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**Searle's Theory of Social Reality and Some Social Reality<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract**

*In this paper, I attempt to show that Searle's theory of social reality is largely based on his observation of some essential features of democratic societies, and is not universally applicable as it claims to be. I argue that his notion of collective acceptance or agreement, which is fundamental to his general theory, does not explain why a dictatorial or totalitarian regime as a social reality is able to survive through a significant period of time and continuously create and maintain institutional facts which are supposed to have no basis of collective acceptance or agreement.*

**Key words**

social reality, collective intentionality, collective acceptance or agreement, democracy, John R. Searle

**1.**

Searle's idea of collective intentionality plays a crucial role in developing his theory of social reality. The difference between individual intentionality and collective intentionality is that individual intentionality is expressed in the form of "I intend ..." ("I" intentionality), whereas collective intentionality is expressed in the form of "we intend ..." ("we" intentionality). Searle's view is that "we" intentionality is individualistic in the sense that it is not reducible to "I" intentionality.<sup>2</sup> The view seems to be at odds with the common understanding about "we" that "we" cannot be treated as denoting an individual agent, which is reflected in the grammar of ordinary language: when used as a subject in a sentence, "we" as a plural pronoun admits only plural verbs, including "intend". Now to characterize "we" intentionality as individualistic may be deemed as a consequence of a grammatical error, that is, as treating the plural as singular in a real sense. The grammatical error became a target of Russell's criticism primarily for its metaphysical implication. Russell argues that to insist on the existence of plural objects as one (single) is reification, and that there is no single object as *Brown and Jones* – there are only *Brown and Jones*.<sup>3</sup> Thus "we intend ..." should be understood as "I intend ... + you intend ... + he intends ... + she intends ... + ...", given that "I", "you", "he", "she" and so on are members of the class denoted by the plural pronoun "we". This can be schematized as:

1

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that I examined with great care and that have lead to an improvement in the paper.

$$wx = (a + b + c + n)x = ax + bx + cx + nx$$

(w = “we”, a, b, c, and n stand for the members of the group, x for any act).

But this reductionist account of collective intentionality, according to Searle, does not help understand collective intentionality: to fully appreciate the meaning of collective intentionality, according to Searle, one has to recognize its singularity. Russell’s formula may be able to explain some particular cases where all the members of the group are doing the same thing, for example, drinking and reading. What is called “a group” here is basically arbitrary, for it lacks the minimal feature of structure, i.e., “collectivity” or “togetherness”. Searle’s example is two people discovering by accident that they are playing the same piece in a synchronized fashion.<sup>4</sup> The conception of individuals as basically discrete and independent may give rise to the “super-mind” realism in the sense that “super-mind” is the abstraction of individual minds.<sup>5</sup> Searle could argue, of course, that collective acts, such as collective intentionality, are not some common features shared by individuals, and therefore cannot be abstracted from the individuals. The dichotomy scheme of “particular vs. universal” or “substance vs. attribute” is entirely inadequate for understanding the real sense of “collective intentionality”. “Togetherness” or “collectivity” is not derivable from the plural form of individuals, which stands merely for an aggregate of individuals.

However, the reductionism Searle refers to is different from and more complex than the above one, for it has already taken into consideration the fact that intentionality as an internal act does not fit the model based on external acts (e.g., “playing”, “drinking”). Intentionality, as customarily understood, is only personal in much the same way a pain is personal. Unlike other predicates predicated of the subject “we”, such as “play” and “drink”, intentionality (e.g., “intend”, “believe”) is inside the person’s brain. As Searle puts it, “... because all intentionality exists in the heads of individual human beings, the form of that intentionality can make reference only to the individuals in whose heads it exists.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, “we intentions” is either a metaphysical illusion (“the Hegelian world spirit”), or to be better expressed as “I intend that you intend that I intend ...” Rather than “ax + bx + cx + ... + nx”, it should be symbolized as

$$ax \{bx[ax(\dots)]\}$$

(for the sake of simplicity, suppose the group has only two members).

