
Roundtable on Global Reflections on the Fiftieth Anniversary
of *The Sacred Canopy*

The Ongoing Plausibility of Peter Berger: Sociological Thoughts on *The Sacred Canopy* at Fifty

Philip Gorski and Jeffrey Guhin*

A full half century after its initial publication, *The Sacred Canopy* (TSC) remains the most elegant and original theory of religion ever produced by an American sociologist. What is more, TSC anticipates many of the most important theoretical developments of the following decades. And yet, despite its relatively advanced age, Berger's text does not read like yesterday's news. Not any more, at least. Because some of its core ideas have been out of fashion for so long, that they now feel fresh all over again.

Alas, the influence of the so-called religious economies school has led to an overly narrow reading of TSC within sociology. Rodney Stark and his acolytes have taught too many sociologists to read Berger's classic as a theory of secularization rather than a theory of religion (Finke and Stark 1988), and as a theory that has been empirically discredited by subsequent research and eventually even disowned by Berger himself (Berger 1999). As it turns out, the rumors of falsification have proven premature (Voas, Crockett, and Olson 2002); other and better readings of TSC are still possible. We will outline several of them in what follows.

Of course, TSC does have its shortcomings. Like many works of American social science from the stability-obsessed decades following

*Philip Gorski, Sociology Department, Yale University, 493 College Street, New Haven, CT 06511-8907, USA. E-mail: philip.gorski@yale.edu. Jeffrey Guhin, Department of Sociology, University of California, 264 Haines Hall, 375 Portola Plaza, Los Angeles, CA 90095, USA. E-mail: guhin@soc.ucla.edu.

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World War II, it is mostly concerned with explaining order. In an era of culture wars, terrorist cells, and sectarian insurgencies, when explaining conflict seems the order of the day, Berger's theoretical toolkit can feel a little under-stocked. Further, like many works of European social theory from this period, Berger's analysis is framed by a loose-jointed phenomenology that conceives of social life as an ongoing interaction between individual and society. It consequently lacks fully developed accounts of both intersubjectivity and social structure.

And yet, Berger's text remains unsurpassed as a general introduction to sociological theorizing about religion. Berger's prose is clear enough, his theorizing uncluttered enough for any serious undergraduate to absorb. But the analysis is also subtle enough, the synthesis grand enough, that a well-versed specialist can still learn from it. If only more of us could manage—or at least strive for—this delicate balance of accessibility and profundity, the academic study of religion would be more publicly relevant than it is. In this regard, too, *TSC* is a model worth emulating.

FIRST READING: NEOCLASSICAL SYNTHESIS

Berger opens *TSC* with a brief recapitulation of the “dialectical” framework he had previously developed together with Thomas Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality*. “The fundamental dialectic process of society consists of three moments,” Berger argues: “externalization, objectivation, and internalization.” Externalization occurs via the “physical and mental activity” of human beings in the world. Objectivation takes place when the material and symbolic products of these activities confront their human producers with a “facticity external to and other than themselves.” Internalization involves the “re-appropriation” of these objects and their transformation (back) into “structures of consciousness” (Berger 1967, 4). In this way, society is simultaneously reproduced and transformed.

A reader versed in the sociological classics will quickly spot their influence on Berger's thought. The influence of Weber is most evident in his discussions of externalization. Like Weber, Berger places particular emphasis on the historic eruptions of charismatic imagination that gave rise to the various “world religions,” especially the monotheistic breakthrough in ancient Judaism and the rationalistic revolution in Greek philosophy (Berger 1967, 35). Berger also follows Weber in treating human activity as the *fons et origo* of meaning in a “disenchanted” cosmos. And, like Weber's, his accounts tend to privilege “mental activity” over “physical activity” in the process of meaning-making.

The influence of Marx shines through most clearly in Berger's discussions of “objectivation.” Berger does not espouse a projectionist, debunking theory of the sort that Marx inherited from Feuerbach; he

does not argue that religious ideas simply mirror social arrangements or conceal material interests. But Berger does argue that religion can be a powerful source of “legitimation” for social institutions—in his view, the most powerful one. At the same time, he also acknowledges that religion can provoke feelings of radical “alienation” in some people—extremely powerful feelings (though Berger’s theory of alienation is actually more Hegelian than Marxian). In his view, feelings of alienation are rooted in an “undialectical” or “false” form of “consciousness” rather than in unjust or exploitative social structures. The alienated individual is one who overlooks her own role in producing and reproducing the social world and who therefore (mis)perceives it as a foreign object.

