

From weak social constructionism to critical realism in housing theory – exploring issues

Less than a decade ago a debate about social construction raged in the international journal *Housing, Theory and Society* (Lawson 2002; Somerville and Bengtsson 2002; Manzi 2002). Arguably, at that time social constructionism, with its rich variations (Fopp 2007: 8-13; Jacobs et al 2004: 4-8), had been generally accepted internationally as the predominant methodology in, and theoretical basis of, housing research. There are numerous examples of this trend including Franklin and Clapham's analysis of housing management (1997) and the work of Jacobs, Kemeny and Manzi (2000), which culminated in their book-length treatment, *Social constructionism in housing research* (2004a). One of the advantages of social constructionism is that it held that policies and practices, social attitudes and discourses are inextricably linked to particular times and places, ideologies or interests.

Rather than accept at face value the underlying assumptions in housing policy, research and theory, the former could be identified as bound to particular interests (Fopp 2008). Rather than such interests being incorporated into research as taken for granted assumptions (as occurred in positivist methodologies), social constructionism possessed the potential for critique. Housing policies and practices reflected a time and place, interests and ideologies, and so the potential for a critical approach which exposed the underlying and tacit assumptions and discourses could be identified, their time and location detected, and the interests and ideologies on which they were based exposed (Franklin and Clapham 1997; Gurney 1999).

Further, the version of social constructionism that seemed to emerge as the most popular among housing researchers was known as 'weak' social constructionism' because it is more modest, rejecting the relativistic implications of its 'stronger' cousin while also acknowledging that there is a social reality to which the housing policies and practices refer (Jacobs et al 2004; Kemeny 2004). While the 'strong' social constructionist position questions notions of 'truth, objectivity' and social 'reality', there are certainly some constructionists who do not reject them altogether (Jacobs et al 2004: 3-4; Fopp 2007; 2008).

In the volumes of *Housing, Theory and Society* during the period between approximately 1997-2007 there was another position which operated almost as a foil, in the double sense of opposing social constructionism and throwing its features into sharpest relief. In housing research, this position was called *critical realism* (Fitzpatrick 2005; Lawson 2002; Somerville and Bengtsson 2002), a position which had been applied to, and become popular in, philosophy (Aronson 1984; MacKinnon 1972), in the social sciences generally (Sayer 1984; Outhwaite 1987) and even theology (Polkinghorne 1998). In the theorising and research in the social sciences, in particularly in housing, researchers have acknowledged many of the aspects of 'weak' social constructionism but they were much more comfortable with notions of truth, objectivity and reality. Indeed, according to critical realists, without such notions a critical social science was impossible.

As a precursor to a paper to examine Australasian housing research in a theoretical context, the primary aim of this paper is to highlight the essential features of critical realism. To my knowledge there is no evidence in the Australian literature which might indicate that Australian housing researchers have engaged with, explored or critiqued, this position.

Thus, the paper attempts to advance the understanding of critical realism in general terms, and does so by comparing it with its apparent rival, ‘weak’ social constructionism (where the housing literature will be used). This paper is primarily about critical realism, with other methodologies mentioned in order to make the comparisons and contrasts necessary for understanding its position in the theoretical landscape. This is thus an exploratory paper which attempts to engage international theoretical debates among Australasian housing researchers. It is relevant to housing research in Australasia because: it provides the background and context to critical realism which is the major alternative to social constructionism in the international housing literature; it compares and contrasts weak social constructivism and critical realism in housing research; it uses the work of housing researchers and theorists (Jacobs et al 2004a, Manzi 2004, Travers 2004) in order to compare key points in both perspectives and further, provides the basis for making specific comparisons between the perspectives, for example, by comparing what the different perspectives highlight in regard to homelessness, or so-called problem tenants, or allocation policies in public housing.

Context – positivism and interpretivism in social science

With few exceptions (Sayer 2000), the trajectory of critical realism as it is expressed currently in the philosophic and social science literature is rather circuitous if not tortuous and technical (see, for example Archer et al 1998). However, so that it can be applied later to housing research I will use that which is better known in the social sciences to elucidate the twists and turns.

