among them, we look at both disconnection and connection. All eigen-values emerging with society recursively reproducing itself must follow the fixed rule of accounting for the possibility of both disconnection and connection. This applies to all kinds of society: early ones and developed ones. And it applies to all phenomena within society, be it the family that raises us, love that seduces us, power we ask for to restrict the range of our fellow humans, money we use to both disrupt and combine in more improbable ways, or sciences that we entertain to never be sure of the knowledge we would like to be sure of. But the rule of having to be able to account for both the possibility of disconnection and connection may well be the only fixed rule we

have to obey and rely on when dealing with society.

9 There are two ideas in von Glasersfeld's paper that we are thus able to emphasize rather than oppose. The first is that not only education but any kind of human practice that relies on communication (and there is no human practice that does not rely on communication) is indeed a matter of understanding and fit rather than of repetition and training (§23). Understanding and fit mean that at any instant one must be able to count the other as different than himself ("understanding") and that to count himself means not to stop counting thereafter but to go on counting the others as well ("fit"). And the second one is the unusual but deeply sociological idea of

counting individuals as units that do not find themselves completely within the realm of the social but embody, so to speak, non-social features as well, among which are their bodies, their minds, their fears, and their desires (§41). Indeed, this is Georg Simmel (1950) at his very best: society is only possible by providing individuals with places that are empty, awaiting their determination by both the individuals and their fellow humans, other beings, and their interaction. And society is only possible by offering individual human beings ways to socialize, which are determined by paying respect to their never being completely socialized. This may even help in counting them, since counting needs both distinction and relation.

Sociology, Dynamic Critical Realism, and Radical Constructivism
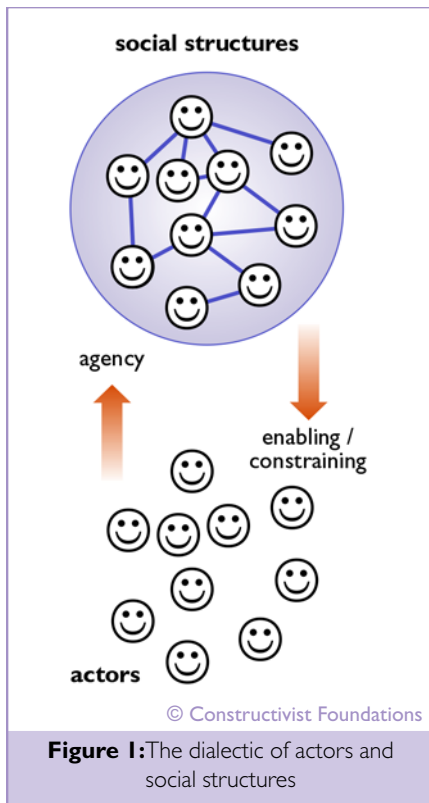
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1 Ernst von Glasersfeld criticizes social constructivists for their assumption that reality is an outcome of social relationships. It would be a "metaphysical assumption" to assume that the "others with whom the individual relates have to be there before his or her construction can begin" (§32). Society, for von Glasersfeld, is a relative concept, a term for all the people an individual has learned to recognize and of whom one has heard or read of.

2 As a consequence, this means that there are as many societies as there are individuals and that society is a subjective construction . In sociology, the notion of society has been used not for small-scale social systems, but for large social systems, systems of social systems, social supersystems covering many actors, their interactions, and the social structures that their interactions involve. The problem with von Glasersfeld's notion of society is that it includes only those whom one knows and whom one has heard about, it would include "the handful of people we have learned to recognize" and those "we have only seen (…) casually or heard or read of" (§38), it does not

include people whom one does not know and has not heard about. As the number of people whom one knows and can meet and about whom one can hear personal stories is limited, von Glasersfeld's concept is ultimately limited to small social systems, or to systems that include personal acquaintances and prominent people featured by the media. But to term such systems "societies" contradicts the common usage of the term in sociology. For Anthony Giddens, probably the most prominent contemporary sociologist, society is constituted by the "intersection of multiple social systems" (Giddens 1984, p. 164) that involves a "clustering of institutions across time and space" (ibid). Other features of a society for Giddens are locales and territory, normative elements that involve laying claim to the legitimate occupation of the locale, and the prevalence of a sort of common identity that need not be considered as right and proper, but is constituted through common practices. Based on von Glasersfeld's notion of society, concepts such as "global society", "European society", or "French society" do not make sense because they always cover individuals whom one or others have not met or heard of. Von Glasersfeld's notion of society then is not really a notion of society, but more of small-scale personal social systems. Radical constructivism, as a consequence, does not seem to be useful for sociology and social theory: its radical individualism is a form of reductionism that reduces society to those whom one knows and one has heard about.

