Ivaylo Znepolski

STRUCTURING OF THE SOCIAL IN A POST-MODERN WORLD

The problem of constructing the social, of the relationship between the principles of constructivism and naturalism has deep roots, and has accompanied the history of human thought since ancient times. The archetype of the opposition between constructivism and naturalism – as the two pillars that formed the human world – originated from Plato and Aristotle, and their divergent ideas of the constituting principles of human communities and life in the Polis. Over the centuries, the fascination with this opposition has resumed periodically – or cyclically for that matter, to a certain extent. The pace of oblivion and return has been determined by the dynamic in society itself. In periods of relative stability and continuity, social sciences have tended to lose interest towards the problem. But their interest has come back with a vengeance in times of upheavals, of breaking away from established practices, of social insecurity and conflict. The notions of constructivism and naturalism as tools for understanding or prescribing the processes in society come to the fore when social rules fluctuate while clashing with a growing resistance; while issues directly related to human everyday existence and the very human condition are high on the agenda. Such periods are, for example, the era of the Enlightenment, the time of the Industrial Revolution, the emergence of mass society and mass movements, social revolutions, globalization, the European construct, the information society, and the surging issue of the epistemological status of the truth.

This also explains why an international conference entitled *Constructivism and Naturalism* managed to bring together scientists from France and Bulgaria, countries not only located at the opposite ends of Europe, but also having divergent historical trajectories and levels of development.

10   Having said that, social sciences in both countries were facing similar, if not identical, problems: to understand the need to change social norms and practices, and also to determine the direction of change. France, coming to terms with the call for reforms and adaptation in the context of a globalized economy, in view of enhancing its efficiency and competitiveness, but also facing serious social clashes and fierce resistance to the reforms being undertaken. Bulgaria, just out of its totalitarian past and into its democratic future, still torn between two types of normative orders: facing a difficult extraction from its old political mores and resistance from various social groups – more surreptitious than open – to the deepening of the liberal ways of life and of European integration. In both cases, it is important to understand the nature of resistance against the new wave of social constructivism.

The topic of constructing the social world and human resistance against social coercion was for the first time so succinctly recognised and articulated in the thinking of the Enlightenment era philosophers. The complex duality of this mindset enjoyed centrestage: while proclaiming individualism and doing everything possible to affirm the human autonomy and self-worth, the Enlightenment philosophers were also ardently willing to supply the human world with adequate social institutions. No one was preoccupied with this dilemma more than Rousseau: he spent a lifetime thinking about it. In his *Political Fragments* he scrutinised the conflict between the human being and the citizen. In his view, these two states are incompatible, and the clash between them is a source of misery. "What leads to human misery is the contradiction (...) between nature and social institutions, between the man and the citizen (...) Leave the man entirely to the state or leave him alone to himself, but if you divide his heart, you will tear him apart." Therefore, Rousseau wanted to know when the individual is a person and when a citizen and how he could be perceived simultaneously as both ... In *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* and *Emile or On Education* he saw two different ways to mitigate the contradiction. In *Origin and Basis of Inequality*, he argued that man contributes to the course of his destiny, but does not guide it all alone: human action is the result of two forces – nature and freedom. One is not totally free from the calls of nature, but still enjoys a degree of freedom in his actions. On the other hand, in *Emile* he claimed that "good social institutions are those that best know to denature man." The individual and the appropriate institutions (Rousseau refers to the republican form of government) are the two sources of the natural, nonviolent "denaturation" of man, of his detachment not from a natural state, but from

what is nature within the human being itself. In his *The Social Contract*, he already sought to answer what he perceived as the fundamental question of politics – how to reconcile the individual's freedom with state authority based on sovereignty.

After Rousseau, Kant was the one who defined the fundamental contradiction in the human kind as "unsocial sociability", as an eternal struggle between the natural and cultural elements. He admitted being uncertain whether a single uninterested deed ever existed in the world. But, on the other hand, he wondered who could say that every noble act was an expression of interest? The detachment from natural determinism is an act of self-constructivism.

