

Introduction to Cultural Studies
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Lecture - 39
Ian Hacking – The Social Construction Of What - V

So hello and welcome to this NPTEL course entitled Introduction to Cultural Studies where we are looking at Ian Hacking's Social Construction Of What, the book that we are studying at the moment and this will be the last lecture on that particular book.

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INTERACTIONS

We have seen how some objects and ideas may interact. The idea of the child viewer of television interacts with the child viewer. Ways of classifying human beings interact with the human beings who are classified. There are all sorts of reasons for this. People think of themselves as of a kind, perhaps, or reject the classification. All our acts are under descriptions, and the acts that are open to us depend, in a purely formal way, on the descriptions available to us. Moreover, classifications do not exist only in the empty space of language but in institutions, practices, material interactions with things and other people. The woman refugee—that kind or "species" of person, not the person—is not only a kind of person. It is a legal entity, and more importantly a paralegal one, used by boards, schools, social workers, activists—and refugees. Only within such a matrix could there be serious interaction between the "kind" of person and people who may be of that kind.

So we started in the previous lecture with the subsection called interactions and we just began with that section and then we move on with this and hopefully conclude the book for our purpose in this lecture. So we saw interactions become a very important activity for Hacking. So he looks at interactions as happening within certain matrixes of production. How interactions produce human subjects, how interactions produce agreements, decisions, consensus, disagreements etc.

And we saw some time ago when we were look at introduction that Hacking is writing that he is more in favor of using the word social product than social construction because he is more interested in the production that happens to material conditions, right rather than constructions. So construction becomes a very loose category, a very nebulous category for Hacking and he is

more keen on looking at the materiality of that particular production of human subjects and the subjects situatedness in the same, okay.

So and then this is the point, this is the section where Hacking talks about how all our acts are under descriptions and the acts that are open to us depend in a purely formal way on the descriptions available to us. Moreover classifications do not exist only in the empty space of language but in institutions, practices, material interactions with things and other people. So the difference that he is making between the empty space of language and the materiality of his visions that holds the key for our understanding of what Hacking is saying.

So the empty space of language is where Hacking says that is where the purely social constructionist theory operates. It is purely rhetorical, it is purely an empty space of language. It becomes a linguistic and loose linguistic activity and compared to the solid materiality, the ontological materiality of institutions, practices, and material interactions. So this is this particular bit we need to understand this very clearly in terms of looking at what Hacking is favoring for and what he resists or what he rejects as a theory.

So the empty space of language is purely rhetorical in quality, is purely loose in quality and Hacking seems to reject that in principle and is more in favor of the institutions practices and material interactions with things and other people. So it becomes an inter-subjective, interactional activity to a very material conditions and in that materiality is meaning produced, okay.

The woman refugee, that kind or species of person, not the person is not the kind, is not only a kind of person. It is a legal entity and more importantly a paralegal one used by boards, schools, social workers, activists and refugees. So the woman refugee, that is one of the categories that Hacking keeps referring to, the woman refugee does not become just a social constructionist saying but a real legal entity you know a paralegal one used in school textbooks, boards, social workers, activists and refugees.

So it becomes, the woman refugee becomes a real condition, a real identity and not just a loosely, rhetorically constructed social identity, okay. So only within such a matrix could there be serious interaction between the kind of person and people who maybe of that kind. So again, the matrix quality is something that Hacking is very keen on and it is only within the materiality of the matrix can we have any sophisticated or appropriate understanding of the woman refugee as a legal, political, immigration, racial category.

So all these things come into play and there are material institutions that work over here. There are material texts at work over here. That the people, the real people at work over here. There are material apparatus at work over here. There are real laws which are at work over here and all these different materiality, different orders of materiality need to be brought together in order to understand or substantiate or highlight you know the woman refugee condition and you know instead of looking at it as a purely constructionist perspective, okay.

