

## Limited = Limiting Reading of Social Constructionism: A Reply to Carl Ratner's "Epistemological, Social, and Political Conundrums in Social Constructionism"

*Pascal Dey*

**Key words:** social constructionism, conjuring trick, hyperreality, metonymy, ethos of reading, author/discipline-less production, inheriting

**Abstract:** RATNER's "Epistemological, Social, and Political Conundrums in Social Constructionism" provides ample illustration of how a grossly negligent, read both limited and limiting, exegesis of social constructionism has the demonstrable effect of installing the impression of the subject matter forming a homogeneous unity and an utmost negative one at that. The present commentary will show that the irony of RATNER's article is not that it has gotten social constructionism completely wrong but that it conceals that he himself is a (hyperreal) constructionist and that his account might be used for pinpointing how the construction of (hyper)reality works in textual practice. To rebut RATNER's assertion that social constructionist theorizing engenders a relativistic worldview of "everything goes" on the basis of his own account, it will be shown that though his truth is (partly) random, temporary and thus alterable it does have *real* implications (both existent and potential) for those referring to it, in either positive or negative terms. The commentary will close with tentative suggestions for an ethos of reading that seeks to cultivate a sensitivity towards the singular spirit of social constructionist writings as well as the necessity of creative inheriting and hence invention.

### Table of Contents

- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. Conjuring Trick](#)
  - [2.1 "Ratner"'s hyperreal metonymy or the anti-constructionist-turned-constructionist](#)
  - [2.2 The dark side of the hyperreal: Unity and the misguided reader](#)
- [3. Ethos of Reading](#)
  - [3.1 Step 1—Back to the "originals" or how to overcome "RATNER"'s simulacra of social constructionism?](#)
  - [3.2 Step 2—Author-/discipline-less production](#)
  - [3.3 Step 3—Inheriting, Experimenting and "Headaches"](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[References](#)

[Author](#)

[Citation](#)

"You have left your readers with a very special gift: a headache. By which I mean a problem: what in the world to do with it all. [...] That's where [our] experimentation begins."

(MASSUMI, 2002, p.19; slightly modified)

## 1. Introduction

RATNER's (2006) "Epistemological, Social, and Political Conundrums in Social Constructionism"<sup>1</sup> could be approached in a variety of ways: as indicating that it did not properly understand social constructionism (an argument which would probably be hard to sustain in light of RATNER's previous, more affirmative, writings on the matter; cf. in particular 1989), that his misreading was intentional, maybe even politically motivated<sup>2</sup> or that it qualifies as a superficially entertaining performance. Though all these perspectives are laudable in their own right and considering that some perspectives have already even been taken at *FQS* (cf. VAN OORSCHOT & ALLOLIO-NAECKE, 2006; ZIELKE, 2005, 2006), I take an alternative path so as to show that RATNER's account is not just negative, i.e. disastrously wrong, unfair or at most mildly amusing, but even creative and artistic in that it performs several cunning conjuring tricks: it conceals, first, that RATNER—by criticizing social constructionism based on an avowed anti-constructionist stance—is himself operating as the constructor of a particular reality of social constructionism. And second, though RATNER claims that social constructionists have no say whatsoever about objective reality (since claiming that there is none), it can be shown that his own account produces a particular truth about social constructionism which in turn has (might have) real effects (where the reactions at *FQS*, including the present one, form only the most obvious bit of evidence). [1]

Before discussing how RATNER's construction of social constructionism produces the (hyperreal) illusion of the matter being a unity and prior to elaborating on how we could counteract this particular reality, a couple of preparatory steps must be made. That is, provided that it is hardly tenable to assume that RATNER's text is unique (in the etymological sense of the term: forming the only of its kind)—which is evident from the plethora of polemics on social constructionism and the (unjustified and untenable) critiques of relativism at large (e.g. EAGLETON, 2003; SOKAL & BRICMONT, 1998) which preceded his account—it makes sense to render more or less anonymous any direct reference to RATNER as an individual. To this end, I will henceforth put RATNER in quotation marks (hence "RATNER"), thus indicating that the present

---

1 Notice that this article is a response to ZIELKE (2005) which forms a reaction to RATNER (2005) which again refers to an interview with Kenneth GERGEN (MATTES & SCHRAUBE, 2004).