The above formula expresses what Searle calls “mutual beliefs” which are arranged in “a potentially infinite hierarchy” indicated by the ellipsis. While this formulation of “we intentionality” eliminates the possibility of understanding “we” as “a super mind”, it says nothing about “we” or conveys no sense of collectivity and togetherness in assertions like “we collectively intend ...”.

The remedy then, according to Searle, is to understand collective intentionality as prior to singular intentionality. That is, singular intentionality is simply derived from collective intentionality, and not the other way around. This is, of course, not to deny the existence of singular intentionality. Singular intentionality is not unreal, and “I think that you think that I think ...” does express a type of real mental act. The mistake of the reductionist lies in the fact that she always starts with individuals as discrete entities, and then tries to establish a net of (collective) relations between them. But in order to capture the real sense of collectivity, Searle suggests, one has to start with the relations between individuals; it is the relations that make individuals the members of

a certain group. Humans as well as many species of animals (e.g., hyenas) are social beings, and talk of their individuality presupposes collectivity as the essential part of their nature.<sup>7</sup> Now Searle's account of collective intentionality does appear to be a proper target of Russell's criticism: treating *Brown and Jones* as one. But if language provides any clue at all, one should not neglect the grammatical singularity of expressions such as "a team" and "a party", etc. which are semantically equivalent to "the members of a team" and "the members of a party" respectively. We can say not only "we intend ...", "they intend ...", but also "this team intends ..." and "the party intends ..." While the switch from the plural to the singular may well suggest the formation of "a super-mind", nothing prevents it from being understood as an indication of a net of relations, an entity that is not another individual over and above *Brown and Jones*.

## 2

The account of collective intentionality is fundamental to Searle's theory of social reality, for it provides the basis for understanding all the other important concepts, especially "social facts" and "institutional facts". While Searle succeeds admirably in his non-reductionist account of collective intentionality, there are two problems, which, I shall argue, he does not take into consideration. First, it is unclear just how particular collective intentions are formed, or more specifically, whether or not individual intentions play any role in the formation of collective intentions. Second, it is unclear whether there could be pseudo-collective intentions, that is, individual intentions disguised as collective intentions, or intentions of the few disguised as intentions of the many.

Searle's view that individual intentionality is derived from collective intentionality concerns the intentionality of individuals who are members of a group with collective intentionality, as in the case of a violin player intending to play in a certain way as part of the orchestra's intention to perform a symphony in a particular style. But as Searle acknowledges, there are intentional facts that are purely individual or "singular" and hence are not derivative from collec-

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John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, New York: Free Press, 1995: 23–26.

3

Bertrand Russell, *The Principles of Mathematics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903; reprinted, London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1937: 57.

4

J. R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, 25.

5

Ibid.

6

Ibid.

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One can notice some commonality between Searle's idea of collective intentionality and Marx's account of human nature ("the totality of social relations"). Both maintain the

primacy of relation over individuals, in virtue of which, it is promised, one can avoid both the abstract speculation on the entities involved in the relations and the Hegelian "super-mind." More importantly, both agree on the derivative nature of individual intentionality. However, whereas Marx is only concerned with the derivation of individual intentionality from a particular collective intentionality, namely, class intentionality – all other kinds of collective intentionality are merely distorted class intentionality and thus reflect in one way or another class intentionality, Searle thinks that groups can be identified in various ways – there exist not only class intentions, but also intentions of religious communities, of nations, of armies, of game teams, etc., which may not be reducible to intentions of any single kind. Searle goes so far as to assert that collective intentionality can even be found at the biological level in cases such as hyenas hunting a lion. (Ibid, 122)

tive intentionality, such as the fact that I want a drink of water.<sup>8</sup> The individual intentionality which is said to be derived from collective intentionality is only the intentionality of the individual who has already participated in a certain collective activity and whose intentionality is in accordance with, though not always the same as, the collective intentionality. Searle gives no hint as to whether collective intentionality requires any individual intentionality as a prior condition for its creation. But it seems quite obvious that people have to be individually motivated to come together to do something collectively (e.g., performing a symphony). If so, what kind of intentionality it is in the first place that makes possible for people to do things that they collectively intend to do?

