

## Chapter 5

### Peter Berger: Pioneer of Constructivism Despite Himself

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**Abstract:** As a sociologist and a theologian, Peter Berger (1929-2017) would not necessarily be expected to be referenced in this book. However, this chapter aims to show that Berger has marked political science from the outside in several ways. Those changes can be characterized as twofold: as a *displacement* and as a *layering*. The displacement relates to Berger's book *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967), co-authored with Thomas Luckmann, whose impact went beyond what the authors intended remit of constructivism in social science. Through a study of co-citation of this work and its graphing with VOSviewer, it is possible to identify the subdisciplines or schools of political science that were more influenced by it. On the other hand, the layering is related to Berger's work as a sociologist of religion. His work had a deep impact on social science through what have been called the secularization paradigm and the rehabilitation of religion decades later. In political science, the secularization paradigm contributed to marginalizing religion from analysis. Peter Berger's own shift on this point would contribute to modifying political science perceptions of religion. The chapter is divided into three parts. First, the life and trajectory of Peter Berger is described, with insights into how his personal trajectory probably impacted his sociology. Then, I examine the contribution Berger made to the discipline by reframing both epistemological and ontological questions in social and political science. Finally, the chapter ends with a consideration of Peter Berger's influence on social and political science, through the abovementioned methodology of the study of co-citation.

#### Introduction

Peter Berger was not a political scientist. His work has traditionally been described as being at the border between theology and sociology, making him a good example of an author who has marked the discipline from outside, by being imported and interpreted by others. This exogenous influence is twofold: on the one hand, his work influenced the revolution of constructivism, even though he did not identify with this term or this approach himself; secondly, the extension of the boundaries of political science, including the introduction of religion as a new and legitimate object of social studies.

Berger's work *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of knowledge* (1967) (hereafter: *The Social Construction of Reality*), co-authored with Thomas Luckmann, is an essential work of social sciences. Although internationally recognized, cited, and studied, this book has not necessarily resulted in its authors being recognized to the same extent. Peter Berger himself acknowledged this in his later writings, attributing this 'marginality' to the provenance of a peripheral, non-elite institution<sup>1</sup> (Berger, 2013, p. 12). His scepticism regarding quantitative

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<sup>1</sup> After receiving his PhD in 1954, Peter Berger worked for two years at an Evangelical Academy in Germany, then as an assistant professor at the Women's College University of North Carolina (1956-58), as an associate professor of Hartford Theological Seminary, as an associate professor at The New School for Social Research (1963-70), as a

methods, at a time of a significant rise of enthusiasm towards them in the United States, also played a role in this relative lack of recognition. As mentioned in the introduction to the present volume in relation to Bourdieu, change has often been promoted at the margins of the field, where intellectuals find more liberty to innovate. Berger, both methodologically and institutionally ubicated himself in those margins. Moreover, Berger's public positions disconcerted both the progressive and the more conservative movements, which was probably another factor in preventing him from becoming a 'classic'.

Peter Berger (1929-2017) was born in Austria to a Jewish family and migrated to the US at the age of 17. He then became a sociologist and theologian and therefore belonged to the group of authors who have marked political science from outside. He did so in several ways. First, through *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967), co-authored with Thomas Luckmann, which is a classic of social sciences. His other works, considered by Linda Woodhead as a metatheory (Woodhead et al., 2001, p. 1), also played a fundamental role for the social sciences. Berger's major contributions emerged in the early years of his career at the New School for Social Research in New York. Those contributions included the idea of social construction, which played a major role in the rise of constructivism (Knoblauch & Wilke, 2016), and later, his effort to go beyond the debate between structure and agency, set out in *The Social Construction of Reality* as well as in *Invitation to Sociology* (1963). Finally, Berger's work on the sociology of religion in particular, *The Sacred Canopy* (1967) and *The Desecularization of the World* (1999), contributed to taking religion into account as a fundamental factor in explaining social relations. Indeed, after the important contributions of Durkheim, Weber, or Marx, religion has often been neglected by the academy, influenced by the secularization paradigm of which Berger has also been a part.

For political science, as this chapter will show, the work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann and the introduction of constructivism can be considered a displacement type of change (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009) which had important consequences for the foundation of various schools and approaches, in particular New Institutionalism and constructivism in International Relations. Indeed, as Mahoney and Thelen put it, displacement is not always produced by 'sudden breakdown'. It can also be 'a slow-moving process' which can occur 'when new institutions are introduced and directly compete with (rather than supplement) an older set of institutions' (2009, p. 16). In the case of Berger, the innovation consisted of reconciling classical oppositions of social science, such as the opposition between agency and structure, objectivism and subjectivism, for the creation of a new epistemology. This was later called 'constructivism', a concept which in Colin Hay's words 'challenges conventional approaches in some profound ways' (2016, p. 520). *The Social Construction of Reality* broke with the previously established epistemologies, in particular positivism, and opened the way to a redefinition of the problems and tasks of the sociology of knowledge, and more broadly to all areas of sociology (Lamo de Espinosa et al., 1994, pp. 405–407). The transfer to other social science, in particular political science, would wait until the 1980s.

Even if *The Social Construction of Reality* was a collaboration between Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, we postulate that the former had more influence on political science, beyond this book and constructivism. Indeed, Berger's production after *The Social Construction of Reality* was more prolific while his work on sociology of religion has had a remarkable impact on social and political

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professor at Rutgers University (1970-79), as a professor at Boston College (1979-81) and then at Boston University where he finished his career.

science. Moreover, his collaborations with renowned political scientists such as Effie Fokas (2021) or, in particular, Samuel Huntington (2003) allowed him to cross to political science. In contrast, Thomas Luckmann's individual work remained more linked to philosophy and sociology, with collaborations limited to scholars in those disciplines, in particular with Alfred Schütz. An example of this crossover to political science can be found in Berger's citation for his individual work in political science journals.