2 According to DELEUZE (1995) there is "always a political motive behind any misinterpretation" (p.23).

confrontation (which never quite took place in reality<sup>3</sup>) is interested in identifying negative developments in academic reading practice and not in tracing reprehensible individuals. This minor alteration will give me the chance not to offend "individuals or proper names in the course of an argument that [...] might now and then [...] [be considered] to be polemical" (DERRIDA, 1988, p.36). Arguably, we had enough of that. [2]

The contribution will proceed as follows: first, it will be discussed that "RATNER" carries out a conjuring trick which allows him to conceal that he is actually actively engaged in both producing (read constructing) and promoting a particular truth about social constructionism. Second, after discussing the conjuring trick in its general modality and in terms of its creative qualities, I will go over to pinpoint the dangerous effects of "RATNER"'s hyperreal construction. Claiming that the most dangerous threat of "RATNER"'s account is that it delineates social constructionism as a unity, it is in the last part of this commentary that I will endeavor to outline an ethos of reading that aims at providing concrete measures for counter-acting "RATNER"'s monological reading of social constructionism. [3]

## 2. Conjuring Trick

Essentially, "RATNER"'s text—while joining the chorus of scholars who chant that social constructionism is largely anti-reason, subjective and nihilistic, and, worst of all, denying the possibility of truth, reality and meaning—serves as an apt illustration of how truth (of social constructionism) emerges as an effect arising from the production of knowledge. In other words, contrary to the well-known objection, offered by "RATNER" and others, that social constructionism is chiefly propounding the view that nothing is real and, by implication, that the truth withers to become a matter of individual choice and personal gusto so that people are literally free to claim whatever comes to mind, I argue that "RATNER"'s account is real and, by implication, effective and momentous in the sense that its inchoate collection of opaque, and at times elusive, arguments turns social constructionism into a dreadful and hence condemnable academic specter. [4]

Despite, or precisely because of "RATNER"'s claim that the question of truth (respectively of the validity of knowledge) does not matter much to social constructionists (since all truths are said to stand on an equal footing), a paradox is engendered at the hiatus of what he actually says and what he *de facto* does in his text. Thus, I will now get to demonstrate how "RATNER"'s account lends itself to illustrating the construction of social constructionism in action and how his account, or what I soon call "hyperreality", implies and stimulates real (and dangerous) effects. [5]

---

3 DERRIDA (1988), in the context of a dispute with John R. SEARLE, mentions that his textual exchange could be depicted as a "false beginning" since it relies on a confrontation which never really (i.e. in reality) took place: "I address it [his reply to a previous text by SEARLE] to Searle. But where is he? Do I know him? He may never even read this question" (p.29).

## 2.1 "Ratner"'s hyperreal metonymy or the anti-constructionist-turned-constructionist

It is at this juncture that I would like to discuss the irony imposed by "RATNER"'s text in its principal modality. Hence, departing from the paradox that "RATNER", despite speaking in the name of a declared anti-constructionist, turns out to perform the role of an imaginative constructionist, one must keep in mind that the truth entailed in his depiction (of social constructionism) ceases to be defined in terms of correspondence to an irrevocably real, i.e. pre-ordained, reality. Quite the contrary, "RATNER"'s social constructionism is unrecognizable and abstract (that is, etymologically speaking, "drawn away") in the sense that it bears almost no relation to the original ("almost" because his account in fact bears two traces to GERGEN; i.e. 2001; MATTES & SCHRAUBE, 2004). Nevertheless, and as will be discussed more thoroughly below, "RATNER"'s contribution is utterly effective in the sense that it puts the reader in the proper state of mind, setting the tone ("social constructionism is not worth reading, even dangerous"), and generally aiming to impart certain orders ("keep your hands off social constructionism!"). But how does all this become possible in the first place? [6]

To be very simplistic for once, "RATNER"'s account intervenes in the determination of social constructionism from its very inception in that it delivers the conclusion (i.e. social constructionism is not worth reading) before the demonstration has actually taken place. That is, it provides an evaluation of social constructionism without or only loosely grounding its claims on textual references or illustrations. Yet, though "RATNER"'s account makes disappear all traces to the real (read books, journal publications, conference speeches, etc.) this is not meant to say that it is either negativity (since malicious) or nothingness (since not substantiated/grounded in reality). It is rather the case that these omissions form an indispensable part of an artistic conjuring trick that aims at transforming social constructionism into a *sui generis* entity. To be sure, it is not only observable that "RATNER"'s account conceals the "real truth" about social constructionism (i.e. that what has *actually* been said/written about the matter), it establishes its own truth which in turn conceals that there is none (read the simulacrum is true). The striking irony revealed in this conjuring trick, however, is that "RATNER"'s account serves as an apt illustration of relativism (i.e. the perspective he seeks to challenge). In other words, "RATNER" brings to the fore not the question of false representation of reality but the understanding that truth is never really real (i.e. stable, objective, preordained, etc.). Therefore, "RATNER" can be construed as an anti-constructionist-turned-constructionist in that he effectuates a slippage of the reality of social constructionism which in turn points at, among other things, the elusiveness and ephemeral "being" of its truth. It is hence in his basic search for definition or denotation that "RATNER" creates (read constructs) the condition in which the distinction between the real (i.e. that which has objective existence) and the virtual or imaginary implode. [7]