Which brings us to Durkheim, whose influence on Berger is most evident in the moment of “internalization.” Following Durkheim, Berger emphasizes the role of ritual in the process of “socialization.” Echoing Nietzsche, Berger notes that “Men forget. They must, therefore, be reminded over and over again.” But where Nietzsche saw punishment as the mnemonic device par excellence, Berger avers that ritual is more important. “Religious ritual has been a crucial instrument of ‘reminding.’ Again and again it ‘makes present’ to those who participate” (Berger 1967, 40). Yet the physicality of that ritual—so important for Durkheim (Rawls 2005)—is often underemphasized; for Berger there is ultimately little difference between mental and physical action.

Berger’s theory of religion is also part of a general theory of society. That theory has a number of attractive features, which come out more clearly when we compare it to other influential syntheses. Consider Bourdieu’s theory of social fields. It is often criticized as overly deterministic: it leaves too little room for human agency. Berger’s model is more capacious:

The individual is not molded as a passive, inert thing. Rather, he is formed in the course of a protracted conversation . . . in which he is a participant. That is, the social world . . . is not passively absorbed by the individual, but actively appropriated by him. (Berger 1967, 18)

In Bergerian terms, Bourdieusian theory places too much stress on moments of “objectification” and especially of “internalization” at the expense of the moment of “externalization.”

Berger’s theory of society can also be fruitfully contrasted with contemporary versions of social constructionism, such as that championed by Talal Asad and his collaborators. Building on Foucault’s writings, this account focuses on the relationship between cultural discourses, bodily practices, and human subjectivity. The central claim is that discourses

“construct” practices via processes akin to Augustinian discipline (Asad 1993). It is through these disciplinary processes that an earlier generation forms the subjectivities of its replacements. While Asad pays more attention to the explicit coercion that goes into all subject formation, this can come at the cost of acknowledging people’s capacity to go back and reform the “tradition” that drives their culture forward through time.

One of the great virtues of Berger’s synthesis of classical theory is that it conjoins a robust account of human agency with a certain realism about social structures. The principal deficiency of Berger’s theory qua general theory of society is that its account of structure is insufficiently critical. Still, it can serve as a useful counterbalance to the structural and cultural over-determinisms of other contemporary syntheses.

SECOND READING: THEORETICAL PROLOGUE

The interior chapters of *TSC* contain many conceptualizations that go well beyond Berger’s initial framing—and in interesting ways. There is nothing unusual about this, of course. Substantive analysis often presses the bounds of a conceptual system. But in the case of *TSC* this analytical excess anticipates many subsequent developments in the study of religion and in social theory more generally.

One of the most important of these developments has been the renewed attention to the importance of artifacts and other “non-human agents” in social structures.¹ Berger anticipated this artifactual turn a half century ago, when he noted that:

The humanly produced world...consists of objects, both material and non-material, that are capable of resisting the desires of their producer. Once produced, this world cannot simply be wished away. (Berger 1967, 9)

This is one reason why “deconstructing” a “discourse” is not sufficient to “subvert” a structure. Berger goes on to add that “the tool (say, an agricultural implement) may even enforce the logic of its being upon its users, sometimes in a way that may not be particularly agreeable to them” (Berger 1967, 9). Here, Berger rightly rejects a “passivist” understanding of the material world (Groff 2008). Alas, Berger does not follow through on this insight by extending it to religious artifacts—something that Durkheim had already done a half century before in his seminal analyses of totemism.

¹One thinks here of intellectual movements such as assemblage theory (DeLanda 2006; Deleuze and Guattari 1988), actor-network theory (Latour 1996), new vitalism (Bennett 2009), object oriented ontology (Harman 2010), and causal powers ontologies (Mumford and Anjum 2011), among others.

Another key development in contemporary social theory has been the turn from approaches that emphasize conscious reasoning and deliberate action to approaches that highlight preconscious schema and embodied practices. Berger partly anticipated the “practice turn” when he correctly insisted that:

Most socially objectivated “knowledge” is pretheoretical. It consists of interpretative schemas, moral maxims and collections of traditional wisdom that the man in the street frequently shares with the theoreticians. (Berger 1967, 21)

Writing in the interlude between Talcott Parsons’s *Structure of Social Action* (Parsons 1937) and Bourdieu’s *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Bourdieu 1977), Berger was tacitly drawing the now familiar distinction between “theoretical” and “practical rationality” while warning against the “intellectualist fallacy” that arises from conflating the two. Of course, Berger had little to say about practices or the body. To this degree, he remained captive to the idealistic version of phenomenology he had inherited from Husserl via Schütz. Strangely, advocates of a more embodied phenomenology, such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, receive only passing mention in Berger’s work (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 202, 208).

