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Pragmatism and Constructivism in Contemporary Philosophical Discourse

Pragmatism and Constructivism are allies in many contemporary philosophical debates. In my view, there are a great number of affinities between both traditions that by far exceed the differences. In this essay, I intend to discuss some of these affinities and differences from the perspective of the Cologne approach of interactive constructivism.¹ Responding to recent debates among Dewey scholars about the core concepts of neopragmatism² – “experience” (e.g. Bernstein, Putnam) vs. “language” (e.g. Rorty, Fish) -, I will argue that constructivism offers a third alternative that may be helpful for rethinking pragmatism today: the concept of the “observer”. On the one hand, my thesis is that constructivism can profit a lot from pragmatism in devising an observer theory that avoids one-sidedly linguistic, cognitivistic, subjectivistic, or even biologicistic reductions. Rather, we should take observers as being at the same time agents and participants in cultural practices. On the other hand, I shall suggest that a constructivist observer theory of knowledge can inspire a critical re-reading of pragmatist classics such as Dewey that takes seriously both (post-)modern criticisms of naturalism and realism and poststructuralist approaches to discourse and power.

1. Observers/Participants/Agents

When Deweyan pragmatists hear the constructivist claim to appraise the viability of constructed realities by means of an observer theory of knowledge, many of them are likely to be reminded of what Dewey once called a “spectator theory of knowledge”. In “The Quest for Certainty” Dewey strongly rejected such a theory. In his view, the phrase summed up one of the most influential philosophical

¹ Interactive constructivism is a new approach in the German field of social and cultural constructivist thinking. The term “interaction” is used in the sense of what the late Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley called “transaction” (see Dewey 1991b). For recent publications in interactive constructivism see e.g. Reich (1998, 2000), Burckhart/Reich (2000), Neubert (1998a), Neubert/Reich (2000). An English introduction is presently being prepared as a co-authored book by Neubert and Reich.

² For an instructive survey see Kloppenborg (1998).

fallacies to which he opposed his instrumentalist transactional account of knowing via inquiry. His famous passage reads as follows:

“The theory of knowing is modeled after what was supposed to take place in the act of vision. The object refracts light to the eye and is seen; it makes a difference to the eye and to the person having an optical apparatus, but none to the thing seen. The real object is the object so fixed in its regal aloofness that it is a king to any beholding mind that may gaze upon it. A spectator theory of knowledge is the inevitable outcome. There have been theories which hold that mental activity intervenes, but they have retained the old premise. They have therefore concluded that it is impossible to know reality. Since mind intervenes, we know, according to them, only some modified semblance of the real object, some “appearance.” It would be hard to find a more thoroughgoing confirmation than this conclusion provides of the complete hold possessed by the belief that the object of knowledge is a reality fixed and complete in itself, in isolation from an act of inquiry which has in it any element of production of change.” (Dewey 1988a, 19)

To be sure, what Dewey opposes in this paragraph is the philosophical heritage of Platonist epistemology, and contemporary constructivists are certainly not under suspicion of promoting such an approach. To conceive of the “object of knowledge” as a “reality fixed and complete in itself”, isolated, unchangeable and unaffected by our will to know, is of course completely at odds with the very idea of the construction of realities by observers. However, there is maybe another and more subtle level of connotation on which, from the viewpoint of pragmatist critics, the constructivist “observer” and Dewey’s Platonist “spectator” might have something in common: a level that is indicated by such words as “aloofness”, “gaze” and “beholding” which indicate a specific form of detachment that is often associated with the very concept of “vision”. An objection of this kind is e.g. raised by Charles Anderson who contrasts pragmatism with what he vaguely and on the whole rather indiscriminately refers to as “postmodernism”.

“It is worthy of note that postmodernism, as positivism, takes the point of view of the detached observer. The appropriate position of the self-conscious mind is *outside* any enterprise of thought, any tradition, school, method, creed, or doctrine. (...) pragmatism, in any of its forms, must take the view that we think best not alone, but as participants, as parties to an ongoing project of inquiry.” (Anderson 1997, 118)

Let me take this objection as a starting point to prevent one possible misunderstanding from the start. As interactive constructivist, when I speak of observers constructing realities I do not necessarily imply a relationship of detachment or remoteness, as exemplified by the postmodern TV-watcher who zaps her/his ways through the virtual storehouses of electronic imagery. This is of course one possible cultural context of observing, but it is not at all a paradigmatic instance for all ways of constructing reality. In general, I conceive of “observing” in a

much broader fashion. It is not only seeing, but hearing, feeling, sensing, imagining as well. It is not only perceiving and thinking, but acting and participating as well. It is a case of doing and undergoing in the Deweyan sense that comprises all the immediate, fuzzy and elusive qualities of primary experience.

