

ABOUT THE NECESSITY OF ONTOLOGICAL CONCEPTS IN SOCIAL SCIENCES¹

A BRIEF PERSPECTIVE UPON JOHN SEARLE'S RECENT IDEAS ON SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

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Abstract. This study represents a short incursion into the issue about the necessity of having the ontological foundations within social sciences. It starts with a brief distinction between what it could be called, on the one the hand, the “applicative” and “empirical” research in the field of social sciences and, on the other hand, the fundamental research within social science in general. These distinctions are taken here in a general and intuitive mode without plunging into epistemological details about them. After this we take into consideration Searle’s point of view as it appears in his latest book that has been recently published, a point of view which seems to accept the idea that are indeed within the social sciences domains which do not need for strictly empirical research a set of ontological foundations. Beginning from here we try to shortly disclose the way in which can be interpreted this perspective but without entering into details of an extended epistemological debate.

1. INTRODUCTION

In one of his latest books John Searle makes a strange remark about the efforts to disclose the set of conceptual foundations in some areas from the social sciences. Briefly, his point of view can be summarized in these terms: in almost all areas within the social sciences it is not necessary to insist upon the foundational issues because the applicative research does not need such an undertaking². This daring assertion can raise a set of questions regarding the mode in which must be understood social applicative research in terms of Searle’s perspective but it also can open a deep discussion about the rift that could occur between the type of research which is specific within an applicative and empirical mode of social science and, on the other hand, the type of work which is usually involved in fundamental research in social sciences in general. Following this perspective our study will try develop some coordinates upon which could be represented this possible rift. We use here the term “rift” because we believe that is a proper one in order to describe how those two types of research actually work. Our study will not

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² Searle, John, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 200.

be limited to Searle's ideas rather will begin with his observation about the fact that a social scientist can develop his research work without having the set of ontological foundations of his scientific area. According to Searle's position, as we will see later during this study, an applicative research within social sciences does not necessary need a complete clarification of its fundamental conceptual issues but it appears that the attempt to obtain such a type of clarification would have no major effect upon the basic empirical research. Of course this does not mean that such an attempt can not deepen the understanding of various issues within any particular social science but this sort of situation, however, does not have any effect upon the objective status of the reality that is been researched.

2. FUNDAMENTAL RESEARCH AND APPLICATIVE RESEARCH IN SOCIAL SCIENCES. A POSSIBLE WAY OF UNDERSTANDING JOHN SEARLE'S POINT OF VIEW UPON THE NECESSITY OF FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

In this paragraph we want to draw in a brief mode the main set of characteristics between what we call here an *applicative research*, on the one hand, and *fundamental research* on the other hand within social sciences. Even if our exploratory undertaking begins with Searle's observation we do not intend here to summarize or to develop any further idea from Searle's book regarding this issue. We want to offer a possible perspective upon Searle's idea and not necessary to subscribe to his detailed vision on it. In order to achieve this we firstly must to obtain a clear and comprehensive picture about the notions of "applicative research" and "fundamental research" within social sciences. Before we begin we also must say that in our undertaking we will not follow or discuss any particular theoretical perspective about the relation between the *content* of any social science and the issue of fundamental concepts of those sciences. Of course, in history of science there are relatively numerous conceptions which, directly or indirectly, have something to say about the relation which we are talking about here. From the positivist one to relatively recent phenomenological one there are, indeed, theoretical conceptions which can be used in any discussion upon the relation between fundamental research in social science and the strictly empirical and applicative one. We will not insist upon those conceptions but only, where this will be necessary, we will provide some theoretical links with Searle's position about the necessity of having a set of fundamental concepts, a set which is designed to describe the ontological bases, within social sciences.

Let us now go further and begin with the idea of "applicative research" in social science. About this we will say in very simple terms that any applicative social research is directly linked with empirical level of its objects. This means that a sociological or psychological research for example, in its applicative side, will not be too concern about *the origins* of the concepts which are used within empirical and direct research but to their abilities to really describe the object of research. Of

course, now there are relatively many conceptions and general epistemological approaches about this issue. We do not insist here upon them. We only underline the main characteristic of what we call in this study “applicative research”.

