



Anders Strindberg reviews
Peter Berger and Thomas
Luckman, *The Social
Construction of Reality*

By Anders Strindberg

Suggested Citation

Strindberg, Anders. *Review of The Social Construction of Reality* by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman. *Homeland Security Affairs* 18, Article 9. hsaj.org/Articles21407

Fairly consistent student feedback over the years suggests that Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman's *The Social Construction of Reality*, first published in 1966, is considered one of most dense and least "liked" books in the CHDS Master's program. Nevertheless, it is also a book that – over half a century after publication – continues to challenge and impact students' understanding of society and their own place in it. It is not for nothing that *The Social Construction of Reality* (affectionately known as SCR) is firmly established as one of the most important sociological books of the 20th century.

SCR has had an impact in a wide range of areas; law, philosophy, political science, and management studies, to mention a few. It has fundamentally impacted the way that scholarship approaches "social reality." Berger and Luckman were primarily interested in how human action and interaction shape our "knowledge" of ourselves and the world around us: the customs, norms, expectations, traditions and institutions which individuals experience as social reality.

The central idea of SCR is that social realities are created, over time, by humans and human interaction. Any pattern of action and interaction that is repeated consistently, they argue, "becomes cast into a pattern, which can then be ... performed again in the future in the same manner and with the same economical effort." (53) Berger and Luckman refer to this as "habitualization" which involves not only the creation of social realities, but the acceptance of them – because they're there. In this sense, society, its structures and processes, can be thought of as durable and agreed upon habits.

A classic example is the value of currency. Social consensus makes a \$100 bill into something other than simply a piece of paper. This consensus about the value of currency is so rooted in society that we have created a great number of laws, structures, processes, and routines to safeguard and maintain that value. Absent that consensus, a \$100 bill is nothing more than a piece of paper. *Its value is socially constructed – but also institutionalized.*

The institutionalization of social reality moves the focus from *what is real* to *what we ought to do about it*. Sociologist W.I. Thomas' so-called "Thomas Theorem" states that "if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." That is to say, the actions of individuals and groups are shaped by the subjective construction of reality, rather than by objective reality.

In the study and practice of homeland security, this impacts our understanding of virtually every aspect of conflict, from causes to viable resolutions. Even though it may be dense, SCR continues to be a fundamental text for understanding social and political conflict.

About the Author

Dr. Anders Strindberg teaches at the Naval Postgraduate School's Center for Homeland Defense and Security (CHDS). His areas of specialization include terrorism and violent extremism, Democratic Security, hybrid warfare, and influence operations. He has held academic appointments at Princeton University, Damascus University, Syria, and St Andrews University, Scotland. Prior to joining CHDS, he was Special Correspondent for Jane's Intelligence Review, and served as consultant to several European law enforcement agencies and security services, as well as ministries of defense, foreign affairs, justice and immigration. He has served as Political Scientist with the RAND Corporation and is currently a Senior Scientist with the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI). He is author of numerous articles, book chapters, and books including *Islamism* (Polity, 2011, with Mats Warn). He may be reached at astrindb@nps.edu.

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