

# The Terrorism Phenomenon in Peter L. Berger's Social Construction of Reality

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**Abstract:** Peter Ludwig Berger is a well-known American sociologist with expertise in the sociology of religion. He has extensive sociological knowledge, and his thoughts have been widely acknowledged in Indonesia. Berger sees the imperfection in human beings as “unfinished.” According to him, humans are required to be able to manage their lives and must always construct their social world. That structuring mechanism ensures that humans can survive within their social construction. This assumption is the primary basis for Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in building their grand theory, *The Social Construction of Reality*. This theory consists of three main mechanisms: externalization, objectivation, and internalization. The central assumption of the social construction of reality theory is that humans create reality, and then what we find (reality) in this world is the result of human construction. The term terrorism has been more often heard since the 11 September attacks in 2001 in the United States. The act of terrorism is part of violence, which is easy to find, like in newspapers and television. Terror seems to be a new category to explain a tense event, including when someone wants to give up their life to become a suicide bomber. Many things happen in this life that are created due to social construction. The theory of social construction of reality by Peter L. Berger can help us understand and answer our questions about the social reality of terrorism. Terrorism is a social construct and the things behind the situation.

**Keywords:** construction of social reality, terrorism, social epistemology, Peter L. Berger

## I. Introduction

Have we ever questioned an unavoidable social reality, for example, when we questioned family, beauty, or gender? Perhaps rarely, in fact, do we consider it to be taken for granted, an everyday reality. Another question is why something may be accepted in one place but rejected in another. It means we are asking about a social reality. We can find the answer from a social science perspective using the theory of social construction of reality. This theory was put forward by a very popular American sociologist from Austria named Peter L. Berger. His thoughts are widely known in Indonesia. This sociologist was born in Vienna, Austria, in 1929. Berger completed his education in the United States after moving from Vienna in the post-second world war period. In the United States, he began pursuing a career as an academic, completing his studies at the New School for Social Research, New York (USA) in 1952. Throughout his life, he has worked at several institutions and universities. His work at various institutions began as a young professor at the University of North Carolina in 1958. The second period of his career started when Berger left his duties as professor of Social Ethics at Hartford Seminary and was appointed as professor of sociology at the New School for Social Research, New York, a phenomenological center in the United States (Berger, 1990: xii). Since 1981, Berger has served as a professor of theology and social studies at Boston University; these two fields became the basis for Peter L. Berger's thinking in his theory, namely ‘*The Social Construction of Reality: a Treatise in Sociology of Knowledge.*’

According to Berger, a social reality can be accepted in one society but not by another. The answer is that this social reality is constructed by society. So, of course, some accept and some reject. Then, how does the process of social construction occur, namely when someone refers to a specific social reality according to the meaning of the abilities that exist in him, such as a cell phone? Why does he call this object a cell phone? Because in his mind, there is a stock of knowledge. A stock of knowledge that he may have obtained from somewhere or someone around him, then when he sees this reality, he will call it according to the stock of knowledge in his head or memory. Reality is formed due to a habituation process, namely when someone states that reality is based on their existing habits. Thanks to this accumulation, a social stock of knowledge is formed, which is transferred from generation to generation and is available in individual lives for everyday life (Berger, 1990: 56).

Berger states three stages of the social construction process: externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Externalization, namely, when a person (individual) sees social reality, he will understand it according to his subjective understanding. This subjective understanding will be influenced by the stock of knowledge or reserves of expertise in that person's head so that he can interpret reality according to the habits in his society. If earlier, for example, a cell phone, British or American people, even any country that uses English to communicate, would call it that, but here we are used to calling it a cell phone, as well as Japanese people calling it '*keitai denwa*' because of the stock of knowledge that exists in each person's head. Everyone is different; the designation will be based on the habits where they live and live. These objects also have their reality. So, the existence of an object does not depend on the reality that an individual has constructed.

Likewise, with others, they will understand and interpret the same reality with their respective subjective understandings. So, reality will be the same, and objects will be the same, but they will be referred to in different terms. It is called subjective meaning, carried out by individuals they meet in a society. Then, they create a shared meaning, which is called collective meaning. This collective meaning or shared meaning will later become a language. Language, defined here as a system of sound signs, is human society's most critical sign system (Berger, 1990: 50).