About what we call “fundamental research” within social sciences there are few main characteristics which are really important for us in order to get a perspective about Searle’s position upon the way in which we can understand the necessity of having ontological bases for social sciences. In what will follow here further we will try to offer a comprehensive view upon those characteristics and later we will return with our discussion about the type of necessity of having ontological bases clarified in any area within social sciences.

As a first general characteristic of fundamental research within social sciences we can underline the imperative that all empirical research must be contained and developed only and only into that areas which are clear delimited by the set of concepts which are in use. Beside others implications this is also involving the fact that any empirical research must be developed without any kind of deviation from the way in which are defined fundamental concepts at the beginning of the research. Further more, *there should be no epistemological debates during the empirical research unless the empirical research has to adapt to new set of conceptual conditions. The conceptual level which sustain empirical research and especially the task to refine that conceptual level if the empirical field requires such an undertaking is the level of fundamental research.* Of course, this simplified version of understanding the way in which general theoretical concepts are working within a particular social science was a source of constant debate and a spring of many well refined epistemological theories during the history of science in general. We are not interesting here in doing a complete and detailed exposure of one or other of those theories. We use this general exposure in order to underline, in what will follow below, a second type of so called fundamental research in social sciences in general.

Within the above described situation the only thing which really fulfils the condition to be considered fundamental research is the permanent concern regarding the way in which the whole set of concepts that are in use within empirical research are maintaining their consistence and their content accordingly to what was initially defined and accepted. Nobody can deny the fact that also at this stage the epistemological debates could be very complicated and elaborate. *However, this level is a soft one because it does not yet take into consideration the way in which those fundamental concepts are extracted and elaborated.* And this does not mean that at that level the fundamental concepts are not seen in their relation with experience. *The key issue here is not this relation but the way in itself which allows appearing of those fundamental concepts.* In other words what we have here in mind is not the set of epistemological characteristics specific within relation between concepts and their empirical correspondents but the mode in which fundamental concepts are born. This perspective is radically different from

the first one because is questioning the inner mechanism through which the set of fundamental concepts are made and does not take too much into consideration the relation between these concepts and their empirical designated areas. Of course, this type of relation is also an epistemological one but this is possible only after those concepts are already generated. And this is the point where we wanted to arrive: *the issue of how are generated fundamental concepts within social sciences*. By “fundamental concepts” we understand here those concepts that are describing the set of entities which are the object of one social science or another. For example terms and concepts such are “social classes”, “unions”, “political entities”, “government” or “society”, “system of justice” and “institutional structures” represent fundamental concepts in sociology in general because they are describing the basic entities which are targeted by any sociological theoretical discourse. Further more, there is a direct link between these concepts and what Searle calls the “ontological bases” of social sciences. Why? Because these concepts are the base frame upon which any social science is constructed and conceptualized. In what will follow we will try to disclose, on the one hand, the detailed analyses of those fundamental concepts as a set of ontological bases for any particular social science within John Searle’s point of view and, on the other hand, the way in which those fundamental concepts are obtaining according to John Searle’s theoretical and epistemological perspective³. Only after this step will be completed we will focus our attention to Searle’s vision which seems to accept the idea that for the empirical, applicative and direct mode of research within social sciences it is not an absolute necessity to clarify the ontological bases of those social sciences.

**3. FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS AND ONTOLOGICAL BASES IN SOCIAL SCIENCES.
A BRIEF DISCUSSION UPON JOHN SEARLE’S APPROACH WITHIN MAKING
THE SOCIAL WORLD: THE STRUCTURE OF HUMAN CIVILIZATION**

In case of John Searle the whole set of fundamental concepts within areas of social sciences has also a profound ontological signification. This is due to the simple fact that all those fundamental concepts are describing parts of social reality which are situated at the deepest level. For example, everything which in Searle’s view can be called “institution” is also a fundamental concept but also a sort of ontological base upon which any social science can be build through conceptualization. The question is here not about the role of those fundamental concepts, because this is very clear, but about the mode in which they are obtained. Is an issue about *the method* by which Searle consider that are forming the fundamental concepts within social sciences. Without entering here into the details

³ As it has been suggested, the entire work of John Searle seems to offer a beautiful coherence and continuity at least about the way in which we must understood the ontology of institutional facts and social reality.

of Searle's endeavor we can summarize his method to a mix of language analysis, philosophy of mind and phenomenology. Every of these theoretical efforts have its own part in the entire undertaking which Searle has performed during his academic career. In what will follow next we will focus our attention not only upon the way in which Searle considers that human society exists but especially to critics that have been made regarding his theoretical perspective. As we will see a significant part of those critics not only that there are very radical but there are also a very skeptical about the relevance of Searle's endeavor for the empirical social research.