Peter Berger applied the approach developed in *The Social Construction of Reality* to the sociology of religion, as an historical and socially constructed phenomenon. His leading role on the secularization paradigm and its turning point at the end of the nineties, had a significant impact on the marginalization of religion in social science and in political science in particular, and then on its later rehabilitation (Bobineau & Tank-Storper, 2012; Fox, 2018; Philpott, 2009; Wald & Wilcox, 2006). This contribution to political science is here considered an illustration of layering, as Berger's development of ideas on secularization added new elements to discussions already present in social science.

The chapter is divided in three parts. The first describes how Peter Berger's biography, in particular his youth marked by exile, multiculturalism and religious conversion, may have influenced his contributions. The second part details how Berger had an impact on reframing ontological and epistemological questions in sociology and political science. The main concepts developed in Berger's work<sup>2</sup> such as social construction and secularization will be explored to demonstrate how they constitute a considerable change for social science: a displacement as far as social construction is concerned and a layering regarding secularization. The last part of the chapter explores Berger's influence on social and political science, situating him in various schools and subdisciplines through the study of his co-citations and citations, and explaining the paradox alongside his reception.

### **Migrations, multilingualism, and religious conversion: Berger's own experiences of the social construction of reality**

Understanding Peter Berger's life and trajectory is particularly useful to comprehend his reflections and his scientific work. This section will try to illustrate how his personal journey influenced his views on society.

Peter Berger was born in Vienna in 1929 into a non-practicing Jewish family. In the wake of the Anschluss his family had him baptized Anglican. Nazism drove his family into exile in Italy and then in British Mandate Palestine, where he spent his childhood and adolescence attending Pietist and then Anglican schools. There he studied Hebrew, German, and English, while speaking German and Italian with his family. It was during an excursion to Jerusalem that he had a mystical experience, which led to his effective conversion to Protestantism (Fernandez, 2003; Pfadenhauer, 2013; Woodhead et al., 2001).

This multireligious, multicultural and multilingual environment likely had an impact on Berger's career as a sociologist. Indeed, the very particular context in which he grew up and the migrations he had to make perhaps influenced the fact that he did not regard one particular reality as 'natural',

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<sup>2</sup> Those concepts are treated more as Berger's, than as Berger and Luckmann's because they were exposed in the second chapter of *The Social Construction of Reality*, which Luckmann recognized as Berger's (Luckmann, 2001). Although, the reconciliation between structure and agency was present in a previous volume of Berger, *Invitation to sociology* (Berger, 2014) and he kept deepening in those concepts in *The Sacred Canopy* (Berger, 1967).

having known several different cultural and religious contexts. In fact, in his *Invitation to Sociology*, Peter Berger pointed out some characteristics that he found necessary to the practice of sociology: one is the importance of being aware of the radical relativity of values, and another, cosmopolitanism. For Berger, ‘a sociological consciousness is particularly likely to emerge in a cultural situation marked by [...] the possibility of choosing between different and sometimes contradictory systems of meaning’ (Berger, 2014, p. 93) as happened in his own life. Indeed, according to Berger, sociology could help individuals understand better what is at stake in their own biography, especially at the turning point of geographical and social mobility since these are events that can lead us to reinterpret our own identities. The links that Berger saw between the discipline and the understanding of one’s own migration were also likely to be related to his own experience, alongside that of his sociologist contemporaries.

Berger also underlines the migrant condition of modern humankind in *The Homeless Mind* (1973): ‘The correlate of the migratory character of his experience of society and of self has been what might be called a metaphysical loss of “home”’ (1973, p. 77). It is also easy to link Berger’s experiences during his youth to the idea developed about twenty years later that ‘the identities that we consider to be our essential being have been socially assigned to us’ and are therefore not natural (2014, p. 138). Similarly the cultural shock he went through himself also perhaps gave birth to his very approach to sociology: ‘a culture shock minus displacement in space’ (2014, p. 58). Although Berger did not directly acknowledge the relation between his personal history and his thinking, we might postulate that these cultural shocks, identity changes, and religious conversion had a profound impact on his thinking, particularly on the constructed nature of reality.

Berger arrived at New York City at the age of 17 with the idea of becoming a pastor. He obtained a B.A. in philosophy and decided to enrol in sociology night classes at the New School for Social Research to better understand the American society in which he had arrived. The New School, together with the Emergency Committee for Displaced German Scholars, and the Rockefeller Foundation, led a rescue operation of German speaking academics in danger from Nazism because of their Jewish origins or their political activities (Schrecker, 2015). Berger himself was not of an age to benefit directly from those programmes at the beginning of the Second World War but when he joined The New School, most of his teachers were European intellectuals who had fled fascism like himself. As mentioned in the introduction to this volume, European sociology had great influence in the US through those refugees, and Berger’s teachers were no exception. Alfred Schutz particularly influenced him, and phenomenology had an important place in his writings. Beyond Alfred Schutz, Peter Berger was deeply swayed by Max Weber and the idea of a social science free of values, and we can also cite the influence of Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Carl Mayer, Arnold Gehlen and George Herbert Mead on his work.

At this time, Berger also met Thomas Luckmann, a classmate with whom he would later collaborate on their major book: *The Social Construction of Reality*. More than collaborators, the two were friends, and Luckmann called their collaborations [their] ‘excursions into thinking and writing – and getting older – together’ (Luckmann, 2001, p. 18). Luckmann himself noted that their common background as German-speaking immigrants from the former Austro-Hungarian empire was probably largely responsible for their intellectual match (2001). According to Luckmann, Berger was particularly responsible for the first two chapters of *The Social Construction of Reality*. Even if they did not work together for the next twenty-five years and did not really further elaborate on the theory presented in their book, they remained friends. Almost

thirty years after their first collaboration, they then published *Modernity, Pluralism and the Crisis of Meaning* together in 1995.