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Interactions do not just happen. They happen within matrices, which include many obvious social elements and many obvious material ones. Nevertheless, a first and simplistic observation seems uncontroversial. It stems from the almost-too-boring-to-state fact that people are aware of what is said about them, thought about them, done to them. They think about and conceptualize themselves. Inanimate things are, by definition, not aware of themselves in the same way. Take the extremes, women refugees and quarks. A woman refugee may learn that she is a certain kind of person and act accordingly. Quarks do not learn that they are a certain kind of entity and act accordingly. But I do not want to overemphasize the awareness of an individual. Women refugees who do not speak one word of English may still, as part of a group, acquire the characteristics of women refugees precisely because they are so classified.

So interactions do not just happen. They happen within matrices, which include many obvious social elements and many obvious material ones. So interactions do not happen in empty space. They do not happen in loose linguistic activities. They happen within matrices which include economy, institutions, law, legality, courts, medical practices, rituals, etc. So all that become the matrix inside which interactions take place and subject positions created or generated or agreed upon from this interactions.

Again, you know in the last lecture we saw how Hacking had very usefully given us an entanglement between ontological subjectivity and epistemological objectivity and he gave a very banal example of house rent you know as an example. So the house rent has to be agreed upon by two or more people and that agreement is subjective in quality. It has to be you know subjectively decided upon. It is an inter-subjective agreement in a way.

But once that agreement is reached at then a knowledge about the house rent becomes an objective category. So it becomes epistemologically objective. So this loop between ontological subjectivity and epistemological objectivity is something that Hacking keeps referring to throughout this particular book and you know thus a similar loop functions, many more complex loops like that function within the matrices that Hacking highlights over here, okay.

So they happen within matrices which include many obvious social elements and many obvious material ones. So the social and material are constantly entangled with each other. So just to branch out and say that everything is a social construct often disregards, often becomes very gross disregard according to Hacking of the real material conditions, real material dimensions of that matrix in which the subject is situated.

Nevertheless, a first and simplistic observation seems uncontroversial. It stems from the almost too boring to state fact that people are aware of what is said about them, thought about them, done to them. They think about and conceptualize themselves. Inanimate things are, by definition, not aware of themselves in the same way. Take the extremes, women refugees and quarks. You know quarks are inanimate activities woman refugees are you know real human people who are often times in crisis. Who experience you know suffering, loss of agency etc.

So that is an extreme example that Hacking is offering over here. A woman refugee may learn that she is a certain kind of person and act accordingly. Quarks do not learn that they are a certain kind of entity and act accordingly. But I do not want to overemphasize the awareness of an individual. Women refugees who do not speak one word of English may still, as part of a group acquire the characteristics of women refugees precisely because they are so classified, right.

So classification takes place in some material conditions inside matrices and you know obviously awareness of your self inside the matrix make you an animate person, animate human being. A human being with a degree of articulation and agency that you are aware of your location, of your situatedness as a subject inside a particular matrix or the matrices that we inhabit at a certain point of time, okay.

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The "woman refugee" (as a kind of classification) can be called an *interactive kind* because it interacts with things of that kind, namely people, including individual women refugees, who can become aware of how they are classified and modify their behavior accordingly. Quarks in contrast do not form an interactive kind; the idea of the quark does not interact with quarks. Quarks are not aware that they are quarks and are not altered simply by being classified as quarks. There are plenty of questions about this distinction, but it is basic. Some version of it forms a fundamental difference between the natural and the social sciences. The classifications of the social sciences are interactive. The classifi-

So the women refugee as a kind of classification can be called an interactive kind because it interacts with things of that kind, namely people including individual women refugees who can become aware of how they are classified and modify their behaviour accordingly. So notice how Hacking over here is sort of very sophisticatedly moving towards this entanglement between interiority and exteriority.

So what you are as a person, how you behave as a person is determined by interactions through other persons at a given point of time inside a particular matrix, right. So and that particular matrix is also a classifying matrix. It classifies yourself you as a category. So the women refugee can be called an interactive kind because it interacts with other things of that kind. So it interacts with other human refugees, other people you know and through the interaction they can you know generate a degree of awareness who can become aware of how they are classified and modify their behaviour accordingly.

