THEMATIC ARTICLES: MIGRATION AND XENOPHOBIA

Xenophobia: Natural Fact or Social Construction?

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Abstract. Social and human sciences often study "objects" (population, gender, classes, groups, etc.) that are both natural and social. The same "object" is sometimes studied statistically (by sociology, demography, economics, social psychology), sometimes as "natural reality" (by life sciences, biology, ecology, genetics). In this situation, we also find the phenomenon of xenophobia. Our study is on the concept of xenophobia. Is this a natural fact or is it a social construct? It is obvious that, depending on the response, very different policies can be imagined. In recent decades, we have witnessed numerous social investigations focused on "denaturalization" of the social phenomena and realities. Are such steps scientifically justified? Many studies of xenophobia over the last few years have shown that xenophobia is a social construct. In our opinion, this perspective is wrong. Xenophobia, understood as a feeling of fear for foreigners, expresses a natural "psychological state", a natural fact. There are, of course, "social construction" operations, but "construction" refers to the ideas and images of "natural fact", not to replace that "fact". Beyond the idea that the expression "social construction" is an obscure one, we have to ask ourselves, as Ian Hacking says, is the social construction of what? We can "build" various classifications and labels, even in situations where the referent does not exist. But can such an approach be called scientific? No, because by the constructive approach we are moving away from reality. We build images, ideas, but not individuals! However, in the study of xenophobia, as in so many other cases, research should come closer to "xenophobic individuals", to their lived reality. To test the xenophobic images, we will try to apply for this concept of xenophobia the three criteria (blockages) proposed by Ian Hacking in the critical analysis of social constructivism: a) contingency; b) nominalism; c) stability. The advocates of social constructivism support the thesis of contingency. According to this thesis, the xenophobia is it a contingent phenomenon, it may or may not be. If we adopt a critical attitude, we can require constructionists to show us an "alternative development", that is, one without xenophobia. But since we have accepted, by definition, that people always have a certain "fear of the unknown", "fear of foreigners", the phenomenon of xenophobia is a necessary, not contingent one.

Constructivists claim that scientific facts are "social constructions". In other words, certain statements made by us become "facts". Critical attitude, however, requires us to make it very clear that the statements do not become facts but are statements about the facts. Constructivism can undermine the nominalism. But in this case, the ontology of xenophobia, instead of being descriptive, will be prescriptive. For constructionists, the explanation of the stability of scientific theories and beliefs is due, at least in part, to external

social factors to the scientific research itself. This would also apply to the scientific study of xenophobia. This argument can be contradicted by the thesis that the stability of the explanation is internal to science, being assured precisely by the persistence of the natural fact.

Keywords: *xenophobia; social construction; natural fact*

Is the xenophobia a natural fact or a social construction? Here is a question whose debate can provoke "pro" and "counter" views. But, what is more important, the debate can help us understand more clearly what it is the phenomenon of xenophobia and which is his nature.

1. **Skids in social constructionism**

For many scholars, the scientific knowledge necessarily calls for constructs. The commitment to the social constructionism is indispensable for any scientific research, says Darin Weinberg[1], because science cannot works without "constructs". It is true that, at his time, Kant drew attention to the need for an intermediate term between the concept and the empirical phenomenon, of an intermediate representation that he calls a "transcendental schema"[2]. And this method belongs to the constructionist methodology:

sensitive intuition ------- transcendental schema --------- concept.

From a philosophical point of view, the method of Kant is successfully continued especially in Peirce's semiotics, for which the signs are "mediators" between the actual object and the interpretive subject, but also in Wittgenstein's theory about the operations with signs (*Zeichenhandeln*)[3].

Regarding social sciences, the idea of social constructionism is found at the founders of sociology at Durkheim, Marx and Weber[4]. Although Émile Durkheim professed a positivist methodology of social "things", he admits, for example, that classification systems in a society reflect the social organization of that society, which

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[1] Darin Weinberg, Social Constructionism, în vol. Bryan S. Turner (ed.), *Social Theory*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2009, p. 281.
[2] Immanuel Kant, *Critica rațiunii pure*, Editura Științifică, București, 1969, p. 171.
[3] Ioan Biriș, *Conceptele științei*, Editura Academiei Române, București, 2010, p. 33.
[4] Ioan Biriș, *Filosofia și logica științelor sociale*, Editura Academiei Române, București, 2014, p. 119.

is a "social construction". Then Karl Marx's theorizing of "false conscience" is clearly a constructionist approach. As in Max Weber's case, his ideas about significance, values, and ideal types are constructionist.

