Dave ELDER-VASS, *The Reality of Social Construction*
(Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012)

SOMETIME IN THE MID-1990s, a senior colleague on the
graduate admissions committee in my department lamented that
almost all of the applicants that year were proposing to study the
"social construction of race, class and gender." Having read a lot of
Foucault myself, I was not altogether unsympathetic to the enterprise.
Still, I was already enough of a realist to be uncomfortable with the
extreme forms of constructionist rhetoric then in circulation, which
made of the world a mere projection of our language. It was enough to
make you pound on a table. And some realists did. But this didn't
really resolve things. The solidity of a table may not be a social
construction. But what about its "table-ness?" Is that also "real?"
Wasn't there some sort of via media, I wondered, between social
realism and social constructionism?

The goal of Dave Elder-Vass' new book is to mark out one such
path, a path that gives both realism and constructionism their proper
dues. His starting point is the Critical Realism (CR) of Roy Bhaskar
and Margaret Archer. For those not familiar with CR, a few quick
caveats: CR is not commonsense realism; it does not equate the real
with the visible in empiricist fashion. Nor, it should be added, is it a
reductive realism that equates the real with the physical (atoms,
quarks or whatever). For Critical Realists, the real does include "non-
observables", entities that cannot be directly observed with the
unaided senses. But it also includes emergents—wholes whose powers
and properties cannot be predicted or derived from those of its parts.
The principle of ontological emergence implies the principle of
ontological stratification—very roughly, the view that the social is
built up out of the biological, which is built out of the physical, in a
whole series of nested hierarchies. Ontological stratification therefore
entails the relative autonomy of the scientific disciplines. Sociology
can never be collapsed into biology, which can never be collapsed into
physics, which is not to say that the one cannot be informed or enriched
by the other. And this leads in turn to methodological pluralism.

461

Philip GORSKI, Department of Sociology, Yale University [philip.gorski@yale.edu]

Because each discipline has its own distinctive objects, each discipline must also develop its own distinctive methods, ones that are appropriate to those objects. The monist dogma that there is some sort of methodological "gold standard" (*e.g.*, the random assignment field experiment) that applies equally to all disciplines, capable of definitively resolving all questions, however fashionable it may be in some circles at the moment, is, politely put, a complete canard.

Now, what sort of constructionism is compatible with this sort of realism? Certainly not the sort of radical constructionism about the physical world that arose on the left flank of the science wars during the 1990s. Let us not forget how radical it sometimes was. As a reminder, Elder-Vass offers up this passage by Kenneth Gergen:

> [W]e must suppose that everything we have learned about our world and ourselves—that gravity holds us to the earth, people cannot fly like birds […]—could be otherwise […] we could use our language to construct alternative worlds in which there is no gravity […] or in which persons and birds are equivalent" (1999: 47).

To which I can only say, have at it! Jump off a building, flap your arms and see what happens. Nonsense like this only flies from the safety of a seminar table. Where the physical world is concerned, Elder-Vass argues, we have a pretty good warrant for accepting the existence of natural kinds: "classes of things that share objective properties independently of how we categorize them." Think of elementary particles or the periodic table. Of course, our representations and classifications of natural kinds are fallible and corrigible, as are our theories about their powers and properties. And all of this must be expressed in language of some sort (natural, mathematical or whatever). And language can be (and often is) inflected by power. But this does not turn our scientific theories into "arbitrary constructions."

Are there also natural kinds in the biological realm? Yes, says Elder-Vass, but not in quite the same sense. In the physical domain, he argues, "A natural kind […] is a type of entity, all cases of which have a similar micro-structure that gives them a specific property, power, or set of such properties and powers." In the biological domain, things are not so simple. Consider a plant species, he says, such as a Douglas Fir. While there will be a family resemblance amongst individual trees, their micro-structures and their properties and powers will not be identical; however, they will generally fall within a certain range. What is more, there will always be outliers, individual trees that fall outside of this range, due to genetic mutations, environmental shocks, or unfavorable conditions. The latter two situations can be dealt with

462

by defining a biological kind in terms of its developmental potential rather than its actual development. Genetic mutations or abnormalities are not so easily dealt with, however, and become particularly fraught where human beings are concerned.

Elder-Vass takes on this issue in a clear-minded discussion of Judith Butler's radically constructionist approach to sexual difference. Butler argues that binary distinctions between the human sexes are socially—more precisely: performatively—constructed. In her view, sexual difference is actually a continuous variable—an androgynous spectrum if you will. The theory has some intuitive appeal: some women do strike us as more "manly" than others, and some men may look or act more "feminine" than others. But that is gender, not sex. Isn't there a binary difference between the sexual organs of men and women? And doesn't this give them different causal powers—different reproductive capacities? Not so fast, Butler interjects. What about intersexuals (*i.e.*, hermaphrodites)? Aren't they 10 % of the population? No, says Elder-Vass, they're not. On the best available evidence, intersexual individuals make up around 0.3 % of live births. We may wish to assign them to a third category. But this does not in itself "destabilize" sexual difference. In short, says Elder-Vass, we can be constructionists about gender and realists about sex.