After receiving his PhD in 1954, Peter Berger worked for two years at an Evangelical Academy in Germany, then became assistant professor at the Women's College University of North Carolina (1956-58), then associate professor at Hartford Theological Seminary, associate professor at The New School for Social Research (1963-70), professor at Rutgers University (1970-79), and Boston College (1979-81) and finally professor at Boston University where he finished his career.

As mentioned above, Peter Berger was multilingual from childhood. In several of his works, the question of language is discussed at length, as it marks a crucial stage in the social construction of reality and concepts (Berger, 1967, 2014; Berger & Luckmann, 1967). The fact of naming things in one way or another, and the idea that a denomination covers a particular reality, transmitted from generation to generation at the time of primary socialization, is an integral aspect of the social construction of reality. The role of primary socialization and mother tongue, and in particular their affective component, occupied an important place in Berger's work but also in his academic career. Indeed, while pursuing his career in the United States and writing in English, Berger had many friends and collaborators who also shared his German linguistic and cultural origins, including Max Weber, one of his main sources of inspiration, as well as his teacher Alfred Schutz, his friend and co-author Thomas Luckmann<sup>3</sup>, and the philosopher Ivan Illich, who we will be discussed in the next paragraph. Berger wrote 'This socially determined conception of the world is, in part at least, already given in the language spoken in a society [...] there is no doubt that language at least contributes to shaping our relationship to reality.' (2014, pp. 157–158). Peter Berger's wife and co-author, Brigitte Berger née Kellner, was also a German speaker, as was her brother, Hansfried Kellner, with whom Berger also worked. Brigitte Berger was born in eastern Germany in 1928 and arrived in the United States in the mid-1950s. She obtained her PhD in Sociology from The New School and married Peter Berger in 1959 (Berger, 2015).

Peter Berger himself describes his meeting with the philosopher Ivan Illich (whose career has important similarities with Peter Berger's<sup>4</sup>) as a key event in his existence (Pfadenhauer, 2013, p. xix). Illich had invited the former to give a seminar at the Intercultural Documentation Center in Cuernavaca, Mexico. This meeting and the journey to Mexico led Berger to adhere to the market economy and democracy as primary engines of progress. The war in Vietnam then marked the beginning of Berger's ambiguous public political position-taking, as he protested the way in which the United States were engaged in the war although he did not identify with the peace movement at the time.

From 1981, Peter Berger was a professor at Boston University and in 1985 he founded the Institute for the Studies of Economic Culture there, now the Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs. With its Weberian legacy, the Institute promotes the study of the relationship between the cultural and religious dimension and economic development. The research projects of the Institute have exerted a notable influence on topics such as the study of the emergence of Pentecostalism in Latin America (Martin, 1993), on the relationship between congregations and social change

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<sup>3</sup> His co-author puts it this way: 'Berger and I found that we came from partly very similar, partly quite dissimilar milieus from the same background. Our families were rooted in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, and we came from its successor states. In a manner of speaking, we talked the same language whether in German or English.'

<sup>4</sup> Like Peter Berger, Ivan Illich comes from a Jewish family with Austrian and Croatian roots who took refuge in Italy during World War II. Like him, he intended for religious life by becoming a Catholic priest.

(Ammerman & Farnsley, 1997) or on the relationship between Islam and democracy (Hefner, 2011).

### **Reconciling Max Weber and Emile Durkheim by overcoming the structure/agency divide**

One of Peter Berger's most valuable contributions to social science is the overcoming of a traditional opposition between structure and agency, objectivism and subjectivism, and holism and individualism. Previously, Émile Durkheim had insisted on social reality as being an objective, almost natural fact, whereas Max Weber pointed out the subjective signification, intention, and interpretations through which actors understand social situations.

In his *Introduction to Sociology* (1963), Peter Berger tried to reconcile this transcendent cleavage of social science between structure and agency. Indeed, in his opinion, different mechanisms of social control as well as social classes or other systems of social stratification are all objective facts which serve to channel human actions. Because of them, society may appear like a very coercive place. However, Berger also stated that daily life in society is bearable because it is not only individuals who are in society, but society is also in individuals. Thus, most of the time the objective reality of society does not constitute a coercive force. Indeed, Berger stresses that before we even act, society unconsciously defines who we are. Peter Berger here claims to be dependent on role theory, the sociology of knowledge, and the theory of the reference group, thus placing himself in the lineage of George Herbert Mead, Erving Goffman, and Talcott Parsons.<sup>5</sup>

As mentioned above, the primary and secondary<sup>6</sup> socialization of individuals are crucial stages of the internalization of society and are omnipresent processes in the work of Peter Berger. Through socialisation and internalization, human beings receive their roles and identities from society as well as the cognitive approach to the world around them, which includes their religious ideas and beliefs, which are serve to maintain social order. Thus, society seems to not only control our movements, but also shapes who we are as well as our consciousness.

According to Berger, social constraints do exist, but it is possible for individuals to free themselves from these (2014, pp. 168–178). Situations of social marginality and social change prove it. Indeed, if social constraints were total and absolutely incorporated by individuals, it would be impossible to imagine social change or individuals challenging the status quo. Berger thus insists on the importance of looking at historical process. Social structures, while being massive, have evolved and changed over time. Thus, power in society is never absolute, and powerlessness is never complete either. There is a dominant official definition of reality, but with alternative interpretation, that could lead to social change or to the threatening of official definitions. For example, individuals whose interpretation of the world deviates from the norm can attract enough followers to create a new norm. More conventionally, it is possible to sabotage or withdraw from social situations to resist social controls.

