

3. *Everyday Life and Social Reality*

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We commonly assume that our experience is of a world "out there," and that the world out there exists independently of our experience of it. We seldom appreciate how much interpretation guides and shapes our experience. We look out the window and see a toddler who is running down the sidewalk fall and start to cry. We then watch his mother run to his aid and pick him up in order to comfort him. But what we actually saw and heard was a small animate object quickly going from a vertical to a horizontal position, followed by loud, piercing sounds, and then the appearance of a larger animate object that elevated the smaller one off the ground. Toddler, cry, mother, and comfort are symbols through which we filtered those perceptions. These symbols and their meanings constitute our experience as much as, if not more than, our perceptions. And we did not invent those symbols and their meanings; we learned them from others. In this important respect, then, the reality we experience day by day and moment by moment is a socially constructed reality.

That is the subject of this selection by the sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, taken from their widely read book, *The Social Construction of Reality*. As they note, the reality of our everyday lives is shared with others and filled with evidence of their thoughts and feelings or what Berger and Luckmann call "objectifications of subjective intention." We do not feel the toddler's pain, but we know he is in pain from his crying. We do not see the mother's intention, but we know from her warm embrace that

she is attempting to comfort him. His crying and her embrace are signs that objectify what we cannot perceive. It is through such signs that we share experiences and construct an intersubjective reality.

Berger and Luckmann also point out that the systems of signs through which we share experiences with others also organize and shape our subjective experience. Language is the most obvious and influential example. Language classifies and typifies experience. For example, we classify the woman following the toddler as a mother and her response to his fall as comfort, because that is the type of thing mothers typically do. As Berger and Luckmann also note, language detaches meaning from direct experience. Thus, we can meaningfully talk to one another about maternal affection in the absence of any direct evidence of it. For us, abstract ideas like maternal affection have an independent existence. They reside in the language that we speak. Our shared systems of signs and symbols not only organize our experience, but also create the very reality we experience. Because these typifying systems of meaning guide our interactions with one another, they are the building blocks of the social structures we experience and continually reproduce in our everyday lives.

Everyday life presents itself as a reality interpreted by men and subjectively meaningful to them as a coherent world. . . . It is a world that originates in their thoughts and actions, and is maintained as real by these. [W]e attempt to clarify the foundations of knowledge in everyday life, to wit, the objectifications of subjective processes (and meanings) by which the intersubjective common-sense world is constructed.

The reality of everyday life is filled with objectifications [and] is only possible because of them. I am constantly surrounded by objects that "proclaim" the subjective intentions of my fellow men, although I may sometimes have difficulty being quite sure just what it is that a particular object is "proclaiming," especially if it was produced by men whom I have not known well or at all in face-to-face situations. Every ethnologist or archaeologist will readily

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testify to such difficulties, but the very fact that he *can* overcome them and reconstruct from an artifact the subjective intentions of men whose society may have been extinct for millennia is eloquent proof of the enduring power of human objectivations.

A special but crucially important case of objectivation is signification; that is, the human production of signs. A sign may be distinguished from other objectivations by its explicit intention to serve as an index of subjective meanings. To be sure, all objectivations are susceptible of utilization as signs, even though they were not originally produced with this intention. For instance, a weapon may have been originally produced for the purpose of hunting animals, but may then (say, in ceremonial usage) become a sign for aggressiveness and violence in general. But there are certain objectivations originally and explicitly intended to serve as signs. For instance, instead of throwing a knife at me (an act that was presumably intended to kill me, but that might conceivably have been intended merely to signify this possibility), my adversary could have painted a black X-mark on my door, a sign, let us assume, that we are now officially in a state of enmity. Such a sign, which has no purpose beyond indicating the subjective meaning of the one who made it, is also objectively available in the common reality he and I share with other men. I recognize its meaning, as do other men, and indeed it is available to its producer as an objective "reminder" of his original intention in making it. It will be clear from the above that there is a good deal of fluidity between the instrumental and the signficatory uses of certain objectivations. The special case of magic, in which there is a very interesting merging of these two uses, need not concern us here.

