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Social constructionism in music studies

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Social constructionism (or sometimes 'constructivism') is a broad-based epistemological approach to understanding (largely) how talk and text work to construct our social lives. It is corollarous with the more familiar 'relativism' in music studies, but has certain advantages over the more anthropologically ground relativism. In my view, these lie in a view of constructionism that goes beyond simple (or 'weak') relativism and that presupposes mass understandings that are shared in social space (e.g. the aesthetics of pop or the notion of a 'tender' sound in music), have consequences in real life and can in some ways be addressed through scholarship. Social constructionism is like an older, wiser sister, who recognises the value of descriptive relativism, but demands more by recognising that power is unequally distributed and wishes analysis to move towards change, rather than simple description. The core components of a social constructionist approach include a critical stance towards tacit assumptions about social life, a belief in the contingency of social processes (and their importance to any given values or meanings) and a deep critical realism that questions any singular conceptions of what truth might be. To give one simple example, as the psychologist Vivien Burr puts it, 'just because we think of some music as "classical" and some as "pop" does not mean that we should assume that there is anything in the nature of the music itself that means it has to be divided up in that particular way' (Burr 2003, p. 2).

There are generally accepted to be two main traditions of social constructionism in sociological approaches to life: interpretive social constructionism and objective social constructionism. The interpretive constructionism tradition relies on the core idea that meaning only emerges at the point of consumption and thus lies close to the ethnographic and subjectivist approaches in popular music studies and ethnomusicology. More objectivist traditions would assume that there is more inherent meaning readily available to analysts out there in the world, and the job of the analyst is to discover how the conditions for social meaning were or are created. In an important discussion of what 'social constructionism' might actually be, Gubrium and Holstein suggest that the core conceptual, 'summary was that the world we inhabit and our relations to it "are not simply and self evidently there" – rather, participants "actively construct the world of everyday life and its constituent elements"' (Gubrium and Holstein, in Hosking 2011, p. 48). In my view, this is crucial for music studies (of any flavour) at the time of writing in 2015, both because of the continuing lack of musicological voices in mainstream media talking about the value of popular music and how it makes meaning in our everyday lives and because of the growth in recent years of numerically, neurologically and so-called 'objectivist' determinism in the discussion of what and how music means. The problem with these essentialising

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approaches is that they deny the politics and contingency of the value of music, and they suggest that it is knowable in some objectivist way. The answer in 2016, however, is not any sort of weak cultural relativism: musical value and meaning is always already socially contingent, but there are things we *can* know about 'shared' musical values and meaning; however, in order to do this, we must speak up louder for a relational and social constructionist view of popular music. I would like us not only to reclaim musical meaning and its social significance from the eviscerating and reductive influences of various voices from elsewhere in the academy, but also to begin to speak out more loudly in the world about the importance and significance of popular music (and its others) in the public discourse.

Thus interpretive, or relativist epistemological traditions, and particularly those ethnographic traditions that rely primarily upon people talking about music, produce deep and often highly personal, plural interpretations of music's meanings. I agree with Botterill, however, who asks that today, in the age of 'big data', increasing marketisation and globalisation and concentrations of power, 'is this enough?' Is it also enough to 'empower a myriad of voices and to delight in documenting multiple representations'? (Botterill 2014). Musically I would argue, it is sometimes enough to discover and document the social life and meanings of different musical scenes, traditions or social groups, especially where their history has not already been written or documented, but that our research should go further and have impact in the public square. Work for instance laying out the narrative history of musical performers or institutions, popular music as an industry or the descriptive histories of various genres stands alone as valuable interpretative acts of scholarship. On the other hand, we are facing a growth in the mass media of essentialising, often hegemonic discourses that offer deterministic analyses of topics such as the musical characteristics of a particular genre or canon, the 'qualities' that determine a 'hit' record across time, or (my particular bug bear) neurodeterministic accounts of how music 'means'. To be clear, I am in favour of cognitivist musicologies, but understanding *how* the brain cognises rhythm or activates mirror neuron circuits is not the same as understanding *what* a given rhythm might mean or signify in a particular social context (see Bello *et al.* 2015). We see this instinct towards essentialism in all music studies disciplines, and particularly in work such as large-scale corpora analysis of 'hits', or the reductive analyses of the core skeletonised tunes of folk song, or Schenkerian analyses. The problem of course is that too much essentialising, reduction or determinism imposes one dominant ontology upon Others. Popular music studies never had any of these problems in the 1980s or 1990s in the way that say ethnomusicology's precursor of comparative musicology, ballad scholarship or art music musicologies had. The key intellectual contributors to early popular music studies were already broadly pursuing socially constructionist approaches to popular music, engaged in questions about the politics, aesthetics and power of mass-mediated music. It is only recently that we have seen research (often not from within popular music studies itself) that masquerades as simplistic explanation for the whole messiness of musical life.

