

The politics of realism and social constructionism in psychology

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Abstract

This item presents a controversial discussion on the political implications of realist and social constructionist psychologies. After summarising a 2002–2005 debate between Kenneth Gergen and Carl Ratner on issues such as positivism, social constructionism and the political implications of psychological theories, it moves on to reproduce a discussion between Carl Ratner and David Pavón-Cuéllar that took place in Morelia, Mexico in 2015. This discussion focuses on the contradiction between realism and social constructionism, and successively addresses subjective freedom, idealism and positivism, scientific objectivity, the truth claims and practical outcomes of psychological theories, the connection between science and politics, Gergen's attitudes toward other theories, social fragmentation as a consequence of social constructionism, technocracy, cultism, solipsism, the neutrality of science and its role in the Nazi regime, religion, and indigenous psychologies.

KEYWORDS

critical realism, politics, realism, science, social constructionism, social psychology

1 | INTRODUCTION

David Pavón-Cuéllar and Karla Montserrat Ríos-Martínez.

What happens in Europe and the United States, the centres of the academic world of psychology, may take a while to reach the peripheries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The delay is not only due to geographical

distances or the insufficiency of education resources and research institutions in peripheral regions, but also to other factors such as the forgotten condition of the peripheries, the global logics of marginalisation and neo-colonial dependence, the dynamics of academic work in poor and emerging countries, the lack of interest in the centres, and different ways of conceiving psychology (including its historicity and novelty). Whatever the reason for the delay, it is not necessarily negative and deplorable. The delay can even be seen as something positive and favourable to reflection. Like our marginality, our delay allows us—the peripheral academic psychologists—to maintain our distance with respect to current psychological ideas. We can assess them calmly, employ a global perspective, and be better equipped to resist the frivolous and amnesic precipitation of the centres.

The delay of the peripheries can, for example, enable us to remain interested in such crucial episodes in psychology as the debate between the American psychologists Kenneth Gergen and Carl Ratner between 2002 and 2005. Encompassing issues such as positivism, social constructionism and the political implications of psychological theories, this debate happened relatively recently and remains topical—perhaps even more topical than 10 or 20 years ago. However, it has been practically forgotten in the centres. Meanwhile, in peripheral countries like Mexico, it still arouses great interest among psychology scholars and students.

Our anachronistic interest in the old debate between Gergen and Ratner made one of us, David Pavón-Cuéllar, propose a discussion on the subject to Ratner during his visit to Morelia in western Mexico in 2015. This discussion can be read in full in the following pages. The timing and location of the discussion were very significant. Exactly 10 years earlier, in 2005, Gergen had been interviewed in the same city by César A. Cisneros-Puebla. This interview resulted three years later in a publication that can be considered the last important contribution to the debate between Gergen and Ratner (Cisneros-Puebla, 2007).

In this article, after summarising the confrontation between Gergen and Ratner, we offer a transcript of the 2015 discussion between Ratner and Pavón-Cuéllar. This discussion focuses on the contradiction between realism and social constructionism, and successively addresses subjective freedom, idealism and positivism, scientific objectivity, the truth claims and practical outcomes of psychological theories, the connection between science and politics, Gergen's attitudes toward other theories, social fragmentation as a consequence of social constructionism, technocracy, cultism, solipsism, the neutrality of science and its role in the Nazi regime, religion and indigenous psychologies. In the conclusion, we briefly assess the ideas Ratner expressed during the discussion, and examine their importance in contemplating psychology today.

2 | THE DEBATE BETWEEN RATNER AND GERGEN

The starting point of the debate was Gergen's (2001) reference to the postmodern reconceptualisation of the truth, objectivity and science:

To “tell the truth” is not to furnish an accurate picture of “what actually happened,” but to participate in a set of social conventions, a way of putting things sanctioned within a given “form of life.” To “be objective” is to play by the rules within a given tradition of social practices . . . to “do science” is not to hold a mirror to nature, but to participate actively in the interpretive conventions and practices of a particular culture. (p. 806)

This reconceptualisation reveals some basic epistemological assumptions of Gergen's social constructionism. Maybe this is why social constructionism was used by Ratner (2002) as an example of what he described as the “subjectivist” position—the limitations of which, according to him, would be obvious since this position does not allow us to distinguish between science, religion and ideology, nor to scientifically refute religious dogmas, racist claims or justifications for acts such as rape. These would simply be considered valid and respectable “views of the topic” (pp. 1–2).

Just as Ratner considered Gergen's position to be limited, so Gergen criticised two years later the "limitations" of a "positivist psychology" in which "one presumes a real world (objective, material) somewhere out there" without recognising, on the one hand, that "it is through language" that we come to agree on *what there is*, and, on the other hand, that there may be "local truths" that must be respected to facilitate "dialogue" between different communities since "declarations of truth beyond tradition" are "a step towards tyranny and, ultimately, the end of communication" (Mattes, Schraube, & Gergen, 2004, pp. 3–4). Ratner rejected these ideas also with the same arguments regarding language, dialogue and communication. Gergen's conception of local truths, according to him (Ratner (2004), excludes mutual understanding as it "denies there is a common reality to be understood, and also denies a common way to understand it" (p. 2).