First of all we have to notice that Searle's latest book, a book which attempts to understand how is constructed the social reality at its deepest level, was not welcomed very well by the all commentators. For example there were voices who not only that were very critic about it but also very skeptical regarding the scientific viability of Searle's ideas about social reality and social ontology. In what will follow we will focus our attention upon one of these critical voices. We refer here at Howard Saul Becker, a leading American sociologist and also a very prominent figure of the American academic life during latest decades.

Howard S. Becker's critique starts by noticing that Searle's purposes within his latest book about how it is made the social world are to describe "the nature of human society and the mode of existence of its parts as the consequence of *Status Functions Declarations*, statements people make (collectively, one supposes) which change the nature of social reality by declaring that it *is* changed and then collectively recognizing that change is real"⁴. Becker quickly observes that this type of theoretical position is not a new one. Even more, not only that it already was promoted during the history of sociology but beside this Searle's point of view is also expressed in less clear terms that it was expressed in the past. In order to be complete Howard S. Becker's critiques does not stop here but goes even further using irony and another type of very serious accusation against Searle's conceptual frame. For example, Becker observes that Searle's work does not have any serious contact with the theoretical efforts of the great social scientist either from the past either from the present. References to Bourdieu, Durkheim or Weber are perfunctory says Becker and there are no references to any *empirical social sciences* which Searle wants to offer for them an ontological base. Of course, these accusations are very well defined and must be taken seriously. However, we must yet admit that Searle's undertaking within *Making the Social World* was not designed for a traditional empirical research or even for a traditional empirical approach regarding the way in which concepts are formed within social sciences. But this deliberate purpose, of course, does not provide any excuse for the lack of clarity and the absence of a consistent relation between the general theoretical

⁴ Becker S., Howard, online reference: <http://home.earthlink.net/~hsbecker/articles/searle/html>. Also, it is very inspiring to read some of his books regarding the issue of understanding the way in which social reality can be understand. See, for example, Becker S., Howard, *Telling about Society*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2007.

analysis and the field of empirical areas which Searle tried to “ontologically” describe them. This accusation is indeed a very serious one and, beside other things, this accusation is clearly destined to underline the absence of almost any type of relevance of his analysis for the social empirical scientist: “In any event the book does not show any great engagement or familiarity with the work social scientist do. Aside from a few perfunctory references to Bourdieu, Durkheim and Weber, no work of social science is mentioned, and certainly not of the empirical social science he hopes to underwrite. His own attempts at social analysis don’t give us much confidence either, reading more like something you might hear at an academic cocktail party than serious empirically based social science”⁵.

And Becker’s critique goes on plunging into irony when it notices that it took for Searle two hundred pages to admit that his efforts might be completely useless for an applicative social researcher. But let us see these remarks in their details as they actually appear in Searle’s book: “Suppose that I am right that human society is largely constituted by distinctive institutional structures that create and distribute deontic power relationships by assigning status functions, and with those status functions differing social roles, in society. *What implications, if any, does that account have for actual research in the social sciences?* I guess the short answer is that I don’t really know. It is impossible to tell in advance what is going to be useful for actual research. *It seems that there are many areas of social science research in which, at least in principle, it is not necessary to understand the foundational issues*”⁶. Searle goes further and makes the next type of comparison between the efforts to understand and solve the foundational issues within the area of social sciences and the set of specific efforts to develop the empirical and applicative research in this type of science. The comparison was made as a result of an encounter between Searle and one of empirical social scientist at a meeting in Paris: “So, for example, when I lectured on the subjects (about foundational issues in social science) at the Memorial for Pierre Bourdieu in Paris, one of the other participants, an American sociologist specializing in the sociology of labor unions, told me that his work began where mine ended. And I take it he meant that it is not necessary for him to know the ontological foundations of trade unionism. All he was to understand is the actual operations of particular historically situated organizations”⁷. And Searle goes further by saying that “the picture I think he had was that, just as a geologist might study the movements of tectonic plates without understanding the details of social ontology”⁸. Also, as we have already seen, this ending position of Searle’s undertaking from his latest book was ironically considered by Becker’s analysis we yet think that Searle’s perspective could be a very good starting point in order to plunge into a deeper analysis regarding that

⁵ Idem.