With this as a backdrop, I prefer to conceive of the text at hand as effectuating a simulacra (BAUDRILLARD, 1988), that is, a hyperreal construction. Consequently, I find it both inspirational and helpful to make direct reference to

BAUDRILLARD (1994) who convincingly argues that the hyperreal has "no relation to any reality whatsoever" (p.6), it is a copy with no original (DELEUZE, 1990). To depict the text at hand as a hyperreal construction appears justifiable in light of the fore-cited observation that it only refers to two texts (by GERGEN) to make his point. More precisely, the conjuring trick relies on a metonymy in that "RATNER" uses GERGEN's social constructionism to make inferences about the field as a whole.<sup>4</sup> For instance, sentences such as "GERGEN's social constructionism is appealing because it appears to espouse tolerance and empathy with different viewpoints. However, social constructionism actually promotes the opposite of these; it promotes estrangement and divergence" (RATNER, 2005, p.1) reveal, among other things, that "RATNER" quickly browses across an isolated example, but then goes over to extend his claim to social constructionism at large. What this means, then, is that "RATNER" not only proceeds without either making references to the broader works of GERGEN or to other social constructionists to substantiate his claims, thus deliberately erasing all connections between the signifier and the signified, but (ab)uses the signature of an avowed forerunner of social constructionism to reduce an indisputably complex and variegated field of inquiry to a simpler or, more precisely, univocal entity. [8]

Having said that "RATNER" skillfully, even artistically, sets up a kind of BAUDRILLARDian hyperreality, the really important point to notice is that his account, notwithstanding its lacking touch with "real reality", has the (potential) effect of disavowing social constructionism *tout court*. It is hence in the following paragraph that I will discuss that the operation and force of a given text (such as that imparted by "RATNER") is not necessarily limited to its validity/truthfulness but to how the notion of "social constructionism" is used. In other words, I will show that social constructionism *is* (in the ontological sense of the term) only what it does and what is done with it. It is in this way that I will not primarily address "RATNER"'s misconception of social constructionism but pinpoint respectively the actually and potentially harmful effects of his hyperreal creation. [9]

## 2.2 The dark side of the hyperreal: Unity and the misguided reader

Despite the artistry revealed in "RATNER"'s conjuring trick one should not immediately accept as self-evident the things his text proposes to us and instead endeavor to reflect the potentially dangerous effects of his hyperreal construction. I would like to show that the preeminent danger of "RATNER"'s account is that it envelopes a looming marginalization of social constructionism in the realm of academia. Admittedly, one could reasonably claim that "RATNER"'s polemic is pointless since it has no other aim than stigmatizing those who have a contrary opinion as bad, even immoral, beings. Yet, I find it even more illuminative to mention that it entails a second conjuring trick; a novel working that produces the

---

4 Indeed, the metonymy is even extended beyond the field of social constructionism in the later part of "RATNER"'s response in that he uses WOLIN (2004) to connect social constructionism with postmodernism (sic) and hence to discredit this even more elusive assemblage based on their avowed political impotence.

illusion of similarity and identity<sup>5</sup>. Hence, though one could say that "RATNER" is an obscurantist, it is maybe less helpful to point at his tedious personality but at how his hyperreal construction, by simplifying at all costs, strengthens the impression of social constructionism forming a unity. [10]

Indeed, it only requires a small intellectual leap to understand the delimiting operation of "RATNER"'s account. That is, "RATNER"'s metonymy-based hyperreality practices a series of exclusions in that it takes a single and utmost elusive reference (to GERGEN) to make sweeping and exhaustive inferences about the identity of social constructionism. "RATNER" thus *a priori* excludes the possibility that the term "social constructionism" might "host" multiplicity or what I prefer to call, following DERRIDA (1988), the "*essential* possibility of those cases called "marginal", of accidents, anomalies, contaminations" (p.118; emphasis in original). Provided that "RATNER"'s account does (deliberately) not account for the possibility of social constructionism's differentness and diversity, it may be construed as remaining insufficient and thus in urgent need of extension. However, before I will immerse myself in the quest for finding apt measures for counter-acting "RATNER"'s uniform spirit, there is no way around accepting that the really dangerous ramification of this operation has yet not been discussed. Consequently, I hasten to provide some speculations about what could happen if "RATNER"'s truth would gain (even more) authority in propounding the (negative) essence or identity of social constructionism. [11]