Ratner is convinced that convergence in a single reality and in a shared understanding are necessary for groups to have a reason to communicate with each other instead of remaining isolated—in their subjective beliefs, in their cults, and in the different realities constructed by each one of them. This idea was deepened and questioned by Barbara Zielke, who intervened in the debate between Gergen and Ratner to side with the former and explain to the latter that social constructionism does not postulate the existence of stable, monolithic and closed subjective beliefs, but of cultural meanings that are always shared as well as formed and transformed within communication. Therefore, following Zielke (2005), "it is not really the question if one chooses to communicate them to outsiders or not; it is rather the other way round: limits in the communicability of meaning make visible the borders between language games or 'cultures', and makes some people outsiders for others" (p. 2).

Zielke (2005) also attributes to Ratner a "naïve concept" of reality, and asks him to "take the trouble to distinguish his point from naïve realism" (p. 2). In responding to her, Ratner (2006) insists that his realism is critical, not naïve, and he reproaches her that "her desire for dialogue is contradicted by the principles and logic of her theory," since "accepting diverse opinions that are ungrounded in any evidence about things and have no truth value is a license for any group to cling to any belief they find culturally appealing" (p. 5).

In the last act of the debate, an interview by (Cisneros-Puebla, 2007), Gergen was aggressive and contemptuous to the point of using *ad hominem* arguments. Reducing critical realism to Bhaskar's version, and betraying his ignorance of Popper's previous interpretation, he denied that Ratner professed a "critical realism," and characterised him as a "practicing psychologist" who "had not read very much" and who was "essentially extending the arguments of 1930s positivism" (p. 4). However, agreeing with Ratner, Gergen acknowledged that social constructionism has no "foundational logic" for bringing conflicting parties into dialogue—but, at the same time, "the lack of ultimate grounds for one's perspective invites both a curiosity" and "a certain humility regarding one's own views" (p. 5). As we will see later, where Gergen sees a humble and curious attitude, Ratner discovers the opposite: a subtle form of dogmatism and arrogance.

3 | SUBJECTIVE FREEDOM

D.P.C. (David Pavón-Cuéllar) After interviewing Gergen in 2005, here in Morelia, Cisneros Puebla wondered if social constructionism would become retro in ten years. Do you believe this has been the case?

C.R. (Carl Ratner) I don't think so. Social constructionism is still very popular in social psychology and cultural psychology, in what I call "micro cultural psychology" (Ratner, 2018, 2019a, 2019b).

D.P.C. How do you explain this popularity?

C.R. I think the reason why social constructionism has been, and still is, so popular is because it is really based on the fundamental idea of subjective freedom. Like many forms of liberalism and populism, social constructionism is the belief that the only and most complete form of freedom is for the individual to have free subjectivity. That's the basic message of social constructionism: people can structure the world any way they want and nobody can decide for them; the

world is the way you make it. People like that because they are oppressed and want to somehow circumvent or escape from their oppression. I think that's why social constructionism is popular. But, of course, it's a silly ideology.

D.P.C. But it is a fact that the same world is not the same for different groups; it is constructed differently by each group.

C.R. Yes, but there are objective cultural reasons for this. It is not personal, subjective fantasy, as Gergen claims. Cultural psychology explains the cultural basis of these psychological differences. It also provides a means for making psychology more fulfilling by humanising a culture. Gergen reduces fulfilment to subjective desires without social transformation.

D.P.C. What you are saying is that social constructionism gets freedom—subjective freedom—in theory, in fantasy, but not in practice—not in the real world?

C.R. Yes. I think people are more oppressed than ever, and social constructionists say: "Don't worry, everything is OK; just subjectively imagine whatever kind of world you want."

4 | IDEALISM AND POSITIVISM

D.P.C. Your idea is that instead of supporting people to think what they want, and see reality as they wish, as social constructionism would do, we should help them to fight against oppression and change reality. But reality can only be transformed by seeing it in another way, by conceiving it in such a way that it can be changed, by constructing it as a changeable reality.

C.R. This is not what social constructionists do. They don't want to change reality. There is no reality for them. They only change subjectivity.

D.P.C. It is true that social constructionists only change the conception of reality in the psychological sphere, but perhaps it is all they can do as academics.

C.R. That's not true at all. Progressive academics have always called for improving society. Think of Noam Chomsky, Herbert Marcuse, Charles Wright Mills. Gergen has retreated from progressive social change because of his political philosophy, not his academic position.

D.P.C. I still think that Gergen's philosophical (not political) idealism is common in universities, especially amongst psychologists. We usually forget the materiality of poverty, and the exploitation and structures that oppress most of the population and govern their lives and thoughts.

C.R. This forgetfulness gives rise to social constructionism, which forgets reality ...

D.P.C. I agree with Gergen that reality is different for each group, but not because each group constructs its reality differently. It is rather because different groups occupy different places in a single material and objective reality, which manifests differently through each subject and through each group, and also treats each one differently. This prevents us from knowing objective reality as it is for everyone. No one of us can be everyone! The same reality is not the same for you as for me, for an American as for a Mexican, for a man as for a woman, for a lecturer as for a worker, for a white as for a black, but not because these different subjects live in different realities, as if reality was constructed differently by each subject ...