During the times of the late Bulgarian Enlightenment, Stoyan Mihaylovski (an original political thinker, moderate conservative and follower of French political and social thought), in "Metapolitics", an essay unpublished during his lifetime, pursued his ambition to explain to the still philosophically unenlightened Bulgarian audience from the second half of 19 century the harm of alien principles and rules superimposed on the construction of modern Bulgarian statehood. The occasion was the so called "Turnovo Constitution of the Kingdom of Bulgaria" adopted in 1878, right after the country's liberation from Ottoman rule, based on the Belgian constitution, deemed among the most democratic for its time. Here's his comment: "What happens when we try to wear shoes not made for our feet, shoes that are too snug on them? We either mangle our shoes or cripple our feet – or both, we waste our shoes as well as our feet. This is what happened with the Bulgarian constitution. The Bulgarians were given a constitution that did not match their psyche: they were given provisions borrowed from environments that had nothing to do with the nature of the Bulgarian. What followed? On the one hand, the Bulgarians distorted the essence of their West European regulations. On the other hand, West European regulations distorted the spirit of the Bulgarian. If Bulgarians were given institutions harmonizing with their demand, these institutions, incrementally developed, in parallel with the spiritual development of the crowd, would yield the happiest results as provided by the laws of sluggish progress."

This example can be seen as an embodiment of Rousseau's abstract philosophical assumption, but also as a premonition of the question subsequently raised by psychoanalysis: what happens when an externally forced norm is perceived by an individual or a group (a "crowd", as Mihaylovsky puts it) as coercion, and when its open rejection is impossible or unacceptable. Psychoanalysis claims that one can never fully socialize. "natural"

12 forces, such as egotism, self-absorption, various instincts, the death drive, aspiration to dominate, greed, etc. are working on us. When society with its norms, legal or moral, confronts our aspirations and desires, the Freudian mechanism of displacement is set in motion. The displaced desires, all that we have to hide, continues to exist in a reversed form, putting its mark on the individual's psyche and behaviour. The pressure on man's "nature" provokes its resistance, which, in order to circumvent being penalised, resorts to subterfuge: it displaces the conflicts of consciousness into the subconscious. This leads to mental distortions, very similar to feet deformities resulting from snug shoes.

Contemporary anthropology is also very sensitive to the categories shaping the opposition between constructivism and naturalism. Claude Lévi-Strauss paid tribute to Rousseau, defining him as the creator of human sciences, and in particular as a thinker having laid the foundation of what a century later would become the scientific discipline of ethnology. Staying close to him, Lévi-Strauss translated in modern concepts two of Rousseau's main discoveries in his *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. This is how he came to the oppositions "nature-culture" and "universal-partial". "Let us suppose then that everything universal in man relates to the natural order, and is characterized by spontaneity, and that everything subject to a norm is cultural and is both relative and particular."

In his *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, Rousseau writes: "When we want to study people, we must look around; but to study man, we must learn to see far; we must first observe the differences to discover his inherent properties." Levi-Strauss saw more in this thought than the mere relation between universal and partial. For him it actually sketched the foundation of the ethnologist's cognitive situation. By constructing himself as the subject of scientific observation, the researcher is alienated from himself, while at the same time his knowledge of the Self teaches him to know the other's *self*, uniting the two strands of knowledge into a common process. This is a description of the situation of the ethnologist in a distant, alien country, but also a description of the process of exploring human beings and man. That is why in "Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Founder of the Sciences of Man", he will not hesitate to say: "For if it is true that nature has cast out man and that society persistently keeps suppressing him, one can at least turn the poles of this dilemma to one's benefit and seek the society of nature over again to meditate in it on the nature of society." It is a transposition of the constructivism-naturalism opposition and its reformulation from a dialectical perspective.