⁶ Searle, p. 200.

⁷ Idem.

⁸ Ibidem.

mode in which it can be understood the necessity of having the ontological bases in the field of social sciences.

The best way to return to the issue of foundational ontological categories within social sciences is to remember the brief distinction which we already made about the empirical type of research and the fundamental one. As we already knew, the empirical research in the field of social science, and Searle is agree with this, does not seem to need a deeper and complete set of concepts in the role of the “ontological foundation” for what is supposed to be researched. Even Searle admits when is talking about that social scientist which was doing research about the sociology of labor unions. And this is happening and it is possible only and only because the empirical centered research really does not need an understanding about what we may call the “ontology of labor unions”. That sociologist it already has in front of him an empirical reality and he can develop his researching work without the concern of understanding the way in which labor unions are *ontologically possible*. And we have to strongly underline this point of view: the absence of a solid ontological base for the objects of social sciences does not imply that those objects do not exist. They exist but in a way which do not need that ontologically level of discussion (by mutual acceptance of them, for example, in an intuitive mode and without any complicated epistemological debate upon them). We think that this is what Searle wanted to express when he talked about that sociologist specialized in sociology of labor unions. We do not insist anymore about this subject here.

The observations that we made above can allow us to go further to the last stage of our brief discussion regarding the issue of ontological foundations within social sciences. Without going to deep into discussion about ontological bases within social sciences we will summarize here our point of view by saying that we have to make a clear distinction between the issues of *fundamental concepts*, on the one hand, and the issues of *ontological bases* on the other hand within the field of social sciences. For the *empirical and applicative* research it is almost unimportant the way in which the first ones are obtained. The fundamental concepts are translating parts from social reality upon may exist mutual acceptance regarding their content, even if this content, at the level of details, is not perfectly uniform for all social scientists. For example, it is not very difficult to obtain and to operate within social sciences with concepts such are “unions”, “social classes”, “political institutions” and so on. By using some *empirical criteria* and, if necessary, using even different types of *standard conventions* regarding the in which the set of fundamental concepts are about to be defined and elaborate, social scientists can indeed develop their work without having to much concern about the ontological perspective and implications of the result of their research. At least to a some point we think that Searle had in mind this type of vision when he said that the sociologist which he met at that occasion did not need to have at his disposal the ontological ground upon the phenomena of labor unions in general in society when he was doing empirical research upon it. This perspective might be not valid in all

situations but, regardless of how intense could be the epistemological debate the empirical one is in general possible. Of course, nothing can stop a social scientist to constantly refine his concepts or to adapt them to needs of empirical reality if necessary but even in this situation a social scientist does not necessary need to have a philosophical and ontological background discourse about his work. Of course, this type of discourse could offer a deeper and larger horizon to his research but it would never affect the empirical results of his work. And this is happening because the search for the ontological grounds is attempting to understand how social reality is constructed and to how it is functioning once it exists already. We think that this is one of the few possible ways in which it can be understood the distinction between what we called here the “fundamental concepts” and the “ontological grounds” within social sciences.

4. THE SET OF POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS OF SEARLE’S PERSPECTIVE ABOUT THE NECESSITY OF HAVING AN ONTOLOGICAL BASE FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE WITHIN *MAKING THE SOCIAL WORLD*

In this paragraph we will try to summarize a set of implications, as they appear in our point of view, regarding Searle’s general position which claims that it might be not necessary to have and even to understand the ontological bases within the area of social sciences in general. In order to do this we will offer a brief picture about the ways through which was understand the process of obtaining the set of fundamental concepts within social sciences.

