (of, e.g., physical theories or natural history descriptions), but rather their truth decides what is real" (Janich et al. 1974, p. 83).

Able of being true are only those statements for which it is established how to argue for or against their validity. With increasing progress in knowledge, these provisions are refined and differentiated. What is true today may turn out to be false tomorrow. Reality is therefore also in a constant state of flux. Sometimes they are downright revolutionized. Then it may seem as if our previous knowledge has failed due to an external reality. In fact, however, this "external reality" is nothing that exists outside of what can be represented in true statements. It is the utopia of a reality as it would be represented if the process of knowledge could come to its end.

3 Forms of reality

That the linguistic distinctions we make bring certain aspects of our subject to the fore is inevitable and also wanted. If language does not make any distinctions, it cannot fulfill its function of orientation either. Regarding the question of how these distinctions should be made, we are given more leeway for method-critical arguments in science, which we gradually and reasonably acquire, than in the everyday world into which we are socialized (Berger and Luckmann 1969). The defense obligations that we enter into with the assertion of a statement are often not so precisely defined in everyday life, and hence it makes sense to differentiate between different forms of reality:

1. A reality that transcends subjectivity by being presented in statements whose truth can be verified on the basis of explicitly agreed and methodically based rules (= trans-subjectively). This we can also call *objective reality.*
2. A reality that is represented in statements for which such rules do not exist, but whose truth is social practice in the sense that belief in them is intersubjectively shared. This we can refer to as *social reality*.
3. A *subjective reality* in the narrower sense of the word, for which not even this is the case, but the knowing subject is nevertheless convinced of the truth of the statements that represent it.

The trans-subjectively founded (objective) reality and merely intersubjectively shared (social) reality as well as purely subjective reality have a completely different methodological status.

While objective reality only includes those facts (= *real* facts) that are presented in true statements, social and subjective reality also contain:

- merely *possible* facts, whose truth or falsity is (still) undecided;
- *fictitious* facts that are presented in false statements;
- and such facts that are merely *simulated* in the sense that they are presented in statements for which it is not even clear how to argue for or against their validity.

It is therefore obvious that these different forms of reality do not stand side by side on an equal footing—and therefore not every arbitrary construction of reality can make the same claim to validity.

4 Facts and meanings

A characteristic of social and subjective reality is that they are constituted in the medium of everyday language, which lacks a systematic and methodical structure. Hence, we can only demand a clear terminology for speaking *about* social and subjective reality and its genesis. With regard to the words with which we represent this reality—from the inner perspective of the person concerned—a standardization of language is not possible, however. Symbolic worlds of meaning—including language—are "social products that have a history. If one wants to understand their

meaningfulness, one has to follow the history of their creation, which is all the more important since these productions of human consciousness present themselves as fully developed, irrefutable wholes" (Berger and Luckmann 1969, p. 104).

The subjective world of a person is usually an amalgam of objective, social, and subjective realities, and in order to grasp it from the person's inner perspective, we have no choice but to reconstruct the distinctions and assignments made by the person themself.

But not only that. Human action is based not only on facts (or what we think they are), but on their meaning (Blumer 1973). Whether something is a real fact can be checked using generally acceptable rules (= trans-subjectively). For the constitution of meanings, however, there are no such rules.

The meaning of an issue results from its context and from the perspective from which we look at it. The assignment of meanings is an interpretive process based on current interests, biographical experiences, social and cultural rules, etc.

Because different people, groups, and societies have different interests and experiences, and because different groups, societies, and cultures interpret the same facts based on different rules, the world of meanings lacks a trans-subjective basis and it is therefore not possible to evaluate meanings *per se* as true or false. The predicators true and false are simply not applicable to statements about *the* meaning of a fact. Or in other words:

- they cannot be defended against every impartial and knowledgeable opponent,
- but only against those who share the same social and cultural rules, view things from the same perspective, and look back on similar experiences.

But if statements about *the* meaning of an issue are neither true nor false, don't we have to agree with Hanitzsch (2004) that—at least as far as meanings are concerned—any arbitrary construction of reality can make the same claim to validity? Or do we even have to turn away from the social and cultural sciences and limit ourselves to the hard natural sciences, where things are much simpler?

Here, too, it makes sense to show some methodological rigor, and not throw the child out with the bathwater. When people act towards things in their environment based on the meaning they have for them (Blumer), then there is a practical interest in the social and cultural sciences. And although statements about *the* meaning of a fact per se are neither true nor false, this does not apply equally to the theories of social and cultural sciences.

Although meanings are relative, there are still statements *about* meanings that are amenable to verification or falsification.

- These, however, are not statements about *the* meaning of a fact *per se*,
- but statements that describe the meaning that an issue has for a given person, group, society, or culture;
- statements that describe the perspectives and experiences and/or the social and cultural rule systems on the basis of which this meaning is constituted;
- as well as statements that describe how these constructions of reality interact with one another and how they determine action.

So what can be true or false—and thus accessible to scientific treatment—is the *description* of social and/or subjective worlds of meaning, the *explanation* of how they are constituted, and the *analysis* of their interactions and consequences.

5 Appropriateness of assertions

But if statements about *the* meaning of an issue are neither true nor false, don't we have to agree with social constructivism that—at least as far as meanings are concerned—any arbitrary construction of reality can make the same claim to validity?

Are the possibilities of a constructive political discourse limited to

- recognizing established facts,
- taking the contingency of possible facts into account,
- refuting demonstrably false statements,

and leaving everything else to the discretion?

