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Anchored Constructivism: Toward a Theory of What Societies Construct, and What They Cannot

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ABSTRACT

For decades, contemporary sociology has examined how social realities are constructed, yet indigenous theory-building must address a more foundational prior question: upon what ground and limits is the social order built? While social constructionism explains institutional making without accounting for limits, and critical realism posits limits without detailing the process of making, this article proposes a tripartite model termed "Anchored Constructivism," drawing inspiration from Mohammad Hossein Tabatabai's theory of conventional perceptions (*I'tibariyyat*). The model comprises three core components: first, the Anchor, representing the non-constructed, real ground of human fitrah, authentic needs, and ontological regularities; second, the Construct, encompassing variable norms, institutions, and legal categories; and third, Mediation, designating processes such as ijtihad and public interest reasoning that keep constructs answerable to the anchor. This framework is structured around four falsifiable propositions: bounded construction rooted in real needs, institutional "drift" (reification in the absence of mediation), the correlation between mediation speed and societal resilience during shocks, and cross-cultural applicability. The special axis of "war and social order" is examined as a rigorous test case, wherein formal institutions collapse and only constructs addressing persistent human needs are regenerated. Ultimately, this model is offered not as a definitive conclusion, but as a research agenda and a critical invitation to operationalize the anchor and measure institutional drift within social sciences.

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Why now: the question beneath the question

For four decades, sociology in Iran has asked how societies construct their own realities. For a journal devoted to the social theories of Muslim thinkers, that question arrives with a prior one: what is there to be constructed *upon*? Indigenous theory-building has so far been defined mostly by what it opposes. It is critical of imported Western frameworks, wary of secular assumptions, and committed to rereading the intellectual tradition. These are necessary moves, but they are not yet a theory. A critique tells us what a framework misses; a theory must say what happens, to whom, and under which conditions.

Our tradition already holds a candidate for such a theory, and that candidate addresses what is arguably the most contested issue in contemporary social ontology: the relationship between what is *constructed* and what is *given*. Social constructionism and its descendants explain brilliantly how institutions, roles and identities are made. They are less able to say whether any limits bind the making, and what follows when the made drifts far from what human beings need. The Muslim philosophical tradition, above all in the work of Mohammad Hossein Tabatabai, was organised around precisely that limit.

The topic is timely for three reasons. First, the global turn towards sociologies "beyond the canon" has opened space for non-Western conceptual resources, but the field is still better at recovering thinkers than at turning them into testable propositions (Alatas & Sinha, 2017; Connell, 2007). Second, the critique of secular-modern categories has matured (Asad, 2003; Hallaq, 2018), and now needs constructive counterparts. Third, our new situation, war and social order, forces the question in its sharpest form: when institutions collapse, which of them were arbitrary conventions, and which answered something that does not go away?

A scoping map of the field

This is an interpretive mapping, not a systematic review: it makes no claim to exhaustive search or counted corpora. Reading across the relevant literatures, four clusters emerge, and each leaves the same gap.

Table 1. Mapping the Theoretical Landscape: Contributions and Open Gaps Across Literatures

Cluster	Representative works	What it contributes	What it leaves open
Social constructionism and social ontology	Berger & Luckmann (1966); Searle (1995)	Institutions as products of collective acceptance and shared language	No account of limits: nothing in principle prevents any construction
Critical realism	Bhaskar (1975)	A stratified reality that exists independently of our descriptions	Weak on how normative and institutional facts are made and revised
Decolonial and Southern theory	Connell (2007); Bhambra (2014); Alatas & Sinha (2017)	Critique of the canon; recovery of non-Western sources	Recovery outpaces model-building; few propositions to test
Islamic social thought and critique of the secular	Alatas (2014) on Ibn Khaldun; Asad (2003); Hallaq (2018)	Alternative genealogies; critique of secular-modern categories	Strong on diagnosis, thin on a general, comparative theory

Two observations follow. The first two clusters are close to a synthesis but have not been joined: constructionism explains *making* without *limits*, and realism explains *limits* without *making*. The last two clusters are rich in critique and recovery, yet seldom produce a model whose claims could fail. A theory that sits at the first pair's junction, and is drawn from the tradition the last pair recovers, would answer a gap in both literatures at once.