It is well known that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Emile Durkheim advocated that sociology should emulate the methods and theories of what counted as socially credentialed and certified knowledge in the natural and physical sciences. He was rather sanguine that by using such methods and theories of knowledge, or epistemologies, sociology would disclose forces and laws similar to those uncovered in the burgeoning natural and physical sciences and, as allegedly with the latter, to the betterment of humankind. As such he was influenced by the positivism of Comte. Thus, for example, he developed his notion of ‘social facts’ (Durkheim 1968).

By contrast, and at approximately the same time, Max Weber was suggesting that the new discipline of sociology abjure the method and epistemologies of the natural and physical sciences (Scott 1998: 105-106; Sayer 1984). For Weber, the focus of sociological examination was about social meaning, that which was socially significant, about interpretation. He advocated an interpretive approach at variance with that used in physics and chemistry (Scott 1998: 105-106).

Here we can descry a *leitmotif* in the history of the social sciences in general and sociology in particular (Bhaskar 1989: 3) which highlights the salient issues which have been relevant in the recent international debates in housing research and theory. In question form it can be formulated thus: in calling itself a social science, should sociology follow the methods and epistemologies used in the natural and physical sciences, or should it develop a unique method and epistemology appropriate to the focus of its inquiry?

In short, the question became: “What is the ‘science’ in social science? Yet one reason that question was asked was related to the focus of the social science discipline regarding its

particular human focus. For Weber, sociology had a different focus to the natural and physical sciences, it studied different things, different realms or domains and, thus we might say, different ontologies, one natural and physical, the other human. This also raised the question: ‘What is the ‘social’ in social science?’ As we shall see, the debate about which science to adopt, the meaning and parameters of ‘social’, the privileging of epistemology over ontology, are the precursors of current debates and reactions, including those associated with critical realism and thus are relevant to the origins of the debates in the housing literature.

An incursion – Logical Positivism and its Critics

Interposed between such perspectives and the current positions, was the influence of the Vienna Circle of Logical Positivism. Their credo of the late 1920s and early 1930s was intended to be progressive and emancipatory, a counter to the metaphysical absolutes which they believed contributed to the First World War and were the scourge of post-war developments. Moreover, their brand of positivism became very influential in the social sciences in the English speaking world, particularly after they were removed by the Nazis from their academic positions in Germany and migrated to the United States. Until the 1970s, their position was largely adopted as the exemplar of epistemology and methodology in the social sciences in the English-speaking West.

In the tradition of French positivism, and against the neo-Kantian distinction between the natural and human sciences, the Logical Positivists advocated a unified science with a rigorous principle of what constituted verification. Implacably opposed to metaphysical statements, and empiricists to the core, they argued that the meaning of a proposition was identical to the method of its (empirical) verification. If a statement could not be verified it was devoid of meaning. They also advocated the unity of science which meant that they colonised the source of objective knowledge by dictating that only that which came within their rubric, could be classified as ‘scientific knowledge’ (Hanfling 1971; Fopp 2008: 161-162).

When transformed into post-Second World War social science, logical positivism became a view of science which insisted that gaining ‘truth’ was the feasible and plausible aim of science, that their unified method was the only means available to access a ‘real’ world which could be regarded as objective. It was this perspective, and its tacit assumptions and implications, to which three perspectives, social constructionism, postmodernism, and critical realism responded, albeit with different emphases and in different ways (Lopez and Potter 2006: 6-12).

Postmodernism and social constructionism

Postmodernists’ accounts are more likely to accept the social construction of social reality but find in social reality a multiplicity of discourses (Cahoone 1996). Of interest to postmodernism are the ambiguities and the varied nature of the social world which are disguised, masked, excluded and repressed by the socially dominant metanarratives.

Postmodernism diagnosed the repression of heterogenous and diverse cultures and societies by powerful discourses which are, in turn, homogenous and uniform. In this common scenario, what constitutes social knowledge is a function of who holds power. Some knowledges are subjugated by those who have the power to position them in a socially

belittled and discredited way; others are accepted by powerful interest groups and socially validated (Cahoone 1996).