The second stage is objectivation, namely, when the individual understands social reality, that social reality will immediately be separated from the individual. After being outside the individual, it will become a social reality. After that, it will change to have other elements, such as coercive power, or it can also influence meaning-making. Objectivation is a reality that exists outside the individual, but the individual also produces objectivation to become a reality of its own. Individuals will learn or interpret objectivation that exists outside in a way or process that Berger calls the internalization process.

The third stage is obtained through socialization, so social reality construction has three stages: externalization, objectivation, and internalization. In this way, we can understand why society can accept or reject certain social realities. So, what about acts of terror? Are they a construction of social reality? What is behind the phenomenon of terrorism?

## **II. Methods**

The research method used by the author is a descriptive research method with a qualitative type. For Husserl, a description is one of the essential elements of finding eidos in a particular phenomenon (Zubair & Bakker, 1990: 54). This type of qualitative research analyzes a social phenomenon (terrorism) and briefly examines the sociological problems involved in violent events called terror. This research was also prepared using a literary study method through a study of several literature sources, including scientific journals, books and documents, and other supporting and relevant information. The author focuses this research on studies related to sociology and the realm of philosophy, namely social epistemology. Therefore, the research will only explain the phenomenon of terrorism in terms of Peter L Berger's construction of social reality.

## **III. Discussion**

### **Knowledge, Reality, and Social Phenomena**

Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann wrote this Social Construction Theory, but it is often referred to by scientists related to this theory as Peter L. Berger. It is the earliest theory among sociological scientists who tried to get out of the challenging debate between the traditions of positivism and humanism. Positivism is also said to be the forerunner of sociological knowledge as stated by F. Budi Hardiman in one of his books that facts are understood as “phenomena that can be observed,” so in fact, positivism is closely related to empiricism (Hardiman, 2019: 198). Theories: Construction theory has influenced many other theories; apart from that, structuralism strongly supports the tradition of humanism in contemporary times. Social Construction Theory has two analytical focuses: knowledge, knowledge, and social reality. At the beginning of his book on social construction, Berger explains that knowledge and reality are fundamental elements in various individuals’ daily actions. So, what is called ‘reality’ does not have to stop at the concept of reality as an individual reality but rather a reality that is part of a socio-cultural group's consciousness, knowledge, and beliefs (Ngangi, 2011: 3).

In social construction, reality and knowledge will always be present in everyday life. So, we need to understand what knowledge and social reality mean. Knowledge is one of the approaches used by Berger and Luckmann to reject this by offering a new perspective, seeing how a system can grow in different societies. If Karl Marx considered materialism the basis of all life, Berger argued that knowledge is how all societal actions are created and will continue to develop. Knowledge from a social construction perspective refers to phenomenology. Phenomenology is observing, understanding, interpreting, and interpreting something as a philosophical stance or school (Abidin, 2018: 169). Knowledge is a stream of experiences.

Every individual experiences various experiences in their daily lives, while life creates multiple human experiences, such as when we walk, see something, and feel something that may be scary, for example, witnessing violence or terror. Many experiences have been created in everyday life, which are then collected into knowledge. Individuals will use this knowledge as a reference for carrying out various daily actions. Knowledge from the stream of experiences will continue to be processed in historical phases from time to time in everyday life. Then, these experiences will be selected, theorized, or scientificized and filtered by individuals to become a stock of knowledge or reserves of knowledge. Knowledge rooted in an individual will develop into an identity, ideology, and others. Social reality in the social construction approach is reality and must be understood as a mature concept. So, social reality is all events created or experienced by individuals that cannot be denied by imagination or rejected by wishful thinking and cannot even be rejected by desires. Reality is events that cannot be denied. These events are conceptually often known as social phenomena, where an event involving various forms of action will create consequences for the individuals around them and the physical environment. Social reality is related to all actions that are designed and, of course, will have an impact and have consequences on other individuals and the physical environment, such as the actions of choosing a life partner, getting married, stealing, killing, or even committing acts of terror are phenomena. Knowledge is a stream of experiences that has been abstracted and becomes a stock of knowledge. It is precisely this “knowledge” that is the network of meaning without which no society can survive (Berger, 1990: 21). Thus, the relationship between knowledge and reality are two elements that exist in the daily life of every individual in society and the relationship between the two is reciprocal, or in Berger’s language it is called dialectic.