Peter Berger concluded his work by presenting society as an apparatus of 'bad faith'<sup>7</sup> (Berger, 2014, pp. 186–187), in which individuals always have the choice to step out of their role, yet attribute their acts to the absence of alternatives. Thus, society, through its processes of

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<sup>5</sup> On this subject and others such as the emphasis on language or primary socialisation, we can also perceive a certain inheritance from Norbert Elias.

<sup>6</sup> Primary socialization refers to the very first years of childhood and socialization within family, whereas secondary socialization is everything occurring after that, typically school, work, church, union, etc.

<sup>7</sup> We can here see a clear reference to Jean-Paul Sartre, with whom Berger shares the legacy of phenomenology and in particular his famous example of the waiter acting in bad faith and denying his own freedom (Sartre, 1943).

socialization and social controls, equips the individual with mechanisms through which they can hide from their own freedom.

### **Overcoming the objectivism/subjectivism opposition**

As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, Peter Berger's main contribution was to overcome traditional oppositions in social science. We have already mentioned the one between structure and agency. Weberian and Durkheimian sociologies are also separated by the opposition between objectivism and subjectivism. The concepts of externalization, objectivation, and internalization, which work as a three-stage dialectical relationship, are central to Berger's sociology (Berger, 1967, 2014; Berger & Luckmann, 1967) and are key concepts for overcoming the two cleavages already mentioned. The three moments of this dialectical relationship can be summed up as follows: 1. Society is a human product; 2. however, society is an objective reality; 3. human beings are social products, shaped by society (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 61).

The first stage, called **externalization** by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, is the movement by which human beings institutionalize their practices through habitualization (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, pp. 60–61). Indeed, in comparison to other animals, human beings must evolve considerably from birth, a process which takes place in a specific social and cultural order. In this sense, despite anthropological constants, Berger does not recognize any human nature but the need for a social order. From his viewpoint, social order is not an external fact: it only exists since human activities produce it, because of our incapacity to be independent from birth. Human beings build their own nature for themselves, and the process varies enormously from one society to another. The repeated human activities produce habits which allow us to free up time and energy by eliminating decision-making in certain aspects of our daily life. The usual actions that everyone – or certain actors – typifies or names in the same way become institutions, including the different social roles. Thus, any continuous action over time contains the seeds of an institution. In this sense, the first stage of the social construction of reality is more Weberian than Durkheimian, recognizing the arbitrary and human character of social reality.

According to Berger and Luckmann, the second step of the social construction of reality is its **objectivation** (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, pp. 47–128). The world created by parents and grandparents becomes 'The World' in the eyes of a child. Lacking access to the mechanisms that contributed to the formation of its institutions, it is a world that looks like a 'natural', objective reality. This objectivation of institutions is realized through primary socialization as well as language. Indeed, the fact that everyone within the same society names something by the same name and understands its meaning in the same way makes this reality objective and tangible, just as other signs can have the same meaning (a judge's gown, military badges, etc.).

This second step could, however, be understood as Durkheimian: the institutional world is therefore an objective reality, external to individuals. Human beings are not able to understand social institutions through introspection and must on the contrary look outward, just as they must look outward to understand nature. Even if social institutions have a social meaning at their origin, those institutions have been 'naturalized' and people do not have access to their original signification. Institutions therefore need legitimation. This constitutes a second objectivation of reality which can range from a very basic one, as simple as 'this is how things are done' to a tradition of theoretical symbolic universes that explain the entirety of social history and the biographies of individuals from their birth to death (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, pp. 92–128).

The first two steps described, externalization and objectivation, are not separate stages but aspects of the same dialectical movement. Humans and the social world are constantly interacting: human beings create institutions by the repetition of habits (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, pp. 53–67), in order to reduce uncertainty and those social institutions, even if they are constructed by humans, are nevertheless very real and objective realities to individuals. According to Berger and Luckmann, the last step of the dialectical movement is the action of society upon human beings.

**Internalization** is the third movement in the process. The individual, in fact, is not born a member of society but becomes one, through a process of primary and secondary socialization. Primary socialization, during childhood, is shaped by the social structures in which an individual finds themselves and by the mediation of the people who raised them. However, the child does not internalize this world as one possible world among others but as the only possible and existing world, which makes this sociability extremely strong and rooted in consciousness. According to Berger and Luckmann (1967, pp. 138–147), secondary socialization is the acquisition of knowledge and of legitimizing symbolism specific to the individual's role, which is often a role linked to the division of labour. During a person's existence, learned and legitimized reality is reinforced by routine mechanisms, for example interaction with others and language or social sanctions such as ridicule. In the event of a personal or collective crisis (misfortune, natural catastrophes...), reality can also be maintained by more intense and explicit confirmation. In those cases, ritualistic techniques such as exorcism, taboos, curses, etc. could also be employed in order to restore normality, in case of deviation (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, pp. 129–184).

Externalization, objectivation, and internalization are three steps of the social construction that had an enormous potential to transcend the traditional opposition between objectivism and subjectivism: social reality is both humanly constructed and an objective reality. In turn, human beings are a social product even considering that social institutions are taken for granted. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman summarized this in the following expression: 'Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product' (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 61).

Peter Berger participated in reframing ontological and epistemological questions by transcending traditional oppositions. Through his collaboration with Thomas Luckmann, he had a huge influence on the emergence of constructivist and post-positivist epistemologies in the social and political sciences. This represented a major change for social and political science and allowed the emergence of new schools within subdisciplines.