Thus, postmodernism tends to reject the possibility of accessing truth, the existence of what is 'real' (other than that which is socially constructed) and objectivity. Some postmodernists go further to argue that it is impossible to adjudicate between the diversity of perspectives, to say that one, or one set, is preferable to another. This is an epistemological view sometimes known as judgmental relativism or, in so far as values are the focus, epistemological value relativism (Bhaskar 1989: 123-124).

Arguably, this relativism was extended into the natural and physical sciences by the critique of science proffered by Kuhn's (1971) consensual view of scientific paradigms, Feyerabend's (1989: 19) 'anything goes' view of science and developments in the sociology of science in which scientific facts were understood as 'constructed'. The nett result, adopted by some forms of postmodernism and the 'strong' version of social constructionism, was that there is not only epistemological relativism between values but also between facts. The fact-value dichotomy - which asserted the possibility of objective facts, and the relativity of values - had collapsed so that, if previously it was impossible to arbitrate between values, it was now impossible to say that one fact or set of facts, or theories, was superior to another.

'Weak' social constructionism also emphasises that 'reality' is socially constructed. This had, and has, the advantage of unsettling and problematising those socially credentialed, ordained and popular assumptions that were implicit in definitions and explanations of social phenomena, including those associated with housing and homelessness. Articulated in the housing literature, the 'weaker' position maintains that our access to the material world is mediated through language and discourse (Jacobs et al 2004: 3). This position 'does not entirely reject the notion of an objective understanding' of "truth" because it makes the distinction between 'ideas and concepts which are socially constructed' on the one hand, and 'social and spatial process which have a material existence', on the other (Jacobs and Manzi 2000: 38).

Critical realism and the possibility of naturalism

Critical realism is most at variance with positivism and postmodernism over the issues of the possibility of objectivity, the prior existence of a 'real', independent social world and the possibility of verisimilitude (in this sense of approximating the truth or getting closer to it). However, a fundamental question which critical realists ask concerns what is usually called *naturalism*. The question is: should 'social phenomena be studied in (broadly speaking) the same manner as the objects of natural scientific knowledge?' (Potter and Lopez 2001: 8). While positivism answered affirmatively, and the interpretivism (following Weber) answered negatively, critical realism maintains that the social sciences should emulate the natural and physical sciences, and that it is possible to investigate the social world as a science.

But this does not mean that critical realism sided with positivism and rejected interpretivism and hermeneutic variations (Sayer 2000: 17-18). It is more complex than that. In a minimalist sense, critical realism agreed that it was possible to study the social world as objects were studied in the natural and physical world. But it was there that any similarity ended; apart from this point, critical realism, inter alia, rejected outright positivist

epistemology and, in particular, the privileging of epistemology over ontology (Outhwaite 1987; Bhaskar 1989: 18-20; Bhaskar 1979: 11-17).

Yet, while rejecting the non-naturalism of the interpretivist/hermeneutic tradition in social inquiry, the critical realists took seriously both aspects of the rigorous interpretivist distinction between causal explanation in the natural and physical sciences, on the one hand, and the importance of meaning and understanding in the social sciences, on the other. While interpretivism argued that the social sciences differed from the natural sciences because the social was about meaning and understanding, the critical realists argued that their naturalism required *both* causal explanation and inquiry about social meaning and understanding (Sayer 2000).

According to critical realism, it is important both to be able to arbitrate between theories *and* to seek a theory which has the most explanatory power as well as recognise the human component in knowing and the constructions in the social world. Here, it is possible to see where critical realism diverges with postmodernism (against the postmodernist relativism in facts and values) but converges in some respects with interpretivism and the weaker variety of social constructionism (because critical realism recognises the human element in the social realm which are constructions).

Critical realism – challenging the positivist privileging of epistemology over ontology

However, there is another area in which critical realism is at odds with positivism. The positivists argued that there was one method, which meant one epistemology, by which all objects of knowledge should be examined. Unless they used this method, it would be impossible for such objects of knowledge to satisfy the conditions for them to be certified as valid, as objective (Hanfling 1971). If the object of knowledge under investigation did not conform to this epistemology, if it was insufficiently malleable to be construed into this epistemology, it could *not* be regarded as valid objective knowledge – and this, even before the particular object of knowledge was studied in any detail. This could be called the *a priori* exclusion of certain objects of knowledge before any real investigation of it took place. In fact, the presumption behind it claimed that objective knowledge about such an object was impossible.

