Social Construction, Deconstruction, and Reconstruction;Mises and Hayek on social institutitions.

Ludwig von Mises Knowledge Problem F. A. Hayek

In the last few decades scholars in the social sciences and humanities have commonly denied that social institutions are timeless essences reflecting objective human nature. Instead, these scholars argue that institutions are “socially constructed,” by which they mean that we human beings have, through our choices and actions, created and endowed them with particular meanings, leading to the variety of practices we see across societies.

An example of this idea is “sex” versus “gender.” Sex in this view refers to the biological characteristics of men and women, which are given to us by nature. By contrast, “gender” refers to social characteristics we associate with males and females — what we call “masculinity” and “femininity.” The argument is that these characteristics are “socially constructed” in the sense that there is no universal essence for either; instead, over time we have constructed those terms to mean certain things. For example, to be masculine is to be rational and aggressive while to be feminine is to be more emotional and passive.

As a libertarian who thinks Mises and Hayek have much to teach us about the world, I see nothing objectionable about the idea that many institutions are socially constructed. In fact, I would argue it’s not only correct but that Mises and Hayek would have agreed. Mises argued in the 1920s that our very thought processes are constrained by the language we speak, and Hayek’s work on how institutions, norms, and practices are unintended orders resulting from social evolutionary processes is completely consistent with the idea that many of our categories are “socially constructed.”

Beware Connotations

From a Mises-Hayek perspective the problem with that phrase is that the word “constructed” has connotations that can lead to intellectual confusion. Normally that word suggests intentional planning. When we construct a building, we don’t imagine it coming together without a master plan involving architects and engineers. In the social world, by contrast, institutions emerge as the unplanned outcome of human action. Or in Hayek’s phrase taken from the eighteen-century thinker Adam Ferguson, they are the “products of human action, but not human design.”

The danger here is that once one sees social institutions as “constructed,” even “socially,” it’s easy to take the next two steps: thinking one can deconstruct and then reconstruct them. One of the great intellectual pastimes in the humanities and social sciences is to deconstruct social institutions by pointing out how they serve the interests of a specific group or enable one group to dominate another. Again, this by itself is no problem as long as one understands that the process which created those institutions was not the result of human design.

Take the western family, a classic example of a socially constructed institution. Yes, biology matters, but the particular ways in which we organize the family — the roles of “mother,” “father,” and “child” — are most certainly the product of a long social evolutionary process, which has varied across cultures. In the West this process has benefited men more than women, which is often one of the major points made by those who want to deconstruct the family. In fact, some will then argue that men must have controlled the construction process to benefit themselves.

No Conscious Design

And here is where a good dose of Mises and Hayek would help. Once we recognize that institutions were never really constructed — in the sense of being the intentional product of human design — we can see that the family is not the result of planning and that even though it has perhaps disproportionately benefited men, it need not be because men, or anyone else, consciously designed it that way. The Mises-Hayek perspective also shows that reconstructing the institution to address those supposed problems is simply not possible thanks to the limits to our knowledge and the way in which unplanned social processes make better use of that knowledge.

That is not to say we are helpless to change social institutions. As Hayek argued, we can make changes at the margin or adjust one rule at a time, but we cannot redesign or reconstruct them from whole cloth. Thinking we can do so is a mark of what Hayek called “constructivist rationalism”: the incorrect belief that we can design the social world as we please. The common etymology is no coincidence, because another way of putting Hayek’s point is that what was never constructed by human design cannot be reconstructed by human design. This is a lesson that more scholars using the language of social construction need to learn.