Apart from the observation that "RATNER"'s construction of social constructionism is reductionistic<sup>6</sup>, the really important point is that it has, whether despite or because of its hyperreal character, already had some real effects (cf. the ongoing debate at FQS) and might have even more appalling ones in the future. Keeping in mind that RATNER's account (2006) has proven that he is wrong, *stricto sensu*, in claiming that social constructionism is "powerless to alter the status quo" (p.32),<sup>7</sup> the point to be stressed is that it is not important whether a certain text such as that by "RATNER" effectively pertains to truth, since the preeminent question is whether something being said (e.g. "I [RATNER] see it [social constructionism] as reflecting and also encouraging social disintegration and intellectual degeneration" [p.32]) has an effect on the broader reception of that particular reality. This question of textual authority, i.e. whether or not a statement gets accepted and stabilized as an objective truth claim, is what should worry us. Because despite the observation that "RATNER" is haunting a specter (i.e. a ghost of which one knows whether "it is living or if it is dead" [DERRIDA, 1994, p.6]), it is beyond all question that even the most unrecognizable, not to say false, claims can have real effects and cause severe damage once they are accepted as true. [12]

---

5 As opposed to difference and alterity.

6 Note in passing that RATNER, the proper name, seems to be well informed about the meaning of the word reductionistic; this is at least implied from his entry on reductionism in the 2008 Sage Encyclopaedia of Qualitative Research Methodology.

7 Precisely because his own account has led to a fundamental change in the truth of social constructionism.

As should be obvious by now, the important point to recognize is not that "RATNER" is mocking social constructionism instead of criticizing it on the basis of (sound) demonstration but that "RATNER"'s truth about social constructionism has worked and will probably continue to work despite being *obviously false*. "RATNER"'s account, which does not take the trouble of close, intimate examination, might have REAL effects in that it installs a view of the subject matter upon which others might base both their attitudes and deeds (read reading/writing habits). Obviously then, the (actually and potentially) harmful effect of "RATNER"'s account is that it is or might prospectively be used by those people who, for whatever reason, do not take the time to immerse themselves in what is sold on the market under the batch "social constructionisms". There is a dangerous game here; a game which conceals that "RATNER" is eager to say what is good and bad, and people/scholars (including the more arrogant ones who could not bother less about reading but also the more naïve and credulous) ask nothing better than to be told what is good for them and, by extension, what they should ignore.<sup>8</sup> [13]

Having depicted "RATNER"'s text as characteristic of hyperreal truth-telling, it is in conjunction with discussing a novel ethos of reading that I want to bring to light the variety, difference as well as the creative aspects of scholarly works on social constructionism; hence those aspects which are swept under the carpet by "RATNER"esque accounts. [14]

### 3. Ethos of Reading

First of all, it needs to be repeated that "RATNER"'s take on social constructionism is in fact not endemic, even less so unique, but representative of a particular scholarly fashion; a fashion on the basis of which scholars seek to make themselves a name based on downright, blatant reductionism. It is precisely at this point that I want to pose the question as to what might serve as an antidote against this kind of academic practice? To be very associative, one solution would be to dismiss "RATNER"'s account by arguing that it actually does not hit its target (remember: it is a hyperreality; i.e. a mimesis with no original!), that it is always "better to get on with something else, to work with people going in the same direction" (DELEUZE & GUATTARI, 1995, p.25) or even that "RATNER"'s text only shows, according to HERACLITUS, that "dogs bark at what they do not understand". Yet, I have already claimed that "RATNER"'s text does work (DELEUZE, 1995), though in a negative sense, which is evident not least from the sense of maltreatment it has engendered at FQS. In light of this, and following BAUDRILLARD's (1988) assertion that at a certain point in time the hyperreality always gets more real and hence powerful than the actual reality,<sup>9</sup> it

---

8 To proceed by means of allegory, the danger associated with "RATNER"'s account is that it operates like a sect leader in that it ideologically blinds the disciples' eyes, first, by showing how bad the other actually is and, second, by encouraging those same people not to read the original text(s); since it is either not worth the pain or, worst of all, dangerously seductive.

