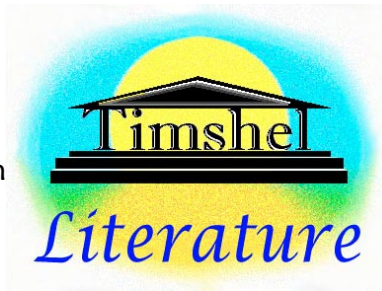


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Just Thinking, 07/28/03:

A Social Construction Coming Unglued

by Justin Katz

The factors that influence various views of reality make for rich prodding, and the world seems to have entered an era in which clarity has caused the structural beliefs upon which people base their actions to show through their ideological skin. Noting one such trend, Boston University law professor Randy Barnett recently made some observations, while guest-writing Glenn Reynolds's MSNBC blog (<http://www.msnbc.com/news/856672.asp#030723>), of the sort on which I expend many middle-distance-staring moments:

But what I am now coming to appreciate is that increasing numbers of persons on the Left create in their minds a false world in which to live — a world that better suits their preconceptions. They are not content to disagree with the goals of their opposition or about predictions of future policy results. They must make up facts about the world that fit their theories...

This socially constructed reality changes all the time to fit current ideological needs. One day, Bush is a moron; the next he is Machiavelli reborn; the next he is a moron again. Flip-flops don't seem to faze them in the slightest. They just "move on."

Barnett says that whether or not the world is socially constructed is irrelevant unless it enables us actually to reconstruct the world to our preferences. As with the "old speculation" that "the universe exists in a drop on some cosmic chemist's workbench," Barnett suggests, there is no practical application for our lives. However, the cosmic workbench differs from social

constructionism in that the former is inherently distant, while the latter ostensibly covers the range of knowledge from the everyday to the universal.

At some observational distance, we have to use a strategy that resembles social constructionism as a sort of shorthand for what's really going on. Nobody can possibly comprehend all of the intricacies of even a short news report, but anybody can take the core message and align it with his understanding of the world. Not only is this possible, it is unavoidable. It is also advisable; the farther out from ourselves we are able to anticipate and react to events, the better off we'll be. In one respect, looking into the middle distance of comprehension is the defining characteristic of humanity.

Human beings are not limited to being as tightly reactive as animals. Our perception includes assessment and prediction, and if we forswear any intellectual shorthand, we can become incapable of action. This is akin to stereotypes, which are useful to summarize infinitely complex social relations. To be sure, bigotry arises when expectations overshadow reality. Yet, if abhorrence of bigotry leads us to forbid stereotypes, we can become blind to real behavior just because it aligns with type.

Barnett uses the image of the mind recognizing an object as it comes into view. Having some familiarity with the constructions to which one's mind leans, as well as the useful range of their application, can be useful toward acknowledging concrete information. In other words, when we get closer to the "thing," or when it behaves in a contrary way to our expectations, we must be capable of revising our perceptions, understanding that they had previously involved some guessing. If the "tree" in the distance begins hopping around, we attempt to reassess our conclusions.

In the middle distance, there is room to debate, for example, whether the Industrial Revolution *helped* workers by making their lives easier in many ways or *harmed* them by

diminishing some part of their selves (e.g., connection to their natures and a stronger sense of self-reliance). Various bits of evidence can be seen as supporting either conclusion. The danger is in too-obsessively making the conclusion the starting point, whether based on bigotry or wishful thinking, so much as to deny new evidence.

This is where Barnett can begin to answer his question about whether he is “equally guilty of doing exactly the same thing” as the Leftists. It is a question of what shifts — the significance of the detail or the nature of the thing — when information that is contrary to a previous conclusion comes into the picture. When that tree starts hopping, does one conclude that it is not a “tree” (or at least not *just* a tree) or insist that trees can hop and still be trees as we know them? Or to take Barnett’s example of Bush hatred: if a Leftist’s conclusion is that President Bush is a dangerous leader because he is stupid, does she acknowledge a possible previous error when later claiming that Bush is dangerous because he’s an evil genius.

Of course, there are layers of complexity, here, and there’s bound to be intellectual wiggle room with any specific conclusion that is sufficiently desired. There is no stark line; thinking involves continual and honest reassessment, and when an idea in which we’ve invested thought and emotion proves false, there is bound to be a period of denial. At some point, a threshold of delusion will be reached. From this point of view, the reason Barnett has observed the denials’ getting worse among a certain group of people is that their worldview has gone too far in denying reality, and larger and larger swaths of society are beginning to pull back. Not only does this reveal the higher thresholds of the ideologically devout, but it also requires them to ratchet up their delusions.

Barnett asks, “how can we settle our political disagreements if a large number of the players are living in a world of their own making?” This is the question of the ages. Broad political or social disagreements don’t have merely to do with whether a blur is a tree or the President is a

Machiavellian idiot savant; they represent myriad individual judgments piled up as complete worldviews. Some people will be impossible to engage in debate because they will always find somewhere in their own ideological piles to slither. In such cases, those who disagree need address them only inasmuch as it is necessary in order to convince a majority of others that the slitherers are mistaken or arguing in bad faith.

Perhaps that points to what is truly unique in our historical time and place: we can address political differences with discussion and persuasion rather than revolution and war. Actually, that we have left each other free to think and to spew nonsense without threat of violence is very likely part of what has allowed delusion to be entertained as philosophy. A weakness of this approach, however, seems to be its inherent lack of restraints on the human desire to be correct and to seek agreement.

Broad agreement will tend to funnel power to specific, limited locations. Within a culture that has constitutionally enshrined plurality of thought as a necessary guard against homogeneity of bias, those who would funnel power toward themselves must reconcile the call for variation with the desire for unanimity. Under these conditions, it has become in would-be totalitarian socialists' interest to perpetuate the process of making confidence and consistency the qualities to which the masses can unite in opposition.

If theirs seems an impossible task, it is. And as the careful phrases and balanced contradictions unravel, the relativism on which they rested becomes the weight by which they fall. Few among our human family will fail to notice when fear of confidence becomes encouragement of inconsistency – reliable only in serving those who point the fingers. And few in our society will long accept that freedom from the threat of violence means freedom from loss of prestige and power. As is to be expected, those on the losing end of that realization will be the last to admit the reality.