To argue for an observer theory of knowledge, then, should neither be misunderstood as an appeal to a narrow visualistic metaphor, nor should it be taken as an opposition to the pragmatic concept of joint activity in cultural contexts. Rather, the aim of maintaining such a theory is to refer knowledge claims to the *perspectives* of the observers who make them. It is to argue that all claims to knowledge be seen as provisional constructions of observers that on principle should be kept open to further re/de/constructions by other observers. This is not to say that all knowledge *per se* is relative for all observers at all times - which obviously it is not. But it is to say that there is no claim to true knowledge that *per se* warrants the consent of all observers and thus evades the possibility of relativization. I take this as a constructivist conclusion from a diversity of (post)modern discourses on knowledge criticism that show the inherent paradoxes of the absolute and the relative in the field of truth claims (see Reich 1998, vol 1). We shall return to this point in more detail in the second part of this essay.

Given the importance for constructivism of the idea of the observer, though, there is of course the question of how we spell it out, i.e. which perspectives we prefer in devising a constructivist theory of the observer. At present there is a variety of constructivist approaches that in part differ considerably with each other over this issue.¹ Having been proliferating particularly since the 1970s, parts of the recently emerging constructivist theories were at first stimulated not so much by developments within the humanities or the social sciences, but by discourses on cybernetics and the biology of cognition. Accordingly, the observer theories they designed were in the main rather cognitivistic and subjectivistic – e.g. taking cognitive autopoiesis as the key for explaining the construction of human realities. Many of these theories tended to underestimate the interactive and socio-cultural dimensions of experience. Since the 1980s and 1990s, however, there has been a broad movement which some have called a “cultural turn” in constructivism. The emphasis has shifted from cognition and biology to social and cultural perspectives, and today many constructivists are striving to overcome the more reductionistic assumptions of so called “radical constructivism” by reformulating constructivist thought within the discourses of the humanities and social sciences.

In this connection, there is at present an awakening interest in the “rediscovery” of classical pragmatism (and especially Deweyan pragmatism) among contempo-

¹ This is not the place to resume in any detail the complex and highly diversified scene of present day constructivist approaches. They comprise at least perspectives as different as constructive subjective psychology (Piaget, Kelly), materialist constructive theory of culture (Wygotsky), radical constructivism (von Foerster, von Glasersfeld, Maturana), systems theory (Luhmann), methodological constructivism and culturalism (Janich, Wallner) and socio-cultural constructivisms in many varieties (e.g. Berger/Luckmann, Gergen, Garrison, Reich). For a detailed survey see Reich (2001a). I confine myself here to outlining some main tendencies that I consider most pertinent to the present theme.

rary constructivists. For example, Jim Garrison (1997a) has recently opted for “Deweyan Social Constructivism” as an alternative to von Glasersfeld’s radical constructivism and subjectivism in the field of science education. I share Garrison’s conviction that “Dewey was a ‘social constructivist’ decades before the phrase became fashionable” (Garrison 1997b, 39). On another occasion, I have pointed out in detail why and how Dewey’s philosophy can be a major source of inspiration and reflection for constructivists today (see Neubert 1998a). I shall confine myself now to briefly indicating three perspectives of Deweyan pragmatism that in my view are highly relevant here.

(1) Dewey’s *theory of experience* offers an instructive observer perspective on the intimate relationships between knowing and making. His focus on primary experience as the source and *telos* of all reflection opens a view on life that frankly acknowledges the indeterminate, vague, obscure and fuzzy dimensions of human existence. In claiming that “the cognitive never *is* all-inclusive” (Dewey 1988b, 30), his philosophical experimentalism rejects all rationalistic attempts at symbolic closure for the benefit of appreciating the varieties and perplexities of human life-experience as it is lived in the concrete. This allows for the vision of a universe that is still ‘in the making’ (William James), an open and pluralistic universe in which there is space for something new to happen. Dewey’s radical understanding of the meaning of contingency is a trait that links his philosophy to postmodernity. Its importance for constructivism lies, in part, in the fact that for Dewey it is precisely the precariousness and incompleteness of our established systems of belief and knowledge that time and again calls upon us for new experimental constructions.

Furthermore, Dewey’s philosophy rejects the idea that the objects of knowledge are passively absorbed or taken in as mental representations of a fixed outer reality. On the contrary, his view of the relationship between primary and reflective experience implies – in constructivist terms – a circular logic of observation: it shows how knowledge is actively constructed in processes of inquiry that are located in the life-worldly contexts to which the practices of knowing give meaning. This contextuality of the Deweyan experience as a continuum of ‘doing’ and ‘undergoing’ implies that construction is always a transactional affair informed by the socio-cultural interactions in which we participate. Primary experience for Dewey is deeply imbued with cultural meanings. And it is part of the greatness of his thought that his profound “respect for concrete human experience and its potentialities” (ibid., 41) allowed him to put emphasis on the potential constructivity of human activities in all fields of cultural practice. The term ‘construction’ is indeed a recurrent and continuous motif in Dewey’s writings.