9 In fact, BAUDRILLARD reminds us that with passing time reality is put into complete oblivion by the simulacra.

might appear unwise, even fateful, to render ignorance or silence our primary choice. [15]

To say it without hesitation and in all brevity, the present paragraph holds the view that "RATNER"'s hyperreal metonymy is not commendable in the context of reading/writing. The reason for this, as pinpointed above, is that metonymy fosters the (false) conviction that a cursory look at one or a few entities (read texts) is sufficient for making inferences about the entirety of a given system (i.e. the whole range of thoughts on social constructionism). To be very captious and extreme by way of exception, the two texts by "RATNER" (2005, 2006) probably tell us less about social constructionism and more about a particular body of work written by someone who has never hesitated in using the label "social constructionism" (i.e. Kenneth GERGEN).<sup>10</sup> The point I am aiming at here, however, refers not to the appalling mistreatment of GERGEN's eloquent and inspiring work but to the observation that "RATNER"'s one-for-all exercise gets to perform an unbearable generalization and homogenization. To be sure, putting RATNER in quotation marks was not only intended to protect his proper name, his identity, but to show that it points at a larger problem in academia. Hence, what "RATNER"'s account seems to testify to is a way of reading text(s) which is at least hasty and, most fundamentally, to the ceasing virtue of affirmative reading/writing. We are here encountering not only a problem of truth (i.e. the false representation of social constructionism) but of truth-telling. That is to say that "RATNER"'s account is to be construed as an epiphenomenon of a larger tendency, i.e. that scholars accelerate their writing/thinking so as to collect just another credential (read publication) in their quest for academic status. If one temporarily accepts the assertion that "RATNER"'s account is just a symptom of a broader malady, then we have reached the point where we are called upon to look out for a positive *pharmakon*.<sup>11</sup> [16]

As a social constructionist (to use this awkward label on our own terms), who is often, though mostly wrongfully, accused of practicing an odd kind of *laisser faire* (i.e. accepting, even appreciating, whatever "truth" is passed forward), I find it most helpful not to practice the sort of misconceived tolerance, not to say undecidability, described by some anti-social-constructionists, but to sternly and unmistakably object to the one-sidedness and seeming homology entailed in "RATNER"'s derogation of social constructionism. To this end, I would like to suggest an image of scholarship that is better able to highlight the creditable variety and alterity of social constructionism (both in terms of theoretical/paradigmatic assumptions as well as investigated subject areas) that evidently yet indefensibly become inaccessible, even insensible, in "RATNER"'s take. [17]

This in turn obliges us to sketch out a formula, i.e. a set of suggestions for counter-acting the identified tendencies and dynamics. Essentially, though an ethos of reading cannot be too programmatic (since this would in turn limit the

<sup>10</sup> Though this assertion too might be overstated.

<sup>11</sup> Notice that the term *pharmakon* embodies a double meaning in that it signifies both poison and remedy (DERRIDA, 1981). Needless to say that I refer to the latter signification.



horizon of creative imagination), I would nevertheless like to proceed by providing a three-part list of tentative recommendations.<sup>12</sup> [18]

### **3.1 Step 1—Back to the "originals" or how to overcome "RATNER"'s simulacra of social constructionism?**

To be very schematic, the sort of ethos I am about to describe should necessarily depart from DERRIDA's (1988) insightful comment that "one shouldn't complicate things for the pleasure of complicating, but one should also never simplify or pretend to be sure of such simplicity where there is none" (p.119). Arguably, if things were simple, we would probably know by now, meaning that there would be consensus that social constructionism is a (singular) thing that can be learned almost effortless (i.e. without the ordeal of close reading). To get this unmistakably clear: would-be readers must not be seduced into believing that they should have it easy when reading and even less so that they are allowed to acquire knowledge based on short-cut summaries *à la* "RATNER". Indeed, the ethos of reading overlaps with FOUCAULT's (1996) plea<sup>13</sup> which holds that the writer—in the course of his/her analysis—"ought to read everything, study everything" (p.14). Apart from this admittedly pedagogic intervention, a new ethos of reading also suggests a "reading in love" (DELEUZE, 1995, p.9), that is, a reading that does not allow for rushing, for cursory, vertical browsing, for possession. This sort of reading implies an escape from the "desert" associated with second-hand denotations in that it obliges us to return to the "originals". Importantly, the ultimate aim of these two stipulations is that the process of reading gets to appreciate the breadth of writings on social constructionism by virtue of advising the reader to focus on the minutiae of each writing and on how each text engender a small extension of the available stock of knowledge of social constructionism. In my assessment, obliging readers to read the "originals" marks an utmost promising way to become concrete, i.e. "grow together" by way of directing them towards both text's little "imperfections and their possible good qualities" (FOUCAULT, 1996, p.454). It quasi represents a first step for learning to embrace the diversity of the available body of writing on social constructionism. [19]

### **3.2 Step 2—Author-/discipline-less production**

To be sure, even if one proceeds along the lines just described and though this might already cultivate a certain sensitivity towards the variety inherent to the sign "social constructionism", this alone does not solve the general problem of "RATNER"'s conjuring trick. That is, as long as texts embody a trace towards the term "social constructionism" there is always the possibility that a(nother) magician will come our way to use this umbrella term (in the context of, for instance, a(o)ther) bashing or hoax) to even out the variety of approaches (PEARCE, 1992). Though this might sound paranoid, I nevertheless believe that the label "social constructionism" is utterly problematic in that it allows for

---

12 According to BLANCHOT (1988), to "have a system, this is what is fatal for the mind; not to have one, this too is fatal" (p.61).