A few decades later, Tsvetan Todorov also harked back to Rousseau's **13** view of the conflict between human being and citizen to translate it, in his turn, into the categories of moral philosophy, by building an "ethics-politics" opposition. As someone whose youth had passed in a totalitarian state, under the shadow of norms imposed by the Party's communist morality, thoroughly submerging all ethical principles in the interests of a class hegemon, Todorov's position was fuelled by the desire to find a new, universal foundation of morality. A desire, reinforced by his experience of living in the West, and his observations on the policy of exporting democracy to the Third World and the concept of "humanitarian bombs". Binding together two of Rousseau's ideas – that man is born good-natured and that man and citizen clash – Todorov attempted to outline a universal character of ethics. Assuming that man is not a citizen, he concludes: "Man in this sense is judged on the basis of ethical principles; the behaviour of the citizen, in turn, stems from a political perspective." Todorov couples the ethical principle with the nature of man while linking its deviations or distortions with the influence of the political context, with the compulsion of having to be a citizen of a particular country. But Todorov, following Rousseau, is well aware that neither of these two aspects of human life can be eliminated or reduced to the other. We are well-advised, concludes Todorov, to come to terms with this inevitable and sometimes tragic duality. Having said that, he was reluctant to forsake the hope for a beneficial influence in the opposite direction. Pinning his hope on the power of human nature, Todorov postulates the ability of "ethics to raise barriers that politics would not be entitled to pass". This is his conclusion: "Belonging to humankind (i.e. being moral – I.Z.) does not prevent us from belonging to a nation (that is, being citizens – I.Z.); human feelings (i.e. human nature – I.Z.) should be able to contain the grounds (i.e. influence the shaping of the norms – I.Z.) of the State."

The greatest test of the constructivist approach is related to the erosion of the totalitarian regime in the Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe. At the same time, the difficulties these countries experience while transitioning from tyranny to democracy and from a dirigisme to a market economy provide fresh arguments to the supporters of naturalism. The comparison between social construction and social practices in totalitarianism and democracy demonstrates starkly that the conflicting relations between the principles of constructivism and naturalism take different forms in different political systems yet their essence remains relatively constant. Totalitarianism renders this clash both better disguised and more radical.

14   Communism, along with historical materialism, faded away for being oblivious to the actual processes in social life. They also neglected the material reason of every science – the accommodation of empirical data – as their exploration might refute the postulates of historical materialism and hence the regime's foundations. Far back in history, Aristotle defined the four pillars of every science: its *material* cause (matter) is data; its *formal* cause (form) are its concepts (categories); the *acting* cause (agent) are the scientists (researchers); and its *ultimate* cause (end or objective) is the logical consistency of its arguments. From this perspective, historical materialism, i.e. communist constructivism, loses its material grounds for having both ignored the facts of living reality and persecuted the researchers who articulate and study them. This has led to invalidation of its formal grounds as the categories it used were no longer leading to the development of knowledge. Historical materialism's efficient cause was also eroding, as historical materialists had become the high priests of a frozen absolute truth, performing a safeguarding rather than a creative function. There is no free scientific field to verify the tenets imposed from above. Yet that did not entail a complete seize-up of human experience: it simply threaded different pathways, mostly through the thousands of anonymous actors of everyday life. As a result, historical materialism lost its ultimate cause as well. Its sad destiny seems to constitute a theoretical triumph of naturalism.

Communist totalitarianism is a particular kind of constructivism, fundamentally radical, rejecting the entire preceding social system to rise from the ground up, based on the theoretical and philosophical postulates of historical materialism rather than on any previously accumulated experience. We can define it as a political constructivism, a concept equivalent to social engineering. In contrast to democratic constructivism, the communist one is hard, unyielding, at least on the surface, to external pressures and mutations. But in reality every constructivism is essentially political as the regulation of the social norms and their fluctuations are the result of the policies undertaken. They cannot take place on their own. Democratic constructivism in the context of post-totalitarian transition also constitutes a radical project prescribing a demolition of the legacy political system. But even at this stage, its methods of norm enforcement are different. It asserts its principles in a softer way, being more amenable to pressure from the grassroots; it pays more heed to history, to human responses and feelings. instead of fomenting class and political strife, it takes place amid an established democratic consensus. The latter implies an agreement over the nature of the political system.