A third important development within contemporary social theory is the return of a sophisticated form of social-scientific realism (e.g., Archer 1995; Bhaskar 1998; Dreyfus and Taylor 2015). The “return of realism” is best understood as a response to overly idealistic versions of social constructionism—ones that treat social structures as mere projections that have no reality outside of social science “discourse.” Despite his status as one of the founding fathers of social constructionism, Berger correctly avers that: “Institutions, roles, and identities exist as objectively real phenomena in the social world, though they and this world are at the same time nothing but human productions” (Berger 1967, 13). Berger himself does not show how social constructionism can be reconciled with structural realism. But others have done so in the meantime.²

THIRD READING: SECULARIZATION THEORY

In recent decades, sociologists of religion have most commonly read *TSC* neither as a synthesis of classical social theory nor as a prologue to contemporary theories of religion but as a variant of orthodox

²This is typically done via the idea of “emergent properties and powers” (Elder-Vass 2010; Gorski 2016; Haslanger 2012). Christian Smith has recently published a critical realist theory of religion (Smith 2017). See also Schilbrack (2014).

secularization theory. On this positivistic reading—popularized by the sociologists Rodney Stark and Roger Finke—the “core hypothesis” of TSC is that “religious pluralism” leads to a decline in “religious vitality.”³ Pace Berger, Stark and Finke hypothesized that pluralism and vitality would be positively correlated, and they produced a series of statistical analyses that appeared to confirm this (Finke and Stark 1988). Alas, other researchers repeatedly failed to replicate these results and eventually determined that the findings were statistical artifacts based on inappropriate measures and questionable assumptions.⁴ By this time, however, Berger had publicly renounced his own theory, declaring that “the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false.” (Berger [1970] 1991, 2).

Was Berger’s retraction premature? Or has it been vindicated? The answer depends on where you look and to whom you talk. The central exhibit in the religious economists’ case against secularization theory was the United States. The apparent persistence of organized religion there combined with an evident “resurgence” of religion outside of the West suggested that Europe and not America was the real “exception.” Or perhaps not? In recent years, religious demographers have detected a slow but steady decrease in religious belief in the United States and a rapid and accelerating increase in the ranks of the unchurched. Meanwhile, the Catholic countries of Latin Europe are belatedly following their erstwhile co-religionists in the Protestant north in a mass exit from religion. On the other hand, the ranks of the religious clearly do seem to be expanding outside of the West. Not to worry, say defenders of orthodox secularization theory; this is only because religious people are out-reproducing secular people, which they will cease to do once they have become as prosperous as their Western counterparts—which is to say, “soon.”

But isn’t bean counting of this sort beside the point? What if secularity isn’t about levels of belief so much as “conditions of belief,” as Charles Taylor has argued? About the very plurality of belief systems? About the resulting “fragilization” of personal beliefs? But what if this new sense of radical immanence is sometimes opened up by shattering experiences of “transcendence” or “fullness”? Anyone who has read *A Secular Age* (Taylor 2007)—the most important treatment of secularization since Berger—will

³Pluralism is then “operationalized” as the “competitiveness” of the “religious market,” specifically, the number of “religious firms” and their relative “market shares.” Vitality is operationalized in terms of the “consumption” of “religious products” (e.g., religious services, rituals, and beliefs). Stark and Finke posit that their theory of religions is more or less applicable in all times and places; it is therefore in contrast to the more modest claims of R. S. Warner, who shows how American denominationalism makes religious competition more likely (Warner 1993).

⁴Amongst other things, Stark and Finke had introduced a statistical control for “percent Catholic,” which effectively transformed the analysis into a comparison of American and European Protestants.

immediately recognize these phrases and arguments. But anyone who bothers to re-read *TSC*—or the endnotes of *A Secular Age*—will also see that many of them were coined or inspired by Berger. However, there is one subtle but crucial difference between their accounts. For Taylor, pluralism is not a cause of secularization, as for Berger; rather, it is a constitutive feature of the secular age itself (what Taylor refers to as “secularity 3”; Taylor 2007, 14, 19–20]).