Signs are clustered in a number of systems. Thus, there are systems of gesticulatory signs, of patterned bodily movements, of various sets of material artifacts, and so on. Signs and sign systems are objectivations in the sense of being objectively available beyond the expression of subjective

intentions "here and now." This "detachability" from the immediate expressions of subjectivity also pertains to signs that require the mediating presence of the body. Thus, performing a dance that signifies aggressive intent is an altogether different thing from snarling or clenching fists in an outburst of anger. The latter acts express my subjectivity "here and now," while the former can be quite detached from this subjectivity—I may not be angry or aggressive at all at this point but merely taking part in the dance, because I am paid to do so on behalf of someone else who *is* angry. In other words, the dance can be detached from the subjectivity of the dancer in a way in which the snarling *cannot* from the snarler. Both dancing and snarling are manifestations of bodily expressivity, but only the former has the character of an objectively available sign. Signs and sign systems are all characterized by "detachability," but they can be differentiated in terms of the degree to which they may be detached from face-to-face situations. Thus, a dance is evidently less detached than a material artifact signifying the same subjective meaning.

Language, which may be defined here as a system of vocal signs, is the most important sign system of human society. Its foundation is, of course, in the intrinsic capacity of the human organism for vocal expressivity, but we can begin to speak of language only when vocal expressions have become capable of detachment from the immediate "here and now" of subjective states. It is not yet language if I snarl, grunt, howl, or hiss, although these vocal expressions are capable of becoming linguistic insofar as they are integrated into an objectively available sign system. The common objectivations of everyday life are maintained primarily by linguistic signification. Everyday life is, above all, life with and by means of the language I share with my fellow men. An understanding of language is thus essential for any understanding of the reality of everyday life.

Language has its origins in the face-to-face situation, but can be readily detached from it. This is not only because I can

shout in the dark or across a distance, speak on the telephone or via the radio, or convey linguistic signification by means of writing (the latter constituting, as it were, a sign system of the second degree). The detachment of language lies much more basically in its capacity to communicate meanings that are not direct expressions of subjectivity "here and now." It shares this capacity with other sign systems, but its immense variety and complexity make it much more readily detachable from the face-to-face situation than any other (for example, a system of gesticulations). I can speak about innumerable matters that are not present at all in the face-to-face situation, including matters I never have and never will experience directly. In this way, language is capable of becoming the objective repository of vast accumulations of meaning and experience, which it can then preserve in time and transmit to following generations.

In the face-to-face situation language possesses an inherent quality of reciprocity that distinguishes it from any other sign system. The ongoing production of vocal signs in conversation can be sensitively synchronized with the ongoing subjective intentions of the conversants. I speak as I think; so does my partner in the conversation. Both of us hear what each says at virtually the same instant, which makes possible a continuous, synchronized, reciprocal access to our two subjectivities, an intersubjective closeness in the face-to-face situation that no other sign system can duplicate. What is more, I hear *myself* as I speak; my own subjective meanings are made objectively and continuously available to me and *ipso facto* become "more real" to me. Another way of putting this is [that I have] "better knowledge" of the other [than] of myself in the face-to-face situation. This apparently paradoxical fact has been previously explained by the massive, continuous, and prereflective availability of the other's being in the face-to-face situation, as against the requirement of reflection for the availability of my own. Now, however, as I objectivate my own being by means of language, my own

being becomes massively and continuously available to myself at the same time that it is so available to him, and I can spontaneously respond to it without the "interruption" of deliberate reflection. It can, therefore, be said that language makes "more real" my subjectivity not only to my conversation partner but also to myself. This capacity of language to crystallize and stabilize for me my own subjectivity is retained (albeit with modifications) as language is detached from the face-to-face situation. This very important characteristic of language is well caught in the saying that men must talk about themselves until they know themselves.