13 Which FOUCAULT formulated in connection with his archaeological inquiries.

confining multiplicity. One is therefore called upon to find a way to think "social constructionism" outside a uniform logic. [20]

Yet again, despite the existence of attempts that tried to break open the monological spirit of the label "social constructionism" by subdividing the field into different sub-territories, it is not enough to argue, for instance, that there are essential differences between social constructivist, social constructionist and relational constructionist approaches (FLETCHER, 2006) since this only postpones the whole problem. In concrete terms, extending a seemingly homogeneous entity into a, for that matter, three-part structure does not solve the fallacy of reductionism. Therefore, the aforementioned ethos of reading implies that we take the whole issue one step further so as to follow FOUCAULT (1996)<sup>14</sup> who says that the author (i.e. the proper name of social constructionists) must become an unknown marginal so that "critics will have to manage with an entirely anonymous production" (p.302). In my assessment, FOUCAULT's eloquent plea can, even should, be extended to render a given discourse (such as that on social constructionism) not only author-less but also disconnected from fixed disciplinary boundaries, seemingly essential scholarly traditions and, by extension, from the ubiquitous censorship of academic enunciation. Again following FOUCAULT (1996), there are good reasons to believe that social constructionism "is a category that exists for others, for those who are not [...] [social constructionists]. It's from the outside that one can say that so and so are [...] [social constructionists]"<sup>15</sup> (p.53). And we must hence stay vigilant towards the observation that it is only by dubbing people "social constructionists" that one is able to sustain the idea that they constitute a coherent group, "a group constituting some kind of unity that we ourselves don't perceive" (p.53). [21]

Inasmuch as one accepts that conventional categories do neither envelope the richness and variegation of FOUCAULT's opus nor the plurivocal body of writing on social constructionism, we can proceed by way of claiming that it is as a result of erasing the author's signature or textual imprint as well as of removing all traces with labels such as "social constructionism" that one is put under the strict obligation to approach each textual performance in its own right (FOUCAULT, 1996). The additional merit of such an intervention would be that one would simultaneously avoid construing individual texts as mere "derivatives" or representatives of a blatantly limiting umbrella term (e.g. "social constructionism"). It is in this way that apt attention would be given to the singular spirit, i.e. singularity<sup>16</sup>, of any given text. Or, following AGAMBEN (1993), it would enable the view that "pure singularities communicate only in the empty space of the example, without being tied by any common property, by any identity" (pp.10-11). [22]

---

14 "There are books for which recognition of the author provides the key to their intelligibility. But outside of a few great authors, this knowledge of the author's name has no real use. [...] books ought to be read for themselves" (FOUCAULT, 1996, p.454).

15 Bear in mind that FOUCAULT staged his argument in conjunction with structuralists/structuralism.

16 Note that singularity does not ignore that texts are always produced in and hence influenced by a particular context or tradition. Singularity hence emphasizes not uniqueness but rather that each text, social constructionist or other, engenders a repetition with a difference, rather than simply reifying what has already been said on beforehand.

### 3.3 Step 3—Inheriting, Experimenting and "Headaches"

Having suggested a, however farfetched, way for counter-acting the over-codification of the label "social constructionism", I would like to pinpoint and take issue with a last danger. Hence, insofar as one agrees that "RATNER"'s account all too easily renders the reader into a passive user, "in the same way as a lawn mower tends to mow the lawn regardless of who is moving it" (MEIER SOERENSEN, 2001, 369), it appears essential to reflect once more on the obligation and responsibility of the reader. Where it has already been said that the novel ethos of reading implies that the reader must not content him-/herself with browsing slim-lined diets of the "RATNER"esque type, there is also an obligation to re-read available text on social constructionism or on "the social construction of X or Y" not only in a scholarly fashion, since reading is never solely a matter of comprehension or intellectual denotation. It is or should necessarily become a matter of intensity and experimentation: "there is no other truth than the creation of the New: creativity, emergence" (DELEUZE, 1989, pp.146-147; quoted in SEMETSKY, 2006, p.5). [23]

On the same level as the impossibility of discovering absolute truth of social constructionism (cf. above) is the possibility of reading in a manner that focuses on the manifold exegesis of social constructionism. Re-reading available texts in a way that brings to the fore their diversity presupposes, first, that one accepts that each text contains its margin of play. In other words, to blur and hence complicate the limits of labeling obliges us to consider that each re-reading, each repetition brings about not the confirmation of the label's identity but its inherent difference (DELEUZE, 1994). [24]