3 For sociology to work, it needs to assume that there are many other people existent who exist and with whom one can interact. The assumption that there are people who are members of a society, even though one has not heard about their personal existence and identity, is justified because our everyday communication and experiences and those of others whom we know tell us that every day we meet and see and interact with, on the one hand, people that we have already known for some time and, on the other hand, with individuals that we have not known before. That there are large-scale social systems that we term "society" that are existent outside of our minds, but not independent of us, is a necessary assumption for sociology. Hence sociology does not work on a basis of radical constructivism, or to put it another way: radical constructivism does not matter for sociology. Our everyday experiences tell us that we can be confident that others exist and are potential partners in communication in an overall shared space that is termed "society" and that is created by many individuals together. Hence it is not independent of these individuals and cannot be reduced to their cognition as they require others with whom to mutually create that space. This space is objective in the sense that it is co-created by humans who, in their social relationships, create supra-individual regularized patterns of interaction that they can rely on in everyday life and that make social activity work, and in the sense that action is oriented and produces social results

social structures

agency

enabling / constraining

actors

© Constructivist Foundations

Figure 1: The dialectic of actors and social structures

and actions of others. Society is not independent of individuals, but also not, as von Glasersfeld seems to claim, only subjectively cognitively constructed (§1, §42). It is a system that is co-created by many individuals who partly know each other and partly do not know each other. So, for example, the results of elections are binding for a society and are co-created by all those who voted, even though no voter knows all the other voters or has heard of the names, personal identities, etc. of most of them. That such collective phenomena as elections, in which the actors do not encounter each other personally, obviously bring about results, gives us confidence in assuming that society exists objectively as a reality that is larger than all the subjective realities and that is an outcome of the totality of the interactions of many human subjects. This social reality is co-created by many individuals, and parts of it are relevant for each individual's thinking and interactions: they enable and constrain the individual's actions that together with other actions again produce social reality, which conditions further individual actions that again bring about social reality, etc.

4 What troubles me most about radical constructivism is that it frequently claims that there is no objectivity and no truth, or that we do not know if this is the case, but at the same time it dogmatically defends the truth that there is no objectivity and no truth (cf. §§42, 43, 45). For me, this sometimes conveys the impression of radical constructivism as a closed sect that defends its dogmas. Such a defence of dogmas can also be found in the target article, which reminds social constructionists such as Kenneth Gergen that they are not constructivists if they assume the existence of a social reality and not just of individual realities (§§31, 32, 45). Personally, I never considered radical constructivism as suitable for sociology and my view is that social constructivistic social theories are more realist than constructivist in character and that all sociological approaches are non-constructivistic and realistic. Hence, I can only welcome von Glasersfeld's decision to see many social constructivists as not constructivists. By doing so, he categorically and by definition decimates the number of constructivists.

5 Radical Constructivism stresses that knowledge is a construction and invention and not a mapping and discovery (cf. §42). The constructor would be the human individual. Social constructivist approaches argue that reality is constructed in social relationships. What I value about some social constructivist approaches such as, e.g., those of Klaus Krippendorff (2006), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) or Kenneth Gergen (1999), is that they stress the importance of human actors in society and its social relationships. This helps strengthen positions that are directed against functionalistic social theories that exclude human actors from social systems or see them as completely determined by social structures. So, for example, Berger and Luckmann (1966) stress that in society there is a dialectic of human and social reality that is constituted in processes of externalization, objectification, and internalization. Such accounts are much more objective and intersubjective than radical constructivism's reductionist focus on individuals, hence I consider them as realistic accounts of society, not as constructivist ones. Von Glasersfeld's target article seems to make the same assessment, but from a radical constructivist position that is critical of social constructivist approaches.

6 There is a particular stress on the dialectic of structures and human actions in contemporary sociology. Such accounts are realistic in the sense that they assume that there is a social reality that is co-constructed by human beings. But they are not naively realistic, they do not assume that this reality is passively given to humans, but that it is shaped, produced, and differentiated by humans in social relations as well as conditioning human activities. These are dynamic, dialectical forms of realism. They differ from von Glasersfeld's radical constructivist notion of society in that they do not consider society, as von Glasersfeld does, as a subjective construction of an agglomeration of individuals (§39), but that the individuals are only a foundation from which an irreducible social reality emerges that is permanently re-constituted and differentiated.

7 My own theoretical account of society (Fuchs 2003a, 2003b, 2008) is such a form of dialectical realism. It is based on the problem of finding solutions to the traditional gap between actor theories and structural theories in sociology. This gap can be overcome by dynamic, dialectical social theories. It starts from the human-centred argument that human beings, as such, are creative social beings that co-create social reality together with others. Society is conceived as a large-scale system of networked social systems that is based on the dialectic of social structures and human actors. Society reproduces man as a social being and man produces society by socially coordinating human actions. By social interaction, new qualities and structures can emerge that cannot be reduced to the individual level. This is a process of bottom-up emergence that is called agency. Emergence in this context means the appearance of at least one new systemic quality that cannot be reduced to the elements of the system. So this quality is irreducible. Social structures also influence individual actions and thinking. They constrain and enable actions. Society, through such processes of permanent conditioning and agency, again and again creates its own unity and maintains itself (cf. Fig. 1). Social structures enable and constrain social actions as well as individuality and are a result of social actions (which are a correlation of mutual individuality that results in sociality). The crucial point that distinguishes such an approach from the one by von Glasersfeld is that social

reality is more than the sum of individual realities that are viable, has irreducible qualities, and changes dynamically.