### **From secularisation to desecularisation: Berger's contributions to the sociology of religion**

After *The Social Construction of Reality*, most of Berger's work was dedicated to the sociology of religion. Despite his own religious education, he adopted a 'methodological atheism'<sup>8</sup> (Berger, 1967, p. 100). Indeed, classic authors of sociology who worked extensively on religion before him, such as Marx or Comte, had critical views on their subject, considering religion to be a premodern, irrational, and often instrumental phenomenon. Weber and Durkheim had more neutral views on religion as they refrained from pronouncing an opinion on the ontological status of the divine. In the appendix of *The Sacred Canopy*, Berger stressed that the 'essential perspective of the sociological theory here proposed is that religion is to be understood as a human projection [...]. Valuations must be kept strictly apart from the theoretical analysis of religion as false

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<sup>8</sup> Berger recognizes the authorship of this term to Anton Zijderveld.

consciousness, an analysis that, within his frame of reference, remains value-free with regard to both these aspects.' (1967, p. 180) Berger's methodological atheism can be interpreted as an application of Weber's axiological neutrality regarding the sociology of religion.

Berger's approach to religion was in continuity with his previous publications and he considered religion as a social construction that constitutes a 'sacred canopy', protecting human beings from the chaos of anomy (Berger, 1967, p. 26). The author recalled the three steps of the dialectic process of society and applied it to religion: 'men produce their gods even while they apprehend themselves as "totally dependent" upon these their products. But, by the same token, the "other world" of the gods takes on a certain autonomy vis-à-vis the human activity that ongoingly produces it' (Berger, 1967, p. 96). According to Berger, worlds are socially constructed, but also socially maintained. In both aspects, religion plays an important part: it is considered as 'a strategic part in the human enterprise of world-building' (Berger, 1967, p. 27). In particular, according to Berger, religion 'has been the historically most widespread and effective instrumentality of legitimation' (Berger, 1967, p. 32). Through their religious legitimation and the religious social control, social institutions are then seen as inevitable, firm, and durable.

The main concepts Berger developed in the sociology of religion relate to secularization and pluralism. As Dobbelaere (1981) and Tschannen (1991) pointed out, modern theories of secularization emerged as a paradigm, as described in the Kuhnian framework, in a concrete scientific community, including, beside Berger, Thomas Luckmann, Bryan Wilson, David Martin, Richard Fenn, Talcott Parsons, and Robert Bellah. Others, like Acquaviva or Habermas, have worked on the concept from outside of this community.

In Peter Berger's work, secularization is defined as 'the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols' and 'may be observed in the decline of religious contents in the arts, in philosophy, in literature and, most important of all, in the rise of science as an autonomous, thoroughly secular perspective of the world' (Berger, 1967, p. 107). Berger's originality within the paradigm of secularization is the fact that he traced the very roots of secularization to Protestantism<sup>9</sup> (1967, p. 113) and religious rationalization and specialization. In Berger's words, with secularization and modern industry the State no longer serves as an 'enforcement agency' (1967, p. 130) on behalf of the dominant religious institution. Thus, this demonopolization of religious tradition leads to pluralism, that is to say the entry of minorities religion or non-religious rivals into the 'business of defining the world' (1967, p. 137). According to Berger, those two processes of pluralization and secularization are closely linked. The idea of religions being more pluralistic as the 'market' became freer, would bring significant meaning to the tradition of rational choice theory in sociology of religion.

Three decades after *The Sacred Canopy*, Peter L. Berger published *The Desecularization of the World* (Berger, 1999), with the following subtitle: *Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. He declared in the introduction that 'The assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today [...] is as furiously religious as it ever was' (Berger, 1999). Berger recognized that he was contributing to secularization theory and that this literature was essentially mistaken. Indeed, the idea that modernization would lead to a decline of religion also turned out to be wrong: with

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<sup>9</sup> According to Berger (1967, pp. 112–113), protestantism abolish the mediation that catholicism established between the believer and he sacred (sacraments of the church, intercession of the saints, miracles...). This mediation represented a continuity between heaven and earth, broken by protestantism. That explains how « protestantism served as a historically decisive prelude to secularization » in Berger's words.

the shift towards secularization, we witnessed spectacular movements of counter-secularization. Moreover, secularization on the societal level is not necessarily linked to the secularization of individual consciousness. In this panorama, Western Europe constitutes an exception rather than the rule. In *The Desecularization of the World*, Berger linked this religious resurgence to other typically political questions such as international politics, referring to Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations, war and peace, economic development, human rights, and social justice. Both secularization theory and this U-turn in Berger's thinking would have an impact on religion's place in political science.

### Peter Berger's influence on social and political sciences

Peter L. Berger was a prolific author with more than forty books published, and an h-index up to 111. The next table lists his most cited publications in English.

**Table 5.1. Peter Berger's ten most cited publications in English**

References	Citations
Berger, P. L. and Thomas Luckmann (1967). <i>The Social Construction of Reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge</i>	71,459
Berger, P. L. (1968). <i>The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a sociological theory of religion</i>	14,383
Berger, P. L. (1963). <i>Invitation to sociology: A humanistic perspective</i>	4,311
Berger, P. L., Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner (1973). <i>The homeless mind: Modernization and consciousness</i>	4,145
Berger, P. L. (1999). <i>The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics</i>	4,145
Berger, P. L. and Richard J. Neuhaus (1977). <i>To empower people: The role of mediating structures in public policy</i>	1,732
Berger, P. L. and Thomas Luckmann (1979). <i>The heretical imperative: Contemporary possibilities of religious affirmation</i>	1,710
Berger, P. L. (1969). <i>The social reality of religion</i>	1,682
Berger, P. L. (1970). <i>A rumor of angels: Modern society and the rediscovery of the supernatural</i>	1,604
Berger, P. L. (1991). <i>Capitalist Revolution</i>	1,292

Among these ten most influential books, *The Social Construction of Reality* stands out as the most cited one, five other texts are references for sociology of religion, three are essays on modernization, capitalism, and mediating structures and the last one stands as a reflexion on the discipline of sociology. In the next pages, we will consider how Berger's work in *The Social*

*Construction of Reality* on the one hand, and on sociology of religion on the other, had an impact on political science. Finally, the chapter will demonstrate how Berger's reception has been paradoxical and largely unintended.