(2) Dewey’s *theory of habit* further elaborates the cultural embeddedness of human constructivity. It offers an interactive phenomenology that helps us to understand the intimate relationship of constructions, reconstructions² and

² I use the word “reconstruction” in a somewhat more limited and specific sense than it is commonly understood in English. In this sense “reconstruction” refers to the *reproduction* of previously established constructions. Although this can be an act of discovery that is largely constructive in nature, the emphasis in “reconstruction” is on the aspect of reiteration and not so

deconstructions in cultural practices, routines and institutions. For Dewey, all cultural viability rests on the operation of habits that inform our active capacities to master new situations. Individual habits incorporate the customs of our life-world. They provide us with the necessary reconstructive patterns that are part of ‘ethnicity as a cultural resource’ (see Neubert/Reich 2001b). Taken by themselves, however, these resources readily tend to petrify and become unreflecting routines unless they are enlivened by flexible readjustments to new experiences. Dewey’s emphasis on ‘problematic situations’ – or what following a suggestion by Thomas Alexander we might better call ‘tensional situations’ (see Alexander 1987, 301, Fn. 32) – stresses the importance of such readjustments for constructive growth and learning. Following his account of intelligent problem solving, our initial impulsive reactions to new and puzzling events provide the starting points for partly deconstructing an ‘apparently stable world’ we inhabited before and thereby putting at risk the viabilities we already had achieved. However, these partial deconstructions are an inevitable precondition for the possibility of constructing new visions and attaining new solutions. Hence for Dewey there is an indissoluble and eminently political connection between ‘Construction and Criticism’ (see Dewey 1988c). His view suggests that constructivism must in part be cultural criticism lest it underestimate the delimitations imposed on the freedom of constructions by established social practices, routines, and institutions.

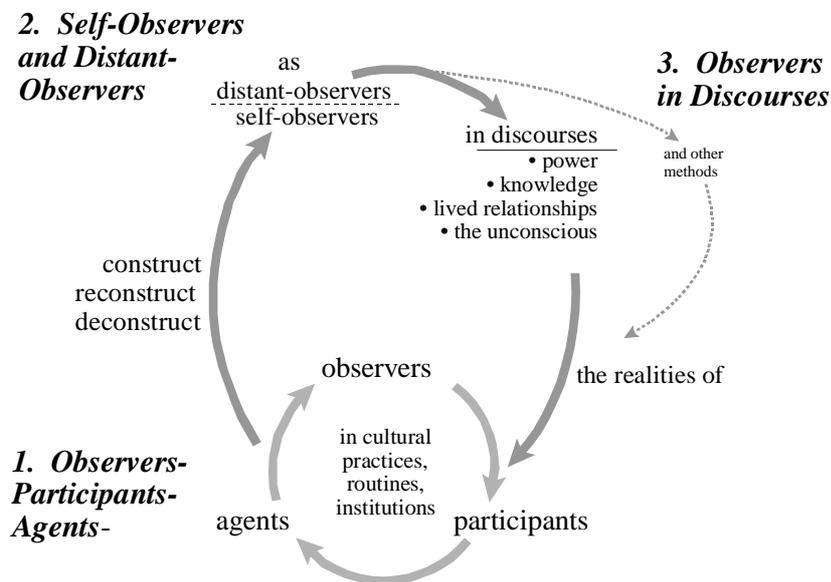
(3) Dewey’s *theory of communication* at least in part anticipates the linguistic turn that was to follow after his death. Most impressing for me is his acute awareness of the import of the imaginative in human communication. His original distinction between the instrumental and the consummatory phase of communicative experience testifies to his extraordinary sensitivity to the imaginative desire that drives human subjects to reach consummation and fulfillment by participating in symbolically shared meanings and values. This imaginative desire is highly relevant for constructivism, too, since it points to the more subjective, impulsive, affective, emotional, and volitional dimensions that necessarily must accompany our symbolical constructions lest they lose all sense and relevance to our personal lives.

Dewey’s theory of communication is of course closely connected with his ideal of radical democracy. Although, as a constructivist, I prefer a model of communication that more persistently stresses the unavoidable gaps and fissures between the imaginative and the symbolic and thus in part relativizes Dewey’s brave poem of free, rewarding and successful communication, I unreservedly consent to his credo that – politically as well as educationally – “Imagination is the chief instrument of the good” (Dewey 1989, 350). And I think that for contemporary constructivists as well as for contemporary pragmatists Dewey’s claim still holds true that democracy is a creative task before us (see Dewey 1991a) that challenges our imaginative and symbolical capacities to envision and accomplish viable ways of ‘the good life’ that we and others wish to live.

much on the aspect of renewal. I always use the word “reconstruction” in connection with “construction” and “deconstruction”, since the three terms taken together represent one set of observer perspectives to be distinguished but not separated.

To sum up so far, one crucial consequence of pragmatism for constructivism, in my view, is that when constructivists speak of observers, they should always have in mind agents and participants in cultural practices, routines, and institutions as well. Observing begins and ends in life-worldly contexts (as we say today) or in life-experience (as Dewey would have it) in all its ambiguities, uncertainties, contradictions and giddy varieties. Here we are always involved as agents who act in more or less consciously reflected ways on the basis of preestablished habits that largely grant the viability of our daily practices. And as agents we are always participants, too, since it is only by communication and shared activities that acting becomes meaningful and informed by performative agency. The interdependence of observers/participants/agents, then, constitutes the primary circle of what I want to suggest as a constructivist account of the cultural construction of realities.