We come at last to the properly social realm. Are there social kinds that are analogous to natural kinds of a physical or biological sort? No, says Elder-Vass, there are not. But there are "social entities" or, if you prefer, "social structures." Elder-Vass defines social entities as "entities whose parts include multiple human beings." To which, he quickly adds that social entities need not be composed *exclusively* of human beings. For example, they often include material artifacts as well. What makes these parts into a whole though? Not material bonds of course (physical, chemical), says Elder-Vass, but "intentional" ones. Here, the word "intentional" should not be understood in common sense terms (*i.e.*, "plans," "goals" etc.) but rather in the technical philosophical sense (*i.e.*, "beliefs," "dispositions"). What makes social entities possible, he continues, invoking John Searle, is the human capacity, shared with some other social animals, of "collective intentionality." By this Searle means not simply that some set of individuals "engage in cooperative behavior, but that they share intentional states such as beliefs, desires and intentions […] Obvious examples are cases where *I* am doing something only as part of *our* doing something" (1995: 23), as with a sports team or a musical group.

463

But doesn't the idea of collective intention open the door to social construction? Aren't human "beliefs, desires and intentions" frequently formulated, articulated and stored in human language. And isn't human language shot through with power relations? Absolutely. While social constructionists often overstate their case with respect to the physical and biological realms, social entities are indeed socially constructed. But CR has never denied this. From the beginning, it has acknowledged that social structures are "concept-dependent." States, markets and families do not exist independently of their respective concepts or, in Searle's terms, of some measure of "collective intentionality." Note that concept dependency and collective intentionality do not entail any sort of *moral consensus* as in Durkheim's notion of the *conscience collective*. They do not require that the individuals who make up a social entity have an identical concept of it, or that they act out of non-instrumental motives. It simply requires that their actions are *oriented* to this concept as in Weber's concept of "social action." In short, while we may have good reasons to reject strongly constructionist understandings of the physical and biological kinds, says Elder-Vass, we must admit a "moderate constructionism" for social entities.

But if we concede that social structures are concept dependent then how can they also be "mind-independent"? Mind independence, after all, is the litmus test of scientific realism. The physical and biological realms pass it with flying colors. We can easily imagine a cosmos without life or an earth without humans. Indeed, we have good reason for believing that such a world is not only possible but was, until quite recently, also actual. But a social world wholly independent of human minds is not so easily imagined. There are, however, a number of possible defenses for a more limited form of mind independence. The first is historicist. It is due to Margaret Archer. While the social world is never mind-independent in an absolute sense, it is so in the historical sense of being independent of "these minds, right here, right now." Each and all of us are born into a social world that is not of our own creation and that we experience as "exterior" to us. The second argument is materialist. It is also due to Margaret Archer. Drawing on Karl Popper's "three worlds" theory, she argues that human culture has an objective dimension, at least since the invention of writing. Culture is stored in a "universal archive" of "intelligibilia," of human artifacts that exist independently of human minds.

Elder-Vass does not find either of Archer's arguments fully convincing. He therefore develops a third, interactionist defense of social realism. In our routine interactions with other people, he says,

464

we continually experience a world governed by norms—norms governing speech, gesture, and so on. And if we violate a norm, or are mistaken about its content, then we will soon be corrected by others. Of course, not all people operate according to the same norms. Nor do the same norms hold in all contexts. However, there are actual sets of people who are oriented to shared norms in certain contexts. Elder-Vass refers to such groups as "norm circles." He then uses this idea to critique various forms of social constructionism throughout the book. The result is a proliferation of circles—"linguistic," "cultural," "discursive" and "epistemological," to name the chief species. What they all have in common is the enforcement of norms about how and what we say and evaluate what others say. The critical thrust of Elder-Vass's discussion of norm circles is to challenge the view that human language is a sort of external force that "constructs" our world.

While I find Elder-Vass' criticisms of strong social constructionism to be quite convincing, I do not share his misgivings about Archer's arguments in favor of social realism. On the contrary, I find them quite powerful. The standard arguments against the mind independence of social reality all rely on a rhetorical elision between "individual minds" and "all minds." While there can be no social reality that is independent of "all minds" considered collectively, there is a social reality that is independent of "individual minds" considered singly. The social world can exist independently of any single mind—and does so before our births and after our deaths. Likewise, the social world as conceived in any individual mind can continue to exist independently of that particular mind—and does so in the various material, mental, and cultural traces that we leave behind us. And Archer's historicist and materialist arguments bring this out quite nicely. That we so often fail to see this is, I think, due to the individualist prejudices of our age and the presentist focus of our discipline.

<div align="right">PHILIP GORSKI</div>

<div align="right">465</div>