Today, the social constructionism finds its resources especially in symbolic interactionism and in postmodern orientations, for which the social world is just an "interpretation". The classical work on the assumption of social constructionism is considered the book of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann[5], *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966). For these authors and for their disciples, "reality is built socially". What reality? Including the natural one? For supporters of radical constructionism, the answer is affirmative, the whole reality is socially built, because any "real fact", whether natural or social, is interpreted by humans and is "built".

To exemplify the radical constructionism we will refer to two very well-known works only, one for physical reality and the other for biological reality.

In the first case, is about Andrew Pickering's book[6], *Constructing Quarks*. It's a book - as Ian Hacking[7] thinks - that presents a systematic effort to the social construction of quarks. The Pickering's opinion is as follows. "The view taken here is that the reality of quarks was the upshot of particle physicists' practice, and not the reverse: hence the title of the book, Constructing Quarks"[8]. For this author the quarks are rather theoretical entities, theoretical constructs, not a natural reality. The researcher's activity, his construction is at the forefront, not the phenomena of reality. "In this book, the view will be that agency belongs to actors not phenomena: scientists make their own history, they are not the passive mouthpieces of nature"[9].

For the biological reality we will recall the famous book by Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*. In this book we find the famous phrase: "*On ne naît pas femme, on le devient*". According to the author, "the terms *masculine* and *feminine* are used symetrically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers"[10]. In this line of

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[5] Peter L. Berger, Thomas Luckmann, *Construirea socială a realităţii*, Editura Univers, București, 1999.

[6] Andrew Pickering, *Constructing Quarks*, The University of Chicago Press, 1984.

[7] Ian Hacking, *Entre science et réalité. La construction sociale de quoi?*, Éditions La Découverte, Paris, 2008, p. 51.

[8] Andrew Pickering, *Constructing Quarks*, p. X.

[9] *Ibidem*, p. 8.

[10] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Jonathan Cape Thirty Bedford Square London, 1956, p. 15.

theorization, the "gender" becomes a border criterion[11] between natural sciences and social sciences. If the "woman" is not a natural product - as Simone de Beauvoir argues - but a product of civilization, then a denaturalization of the sex determinations becomes obligatory. That is biological sex is socially built. Is the male body and the female body not a biological fact one? For radical constructivism the answer is negative, the gender being a social construction.

Between the characteristics of radical constructionism we can thus retain a generalized antirealism (with sliding to solipsism), the determined rejection of naturalism, a radical contextual approach and a universal symbolic causality. For some supporters of this orientation, authentic reality is not what is revealed by scientific theories, but that presented equally by personal conceptions and different ideologies[12]. Thus, it is considered that the traditional theory of correspondence-truth should be replaced by the functional adequacy relationship[13].

This modality of radical constructionism is also adopted by some authors who deal with xenophobia, racism or ethnicity, etc., in these years, and argue that such phenomena are produced and reproduced discursively, that they are nothing more than social constructs. "As it is one of our key assumptions that racism, ethnicism and antisemitism are – to a large extent – produced and reproduced discursively... "[14].

Once produced, these constructs are then used for identification and self-identification, for political and social battles, etc. "On the one hand, racist opinions and beliefs are produced and reproduced by means of discourse; on the other hand, through discourse, discriminatory exclusionary practices are prepared, promulgated, and legitimised"[15]. We can ask, of course, if things are so. Are such social phenomena constructs only? There is no doubt that the scientific researcher builds various images, ideas or models for the phenomena studied. But is it "built" and the phenomenon itself? Are quarks in physics just a construct as some authors claim?

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[11] See also Riccardo Fanciullaci et Stefania Ferrando, Le Genre, în vol. Florence Hulak et Charles Girard (dir.), *Philosophie des sciences humaines II. Méthodes et objets*, Vrin, Paris, 2018, p. 136.

