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One must now be very careful with whom one talks

Interaction as Reality-Maintenance

Some notions on representation, interaction, discourse, and reality, from Berger & Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality*.

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Some notions on representation, interaction, discourse, and reality, from Berger & Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality*.

The social reality we inhabit must be constantly constructed and reconstructed and reproduced through socialization. Berger & Luckmann differentiate the primary socialization acquired in childhood, which gives the individual a social identity, and secondary socialization, e.g. education, professional training, etc., which gives the individual a number of roles in society, a profession or provisional identity which may be more or less fluid or permanent according to circumstances and social complexity.

Social reality is a system of institutions, externally speaking, but they must be interiorized by the individual to become a subjective reality—through a number of techniques. "The more these techniques make subjectively plausible a continuity between the original and the new elements of knowledge, the more readily they acquire the accent of reality" (163); just as we build a second language knowledge on our mother tongue, we build secondary socializations on our primary socialization. In complex societies there is a socializing personnel (e.g. teachers) who may become significant others to the subject—especially if the secondary socialization requires intensity and dedication, a commitment of the self-identity so to speak. Socializing tasks vary much from one society to another, just as the distribution of knowledge.

Maintenance and Transformation of Subjective Reality.

"Since socialization is never complete and the contents it internalizes face continuing threats to their subjective reality, every viable society must develop procedures of reality-maintenance to safeguard a measure of symmetry between objective and subjective reality" (167)

"Primary socialization internalizes a reality apprehended as inevitable. This internalization may be deemed successful if the sense of inevitability is present most of the time, at least while the individual is active in the world of everyday life". There are the sinister psychological metamorphoses of reality threatening it, usually marginally; [mental distortions of reality](#) which must be kept under control in the individual's subjectivity. "There are also the more directly threatening competing definitions of reality that may be encountered socially" (167)—people living with other cultural assumptions, in another reality so to speak.

If a secondary socialization is to be strongly internalized, the socialization

procedures (discipline, control, etc.) will have to be intensified and reinforced accordingly. (E.g. the military, the clergy...);

"the reality of everyday life maintains itself by being embodied in routines, which is the essence of institutionalization. Beyond this, however, the reality of everyday life is ongoingly reaffirmed in the individual's interaction with others. Just as reality is originally internalized by a social process, so it is maintained in consciousness by social processes. These latter processes are not drastically different from those of the earlier internalization. They also reflect the basic fact that subjective reality must stand in a relationship with an objective reality that is socially defined" (169).

So, reality (the human reality of individuals, projects, actions, institutions, customs, etc.) is made and remade through interaction—this much Berger & Luckmann share with [other propounders of symbolic interactionism](#). Reality is made (to put it otherwise) of [a collectively sustained set of self-fulfilling expectations](#).

Due to their interactionalist account of socialization, Berger and Luckmann are ideally placed as major theorizers of what I used to call [the relational self](#)—the notion that the self is not a substance with a stable core but rather a dynamic system of social relationships—a structure defined by its position in a social network. We do not *have* social relationships; we *are* our social relationships, so to speak (if this does not account for the whole of the reality of the self it does place a useful focus on a side of the self that is usually neglected or ignored). Each of the people we meet has a corresponding relational reality, and brings to ours a partially alien world which partly defines ours. We inhabit, or construct, a different reality (partly different, provisional, interactional) with each of the people we interact with. Especially with the most significant persons.

Significant people define your reality with you, and you define theirs. Which is why many communities don't find it advisable for their members to have significant relationships (marriage, love, friendship) with members of other communities holding different beliefs—inhabiting another reality, so to speak. A foreigner's look threatens the very core of reality, it is an intrusion from another dimension. "There is no salvation outside the Church" —a doctrinal point which is given a more general, and rather ironic, reading, by Berger and Luckmann. Individuals may inhabit a fairly consistent reality, or experience tensions between

different realities which assert their claims. "The individual then faces a problem of consistency, which he can, typically, solve either by modifying his reality or his reality-maintaining relationships" (170). E.g. accepting that one is a failure, or turning to other people that give back a more satisfying image of oneself and our activities. Human realities only partially overlap, and that there is often a conflict of realities among diverse social groups; see e.g. my paper on the battle for reality between the Gnostics and the early Christians, as portrayed in The Gospel of Judas ("[La Visión del Templo: Espiritualidad antieclesiástica en el Evangelio de Judas y la Batalla por la Realidad](#)"). There is a whole job of reality-management and reality-maintenance, especially in a globalized world in which different communities and different realities run into chaotic and absurd juxtapositions with each other:

"Reality-maintenance and reality-confirmation thus involve the totality of the individual's social situation, though the significant others occupy a privileged position in these processes" (Berger and Luckmann 171).