As it is very well known, from an epistemological point of view, there were some theories which attempted to disclose the mode in which are formed the concepts, *together with their signification*, in social sciences. Without entering here in details we only indicate them: Frege’s perspective which seems to sustain that every signification is build up and it is made possible through the empirical evidence of one term (this theory of signification was named by some authors the *inferential type*), the *communicational theory* which claims that signification is obtained by and must be understood only and only within a system of perfectly coherent logic languages and the performative perspective with all its different modes of conceptualization regarding the so called “speech acts”⁹. Of course, any of these three perspectives is a complex one and it is not our purpose here to plunge into details. We spoke about them, firstly, in order to underline that the task of obtaining the epistemological base for the concepts that are in use within social science are far away from being an easy. And secondly we have to underline that the epistemological task must not be confused with the ontological one. This is because we believe that the task of understanding the ontological base, although is very connected with the epistemology of concepts that are used in social sciences

⁹ Biriş, Ioan – *Conceptele științei*, Editura Academiei Române, București, 2010, pp. 93–122.

to describe some parts of human reality, can not be reduced to this. Between others possible reasons for this is the fact that from an ontological point of view it is important not only to understand the set of mechanisms which are involved in the process of obtaining those so called “fundamental concepts” but also the fact that all those technical mechanisms *are relative*. They can indeed describe, at least to some point, the human reality, but they never could be considered an absolute landmark which can offer a last word about the ultimate level of existence of the reality which tries to understand.

In the end let us draw now a brief set of conclusions about the claim that the need of an ontological base within social sciences could not represent an absolute necessity. This set of conclusions, in our point of view, could be summarized as it follows bellow

1. Regardless if there are or there are not attempts to disclose the ontological base in various social science it seems that the *empirical research* it is not very serious disturbed. We can understand the way trough which some historical processes have been taken place, or, at least, we can propose some coherent theories about them, without having permanently in mind the ontological issues regarding that parts of reality which are responsible for those hypothetical historical processes.
2. The epistemology about how the fundamental concepts within social sciences are formed does not necessary imply, in our perspective, the fact that this type of analysis will automatically can tell us something about the ontological level.
3. The above observation is based in our point of view, beside others, upon the fact that the forming of those fundamental concepts is in itself a relative process which depends strictly upon the epistemological *option* made by an author or another.
4. Another conclusion which we strongly want to underline here is the idea that Searle might be wrong when he says that plunging into ontological issues can improve our understanding within social sciences. By the contrary we believe that the level of ontological debate could leave untouched the level of empirical research. And maybe, following this line or argument, that sociologist specialized in labor unions had right when he argued that his work begins after the Searle’s stopped. We might add here that his work could be very well developed even *without* Searle’s theoretical endeavor in searching of those “ontological bases”.
5. We think that the so called “ontological level” in science in general and not only within social sciences area, is something which depends in very large measure upon the *options* of an author or another in order to clarify the ultimate level within a specific science. *But this option is always a relative one and a modifiable one*. Some would prefer to use the analysis of speech

acts, as Searle did¹⁰, other will prefer to analyze a set of empirical parameters within parts of social reality which they want to explore and to understand. However, we think that is always important within science in general and social sciences in particular, if we want to have some results from our empirical research, to not overcome some point in the epistemological debate which we use as a base for the whole set of concepts that we are using. Even if every result which can be obtained by following this line of approach will be always *incomplete* and *relative* it is much better than plunging into sterile debates about the “ontological level”, debates which, beyond some point, would leave us nowhere.

These last considerations are not designed to shatter Searle’s efforts from his latest book. They rather be considered as a short incursion into some really difficult issues and a result to the challenge that Searle himself is launching when he says that it might be very possible that the search for the ultimate ontological level of human reality, and of the social reality in particular, could be indeed completely useless for the empirical research within social sciences. Of course, nobody could deny Searle’s efforts to offer an ontological ground for what we call “social reality”, efforts which have been made during his entire academic career. But these efforts, such it was the analysis of speech acts and the phenomenology of collective intentionality for example, with all their inner coherence, have their own limits and we are not speaking here about those limits in terms of content or consistence but in terms of perspective and reductionism. Those efforts are relative but not because Searle might be wrong. They are relative because there are others types of approach regarding the issue of the ontological level within social sciences. And none of these perspectives could ever claim its absolute truth in front of the others. Even more, the plunging into ontological and foundational issues of social sciences it is not a task capable to assure us that by doing this we will better understand, or even solving some problems, in one social science or another. Perhaps we must accept our relativism and be satisfied with results from an empirical approach even if they are extracted from an incomplete epistemology.

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¹⁰ See in this case the extensive analysis which Searle did upon the speech acts and upon the role of intentionality in configuring the human reality in general and not only the social part from it.