C.R. Exactly. And social barriers must be reduced through united political struggle against them.

D.P.C. This is what we Marxists call "materialism," but it can also be interpreted as an old kind of positivism and empiricism. Gergen accused you of being still attached to empiricist and positivist assumptions, while you have situated yourself nearer to hermeneutic objectivism and critical realism. Would you still describe yourself in those terms? And how would you distinguish your objectivist-realist standpoint from the empiricist-positivist perspective that Gergen imputes to you?

C.R. Gergen does not understand positivism or my work. He reduces positivism to realism. This is false. Positivism is a particular view of reality that consists of discrete, atomised particles of physical characteristics. Einstein criticised this positivistic view of reality while believing in reality. I have criticised positivism in my books on cultural psychology and qualitative methodology. Gergen has never read these. Karl Popper distinguished science and positivism very clearly. He

called positivism “scientism” in contrast with science, and he said that scientism is a false science; it seems to be science, but in many ways it is not. Popper opposed positivist scientism to the critical realistic conception of science.

D.P.C. Now I understand better. Your critical realism is Popper’s, which has nothing to do with my Marxist critical realism, closer to Bhaskar, Lukács and others. But I agree with you that none of these realisms is positivist, strictly speaking. Then why do you think you appear as a positivist in the eyes of Gergen?

C.R. Because Gergen is very confused about science. He equates and he confuses positivism with all science. This, of course, is a big mistake—but it is intentional.

D.P.C. Intentional?

C.R. There is a hidden logic behind Gergen’s confusion. He believes in subjective freedom and he doesn’t want to believe in objective reality. But how can he justify rejecting objective reality? The way he does it is by saying: if you believe in objective reality, then you are a stupid positivist who is doing everything wrong. It’s a very insidious, deliberate strategy. It implies that positivism made a lot of mistakes and, if all science is positivistic, then all science makes those mistakes. That justifies the illusion of anti-scientific subjective freedom. However, science is not positivistic, and positivism is not science. Gergen, Zielke, and the postmodernists/populists have no understanding of this crucial point.

D.P.C. We may also say that the purpose is to protect the subject, either free or not, from the usual positivist functioning of objective science . . .

C.R. I certainly do not associate science and objectivity with positivism. I believe in objective science, but I have written extensively criticising positivistic cross-cultural psychology. One of the important reasons I work on cultural psychology is to find a different way of studying culture and psychology, different from positivistic cross-cultural psychology. So, in terms of my own work, I do not work as a positivist and I have been extremely critical of positivism. It is absurd to accuse me of being a positivist! I wrote the book *Cultural Psychology and Qualitative Methodology*. So Gergen is just falsifying my position in order to discredit it! He says: Ratner believes in science; science is positivistic; positivism is bad; so Ratner’s scientific work is bad. Gergen knows nothing about real science. Of course, in his view, he doesn’t have to know about science or my view of science. His own view of science and his own view of my approach are his constructed reality, so they are acceptable no matter what. This is the lunacy of his constructivism.

5 | OBJECTIVE SCIENCE

D.P.C. Although rejecting positivism, you believe in the traditional and conventional way of doing objective science, such as hypothesis testing . . .

C.R. In terms of my understanding of science, of my work in science, I certainly do believe in objective scientific procedures, such as hypothesis testing and experimentation. What is wrong with that? I also strongly work in the field of qualitative methodology, which involves discourse analysis, interviewing techniques and historical analyses of things.

D.P.C. Can these qualitative methods be still considered objective?

C.R. Yes! Dilthey talked about an objective science using hermeneutic interpretation, and there are many other qualitative researchers who believe in the characteristics of science, and they are not positivists. The root question is: what is a non-positivistic objective science that accepts the notions of an independent objective reality, of the truth and of the need to understand the truth? Many qualitative researchers do take that position. I mean, in qualitative methodology, there are two schools. There is the unscientific school, with people like Gergen, and there is the scientific school (e.g. Dilthey, Giorgi), which believes very strongly in scientific concepts and procedures, without being necessarily positivist. Einstein was one of the greatest scientists of all times who rejected positivism.

D.P.C. Gergen would rather say that you refer to scientists, like Einstein, because science cannot prove itself, so you have to involve famous and brilliant scientists as an argument of authority, as a way to legitimate your scientific discourse.

C.R. I don't know what he's talking about. Einstein was a scientist, and his views were scientific. That is why he is authoritative. He is not some political demagogue or religious figure that is falsely used to authenticate science. He truly authenticated it through his scientific prowess. Science has produced the most outstanding, the most amazing, the most useful products of all time. Everything we use and everything we do is a product of science. There is no need of justification for science! When you compare what science has done to what social constructionism has done to produce useful things, there is no comparison. Tell me one thing that social constructionism has ever produced!

D.P.C. Is this a problem? Should theories be productive? This makes me think of a typically capitalist productivist ideology.