Given such premises, is critical social research still possible? Is it possible that social research does not only explain how the subjective world of man is *de facto* constituted? Can it go beyond that, and offer an orientation aid for human action?

The answer, which I have already given elsewhere, is *no*. Even if the discourse about meanings cannot be a discourse about whether they are true or false, assignments of meanings can nonetheless be judged with regard to their *appropriateness*.

More precisely: with regard to their appropriateness for constructive problem resolution.

Appropriateness is not a property of assignments of meaning *per se*.

- Appropriateness is a two-digit predicator that puts the assigned meanings in relation to something else that lies outside the meanings themselves: with the orientation function that the assignments of meanings have for human action.
- And whether a construction of reality proves to be appropriate depends on what we orient our actions towards (Kempf 2009).

Most often, however, political problems are not only *technical* problems. Even if it is initially "only" a matter of finding suitable means to achieve specified goals and to satisfy the interests behind them, it often turns out that the proposed solutions conflict with other interests.

For example, phasing out of coal technology may be a suitable means of containing global warming. However, it harms the economic interests of the coal industry and the people who work in it.

The containment of global warming is thus becoming a *practical* problem. It is no longer just a matter of finding means, but a matter of setting goals.

Social life is inconceivable without conflicts, and there is an urgent need to also approach practical problems in a reasonable way and reconcile the legitimate interests of those involved.

In principle, conflicts are open to being dealt with constructively. Whether this can succeed depends essentially on *how* those involved construct their (social) reality and how they bring it into the political discourse.

- Being able to rely on asserted facts,
- disclosing untruth,
- rating the contingency of possibilities, as well as
- keeping mere beliefs (simulated facts) out of the discourse

is a necessary but not sufficient requirement for this.

- It is counterproductive if political decision makers agree on an issue when it really means quite different things for them. Avoiding such *misunderstandings* is what Lorenzen and Schwemmer (1975) call the first level of reasonable commonality.
- Furthermore, it is not acceptable if they ask something of their counterpart that they are not prepared to adhere to themselves. Refraining from such *double standards* is what Lorenzen and Schwemmer call the second level of reasonable commonality.
- Finally, it is not acceptable if they leave the public in the dark about how the terms they have agreed upon are actually to be understood. To refrain from such *attempts at deception* is what Lorenzen and Schwemmer call the third level of reasonable commonality.

Lorenzen and Schwemmers's proposal to achieve reasonable common ground through the standardization of language, however, turns out to be a chimera.[1] Of course, it is desirable to fix political decisions as unambiguously as possible (also in writing) and to avoid "productive indeterminacy" in the sense of Henry Kissinger. The latter may facilitate quickly reaching agreement, but if negotiating partners leave each other uncertain about how to understand their reasoning and suggested solutions, it will sooner or later become the motor for renewed conflict escalation. At the latest when conflicting parties' expectations are disappointed and they accuse each other of breaching their agreement.

But even if they are formulated in a clearly defined terminology, this does not guarantee that the proposed solutions and the arguments in favor of them actually mean the same thing for everyone involved. What they mean for the other can only be determined through empathy and taking perspective and requires hermeneutic efforts.

6 Coexistence and freedom of opinion

The fact that social reality is always an interpreted reality forms the core of the fundamental right to freedom of opinion.

[1] Depending on the context in which they are learned, already the descriptive predicators, whose use is practiced on the basis of examples and counterexamples and safeguarded by means of predicator rules (Kamlah and Lorenzen 1967), gain a subjective horizon of meaning that goes beyond their trans-subjectively agreed core meaning and may vary from case to case. In addition, so-called life orientations (Kambartel 1981) always play a role in political discourse: values such as freedom, justice, democracy, etc., which are described by reflection terms that cannot be defined by production rules, but rather have an open field of meaning (Kempf 2006).

Freedom of opinion does not exclude disagreement, but is a prerequisite for the common struggle for an appropriate construction of reality. A constructive political discourse is only possible if all those involved are willing to critically examine not only the positions of the other side but also their own positions.

This requires a social climate of coexistence, which Bar-Tal (2004) characterizes by five principles:

1. the will of all involved to accept a constructive conflict resolution and to strive for positive relations;
2. recognizing the political opponent and his right to bring his positions and interests into the conflict resolution process;
3. considering others as people with legitimate and different needs, justified claims, wishes, and hopes;
4. recognizing the others as equal partners and supporting the principle of equal treatment and equal rights; as well as
5. reducing negative emotions, such as anxiety and hatred, and the developing positive emotions like hope and trust.

Political discourse, however, it is all too often not about problem solving, but about gaining power, maintaining power, and using power in order to assert one's own positions. Instead of appropriateness for a constructive problem resolution, there is then the mere *expediency* to satisfy one's own interests. Truth is then only raw material. If one has to lie, it is only a technical question, not a moral one.

Populist politicians drive this to a perfection in which their careless handling of truth is only the tip of the iceberg. At the base of it is the refusal of coexistence and the destruction of reasonable common ground.

Sometimes the subjective reality of the protagonists takes on delusional features. This suggests psychiatric diagnoses of the type of personality disorder underlying these delusions. But that is not enough. The urgent question seems to me to be how distorted (subjective) constructions of reality transform into a social reality shared by (at least) parts of society. In other words: which *social pathologies* make people susceptible to believing them and holding onto them.

But this is no longer the subject of this work, which only wanted to show this: if we let ourselves be misled by the epistemological naivety of social constructivism and confuse freedom of opinion with arbitrariness, we will not find any viable answers.

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