However, this is but the first step of my argument. I shall now turn to another constructivist distinction that may help us clarify some differences between contemporary constructivism and pragmatism and provide us with some critical perspectives for a constructivist interpretation of Dewey. The diagram sketches the course of my argumentation.



2. Self-Observers and Distant-Observers

According to interactive constructivism, observers are “on principle to be situated within the context of interpretive communities³: they are subjects who from the outset participate in the discursive construction of realities on the basis of cultural pre-understandings and in interaction with other subjects.” (Neubert/Reich 2001a, 10) Furthermore, we should distinguish between what I suggest to call self-observers and distant-observers.⁴ As self-observers, we observe ourselves and others *from within* the practices and discourses in which we directly participate. As distant-observers, we observe others in their practices and discourses *from outside*, be it by temporal or spatial detachment or from the distance of reflection. However, this distinction should not be misunderstood as a separation, for the transitions are fluid. As distant-observers we are always at the same time self-observers within our own context of observation, while as self-observers we may at any moment try to imaginarily project ourselves into the position of a distant-observer who looks and reflects from outside.

This distinction, I further suggest, is becoming more and more important for philosophical reflection in times of postmodernity. It is a marked trait of present day discourses that they have diversified to a degree that no one self-observer can overlook the varieties of approaches even in a limited field of discipline. In proclaiming the end of the “great projects” and “meta-narratives”, postmodern criticism of knowledge focusses on how the pluralization of possible truth claims has rendered any single and comprehensive approach to knowledge questionable. Truth claims more and more seem to be stated by the ones only to be relativized by the others. “In the juxtaposition of approaches, plural knowledge gets relativized and deconstructed by itself, since discourses of knowledge have multiplied and differentiated to an extent that the *one* obligatory truth for all observers can only be seen as the fantasy of a long lost unity of science.” (Ibid., 22) In my view, this situation suggests that a constant readiness to change perspectives between self- and distant-observer positions should be seen as a minimum requirement for postmodern knowledge.

At the same time, it seems to be a characteristic of postmodernity that varied interpretive communities of philosophical discourse tend to co-exist while sometimes taking pretty little notice of each other. The present juxtaposition of pragmatisms, constructivisms, deconstructivisms, poststructuralisms and the likes, all operating in their respective circles, meeting at their respective conferences, and articulating themselves in their respective publishing organs, sometimes gives

³ I borrow this phrase from Stanley Fish (1998, 419). The German term is *Verständigungsgemeinschaft*. Translated literally this would be “community of understanding”, which perhaps sounds somewhat awkward to Anglo-American ears.

⁴ The term “distant-observer” is not a wholly equivalent translation of the German *Fremdbeobachter*. However, I could not find a more satisfying expression in English. The German *fremd* properly means “alien” (or “strange”), but “alien-observer” would point toward the false direction, since it completely neglects the dialectical relationship of self and other implied in the German *selbst und fremd*. Simply to speak of the “other observer” would be misleading, too, because in most cases the *Fremdbeobachter* is not the other with whom we directly interact, but a third other who observes from a distance.

one a troubling feeling of closure. Of course there are interconnections, I would not deny this. But to my mind they are often too feeble and their mutual impact remains too marginal. For example, I must confess that it took me by surprise that when I was reading in a comprehensive book on neopragmatism with several contributors focussing on Dewey and political theory⁵ while preparing myself for this paper, I did not find a single reference to what I regard as one of the most interesting recent approaches to radical democracy – namely, the poststructuralist theory launched by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. I shall briefly return to them later. What I want to suggest at the moment is that to me this confusing juxtaposition of communities of discourse, while certainly being an inevitable consequence of postmodernity, seems all too often to be a hindrance to exchange and mutual learning.

In a word, I think that looking more persistently for possibilities of boarder-crossing the discursive lines of postmodern thought is certainly one of the most promising and at the same time fascinating ways to try to advance our approaches. At least this vision inspires me to travel between contemporary constructivism and pragmatism. These boarder-crossings as self- and distant-observers often help us to increase our capacities for a thoroughgoing rethinking of the traditions to which we adhere. They may at times involve the deconstruction of even the core concepts that have become dear to us when we first learned to work with them.

To go beyond established teachings or doctrines whenever changes in our times, life-experiences, and intellectual resources demand, is of course a most Deweyan thought. So re-reading Dewey through postmodern eyes may be said to be an exercise in what – paraphrasing a famous dictum that Lacan used to qualify his relationship to Freud – we might call “going beyond Dewey – with Dewey”. However, as we will see in what follows, I think that with regard to some of the specific answers to philosophical questions that Dewey gave in his time, this will at the same time partly be an exercise in “going beyond Dewey – without Dewey”.