So, for example, the result of normative discussions in political theory about the best regime could not yield objective knowledge because the norms and values with which political theorists dealt were not amenable to the one method and epistemology which could yield such objective knowledge. Such knowledge might be obtained by undertaking a survey of what citizens believed because it could be quantified in the way prescribed by the positivists. But, overall, normative discussions in political theory were ideological not scientific (Hanfling 1971).

This priority of theories of knowledge as the precondition of any form of examination in any area, discipline, domain, field of inquiry or realm, has characterised human inquiry and investigation since the beginning of the Enlightenment (Taylor 1995). Arguably, however, it reached its zenith in the social sciences in the middle decades of the twentieth century. This primacy of theories of knowledge as the undisputed starting point of research, this privileging of epistemology over the object of things under investigation, over ontology, is sometimes known as the, ‘epistemic fallacy’ where the ontological questions can only be reparsed [sic]

in epistemological terms’ (Bhaskar 1989: 13) or, when what is is reduced to ‘our ways of knowing’ and ‘our knowledge of it’ (Bhaskar 1989: 181).

Critical realism challenges the privileging of epistemology over ontology and does so for several reasons (Lawson et al 2007; Archer 1995: 21-26; Taylor 1995: 1-19;). Firstly, critical realists reject what can be regarded as the colonising or (to change the metaphor) the corralling, the delimiting or circumscribing, of broader realms of study by the dictates of epistemologies which might claim to be objective, but whose strictures define some domains of study outside the possibility of gaining objective knowledge – and do so before they have even investigated it.

Secondly, critical realists emphasise ontology, the world of things, the realism of being and things that exist. They insist there is a real world of things, physical and social. But, as previously identified, in positivism and empiricism things which are putatively amenable to the dominant epistemology are also regarded as being potentially objective or providing objective knowledge, and all those which cannot be so captured by the epistemology are subjective. As William Outhwaite notes: empiricism and idealism ‘reduce ontology to epistemology, questions about being to questions about our knowledge of being. And in so doing they also retain an implicit ontology of the “empirical world”’ (Outhwaite 1989: 32).

By contrast, critical realists are inclined to the view that rather than an epistemology determining how a discipline, domain, field or object should be investigated, the latter should govern and regulate the former. This view is based on the distinction Roy Bhaskar made between the ‘intransitive’ and ‘transitive’ aspects of all scientific inquiry. Where ‘intransitive’ aspects of scientific inquiry refer to those causes, sequences, mechanisms in the natural and social worlds which exist ‘independently of identification by human beings’ (Bhaskar 1989: 17), the ‘transitive’ objects of science refer to human knowledge and understanding of the independently existing world of things (Bhaskar 1989: 18). That is, transitive objects of science refer to the ‘human descriptions of reality’ and intransitive to the independent ‘reality which the [transitive descriptions] attempt to describe’ (Outhwaite: 1987:35).

Critical realists reject all forms of idealism, insisting instead on a real world of things independent of human beings (that is, a real world which has not been constructed, defined or is in another way dependent on humans). This is no less true in the human and social sciences as in the physical and natural realms. According to critical realism, there is a real physical and social world of independent phenomena which cannot be reduced to language or discourse or human constructions of knowledge.

Comparing ‘weak’ social constructivism and critical realism

In the light of the above analysis it is now possible to compare more directly ‘weak’ constructionism and critical realism. In the following we investigate where the two positions concur and are at variance.

The social basis of human knowledge

Sayer is probably correct when he notes that ‘Realists can happily accept weak social constructionism ...’ (Sayer 2000: 90) – or at least some aspects of it. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, social constructionism and critical realism share common ground

about the social and human basis of knowledge and social phenomena, including issues relating to housing and homelessness. While this would appear axiomatic for social constructionism, in critical realism this is explicated in what is called the transitive nature of human knowledge, that human beings generate knowledge about intransitive natural and social phenomena.