“Fine,” the bean counter might reply. “But I still want to know why Americans are more observant than Europeans. And why Westerners are more secular than everyone else.” Fair questions—questions that also point to the limits of Berger’s analysis, and of Taylor’s, too (Gorski 2017). The first limitation is a certain provincialism. Both of their narratives focus exclusively on the internal dynamics of Western history. The growth of pluralism is traced to the functional differentiation of religion from other Western institutions and a corresponding profusion of value systems. But this is not the only source of pluralism in the cotemporary world. There is another: the accelerating movement of people, things, and ideas that we now call “globalization” for short. Let’s call the first kind of pluralism “endogenous” and the second “exogenous.” The effects of the two types are not necessarily the same. While endogenous pluralism may indeed weaken or fragilize “plausibility structures,” exogenous pluralism often leads to a deepening, sharpening, and hardening of beliefs. Immigrant religiosity is a key example.

The second limitation is an inattention to meso-level structures that mediate relations between the individual and society. While Berger does briefly discuss such “subuniverses of meaning” in *The Social Construction of Reality*, they receive little attention in *TSC*. Christian Smith has tried to address this problem in his work on American evangelicals (Smith 2000). One reason that evangelicals continue to thrive, he argues, is that they have gathered up the tattered remains of the sacred canopy and refashioned them into “sacred umbrellas.” That is, they have created their own closed subuniverses of meanings and thereby shored up traditional “plausibility structures,” albeit in a more fragmented form and on a smaller scale. To this, we would add that many nonreligious people have stitched together their own secular umbrellas. Whether all these sectarian grouplets will be able to coexist, or whether they will use their umbrellas as weapons against each other remains to be seen.

This brings us to a third limitation of the Bergerian interpretation: its focus on economics and its inattention to politics. At several junctures, Berger argues that industrial capitalism is the structural driver of the secularization process. By contrast, he has remarkably little to say

about church/state conflict. In retrospect, this analysis looks upside down. Economic modernization and religious resurgence seem to go hand-in-hand in rapidly developing regions of the world. Meanwhile, there is good evidence that the tight alliance between religious and political conservatives in the United States is behind the recent upsurge of religious “nones.” Perhaps the United States is belatedly repeating the European dynamic of the 19th century, when the notorious “alliance of throne and altar” drove progressives out the churches.

Yet within *TSC* are resources that set the ground for the discussions of religion and politics that have only grown in importance since the 1980s, when, as José Casanova describes, religion went public (think of Solidarity, liberation theology, the Moral Majority, and the Iranian Revolution). Casanova argued that religions around the world are “refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity and as well as theories of secularization have reserved for them” (Casanova 1994, 5). Berger’s was one such theory, emphasizing the “privatization of the religious tradition” more or less explicitly in line with Weber’s conception of value spheres (Berger 1967, 134). Why did Berger get this so wrong? Part of the problem was his assumption that the “the Protestant development is prototypical.” Berger (incorrectly?) predicted that the collapse of liberal Protestantism presaged the fate of religion in the modern world (Berger 1967, 156–57). Yet all religious believers didn’t act like he thought Protestants would. Even the Protestants didn’t.

Nonetheless, Berger was onto something important about the linking of the liberal economic order to religious belief: as a number of centrist and center-right religion scholars have noted (Deneen 2016; Hunter 2010), consumerism might not make people stop believing, but it does make them believe what’s useful for them. Indeed, Berger’s late-text focus on the linking of capitalist consumption and religious belief is a prophecy of today’s megachurches, promising a heavenly hereafter and worldly riches too, not to mention a frothy cappuccino to accompany stadium seating, professional rock musicians, and a sermon that tells you to just keep being you. But non-Protestants shouldn’t get too smug: a similar sort of individualism has found its way into most American religions (Madsen 2009; Smith and Denton 2009).

That sort of capitalism-linked individualism makes the most sense in a Protestant moral universe, in which the relationship to the divine is tethered through the self. That focus helps to explain why Berger paid less attention to mediating institutions, and it also helps set the stage for another important element of our secular age: lived religion. Now “lived religion,” in the sense that Robert Orsi and others describe it, has probably existed as long as there have been official religions to which it could

be opposed: the priests say one thing and the folks do another. Yet there is another, more individualist kind of lived religion, something similar to what Charles Taylor calls an “ethics of authenticity” and Robert Bellah and his co-authors label “Sheilaism” (Taylor 1992; Bellah 1985). Here we find a commitment to some kind of religious devotion as a process of self-formation and discovery. That commitment can happen with or without communities, but the community is of secondary importance to the development of the self. Many of the recent sociological studies of “lived religion” (Ammerman 2007; Bender 2003; Hall 1997; Orsi 1997; Taves 2011) have shown how religious actors—even those within communalist religions like Judaism or Catholicism—have emphasized the sovereignty of the self in undertaking their religious careers. Such an emphasis makes it possible to be “spiritual but not religious” in a way that a more meso-level approach cannot imagine.