### **New epistemologies and schools stemming from 'constructivism'**

Berger's most cited work is the abovementioned book, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967) co-written with his colleague and friend Thomas Luckmann. Written in a context in which the hegemonic theoretical models were functionalism and structuralism, Berger and Luckmann opened a third way with their attempts to reconcile Weberian and Durkheimian sociology, two approaches that were considered incompatible. Their peers recognized it as a reference work. Cited more than 70,000 times, it was elected among the five most influential sociology books of the twentieth century according to the International Sociological Association, alongside *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* by Max Weber and *The distinction*, by Pierre Bourdieu. As mentioned above, Berger and Luckmann's text contributed to the emergence of constructivism and sociological institutionalism in political science. Moreover, the book had an impact beyond social science. According to Scopus, approximately a third of publications citing *The Social Construction of Reality* are not listed under social sciences, but are texts from business, economics, medicine, computer science amongst others.

Even if Peter Berger did not recognize himself as a constructivist, *The Social Construction of Reality* undoubtedly played a role in the emergence of constructivism and thus also in every discipline of social science. As Berger and Luckmann did not intend to establish a school, and as constructivism was first developed in other disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, or anthropology, their legacy for political science is often seen as implicit and indirect. Even so, *The Oxford Handbook of Political Science* includes Peter Berger as one of the 'integrators of the discipline', having influenced several sub-disciplines of social science and political science (Goodin, 2011, p. 40). Even if constructivism was quite heterodox when first introduced in political science, it has become a 'common coin' (Hacking, 2000, p. 2). Following the types of institutional change outlined by Mahoney and Thelen (2009) and already explained in the introduction of this volume, the degree of change introduced by the emergence of constructivist and post-positivist epistemologies could be defined as displacement, i.e. the introduction of new institutions directly competing with an older set of institutions (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009, p. 16). Indeed, positivist epistemologies, which are incompatible with constructivism, did not disappear with the emergence of the latter, even if the introduction of new epistemologies represented significant renewal for the discipline.

In the 1960s, Peter Berger, along with others such as Garfinkel and Bourdieu, influenced the ideational and cognitive approach to social science by shifting 'the image of cognition from a rational, discursive, quasi scientific process to one that operates largely beneath the level of consciousness, a routine and conventional "practical reason" governed by "rules" that are recognized only when they are preached' (Parsons, 2007, p. 126). This is what Berger and Luckmann call the 'taken-for-granted' (1967, p. 23) character of reality. Culture, beliefs, and convictions found a place in social science and have been considered valid variables to understand human behaviour.

Constructivism, noted Hay, is a profoundly *political* sociology 'for it seeks quite consciously and often [...] to identify (often where it might not otherwise be apparent) the political authoring of institutional, institutionalised and institutionalising processes and the difference that actors make

to institutional dynamics' (Hay, 2016, p. 525). Nevertheless, constructivism would take almost thirty years to enter political science (at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s), especially through New Sociological Institutionalism and International Relations (Adler, 1997; Hay, 2006). The ideational approach in general, and Berger's work in particular, contributed widely to the emergence of constructivist school in International Relations (Adler, 1997; Wendt, 1992, 1995). The novelty of constructivism compared with realism or liberalism in international relations is the idea that the nature of State is not dictated by objective conditions, whether security or wealth, but instead is 'socially constructed'. Berger and Luckmann were key references for Alexander Wendt, the main initiator and representative of this particular IR school (Wendt, 1992). Other important names in the constructivist school within IR also interacted with Berger and Luckmann, like Finnemore (1996) or Onuf (2013). As a matter of fact, Thomas U. Berger, the elder son of Peter Berger, is himself a constructivist International Relations scholar at Boston University.

Sociological institutionalism postulates that institutions have cultural roots (institutions and culture are in fact seen as somewhat synonymous with sociological institutionalism), contrary to rationalist institutionalism which describes institutions as 'long-lived patterns of rational behavior' (Aspinwall & Schneider, 2000, p. 4). The cultural and constructed character of institutions, their cognitive and normative characteristics, and their role in offering legitimation are all features of Berger's work which have widely influenced new institutionalism, being one of its main references (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). Hay noted that constructivism was both trendy and controversial in current political science (2016, p. 520) and that it meant different things to different people, but that its essence is institutionalism both in Berger and Luckmann and later in Searle (2016, pp. 520, 524). As a matter of fact, according to Hay, institutions are central in constructivist International Relations and constructivism actually preceded the turn to institutional analysis in sociology and political science that started in the 1990s (2016, p. 525).

In order to objectively support Peter Berger's influence in different disciplines and subdisciplines, including subdisciplines of political science, I used the Scopus database and searched for documents citing *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967), which numbered 19,992 in total. Of this corpus of citing documents, I then selected the 2,000 most cited texts classified under Social Sciences. This corpus of 2,000 texts contains documents published between 1971 and 2020 and which are cited between 34 and 7,726 times. After selecting the texts, I then conducted an analysis of co-cited authors using the VOSviewer software. To facilitate the analysis, only authors with at least one hundred citations were chosen, leading to a final selection of 222 authors for the network. This exercise allows us to observe which authors are co-cited with the work of Berger and Luckmann and thus to confirm in which disciplines and theoretical schools this work falls, and which disciplines and theoretical schools refer to it more frequently. In the graph, every node represents an author co-cited with *The Social Construction of Reality*; the bigger the node the more the author is cited. Every link represents the frequency of co-citation. According to VOSviewer, the network of authors co-cited with *The Social Construction of Reality* forms five<sup>10</sup> clusters (see Graph 5.1).