C.R. What is really problematic for social constructionism is that it cannot justify itself. If you say that reality is whatever you construct and there is no truth, and there is no objectivity, then there is no truth or objectivity to social constructionism. Why should anybody believe it? It is just Gergen's opinion. It cannot claim that itself is true. So, who cares what Gergen said?

6 | TRUTH CLAIMS AND PRACTICAL OUTCOMES

D.P.C. Gergen did not want to have a foundational debate with you on what really is the case, and he asked to replace truth claims with issues of practical outcome. Do you think that your critique of social constructionism might be reduced to these issues?

C.R. No. Social constructionism is wrong in every way. It is a false ontology and epistemology; it is irrational, it is biased (since it is entirely whatever one wishes to believe), and it is impractical. Gergen eschews empirical reality apart from his subjectivity. So he is not interested in practical outcomes. He is only interested in himself, what he believes. It is all solipsistic and narcissistic. He believes what he wants to believe. That's exactly what George Bush did when he decided to invade Iraq! He was not interested in the truth of whether Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. He focused on invading Iraq and he constructed an imaginary world where this invasion was justified. Science could have prevented all this by going to Iraq and investigating whether there objectively were weapons of mass destruction that could be seen and identified and measured. If Bush was interested in the truth, that would have prevented the whole invasion. What I want to emphasise is how Gergen is really complicit with the most disastrous, ridiculous, arbitrary, unreasonable actions, like the invasion of Iraq.

D.P.C. Gergen could argue, on the one hand, that weapons are science—and also, on the other hand, that the lies or beliefs of Bush were as effective as science as they destroyed Iraq. Both lies and science imply a construction of the world and have practical outcomes, which are not only constructive, but also destructive. The destruction of Iraq results from both lies and science ...

7 | SCIENCE AND POLITICS

C.R. Of course, lies can lead to behavioural consequences. Everyone knows that. That's what makes lies dangerous. But so what? That has no bearing on truth and error. Bush's lies led to terribly destructive consequences because they were not based upon objective analysis of consequences. Truth would eliminate these erroneous, damaging consequences.

D.P.C. I rather see science at the service of damaging, destructive purposes.

C.R. It is not science that destroys; it is the politician who uses science to destroy. Even the destructive things that science produces can have constructive uses. This is the case of nuclear energy.

D.P.C. Is it not possible for science to produce essentially destructive things? This would mean discarding one of the deepest intuitions underlying the critique of technology at the Frankfurt School . . .

C.R. The only reason why science produces destructive things is because politicians want it to. Science does not cause war. It is used as a tool for destructive political purposes. It is absurd to blame science for war.

D.P.C. I don't agree with Gergen, but my own feeling is that he does not blame science as science. He respects the scientific constructions as he respects other constructions. He accepts the coexistence of different constructed realities and is curious about the way other people construct reality. He only blames science for its intolerance against other social constructions.

C.R. He's only interested in scientific work as new information for him to consider. It is the same level as poetry or jokes or religious myths. It's all titillating information for him to process/construct as he wishes. But science is not regarded as proving true facts or as disproving untrue facts. It does not settle any questions in ways that individuals must accept—for example, if you smoke cigarettes, you will likely get lung cancer. Gergen rejects this character of science because it imposes direction on subjectivity/agency and therefore denies its freedom to construct its world. Gergen insists that all interpretations, conclusions and decisions are up to the individual and express her freedom. In this sense, he does reject science as science. He reduces it to titillating fodder for the imagination to construct. Gergen's solipsism can lead to curiosity about others' views, but only as grist for the self's own interpreting and perceiving of these views. Others expose the self to new information that the self uses for its own growth, if it so chooses. Gergen prefers to reject science.

D.P.C. He only rejects science when it becomes an ideology, when it is dogma intolerant against other kinds of knowledge, when it can be used to suppress politics and to decide instead of people.

C.R. I would say science is bad for Gergen when it acts as science, as veridical evidence about reality. This is not ideology. It is the valuable character of science that explains and predicts events. The scientific fact that smoking causes lung cancer is not ideology; it is the most precious information that people can have to be healthy. It should supersede any other decision-making in the case of physical health. Any religious myth or custom that encourages smoking is dangerous and should be rejected in favour of scientific evidence. The same is true for the science of climatology. It is the only basis for treating the ecology in certain ways that will eliminate pollution. To rely on "people" making decisions, as you opine, allows people such as industrialists to proffer their ideas about how to treat industry and the ecology. Then we die!

Of course, science is not the only way to think about things. It doesn't answer all questions. For instance, it doesn't answer questions of politics or morality. But this does not mean that science is just an opinion in the areas that it does operate in. The reason why Gergen considers science an opinion is to justify his false theories of subjective freedom and social construction.

8 | DOGMATISM OR CURIOSITY? ARROGANCE OR HUMILITY?

D.P.C. Would you say that the ideas of subjective freedom and social construction are Gergen's dogmas? Both ideas appear as objective truths, as foundational premises, and their questioning provokes Gergen's intolerance, which is not lesser than the intolerance of science. In my opinion, by assuming these ideas, Gergen is not really avoiding foundational questions. When he asks to avoid these questions, he is just asking for acceptance of his foundational premises to put the debate on a social constructionist foundation. Therefore, he excludes any debate about social constructionism.