Difference, however, does not come naturally,<sup>17</sup> so to speak, and it is probably closer to the "truth" that "difference must [actively] be shown differing" (MEIER SOERENSEN, 2001, p.368). To emphasize that re-reading is chiefly about the kind of iteration through "which something new takes place"<sup>18</sup> (DERRIDA, 1988, p.40), we must take into account that reading is an active process (and not passive consumption). By implication, instead of passively awaiting to be entertained (by "RATNER" or whomsoever), the reader should become a user (FOUCAULT, 1974<sup>19</sup>), not a reader, of social constructionism. To set a good example, I suggest to conceive of the ethos of reading as a process of "*active interpretation*" (JONES, 2002, p.226; emphasis in original) that aims at asking "what would we like to inherit from previous social constructionist readings and, most importantly, how would we like to use these works in remodeling the future understandings (notice the plural form) of our subject area?" It is thus particularly in view of "RATNER"'s negative truth-telling of social constructionism that one should treat the stock of available writing on social constructionism, both critical and affirmative, as a heritage that can, even must be, treated selectively.

17 Though it must remain clear that difference or the multiple (SERRES, 1995) are always ontologically prior to unity and order.

18 DERRIDA (1988) convincingly argues that iteration is always about difference in that the "*iter* [from iterability] [...] ties repetition to alterity" (p.44; emphasis in original).

19 FOUCAULT (1974): "I don't write for an audience, I write for users, not readers" (p.524).

Following DERRIDA's (1994) elaborate dictum that "[i]nheritance [of social constructionism] is never a *given*, it is always a task" (p.54; emphasis in original) we are reminded that social constructionism is always a matter of reference or, as EGEA-KUEHNE (2005) concludes in a different context, a matter of both questioning and assuming one's legacy. It is directly implied from this that "it is actually up to us to correctly choose what in [the] history [of social constructionism] to *remember* and what to *forget*" (CHEN & LAI, 2007, p.247; emphasis in original). [25]

Where inheriting implies a multiplication of forms of understanding and, most essentially, the ability to reject all forms of totalization, it must simultaneously be borne in mind that social constructionism does not have to be done anew or reinvented each time we opt to carry out an investigation of "the social construction of X or Y". There are those who have preceded us, who have swum in this water before, as it were, wherefore it would be pitiful if we simply ignored their heritage. If looked at in this way, it becomes helpful to once more summon FOUCAULT (1974) who has made it clear that the writings of others should be used as a tool-box "which others can rummage through to find a tool which they can use however they wish in their own area" (p.523). [26]

By way of concluding remark, all the above does not necessarily imply that the task of critique is impossible, not even unwelcome. Far from it. Yet, provided that the university is claimed of being the, *de facto* or potential, space for embracing the "right to say everything" (DERRIDA, 1995), one must immediately add that this rare space of unconditionality should nevertheless adhere to a non-polemic style of exchange. To keep advice and pedagogy at a minimum level, it shall suffice here to mention that respectively critical affirmation or affirmative critique require experimentation and a tactics that does not in the first place seek to displace or mute (which again is the primary ambition of polemics) but to afflict a text with questions and problems, that is, "headaches" (MASSUMI, 2002) to which the anonymous writer (cf. above) is invited to reply (again affirmatively). At the heart of such an ethos of reading one thus finds a *question-ability* as the art of intensifying idle potentialities of a given text, an art of participation/response that aims to (re)invent further exegesis. Whereas it hardly needs to be repeated that the ethos of reading does not exclude commentary of others' work (not even skeptical ones), it must be kept in mind that affirmation and creativity form two of its essential ingredients. That is, it transforms critical reading (from the outside; FOUCAULT, 1996) into an intensive reading that asks not what social constructionism is but how it works and how it can work for you. And if "nothing comes through, you try another book" (DELEUZE, 1995, p.8). [27]

## Acknowledgments

My *Merci* goes out to Dr. Barbara ZIELKE who affirmed this article in the first place.