The difference between the two types of constructivism is not only in   **15**
their principles, but also in the way people react and cope with the norms
they perceive as unacceptable and therefore "bad". The mitigation or even
the withdrawal of certain social rules in democratic regimes takes place
through protest, social movements, and reasoned discussion. This is the path
of constantly reforming the system. Since people were not allowed to openly
challenge the norms of communist constructivism, this was done by dint of
circumvention and silent sabotage. Resistance adopted the forms described
by psychoanalysis – cunning, displacement, deformation of social psychol-
ogy... Processes that lead to a menacing bulge of the collective unconscious.
Paradoxically, totalitarian constructivism and the totalitarian system are
much more vulnerable than democratic constructivism and the democratic
system. Hence, the key issue in the transition period of the former com-
munist countries of Eastern Europe was how to heal the social deformities
in the collective psyche inherited from the former regime. The distrustful
person of communism continues to perceive the democratic environment
as hostile and to reproduce unconscious behaviour. We see that the places
of constructivism and naturalism are not permanently allocated as far as the
direction of their corrective influence on the social world is concerned.

However, the difficulties in clarifying the nature of constructivism,
naturalism, and the various forms of relationship between them arise not
only from the differences of the political systems under which they operate,
but also from the nature of the scientific disciplines where their key con-
cepts are applied. The primary division is between natural sciences and the
humanities, and they are due to the fact that in the former researchers deal
with objects directly represented in material form, while in the latter they
deal with facts constructed by themselves. Another fundamental difference
between constructivism in natural sciences and the one in humanities is that
the former expand their knowledge to a great extent by further advancing
the technology of their research tools, whereas the conceptual descriptions
of the humanities strongly influence the subject of their research. But major
differences in the use of leading concepts are also seen among the humani-
ties themselves. Constructivism in social sciences is not just a tool of ex-
ploration; almost inevitably it is an agenda how to change the social world,
how to reconstruct it, i.e. it easily morphs into a recommended action plan.
There are differences in the constructivist approaches deployed in sociology
and history: they stem from the different time distance between object of ex-
ploration and researcher. In the former, the explored subject is immediately
represented, while the latter has a mediated contact with it. The result of

16   all this is the different content invested in the same category. For example, anthropology puts a completely different meaning compared to sociology in the notion of "nature" in the opposition "nature-culture".

This ambiguity in the use of the terms "human nature" and "natural person" is based on the relationship between these two disciplines. For Rousseau there is a substantial difference between the "natural man" in his natural state and the "natural man" in a social state. "We would like to build the natural man, but that does not mean turning him into a savage and sending him out in the wilderness." This is why Rousseau qualified himself as a "mixed being". For most contemporary ethnologists, however, the "nature of man" is associated with his pre-civilised state. For psychoanalysis, the "nature of man" manifest itself in that part of modern man's life, which has evaded socialisation or is unamenable to full socialization. For a number of social scientists, the nature of the individual – rather than that of the species – is expressed in an attempt to assert the individual's right to think and act, based on his own views and interests, which might accord with the established norms and rules of society, but might contradict or even challenge them just as well. In other words, it is in the nature of man to have a degree of independence from his/her own society.

This is one of the important legacies of the Enlightenment philosophy. Describing the nature of despotic rule in his *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu mentions that man may refuse to accept and obey certain imposed principles, for he, fortunately, is *intelligent*. Therefore, man can think, evaluate and act according to his own understanding of things. Rousseau said something similar, but it sounded much more heretical at that time: he argued that man is *free* and can challenge whatever has been imposed on him/her. It is obvious that for both philosophers *intelligence* and *freedom* are part of human nature – and a fundamental and distinctive one too. This nature manifests itself through the actions of individuals in the course of building different relationships. From this perspective, it is also a construct. Human nature is a social construct with a long history: it is the output of a past, historically protracted contraption, which, from a certain point on, began to be perceived as something natural, as a second nature. It is precisely this second, acquired nature (expressed in categories like freedom, human autonomy, natural right, human rights, etc.) that forms the basis of modern naturalism in social sciences.