C.R. I agree. Personal construction of reality is his foundational premise. But he cannot say there are objective truths because he denies this concept. That is why social constructionism cannot justify itself. It has to admit that its premises are mere opinions that have no truth. There is no reason that Gergen or anyone should believe them. They are just titillating ideas. He does not even believe that what he says is true. He already makes himself irrelevant.

D.P.C. Is it not a kind of humility?

C.R. He can say anything he wants, and there is no independent evaluation of it, so how can you say he is humble? It is just the opposite. It is total hubris, dogma. If you invent any ridiculous reality, insist on it, and ignore challenges to your construction, this is not humility.

D.P.C. Gergen's reasoning seems to me as problematic as yours. Why should one be curious of the ideas of others—as Gergen pretends—if one believes that there are no grounds for them, and no truth anywhere? But perhaps the truth claims are simply not necessary for social life. However, if they really are necessary, and if one claims to have the truth, why should one be interested—as you pretend—in communicating and understanding the others?

C.R. You have not demonstrated that my reasoning is problematic. I have explained many ways in which Gergen's reasoning is problematic.

You ask why science should be interested in other peoples' ideas. One reason is to help them see things that their unscientific views overlook. For example, if your father smokes cigarettes, you want to inform him with scientific information that they could kill him, so he can live longer. Gergen hates this because he construes it as external imposition of behaviour on people that denies their own construction. But in this case, validating your father's own construction of smoking would kill him.

Scientists also interrogate people's ideas for new leads about various phenomena that can be incorporated into science. For example, a group of Indians may smoke and not develop lung cancer. This leads scientists to inquire into various factors that mitigate the effects of smoking on cancer.

D.P.C. Would you say that the real scientist never believes that he already has the truth?

C.R. There are some things that are obviously true. Water boils at 100 degrees centigrade at sea level and if you say, "Water boils at 10 degrees centigrade at sea level," any real scientist will say you are crazy. But that's not because he is close-minded. It is because some things are true. Other scientific issues are very complex and require long investigation. This is a period of approximation and uncertainty.

9 | SOCIAL FRAGMENTATION AS A CONSEQUENCE OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

D.P.C. You have condemned the constructionist elimination of truth claims for preventing communication and mutual understanding, and for leading to social fragmentation, to divergences between groups maintaining any belief system they want.

C.R. That is a very important issue. It is obvious that if everyone and every group can invent their own reality and nobody else can evaluate it or criticise it and try to change it, then clearly that's an example of social fragmentation. I call it "cultism." You're either in my cult or outside it. Cults are quintessential social constructionism. That is exactly what is happening in the United States today. Every crazy group can believe any crazy thing they want, and they don't talk to each other. The neo-Nazis don't talk with the Jews, the conservatives don't talk to the liberals, and the anti-abortion people don't talk to the abortion people. Now, people take their kids out of school and they educate them at home, and the kids don't have contact with other kids in school because the parents have their own religion and social beliefs, and they say, "The school does not accept my beliefs; I don't accept the school's beliefs." Everything is breaking down into dogmatic cults. Gergen never explains how these separate social realities would come together or what common interest they would have. Gergen's theory is part of all of this and encourages all of this. Once you say that everyone has their own reality, you destroy any possibility of unification. This is socially very dangerous; it leads to non-communication and prevents social integration. It is actually science that provides the unity of people. If it is true that water boils at 100 degrees centigrade at sea level, then that is a common reality we all have. People agree on this truth. That truth unifies people.

D.P.C. Actually, the idea of an objective truth presupposes a unification of people. Now we know, especially after Husserl's phenomenology, that objectivity is founded on intersubjectivity. It requires a relationship between people.

We can only scientifically accept that something is real, true and objective when many people agree that they have the same perception. But this is precisely what Gergen is saying . . .

C.R. I would reverse this. Science discovers truths, these truths must be accepted by bodies of people, and this is what creates community. If you say that people agreeing constitutes science, then you have to say that industrialists who agree that pollution is harmless have thereby created scientific truth. You are reducing truth to popular opinion. That's Gergenism.

Of course, science itself is a social, cooperative activity. Science is verified by multiple researchers cross-checking. However, I believe that the key to science—which makes it valuable and insightful—is its ontology, epistemology, logical reasoning, analysis, law of parsimony and methodology. I think that the scientific findings that emerge from this point of view create social unity because they are true and helpful. We may say that the social unity that results from science—for example, around ceasing to smoke cigarettes and reducing pollution—is far greater than the relatively few scientists who produced these scientific findings.

Gergen's solipsism and subjectivism destroy social unity because they generate individual constructs for individual uses. "It's how I see things," "It's how I like to express myself," "It's what is meaningful to me." Of course, others may agree with me if they so choose, that is, if their agency likes what I do. However, there is no social imperative to do any one thing because it is objectively helpful to masses of people. Again, constructionists eschew this way of talking as "scientific imperialism" (my term) that imposes action on the self.

Even the extremists don't take a social constructionist position because they assume their extreme beliefs are true. Religious people are sure that God created the universe. They are not supposing that it is a relativistic idea. They are saying: "That is true." They are not saying: "That is our imagination," or "That is a subjective reality," or "That is our own crazy idea." So nobody believes in social constructionism. Nobody, not even the crazy people!

