

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Construction of Social Reality*. by John R. Searle

Review by: Hubert Knoblauch

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conflicts of postindustrial society than Bell's book? Is this better intellectual history than Kishan Kumar's *Prophecy and Progress* (Penguin Books, 1978)? Does he explore in greater depth a potential promise of this transformation in a similar way to, say, Fred Block's *Post-industrial Possibilities* (University of California Press, 1990)? I do not think so.

The Construction of Social Reality. By John R. Searle. New York: Free Press, 1995. Pp. xiii + 241, \$25.00.

Hubert Knoblauch
University of Constance

The Berkeley philosopher John R. Searle became famous for his systematization of speech-act theory and its intentionalistic elaboration, in which he developed a version of "mentalism" that makes strong claims on the reality of intentional states. In his new book he tries to extend his approach to social facts. To the sociologist's ear the title of his book echoes *The Social Construction of Reality* (Doubleday, 1966) by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. Searle's approach does indeed share several elements with this phenomenologically founded classic of sociology: Searle's starting points, "consciousness" and "intentionality," also make up the basic notions of phenomenology; moreover he takes a naive attitude that reminds me of Schutz's "natural attitude"; he also emphasizes language, refers to the biological and anthropological basis of social constructions, and, finally, he asks "how is socially constructed reality possible?" (p. 2). Searle's answers, however, follow a quite different path than that which a sociologist would expect, and this path is rather disappointing to the sociologist who discovers that Searle hardly ever takes any social scientific discourse into consideration.

As his vantage point Searle takes the position that "philosophical investigations should begin naively" (p. 31), and this attitude is expressed at least partly in his style. Whereas some parts offer formal analyses of propositions, and even others offer striking philosophical arguments, in the sociologically more relevant parts of the book examples on (American) football or baseball are abundant, and the investigations of such utterances as "Clinton is president" exemplify what the book is mainly about: Searle analyzes the view of an already constructed society rather than the process of its construction.

Although stretches of the book resemble his earlier statements on language, the very selection of the topic of social reality leads him to extend his theory. Social facts (i.e., in his view, always institutional facts) are not only different from "brute facts"; they constitute an almost Durkheimian *réalité sui generis* by virtue of the "assignment of function." Assignment of function means that a brute fact, such as a piece of paper, counts as something else (e.g., money). This assignment of function relies on the

ability of actors to symbolize, and it becomes social through "agreement." The creation of social facts starts (as is to be expected) with performative acts; they are institutionalized through "iteration" of assignments, which evolve into interlocking systems before they can be, finally, codified. The agreement that is at the core of assignments does not depend on conventions but follows rules, especially constitutive rules that depend on background abilities. The (unconscious) background, which has been an important topic for Searle before, is now compared to Bourdieu's "habitus." Thereby Searle introduces a social, normative component into his theory. But how, should we ask, does this social component get into intentionality? To Searle, social reality depends wholly on the concept of collective intentionality, and this consists in the substitution of "I intend" by "we intend." How this substitution comes about, resembles a *deus ex machina*: Collective intentionality is considered a "biologically primitive phenomenon" (p. 24). Moreover the question of how agreement works is left to speculation. Unfortunately, Searle never turns to the question how the peculiar cultural phenomenon of American football has been "constructed." Furthermore, Searle leaves out the whole discussion on intersubjectivity not only by earlier social intentionalistic social philosophers (such as A. Schutz) but also the arguments of his critics (such as Habermas, Gilbert, and not to forget—with respect to Austin—Bourdieu). Even the question of what role language plays in the symbolic construction of reality remains ambivalent.

Only one part of Searle's book really tackles the problem of social reality. The second part turns to two fundamental philosophical issues. Obviously this second part is supposed to back the argument that there is a reality prior to social constructions. Therefore one could regard this part of the book as a defense of the naive realism of common sense. He tries to argue (mainly *ex negativo*) for a refined version of "external realism" suggesting that "there is a way that things are that is independent of all representations of how things are" (p. 182); and he opts for the seemingly old-fashioned correspondence theory of truth by opposing strongly relativistic approaches such as the one he labels "social constructivism."

Despite the clarity of the arguments developed, especially in this second part, one problem of Searle's book is salient: For the sake of clarity he oversimplifies theoretical approaches in such a way as to blur their differences. In particular he neglects the difference between the different kinds of constructivism. Thus social constructivism, in his view (and without reference), considers the "real world" as simply an arbitrary construction. From this perspective, of course, the conclusion that "the traditional opposition that we tend to make between biology and culture" is misleading, appears to him as a new insight. However, if one looks back at the *Social Construction of Reality*, which not only took the structure of consciousness as a central topic, but also showed how reality is constructed socially within the (biological) limits of the *conditio humana* (by referring to the tradition of philosophical anthropology), the

newness of this insight seems to be lost. The social scientist may learn, at least, how big the hiatus between philosophy and the social sciences has become.

Rhetoric and Marxism. By James Arnt Aune. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1994. Pp. xi + 187. \$59.95 (cloth); \$18.95 (paper).

John Eldridge
University of Glasgow

As befits a book in the Westview Press Polemics series, Aune's *Rhetoric and Marxism* serves as a challenge and provocation to those who see the events of 1989 as signifying the end of Marxism and socialism as world historical forces. Rhetoric is a term with varying connotations, as Aune well knows. It can be a term of abuse, where we speak suspiciously of "mere rhetoric"; a conceptual system, as in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*; a particular approach to discourse production, "the rhetorical tradition"; and a way of describing the techniques of persuasive speech that are deployed in the course of argumentation—Churchill's rhetoric, Kennedy's rhetoric, and so on. This touches on crucial questions about the nature of human communication, especially as we recall that the traditional functions of rhetoric are to delight, to teach, and to move. The recurring questions in communication are: who is speaking to whom, for what purposes, in whose interests, and with what effect? Who are the publics that are being addressed? What difference does it make? Is anybody listening?

Aune, of course, has his own rhetorical strategy. He wants to persuade us that there is value in developing a red rhetoric. This might seem to be something of a scandal, partly because Marx, as a modernist, a child of the enlightenment, was highly suspicious of rhetoric, and partly because this goes against the contemporary tide of postmodern thinking. In general terms, Aune takes a twin-track approach. He offers a critique of Marxism from a rhetorical standpoint and a criticism of rhetoric from a Marxist perspective. He wants, after all, to make a case for Marxism, both as an analytical method (in the spirit of Gouldner's "culture of critical discourse") and as a guide to social change. This involves him engaging with what he terms a rhetoric of reaction, where, following O. Hirschman, he identifies three main strands. There is the perversity thesis—attempts to push society in one direction will end with it moving in the opposite direction; the futility thesis—nothing really changes; and the jeopardy thesis—a forward move will have negative effects on previous achievements, including civil liberties. But these are rhetorical strategies rather than sociological universals, which, we may recognise, can be deployed against right-wing revolutionary movements as well as those on the left. Aune's purpose, however, is to persuade us that "it is the function of a critical theory of rhetoric to help formulate strategies to