This critical realist distinction also recognises what social constructionists aver, namely that social practices and beliefs, discourses and values are socially generated products of the outpourings of human beings. Socially sanctioned and validated in the popular and powerful discourses, some are so reified that their human origins are masked and thus appear natural, neutral and unchallengeable. Writing in the critical realist tradition, Sayer could affirm: 'Of course knowledge and social phenomena are socially constructed' (Sayer 2000: 91). It would seem that in this way 'weak' social constructionism and critical realism share some common ground.

Problematising dominant discourses

An implication of such common ground is that both positions have the potential to challenge and problematise the dominant discourses. This, positivism was constitutionally unable to do. By taking the dominant assumptions at face value it was linked with political acquiescence and quietism (Fopp 2008: 161-165; Travers 2004: 15). Thus, whereas positivism accepted socially popular definitions without challenge, buttressing the status quo, power blocs and interests, both social constructionism and critical realism are not obligated in the same way.

A pre-existing material, real world of social phenomena

Contrary to positivism, both social constructionism and critical realism do not deny the possibility of objectivity, although its place and justification in the respective positions differs. In the introduction to their book, *Social Constructionism in Housing Research*, Jacobs et al (2004b: 3) state their position as follows:

Since critics of social constructionism have claimed that it denies the existence of an objective material world, it is important from the outset to make clear that there is no attempt in the edited collection to advance such arguments. Instead, the claim advanced is that *our access* to the material world is mediated through language and discourse.

So, the 'weaker' and philosophically more defensible position of social constructionism acknowledges the existence of an objective, we might say, real, material world of social things.

If social constructionism recognises a material world, critical realism also asserts that there is a real world of things – physical and social. Sayer (2000: 11) points out that 'real' is not used 'in order to claim privileged knowledge' but to emphasise two points:

First, the real is whatever exists, be it natural or social, regardless of whether it is an empirical object for us, and whether we happen to have an adequate understanding of its nature. Secondly, the real is the realm of objects, their structures and powers. Whether they be physical like minerals, or social, like bureaucracies, they have certain structures and causal powers, that is, capacities to behave in particular ways, and causal liabilities or passive powers, that is, specific susceptibilities to certain kinds of change (Sayer 2000: 11).

Thus, both ‘weak’ social constructionism and critical realism recognise a ‘real’ world. For the former, however, this real world is mediated by language whereas for the latter it is revealed by science and scientific theories.

The possibility of objectivity

Some form of objectivity is possible in both weak social constructionism and critical realism. For example, Jacobs and Manzi (2000: 38) claim that:

A more cautious [social constructionist] position maintains that reality is socially constructed but does not entirely reject the notion of an objective understanding of “truth”. This form of constructionism makes the important distinction between ideas and concepts, which *are* socially constructed and the social and spatial processes which have a material existence.

More recently Jacobs et al (2004: 3) have argued that: ‘... constructionism problematises the notion of objective truth as such and instead emphasises the contingent basis of social reality.’ However, in the light of the previous quotation, this statement can (and probably should) be interpreted to mean that their brand of social constructionism challenges what counts socially as objective truth. In this way:

Rather than assuming that facts are given and discoverable through scientific investigation, constructionism questions the status of given assumptions and interrogates the process of “claims-making” in social policy. Social facts are therefore understood as contingent, contested and subject to considerable diversity of interpretation (Jacobs et al 2004: 3).

Similarly, as John Scott (1998: 104) maintains, critical realism too ‘affirms the possibility of objectivity’ but whereas empiricism ‘held that this objectivity involved the adoption of an impartial standpoint, realism remained sceptical’. While the latter recognises the “intransitive” foundation of knowledge in real objects that exist outside of knowledge, the [critical] realists also recognize the “transitive” dimension of shifting cultural frameworks’ (Scott 1998: 104).

One implication of this is that critical realism does not hold with empiricism that the physical and social phenomena can be reduced to our experience of them. In other words, critical realism rejects the empiricism which ‘identifies the real with the empirical, that is, with what we can experience, as if the world just happened to correspond to the range of our senses and to be identical with what we experience’ (Sayer 2000: 11). While rejecting such empiricism, critical realism does not abandon the notion of objective knowledge, as the distinction between the intransitive real world and the transitive nature of human knowledge attests.