D.P.C. Perhaps it would be better if they were social constructionists. Unlike social constructionism, religious dogmatism is really aggressive and divides society more than any relativism . . .

C.R. This is why we need science.

10 | TECHNOCRACY, CULTISM AND SOLIPSISM

D.P.C. Let me insist that science can also be dogmatic and aggressive, and oppressive and repressive in politics. This is something we know very well in Mexico. Science made us suffer throughout the twentieth century, from the times of the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship with his so-called "positivists" or "scientists" to the authoritarian and violent neoliberal technocracies of last three decades.

C.R. We have covered the fact that science can be employed by political interests to harm people. It makes no sense to blame science for this. What are you going to do? Outlaw science? The simple, obvious solution is to change political and economic interests so that they do not employ science destructively.

D.P.C. The problem is that science can become so powerful that it dominates political and economic interests. It's something that Marcuse and Habermas understood very well. Science can dominate us when it becomes as unquestionable as it is for you. This reminds me that Gergen, responding to your accusation of solipsism, accused you of another kind of solipsism, as you stay confined inside the old traditional communal reality of science and scientism, of positivism and empiricism, which would remain a territory beyond question. What would you respond to this accusation?

C.R. First of all, your or his use of solipsism is faulty. Solipsism is the belief that only the self can be known. Gergen is a solipsist in this sense. Nothing outside the self can be really known. Solipsism does not mean endorsing traditional science, for science seeks to comprehend the world in which individuals live—the cultural, physical, natural world. Science is antithetical to solipsism and vice versa. Science draws more and more people into comprehending and practising objective, scientific truths. Climatology has united millions of people together in believing and acting against pollution. Science convinced millions of people that smoking causes cancer. These converts direct their

behaviour to avoid smoking. Science brings all these new converts to “smoking causes lung cancer.” It unifies their beliefs, interpretations, perceptions, emotions and behaviours around a common understanding and course of action.

D.P.C. I feel that there is something dogmatic and totalitarian in this scientific unification of people . . .

C.R. If you know anything about the history of science, it was the scientists who criticised the Church for their ideological, self-serving ideas. So it is the scientists who destroy cults. That's exactly why Gergen hates science: because he is a cultist and he doesn't want science to destroy his cult, so he has to destroy science by distorting what it is in order to preserve his cult. In your previous question, you lumped science and scientism/positivism together. As I have explained, the latter are not scientific. Gergen and constructionists love to conflate these because they can then assert that science is as flawed as scientism is, and science can be rejected—leaving the individual to engage in subjective, individualistic acts that are construed as freedom.

D.P.C. I do not think that science and scientism can be distinguished so easily in our time. Your fervent faith in science can lead to a form of scientism. On the other hand, the scientific logic is less and less independent from politics since science is increasingly subordinated to technology, which in turn serves economic powers that are also political powers. Capital has oriented and internally shaped science in its development. I think all this perverts science and makes it not as innocent as you think . . .

C.R. Everything, including science, can be used for bad as well as good purposes. Nazis had Nazi songs, Nazi art, Nazi architecture. Nazis loved to listen to classical music. That is not a problem with music, art, and architecture. It is simply how they were used for political purposes.

11 | NAZISM AND THE NEUTRALITY OF SCIENCE

D.P.C. Both Gergen and you use the Holocaust example in your arguments. You, Carl, denounce constructionists for allowing historical negationism, as they do not have any reason to reject the local truth of those who believe the Holocaust never occurred. One can use science to prove that the Holocaust occurred. But Gergen replies that Hitler could also use science “to eliminate more Jews more rapidly, and science qua science had nothing to say about that.” Science can be used—in Gergen's example—to eliminate Jews, but it can also be used—in your example—to demonstrate and denounce the elimination of Jews.

C.R. Even if science is used to kill Jews, it is not a scientific issue; it is politicians who use science. It is absurd to blame science for the Holocaust. Gergen is totally wrong to denounce science for the problems that politicians are making. The Nazis did not even justify their acts on scientific grounds.

D.P.C. Nazis had their kind of science, including psychological science, to justify their racism.

C.R. That was not science! Just as denying global warming is not science and denying evolution is not science. Science consists of objective procedures that lead to objective conclusions. Science proves evolution and global warming are true. Science also shows that all races are equally capable and all genders are equally capable. Science refutes Nazi propaganda just as it refutes racism and sexism. These evils flourish by renouncing science. They are caused by political views. Gergen accepts these as personal constructions of reality. He also accepts opinions as science. If anyone claims to be scientific, he accepts this as their social construction of what they are doing. He renounces objective science. This is why he accepts Nazi practices as science: because he makes science relative to the speaker. He reduces science to subjective viewpoints. He abandons scientific critique as an objective standard that evaluates personal constructs. This makes him complicit with the most obscurantist and prejudiced and irrational thinking even when it claims to be scientific.

D.P.C. When you affirm that science refutes Nazi propaganda just as it refutes racism and sexism, I feel that science for you is not neutral, and has political implications. But you say, at the same time, that this is not the case. I'm confused.