Berger and Luckmann see that everyone is bound by historical phases and social context, meaning that individuals go through a historical process of living from time to time, being born and growing up as a historical process. Individuals also live in a society that already has a system of knowledge that is objectively recognized in that society. Here, we can see how Berger and Luckmann tried to bridge the approaches between humanism and positivism.

### **Acts Of Terror and Violence in The Name of Religion**

The 1999 International Convention for the Suppression of Financing Terrorism defines *terrorism* as an act intended to cause death or serious physical injury among civilians or parties who are not taking part in an armed conflict situation (Ashari, 2020: 458). Terror is a form of violence; terrorism can be said to be a different phenomenon, even though it is related to ideology. Because, after all, ideology has motivated acts of terror with various targets. Since the events of September 11, 2001, better known as 9/11, there have been many incidents of

violence carried out by soldiers under the banner of religion; even before that, things that were against Islam often occurred. That was the statement from a television channel in America that did not hesitate to mention one religion, Islam. This statement, of course, contains an element of deliberate intention to arouse the anger of the people of the United States and the West, not only towards the perpetrators of terror who happen to be Muslim but also directly accusing Islam as a religion that advocates violence and terror (Shihab, 2004: 2). However, the violence they carry out is different, in terms of structure or method of carrying it out and even organizing violence and terror. In this case, the author will not highlight ideology and terror from a psychological aspect but will briefly provide an analysis of the sociological problem, namely humanity, which is involved in violent events called terror. In this article, the author tries to understand the panorama of violence in the name of God and even in the name of religion. The author's primary focus is evident, namely, only asking questions about terrorism from the perspective of social construction theory. However, the author also presents a few thoughts that might help us to approach this phenomenon. Despite this complex phenomenon, violence is something factual, and if it is said to be "in the name of religion," there is a question of legitimacy. The truth is that there is no naked violence; violence will always contain a dimension or contain an aspect of legitimacy. Of course, we are required to be able to distinguish between legitimate violence and what is not. It gives an understanding that there is a legitimate problem with violence. First, it must be acknowledged that acts of terror are an activity that does not recognize religious, racial, national, and geographical boundaries (Shihab, 2004: 5). If we pay attention to terror in the name of religion, at first glance, it can be assumed that it is derived from the teaching or theology (doctrine). The author will also not discuss this in detail because he is not an expert on "jihad theology," but acts of terror are related to a value system or ideology. In this case, perhaps only those experts in this field can explain in detail why such a value system can motivate violence. How can an ideology or value system make a person (individual) join a radical group and commit violence in the name of religion?

It is a process known as a phenomenon; namely, when they join a group without realizing it, it becomes a complicated problem. Alwi Shihab, a Muslim scholar who also served as the 14th Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, also provides a review of the 911 attacks in his book. The collapse of the symbol of economic supremacy, the World Trade Center (WTC), and military supremacy, the Pentagon Building, was a painful and embarrassing slap (Shihab, 2004: 6). This is because the United States, the superpower, has not escaped terror attacks. Going back a long way, if after the Cold War, there was an ideological vacuum, then since the 911 attacks, there has been a terror event in a new dimension, which has made many thinkers feel like they must create a new category. It is no longer the category of war or conflict. However, there must be a new category to explain events like this and also the events that follow, including the event of someone willing to give up their life to become a suicide bomber. So many terror groups emerged afterward, including Al-Qaeda. The phenomenon of terrorism became a mainstream issue after the September 11, 2001, attack on the WTC building by the Al-Qaeda group, which then gave rise to shared norms in the international world in interpreting terrorism (Muhammad, Surwandono, Warsito, Kusuma, 2019: 336).