Empiricism – Naturalism – Realism

As a constructivist, what I think we should go beyond today is first of all Dewey’s “empirical naturalism” or “naturalistic empiricism” (Dewey 1988b, 10). This is not to say that in my view it is nonsensical to talk about experience and nature in ways that Dewey did. Quite on the contrary, I believe that books like “Experience and Nature” or “The Quest for Certainty” have been pioneering works and still can be regarded today as milestones in pragmatist and constructivist thought. As I indicated before, Dewey’s characterization of natural existence as “a constant mixture of the precarious and the stable” (Dewey 1988a, 194), his sensitivity to the qualitative and aesthetic dimensions of primary experience, his complexly developed conception of the circular interdependence between primary and reflective experience, his open-mindedness to the contingency of the world in which we live and his experimentalist account of all kinds of knowledge in my

⁵ I mean the impressing and inspiring volume “The Revival of Pragmatism” edited by Morris Dickstein (1998).

view are very fruitful ways of talking about these things. They have considerably contributed to developments in (post)modern thought that I regard as important.

However, when it comes to launching these ideas under the name of “empiricism” or “naturalism”, I cannot consent.⁶ For after all, nature, existence or primary experience do not speak to us, but we, as human observers, speak about nature, existence and experience. And here Dewey’s description is but one observer perspective among others that are equally possible. As self-observers, we may readily be tempted to think that the ways we look at nature, experience or existence are grounded in something that is either independent of human observer perspectives or at least to be observed so generally that it can be stated as “the generic traits of existence” (Dewey 1988b, 50) that may properly be expected to be consented to by all other observers. (Dewey’s naturalistic metaphysics opted for the second alternative.) If, however, we look as distant-observers comparing different and competing philosophical or metaphysical discourses on nature, existence, experience, reason, the spirit or life in hindsight, what we find is a succession and juxtaposition of approaches that each in their time and place proved to be successful explanations. In constructivist terms, that is to say they were perspectives constructed by observers that turned out to be viable in the context of their interpretive communities. Constructivists think that in the long run none of them should be expected to appeal to all observers, for none of them is grounded in anything that is more persistent than the cultural viability they have for those to whom they do appeal.

Hence when Dewey, e.g., proclaims his “faith in experience when intelligently used as a means of *disclosing the realities of nature*” (Dewey 1988b, 4-5; italics mine), when he refers to evidence in nature and claims to have discerned traits of aesthetic quality that “*indubitably* characterize[] natural situations as they empirically occur” (ibid., 82; italics mine), I can understand that this was a useful and probably indeed an indispensable strategy to back up the philosophical criticisms that he launched against the powerful and deeply entrenched traditions he offended as a self-observer in the interpretive communities of his time. However, I do not think that these strategies are as useful and as inevitable in our own day. As many more recently launched (post-)modern criticisms have shown, every attempt to ‘naturalize’ culturally constructed concepts and interpretations involves the exclusion of alternative perspectives, since the ‘naturalized’ tends to elude any attempt at deconstruction.⁷ If constructivists avoid terms like “naturalism” and “empiricism”, their aim is precisely to see to it that every observer perspective – including their own – be held open for further deconstructions.

This criticism may be extended to the very realism that undergirds both Dewey’s empiricism and naturalism. To do so, I must first make some brief

⁶ For a more detailed discussion that involves a constructivist critique of neopragmatist defenders of Deweyan naturalistic metaphysics like Stuhr, Sleeper, Boisvert and Alexander see Neubert (1998, 66-141). See also “Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society, vol. XXVIII, No. 2, Spring 1992” for contributions by the neopragmatist authors just mentioned.

⁷ See e.g. Butler (1990), Foucault (1999), Hall (1997), Popkewitz et al. (2001), and, for a comprehensive discussion from the viewpoint of interactive constructivism, Reich (1998, vol.1).

remarks on the constructivist concept of reality.⁸ Interactive constructivism claims that all realities are constructed by observers/participants/agents. However, this claim does not imply that realities constructed by observers are all-embracing and tight totalities that do not have gaps or fissures which render them *precarious* constructions. Rather, they are viable “ways of world-making” (Nelson Goodman) *amongst other* viable ways precisely because of this precarious and incomplete status. As a constructivist I do not think of denying that there is always something independent of our constructions, a world that is never completely absorbed in our observer perspectives but often takes us by surprise and ‘acts upon us’ when we have least expected. In interactive constructivism this is called the ‘real’ that enters our experience as an event and sometimes disturbs even the most entrenched certainties of our constructed realities.

However, what I do deny is that for constructivism there is any direct approach to symbolically ‘take in’ this ‘real’ as a constituent part of our discourses on reality. Even to talk about ‘the real’ is already but a construct to denote the recurrent experience that something is missing, that something eludes even our most refined constructions and returns to us as inner lack – the impossibility to attain a final closure. This recurrent experience, I maintain, can only be denoted as a limit. Of course, whenever we encounter real events in our life-experience – say an accident, the death of someone we love, a sudden pain without explanation, a situation that confuses us, something we could not foresee and that seems puzzling, unintelligible or even senseless – we will try to cover them imaginarily and symbolically and make them a part of our re/constructed realities. (This is precisely what Deweyan inquiry as a method of knowing is about.) As an event, though, ‘the real’ eludes our attempts at symbolic ordering.