**Graph 5.1. Visualization of authors co-cited with *The Social Construction of Reality* by Peter Berger & Thomas Luckmann (minimum 100 times)**

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<sup>10</sup> One of them is too small to be seen in the graph.





As mentioned above, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's work is strongly linked with the emergence of constructivism in International Relations. Indeed, the lower part of the green cluster includes a subcluster comprising key constructivist authors in IR: Alexander Wendt, Emmanuel Adler, Michael Barnett, Martha Finnemore, Kathryn Sikkink, and John Ruggie. Regarding new institutionalism, the green cluster shows a strong link of co-citation with authors such as Paul Dimaggio, James March, John Meyer and Walter Powell, all important figures of this school.

Moreover, Berger and Luckmann's work and the idea of the social construction of reality have had an important impact on critical schools. Indeed, Hacking (2000) pointed out the 'revolutionary potential of constructivism'. For example, we can find in our graph authors like Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, Antonio Gramsci, Jurgen Habermas, Theodor Adorno, or Paulo Freire, co-cited with Berger and Luckmann. Judith Butler is also present in the blue cluster, indeed this is one of the strongest links to Peter Berger in the whole graph. Actually, Hacking pointed out the fact that 'the most influential social construction doctrines have had to do with gender' (2000, p. 7). In her theory of performativity, Judith Butler<sup>11</sup> applies the idea of social construction of roles to gender roles. Indeed, in Butler's work, gender has no ontological status, other than the acts by which it is performed. Even if Butler did not refer to Berger and Luckmann by name (2006, p. 36), her thinking in turn of the social construction of gender (2006, pp. 70–72), its process of interiorization (2006, p. 37) and the tension between agency and structure (2006, p. 72) makes her an implicit heir of their work. Social constructivism has also had great impact on the emergence of critical race theory, because of its main assumption that race is a legal, sociological, and politically constructed concept. We can find in the red cluster representatives of this school such as Derrick Bell.

Amongst the political scientists or political sociologist with the strongest links to Peter Berger in our graph – that is to say, those with most co-citation and then 'closer' to him – we can mention, in order, Anthony Giddens (1320), John Meyer (770), James G. March (481), Charles Tilly (313), Herbert Simon (301), Alexander Wendt (283), Johan Olsen (277), and Robert Keohane (265).

### **Berger's contribution to the marginalization and reintegration of religion within social and political science**

Berger's work with Thomas Luckmann was not the only way he brought innovation to the discipline. Besides the introduction of constructivism, he also contributed to the enlargement of the objects of study of social science and political science, through the sociology of religion. For this last dimension, we must recognize that Peter Berger was both a fundamental theorist of the theory of secularization in the sixties, particularly with *The Sacred Canopy* (1967), and also one of the first to question it deeply, notably in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (1999).

In the last phrase of the introduction of *The Desecularisation of the World* Peter Berger warned that 'those who neglect religion in their analyses of contemporary affairs do so at great peril' (1999, p. 18). Nevertheless, the theory of secularization had the consequence of keeping the social

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<sup>11</sup> For in-depth exploration on her own influence on political science, see Lactitia de Longevialle's chapter in this volume.

sciences away from religious questions. As Anthony Gill put it ‘for nearly a century and a half, one of the most firmly held beliefs in the social sciences was that religion and religious organizations inevitably would fade from social [...] life.’ (2001, p. 117) Political science in particular largely ignored religion as a social and political factor for most of the twentieth century (Bobineau & Tank-Storper, 2012; Fox, 2018). As described by Philpott (2009), the theory of secularization was mainly developed by sociology but it had effects on all the social sciences, and probably particularly on political science where religion occupies a very marginal place (Bellin, 2008; Wald & Wilcox, 2006).

In *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (1999), Berger noted that the re-emergence of religion as a sociological variable has had an impact on other disciplines which are of particular interest to us here: international politics, the relationship between institutions and religious values in conflict and/or peacekeeping, human rights, and economic development. If Berger may have revised his positions on the theory of secularization, he remained entirely Weberian on this last point. The turning point that we have just described, and in which Peter Berger took a central role, contributed to an evolution regarding the way political science consider religion. Wald and Walcox (2006) recognize that despite weaknesses there is a ‘rediscovery’ of religion by political science. For Philpott (2009) too, political science has made important advances since the early 1990s regarding the study of religious institutions, their relationship with State, etc. This is despite the fact that, as Kettel (2023, p. 4) had pointed out, ‘religious issues have yet to be substantially integrated into the mainstream of the discipline’ while Grzymala-Busse (2012), citing Berger, argued that comparative politics should take religions more seriously.

It is also possible to assess the impact of Berger’s sociology of religion in political science through bibliometry. According to the Scopus database, *The Sacred Canopy* is frequently cited in journals classified as ‘sociology and political science’ such as *Social Compass*, *Social Forces*, or *Politics and Religion* (Q2), whereas the ten authors who most cited *The Desecularization of the World* include Pippa Norris, Ronald Inglehart, and Anna Grzymala-Busse. At the institutional level, we can mention the creation of the religion and politics study group within the International Political Science Association in 1986, the Religion and Politics section within the American Political Science Association in 1987, the foundation of a standing group on the same theme within the European Consortium for Political Research in 2006, and the publishing of *Politics and Religion* after 2008.

