

Searle, John R. 2011. *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 224 Pages, ISBN: 0-1953-9617-0 Cloth (\$24.95), ISBN: 0-1998-2952-7 Paper (17.95).

*Making the Social World* is a restatement and a (rather slight) revision of John Searle's argument for the process through which institutional facts are constructed as laid out in his landmark 1995 book *The Construction of Social Reality*. In this more recent (and rather pithy but always demanding) monograph, Searle restates the basics of the theory, responds to various criticisms that have cropped up over the years, tidies up some terminology and tightens up some logical holes in the argument. Readers who are familiar with the original 1995 argument will find little that is particularly new or groundbreaking in this book. However, for readers that are new to Searle, this book represents a very effective introduction to one of the most ambitious and provocative attempts to provide a workable, non-idealist foundation for institutional analysis currently on offer. Searle's argument is complex and wide-ranging, but once the reader makes the effort to master the relevant terminology it also has the advantage—characteristic of writers in the analytic-philosophical tradition—of being well-constructed, logically consistent and clear in its implications.

Searle's primary goal is to develop a workable "social ontology" of institutions in particular and social reality in general. Searle's point of departure is resolutely materialist and anti-dualist. The key problematic is how is it that such institutional creations as schools, presidents, money, citizenship, private property, marriage and contracts, come to seem as natural as run of the mill physical objects. For Searle the key feature of institutional reality is that it does not fit neatly into the standard category of the "subjective/mental" versus the "objective/material" because institutions appear to be mind-dependent yet, objective features of the "furniture" of the world. To shed light on this issue, Searle makes several preliminary distinctions. First, he distinguishes between *mind independent* and *mind dependent* phenomena. Examples of the former include the atomic weight of Plutonium or the distance between the Earth and the Sun; one example of the latter would be the fact of experiencing a toothache at a given moment. All mind-dependent phenomena are what he calls *intentionality relative*; that is they exist only insofar as they can figure as the "content" of our mental states (thus a "belief" in something is intentionality-relative). However, not all intentionality relative phenomena are mind-dependent; instead, when intentionality relative phenomena are established by acts of *collective intentionality* they give rise to mind-independent but intentionality relative phenomena, such as the fact that a given individual is a citizen of the United States. All of institutional reality, according to Searle, consists of collections of such facts. In that respect the I-intentions accounting for run-of-the-mill statements of intent must be distinguished from the "we-intentions" that lie behind the creation of institutional facts.

For Searle, what distinguishes human societies from animal societies is the fact that humans, via acts of collective intentionality can assign *status functions* to objects, such that these objects can perform functions that go beyond anything that we would expect from their physical structure alone. The prototypical case is money; here pieces of paper, metal or even electronic signatures can play the role of currency. This function is independent of the material constitution of currency. Money is only money when its function is *recognized* as such by a given collectivity. Humans thus have the capacity to *institute* new functions of physical objects (including human persons) simply by agreeing to act as if the object performs that function in the designated context. This allows human collectivities to transcend the functional limitations of physical object world, opening up an entirely new realm of collectively instituted (social) realities.

The primary tool used to publicly represent this realm of institutional reality is language. For Searle, understanding the functions and structure of language as a social institution is crucial, since no other institution can exist without some public system of symbolic representation. The primitive operation in the creation of institutional facts is the public statement of a particular type of speech act, what Searle refers to as *declarations*. All institutional facts depend (explicitly or implicitly on such declarations) While other speech acts are either designed with the purpose of either saying something about the world or stating an intention to change the world, declarations *generate the very state of affairs that constitute their "content" by the very act of enunciation* (e.g. "I now declare you husband and wife"); they are thus the only ones that can produce new institutional realities. Declarations assign collectively recognized status functions to objects or persons by the enunciation of a *constitutive rule*. Constitutive rules differ from regulative rules (which simply specify which actions are and are not allowed) by declaring the status function of an object, action or person in a particular context. Thus, they have the abstract structure "X counts as Y on context C". For instance, in chess the checkmate rule is a constitutive rule because it tells us the particular set of actions that count as checkmate in that context. In the same way once a particular piece of paper has been branded a "dollar bill" it counts as "money" in the relevant context.

In this respect, the main role that the assignment of status functions plays in social life is *deontic*. That is, status functions are the primary mechanisms through which *normative regulation* occurs in human societies. For Searle, institutional reality is primarily concerned with the assignment and management of *power relations*; they are the principal "vehicles for power." The reason for why the central role of institutional facts is the regulation of power relations is that all members of a given collectivity the active acceptance of a given assignment of status function by an authoritative body constitutes an *acceptance* of the various rights, obligations, responsibilities, permissions, requirements, duties, entitlements, prohibitions and authorizations that come with that function for the persons that fall under the jurisdiction of the status assignment in question. Institutional facts thus become primarily a way to regulate

deontic relationships among members of a collectivity. Acts of institutional creation therefore can be thought of as the collective creation and imposition of *deontic powers* over persons. For Searle, the reason why deontic powers are important is not only that they produce “social order” where they otherwise would not be any, but also because it serves to provide *desire –independent reasons for action*, thus coupling we-intentional production of institutions with the pursuit of private aims and goals. That is, once a particular status assignment is made, persons have a collective duty to perform the actions specified by the status regardless of whether they have a desire to perform the action or not. Social order *requires* a disjunction between the ability to create desire-independent reasons for action as institutional facts and private beliefs and desires for action.

It is hard not to overstate Searle’s intellectual accomplishment. As it stands, Searle’s conceptual apparatus represents the most sophisticated attempt to theorize the problematic of institutional reality in contemporary social theory. It does however, have some predictable weaknesses. One of them is his rather a-sociological treatment of power. While acknowledging that institutional reality depends on acceptance, and even while acknowledging that “acceptance” is sometimes imposed on others, he fails to properly integrate mechanisms of coercion, collective imposition and cultural hegemony into his framework. Too often, we-intentions for the generation of novel status functions emerge unproblematically and the role of social conflict in their production is thereby muted. The scope and range of Searle’s explanatory framework would be greatly enhanced if it were coupled with a conflict-theoretic account of the role of language and ritual in the production of institutional facts and of group competition for the control of those societal institutions to which the assignment of status functions (e.g. the state, schools, religious institutions) is delegated.

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