One of the key ways in which social constructionism can be brought more prominently into popular music studies is through more widespread use of its key methodologies, which is what I am arguing in favour of here. Most simply put, approaches that privilege the analysis of music-as-discourse, and discourse-about-music intellectually depend upon social constructionism. Discourse analysis is an analytical method of social constructivism that starts from the evidence, and does not impose those often so problematic enlightenment notions of 'hypothesis and proof' upon musical discourses. That is to say, discourse analysis is a method that starts from the data usually

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in the form of talk and text, and moves out from there. Discourse analysis of musical sound is a social phenomenon, and therefore subject to the same sort of constructionist approach to understanding what and how music means (although it is a bit harder than the more semantically specific use of language). This semiotic approach was of course largely discredited in the 1980s and 1990s because of the false objectivism inherent in musical semiotics at that time. Much of this epistemological negativity towards musical semiotics was historically founded upon the unproductive Kantian fallacy that since musical sound is essentially semantically ambiguous the only knowable aspects were purely formalist aspects of sonic structure and syntax. Happily, since the advent of a more cohesive field of social semiotics, a constructionist approach to music as just one part of broader social discourse has opened up again, and in my view offers an opportunity for scholars of music to begin the absolutely critical task of re-integrating popular and vernacular music traditions into mainstream discourses about politics, policy and power in everyday life. For too long we have just simply not been able to use music as evidence in these debates; social semiotic approaches, based upon social constructionism, allow us the methods and analytical terminology to speak to other scholars of culture and society about issues that make a material difference to our lives. One of the benefits of this type of approach is that self-serving hypotheses can largely be avoided or deconstructed to expose their underlying ideological bases in language and sound. Multimodal discourse analysis incorporates text alongside other 'modes' such as sound and image as communication, and starts from the position that people construct their own stories, their own worlds and culture, and that the analyst's job is to get their hands dirty and draw out the surface and subtextual meanings that emerge from music as social communication. Recent work drawing on social constructionism here has been significant in terms of both producing a better understanding of how money is spent on the arts (Stevenson *et al.* 2015) and dealing with anti-black racism in popular music (Mullen 2012) or fascist music (Machin and Richardson 2012; Shaffer 2013), for example. In addition, the growing and valuable trend for the analysis of multimodal discourse analysis which takes musical sound as simply one 'mode' in the larger rubric of communication allows musicological discourse to engage more fully with other disciplinary research (Machin 2013; Van Leeuwen 1999, 2004; Way 2013; Way & McKerrell 2016). These are in my view socially constructionist approaches to musical life because not only do they try to represent the complexity of a particular topic, but they also utilise discourse analytical methods that rest on a belief that scholarship can change the social world it seeks to engage in. This sort of constructionist approach that views music as communication goes beyond relativism, and allows us to rehabilitate musicology into more mainstream public discourses about politics, power and social values (and I think we need to do this urgently).

Another key area of Popular Music Studies that rests upon a socially constructivist perspective, and has consequently had a profound impact in the ways we teach and write about music, is gender. Feminist approaches to the understanding of rock, pop, hip hop and other genres have exposed the deeply sexist and heteronormative assumptions that much of the post-war popular music canon was built upon. Class, ethnicity, race and sexuality, not to mention, genre, place, nationalism and affect, all involve deeply musical performances of their social value and meanings in our lives and are topics of central interest to music studies, but as yet under-represented in the public imagination. At a deeper level, the underlying problem with deterministic and reductive approaches to popular music is that they fundamentally misapprehend the nature of musical meaning. Nicholas Cook's (2001) seminal paper 'Theorizing

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musical meaning' demonstrates one approach to musical meaning that is always contingent and essentially outlines a position where music affords certain meanings depending on the listener. This sort of approach that recognises that society does have shared meanings constructed in sound offers us the chance to simultaneously layer these social semiotics with more nuanced, individual meanings. Despite this, and numerous socially grounded analytical approaches to popular music, much of the conversation surrounding popular music in the public square is premised on the position that musical sound has inherent, stable meanings, or that 'a hit' has certain reductive, knowable characteristics. If this were true in any real way then musicology would be located in science faculties by now.

In addition to deterministic and reductive studies largely beyond the domain of popular music studies, there has been a turn in the last decade within some popular music studies towards attempting to answer questions which do not really do anything in the world, and read simply as amplified fandom. Stuart Hall encapsulated this trend more broadly in Cultural Studies in one of his final interviews when he said: 'If I have to read another cultural studies analysis of *The Sopranos*, I give up' (Hall, in Yardley 2014, n.p.). I would argue that the central job of a musicology of popular music is to provide a social commentary upon mass-mediated musics of everyday experience and to help us understand how that music has meaning and value in our lives. Among a whole host of specialist areas relating to policy, power, politics and aesthetics, this involves appreciating the ambiguity of the social semiotics of popular music and addressing it from a relational and constructionist perspective, and that means making sense of how human beings construct shared values and experience, especially when it is mediated and consumed in so many messy and plural ways.

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