Now realism, as I see it, is an approach that at some point or another ventures to grasp the “really real” as something *independent* of any specific observer position.⁹ Of course I acknowledge that many contemporary realists (as Dewey did in his day) actually do concede that human realities are largely constructions that respond to concrete needs, interests and searchings of observers/participants/agents in the always contingent contexts of culture and history. However, in trying to say what reality really is, they ultimately project themselves into a position that neglects any reference to a specific observer position. If asked why I suggest that we should not do so, my answer would at first be that anybody indeed may do so to whom this approach appeals as viable. This is part of our freedom of decision as observers in (post-)modernity. My second answer, however, would be to add that as a constructivist I think it is wiser to refrain from discerning the ‘really real’, for any such attempt ultimately tends to transform a cultural construction into an ontological or metaphysical statement that by necessity delimits the realm of further possible de/constructions. If as realists we believe that reality is ‘essentially’ the reality of, say, Deweyan primary experi-

⁸ For a comprehensive discussion see Reich (2001b).

⁹ “(...) the question at issue is what the real is”, says Dewey in “Experience and Nature”. “If natural existence is qualitatively individualized or genuinely plural, as well as repetitious, and if things have both temporal quality and recurrence or uniformity, then the more realistic knowledge is, the more fully it will reflect and exemplify these traits.” (Dewey 1988b, 127)

ence, then to be realistic we have to stick to this one interpretation which involves a very specific view on knowing, the aesthetic, the social and the political.¹⁰ If reality, on the other hand, must always be referred to (and thus relativized by) observer positions, then we have greater freedom to change our observer perspectives and even assume views that at some points are radically different from the ones we cherished before.¹¹

I grant that this constructivist freedom of possibility may seem threatening to some who suspect it to expose us to the arbitrariness of the “anything goes”. They maybe think of it as an unduly weak position that bereaves us of any solid ground to walk on. Yet I think that this apparent weakness is indeed a strength provided we acknowledge that the construction of realities does not occur in an isolated realm of pure subjectivity or omnipotent will. It is part of the cultural practices in which we participate. After all, even constructivists cannot simply actualize any possibility whatsoever, but only those discursive options that are available to them as viable solutions in the interpretive communities to which they adhere. And here the “solid ground” we need to walk on is formed by the beliefs that we cherish – e.g. beliefs about our common capacities to find viable solutions to the problems we face, our responsibility to recognize the constructions of other observers even if they do not seem viable to ourselves, and our commitment to the principles of democratic participation. As democrats, we may defend and fight for these beliefs as essential ingredients of our vision of the ‘good life’, even though – as constructivists – we acknowledge their radical contingency as cultural constructions. In this sense I consent to a remark by Stanley Fish who in responding to a critique aptly maintains that indeed “*anything that can be made to go goes*” (Fish 1998, 432).

To sum up, my constructivist interpretation of Deweyan pragmatism is more biased to welcoming the turn to language than to opting for a realistic, empiricistic or even metaphysical concept of experience. However, my suggestion to those inclined towards the Rortyan end of the neopragmatist arc is that the focus on interpretive communities, descriptions, redescriptions, talking and other linguistic concepts be critically linked to a constructivist observer theory that anchors the hovering language games in the concrete socio-cultural practices, routines, and institutions in which agents participate as self- and distant-observers. These cultural practices are always informed by discursive practices involving power relations. Hence, my third step will be to consider new approaches to discourse and power that may help to further differentiate postmodern criticisms while at the same time opening up new vistas for pragmatist thought.

¹⁰ This is precisely what happens when e.g. Raymond Boisvert ventures to reconstruct Deweyan metaphysical realism as a “ground map of the prototypically real” (Boisvert 1998).

¹¹ In this sense I think that even Hilary Putnam’s (1998) recent attempt to launch a concept of “direct” or “natural realism” based on Deweyan and especially on Jamesian pragmatism goes in the false direction.

3. Observers in Discourses

From the viewpoint of interactive constructivism, Kersten Reich and I have recently launched a theory of discourse that largely draws on postmodern and poststructuralist theoretical developments (see Neubert/Reich 2000). This theory distinguishes four perspectives that we suggest for contemporary analyses of discourse: “power”, “knowledge”, “lived relationships” and “the unconscious”. Although time forbids to go into detail here, I want to indicate at least some lines in which I think that constructivist and poststructuralist approaches to discourse can offer valuable stimulations for rethinking pragmatism today.¹²

(1) Discourse and Power

According to interactive constructivism, discourses are never unambiguously accomplished, seamless totalities, but incomplete structures with open sutures that while being established are almost already in transition toward something else (see Neubert / Reich 2001a). This view of discourses, firstly, takes over from poststructuralism the idea that discourses are largely characterized by overdetermination. That is to say that discourses are always multilayered formations of meaning that allow for diverse and even antagonistic articulations. The arbitrary and never wholly stabilized relationship between signifier and signified makes possible condensations and displacements of meanings that lead to a potentially endless ‘game of differences’. Hence any given articulation allows for possible re-articulations and de-articulations that are at the most but temporarily delayed.

