Sociology 412

Social Construction of Reality

Instructor: Professor Tom Semm Office: NH211

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594-5906

Class Meets:

Monday 3:30-6:10PM

SH 119

Office Hours:

Monday/Tuesday 2:30-3:30PM

Texts:

Ewen, Stuart. *PR! A Social History of Spin*.

Gould, Stephan Jay. *The Mismeasure of Man*.

Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.

Lewontin, Richard. *Biology as Ideology*.

Patel, Raj. *The Value of Nothing*.

Semm, Tom. “Globalization and the Power of the Image.” (Handout)

Course Description:

Traditionally, classes in the social construction of reality examine the ways in which micro, or daily, social interactions create, and recreate, the social world. Since the publication of the work that originally defined this area of inquiry, Peter Berger’s and Thomas Luckmann’s The Social Construction of Reality, several factors have transformed it. The first factor is the linguistic turn which has conceptualized a new idea of language. Its main claims are that language mediates human experience of the world, more radically, creates the “world”; it also claims that language structures consciousness and is inextricably woven to power relationships. There is no better example of the connection between language and power than the word “freedom” which is now being used in a specific way, unlike any previous way, by powerful interest groups to justify policies of determinism (unfreedom). The other factors which have impacted social construction are post-modernism, post-structuralism and post-empiricism. From this transformed point of view, the macro-structures of society, in fact modernity itself and its ideologies (science as one), are socially constructed phenomena. They are not the result of micro interactions, nor of evolutionary development, but of social and cultural forces and powerful interests creating, shaping and justifying a world in which they are the primary beneficiaries. The social construction of reality from this point of view demystifies reality as given, “out there,” natural and inevitable, as something to which we must conform, and reveals it as a construct and points us in the direction of recreating it.

For example, economists claim to be scientists of the market. They argue that the market is a system, an autonomous sphere, a reality out there and that it functions according to given laws, laws as predictable as the laws of nature. They claim to have discovered this market system, the laws that govern it, and human nature, individual’s driven by greed. An examination of these claims from the social construction point of view demonstrate that the market system (free market, capitalism) is a social construction, as is the claim about human nature. Various social forces and powerful interest groups were involved in shaping it and its ideology, which includes the discipline of economics. This is important because the myth of the market system is the dominant ideology in the U.S. and globally and as neoliberalism presently claims to be the truth. And in fact, one of its claims is the deterministic one that there is no other alternative, to be free we must live in a market system.

One other example, science claims to be an autonomous discipline, governed by an objective method. Scientists, pursuing this supposedly neutral and unbiased method, claim to have discovered a thing called “intelligence.” And they claim this thing can be measured through the application of an IQ test. A critique of these claims from a social construction point of view reveals there is no empirical evidence that there is a thing called intelligence, or that an IQ test could measure it even if there were. The critique also reveals the function of this claim is ideological. It justifies broad social inequalities based on race, gender and class.

The focus of this class will be on examining the socially constructed nature of the world we live in today. In other words, what and who have been the social forces and powerful groups shaping contemporary society. To find the answer to these questions, the first step will be to analyze the social construction of modernity, its primary institutions and ideologies. They are capitalism, science, the “individual” and the “Other.” Next the course will focus on analyzing the impact of technologies of the image, social theories of social control and the ways in which they enable powerful interest groups to create “reality” and its “subjects.”.

“Economics are the method but the object is to change the soul.”

Courses Goals:

1. Students will gain an understanding of how the institutions and ideologies of modernity emerged.
2. Students will gain an understanding of how science, technology, forces of consumerism have allowed powerful interests to create post-modern reality.
3. Students will gain the ability to analyze social phenomena from a critical point of view.
4. Students will recognize social reality as a set of social phenomena that have been created by social forces and institutional actors to serve those interests and that social reality can be changed.

Evaluation Process:

There will be three exams worth seventy (70) points each. In addition, there will be both announced and unannounced quizzes. There may be extra credit opportunities, but such opportunities will depend on whether the socially constructed environment of the class is positive.

Classroom Expectations:

As I say every semester, I am not a vice principal, nor do a disciplinarian, and I not appreciate having to be one. So stay off your cell phone, the internet, no private conversations, no outside reading material, and do not come to class and study for another class. I do not take attendance, so you do not have to be in class, and if you are and you break the rules, I will deduct points from your grade the first time, and after that I will flunk you no matter what.

Class Topic Assignment

I. Social Construction of Modernity

Week 1 Great Transformation Patel I(1 and 6)

Week 2 “Free Market” Patel Part I (3,4, 5)

Week 3  **No Class: Labor Day Sep 7th**

Week 4 “Individual” Patel Part I (2)

Week 5 **Exam #1 Mon Sep 21**

Week 6 “Science” Lewontin 1,2 Gould, Intro

Week 7 “Other” Gould 2.3.5

III. Social Construction of Postmodernism

Week 8 Social theory, the Image and Ewen Part I

“The House of Truth”

Week 9 Social Construction of Consumerism Ewen Part II and III

Week 10 **Exam #2 Mon Oct 26**

Week 11(2nd no class) Ewen Part IV and V

Week 12 (9th) Politics of Mass Media Harvey 1 and 2

Week 13(16th) Fantasy World of Harvey 3

Neoliberalism Semm “Globalization . . .”

Week 14(23rdno class) **Thanksgiving Vacation**

Week 15(30th) Socially Constructing Another Lewontin, “The Dream of the human World Genome”

“A Story in Textbooks”

Week 16 **Exam #3 Mon Dec 7**