

# **WHEN DIGNITY IS IMPOSSIBLE: Constructivism in the Service of Subjugation**

## **ABSTRACT**

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The general issue addressed in the present discussion concerns the ways in which interaction within systems can be determined by forces, processes, and media apparently beyond the voluntary control of individuals. The particular focus in this regard is the medium of power. I do not examine the latter solely as the medium of the political system, as is the case in sociological systems theory, but rather as a medium, or secondary medium, of every interaction system, regardless of the social system to which it belongs. I will explore how the exercise of power, especially subjection to power, can potentiate interaction such that particular types of interaction tend to occur with a significantly higher degree of probability than others. I will argue that the addition of the subjection to power as a potential to interaction can lead to specific types of meaning being constituted in interaction that may facilitate the functioning and propagation of power.

I will investigate how submission to power can act as a formative force upon the operations of the imagination, perception, and cognition by making the constitution of certain types of meaning significantly more likely than others. The transformation of social relations that takes place through the exercise of power deceives us into believing that we perceive and know purely objective things, and that the world in which we live consists of things whose natures are more or less unchanging, even if specific things themselves come into being and pass away. This restricts not only the types of meaning that can emerge in what seems to be the objective world, but also types of self-reference (self-awareness) as well as possibilities for future action on the part of individuals so affected. This leads to what may be termed the forgetfulness of our creative agency of being insofar as we come to mistakenly regard our own productive powers as the objective – and thereby alienated – creative powers of a seemingly external world.

This extends to realities that are openly acknowledged to be processes or patterns of development that appear to unfold without a carefully controlled prearranged plan. Even when such processes are examined in terms of “localized logics” or “topoi of meaning,” there is nevertheless a strong and growing tendency for them to be located within frameworks of meaning of such breadth that they can be more or less adequately grasped as substances with fixed essences, especially when they promote the interests of others. That is to say that the existing state of social relations represses awareness of the fact that the supposedly objective world of things with stable natures is a world of

meaning that we have created ourselves, which we have the power to change if we can imagine that to be possible.

I further argue that the addition of the subjection to power as a potential to interaction can lead to specific types of meaning being constituted in interaction that facilitate the functioning and propagation of power. I also put forward the claim that manipulation is a form of pragmatic interaction. This results in social life operating with a determining causality to the degree that social integration constitutes subjection to power, the restriction or reduction of alternative ways of thought and action, and the perpetuation and expansion of alienation in both subjective and objective forms.

This discussion seeks to identify and investigate certain forms of the alienation of perception and knowledge, with the specific issue of importance being to identify obstacles that prevent people from both experiencing and understanding process and human creativity as such. The point to be argued is that a peculiar inability to perceive, know, and understand social and existential processes is characteristic of modern society insofar as instruments of manipulation and control play an expanded and more effective role in contemporary societies, even as a concern with individual expression and freedom of action is more openly stated and apparently given greater value. The intention underlying an analysis of the questions that are subsequently raised is to open horizons for discussion that may strengthen the role of the citizen as an interaction partner and generate possibilities for increased reciprocity between citizens and authority.

The investigation proceeds on the theoretical level, being motivated by insights provided by phenomenological philosophy and social theory (Sartre, Merleau-Ponty), post-colonial social theory (Bhabha, Fanon, Spivak), studies of enslavement (Du Bois, Césaire), and post-structural studies of power (Foucault, Bacchi and Goodwin, Petit). It also relies upon the observation that media of information have grown increasingly closed in recent decades to alternative perspectives that are capable of challenging, at least in principle, positions that represent and support narrowly defined vested interests. The unique character of this presentation resides upon the fact that it highlights how the issues noted above can be deliberately utilized in order to promote certain possibilities of discourse and action while strictly limiting others. This point is not addressed in the literature from a sufficiently articulated theoretical perspective.