



Beyond Dualism: On S. J. Schmidt's Attempt to Rewrite Constructivism

Christine Angela Knoop ◇ University College London <uclcdak@ucl.ac.uk>

Siegfried J. Schmidt (2007)
**Pour une réécriture
du constructivisme.
Histoires et discours**

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et Flavien Le Bouter
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Siegfried J. Schmidt (2003)
Geschichten & Diskurse.
Abschied vom Konstruktivismus.
Rowohlt: Reinbek
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160 pages

English translation:
Siegfried J. Schmidt (2007)
Histories and Discourses:
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200 pages

Radical constructivist discourse is often associated with and rooted in biological, psychological and cybernetic processes. For several years now, Siegfried J. Schmidt's work has provided an important complement to the field, as it bases constructivism in a philosophical and socio-cultural context. With his new book, he develops this approach, striving to overcome simplistic models that fail to specify how human constructions come into being, to challenge traditional dualistic models, and to show how social systems emerge and function.

His approach has the double benefit of exploring a rather underdeveloped aspect of constructivist theory and of presenting constructivism as a valuable alternative in the wider context of traditional cultural philosophy, i.e., in a field usually somewhat unaware of and unresponsive to constructivist theory.

The book starts with an introduction by the translators that offers valuable insights in Schmidt's approach, but also seems to be directed at readers new to constructivist ideas. However, Schmidt's whole argument is evidently aimed at readers familiar with constructivism, as is already suggested by the word "réécriture" (rewriting) in the title.

Schmidt's text itself is a slow build-up of theoretical reflections eventually leading to a theory of constructivism in which all elements depend on each other. He refrains from establishing any kind of dualism or hierarchy of elements, rather focussing on their relation. His theory assumes an indissoluble connection of positions and presuppositions. Every position needs to presuppose a positioning instance; equally, every presupposition needs a position to refer to. Therefore, unlike Luhmann and Spencer Brown, Schmidt dismisses the idea of unmarked space as a starting point. All actions, positions and presuppositions are cognitively influenced and emotionally and morally charged. Schmidt refers to the interaction be-

tween positions and presuppositions as "histoires&discours," stories and discourses, in which social influences add to the individual construction. He claims that the constitution and representation of the self form an entity with social interaction, hereby challenging the idea that the individual has to construct everything for herself – "common knowledge" is made accessible to her and merges with her own cognitive acts. Thus, Schmidt insists that the conventional dichotomy of the individual and the group (and later, the *Alter* and the *Ego*) is actually an entity of elements that determine one another. He then develops and illustrates this idea by discussing the notions of culture, identity, morals and truth. While challenging these notions in a rather traditional constructivist manner, he also emphasises their functional significance in discourse as efficient hypotheses.

In the course of his argument, one may occasionally wish for a less casual use, definition and sometimes critique of problems as complex as the relation between ethics and morals or the theory of arbitrary signs in semiotics. Also, the recurring references to Luhmann and Schmidt's use of the notion of the "system" seem to neglect that radical constructivism and the theory of systems are not based on entirely identical premises. Furthermore, the allegations about dualism directed at other philosophers seem rather too general; for instance, Schmidt does not refer to works such as Richard Rorty's.

Finally, a remark on the translation: the attempts of the French translators to remain "faithful" to the original text sometimes have a defamiliarizing effect; the French syntax is changed to accommodate structures of the German language, which does not help the reader to focus on the argument.

Irrespective of that, the book provides an important, prolific and strong case for constructivism as a theory of communication.