Under the sacred canopy: Peter Berger (1929–2017)

Frédéric Vandenberghe

Just when the lights of the celebrations of the golden jubilee of *The Social Construction of Reality* were being switched off, the news reached us that Peter Berger, one of its co-authors, had died at the age of 88 in Boston after a prolonged illness. A plethora of obituaries came from three different corners: Divinity Schools, neo-conservative circles and sociologists.[1] Peter Berger circulated indeed in different milieus: in theological matters, as a Lutheran, he was a liberal Protestant; in politics, he had drifted away from the center to the conservative end of the spectrum; in sociology, he will be remembered as a gifted social theorist in the phenomenological tradition who wrote a classic treatise in the sociology of knowledge, produced work on religion and reflected on moderniza-tion and social change. With a good sense of humour, an appealing style, an existentialist touch and a thorough knowledge of classical sociology, philosophical anthropology and theology, he inspired many aspiring sociologists who read his popular *Invitation to Sociology* (1963) to become social theorists.

I vividly remember the day I was reading that very book as a freshman during a class on statistics. Used to a standard positivist conception of the human being as a dependent variable, the factors turned into actors who suddenly started to dance. Rehearsing the histrionic vision of action and the dramatic vision of society he had used in the *Precarious Vision* (Berger, 1961), his humanist perspective proposed nothing less than a perspectival switch: from a Durkheimian view of society as a stage on which 'puppets move up and down as the strings pull them around' (Berger, 1963: 199) to a more Weberian view in which the 'little puppets jump about on the ends of their invisible strings, cheerfully acting out the little parts that have been assigned to them' (p. 140). With an existentialist emphasis that marks his early writings and that would later be replaced by a more conservative insistence on the necessity of order, he concluded the book with a spirited defense of sociology as a

Corresponding author:
Frédéric Vandenberghe, Rio de Janeiro State University, IESP-UERJ, 82 Rua da Matriz, Botafogo 22260-100. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.
Email: frederic@iesp.uerj.br

discipline with liberating intent and purpose: 'Unlike the puppets, we have the possibility of stopping in our movements, looking up and perceiving the machinery by which we have been moved. In this act lies the first step towards of freedom. And in the same act we find the conclusive justification of sociology as a humanistic discipline' (p. 199; see also Berger, 1961: 66).

Twenty years later, in *Sociology Reinterpreted: An Essay on Method and Vocation*, a sequel to the bestseller of 1963, the tone had significantly changed. The drama of society had turned into a social tragedy. Warning against the dangers of radicalism, Berger denied the possibility of a scientific approach to freedom and passed the buck to philosophy. He now stressed the 'anti-libertarian aspect' (Berger and Kellner, 1981: 93) and the 'anti-utopian tendencies' (p. 118) inherent in sociological thought and debunked sociology as a contributor to social disintegration – 'the diagnosis that is itself part of the disease' (p. 157). By the 1990s, Berger was done with sociology. His growing resentment of sociology turned into an angry indictment of the discipline that runs as a rant against the 'ideological delirium' of Leftist, Marxist and post-Marxist theories (Wallerstein's world-systems theory, Cardoso and Faletto's dependency theory and Gouldner's new class theory are mentioned by name). Consequently, he issued 'a disinvitation' (Berger, 1992).

Peter Ludwig Berger was born into a Jewish family in Vienna, where his father ran a clothing store, while his mother was a housewife. The family converted to Christianity when Peter was a child and fled the country to escape persecution when Germany annexed Austria in 1938. They stayed in British-occupied Palestine for a couple of years and reached the United States shortly after the Second World War. Peter wanted to become a Lutheran minister, but enrolled for the evening courses at the New School for Social Research and became, as he phrases it in his memoir, an 'accidental sociologist' (Berger, 2011). For his master's degree, he wrote a thesis on Puerto Rican Pentecostal Protestants in East Harlem; for his doctorate, he studied the Baha'i movement in Iran. He married Brigitte Kellner, a family sociologist from Eastern Germany who had escaped with her mother from a train that was going to take them to a prison camp in Russia. She passed away in 2015.