C.R. Science is neutral, but it is about real things, and politics also refers to real things. When the Nazis said, “Jews are inferior people,” they were making statements about reality. So scientists came along and said, “Let's test that,”

and they found that biologically, Jews were not inferior. That's not exactly a political decision. It is just a neutral observation of reality. Science continues to be the best way to know reality. Real things are better known, more closely, with science than with politics or religion.

12 | RELIGION AND INDIGENOUS PSYCHOLOGIES

D.P.C. Are you sure that science is closer to the real than religion?

C.R. Yes!

D.P.C. But how can you be sure of this without science? You will certainly need science to demonstrate science, just as religion needs religion to demonstrate religion. Is it not a vicious circle, a question of faith? Gergen has suggested that. How would you respond to him?

C.R. It's perfectly obvious that religion has no empirical merit. Millions of people pray for God to help them in various ways, yet no help arrives. Natural disasters kill thousands of people despite their prayers. You don't need science to see this. Just count the prayers and count the results.

D.P.C. Just as science always finds a scientific way to justify itself, so religion always finds a religious way to justify itself . . .

C.R. But justification has nothing to do with evidences and proofs of reality . . .

D.P.C. The universe can be seen as proof or evidence of God's existence. Religious people may have other ways of knowing reality that we atheists do not have.

C.R. A devotee can justify the failure of his prayer to bring success by saying God is testing his endurance. This is simply covering one irrational notion with another. Nobody would equate this irrational justification with a scientific justification that is based upon objective, empirical tests and logic. Nobody except Gergen, that is, who accepts all subjective notions as equal because they express human agency. He falls down the same rabbit hole as religious extremists.

D.P.C. Why?

C.R. Anything goes for them because subjective wishes are what's real.

D.P.C. May I ask you, as a cultural psychologist, if you think that other cultures have developed other kinds of knowledge as reliable, as close to real, as Western science? What do you think about indigenous psychology?

C.R. Obviously, no culture has developed knowledge of the physical world as accurately as Western science. Of course, knowledge does not necessarily lead to good practice. We have seen how scientific climatology directs us to protect our natural environment; however, political-economic interests overrule this knowledge. Our results may therefore be more destructive and irrational than earlier societies', but this does not mean that our knowledge is inferior to theirs. I also believe that Western cultural sciences are more valid than earlier peoples' notions of culture and behaviour. Anthropologists and sociologists and historians have developed sophisticated understandings of how culture is organised and reorganised, and why cultures are qualitatively different. They, along with macro cultural psychologists, have also developed sophisticated understandings of how psychology is formed by culture. Bourdieu and Foucault and Durkheim have generated brilliant insights into this.

D.P.C. Many indigenous people of Mexico know very well that their conceptions of themselves are different from our psychological conceptions of ourselves, and they have interesting explanations of these differences . . .

C.R. But they are not using science to explain the differences. I argue that it is only the Western-developed idea of cultural psychology as a science that has explanatory principles and has scientific methods to illuminate the cultural bases of psychological ideas. Indigenous people have their ideas about themselves, but these ideas may emanate from religious myths or common sense. I think your question falls into Gergen's subjective relativism: all views about behaviour are equally valid.

D.P.C. So cultural self-consciousness is a privilege of Western science, and cultural psychology, as a Western science, is universal? At this point, I feel very uncomfortable. I don't even believe in the scientific claims of psychology, whether cultural or other. Psychological objective knowledge, for me, is inevitably ideological and responds to interests of

domination. It appears to me that cultural psychology functions as any other colonial ideology, monopolising universality, even when it is as particular and culturally specific as any other indigenous psychology. The cultural specificity of Western science is not universality, but this typically colonial universalism that has been so destructive to other cultures.

C.R. It is not colonialism. It is science! Science has to be the universal framework for understanding the specific cultural character of psychology in different places.

D.P.C. However, universal science and cultural psychology are, as if by chance, Western, white, European and American, while particular indigenous psychologies can be found in any culture. So it seems that Hegel was right. All cultures are enclosed in their particular views, while Western European-American civilisation attains the universality of knowledge. This is just colonialism, imperialism . . .

C.R. This is not imperialistic because I'm not saying that everybody should have the same psychology. I'm saying that the way to understand the differences between the Indian psychology and our psychology is to invoke general principles of cultural psychology. Imperialism will say, "I don't like your customs and you have to change, and your psychology has to change." But I'm not saying that anybody should change their psychology. There is a more accurate way of understanding their psychology, but that doesn't mean that their psychology must be dominated by us. It just means that the science of psychology should be dominated by us.

D.P.C. I wonder who "we" are, and what it means to "dominate" the science of psychology. I agree with you that it is a matter of domination, of power, and I still think this is a colonial power. This is the power of your supposed knowledge, of your Western cultural psychology, with its powerful, oppressive ideological element of universality, of self-consciousness that is supposedly absent in what people from other cultures know about them and humanity.