[12] Paul Watzlawick (Hg.), *Die erfundene Wirklichkeit. Wie wiessen, was wir zu wissen glauben? Beitrage zum Konstruktivismus*, Piper Verlag, München/Zürich, 2010, p. 15.

[13] Ernst von Glasersfeld, Einführung in den radikalen Konstruktivismus, în vol. Paul Watzlawick (Hg.), *Die erfundene Wirklichkeit*, p. 20.

[14] Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination. Rhetorics of racism and antisemitism*, Routledge, London and NewYork, 2005, p. XI.

[15] *Ibidem*, p. 1.

Are genes in biology just a construct? Human races are just a construct of ideological discourse? Is xenophobia just a construct? There are authors who respond affirmatively to all these questions.

Is true, the scientist builds images of the "objects" studied. Heinrich Hertz[16], in his work on mechanics, *Die Prinzipien der Mechanik in neuen Zusammenhange dargestellt* (1894), argued that the sentences or the laws of mechanics are nothing more than "images" built on physical realities. But he drew the attention that these images must to fulfill three conditions: 1) the empirical condition, according to which the image must be correct (*richtig*), that is, correspond to reality (we have here the principle of truth-correspondence); 2) the logical condition, namely the requirement that the image be allowed (*zulässig*), not to contradict the principles of logic; 3) the pragmatic condition that claims the image to be appropriate (*zweckmässig*), be as simple as possible. Under the influence of Hertz, Ludwig Wittgenstein[17], in his *Tractatus*, will also underline in sentence 2.1. that in the process of knowledge, we are making different images of facts (*Wir machen uns Bilder der Tatsachen*), but these images must be compared to the reality (2.223. *Um zu erkennen, ob das Bild wahr oder falsch ist, müssen wir es mit der Wirklichkeit vergleichen*).

Are these requirements respected in support of social constructionism? No, as we have seen, neither physical facts nor biological facts is it considered to be a "natural fact", but a "social construct". In other words, the biological genre of humans is not a "natural fact", but a social construct. How do you get to this kind of support? In our opinion, the constructionism reaches at skids when it confuses the cognitive moment with normative moment, value moment. If we take into account the first condition set by Hertz, we will understand that the cognitive moment must prevail, that the central value must be the truth. The image we construct about gender must correspond to the natural biological fact. If this correspondence does not exist, it means that the built image is false. Respectively, in a scientific approach, information must subordinate its significance, seeking truth. In constructionism skids, things are in opposite, the interpretative significance becomes normative, subordinating its information. What can be more clearly seen in following the tables:

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[16] Heinrich Hertz, *Die Prinzipien der Mechanik in neuem Zusammenhange Dargestellt*, Johan Ambrosius Barth (Arthur Meiner), Leipzig, 1894.

[17] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus. Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2003.

The table 1
Normal Situation

The Relation information - significance	Cognitive moment/ normative moment	Central value	Type of research
Information subordinate significance	Cognitive moment	Truth	Scientific

The table 2
Constructionist skid situation

The Relation information - significance	Cognitive moment/ normative moment	Central value	Type of research
Significance subordinate information	Normative moment	Interpretation	Non-scientific

2. The grade of engagement in constructionism. Applying Ian Hacking's criteria to the concept of xenophobia

From what has been said so far, we must not deduce that the constructionist approach must necessarily be removed. In fact, that would be impossible. Knowledge always presupposes a constructionist side. But it's about building images, ideas, models, not referential "objects". Unfortunately, in social sciences, the direct and observable referential is missing in many cases. This is why sometimes nominal definitions predominate, where information about reality is not provided. In such cases, constructionist skids are easily reached.

However, the concept of xenophobia is not nominally defined. Almost all dictionaries define xenophobia as "fear of foreigners" (from ancient Greek: *xenos* = foreigner, *phobos* = fear). So the referent of the concept is a natural reality, a natural fact, is the psychological feeling of fear for foreigners. What we can build is the images of this fear, but not the feeling of fear itself. In the Greek-Roman antiquity the fear of "barbarians" was known, in the Middle Age the fear of those who did not share in the same faith, and in the modern times fear of those of other ethnicity, the fear of migrants, etc.