The possibility of naturalism

As indicated, naturalism (usually in the form of positivism) as used by critical realism refers to the possibility that the realm of the social realm can be examined in the same way as natural and physical phenomena. The social should be examined as the physical and natural world is examined. It is here that a divergence between the two positions begins to emerge. Max Travers makes this point very clearly when he writes that the positivism and the critical realism ‘dominant’ in the academy ‘believe that the social world has an objective and independent existence in the same way as nature and can be studied using scientific methods’ (Travers 2004: 15). Further, while acknowledging the political differences between positivists and realists (which allows the latter to problematise power blocs and their

interests), critical realism maintains that ‘they ... can explain human structures or laws that are hidden from ordinary members of society’ (Travers 2004: 15).

Such naturalism is problematic for social constructionists who, as we have seen, do not assume that ‘facts are given and discoverable through scientific investigation’ (Jacobs et al 2004: 3). Thus, according to ‘weak’ social constructionism, housing and homelessness research can neither

be simply a question of discovering facts and presenting them in a format amenable to policy makers ... [n]or can the accumulative weight of material ever be sufficient to persuade the reader of the contingency of the analysis. The strength of constructionism is its focus on broader social process and its emphasis on the importance of social, political and economic context (Jacobs et al 2004b: 3).

Yet, arguably, critical realism can be seen to accept such points in social constructionism and go beyond them. For example, critical realism rejects the empiricist realist claim that all that is real can be reduced to our experience of it, and actualism, which assumes that an actual event ‘exhausts the world, leaving no domain of the real, of powers that the world is characterised by emergence’ (Sayer 2000: 12). The latter refers to the situation in which a confluence of two or more features of the physical or social world interact to form new phenomena which are more than the sum total of their constituent parts, without denying that the original ingredients are indispensable to the resultant phenomena (Sayer 2000: 12).

In addition, critical realism affirms causation in a way which is different from classical Humean approaches which are based on regularities induced by confirming examples (Sayer 2000: 13). This, in turn, is based on a distinction made by critical realists between the ‘real’, which refers to ‘structures and powers of objects’ and the ‘actual’ which is the result of objects engaging in such a way that new objects emerge (Sayer 2000:12). Thus, the market place may not supply sufficient affordable housing for households with low incomes even with incentives based around negative gearing. It might take a local housing action group to persuade the state housing authority to lease properties to an agency in order to provide some of the affordable housing that the market does not.

Thus, in critical realism causation is not about the verification (or falsification) of theories, or searching for confirming examples to find regular events. One reason that critical realists reject positivist and empiricist accounts of causation is that they make distinction between ‘closed’ and ‘open’ systems. The regularities required of Humean accounts of causation are most likely in closed systems in which there is stability, and external influences are constant (Sayer 2000: 24-15). Critical realists affirm that, while there are regularities, these are interrupted by novel ways in which structures interact, ways which are ‘open’ and contingent. Thus, the explanation of causation ‘depends instead on identifying causal mechanisms and how they work, and discovering if they have been activated and under what conditions (Sayer 2000: 14). Critical realists seek theories of causation with the most explanatory power. Regarding the social sciences, critical realism acknowledges that social phenomena made by humans are intrinsically meaningful and thus have hermeneutic and interpretive components (Sayer 2000: 17). They are not ‘simply registered or measured’ (Outhwaite 1987: 54). As Bhaskar notes, ‘unlike the natural science’, social structures ‘do not exist independently of the activities they govern’, ‘of the agents’ conceptions of what they are doing in their activity’ and social structure may be only ‘relatively enduring’ (Bhaskar 1979: 48-49; Outhwaite 1987:53). Thus, critical realism is ‘only partly naturalist, for although social

science can use the same methods as natural science regarding causal explanation, it must also diverge from them in using “*verstehen*” or interpretative understanding’ (Sayer 2000: 17).