To be sure, the formation of a group requires the pre-existence of individuals who are not yet members of the group.<sup>9</sup> From this it follows that collectivity and togetherness presuppose separateness, and that collective intentionality presupposes the pre-existence of individual intentionality in the sense that there must be separate individual intentions to form collective intentionality. Now it is important to distinguish pre-collective individual intention from post-collective individual intention. At the first stage, there are separate individual intentions which have the same content (i.e., to form a group), but contain no sense of collectivity and togetherness, although the separate individuals can together be self-referred to as “we”. They are a collection without collectivity, and hence preserve all the features of separation between individuals. It is out of this “unreal” collection a real collection (collection with collectivity) grows. That is, before we get together to do something collectively, each of us must have the intention towards collectivity or togetherness, which is not derived from the collective intentionality formed later. Collective intentionality does not come into existence without the presence of individual intentionality in the first place. People do not form their collective intentionality by coercion or sheer chance. Each of them intends individually to form their collective intentionality. Curiously it is precisely this pre-collective and non-derivative intentionality that Searle does not seem to bother to address.

### 3

The notion of collective intentionality is used by Searle to explain all social facts, that is, not only non-institutional social facts (e.g., hyenas hunting a lion, two friends going for a walk), but also institutional facts (a special subclass of social facts, e.g., money). He claims that while the collective imposition of functions on objects (a manifestation of collective intentionality) is a crucial element in the creation of institutional facts, the performance of such imposition must be based on collective acceptance or agreement.<sup>10</sup> However Searle says nothing about the collective agreement or acceptance itself, which he simply takes as the pre-condition for the creation of institutional facts. Now the question is whether collective acceptance or agreement is a matter of collective intentionality or just a precondition of collective intentionality, or whether collective acceptance or agreement is an acceptance or agreement of a real collection. It is certainly true that collective acceptance or agreement can be expressed in terms of singularity, in cases such as “the party accepts ...” or “the board agrees on ...”. We may follow Searle to treat this kind of collective acceptance or agreement as collective intentionality. Now such collective acceptance or agreement itself can be an institutional fact, rather than a pre-condition of the creation of institutional facts, if its performance fits the

criterion of “X counts as Y in C”. For example, the debate on whether “50 Percent Plus One” can count as a collective acceptance of Quebec’s independence is a matter of creating a certain institutional fact, which is collective acceptance or agreement. In order to create an institutional fact such as Quebec’s independence, there has to be an acceptance or agreement on passing a legislation regarding “50 Percent Plus One”, whose success or failure is to be determined by the result of the debate. Of course, the debate on the legislation can also be an institutional fact, as far as it is set up under certain institutional rules. One can always trace institutional facts back to mere social facts, for example, trace signing a peace agreement, an institutionalized collective agreement, to some informal acceptance of the proposal of signing such an agreement, which is clearly un-institutionalized. Nevertheless, an acceptance or agreement which is only a manifestation of collective intentionality, whether at the un-institutional level or at the institutional level, is still not acceptance or agreement in the real sense, for any acceptance or agreement must presuppose the independence of individuals who intend to make the agreement and the agreement must be made by separate individuals, and not by the group they form.

The above argument for an initial individual intentionality as the pre-condition of the formation of collective intentionality can be extended to support the thesis that individual intentionality is also a persistent and continuing force underlying collective intentionality. The birth of collective intentionality is not followed by the death of non-derivative individual intentionality. The capacity of retrieving non-derivative individual intentionality must be ensured so that collective intentionality will not become fundamentally inconsistent with it. Searle points out, rightly I think, that institutions survive on acceptance.<sup>11</sup> That is, not only the creation of institutional facts, but also their maintenance, relies on acceptance or agreement by the members of a given society. If the capacity of retrieving non-derivative individual intentionality is eliminated or significantly weakened, collective intentionality will lose its real sense of collectivity and togetherness.