In recent years, especially the phenomenon of xenophobia towards migrants

has seen alarming growth in Europe. In a recent report[18], *Xenophobia, Radicalism, and Hate Crime in Europe*, Annual Report, 2018, from which we select some data, one can observe:

The table 3
Migrant Phobia in Europe in 2014-2017

The country	The percentage
Austria	32%
UK	52% - 63%
Hungary	62% - 82%
Germany	28% - 71%
Greece	55% - 72%
Ireland	22%
Spain	18% - 25%
Italy	65% - 80%
Netherlands	31% - 61%
Poland	52% - 75%
Slovakia	58%
France	51% - 65%

As we can see, increasing migratory flows in recent years have led to spectacular increases in phobic feelings towards migrants, with the highest levels being reported in Hungary, Germany, Greece, Italy and Poland. Are these occasional increases? Are they emerging from construction? "Populist radical right forces – is noted in this report19 – and first of all, parliamentary radical parties, have become political beneficiaries of the 2015-2017 migration crisis. These forces were able to significantly strengthen their positions in some countries, including Germany, Slovakia, Croatia, and Hungary; to achieve their stated political goals in Britain; and to come to power in Italy, Austria, and Poland".

A supporter of universal constructionism, like Ernst von Glasersfeld, wants to convince us that constructionist orientation is what we need, that it goes beyond sociobiology and behaviorism, as well as all traditional theories based on the model of truth - correspondence. But what does constructionism place instead of correspondence and value of truth? It puts the functional adequacy relationship of

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[18] *Xenophobia*, *Radicalism*, *and Hate Crime in Europe*, Annual Report, 2018. Institute for the Study of National Policy and Interethnic Relations; European International Tolerance Centre; Centre for Monitoring and Comparative Analysis of Intercultural Communications (Moscow Institute of Psychoanalysis); European Centre for Democracy Development.

[19] *Ibidem*, p. 5.

interpretive construction, thus opening the wide gates of subjectivity. With a persevering constructionism, can be achieved solipsism only.

It is interesting to note how some authors confuse or fail to sufficiently distinguish the "natural fact" from "social construction". For example, in a recent paper, Ray Taras[20] claims, on the one hand, that "Xenophobia is, literally, a fear of foreigners. Xenophobes are considered to be people who harbor negative attitudes towards foreigners, motivated specifically by a fear of them"[21]; and on the other hand considers, in the following Cornelius Castoriadis, that the system of interpretation is always the one that creates a world[22]. Thus, what is stated in the first part (that xenophobia, by definition, is "fear of foreigners", that is, it is natural fact) is denied in the second part, where it is to be understood that xenophobia is "interpretation", is a socially created world.

We can agree that things are complicated. Respectively, if the "natural fact" requires the creation of certain images and ideas, it is equally true that the invention of "interpretations" can also influence the perception of natural facts. But the more we have to pay attention to what is "natural fact" and what is interpreting, "social construction." Nowadays, indeed, in Western Europe, xenophobia is almost synonymous - as Taras says - with anti-immigration, especially with the anti-immigration of people who are not racially Caucasian or religiously Judeo-Christian. These immigrants are often presented (= social construction) as responsible for the deterioration of security conditions and the intensification of terrorism. As a result, in Western Europe, for example, "during the period 2001-2017, 74 international terrorist organizations (most of them Islamist), which fell under the Terrorism Act 2000, were banned in Great Britain only"[23].

Undoubtedly, for the European society, xenophobia remains a very serious problem. It can be a root cause of all hate crime. In varying degrees of intensity it is present in all monitored countries. For example, for some countries, based on the data from Xenophobia, Radicalism, and Hate Crime in Europe, the Annual Report, 2018, we are compiling the following table on the evolution of anti-Roma, anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic feelings during 2014-2017:

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[20] Ray Taras, *Europe Old and New. Transnationalism, Belonging, Xenophobia*, Rowaman & Litlefield Publishers, Inc., Lanham/Boulder/NewYork/Toronto/Plymouth, UK, 2009.
[21] *Ibidem*, p. 83.
[22] *Ibidem*, p. 7.
[23] *Xenophobia, Radicalism, and Hate Crime in Europe*, Annual Report, 2018, p. 6.