This socialized human nature has no teleological meaning as it can be fundamentally good or bad; it is as it has been contrived as a function of a particular context. This can be explained by the simple fact that it is

not a category referred to only by naturalism. Various political constructiv- **17**
isms have very often relied on it as well. Communist constructivism, for
example, comes in the name of man and his social emancipation and full
accomplishment, removing all differences in terms of class, property, na-
tion or gender. In other words, communism wants to relieve human beings
from all their past social encumbrances, from all it ideologically brandished
as distortions of human nature; instead it embarked on constructing a new
human being and endowing it with a new nature. The main proposition dur-
ing the about-turn to democracy was that communism had actually distorted
genuine human nature by fostering a "fake" nature. Besides, the conspirato-
rial character, developed by individuals who resisted communist construc-
tivism, has also proven fake. It had been designed to sabotage the making of
the 'new man', but along the way had veered into qualities, which also failed
to match the new democratic context and had to be outgrown. So, these
societies came to a point where the remnants of communist constructivism
clashed with elements of democratic constructivism, both equally oblivi-
ous of the historicity of human experience, and therefore, albeit in different
ways, questioned by the daily human practices.

But the steepest challenge facing constructivist theories seems to
come from nowhere else but the growing lag of social sciences when it
comes to insights into the new experiences accumulated by individuals in
connection with developments in technology, the information revolution,
the emancipation of the individual pushed to the extreme, the disenchant-
ment of politics, etc. In this situation, the opposition constructivism-natu-
ralism has lost its customary meaning, with the relations between the two
not simply being relativised, but its mechanisms of constructing social
realities being changed. This has not remained unnoticed by the emerging
new generation of constructivist theories. While analysing this situation
in his *How Not to Be a Constructivist*, Cyril Lemieux offers a "soft con-
structivism" as a model of outlining a new methodological framework and
offers the conceptual tools to fill it with content. This type of constructiv-
ism perceives reality not through the prism of certain beliefs or ideologies,
but rather as a "process of current practices in which the individual is
directly involved through his/her actions." Lemieux' theoretical proposi-
tion recognises "a certain degree of non-determination" in the process of
social construction, as well as the existence of the "habitual mechanisms
for naturalising social relations". Still, the question remains about the na-
ture of these individual actions and their weight in shaping social norms,
as well as the nature and scope of these naturalization mechanisms. The

18 inadequate attention to the possible causes of the necessary epistemological change leaves the impression that the concessions made by the rigid constructivism are, more than anything else, designed to prevent constructivist theory from discrediting.

In a recent paper published in Annales and titled, "The Future of the Social Sciences between Empiricism and Normativeness", Andrew Abbott comes up with an ambition to say something more specific about the causes for the crisis of constructivism – or, in his own terminology, of modern normative ontology. Abbott believes that the main challenges facing it have come from history and from particularity, i.e from what we define as the private sphere. "Contractarianism imagines individuals, but they are contentless individuals without life courses or changes of occupation, of religion, or of family. Because of these shortcomings, we now require a normative ontology that recognizes the historicity of human experience and in particular the fact that most humans alive can expect to face, in the course of their lives, major transitions in things like sovereignty, citizenship, ethnicity, and employment regimes. (...) there are billions of people in the world who do not accept the normative theory of contractarian liberalism, but who may believe in a world peopled by particular rather than universal beings..."[1] Besides, these particular beings would like to have an active part in taking the decisions guiding their own lives.