C.R. I think you are confusing psychological theories; you are lumping them all together. Most Western psychology is ideological and has been imposed on foreign societies, although not all of it is. For example, Western psychologists have engaged in empirical research that conclusively proves that mental illness is socially caused, not genetically caused. This is an emancipatory scientific finding that calls for humanising society. It has general application everywhere. This is not imperialist or ideological.

Another caveat about ideological Western psychology is that many foreign societies have avidly and voluntarily adopted Western psychology. China is an exemplary case. In the 1980s—when I lived there for two years and taught the first social psychology course (in Peking University) since the 1950s, when psychology was banned by the Communist Party as bourgeois science—the revamped, capitalist, Chinese Communist Party avidly welcomed Western psychology, and its perks of financial aid and international prestige. The CCP welcomed the ideological character of Western psychology that obscures the cultural basis of psychology. And through to today, Chinese psychology attributes psychological problems to individual factors, not social factors. I explain this in my book on neoliberal psychology (Ratner, 2019c).

However, cultural psychology arose to oppose this ideological, conservative, and anti-scientific mainstream psychology. Cultural psychology focused upon political, economic, and structural factors of society as the constituents of psychological phenomena. This led to tracing psychological problems to social problems, and to humanising social structures in order to generate fulfilling psychological phenomena. Gergen rejects this cultural psychology in favour of subjective relativism as a way to circumvent imperialism. However, disparate groups and conceptions are not impelled to unite to humanise the structural core of culture (Ratner, 2019c, 2019d).

Cultural psychology thus aids people to become more aware of their cultural structures, politics, and power relations. Cultural psychology also aids people to emancipate their cultures and their psychologies.

Scientific cultural psychology, which I have developed under the name of macro cultural psychology (Ratner, 2019a, 2019b), thus frees itself from the destructive characteristics which you identify with Western psychology. There is no reason to think that capitalist, Western psychology is the only model of scientific psychology. Psychological standpoints are cultural, and they vary with cultures. You can see from my brief description that macro cultural psychology is emancipatory for people who adopt it. It does not trap them in capitalist forms.

My cultural psychology is a set of general principles that enables us to understand that psychology is rooted in culture. Different cultures generate different psychologies. The way to understand particular qualities is through the general principles of cultural psychology, just as universal principles of evolution allowed Darwin to account for particular biological differences in different physical environments. Cultural psychology never stipulates that everybody does, or should, have the same psychology. It leaves it up to particular cultures to decide whether they are oppressive or fulfilling, and to analyse deep structural factors as the causes of oppression and fulfilment.

13 | CONCLUSION

David Pavón-Cuéllar and Karla Montserrat Ríos-Martínez.

Ratner and Pavón-Cuéllar did not reach any agreement. Their discrepancies are almost as deep as those that separate Ratner and Gergen. Now, four years after the controversial discussion, Pavón-Cuéllar has joined Karla Montserrat Ríos-Martínez to write in the third person a kind of conclusion (as if he were not part of the debate). The following paragraphs are not intended to be unbiased, much less express a consensus among the speakers. They are rather unilateral judgments that have not been fully accepted by Ratner and would surely not be accepted by Gergen.

Ratner believes passionately in science. He is convinced that scientific knowledge is closer to reality than other kinds of knowledge. It is not true that he wants to replace politics with science; he certainly recognises both fields as different and separate, but science has the last word with him when it comes to recognising the objective reality that is at stake in politics.

Ratner admits the existence of an objective reality, the same for all groups and cultures, precisely because he believes in the science that allows us to identify it. This may seem very strange to us when we remember that Ratner is a cultural psychologist. However, cultural psychology, as conceived by Ratner, is a science as universal as other sciences. It is located above the particularities of different cultures, and can objectively know their psychological knowledge—that is, indigenous psychologies.

Ratner's universalism of general cultural-psychological principles is rejected by Pavón-Cuéllar, who thinks it obeys a colonial perspective in which only Western knowledge—here paradoxically in the form of cultural psychology—is considered universal, while any other kinds of knowledge, such as indigenous psychologies, are confined to the sphere of the particular. Pavón-Cuéllar thinks that Ratner's cultural psychology is as particular as any other indigenous psychology, and has no way of rising to the level of universality as it cannot know the objective reality of different cultures and their different forms of psychological knowledge. Here, Pavón-Cuéllar seems to coincide with Gergen, but this coincidence is only apparent. As we have seen, Pavón-Cuéllar describes social constructionism as a form of idealism that is typically academic and common among psychologists. Instead, he believes in the existence of a single material reality that manifests itself differently for each subject and through each subject, but that for the same reason cannot be known objectively (as Ratner supposes).

The differences between Ratner and Pavón-Cuéllar relate to their opposing conceptions of critical realism, similar to the differences between Popper and Bhaskar. The differences between Ratner and Gergen, on the other hand, are epistemological, historical and political. They contrast constructionism and realism, subjective freedom and objective reality, and trust and scepticism regarding scientific objectivity.

Nowadays, when Gergen's postmodern constructionism doesn't seem to be trendy any more, we can more calmly judge his confrontation with Ratner's modern realism. Perhaps now we will realise that the difference between one and the other was not simply a gap between the past and the future. The difference was, rather, a contradiction between two equally current ways of conceiving psychology and its relationship to science and politics.

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