The table 4
Dynamics Anti-Roma, Anti-Semitic and Anti-Islamic Sentiments (2014-2017)

	Anti-Roma Sentiments	Anti-Semitic Sentiments	Anti-Islamic Sentiments
UK	40-50%	8-10%	19-37%
Hungary	60-70%	20-28%	72% (2016-2017)
Germany	30-40%	5-9%	25-33%
Greece	50-70%	50-68%	52-65%

The dynamics of these feelings clearly show the evolution of the phenomenon of xenophobia in just two to three years. Although in Hungary, for example, the proportion of the Islamic population is below one percent, in one year the anti-Islamic sentiment reached 72%; and in Greece, although only 4,500 Jews live in a population of 10.5 million, anti-Semitic sentiment increases in three years by 18%; in the UK, based on beliefs that Islam is a serious threat to the Western civilization, anti-Islamic sentiment increases by 18%.

It is easy to understand that the position of the authorities, the propaganda and the media can influence the level of xenophobia in one or other historical context through their various constructions of images and discourse. But it should not be forgotten that among the causal or influence factors for the level of xenophobia the first fact is the perception[24] of the people about the facts of foreigners, immigrants, etc. And this perception is the natural fact of "fear," is the natural fact of xenophobia. The problem arises when a significant proportion of immigrants begin to reject assimilation as a form of integration in the countries that have received them. "This has been happening since the end of the 20th century, when the process of globalization combinated with the process of national and religious revival of the Islamic world led to the emergence of a broad stratum of immigrants not ready to accept European standards"[25]. In the last years, more and more Muslim immigrants have refused the integration in European countries, preferring self-isolation and the ghetto. According to a study (Bloomberg, September 2017), 22% of Muslims in Germany and France, 32% of those in the UK and 38% of those in Austria have no social contact with non-Muslims[26] and the number is rising. Moreover, some immigrants are trying to change the identity of Europeans to match

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[24] What admit also the authors of Report *Xenophobia*, *Radicalism*, *and Hate Crime in Europe*, Annual Report, 2018, p. 55.

[25] *Xenophobia*, *Radicalism*, *and Hate Crime in Europe*, Annual Report, 2018, p. 58.

[26] *Ibidem*, p. 59.

their traditions27. And these are not "social constructions", but "natural realities", they are natural facts which leading to the increase of xenophobia, the increase of hostilities and discrimination, as well as the increase of the influence of extremist groups.

We want to emphasize, to the end of these considerations, a recent attempt to treat the phenomenon of xenophobia on a more naturalistic basis, namely on an anthropological basis of family structures, as Emmanuel Todd28 does in the book Who Is Charlie? (2015). Concerned about the anthropological study of family structures, the author highlights the combination of values of freedom, equality, inequality and authority in family patterns from countries like France, Germany, England and Russia. From the historical past, an authoritative and inequality mentality between parents and children, between generations, between man and woman, has been inherited in family structures. In the modern period, over this legacy lay a liberal and egalitarian doctrinal superstructure. In recent years, the author believes, the combination of egalitarianism and multiculturalism has proved to be a failure. The situation of value combinations in family structures in the countries mentioned above can be highlighted in the table below:

The table 5

	Freedom	**Equality**	**Inequality**	**Authority**
France	+	+	-	-
Germany	-	-	+	+
England	+	-	+	-
Russia	-	+	-	+

These combinations can influence the phenomenon of xenophobia differently, but it is clear that a combination such as the French resists as long as immigrants accept integration, assimilation. But when multiculturalism fails, egalitarianism will also fail, making xenophobia a place. The German combination cannot accept multiculturalism from the start, and if it is forced by public policy, a predictable reaction from traditional family structures is precisely the rise of xenophobia. In the English combination, the value of freedom can encourage multiculturalism, but when immigrants claim equality with the native population, the

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[27] *Ibidem*, p. 61.
[28] Emmanuel Todd, *Who is Charlie? Xenophobia and the New Middle Class*, Polity Press, Malden/Cambridge, 2015 (The first version has published in French, *Qui est Charlie? Sociologie d'une crise religieuse*, Seuil, Paris, 2015).

local instinct of conservation will be triggered, facilitating the intensification of xenophobic feelings. In the traditional Russian combination, the equality in family structures is reduced to the parity between brothers, but in parent-child, masters-subject relationships dominate the value of authority. Here, any attempt by immigrants to be "equal" to the natives will be met with profound resistance, fueling xenophobia.