As a sign system, language has the quality of objectivity. I encounter language as a facticity external to myself, and it is coercive in its effect on me. Language forces me into its patterns. I cannot use the rules of German syntax when I speak English; I cannot use words invented by my three-year-old son if I want to communicate outside the family; I must take into account prevailing standards of proper speech for various occasions, even if I would prefer my private "improper" ones. Language provides me with a ready-made possibility for the ongoing objectification of my unfolding experience. Put differently, language is pliantly expansive so as to allow me to objectify a great variety of experiences coming my way in the course of my life. Language also typifies experiences, allowing me to subsume them under broad categories in terms of which they have meaning not only to myself but also to my fellow men. As it typifies, it also anonymizes experiences; for the typified experience can, in principle, be duplicated by anyone falling into the category in question. For instance, I have a quarrel with my mother-in-law. This concrete and subjectively unique experience is typified linguistically under the category of "mother-in-law trouble." In this typification it makes sense to myself, to others, and, presumably, to my mother-in-law. The same typification, however, entails anonymity. Not only I but *anyone* (more accurately, anyone in the category of son-in-law) can have "mother-

in-law trouble." In this way, my biographical experiences are ongoingly subsumed under general orders of meaning that are both objectively and subjectively real.

Because of its capacity to transcend the "here and now," language bridges different zones within the reality of everyday life and integrates them into a meaningful whole. The transcendences have spatial, temporal, and social dimensions. Through language I can transcend the gap between my manipulatory zone and that of the other; I can synchronize my biographical time sequence with his; and I can converse with him about individuals and collectivities with whom we are not at present in face-to-face interaction. As a result of these transcendences, language is capable of "making present" a variety of objects that are spatially, temporally, and socially absent from the "here and now." A vast accumulation of experiences and meanings can become objectified in the "here and now." Put simply, through language an entire world can be actualized at any moment. This transcending and integrating power of language is retained when I am not actually conversing with another. Through linguistic objectification, even when "talking to myself" in solitary thought, an entire world can be appresented to me at any moment. As far as social relations are concerned, language "makes present" for me not only fellow men who are physically absent at the moment, but fellow men in the remembered or reconstructed past, as well as fellow men projected as imaginary figures into the future. All these "presences" can be highly meaningful, of course, in the ongoing reality of everyday life.

Moreover, language is capable of transcending the reality of everyday life altogether. It can refer to experiences pertaining to finite provinces of meaning, and it can span discrete spheres of reality. For instance, I can interpret "the meaning" of a dream by integrating it linguistically within the order of everyday life. Such integration transposes the discrete reality of the dream into the reality of everyday life by making it an enclave within the latter.

The dream is now meaningful in terms of the reality of everyday life rather than of its own discrete reality. Enclaves produced by such transposition belong, in a sense, to both spheres of reality. They are "located" in one reality, but "refer" to another.

Any significative theme that thus spans spheres of reality may be defined as a symbol, and the linguistic mode by which such transcendence is achieved may be called symbolic language. On the level of symbolism, then, linguistic signification attains the maximum detachment from the "here and now" of everyday life, and language soars into regions that are not only *de facto*, but *a priori* unavailable to everyday experience. Language now constructs immense edifices of symbolic representations that appear to tower over the reality of everyday life like gigantic presences from another world. Religion, philosophy, art, and science are the historically most important symbol systems of this kind. To name these is already to say that, despite the maximal detachment from everyday experience that the construction of these systems requires, they can be of very great importance indeed for the reality of everyday life. Language is capable not only of constructing symbols that are highly abstracted from everyday experience, but also of "bringing back" these symbols and appresenting them as objectively real elements in everyday life. In this manner, symbolism and symbolic language become essential constituents of the reality of everyday life and of the common-sense apprehension of this reality. I live in a world of signs *and* symbols every day.

I apprehend [this] reality of everyday life as an ordered reality. Its phenomena are prearranged in patterns that seem to be independent of my apprehension of them and that impose themselves upon the latter. The reality of everyday life appears already objectified; that is, constituted by an order of objects that have been designated *as* objects before my appearance on the scene. The language used in everyday life continuously provides me with the necessary objectifications and posits the order within which these make sense and within

which everyday life has meaning for me. I live in a place that is geographically designated; I employ tools, from can openers to sports cars, which are designated in the technical vocabulary of my society; I live within a web of human relationships, from my chess club to the United States of America, which are also ordered by means of vocabulary. In this manner language marks the co-ordinates of my life in society and fills that life with meaningful objects.