#### 4

It is not difficult to see that the concept of collective intentionality (along with all the related concepts such as social facts and institutional facts) contains a minimal sense of democracy. By a minimal sense of democracy, I mean the sense of equality in access to power or decision making and freedom from coercion. Not surprisingly, almost all the examples Searle gives are what may be called democratic activities (e.g., passing legislation, violinists playing in an orchestra<sup>12</sup>), the

8  
Ibid. In this regard, Searle diverges from Marx. Marx thought that individual intentionality (individual consciousness) as a reflection of the reality is mediated by particular ideologies, which are a systematic manifestation of collective intentionality (collective consciousness). It may be said that for Marx there is no real individual intentionality.

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There is no denying, however, that individuals, being socially defined, always belong to some group or groups.

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J. R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, 39.

11  
Ibid, 118.

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The case of playing a part in an orchestra is a bit complex. It may appear that the violinist who plays under the baton of the conductor has only the role of obeying the decision of the conductor with regard to how the music is performed. It is in this sense that playing



most cited of which is a football game, a perfect illustration of the principle of fair play, a principle that is fundamentally incompatible with the nature of dictatorial and totalitarian regimes, and can only be realized in democratic societies. Searle seems to assume that the creation and maintenance of social facts and especially institutional facts are always such games of fair play. Of course he does not deny the existence of games of “unfair play”, such as the politics in the former Soviet Union and other totalitarian societies, which, however, he tries to explain away by appeal to the existence of acceptance or agreement at some level. He criticizes the view that in the end it all depends on who has the most armed might, and that brute facts will always prevail over institutional facts:

“The guns are ineffectual except to those who are prepared to use them in cooperation with others and in structures, however, informal, with recognized lines of authority and command. And all of that requires collective intentionality and institutional facts.”<sup>13</sup>

This is partially true, as for many groups and large communities there is no need for democratic institutions in the strict sense to ensure the presence of collective acceptance or agreement. A case in point is the type of societies where the governments enjoy a wide support of the masses, but their governing power is nevertheless not institutionally derived from the latter. Individuals or a sub-group within a group as the authority may well represent the collective intentionality of the group, such that the acceptance or agreement required for creating and maintaining social facts are clearly present. There was no short of public support or lack of acceptance or agreement of the masses for the rule of Nazism or Communism at least at their early stages.<sup>14</sup>

Now the question is not whether a dictatorship or a totalitarian regime necessarily lacks any democratic element understood as public support or the acceptance or agreement of its members throughout its history. It is rather the absence of such support or acceptance or agreement which is able to last for a significant period of time only in a dictatorship or a totalitarian regime that presents a major difficulty for Searle's theory of social reality. There are overwhelming cases in which the alleged collective intentionality is really disguised intentionality of the dictators, and collective acceptance or agreement is consistently treated as irrelevant to creating and maintaining institutional facts and social facts in general. In other words, what threatens the universal applicability of Searle's is not instances of the so-called “tyranny of the majority”, but rather those of “the tyranny of the minority”, the latter of which often results from the former. Searle claims that “[t]he secret of understanding the continued existence of institutional facts is simply that the individuals directly involved and a sufficient number of members of the relevant community must continue to recognize and accept the existence of such facts.”<sup>15</sup> This, I submit, is only a description of a democracy, not of one with merely some democratic element, and therefore does not apply to a dictatorial and totalitarian society where during significant periods in its history all the institutional facts can continue to exist without collective acceptance or agreement by a sufficient number of its members.