Under these circumstances, how can be the attitude of tolerance revitalized in Europe? How can xenophobia be reduced? Before imagining all kinds of programs and "constructions" in this respect, it is important to know more about the relationship natural reality, natural facts – constructs; respectively social constructions. As constructions leading to the growth of xenophobia can be developed, constructions can also be developed to influence the downward trend in xenophobia. But these constructions should not be confused with real states, with natural states. In this sense, we think we can help with Ian Hacking's book, The Social Construction of What? (1999). In order to establish an author's commitment to constructionism, Ian Hacking proposes to take into account three "blockage" points, in fact three criteria to measure this commitment[29]. These criteria are contingency, nominalism and stability of the explanation.

2.1 Contingency

The constructionists naturally defend the contingency thesis, because a construction can be replaced at any time with another, each construction being a convention. But in scientific knowledge it cannot be all contingency, on the contrary, some laws, equations, sizes, etc. are inevitable, are necessary. A typical follower of the thesis of contingency in the philosophy of science is Thomas Kuhn, for whom any revolution in science is contingent, has nothing inevitable. It is right, for the phases of "normal science," Kuhn admits that certain problems are inevitable.

We have to recognize that there can often be reciprocal exclusions between what is "real" (natural or social) and what is "built". For example, most scholars consider schizophrenia to be an illness, a natural and "real" state (genetic, biological or neurological disorder), but there are some who claim that this illness is socially "built". The same is true for xenophobia. As we have shown, xenophobia is a natural,

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[29] Ian Hacking, *Entre science et réalité. La costruction sociale de quoi*?, La Découverte, Paris, 2008.

"real" feeling for many researchers, but for others it is a "construct". But we must always emphasize, the "construct" refers to the idea of xenophobia, to the image of xenophobia, not to the natural fact. For example, an association of militant Muslims, such as Comité contre l'islamophobie en France, defines Islamic phobia much broader than current legislation, including in the sphere of Islamic phobia all criticisms of Islam30. Naturally, on the basis of such a "construction", the phenomenon of Islamic phobia seems statistically much more extensive.

Against contingency, it should be stressed that xenophobia is a natural phenomenon inevitable, which can easily be seen from the data presented on the reaction of European societies to the growth of the migration phenomenon in 2014-2017.

2.2 Nominalism

Constructionists are also supporters of a certain form of nominalism. For constructionists, the different classifications of scientific research are not determined by "real" situations, but are "built" conventionally. That is, the facts are not "real", but appear as the consequences of our manners to represent our world. In this way, for constructionists, xenophobia is just the result of speeches, of "constructs" about discrimination, racism or ethnicity, etc. In other words, our statements, our "constructed" images are those that become "facts", which is according to a certain species of nominalism, as Hacking says.

In this way things are overturned in their natural order. Instead of looking for the objective structure of the facts in reality, the constructionists offer us a conventional "construction". The constructionists forget that our statements, the images built do not become "facts", but these statements and images must be about the facts, they must correspond to the real facts. The feeling of fear for strangers is a natural "real" fact, not a derivation from a "built" speech, even if such speeches can also influence that feeling.

2.3 Stability

In general, scientists believe that science can progress because it has a certain internal stability, that different laws, equations and sizes are "stable" in time.

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[30] *Xenophobia, Radicalism, and Hate Crime in Europe*, Annual Report, 2018, p. 91.

On the contrary, the constructionists claim that if there is a certain stability of the scientific explanation, it is due to external factors to the scientific contents. Constructionists emphasize the role of social factors, interests and other factors to explain scientific stability. Again things are overturned by natural order. The natural order tells us that the stability of the scientific explanation can only be based on the "stability" of the real fact being researched, being internal to science itself.

If we can speak of a certain stability of the scientific explanation of xenophobia, this is due to the fact that the natural phenomenon of xenophobia itself has some "stability" in time, that it is present in all known historical epochs. Unfortunately, the constructionists, as we have hoped to have emerged quite clearly from the present lines, are not interested in the truth of the scientific statements, but in the images "constructed" by interpretative interests.

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