

Brief Encounters from the Taos Institute



Social Construction, Politics, and Values

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This is the first of three brief essays triggered by lively discussion among Taos Associates over the past few months. The discussions began when Barnett Pearce thoughtfully shared an editorial written by Stanley Fish for the *New York Times*. Fish's early book, *Is There a Text in the Class*, was a classic contribution to constructionist ideas in literary theory, and much of his public writing, although famously cantankerous, is quite congenial with constructionist views. In his typically provocative style, Fish proposed in his *Times* essay that "the everything-as-socially-constructed thesis, however exciting and powerful...has *no political implications whatsoever*." This would be to say, for example, that there is nothing about constructionism that necessarily favors being a Democrat, rather than a Republican...or for that matter, a Fascist. Many of us recoil at this proposal because we feel that constructionist ideas are deeply wedded to cherished ideals. Indeed it is the very sense that the Taos Institute helps to achieve these ideals that serves as the basis of its vitality. Take away the values, and you pull the plug. I know that it is this way for me.

And yet, formally speaking, I believe Fish is correct. There are no politics or values that are *necessarily* entailed by constructionist ideas. The action implications of any abstract theory are never given in the theory itself. It is their context of usage that lends them the potentials for action. The Ten Commandments might tell us, "Thou shalt not kill," but what this means in day to day life depends a great deal on the culture and its use of the commandment. As Barnett might say, it is the context of usage that grants to our words a *logical force*.

For many of us, then, we live in a time and place in which constructionist ideas support the values of honoring multiple perspectives, and caring that our own perspectives do not dominate, suppress, or silence others. These are also times in which the constructionist emphasis on the social origins of meaning nourish the way we prize collaborative practices, mutual appreciation, and peace-building. No, social constructionist ideas do not give us the rock-solid reasons for our values. But for me, this is an added strength of constructionism: it does not declare itself as fundamentally true, thus condemning all that is not constructionism. Again, this supports my politics and values by implication -- but better by implication than proclamation.