A response to this challenge, from Searle's point of view, is to argue that even when the overall collective acceptance or agreement is absent in a dictatorial or totalitarian society, there still exists collective acceptance or agreement at a certain level, that is, at the level of those in power. But this seems contradictory to Searle's view that collective acceptance or agreement requires a sufficient number of members of the relevant community. The collective acceptance or agreement by the members of the ruling party in a totalitarian

society or the dictator's loyal followers can hardly substitute the collective acceptance or agreement of the society as a whole, for they constitute only a very small fraction of the population of the given society, which, not the members of the ruling party or the dictator's loyal followers, is the relevant community. In other words, even if there always exist collective acceptance or agreement in such societies, it does not follow that the existence of any collective acceptance or agreement, even on Searle's account, is sufficient for the creation and maintenance of institutional facts. Susan Babbitt points out, "it would seem that institutional facts are explained by the agreement of some, and how the agreement of some can constitute institutions and the agreement of others does not is a question not answered or addressed."<sup>16</sup> Now the members of the ruling party or the dictator's loyal followers are not just some members of the society they rule, but a small fraction of the total population. It seems that Searle's theory can only explain the creation and maintenance of institutional facts within the ruling party or within the group of the dictator and his/her followers, for instance, the adoption or amendment of the Constitution of the Communist Party of China, and can hardly explain, with constancy, the creation and maintenance of institutional facts within a society the majority of whose members are nevertheless not part of the ruling party or the group of the dictator and his/her followers which rules them, as in cases such as the adoption or amendment of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China.

The institutional facts in dictatorial and totalitarian societies, e.g., Nazi Germany, Mussolini's Italy, the former Soviet Union, the former Eastern European countries, the People's Republic of China, and North Korea were or are created and maintained directly and indirectly by their armed police and military forces, and not by collective acceptance or agreement of the general population. Of course, collective acceptance or agreement can be forced upon as it was or still is often the case in these countries, and forced acceptance or agreement may retain all the superficial features of genuine acceptance or agreement, which were often put on display. Marching through Red Square or Tiananmen Square was craftily designed to show the "solidarity" of the masses and their collective acceptance or agreement. Searle criticizes the Communist "truth" that "power grows out of the barrel of a gun" as one of the great illusions of the era.<sup>17</sup> He is certainly right in insisting that power grows out of organization, i.e., systematic arrangements of status-functions, as "... in such organizations

in an orchestra is perhaps not as democratic as, say, playing in a chamber ensemble, which involves ostensibly negotiations, compromises and roughly equal distribution of decision making between the members. However a more reasonable consideration is that the difference between playing in an orchestra and playing in a chamber ensemble is akin to one between representative democracy and direct democracy, as the conductor, who directs for all his/her qualifications, forms a relation with the members based on their acceptance or agreement, and who nevertheless does not necessarily make every decision according to the wishes of the members.

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J. R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, 117.

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Hitler's ascension to the post of Weimar chancellor, which ultimately lead to the Nazi rule, was institutionally derived from public acceptance or agreement, namely through election, whereas its transformation into the Third Reich was not, although it did enjoy a wide support from the German people.

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J. R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, 117.

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*The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 106, No. 4, 609.

17

J. R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, 117.

the unfortunate person with a gun is likely to be among the least powerful and the most exposed to danger. The real power resides with the person who sits at a desk and makes noises through his or her mouth and marks on paper.”<sup>18</sup> While there is probably collective acceptance or agreement in the first place to create such a power relationship between the person who sits at the desk and those who carry guns, it is hard to see that the power relationship between the military force and the masses under control is established by the same type of acceptance and agreement. In a dictatorial or totalitarian society, numerous institutional facts and social facts in general (from money to loyalty) are created or maintained by the authority in the absence of (genuine) collective acceptance or agreement of the society.