Abbott appealed for adherence to something resembling Lemieux' "procedural ontology". "If we cannot clearly define the ultimate goal of the social process and still want to improve it in one way or another, then we have only one appropriate normative strategy – to understand the rules of change that we can apply to the current social process." Formally, his call for change is more radical, but it has also remained theoretically open as far as it says nothing about the "rules of change." However, a promising direction of search is outlined: the new normative ontology "must above all embody a true theory of particularity", that is, it should be based on the experience of specific human individuals. But if it were the case, does not it risk becoming a formal framework without any general weight? The singular focus on particularity is obviously not enough. Preliminary work is probably needed to clarify the new status of the individual, the growing weight of small groups and civil society, the overwhelming importance of the private sphere, the new economic logic, the changes in publicity in the age of new technologies, the redefining of the political, etc. And all this is to be bound together within a new conceptual framework. The big question is who can set this conceptual framework today.

The man is free, Rousseau says, but the truth is that he does not always **19** behave as being one, because the price for this is too high in a setting of despotism or oligarchy. But freedom has its own steep price within a system of democracy as well, even though it is paid to a different account. In *The Wisdom of the Moderns*, written in partnership with André Comte-Sponville as a philosophical debate, Luc Ferry describes this price. "Human rights lay the foundations of *political humanism*, and introduce the values of common life (...) This neutrality implies freedom of opinion, the right of the private sphere to choose its ideals, religion, politics, morality, philosophy ... Which means the disappearance of any official state ideology. That is, no public authority to determine any common meaning should exist at the collective level. This makes the democratic state devoid of meaning. The individual is free from the patronage of any ideology: this is the price of democratic freedom." It involves the disintegration of traditional communities, atomization, alienation. Liberal individualism degenerates into selfishness, while public space is saturated with stress, frustration, envy, unrealistic expectations, etc. each individual is coping with his/her problems alone. The end of ideologies is also an end to rigid constructivism. The theorists of postmodernity have characterized this situation as the end of the big narratives and the flooding of the public sphere by the little ones. How could the common meaning be sustained in a situation of no common direction and countless divergent interests and aspirations?

The notion of individualism has undergone a significant semantic shift from the times when liberal democracy was emerging: from a fundamental value, the cornerstone of individual autonomy, it has morphed into the opposite: a manifestation of the morbid state of modern society, a symbol of the disintegration of human connectedness and the degradation of social mores. In this context, most constructivist theories propound the necessity of limiting it in view of holding on to some kind of a common project. It is exactly the tendency to unconditionally stigmatise it that Luc Ferry opposes. Instead of resuscitating outdated utopias, Ferry pins his hopes of attaining the desired shared meaning on a new type of politics capable of articulating the issues of the public and private spheres. For "there is nothing private in this notorious encapsulation in the private as it obviously possesses a perfect political dimension (...) If it decides to, today's civil society can always compel the government to take up whatever matter of common interest, even when it seems to belong a priori to the private sphere." Therefore, the line that has divided society and the individual from the state has shifted. And this shift of the meaning towards the private sphere has ushered a number of

20   areas, which had never belonged to politics until recently, into the political. Once a majority decides so, anything can become a political issue, that is, norms and rules change on the go, as a matter of expediency. Contemporary politics, Ferry argues, defined as "projects" or "programs", occurs primarily while working in the public sphere; it actually deals with issues that proved to be the shared and the collective in the private sphere.

Based on his insights into modern society and its political practices, Luc Ferry also proposes a draft of a new normative ontology, which should revolve around something like a divine status that should be granted to the individual – and, accordingly, the adoption of a new secular religiosity. Incidentally, Tzvetan Todorov works along the same vein by calling for the imposition of a universal ideology of humanism to preside over the existing divergent political agendas. I will not comment here whether these proposals are acceptable or otherwise because, although apparently close to our subject here, they might take us into an entirely different debate.

Divinatio's dossier offers the key papers presented at the international research conference held on 11-12 December 2017 within the 22nd edition of the Sofia Dialogue Forum entitled "Constructivism and naturalism in social sciences and social practices". We hope they will provide a more succinct outline to the complexity and importance of this ever-present issue.

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Notes

[1]   This quote is from Andrew Abbott's "Future of the Social Sciences" in the version featured at http://home.uchicago.edu/aabbott/Papers/Marc%20Bloch%20Lecture%20Pre%20Trans.pdf