### **The paradox of the reception of Peter Berger’s work**

As a reaction to positivism and realism, what has been termed *constructivism* carried a certain optimism and a liberating potential. Indeed, if social phenomena have been constructed, and if they are the product of a particular history and context, this means that they can also be deconstructed. In the 1960s and 1970s, the idea of social construction was received in an extremely politicized context marked in the United States by student protests, the civil rights movement, the second wave of feminism, the start of the LGBT movement, and the opposition to the Vietnam War. In this context, the idea of social construction which indicated that reality, norms, and social institutions were not determined by nature and therefore not inevitable had revolutionary potential. There was only one step, indeed, from the idea that this reality was socially constructed to the idea that if this reality was not satisfactory, it was possible to radically transform it. Hacking (2000)

goes so far as to indicate six degrees of constructionism ranging from the historical to the revolutionary through the ironic, and then the reformist, and the rebels.

However, Berger and Luckmann did not necessarily recognize themselves in the writings that claimed to be their successors. They both denied inventing the term ‘constructivism’, a term that is not in fact found in their work, which relates more to the reception of the work than to the intention of the authors. Berger defends himself against the use of the term by ‘post-modern’ theorists. In particular, he points out the dangers that may arise from certain interpretations of constructivism of which he wishes to steer clear: the fact that all interpretations may be valid or even that there is no reality outside of interpretations (Woodhead et al., 2001). Hacking also pointed out this danger of relativism and historical revisionism (2000, p. 4). For Berger, these dangers are even ‘a recipe for the reverse charge of science, and beyond that and more dangerously, a policy of fanaticism’ (Woodhead et al., 2001, p. 191). Berger sets this out in his *Introduction to Sociology*: for him, sociological consciousness must be tinged with disrespect to lift the veil on phenomena which appear to us to be naturally evident. However, for him this sociological logic also appears to contradict revolutionary ideologies: just as it unmask the springs and illusions of the status quo, so too it does the same with utopias (Berger, 2014, pp. 81–87). In this sense, we could argue that Berger’s influence in political science was also mediated by the reinterpretation and rereading of its importers.

The reasons Berger did not identify with constructivism were not only academic, but also political. Indeed, as Hacking puts it ‘social construction is critical of the status quo’ (2000, p. 6). And if Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann did observe the historical dimension of social reality, possibly looking at it with a certain irony,<sup>12</sup> this was rather a decryption of reality than normative writing calling for an upheaval of the social order. Indeed, for Peter Berger, sociology sought to unmask and bring down the facades of social life in order to better understand its driving forces but had to remain sceptical and anti-utopian. He thus refused to allow *The Social Construction of Reality* to be understood as a manual for the left-wing movements of the time.

Peter Berger seemed to have been the victim of a certain political and academic ‘homelessness’, identity homelessness which he himself considered to be a characteristic of modernity in *The homeless mind: Modernization and consciousness* (Berger et al., 1973). At the border between theology and sociology, he did not recognize himself in the enthusiasm he arouses among liberal readers. Extremely politically conservative, he was nevertheless liberal on theological questions and moderate on social questions. A good example of this homelessness is the reception of *The War over the Family* (Berger & Berger, 1983) co-written with Brigitte Berger, which provoked significant controversies both in feminist and conservative circles.

Berger could also be described as a ‘humanist neoconservative’. He did indeed have a certain proximity to the neoconservative current. His arrival at The New School for Social Science coincided with the departure of Leo Strauss and there is no reference to Strauss in his writings, but it is possible that the ideas circulating in the university had an impact on Berger. Still, the latter later worked with Richard Neuhaus and Samuel Huntington and also participated in seminars with Irving Kristol. He contributed to the relativization of environmental issues or discussion of the health problems related to smoking. His conservative image was also reinforced by his collaboration with Richard Neuhaus in calling for a return to a much more literal and conservative interpretation of religion. However, Berger broke with the conservative movement at the end of

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<sup>12</sup> Berger considered humour to be an essential quality for practicing sociology.

the 1990s, in disagreement with the movement's 'obsession' with moral questions, especially on abortion issues on which he said he was more moderate than the neoconservative movement, and homosexuality, on which he defined himself as liberal.

### **Conclusions**

From sociology and theology, Peter Berger made fundamental contributions to social science in general, and political science in particular. His youth, with his multiple migrations and religious conversions, may have influenced him in the conception of a relative reality, dependent on cultural and historical context. In this sense, *The Social Construction of Reality* his most remarkable work, in co-authorship with Thomas Luckmann, marked a rupture with the previous positivism, overcoming the debate between objectivity and subjectivity (for Luckmann and Berger, reality is both objective and subjective), and a renewal in epistemologies. This is why this contribution is here classified as a *displacement*. In political science the new epistemology of constructivism was particularly applied to International Relations from the 1980s onwards, and also to New Institutionalism. More recently, it also had a great impact on Gender and Racial Studies. In this sense, Luckmann and Berger's concept tended to develop its own life and their influence was not totally intentional, nor did they recognize themselves as constructivists and they often did not agree with the way their concepts have been used.

Berger's work regarding the sociology of religion also had great repercussions, specifically regarding the concepts of secularization, pluralism and then, decades later, *desecularization*. Berger was part of a secularization paradigm, in a Kuhnian sense, and he contributed to the elaboration of those concepts that were not new at the time and that have been continuously worked on. In this sense, his contributions are classified here as a *layering* change. His work on secularization contributed to marginalizing the theme of religion in political science. However, Berger's collaborations with political scientists and his incursions into typically political subjects had an impact on gradually rehabilitating religion in the discipline.

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