The model: Anchored Constructivism

Tabataba'i's theory of constructed perceptions (*i'tibariyyat*) offers the raw material. In *Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism* (Tabataba'i, 1980 vol. 2, essay 6), he argues that human beings, driven by real needs, create conventional concepts such as ownership, authority, rank and obligation. These are not discovered but made, by an act he calls *istikhdam*, the employment of real powers and needs for practical ends. Yet they are not made from nothing: each construct is tied by necessity to a real purpose. He also warns of the characteristic failure, namely that a construct, once established, is mistaken for a reality in its own right and pursued as an end.

Stated as a sociological model, this becomes a triad.

1. **Anchor.** The real, non-constructed ground: human *fitrah* and needs, natural and causal regularities (*takwini* reality), and the moral order held to rest on them.
2. **Construct.** Norms, roles, institutions, legal categories and identities that human beings make, differently across societies.
3. **Mediation.** The processes that keep constructs answerable to the anchor: interpretive effort (*ijtihad*), the recognition of regularities in social life (*sunan*), public-interest reasoning (*maslahah*), and the institutions that carry them.

The model is **constructivist**, because it grants that institutions are made and varied. It is **anchored**, because it denies that the making is unconstrained. Compared with Berger and Luckmann, it adds a limit; compared with Searle, it adds a criterion for judging a construct's soundness; compared with Bhaskar, it adds an account of how normative constructs are made and revised, which critical realism leaves underdeveloped.

Propositions and a test case: war and social order

A model earns its place only if it can be wrong. Four propositions make it testable.

1. **Bounded construction.** Durable constructs trace to a recoverable real need; constructs with no such trace are fragile and short-lived.
2. **Drift.** The longer a construct operates without mediation, the wider the gap between its official purpose and its actual function, and the more it is defended as an end in itself (Tabatabai's reification).
3. **Mediation speed.** Societies whose interpretive institutions revise constructs faster than conditions change show less drift and recover more quickly from shocks.
4. **Comparative transfer.** The pattern should hold across Muslim and non-Muslim societies; if it appears only in one, the model is a cultural description, not a theory.

War and social order is a demanding test. War strips institutions down to what is essential, so it shows which constructs a society keeps improvising (food distribution, mutual protection, dispute

settlement, burial, trust networks) and which it abandons. The model predicts that the first group, which answers persistent needs, re-emerges in new forms, while the second, tied mainly to conventions of status and procedure, does not. Wartime and post-war societies that regenerate order through local mediators, religious scholars or customary arbitration would be cases of mediation working; states whose institutions are defended as ends while their function lapses would be cases of drift. Each prediction can be checked against historical and contemporary cases, with the research design stated in advance, selecting cases without regard to the outcome, and tracing the mechanism rather than only the correlation.

A research agenda, and an invitation

The model raises questions that no single article can settle, which is why it is offered here as an agenda and not a conclusion.

- **Operationalising the anchor.** How can *fitrah*, need or *takwini* regularity be specified so that a claim about them can be tested and not merely asserted? Without an answer, the model risks circularity.
- **Measuring drift.** What indicators separate a construct that has lost its function from one that has merely changed its form?
- **Who mediates?** Mediation has historically belonged to scholars, jurists and customary authorities. How do modern states, markets and digital platforms alter it?
- **Comparison.** Does the pattern hold alongside accounts of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt, 2000), or does it dissolve once institutional context is controlled?
- **Internal pluralism.** Muslim thinkers differ on what the anchor includes. The model should be able to represent that disagreement, not erase it.

We invite critique. Indigenous theory-building will not advance by deference to either the tradition or its Western interlocutors, but by proposing claims specific enough to be refuted. If this model fails, we would like to know where

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