Secondly, discourses always involve power relations. Power, however, should not be thought of as monolithic force, but as something largely disseminated throughout discourse. Following Foucault, power operates like a chain that goes through the individuals. Accordingly, while there is no observer position within discourses that is beyond power, neither is there a position where the effects of power are total. Both arguments (overdetermination and power) stand in intimate connection. Taken together, they explain why the poststructuralist (and constructivist) argument that subjects are *constituted* in and by discourse, is by no means equivalent to saying that they are wholly *determined* by discourse. On the one hand, any concrete discursive formation implies a limited set of subject-positions that subjects may actively occupy as self- and distant-observers. These positions delimit their scope of possible observation and articulation. On the other hand, however, the overdetermined character of even dominant discourses involves that there is always the possibility of new articulations that partly elude hegemonic interpretations by displacement. Hence, while always being pervaded by power, no discourse can in the long run block the possibility of counter-strategies that

¹² I would contest the suggestion sometimes heard in association with Rortyan pragmatism that Deweyan philosophy is some kind of ‘homegrown poststructuralism’ that avoids the excesses of nihilism or pessimism often attributed to the adherents of Foucault while retaining the valuable critical insights. Certainly there are a number of parallels between pragmatism and poststructuralism, in particular issues concerning antiessentialism and antifoundationalism. I think, however, that there are also constructive traits in present day poststructuralism that definitely differ from Deweyan pragmatism and can provide critical perspectives for a postmodern reading of it.

subvert established hegemonies. It is precisely this discursive suspense of re/de/articulations that allows for subjective agency in discourses.

This view of discourses throws some critical light on classical pragmatism. Especially in Dewey's philosophy of communication, we find a strong idealization of discourse which in some respect resembles contemporary approaches to discourse ethics. Habermas' theory of "communicative reason", e.g., bets hope on an idealtypical concept of freedom from domination as a regulative principle for the concrete assessment of empirical discourses. The emancipatory value of this approach should of course not be denied. However, the very idealization of discourse that Habermas as well as Dewey build upon (although in very different theoretical ways and with different consequences for their respective understanding of democracy and democratic practices) is rendered questionable given the poststructuralist view of discourse and power. For the vision of a free, full and unconstrained communication among equals and across differences often tends to neglect the intricate power effects that are always at stake when differences are articulated in the concrete. Nancy Fraser has recently observed that many of the classical pragmatists like John Dewey, George H. Mead, Jane Addams, and W.I. Thomas are today "widely seen as having failed to give adequate weight to the 'hard facts' of power and domination in social life." (Fraser 1998, 158-59) In her view, this failure in particular implies not sufficiently having stressed "the centrality of power to the regulation of group differences in the United States." (Ibid., 159) Indeed, in spite of Dewey's penetrating social and political criticisms that – particularly in the period after World War I – unyieldingly denounced the economical injustices and antidemocratic tendencies of his time (see Neubert 1998b, 2001a), I think that Fraser is not wholly wrong when she states that he and others "tended at times to posit imaginary, holistic 'solutions' to difficult, sometimes irreconcilable, social conflicts." (Fraser 1998, 159)

In my view, pragmatists should today be ready to deconstruct and relativize these 'holistic' tendencies as part of a political imagination that, although it certainly helped to back up the emancipatory aspirations of Dewey and many of his fellow progressives, in times of postmodernity increasingly loses plausibility. To be sure, this is not a call to abandon the social hope or the critical ideal expressed in this political imagination. Rather, what I suggest is to rethink the discursive strategies of giving reasons that support our claims to radical democracy.

(2) Democratic Communities and the Public Sphere

This, of course, has important consequences for the pragmatist conception of democratic communities. Richard Bernstein has recently provided an instructive survey of "Community in the Pragmatic Tradition" (see Bernstein 1998). I do not want to resume his argumentation in detail here. Rather, I would like to indicate one critical viewpoint from the perspective of constructivist discourse theory. In all of its forms, the classical pragmatist concept of the democratic community is clearly committed to a paradigm of reconciliation that feeds on religious sources as well as secular enlightenment ideals. It strongly emphasizes the possibility of consensus and raises high hopes of eventually attaining some kind of unity in

diversity. One of the most striking examples of this hope is certainly to be found in Dewey's passionate search for the Great Community (see Dewey 1988d).

However, this consensus oriented view of the political has been increasingly becoming doubtful towards the end of the 20th century. Informed by postmodernist and poststructuralist thinking, more recent theories of radical democracy have been striking a somewhat different note. One of the most influential approaches in this connection is the one launched by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (see Laclau/Mouffe 1991, Laclau 1990, Critchley/Derrida/Laclau/Rorty 1996, Mouffe 2000). They argue for an antagonistic (or agonistic) model of the political that stresses the necessity of hegemonic struggles in a contingent field of political decisions. Democratic negotiations are possible and necessary, but we should not expect too much of them in the way of achieving consensus. Radical democracy, in this view, rather implies the recognition of the indispensability of dissent and quarrel. Dissent is seen not as a lack, but a requirement for pluralist democracy. Of course consensus is necessary, but this hegemonic necessity should be limited to the very institutions that are constitutive of the democratic project itself – “the presence of institutions that establish a specific dynamic between consensus and dissent.” (Mouffe 1996, 8) At the same time, pluralist democracy lives on the possibilities of expressing conflicting interests and values. And those, Mouffe suggests,

“should not be seen as temporary obstacles on the road to consensus since in their absence democracy would cease to be pluralistic. This is why democratic politics cannot aim towards harmony and reconciliation. To believe that a final resolution of conflict is eventually possible, even when it is envisaged as asymptotic approaching to the regulative idea of a free unconstrained communication, as in Habermas, is to put the pluralist democratic project at risk.” (Ibid.)