If we pay attention, violence is everywhere in newspapers and television, and now people can even find it on social media. When we talk about violence in the name of God, is not that something new, considering that there have been crusades and various conflicts involving religions that also sought justification through religious values? Thus, violence in the name of religion is not unique to today, so this is also a matter of philosophy, not just sociology or psychology. Then another question arises: Why humans are willing to die by becoming suicide bombers is metaphysically related. Religious beliefs generally drive these extremist perpetrators of violence, and what they do is in line with God's commands, as stated in the texts of the holy books (Shihab, 2019: 53). Usually, those identified (the perpetrators) are excellent and pious citizens. Then he assembled a bomb to become a means which was then detonated along with his body, whether this part of a program so that hundreds of people were killed, or was it a kind of global communication through action, or was there a spiritual goal, namely entering heaven? The media always informs that the perpetrators are not recognized by their surroundings, whether that is just a strategy.

On the other hand, mass media also has a vital role in the social construction of reality. As a means of conveying information to the broader community, mass media can shape social reality (Hadiwijaya, 2023: 78).

For some, this action may be considered unreasonable or insane. Why do pious people devoted to their religion carry out these actions? More precisely, Habermas calls it an abnormal text, namely in false consciousness, so that only outsiders can see that they have misunderstood each other (Hardiman, 2015: 220).

Various comments came from the public, most of which stated that religion could not produce such behavior, but religion could produce such behavior if internalized incorrectly. Alwi Shihab also further said that behind the 911 attack phenomenon, two factors were considered as triggers, namely external factors where there was an imbalance in attitudes towards Islam and internal factors, namely the existence of rigid textual interpretations of the sources of Islamic teachings and the implications in the form of thoughts that adherents' other religions are considered as something that threatens their existence (Shihab, 2004: 14). Because not all perpetrators use religious ideology as an instrumental reason to carry out acts of terror, but instead they are willing to die. There is no explanation other than that they truly live their religion.

Phenomenologically, it makes sense that he prayed, fasted, prayed, and thought about God when he detonated the bomb. Behavioral attitudes based on fundamentalism, sectarianism, and radicalism crystallize into acts of terrorism (Subagyo: 10). Then the question is what causes a human being who an individual is to have the freedom to choose, be devoted and then commit violence as an expression of his devotion.

Berger sees religion as a social phenomenon and a very comprehensive thing because, according to him, humans are born in an unfinished state. It is a basic assumption. Humans do not have a survival mechanism when born; this differs from other natural creatures (Menshaw, 2022). Animals are born with a complete mechanism, namely a survival mechanism. Thus, humans are living creatures that need to build their world. Apart from that, in Berger's thinking, religions that enable the existence of social extension will continue to survive, and the existence of survival will last for a long time so that the social world is born or transformed from generation to generation. Humans need religious legitimacy, as Berger calls the Universe. Here, religion is a symbol of the Universe; it is a society that reflects its meaning as a shared guide. The human mind continually suggests to itself (especially the "unhealthy" mind) that perhaps the bright reality of everyday life is just an illusion that the terrifying nightmare of another reality can swallow up, namely the reality of the night side (Berger, 1990: 134). In this way, as a reference for meaning, religion becomes a guide for humans so that their lives or social order are not destroyed.

Religion also exists as legitimacy and not only as a cultural bond but more than just that, namely as a cognitive framework within society itself and the basis for the rationalization of the social world. Religion is a social order created by humans that is very effective because religion connects a meaningful social order to realities that exist beyond human meanings. For example, when we see that a mosque means not only a building but also a social order, then this system survives and has strong legitimacy because it is linked to Baitulloh, which is why religion effectively legitimizes the social order created by humans.

### **Human and Social Epistemology**

For philosophy students in Indonesia, epistemology is usually associated with a central question: What are the conditions for knowledge, or how is knowledge possible? These questions try to find out the basis of knowledge that we claim as something that is based on experience, rationality, and other sources. What is called epistemology is philosophy as an effort to determine the boundaries and reach of knowledge: the source of knowledge, the nature of knowledge, its validity, and values (Lubis, 2016: 3). The field of Epistemology requires us to understand metaphysics and understand the academic atmosphere in the ancient times when philosophy existed in Greece. Every philosopher has their epistemology because epistemology is not a branch even though it is called a branch. Every philosophy has traces of its epistemology, such as those of Aristotle, Rene Descartes, Edmund Husserl, and others. But in the end, everything will come to a question, namely what will continue after the thought has settled because the area of epistemology will always try to find something that remains with curiosity to advance a step so that non-philosophical fields that are now known, such as physics, the environment, geography, and others are invited. Now, epistemology is a mixture of imagination, philosophy, methodological speculation, and the development of factual sciences, which has illustrated a kind of interchance. So, from there, we can briefly understand that epistemology is an evaluative and critical effort



regarding human knowledge (Lubis, 2016: 32). Apart from that, there is also socio-epistemology, knowledge, like thought, cannot be created because of knowledge or thought itself, because knowledge cannot believe, reason or develop ideas from itself but is created by humans in the struggle within their environment, with all the values, intentions, and his humanitarian self-interest (Watloly 2013: 48).