Quarks in contrast do not form an interactive kind. The idea of the quark does not interact with quarks. Quarks are not aware that they are quarks and are not altered simply by being classified as quarks. There are plenty of questions about this distinction but it is basic. So again, it is a very basic, banal description that or distinction that Hacking is offering over here. Some version of it forms a fundamental difference between the natural and the social sciences. The classifications of the social sciences are interactive.

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The classifications of the social sciences are interactive. The classifications and concepts of the natural sciences are not. In the social sciences there are conscious interactions between kind and person. There are no interactions of the same type in the natural sciences. It is not surprising that the ways in which constructionist issues arise in the natural sciences differ from questions about construction in human affairs. I shall now pose two separate groups of questions: (1) those involving contingency, metaphysics, and stability; and (2) issues that are biological but still of the interactive kind.

The classifications and concepts of the natural sciences are not. So again there is an ontological difference between the classifications of natural sciences and social sciences and that difference lies in interactivity. So the social sciences classifications are more interactive, they interact with each other classifications. Whereas in contrast to that classifications, natural sciences do not interact with each other, okay.

In the social sciences there are conscious interactions between kind and person. There are no interactions of the same type in the natural sciences. It is not surprising that the way in which constructionist issues arise in the natural sciences differ from questions about construction in human affairs. I shall now pose two separate groups of questions. Those involving contingency, metaphysics, and stability and issues that are biological but still of the interactive kind.

So we will not go into this but you know suffice to say what Hacking is saying over here is there are questions of contingency, metaphysics and stability and issues that are biological but interactive. So interaction becomes a very important issue over here and interaction, interactional activity, biology, agency and these become very important categories for Hacking especially when you consider the subject's position inside a particular matrix, material matrix which you know combine materiality, abstraction, materiality with emotions etc.

So the material conditioning becomes a very key conditioning for Hacking in the way he examines this, okay.

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Looping effects are everywhere. Think what the category of genius did to those Romantics who saw themselves as geniuses, and what their behavior did in turn to the category of genius itself. Think about the transformations effected by the notions of fat, overweight, anorexic. If someone talks about the social construction of genius or anorexia, they are likely talking about the idea, the individuals falling under the idea, the interaction between the idea and the people, and the manifold of social practices and institutions that these interactions involve: the matrix, in short.

So we just wind up with this and the last bit of introduction is something that we you know pay some attention to. So the last bit, the final paragraph of the introduction is something that a place where we should spend some time on in terms of wrapping up the arguments that Hacking had used so far. Looping effects are everywhere. So by looping effects Hacking means again where interaction between the inside and the outside, what you are as a person inside and how you interact with the environment outside.

They form a loop with each other, they both inform each other, they feed off each other. This kind of the interaction between the inside and the outside, between the interiority and external world. Between the psychological inwardness the existential inwardness of the subject and the

extended socialness of the subject you know they are you know looping at every given point of time. So they form a looping effect constantly.

Think what the category of genius did to those Romantics who saw themselves as geniuses and what their behavior did in turn to the category of the genius itself. So you know he is mentioning the Romantics, the Romantic poets, the Romantic painters, the Romantic writers in Britain and British literature at that point of time. So the category of genius, so the classification of genius, the social classification of genius, so what that did to the Romantics who saw themselves as geniuses, who considered themselves as geniuses you know.

So they interacted with the classification of genius. And what that behavior did, that particular behavior did in turn to the category of genius itself so you know the interaction produced a new category of genius. So it is a loop. So first of all a human subject interacts with the classification outside and that interaction alters the classification subsequently. So you know it is a very interesting interactional activity that Hacking is highlighting.

And of course this activity takes place inside a material condition, inside a matrix which should not be seen loosely just as a social constructionist is seeing, right. it is a extreme material thing. It takes into account various factors such as economy, law, language, race, political conditions etc. and these becomes very important categories in that particular section. Think about the transformations effected by the notions of fat, overweight, anorexic.

So you know we mentioned, we saw how Hacking spent some time with anorexia, how anorexia becomes an important category for Hacking and you know he moves away from a purely social constructionist understanding of anorexia into a more complex, more sophisticated understanding of anorexia.