In a word, Laclau's and Mouffe's much more modest faith in consensus allows them to conceive of pluralism even more radical. Of course I would not deny that Deweyan communities are always to be thought of as pluralistic communities. But seen from the viewpoint of Laclau and Mouffe, the strong longing for unity in diversity tends to neglect the antagonistic character of pluralism whenever difference is articulated.

A critical approach to rethinking the democratic public sphere that defends a more radical concept of pluralism closely related to the one suggested by Mouffe has recently been offered by Nancy Fraser (1994). She argues, among other points, for a thoroughgoing revision of the traditional liberal concept of a single, comprehensive public sphere as the foundation of civic society. Based on feminist and other minority discourses, she questions “the assumption that the proliferation of a multiplicity of competing publics is necessarily a step away from, rather than toward, greater democracy” (ibid., 80). She suggests that both in the case of stratified societies and under the conditions of (hypothetical) egalitarian, multicultural societies a multiplicity of publics and counter-publics is preferable to a single, overarching public sphere. In terms of Laclaus and Mouffes theory of

hegemony, we might say that the constitution of a public sphere always involves hegemonic effects that privilege certain subject-positions at the expense of excluding and marginalizing others – e.g. women, workers, peoples of color, gays and lesbians (ibid., 84). And it has been a recurring and notorious experience of social movements in the 2nd half of the 20th century that for these other, marginalized voices to articulate themselves it is at first necessary to fight for the establishment of democratic counter-discourses that contest the hegemony of the dominant public sphere. This is precisely what hegemonic struggles in present day democracies largely are about.

(3) Cultural Theory

I think that it is not at all fortuitous that these and similar criticisms should increasingly be raised in present day multicultural and postmodern societies. They testify to a deeply changed perception of societal conflicts, struggles, and visions. For interactive constructivism, they are important observer perspectives that can help us rethink the old pragmatist vision of a pluralistic universe under contemporary conditions. In my view, there are at present a number of critical approaches in the fields of cultural studies (see e.g. Hall 1996; Hall ed. 1997; Hall/Du Gay eds. 1996; Grossberg/Nelson/Treichler eds. 1992), gender studies (see e.g. Butler 1990; Benhabib/Butler/Cornell/Fraser 1995) and postcolonial studies (see e.g. Hall 1992; Bhabha 1994; Chambers/Curti 1996) that provide further suggestions for this. By proliferating deconstructive perspectives on dominant Western discourses, they increasingly introduce contextuality, diversity, parody, and hybridity into cultural theory. Focussing largely on minority and marginalized positions, they show the variety of cultural viabilities that co-exist in present day societies and, what is more, point out how difficult or even impossible it is for many of them to find equal recognition in democratic discourses. In doing so, they represent a major challenge for any constructivist or pragmatist discourse on radical democracy (see Neubert 2001b).

Interactionist Constructivism in part tries to answer the increased claims to plural recognition by introducing into cultural theory a discourse model that besides focussing on the entanglements of knowledge and power also offers perspectives on discourses of lived relationships or lived cultures. These perspectives are devised to highlight the oftentimes incommensurable observer realities in life-worldly multicultural contexts that are becoming cultural normality in the processes of globalization. With regard to lived relationships, observing sometimes gets very difficult because relationship realities are often pretty fuzzy even (some say especially) for those who actively participate. Here every distant-observer is most directly confronted with the need to relativize her/his views in the encounter with others. As a self-observer, s/he is always in danger of misunderstanding. In addition, the discourse of the unconscious suggests that there are unconscious dimensions of desire that further complicate the possible (mis)understandings of self and other. However, this should not be conceived of in a narrow psychoanalytical sense. The unconscious as an observer perspective in constructivist discourse theory comprises the subconscious and preconscious phases of habit as well as the not-yet-conscious and suspended meanings of any

tensional situation. The discourse of the unconscious, then, is devised to remind us of the limits to our capacities for (self-)reflection as observers in discourses (see Reich 1998, vol. 2).

Maybe there is no better way for me to come to a close than by referring to one of the most admirable creeds of classical pragmatism. "Hands off", says William James in one of his talks to teachers and students, for "neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar positions in which he stands." Thus he urges us to "tolerate, respect, and indulge those whom we see harmlessly interested and happy in their own ways, however unintelligible these may be to us." (James in: Kloppenberg 1997, 70) This, indeed, seems to me to be a most valuable tenet for a constructivist ethics of observers in a pluralistic postmodern world.

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