Knowledge is a reference source that will justify the created reality. Constructing reality into individual knowledge will be justified through language, communication, and explaining the created reality. The difference between legitimacy and justification is that justification explains justifying personally, while legitimacy means collective recognition of the truth of knowledge. This knowledge is a reference for individuals to construct reality.

Regarding the knowledge of the terror perpetrators, humans are vulnerable to being tempted to commit violence because humans are fragile creatures and are quickly fascinated by violence. Here, the author, who is not a sociologist, although he will use sociology, will not research the history of terror at all or discuss how terror occurred historically. The question that arises is what is wrong with the way of thinking, cognition, worldview, or point of view of terror perpetrators, including suicide bombers. What were they thinking that made the action happen? If we can answer that, we will be able to reflect that epistemological conditions make it easy for humans to do this. So, what prevents other humans from killing? Another assumption is that we have the potential to be perpetrators because we are humans, but why are these humans the ones who do it? Moreover, what is wrong with such epistemological conditions?

Human philosophy often defines humans as animal rationales or rational creatures. Humans are also called animal symbolism; then humans are called homo faber; apart from that, homo sapiens, which of course, is already familiar because it has been in biology for a long time. Animal rationale means that aspects of consciousness and rationality are substantial in humans; human philosophy also upholds human freedom. It is explained that humans are free creatures who can make decisions with free will. Humans seek meaning in life and can even die, and it is precisely because of death that life becomes meaningful. If we pay attention, human philosophy is too busy with human consciousness and rationality. Rationality and reason are anthropological constants in human philosophy; humans from various cultures have been constant rational creatures occasionally. Many adverse events arise from human hands, such as war, rape, torture, mass murder, and acts of terror. Apart from that, humans are also creatures who long and need to be controlled and even fear their freedom, so humans are creatures who are not entirely rational. So it is not surprising that Niccolo Machiavelli views humans as pessimistic; humans are irrational creatures whose behavior is swayed by their emotions (Hardiman, 2019: 19). Humans like the dimness of consciousness and are even very quickly fascinated by the dark of course, we would be a little offended to admit that, especially students of philosophy who are familiar with Rene Descartes's cogito ergo sum. What is found using the doubt method is solid truth and certainty, namely "cogito" or self-awareness (Hardiman 2019: 39). However, history shows that there is always a possibility.

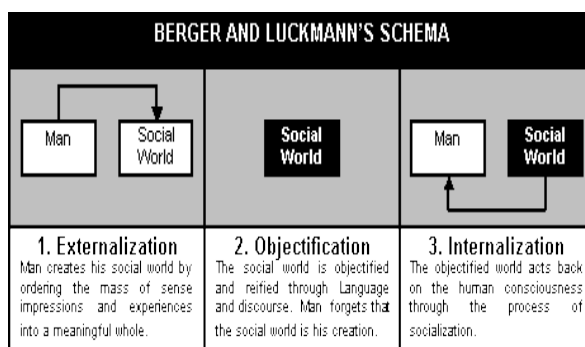
In his book, Berger states that humans create order, which means being in a situation of anxiety, being in a chaotic situation, and being in a chaotic situation. Therefore, humans continually construct their social world, adding that they are unfinished creatures. Humans have interests and sometimes "human needs" within them. The ongoing possibility of anomic terror will materialize if the legitimacy that obscures the fragile situation is threatened or collapses (Berger 1991: 141). Because it is constructive, it is unstable and inherently inseparable from the social world, which will continue to experience change. In this context, religion plays its role as a structure of legitimacy. However, Berger sees deviations in the use of religion as an object to legitimize individual actions, which are then institutionalized in the social environment of the community (Dharma 2018: 2).