8 The notion of the dialectic of structures and actors can be found in some contemporary dialectical social theories. So, e.g., Anthony Giddens (1984, p. 2) argues that "in and through their activities agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible." Pierre Bourdieu (1977, p. 83) speaks of a "dialectical relationship between the objective structures and the cognitive and motivating structures that they produce and that tend to reproduce them", Margaret Archer (2002, p. 18) of a "dialectical relationship between personal and social identities" and Roy Bhaskar (1993, p. 153) of "dialectics of struc-

ture and agency." One aspect that these approaches have in common is that they consider themselves as dynamic critical realist theories that are not naive but dynamic, and they acknowledge the importance of active humans and their social relations in society. The arguments of some social constructivist approaches such as that of Berger and Luckmann come very close to these theoretical approaches. They assume and argue for the existence of an objective social reality that is not passive, static, and determining, but actively co-created and dynamically transformed by humans in social relationships.

9 Radical constructivism generally argues that it cannot make any statements about the existence of realities beyond individual cogni-

tion. But arguing that one simply cannot decide or does not deal with supra-individual realities such as the social means taking a solipsistic approach, although radical constructivism frequently denies being solipsistic. Von Glasersfeld, in my opinion, reduces society to cognition and the individual; his account is what Anthony Giddens, in characterizing methodological individualism, calls "an imperialism of the subject" (Giddens 1984, p. 2). Von Glasersfeld's paper, in my opinion, shows the incompatibility of radical constructivism and sociology. Sociology is an inherently realistic science that cannot be built upon von Glasersfeld's claim, in the abstract of the target article, that society "can be considered an individual construct."

Who Conceives of Mind? Von Glasersfeld's Turn to Society

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1 I have long admired Ernst von Glasersfeld's attempt to render rationally viable a radical constructivist epistemology. And, I have long wished to see him turn his attention more fully to issues of social interchange. The present offering moves cogently in this direction, and this is all to the good. However, immersed in the dialogues on social construction as I am, the offering also poses an array of particular problems, both intellectual and practical. I offer the following in the service of pressing forward the dialogues on knowledge, self and the social world.

2 In my view, von Glasersfeld's work can be seen as a contemporary extension of rationalist philosophy – drawing sustenance from both Descartes and Kant, among others – in positing a mind/world dualism in which preeminent significance is accorded to the mind. One of the most significant features of this tradition is that the existence of mind is transparently clear, while the nature of world remains obscure (e.g., "how can we generate a picture of the whole from a pattern of dots?"). Thus, the scholar is forever struggling with

problems such as how we can know what is actually "out there," and how the "out there" enters the "in here" in such a way that we can be effective actors. And, to solve such thorny problems, the rationalist scholar almost inevitably begins to expand the ontology of mind, positing various features, mechanisms, or capacities. Thus, in the present offering, we find that the mental world obeys the law of effect, draws inferences, and possesses goals, elementary values, imagination, memory, conceptual structures, and more. In effect, to solve even the most basic problems of knowledge, we find it necessary to populate the mind with a substantial cast of characters.

3 It is at this point that constructionists such as myself become quite curious. How is it, we ask, that scholars such as von Glasersfeld came to know about these various mental events? On what grounds can he claim that people's minds are populated in this manner? Is it simply self-evident? Did he somehow look inward and see these events swimming about in his sensorium? The questions are obviously hortatory. The presumed existence of these various events or activities is all the more curious as we take into account variations in the conception of the person found in both history and culture. The idea that individuals are governed by reason, for example, did not come into fashion until the 17th century, and this fashion is quintessentially Western. And why, we might ask, do we not find Western rationalists positing atman, liget, amae and other non-Western ways of concep-

tualizing the mind as essential to solving the problem of knowledge? It is this sensitivity to history and culture, combined with the inability of philosophers to solve the epistemological riddle, that lead Richard Rorty (1979) to conclude that the problem of epistemology, as posed by dualists, is essentially a byproduct of language use. That is, if we did not in the West presume a mind/world dichotomy – with knowledge viewed as in some way a mirror of nature – the problem would not exist.

4 It is at this point that I draw attention to a point of agreement between von Glasersfeld and myself. As he points out, "I am not concerned with describing what might 'really' exist." As a constructionist I am also aware that my very standpoint is a construction, and thus there are no words that will "get it right" about the ultimate nature of what exists. However, von Glasersfeld's next move is problematic for me. As he says, he is thus attempting to generate a rationally coherent model of knowing. Drawing from Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953), whose work is central to the constructionist endeavor, this is saying that he is trying to play the Western game of language (bound by its rules) in such a way that he can solve the long-standing epistemological riddle. But if we ourselves have invented the riddle, then we must ask ourselves what hangs on the attempt at a solution? What is there beyond the personal satisfaction of completing what is akin to a very sophisticated (and linguistically insoluble) crossword puzzle? There may be