If we still wish to apply Searle's ontology to the social reality of a dictatorial or totalitarian society, we must re-define either “collective acceptance or agreement” or “institutional facts.” We may regard forced collective acceptance or agreement as genuine, as the authority of a dictatorial or totalitarian society actually does. But forced acceptance and agreement is clearly not the acceptance and agreement Searle talks about. Alternatively, we may abandon the claim that institutional facts are necessarily created and maintained by (genuine) collective acceptance or agreement. The latter move is equally undesirable from Searle's point of view, for it amounts to removing the basis of his theory of social reality. For Searle, the importance of collective acceptance or agreement could never be overemphasized. He writes:

“Because the whole system works only by collective acceptance, it would seem *a priori* that there is not much we could do with it, and it all looks very fragile, as if the whole system might just collapse at any time.”<sup>19</sup>

This may explain the lost control of the L.A. police in the 1992's riot and the ultimate collapse of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, there is still a difference between the impotence of the L.A. police in the 1992's riot and the success of the military forces in the cracking down of the Prague demonstration in 1968 and in the Tiananmen massacre in 1989. Searle's theory does not seem to be able to answer the question: Why is a system that is not accepted able to survive through a significant period of time and continuously create and maintain institutional facts which are supposed to have no basis of collective acceptance or agreement?

### Xiaoqiang Han

### Searlova teorija socijalne stvarnosti i neke socijalne stvarnosti

#### **Sažetak**

*U ovom članku pokušavam pokazati da je Searlova teorija socijalne stvarnosti uglavnom temeljena na njegovom opažanju nekih bitnih značajki demokratskih društava te da nije univerzalno primjenjiva kao što tvrdi. Tvrdim da njegov pojam kolektivnog pristanka ili dogovora, kao temeljni pojam njegove teorije, ne objašnjava zašto diktatorski ili totalitarni režim kao socijalna stvarnost uspijeva preživjeti značajno dugo i kontinuirano stvarati i održavati institucionalne činjenice koje ne bi trebale imati nikakvog temelja u kolektivnom pristanku ili dogovoru.*

#### **Ključne riječi**

socijalna stvarnost, kolektivna intencionalnost, kolektivni pristanak ili dogovor, demokracija, John R. Searle

Xiaoqiang Han

Searles Theorie der sozialen Wirklichkeit und irgendeiner  
sozialen Wirklichkeit

**Zusammenfassung**

*In diesem Artikel versuche ich zu beleuchten, Searles Theorie der sozialen Wirklichkeit gründe hauptsächlich auf dessen Wahrnehmung etlicher wesentlicher Eigenschaften demokratischer Gesellschaften, und sei nicht – wie er behauptet – universell verwendungsfähig. Ich halte daran fest, sein Begriff der kollektiven Akzeptanz bzw. Übereinkunft – als Grundterminus seiner Theorie – erläutere nicht, weswegen das diktatorische oder totalitäre Regime als soziale Wirklichkeit maßgeblich lange zu bestehen und institutionelle Fakten kontinuierlich zu schaffen bzw. zu erhalten vermöge, die in einer gemeinsamen Akzeptanz bzw. Übereinkunft keinerlei Fundament finden sollten.*

**Schlüsselwörter**

soziale Wirklichkeit, kollektive Intentionalität, kollektive Akzeptanz oder Übereinkunft, Demokratie, John R. Searle

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La théorie de la réalité sociale de Searle et une autre réalité sociale

**Résumé**

*Dans le présent article, j'essaie de montrer que la théorie de la réalité sociale de Searle est fondée principalement sur sa perception de certaines caractéristiques essentielles des sociétés démocratiques et qu'elle n'est pas applicable de façon aussi universelle qu'il l'affirme. Je soutiens que son concept de consentement ou d'accord collectif, élément fondamental de sa théorie, n'explique pas pourquoi le régime dictatorial ou totalitaire en tant qu'une réalité sociale parvient à survivre pendant une période aussi considérable ni comment il parvient à produire et à maintenir de façon prolongée et continue des faits institutionnels qui ne devraient avoir aucun fondement dans un consentement ou un accord collectif.*

**Mots-clés**

réalité sociale, intentionnalité collective, consentement ou accord collectif, démocratie, John R. Searle