The reality of everyday life further presents itself to me as an intersubjective world, a world that I share with others. This intersubjectivity sharply differentiates everyday life from other realities of which I am conscious. I am alone in the world of my dreams, but I know that the world of everyday life is as real to others as it is to myself. Indeed, I cannot exist in everyday life without continually interacting and communicating with others. I know that my natural attitude to this world corresponds to the natural attitude of others, that they also comprehend the objectifications by which this world is ordered, that they also organize this world around the "here and now" of *their* being in it and have projects for working in it. I also know, of course, that the others have a perspective on this common world that is not identical with mine. My "here" is their "there." My "now" does not fully overlap with theirs. My projects differ from and may even conflict with theirs. All the same, I know that I live with them in a common world. Most importantly, I know that there is an ongoing correspondence between *my* meanings and *their* meanings in this world, that we share a common sense about its reality. The natural attitude is the attitude of common-sense consciousness precisely because it refers to a world that is common to many men. Common-sense knowledge is the knowledge I share with others in the normal, self-evident routines of everyday life.

The reality of everyday life is shared with others. But how are these others themselves experienced in everyday life? The reality of everyday life contains typificatory schemes in terms of which others

are apprehended and "dealt with" in face-to-face encounters. Thus, I apprehend the other as "a man," "a European," "a buyer," "a jovial type," and so on. All these typifications ongoingly affect my interaction with him as, say, I decide to show him a good time on the town before trying to sell him my product. Our face-to-face interaction will be patterned by these typifications as long as they do not become problematic through interference on his part. Thus, he may come up with evidence that, although "a man," "a European," and "a buyer," he is also a self-righteous moralist, and that what appeared first as joviality is actually an expression of contempt for Americans in general and American salesmen in particular. At this point, of course, my typificatory scheme will have to be modified, and the evening planned differently in accordance with this modification. Unless thus challenged, though, the typifications will hold until further notice and will determine my actions in the situation.

The typificatory schemes entering into face-to-face situations are, of course, reciprocal. The other also apprehends me in a typified way—as "a man," "an American," "a salesman," "an ingratiating fellow," and so on. The other's typifications are as susceptible to my interference as mine are to his. In other words, the two typificatory schemes enter into an ongoing "negotiation" in the face-to-face situation. In everyday life such "negotiation" is itself likely to be prearranged in a typical manner—as in the typical bargaining process between buyers and salesmen. Thus, most of the time, my encounters with others in everyday life are typical in a double sense—I apprehend the other *as* a type and I interact with him in a situation that is itself typical.

The typifications of social interaction become progressively anonymous the farther away they are from the face-to-face situation. Every typification, of course, entails incipient anonymity. If I typify my friend Henry as a member of category X (say, as an Englishman), I *ipso facto* interpret at least certain aspects of his conduct as resulting from this typification—for in-

stance, his tastes in food are typical of Englishmen, as are his manners, certain of his emotional reactions, and so on. This implies, though, that these characteristics and actions of my friend Henry appertain to *anyone* in the category of Englishman; that is, I apprehend these aspects of his being in anonymous terms. Nevertheless, as long as my friend Henry is available in the plenitude of expressivity of the face-to-face situation, he will constantly break through my type of anonymous Englishman and manifest himself as a unique and therefore atypical individual—to wit, as my friend Henry. The anonymity of the type is obviously less susceptible to this kind of individualization when face-to-face interaction is a matter of the past (my friend Henry, *the Englishman*, whom I knew when I was a college student), or is of a superficial and transient kind (the Englishman with whom I have a brief conversation on a train), or has never taken place (my business competitors in England).

The social reality of everyday life is thus apprehended in a continuum of typifications, which are progressively anonymous as they are removed from the “here and now” of the face-to-face situation. At one pole of the continuum are those others with whom I frequently and intensively interact in face-to-face situations—my “inner circle,” as it were. At the other pole are highly anonymous abstractions, which by their very nature can never be available in face-to-face interaction. Social structure is the sum total of these typifications and of the recurrent patterns of interaction established by means of them. As such, social structure is an essential element of the reality of everyday life.

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