A consequence of this for critical realism with its social ontology as open, contingent and to be interpreted, is that it allows the possibility that new things are made. Intrinsic to critical realism is the possibility that what currently exists does not exhaust the potential or the possible. Thus, ‘Realist ontology ... makes it possible to understand how we could be or become many things which currently we are not; the unemployed could become employed...’ (Sayer 2000: 12). We housing researchers might add that the homeless can be housed and people on low incomes, and at risk of defaulting on their mortgages, can be supported to retain them.

Conclusion: Several observations about constructionism and critical realism

It might seem that the similarities between social constructionism and critical realism are greater than their differences. This is the case, at least to an extent, but the conclusion has some merit only if ‘weak’ social constructionism is at issue. This is the position which acknowledges a material world accessible by language and some concomitant notion of ‘real’ and objectivity. In the past some critical realists have compared and contrasted ‘strong’ constructivism with its postmodern inclination for challenging such notions (Manzi 2002).

Thus, in one response to a housing paper on critical realism (Somerville and Bengtsson 2002), Tony Manzi (2000: 144) makes the point that the authors construct a ‘straw man’ by making the distinction between ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ constructionism while really only engaging with and criticising the former. He recognised that some constructionists may ‘deny the ontological status’ of an ‘objective world’ but he could not identify any housing researchers who hold such a view (Manzi 2000: 144). Since much of the argument against constructionism is flawed in the same way, Manzi’s argument has merit.

Manzi (2000: 144) then proceeds to note that (presumably weak) ‘constructionists operate at an epistemological level, claiming that our knowledge of an objective world is indeterminate, problematic and discursively constituted.’ The distinction critical realists make between the intransitive real world of things and our transitive knowledge and theories about them, would seem to indicate that critical realists would agree with Manzi’s formulation.

This may cause us to ask what, if any, are the differences between the two positions, at least when the weaker form of social constructionism is the point of comparison? So, as a first step, let’s be clear about the similarities. Both positions acknowledge the social basis of knowledge in the social sciences, both have the potential to problematise that which has been socially licensed and validated, including repressive discourses and policies, which become reified, and are considered normal, natural and unchallengeable. Both positions seem to concur about a pre-existing real world of social phenomena and the resultant possibility of objective knowledge.

Where the positions are at variance seems to be one of degree and, arguably, one explanation for this is that the respective positions draw their intellectual armoury from different directions, different traditions, with different meta-claims. The positions are different by degrees in the sense that one gets the impression that social constructionists in housing

research seem to state their underlying assumptions about the existence of a material world, and the possibility of objectivity, mainly when defending their position against attack – or so it seems (Jacobs et al 2004b: 3; Manzi 2002). One explanation for this is that social constructionism has its roots more in the traditions of sociological theory (Travers 2004) whereas critical realism has its origins in philosophy and the philosophy of science (Aronson 1984; MacKinnon 1972).

But even this should not be overstated; the two different positions might be represented by two distinct circles but there is no doubt that the influence of their intellectual forebears and antecedents intersect. For example, Hegel and Marx are influential in both.

However, while it is helpful – and in some ways indispensable – to see where they intersect, social constructionism and critical realism do represent different positions. Perhaps the area where a different orientation can be detected relates to the way they study objects. Critical realism in the social sciences investigates the natural and physical worlds by using science as its model; social constructionism is suspicious of reducing knowledge to science, emphasising instead the mediating function performed by language. As such, critical realism is less chary about issues of realism and objectivity because both are part and parcel of its theoretical antecedents and its dual object of study. Again, this must not be overstated but if we are attempting to discern how they are different and explain their different emphases, their intellectual origins and the methods of studying the objects of interest may facilitate such inquiry.

Thus, as Sayer (2000: 90) claims, ‘Realists can happily accept weak social constructionism.’ The social character of knowledge does not obviate the possibility of objective knowledge. But it seems that critical realists are more likely to appeal to a real world of things independently of our knowledge of it – as adduced by their distinction between an intransitive real world and our transitive knowledge of it.

Critical realists are more likely to appeal to science, where causality is an essential part and the explanatory power of our theories.

But here again, the differences should not be overstated. Social constructionists, too, are interested in explaining a range of housing-related issues (Sahlin 2006).

Perhaps another way to highlight the similarities and differences between the two positions when applied to housing is to reverse Sayer’s statement and ask: can social constructionists happily accept critical realism?

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