## References

- Agamben, Giorgio (1993). *The coming community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Baudrillard, Jean (1988). Jean Baudrillard: Selected writings. In Mark Poster (Ed.), Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Baudrillard, Jean (1994). *Simulacra and simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Blanchot, Maurice (1988). *The writing of the disaster*. Barrytown: Station Hill Press.
- Chen, Fay & Lai, Chung-Hsiung (2007). "The time is out of joint": A Derridian reading of Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway. *EuroAmerica*, 37(2), 227-254.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1990). *The logic of sense*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1994). *Difference and repetition*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1995). *Negotiations*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles & Guattari, Felix (1995). *What is philosophy?* New York: Columbia University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1981). *Dissemination*. London: The Athlone Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1988). *Limited Inc*. Chicago: Northwestern University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1994). *Specters of Marx: The state of the debt, the work of mourning and the New International*. New York: Routledge.
- Derrida, Jacques (1995). Passions: An oblique offering. In Thomas Dutoit (Ed.), *On the name* (pp.3-31). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Eagleton, Terry (2003). *After theory*. New York: Basic Books.
- Eg a-Kuehne, Denise (2005). Right to humanities: Of faith and responsibility. In Peter Pericles Trifonas & Michael Adrian Peters (Eds.), *Deconstructing Derrida: Tasks for the new humanities* (pp.37-52). New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Fletcher, Denise (2006). Entrepreneurial processes and the social construction of opportunity. *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, 18(5), 421-440.
- Foucault, Michel (1974). *Dits et ecrits II*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Foucault, Michel (1996). *Foucault live: Collected interviews, 1961-1984*. New York: Semiotext(e).
- [Gergen, Kenneth](#) (2001). Psychological science in a postmodern context. *American Psychologist*, 56, 803-813.
- Jones, Campbell (2002). Foucault's inheritance/inheriting Foucault. *Culture and Organization*, 8(3), 225-238.
- Massumi, Brian (2002). *Parables of the virtual*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Mattes, Peter & Schraube, Ernst (2004). "'Old-stream' psychology will disappear with the dinosaurs!" Kenneth Gergen in conversation with Peter Mattes and Ernst Schraube [39 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 5(3), Art. 27, <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-04/04-3-27-e.htm> [Date of access: March 18, 2005].
- Meier S rensen, Bent (2001). Assemblage notes, or, a comment on the factory of things. *Ephemera*, 1(4), 367-373.
- Pearce, W. Barnett (1992). A camper's guide to constructionism. *Human Systems*, 2, 139-161.
- [Ratner, Carl](#) (1989). A social constructionist critique of the naturalistic theory of emotion. *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, 10(3), 211-230.
- Ratner, Carl (2005). Social constructionism as cultism. Comments on: "'Old-Stream' psychology will disappear with the dinosaurs!" Kenneth Gergen in conversation with Peter Mattes and Ernst Schraube [10 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 6(1), Art. 28, <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/1-05/05-1-28-e.htm> [Date of access: December 3, 2006].
- Ratner, Carl (2006). Epistemological, social, and political conundrums in social constructionism [33 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 7(1), Art. 4, <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/1-06/06-1-4-e.htm> [Date of access: January 13, 2006].
- Semetsky, Inna (2006). *Deleuze, education and becoming*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Serres, Michel (1995). *Genesis*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Sokal, Alan & Bricmont, Jean (1998). *Fashionable nonsense: Postmodern intellectuals' abuse of science*. New York: Picador USA.

van Oorschot, Jürgen & Allolio-Näcke, Lars (2006). Against the luxury of misunderstanding. Revisiting the debate between Carl Ratner and Barbara Zielke on an interview with Kenneth J. Gergen and his theory of social constructionism [49 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 7(2), Art. 17, <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/2-06/06-2-17-e.htm> [Date of access: August 8, 2007].

Wolin, Richard (2004). *The seduction of unreason: The intellectual romance with fascism from Nietzsche to postmodernism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Zielke, Barbara (2005). The case for dialogue. Reply to "Social constructionism as cultism" by Carl Ratner (December 2004) [12 paragraph]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 6(2), Art. 13, <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/2-05/05-2-13-e.htm> [Date of access: April 8, 2007].

Zielke, Barbara (2006). Not "anything goes." A critical assessment of constructionism and its misinterpretation. A comment on Carl Ratner's "Epistemological, social, and political constructionism" [21 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 7(1), Art. 27, <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/1-06/06-1-27-e.htm> [Date of access: April 8, 2007].

## Author

For the past five years, Dr. *Pascal DEY* used to work as a research assistant at the Research Institute for Organizational Psychology, University of St. Gallen, Switzerland. Today he likes to see himself as a free lancer who uses the liberty derived from not being bonded (which is the etymological meaning of "free") to throw his light spear (read lance) at whatever catches his attention and interest.

Contact:

Pascal DEY

Erlachstrasse 26  
Zurich, Switzerland

Tel.: +41-44-586-44-53

E-mail: [pasdey\\_at\\_hotmail.com](mailto:pasdey_at_hotmail.com)

## Citation

Dey, Pascal (2008). Limited = Limiting Reading of Social Constructionism: A Reply to Carl Ratner's "Epistemological, Social, and Political Conundrums in Social Constructionism" [27 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 9(1), Art. 47, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0801474>.