In the 1960s, he supported the civil rights movement and opposed the Vietnam War. In the 1970s, he and Brigitte spent a considerable time in Mexico in the Centro Intercultural de Documentación (CIDOC), a higher education campus for development workers and missionaries, run by Ivan Illich in Cuernecava. Berger taught at the Hartford Theological Seminary, the New School, Rutgers, Boston College and Boston University. The most creative phase of his work is squarely situated in the 1960s – it corresponds almost exactly with his tenure at the New School (1963–70). With a bunch of collaborators (Thomas Luckmann, Benita Luckmann, Brigitte Berger, Hansfried Kellner, Stanley Pullberg), he wrote a series of classic books and remarkable essays on existential phenomenology, the family, honor and dignity, authenticity and sincerity, personal identity and multiple realities, Musil and don Quixote.[2] He also penned two novels, *The Enclaves* (1965), published under the pseudonym of Felix Bastien, and *Protocol of a Damnation* (1975). In the 1980s and 1990s, he wrote on Third World modernization, secularization and capitalism. Both Brigitte and Peter were conservatives. Nostalgic about the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, he was always critical of the Left. Towards the end of his life, he was closely associated with the neo-conservative magazine *Commentary* and the neo-

liberal American Enterprise Institute in Washington, DC. The postings on his blog on the site of American Interest, which he continued until the very last moment, point to a possible vote for Donald Trump.[3]

No doubt about it: *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), co-written with Thomas Luckmann, is not only Berger's best-known work, it is also his finest and lasting contribution to social theory. It should be read together with his *Invitation to Sociology* (1963), which preceded it, and with *The Sacred Canopy* (1967), which applies the general perspective of the sociology of knowledge to the phenomenon of religion.[4] Meanwhile, its title has become eponymous of a movement in the social sciences that is more inspired by pragmatism and post-structuralism than by social phenomenology. Given the uses and abuses of 'the social construction of X', both the authors have disowned the title (Dreher and Vera, 2016; Vera, 2016), but without ever mentioning that the building metaphor is only a truncated translation of Husserl's *Konstitution*.[5] The subtitle of the (1966) book, *A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, makes the connection to phenomenology clear. It indicates that the book will offer a sociological analysis of the structure and the genesis of the intentional social activities that constitute the world as a human world in its facticity. The book opens with a short history of the sociology of knowledge (written by Peter Berger) and fundamentally democratizes knowledge. The focus is dislocated from theoretical thought, ideas and the *Welt-Anschauungen* of intellectuals to common-sense knowledge of ordinary people. It is followed by a handy summary of the first volume of the *Structures of the Life-World* of Alfred Schütz (written by Thomas Luckmann, who was preparing Schütz's notes for publication) that offers the phenomenological foundations of their analysis of the constitution of society.

Notwithstanding its tone and style, the book is intended as a systematic contribution to general social theory and as a humanistic alternative to Talcott Parsons's structural functionalism. Well before the issue of agency and structure caught the attention in the 1980s – and kept it captive for another three decades! – Berger and Luckmann, who were in their thirties when writing together, had already discovered that the transition from subjectivity to objectivity, from agency to facticity, and then back from determinism to voluntarism, could only succeed if one could articulate Weber to Durkheim by using both Marx and Mead as mediators.[6] In *Invitation to Sociology* (1963), *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) and *The Sacred Canopy* (1967), the young scholar worked out a dialectical social theory that is able to span the distance between Weber's subjectivism and Durkheim's objectivism through a continuous movement in which subjective meanings become objective facticities through the process of externalization, whereas objective facticities become subjective meanings through the process of internalization.[7] At its most simple, the interrelation between wo/men and society joins the Weberian idea that human beings make society to the Durkheimian idea that society makes human beings by means of a dialectical theory of social practices that is indebted to the Hegelian Marxism of Lukács and Sartre, but without its totalization.

The theoretical movement can be analytically decomposed into three moments: The first joins Weber's theory of action to Marx's theory of practice in a movement of exteriorization. In a second moment, Durkheim is joined to Marx. The movement of exteriorization of human meanings brings into existence an objective world of social

institutions (Durkheim's facts) that is encountered by individuals as an inert facticity (Marx's alienation). In a third and last moment, Berger joins Durkheim's theory of institutions to Mead's theory of socialization and describes how the exteriorized meanings are re-appropriated and re-incorporated by individuals through internalization, becoming thus subjectively real for them. From this dialectical perspective, the constitution of society 'as part of a human world, made by men, inhabited by men, and, in turn, making men' (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 211) appears as an ongoing historical process without beginning or end.

