Coming to Grips with Radical Social Constructivisms

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ABSTRACT: This essay distinguishes two broad groups: psychological constructivists and social constructivists — but focuses upon the second of these, although it is stressed that there is great ‘within group’ variation. More than half of the paper is devoted to general ‘clearing of the ground’, during which the reasons for the growing alienancy in the debates between social constructivists and their opponents are assessed; an important consequence of these debates for education is discussed, and an examination is carried out of the radical social constructivist tendency to make strong and exciting but untestable claims which are then backed away from (a tendency which is documented by a close reading of the early pages in Brass’s classic book). The first portion of the essay focuses upon social constructivist accounts of the causes of belief in science — the more radical of which denigrate the role of warranting reasons, and which give an excited place to quasi-anthropological or sociological studies of scientific communities.

If an unsuspecting researcher was to carry out a computer search for articles across the fields of education, sociology, psychology, and epistemology that used the term ‘constructivism’, the results would be overwhelming. And also quite bemusing — for it would turn out that the term is used almost without rhyme or reason. The situation has become so confusing that to be told that a particular individual is a ‘constructivist’ is to acquire no useful information whatsoever.

In an earlier essay (Phillips 1995) I tried to bring some order to this troubling situation by delineating two very broad constructivist ‘camps’ each of which had substantial ‘within group’ differences; I labelled these (1) ‘psychological constructivists’ (Piaget, von Glasersfeld, and even Vygotsky would be included here, and the empiricist philosopher John Locke would be a borderline figure), and (2) ‘social constructivists’. Members of the first group have, as the focus of their interest, the ‘constructions’ or ‘cognitive and memory structures’ or ‘understandings’ in the mind of the individual learner or knower, and how these are built up. Members of the second group are concerned with the public bodies of knowledge — the disciplines — and how these are constructed over time; they downplay the role played by ‘external reality’ in shaping our beliefs, and instead they stress (to varying degrees) the role played by social processes within knowledge-producing communities. Most of my efforts on that previous occasion went into clarifying certain features of the first group, the psychological constructivists, so here I propose to focus upon the second. But before we can grapple with any of the interesting theses put forward by one or other of the social constructivists (actually I will only have room
CLEARING THE GROUND

1. It is notable that the quite remarkable spread of social constructivism over the past two decades has not taken place quietly – the debates between constructivists and their critics have been pursued with vigor and with growing heat. Exchanges were lively, but relatively polite, in the early 1980’s. For example, there was a notable lengthy debate in the pages of the journal Philosophy of the Social Sciences between the philosopher of science Larry Laudan whose contribution had the provocative title ‘The Pseudo-Science of Science?’, and David Bloor – a central member of the ‘strong programme in the sociology of knowledge’ centered in Edinburgh – whose lively response had the misleadingly meek title ‘The Strengths of the Strong Programme’ (see Laudan 1981; Bloor 1981.) However, the follow-up debates spawned by these papers quickly became, in the words of one commentator, ‘lamentous’. (Fuller 1993, p. 12; many of the relevant papers were collected in Brown 1984.)

By a little more than a decade later the emotional temperature had risen even further. A variety of interesting events occurred in the first half of the nineties, ranging from vituperative exchanges at conferences (Times Higher Education Supplement 1994, p. 44; Keller 1995, p. 14), to publication of fiery books and reviews (Gross and Levin 1994, Cole 1995; Love 1995; Nussbaum 1994; New York Review of Books 1995). Even Thomas S. Kuhn, whom many regard as one of the great ancestral figures of contemporary social constructivism, entered the fray and stated in a public lecture at Harvard that the claims of the Edinburgh School are ‘absurd: an example of deconstruction gone mad’. (Kuhn 1992, p. 9)

The discussion above must not be taken as suggesting that there are no books and essays, on either side of the constructivist divide, where name-calling and epithets are kept to a minimum; but as one reads in this general field it is difficult to avoid reaching the conclusion that strong feelings are bubbling just beneath the surface. And the reason for this is not difficult to discern: There is a lot at stake. For it can be argued that if the most radical of the sociologists of scientific knowledge (not to mention a variety of postmodernists and some feminist epistemologists) are right, then the validity of the traditional philosophic/epistemological enterprise is effectively undermined, and so indeed is the pursuit of science itself. In the most radical scenario, epistemology has all the validity and relevance to the modern world as medieval alchemy; in more moderate scenarios epistemology at least has to be reconceptualized as part of – but not a special or authoritative part of – what Rorty called the ‘conversation of mankind’ (Rorty 1979). The picture is even bleaker for science, which according to many of the social constructivist and postmodernist accounts