### **Analysis of the Problem**

As stated previously, there are three keys to understanding Peter L Berger and Thomas Luckman's social construction theory: first, the social construction process occurs due to externalization; second, the objectivation process; and third, the internalization process. In formulating his theory, Peter L. Berger received

donations from Emile Durkheim (regarding social facts), Max Weber, George Herbert Mead (the symbolic interactionism theory, which also belongs to the sociocultural tradition), and Alfred.

Schutz (Karman, 2015: 12). According to Berger, in this life, humans will always be in a dialectic process between individuals and their sociocultural world or individuals and the values (norms) and culture that apply in society. The debate regarding externalization, objectivation, and internalization is built into a concept in the sociology of knowledge. Thus, externalization is adapting oneself to the socio-cultural world, while objectivation is interaction with the standardized world (experiencing institutionalization). Internalization is when individuals identify with social institutions or organizations, they are its members.



Three xx images from www.geocities.ws in 2001

Because externalization and objectivation are the formations of society, they are called primary socialization, while internalization is when someone needs a social institution. For that social institution to be maintained and continued, there must be justification for those institutions. Humans also create justifications through social, legal, and religious institutions. A person may not like the role he has to play, but that role dictates what must be done according to his objective description (Ngagi 2011: 2).

Secondary objectivation refers to institutions that humans construct through a legitimation process. This process will repeat itself repeatedly, so, unsurprisingly, various categories are present every time, such as war, conflict, and terror. So externalization, objectivation, and internalization will synthesize each other, meaning that mutual influence between one another will produce a sustainable process, resulting in the creation of a social construction or social reality that is visible even though its origin is the result of creation and the result of subjective interactions between humans and humans. Then, the question is whether acts of terror are a construction of social reality.

In the externalization process, the author understands that terrorism is an act of terrorizing, torturing, and even killing carried out by a particular group so that it will affect the psychology/mentality of a person (individual). Terrorism is a symptom of violence that has existed since human culture (Mustofa, 2002: 32). This perspective will be produced by other individuals and then become its reality and known by different individuals. It is where the process (objectivation) occurs. Next, the process by which a person learns the meaning of terrorism as an act of violence or crime by a specific group, which is obtained through the socialization process, is called internalization. Simply put, when we see an action or event that contains elements of violence, such as specific attacks that cause a tense atmosphere or terror, resulting in various losses where there are victims and damage to facilities. So, we will construct it as terrorism, and then other people will know that it is terror. Our knowledge about terrorists occurs through socialization when people spread information about terrorism. So, it can be concluded that terrorism is a social construction.

#### IV. Conclusion

The dialectical process will never be completed, and it is not impossible to have a dialectical triangle. This externalization, objectivation, and internalization are then applied to mass media. The truth is that what is published in the mass media is not an actual event but is the result of construction carried out by media workers,

including reporters. A story published by the media will certainly never be 100% (one hundred percent) exact because it is the result of everyone's construction (point of view)—likewise, news related to terrorism, 911 events, and other acts of violence. Thus, when journalists make news, they do three things (externalization, objectification, and internalization) to make it become news. This news results from construction by media workers, so unsurprisingly, the same event produces news that differs from one media to another and creates bias. Besides that, the construction results of each media will be influenced by several elements or factors related to other theories. It should be acknowledged that the reality of news in the mass media is not the actual reality.

As an academic note, Berger and Luckman's thinking looks quite complete because, in their book entitled *The Social Construction of Reality, A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, 1966, theory does not only focus on things such as reviewing figures or the influence of figures and the like but places more emphasis on human actions as creative actors and how social reality is formed as a result of the interaction of subjectivity with objectivity. So, what is meant by the construction of social reality is that there are three stages, as stated above. With the explanation above, it can be concluded that terrorism is a social construction, as noted by Peter L Berger regarding the three stages in the social construction process. Externalization is based on reserve or subjective knowledge that an act of violence and destruction and causing terror is an act of terrorism. Objectivation is when the perpetrator, either an individual or a group, aims to carry out an act of terror; then that is also an act of terrorism. Moreover, for the internalization process, when an individual or people find out about terrorism, that individual will look for information with curiosity and understanding about terrorism.

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