

**Sally Haslanger.** *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*. Oxford University Press 2012. 512 pp. \$115.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780199892631); \$38.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780199892624).

There is more than one way to ‘resist’ reality, and there is more than one way reality may ‘resist’ our intentions and attempts to change it. Haslanger's latest book (a selection of her papers on social construction and feminist social critique) takes it upon itself to examine the delicate relationship humans (more specifically, members of a society) have with the world that surrounds them all the while remaining conscious of the possible multiple interpretations of the title. Haslanger's papers, divided here into the three main sections on ‘Social Construction’, ‘Gender and Race’ and ‘Language and Knowledge’, all share a defining characteristic: they begin to address questions that are easy to deal with on an everyday conversational level, yet that turn out to be much less simple to discuss within the framework of contemporary analytic philosophy. Chapters 1 through 6 deal with the general framework of social construction and the usefulness of social constructivist accounts in various fields of inquiry; chapters 7 through 11 narrow the constructionist's scope to the concepts of ‘gender’ and ‘race’ and attempt to identify (and possibly amend) the many misgivings and injustices our current use of such categories make possible. The book ends with the analysis of the semantic and epistemological background of everyday categories that themselves are the products of human theorizing (chapters 12 through 17), extending the volume's methodological arsenal with that of ideology critique, understood in an unmasking way (more on that later).

An example should be able to illustrate just what kind of topics Haslanger deals with throughout the 400-plus pages of *Resisting Reality*. ‘How do the terms *sex* and *gender* relate to one another?’ is a question most of us would be quick to answer on a colloquial level: *gender* is, according to common wisdom, nothing else but the social dimension of *sex*, the latter itself being a strictly biological characteristic. Social constructionists, however, are eager to press the issue further, and ask where exactly does one categorization end and where does the other one begin? Better yet, where do *all* our categories come from: are they fundamentally rooted in nature, in a physical world that would contain the entities categorized regardless of the workings of *homo sapiens*; or are they the products of our own making, our own tendencies to organize an otherwise incoherent and chaotic universe? The answer, according to *Resisting Reality*, is a ‘yes and no’ on both accounts.

Haslanger's contributions in her various papers dealing with the construction and maintenance of social categories (prominently concerning race and gender) could be read and addressed both from the point of view of feminist social critique (and feminist metaphysics) and of general social philosophy (or, to use a more fashionable term, of ‘the philosophy of sociality’). The following remarks are more concerned with the latter, since what the book has to offer regarding the special categories of race and gender, and what could provide valuable cornerstones for a critical social theory, is also of high importance considering theorizing about social phenomena *qua* social phenomena in general. Much of the recent discussion on the nature of social categories is focused on what exactly separates social from natural phenomena on metaphysical, semantic or epistemological grounds, if there is indeed such a divide to be discovered. There is a strong current of general philosophy of science that paints a picture of natural science as something that is primarily in the business of accounting for ‘natural kinds’, while social sciences should aim to do something similar regarding the entities in their subject area, the so-called ‘social kinds’. This latter term is far from being uncontroversial—after all, social categories and social phenomena are ultimately produced by

human beings, who are just as much parts of the physical world as other chemical or biological entities are. There is a strong inclination in Haslanger's writings toward the deflation of a sharp divide between natural and social kinds, as she argues (most importantly in chapters 3 and 6) that while social entities are undeniably the results of human intervention, this does not exempt them from the status of natural kinds—specifically for the reason mentioned above.

The view defended in most chapters (especially in the first and the third sections) opposes some of the more popular stances other critical (or feminist) assessments of social kinds usually adopt. Most importantly, Haslanger advocates a certain kind of realism which he calls 'critical realism' (though not in the vein of Roy Bhaskar or Andrew Sayer, as she mentions in chapter 6), and which amounts to the acceptance of social institutions into the realm of the objective and the real, and which can be juxtaposed with a constructionist account of their creation. A corollary of this metaphysical commitment is her rejection of eliminativist and error-theoretic views on social categories: it is not the case that talk about race or gender is meaningless because the assertions containing such categories are fundamentally false since there is, strictly speaking, no such thing as a race or a gender. Haslanger's originality is most prominent in these discussions, especially in chapters 2, 3 and 6, where she compellingly argues that one can be justified in endorsing social construction without having to abandon objectivism or naturalism.

Most of the papers in the second and third sections of the book also take up issues of normativity and the legitimacy of social critique. According to Haslanger, there are (at least) three ways to inquire about a phenomenon: conceptual (dealing with actual practices and their meanings to those taking part in them), descriptive (looking for differences between *manifest* meanings attributed to a concept by definitions and the *operational* meanings at work in actual practice), and analytical (which later becomes 'ameliorative', and, as the new name suggests, is mostly concerned with extra-theoretical factors at play in the implementation and potential modification of concepts). The critic's project, as most of the recent feminist literature aptly demonstrates, is to facilitate a change in how concepts are put to use, by shedding light on what unjust background assumptions they help solidify in their current form. The relations of power, systems of privileges and practices of subordination that are inherent in some of our most fundamental concepts (sex, race, gender) are supposed to be laid bare by the social constructionist analyses - they are supposed to be identified as—at least partially—ideological content. Haslanger's use of ideology critique is always unmasking (just as she consistently refers to social construction as a 'debunking' project), suggesting that mere hermeneutic understanding of potential ideological factors in our conceptual frameworks cannot be enough. In that regard, Haslanger's philosophy is clearly not set to 'leave everything as it is': the constructionist's endeavors are fruitful if they contribute to the changing of the conceptual guard, working towards bringing about a society where justice and equality are more fully realized.

Collections of previously published essays often face the problems of potential repetition, and the present volume is no exception. The overall themes of the writings are bound to resurface in almost every paper (though chapters 4 and 5, dealing with a novel way of approaching metaphysical issues from a feminist point of view and the moral dimension of biological relations between children and their primary caregivers respectively, are exceptions to that rule), and sometimes the treatment of the central issues are so similar in two chapters that certain paragraphs are repeated verbatim (see the issue of semantic externalism in chapters 13 and 14 as an example). Aside from this minor problem, however, Haslanger's book contains thoughtful and innovative essays in the field of social construction, even though her take on socially constituted kinds may not be unanimously accepted.

One could argue, for example, that by blurring the line separating natural and social kinds, Haslanger's form of social construction could give way to a reductionist project in social scientific methodologies by downplaying the relevance of our social phenomena's conceptual nature—although aside from this potential reading regarding social scientific practice, Haslanger is always aware of the impact of this conceptual nature. After all, the project of debunking myths or unmasking ideologies could only succeed if what we are trying to debunk and unmask is not as rigid as to be unalterable—and man-made categories, concepts and kinds (or types, as she likes to call them) are certainly not set in stone exactly because of their specific constitution. The book provides examples of the most relatable kind to stress this point, and Haslanger goes to great lengths to differentiate her account from both sides of constructionist extremes: the one that argues for the wholly constructed nature of reality (both social *and* natural) on the one hand, and the view that a physical world ultimately determines how we can categorize each and every entity in it entirely, on the other. She also takes issue with radically revolutionary feminist theories (that are certain to distance themselves from any kind of realism or objectivism concerning social kinds), showing that the politically, economically or sociologically accepted *reality* could be resisted in more sophisticated ways, ways that are still acceptable (and, on her view, highly recommendable) in attempting to change that reality which we ourselves constructed through centuries of categorization and labelling, however much that reality may try to *resist* our efforts.

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