

Book Review

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Sally Haslanger: *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012, 512 pp.

Reviewed by *Federica Gregoratto*

In this rich and manifold collection, Sally Haslanger has gathered seventeen groundbreaking essays in which the conceptual resources of analytic metaphysics, social ontology and philosophy of language are put into play in order to deal with issues of gender and race. The common denominator of the papers is the attempt to outline a general framework of “social critique.” The overall aim relies on the idea that philosophy has a potential for “unmasking ideology, not simply articulating it,” (379) but also for constructing alternative ontologies that enable us to come “to more adequate and just visions of what is, what might be and what should be.” (112)

In pursuing such a critical, or “debunking” project, Haslanger’s main strategy consists in putting forth an account of social constructionism about gender and race that claims not to be antirealist, antiobjectivist or antinaturalist. This is precisely what the double-barreled title, *Resisting Reality*, intends to suggest. On the one hand, in contrast to antirealist approaches, Haslanger maintains that the social categories of race and gender *are* real. She intends thus to challenge the “common resistance to recognize the reality of the social world,” (29) to recognize, that is, how categories like race and gender do *de facto* materially organize and influence our practices, interactions and institutions. On the other hand, Haslanger sees contemporary realities as the product of unjust social structures and asymmetries of power, which have therefore to be resisted (and possibly transformed): “We should not resist seeing the reality that we should, in fact, resist; in fact, disclosing that reality is a crucial precondition for successful resistance.” (30)

The book consists of three parts. In Part I, Haslanger presents her notion of social construction. The central attempt is to clarify how some “social kinds,” like gender and race, are *both* socially constructed *and* real (not mere illusion, that is). In Chapter 2, she introduces some distinctions between different modalities of construction, ontological and epistemological. She distinguishes between things

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that are “causally,” “constitutively,” and “discursively” constructed, and between forms of knowledge that are “weakly” or “strongly” “pragmatically” constructed: “Woman’s Nature” has for example to be seen as constitutively and strongly pragmatically constructed (it is *wholly* determined by social factors and fails to refer), whereas the distinction “males” and “females,” as well as that between what is real and what is unreal, is only weakly pragmatically constructed (it is only *partially* determined by social factors.) In Chapter 6, moreover, Haslanger specifies the conceptions of realism, objectivism and naturalism compatible with her social constructivism. In her view, a social constructivist is a realist (about a domain D) insofar as she “maintains that claims purporting to describe D are truth-apt, that is, the claims are the sort of things to be either true or false, *and* at least some of them are true.” (198) Furthermore, a social constructivist is an objectivist about types, or kinds, insofar as she acknowledges the existence of types that depend “on members of a set of things having some degree of unity.” (202) This implies that the criteria for linking together different entities are not arbitrary. (Later on, Haslanger links objectivism with a certain kind of externalism, 374.) Finally, a social constructivist is a naturalist insofar as she endorses the “commitment to seeing ourselves as parts of a universe in which all things are interdependent.” (210) This implies that our activities, our minds, our language and its meanings, our interactions are all natural, that is, plunged in a web of physical, biological, psychological, and social causation. The natural is not to be distinguished from the social, as the latter is part of the former. (213)

Part II elaborates Haslanger’s well-known definitions of gender and race. Gender presents the social meaning of “sex,” whereas race stands for the social meaning of “color.” As put in Chapter 7, gender categories (“woman,” “man”) are defined hierarchically within a broader complex of oppressive relations; one group (women) is socially positioned as subordinate to the other (men) in virtue of observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of different roles in reproduction. Moreover, races (“black,” “white” people) are defined by the fact that their members are socially positioned as subordinate or privileged along some dimension. The racialized group is marked “as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region.” (236) In Chapter 8, putting forth one of her most controversial theses, Haslanger specifies an important discrepancy in the approaches to gender and race. She argues that, in a just, feminist and anti-racist society, while sexual difference shall be still conceived as meaningful for reproductive purposes, no “color” differences are to be taken into account anymore. (255)

In Part III, Haslanger discusses different issues in epistemology, philosophy of language and ontology in order to give an account of her critical-theoretical

project. As discussed in Chapter 12, the core of such project is given by “ameliorative” (or revisionary) analyses, which elucidate our legitimate purposes and what concepts would serve them best (that is, our “target concepts.”) Such an undertaking is to be distinguished from “conceptual analyses,” that elucidate our “manifest concepts” (that are determined by the meanings that language users understand terms to have), and from “descriptive analyses,” that elucidate “operative concepts” (that are determined by the properties that are tracked by the linguistic practices in which the terms are used.) From the perspective of critical theory, which is here also mainly understood as ideology critique, ameliorative analyses are to be linked to the other two kinds of analyses. Critical social constructionism is in fact “interested in cases where there is a gap between manifest, operative and target concepts,” (377) which is often due to ideologies masking “what we are doing or saying.” (376) In Chapter 17, Haslanger clarifies that ideology is constituted by sets of “background beliefs that purport to justify social structures”, by “schemas,” namely “intersubjective patterns of perception, thought and behavior,” by shared dispositions to have such patterns, and by material resources.

The essays in this collection, all written and published (with the exception of Chapter 6) between 1993 and 2011, do not only engage in critical debates with many outstanding contemporary philosophers and theorists (McKinnon, Hacking, Butler among others), they also stay in a lively dialogical relation with each other. Haslanger’s transparent philosophical prose provokes the reader to critically engage with the unfolding arguments. As a matter of fact, many hypotheses, definitions and argumentative steps in the book have been explicitly left open and stand in need of further elaboration. In the meantime, some of them have already made the topics of more detailed discussion, which Haslanger has promptly rejoined.¹ If critique, as Haslanger thinks, is a matter of “creating social spaces that disrupt dominant schemas,” (427) then *Resisting Reality* can do this not only by opening up the (analytical) philosophical milieu to political and social problems, but also by bringing philosophical rigor and accuracy into public debates about injustices and power structures.

¹ See, e.g., the essays collected in “Dossier: Resisting Reality. A Debate with Sally Haslanger”, ed. by Robin Celikates, in *Krisis*, 2014/1, 2–38.