Taking seriously meanings and signs (and signals from beyond as well), Peter Berger stands in the German tradition of the *Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaften*. He was strongly influenced by the social phenomenology of Alfred Schütz, whose courses he took at the New School, and the symbolic interactionism of George Herbert Mead. For him, the human being is above all an *animal symbolicum*. Unlike animals, human beings are bereft of instincts to guide them. Following the philosophical anthropology of Arnold Gehlen ([1940] 1986), Berger argues that humans have to construct their own world as a meaningful world.[8] To stabilize their environment, they need to build institutions as systems of world-orientation and action. This is necessary, because without orientation, the human being faces chaos and contingency. This is the point where conservatism creeps in. The terror of radical anomie is fatal, according to Berger. To escape from fear and cope with the threat of nothingness, human beings need stable meanings and a stable order that can be taken for granted. A 'socially established nomos' is necessary as 'a shield against terror' (Berger, 1967: 22). As a solution to anomie, the young conservative proposes a modicum of alienation: 'Estrangement is anthropologically necessary' (p. 92). To survive, human beings have to alienate themselves from the institutions they have created, and accept them as their nomos. Berger acknowledges that his 'refunctionalization' of Marx's concept of alienation has 'right rather than left implications' (p. 204, note 5). Although the requirement of order is a social one, Berger's argument is not functionalist, however, but existentialist. The necessity of a stable order is a lived one. Institutions give psychological relief to the individual. Through imposition and the proposition of socially regulated way of thinking, feeling, acting, or, in short, of being, they offer a sense of 'ontological security' and keep anxiety at bay.

Society is constituted and maintained through processes of externalization, institutionalization and legitimation. The constitution of stable institutions is an anthropological imperative. Human beings have to construct it together. Drawing on European theories of action and American pragmatism, Berger interweaves phenomenological theories of action (Weber and Schütz) and American role theories (James, Cooley and Mead) into a *Konstitutionsanalyse* of everyday life. He sketches out how social meanings are constructed through typification in conversation and how patterns of behavior are progressively stabilized through habits and routines in roles. In a beautiful article on the sociology of marriage, Berger and Hansfried Kellner (1964), his brother-in-law, analyse the constitution of society *in statu nascendi*. Through the reciprocity of perspectives between the spouses, the roles of each are defined, with the result that the motivations and typifications of action become increasingly predictable. With the birth of a child, the dyad turns into a triad, while the couple becomes a family that socializes the child into a pre-existing social world. By extension, and thanks to language, which

detaches shared meanings from face-to-face interactions, the local typifications are institutionalized and stable universes of meaning emerge beyond the little world of the family. The world is not only socially constructed, it is also socially maintained. By virtue of its objective facticity, the socially constructed world legitimates itself. But as it remains precarious and vulnerable to critique and doubt, both at the objective and subjective level, it needs to be undergirded by extra legitimations. This is where myths, religions, ideologies and other 'conceptual machineries of reality-maintenance' are brought in. Legitimations range from the pre-theoretical level ('This is how the world is') to the highly elaborated theoretical level of explicit ideologies. They explain and justify the existing nomos, maintain its natural semblance, and preserve the individual from socially induced existential crises of de-realization and depersonalization.