FOURTH READING: DEFINITION OF RELIGION

Bergerian echoes can still be heard in recent debates about the concept of religion.⁵ In the first appendix to *TSC*, Berger famously distinguished between functional and substantive definitions of religion: what religion “does” and what it “is.” He urged openness to definition, but opted for the latter in his own work, where he defined religion as:

the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established...[or] cosmization in a sacred mode [where] [b]y sacred is meant . . . a quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than man and yet related to him, which is believed to reside in certain objects of experience (Berger 1967, 25).

Later, Berger worried that the functionalist definition “serves to provide quasi-scientific legitimations of a secularized world” (Berger 1974, 128). He therefore argued in favor of an experiential definition that left open the question of religious truth.

While they might share Berger’s misgivings about functionalist approaches, some prominent scholars of religion will not be happy with the proposed alternative. For these thinkers, secular understandings of religion are problematic precisely because they force people into a rubric of individual experience, rooted in the exact phenomenological and theological sources from which Berger pulls (Asad 2003; Mahmood 2005; Masuzawa 2005). Berger would likely counter that reverting to a functionalist definition

⁵Sociologists have only recently begun to engage these debates (Riesebrodt 2010).

runs other risks: transcendence becomes immaterial, just a secondary feature of the community itself. Perhaps Berger's original plea for a pluralistic analysis that includes both kinds of definitions was right after all.

And what might these same scholars make of that other, equally famous Bergerian principle: "methodological atheism"? By this, Berger means that the supernatural cannot be included in a sociological explanation. This dictum has certainly done important boundary work for religious sociologists (like Berger himself) who want their work to be taken seriously by their secular colleagues. But why not "methodological agnosticism," the acknowledgment that there might really be a supernatural source for transcendent experience? Berger himself moved hesitantly in this direction in his next major work on religion, *A Rumor of Angels* (Berger [1970] 1991). And he would be followed—again—by Charles Taylor, who sought to combine methodological atheism and agnosticism by distinguishing between "closed" and "open spins" on the "immanent frame."

Wherever one comes down on these questions, Berger's definition, methods, and theoretical apparatus did provide a space for legitimate religious belief even while acknowledging the possibility that any particular belief does not accurately describe the sacred cosmos.

CONCLUSION

That kind of hedge, proceeding from unbelief while leaving ample space for belief, is at once Berger's greatest strength and weakness. He was, along with his contemporaries Clifford Geertz and Mary Douglas, a true intellectual, equally at home in philosophy, history, theology, sociology, and anthropology. Berger cared about questions of meaning and how people understood those meanings in their lives. He understood human life to be a dialectical process through which we come to believe certain things about the world through interacting with it; in the process, we actually continue the making of that world just as it makes us.

Yet that understanding of the world might overemphasize how much belief actually matters in day-to-day experience. Of course, Berger would acknowledge that even in his Otto-inspired theology, the sense of the transcendent is more important than any particular belief about it. Yet it is beliefs that get us there—or at least this is what Berger tells us. Methodological atheism is ultimately a Protestant way to operationalize the study of religion, because it depends upon a cognitive approach to religion's efficacy. Was what that person believed true or not? But what does it mean to ask if what someone *did* was true? Thus, we have Durkheim's much-repeated insistence that no religion is false, at least not in any simple, cognitive sense.

Yet these are dichotomies worth challenging. As Guhin has shown in his work on Evangelicals and Muslims, even the most orthodox can be quite orthoprax, and even the most orthoprax depend upon some level of orthodoxy (Guhin 2013). Belief and practice are inextricably entangled with one another. What things mean to us really does matter, and they have a significant role in forming our subjectivity. It is an insight we can easily forget, especially if we're too enmeshed in the practice turn or in repertoire theories of culture that hold meanings as ultimately superficial and pragmatic. Berger has no such superficiality. *The Sacred Canopy* is a masterwork of integrated culture, from sociological founders to phenomenological philosophers, from mid-century theology to economic theory. More importantly, the work's insights—and even its absences—help us understand our contemporary religious situation. It is as important now as it was fifty years ago. Believe it!

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