A continual interaction with significant others is thus the major vehicle for reality-management and reality maintenance. Conversation is singled out by Berger and Luckmann as the major mode of interaction (though love-making or sports can arguably be just as effective in many cases):

"The most important vehicle of reality-maintenance is conversation. One may view the individual's everyday life in terms of the working away of a conversational apparatus that ongoingly maintains, modifies, and reconstructs his subjective reality" (172)—conversation surrounded by non-verbal communication, and taking place "against the background of a world that is silently taken for granted" (172). One could thus modify Berger and Luckmann's account by saying that it is *shared expectations* or *presuppositions* (on which conversation rests, and which conversation helps to manage or modify) that constitute the most important tool of reality maintenance. Reality sustained by mental communication, then, of which actions and words only minimally modify the surface. Casual conversation is then a crucial sign that the world stands in its place and is what it is; "its massivity is achieved by the accumulation and consistency of casual conversation—conversation that can *afford to be casual* precisely because it refers to the routines of a taken-for-granted world. The loss of casualness signals a break in the routines and, at least potentially, a threat to the taken-for-granted reality" (172). What is voiced out is singled out for

attention; "conversation gives firm contours to items previously apprehended in a fleeing and unclear manner. One may have doubts about one's religion; these doubts become real in a quite different way as one discusses them." (173).

Conversations must be managed—Berger & Luckmann mention conversations through correspondence when physical conversations are not possible. "On the whole, frequency of conversation enhances its reality-generating potency, but lack of frequency can sometimes be compensated for by the intensity of the conversation when it does take place. One may see one's lover only once a month, but the conversation then engaged in is of sufficient intensity to make up for its relative infrequency" (174).

One might as well note, too, the importance of *reading as world-making conversation*, reading (literature, philosophy, science, etc.), interacting with the dead, or with communities and worlds far away in time or space, sometimes to find a loophole to gaze out of the reality defined and circumscribed by our everyday life and by the conversation of our significant others, or, again, turning people living long ago and far away into our significant others. One might also expand on the prominent role of telephones and communication technologies in the present, as reality-management and reality-producing media.

Thus individuals manage their identities and realities, even when they are cut off from daily conversation with their reality-sustaining community. Rituals may be engaged in to keep this contact and prop up this reality. The "plausibility structures" as they are termed by Berger & Luckmann may become threatened and it is then that reality-sustaining strategies become more active and visible:

"In crisis situations the procedures are essentially the same as in routine maintenance, except that reality-confirmations have to be explicit and intensive. Frequently, ritual techniques are brought into play." (175). Taboos, exclusions, scapegoats, curses and exorcisms, etc. are used to sustain the official reality. "The violence of these defensive procedures will be proportional to the seriousness with which the threat is viewed" (176).

An extreme case noted by Berger and Luckmann is "world-switching" or conversion—when an individual leaves behind an old identity and its associated reality, and is "born again" into a new identity, often with the guide of significant others in the new sphere. "These significant others are the guides into the new

reality. They represent the plausibility structure in the roles they play *vis-à-vis* the individual (roles that are typically defined explicitly in terms of their re-socializing function), and they mediate the new world to the individual (177). Religious conversion (Saul into Paul) is the model instance of such reality-switching. "The plausibility structures of religious conversion have been imitated by secular agencies of alternation. The best examples are in the areas of political indoctrination and psychotherapy" (178). Correspondingly, the reality-switching individual cuts off the ties and conversation with the old social sphere and previous significant others; "The alternating individual disaffiliates himself from his previous world and the plausibility structure that sustained it, bodily if possible, mentally if not" (178)—"Once the new reality has congealed, circumspect relations with outsiders may again be entered into, although those outsiders who used to be biographically significant are still dangerous. They are the ones who will say, 'Come off it, Saul', and there may be times when the old reality they invoke takes the form of temptation.

"And in conversation with the new significant others subjective reality is transformed. It is maintained by continuing conversation with them, or within the community they represent. Put simply, this means that one must now be very careful with whom one talks. People and ideas discrepant with the new definitions of reality are systematically avoided" (177-78).

One must be careful with what one reads, too, and with the films and TV programmes one watches. Representations of reality make and remake reality, and they sustain it all day long.

This analysis should be supplemented with a study of mechanisms of avoidance and coexistence—that is, communicative conventions and protocols which allow people to carry out interaction in some areas (e.g. work) with people sustaining other worlds or inhabiting other partial realities, without thereby challenging the hidden, private, different, eccentric or sacred aspects of their own reality. Thus it is advisable to avoid subjects such as politics, religion, etc. in casual conversation, especially if members of a minority creed are present. The weather is thus the safest interactional topic and the prime sustainer of the everyday reality we all share. Sports or celebrity TV are an area where conventional difference is encouraged, a symbol of those other differences which might threaten the plausibility of the world if they came into overt conflict. It is through heated differences on sporting matters that this issue is both

recognized, hidden, and exorcized. Conversation on the weather and on sports and celebrities, which in their own ways are irrelevant topics, thus helps to sustain our sense of a coherent and shared social world.

[Stuart Hall on Representation and Race](#)

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