Social reality is continuously constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed in an ongoing historical process. The individuals who constitute society are, in turn, constituted by society. The relation between social structures and psychological structures is a dialectical one. Like Mauss, Halbwachs, Parsons, Mannheim, Elias, C. W. Mills and Lahire, Berger has a strong interest in sociological psychology. He even intended to produce a sociology of psychology as a final section of *The Social Construction of Reality*, but all that remains of this project is a seminal article on psychoanalysis as a cultural phenomenon that structures the understanding of sexuality, family and child-rearing in America (Berger and Kellner, 1964). Individuals have to be socialized, first, by their parents and their peers in childhood, and, then again, when as already socialized individuals they enter new sectors of society. Like nobody else, the theologian and sociologist is aware of the frailty of the universe and sensitive to the suffering that comes when one's universe is threatened by annihilation or one's identity by fragmentation. The 'epoché of the natural attitude' is prone to break down. As a sociologist of religion, he knows that belief is fickle and that individuals continuously need to be reassured by their significant others that the world is real, that their beliefs are legitimate, and that they are not on the verge of madness. To maintain the plausibility of the universe, they need the reassurance of their fellows. Berger calls the social base of reality maintenance 'plausibility structures' (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 166–82; Berger, 1967: 45–7). They correspond to reference groups. They are especially important when alternative definitions of reality and identity are available within subgroups or, more radically, when individuals 'alternate' from one universe of meaning to another, as happens when they convert, come out of the closet, become political activists or experience 'culture shock'.

In the *Sacred Canopy*, published in England as *The Social Reality of Religion*, Berger transposes and transforms his theory of knowledge into a theory of religion. Once again, he attempts a synthesis of Durkheim and Weber via Marx and Mead. For Durkheim, religion provides norms and values that stabilize the social order. For Weber, religion provides meaning to the individual. Fusing Durkheim and Weber, Berger considers religion as a social arrangement that denies that reality is a human product and ascribes the constitution of reality to God or the gods. Paradoxically, individuals gain access to the higher truth through alienation. By means of socialization, they are induced into religion which offers them solace and meaning; by means of internalization, they come to believe that the ultimate reality is out there as an overwhelming domain to which they have personal access. In spite of Berger's proclamation of 'methodological atheism'

(Berger, 1967: 180), his sociology of religion has all the trappings of a religious sociology. Theology and sociology are alternative frameworks of interpretation. Although sociology is, in principle, 'hierarchically embedded' in theology; historically, the relation has been inverted. Each contains the other: they encompass, but also limit each other. Drawing on Schütz's (1962) famous reinterpretation of William James's 'multiple realities', he continuously hints at an 'alternate reality' behind the social world and remains open to the 'signals of transcendence' within mundane existence (Berger, 1969).[9] Things are not what they seem. They are different. The 'other world' is always there. This explains the precariousness of mundane reality. As a result, reality cannot be taken for granted. It must be constructed and reconstructed over and over again to be stabilized, naturalized, reified and realized. Once one sees through the artificiality of reality and realizes the compossibility of rival universes, one can step back and step out of reality – this is the double movement of the 'ek-stasis', literally the stepping outside of the taken-for-granted routines of society and conventional religion into the clearing, and the 'exodus' out of the holy city into the emptiness of 'the desert in which God is waiting: In this desert all horizons are open' (Berger, 1961: 23).

With the advent of modernity, a process of secularization inevitably sets in.[10] The 'sacred canopy' disintegrates and traditional religious definitions of reality lose their plausibility. For Berger, secularization induces pluralization, privatization and individualization at all levels. Objectively, religion becomes one worldview among others. It has to compete with science and technology, the market and the state. Within the religious fold, the Church loses its monopoly too. It has to compete with other religions, other denominations, new age cults, self-help groups and psychotherapies in a segmented market. To attract followers and ply its spiritual wares, it increasingly has to use marketing techniques. Subjectively, religion retreats to the private sphere and becomes optional. Anticipating current theories of reflexive individualization, from Beck and Giddens to Archer and Kaufman, Berger underscores that individuals can still believe if they want, but that henceforth faith is no longer given; it has to be consciously decided: 'What was previously taken for granted as self-evident reality may now only be reached by a deliberate effort, an act of "faith", which by definition will have to overcome doubts that keep on lurking in the background' (Berger, 1967: 150).