If someone talks about the social construction of genius or anorexia, they are likely talking about the idea, the individuals falling under the idea, the interaction between the idea and the people and the manifold of social practices and institutions that these interactions involve, the matrix in short, okay. So this concludes the introduction to The Social Construction Of What. But you

know it is a very useful and provocative book in some sense because it differs from a trendy way to analyze and examine cultural category.

So it moves away from the trend, it moves away from the fashionable way of looking at social categories and subcategories and it ends with a very useful piece of useful sentence which is basically a revelation where he says that when people talk about ideas, when people talk about certain categories like genius or anorexia, they are talking about the idea and by extension the individual is falling under the idea.

And by extension, the interaction between the idea and the people and the way the people interact with the idea and the manifold of social practices and the rituals and institutions that those interactions involve. So for instance if it is anorexia then the rituals institutions will become medical, will become legal, will become popular, will become the media etc. So these become the apparatus when it comes to looking at anorexia as a condition.

Similarly, when he comes to genius as a condition and the way the interactions and people and the idea happen will include institution such as literature, literary reviews, books, institutions, academic circles, critical circles, cultural circles you know political circles etc. political rewards, prizes etc. So these become very important in that particular interactional activity. So these become involved in any interaction between the people and the idea in that kind of a setting.

So in other words what becomes involved, what happens is the matrix, right. So the matrix becomes important for Hacking and the matrix becomes a more complex category than construction. So construction is a very loose category which oftentimes according to Hacking's analysis ends up being a loose, linguistic activity. A loose rhetorical activity and it moves away from the sophistication and complexity of the cultural categories that Hacking is trying to highlight over here.

So rather than looking at construction as an epistemic tool or epistemic category, Hacking is more interested in looking at the matrix as an epistemic category, as an epistemic tool because the matrix involves or incorporates the materiality, it incorporates institutions, it incorporates

different forms of interpolation, different forms of institutionalization, different forms of materiality and that becomes more useful and more holistic and more complex category through which social and cultural categories and subcategories can be examined according to Hacking's analysis. So with that we conclude *The Social Construction Of What*.

We just read the introduction in great details because that sets out the path for the book, that sets out the agreements, the arguments that Hacking will use subsequently in this particular book. But just to summarize and just to sort of quickly connect this book to some of the other texts we have done so far. It is a very important book in cultural studies because it makes us aware not to go too much, not to be seduced too much by the entire constructionist discourse which says everything is a construct, everything is a social construct.

So it is nothing beyond the construct etc. That kind of a loose understanding of society, that kind of a loose understanding of culture or cultural materiality often does disservice to the real life reality of culture, to the real life reality of the human subject inside a particular cultural condition. So this book is a reminder to resist and reject that kind of a loose seduction into a linguistic play, into a rhetorical play of constructionism.

It rather bring awareness back to the more material conditions and more complex conditions of discursivity, materiality, and abstraction which is constantly at play, the entanglement is constantly at play in terms of how the human subject is situated, resituated and desituated in culture. And again production becomes a very important idea in Hacking's analysis.

So as we mentioned in the very beginning of this course production is a very important term, a very important category, a very important activity in cultural studies, not least because production can be discursive in quality, production can be material in quality, production can be a combination of discursivity and materiality and of course production can be linguistic, production can be you know ideological etc.

So rather than looking at construction as a category, Hacking is more interested in looking at production as a category and he maps out the ontological differences, the functional differences

between production and interaction and construction because production entails materiality, production entails an awareness of materiality, incorporation of materiality which sometimes construction does away with.

That the construction, a loose constructionist theory can sometimes disregard the materiality of that entire system and just become an empty language activity, an empty linguistic activity into rhetorical activity that Hacking warns us against. So this particular book, *The Social Construction Of What* is a very useful reminder for us in cultural studies not to be sort of too narrowed down by the social constructionist perspective.

But rather look at the entire process of culture and culture production as a material activity which brings into effect ideology, abstraction, ideas, you know real conditions and lift reality in a very useful entanglement and that is what constitutes culture and cultural practices. So with that we conclude this book, *The Social Construction Of What* by Ian Hacking. Thank you for your attention and we will move on to a next text in the following lectures.