In *The Homeless Mind* (Berger et al., 1973), he generalized his analysis of the plurality of life-worlds and the reflexivity of identity beyond the special sphere of religion to analyse consciousness and identity formation in modernity, at both the collective and individual level. At the collective level, technological production and bureaucracy are leading to an abstract, anonymous, functional society that is marked by alienation. The urbanization of consciousness and the pluralization of the life-worlds lead to a bricolage of worldviews and the privatization of existence. Alienation and anomie are the twin pathologies that accompany the 'de-institutionalization' of modernity. They are especially acute in middle-class youth who are caught between a sense of self-estrangement and a quest for authenticity. The disintegration of mediating institutions and of collective consciousness unhinges traditional identities. Modern subjects are 'transcendentally homeless' and prone to 'identity crises'. Some identify with their public role; others assign priority to their private self. Once again, Berger anticipates

theories of identity that would only become fashionable much later in the sociology of late modernity. Compared with traditional identities, modern ones are peculiarly open and plural, as well as highly reflexive and individuated. The conjunction of plurality and singularity introduces a high degree of plasticity into life trajectories: 'It is possible for the individual to imagine himself as having different biographies' (Berger, Berger and Kellner, 1973: 69). The description of the long-range life planning that follows could have been taken straight from Beck, Giddens or Bauman: 'The biography of the individual is apprehended by him as designed project. This design includes identity. In other words, in long-range life planning the individual not only plans what he will do but also who he will be' (p. 74). The fear of anomie, the nostalgia for the past, and the conservative critique of American youth and counterculture bear, however, the signature of the late Peter Berger. Now that he has gone, we can thank him for his guidance into social theory, praise him for the brilliance of his early work, dignify his existential sensitivity to the human condition, honor the absence of pretentiousness that mark his writings, and laugh with some of the jokes that are sprinkled throughout his oeuvre.

Notes

1. Given the prominence of Peter Berger in sociology, the secondary literature is surprisingly scarce. I found only two monographs (Wuthnow et al., 1984; Pfadenhauer, 2013), two edited collections of essays on his work (Hunter and Ainlay, 1986; Woodhead, 2001) and a commemorative issue of *Cultural Sociology* (2016, vol. 10, no. 1) that celebrates the 50th anniversary of *The Social Construction of Reality*.

2. For Berger, writing was almost a 'family affair'. On his wife, his brother in law and other collaborators, see Luckmann (2001).

3. https://www.the-american-interest.com/v/berger/

4. Berger and Luckmann teamed up again to write *Modernity, Pluralism and the Crisis of Meaning* (Berger and Luckmann, 1995). The booklet covers roughly the same ground as *The Social Construction* and the *Sacred Canopy*, but the spark is gone.

5. For an A–Z of 'the social construction of X', see Hacking (1999: 1–2). Both *The Construction of Social Reality* by John Searle (1995), who confessed at the World Conference of Sociology in Montreal in 1998 that he had no knowledge of Berger and Luckmann's book, and *The Reality of Social Construction* by Elder-Vass (2012), offer more thoughtful variations on the successful title.

6. The dialectical scheme was supposed to overcome the tension between voluntarism and determinism, but according to Bhaskar's malicious reading, Berger and Luckmann have actually succeeded in combining both errors! 'For it [the dialectical model] encourages, on the one hand, a voluntaristic idealism with respect to our understanding of social structure and, on the other, a mechanistic determinism with respect to our understanding of people' (Bhaskar, 1989: 33). The problem, I think, is elsewhere, not in the voluntaristic conception of action, but in the idealistic conception of social structure as a constraining system of typifications (reduction of structure to culture); not in the conception of culture, but in its overemphasis on meanings to the detriment of norms and expressions (reduction of culture to symbols and signs); not in the determinist conception of subjectivity, but in the conservative conception of the social order (reduction of social order to social control); not in the concepts of alienation

and reification, but in their reduction to modes of consciousness and states of mind (reduction of social pathologies to psychological ones).

7. The most elaborate version of this dialectic, which forms the backbone of the three books, is to be found in an article on reification and consciousness (Berger and Pullberg, 1965).

8. For a presentation of Gehlen's sociology of institutions, see Berger and Kellner (1965).

9. For a brilliant analysis of the effects of "de-realization" and "alternation" that accompany the intimation of another reality, see Berger's (1970) interpretation of Musil's *The Man without Qualities*.

10. Well before 'post-secularism' became a buzzword, Berger had retracted his theory of secularization. From 1973 onwards, he noted a possible reversal of the secularization trend in the developing world and 'de-parochialized', as it were, secularization theory, limiting its reach to Western Europe and Québec.

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