



REREADING PETER L. BERGER'S SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION IN THE FRAGMENTATION OF DIGITAL RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

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Abstract

This paper reviews Peter L. Berger's social construction in the context of the fragmentation of religious authority in the digital era. Berger emphasizes that social reality is the result of human construction through the processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Externalization refers to the process through which human beings express themselves and create a social world through everyday activities. Objectivation is the process by which human social products become objective realities recognized by members of society, such as norms, laws, and religion. Meanwhile, internalization is the process through which objective reality is reabsorbed into consciousness, so that it is regarded as natural and taken for granted. In the digital era, however, this process is disrupted because religious authority is no longer singular and stable, but fragmented through discursive competition among traditional clerics, the state, academics, and digital actors. This fragmentation shows that the legitimacy of authority is not determined solely by religious institutions, but also by media logic, symbolic capital, and virtual interaction. This paper offers a critique that the social construction of religious authority in Indonesia cannot be adequately understood within a classical framework that presupposes the stability of meaning. Rather, it needs to be approached through the dynamics of digital contestation and identity politics. This article emphasizes the importance of reconstructing Berger's theory so that it remains relevant for explaining changes in religious authority in an increasingly plural and digitalized society.

Keywords: Social Construction, Fragmentation of Authority, Digital Era

INTRODUCTION

Traditional religious authorities, such as pesantren, established Islamic organizations, and charismatic ulama, are increasingly facing challenges to their legitimacy as new forms of authority emerge in digital spaces. This occurs because the religious social field has shifted into digital spaces, producing fragmented and even competing forms of authority. This situation raises the author's concern about whether Berger's theory, which emerged in the context of Western modernity, remains relevant for rereading religious phenomena in Indonesia, which are shaped by tradition, local culture, and global influences at the same time.¹

Berger's theory of social construction argues that society is a human product and that individuals construct their realities through shared beliefs and symbols. In the Indonesian context, where authority is deeply rooted in cultural traditions and history, Berger's theory can provide valuable insight into how structures of power are created and maintained. Religious authority in Indonesia involves a complex interaction between traditional beliefs and modern influences. The role of Islam, in particular, has become a central focus of this study, since Indonesia is home to the world's largest Muslim population.²

Scholars have examined how Islamic teachings and practices intersect with political power, social norms, and cultural traditions in shaping the country's religious landscape. In addition, the rise of religious extremism and the government's responses to it have also

¹ R. Wuthnow, "Cultural Analysis: The Work of Peter L. Berger, Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault, and Jürgen Habermas," *Cultural Analysis the Work of Peter L. Berger Mary Douglas Michel Foucault and Jurgen Habermas*, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203092774>.

² F. Lombardo, "Dark and the Social Construction of Knowledge," in *Societes*, vol. 154, no. 4, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.3917/soc.154.0021>.

become an area of research. On the other hand, the changing socio-religious landscape in the digital era presents a new problem in understanding authority. Whereas in traditional societies religious authority tended to be centered on formal institutions such as ulama, pesantren, or state religious bodies, religious legitimacy is now increasingly fragmented by the emergence of alternative authorities in digital spaces, such as social media ustaz, celebrity preachers, and even algorithms that determine the flow of religious discourse. This phenomenon shows that religious authority is no longer singular, but is the result of symbolic contestation that is continuously negotiated.³

It is in this context that Peter L. Berger's idea of social construction becomes relevant to reread and even to critique. Berger emphasizes that social reality is the result of a dialectic of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. However, this framework emerged from a relatively stable modern society. The digital world, by contrast, displays instability, acceleration, and the fragmentation of meaning. Religious authority, which was once regarded as taken for granted, is now reproduced in virtual spaces saturated with market logic, symbolic capital, and the democratization of access to information. Therefore, rereading Berger critically means placing social construction no longer within a framework of stable meaning, but within the dynamics of digital disruption that challenge traditional claims to authority. This article argues that the fragmentation of digital religious authority is a symptom of a new social construction that requires an interdisciplinary

³ M. Heide, "On Berger: If Peter Berger Was Doing Public Relations - A Social Constructionist Perspective on Crisis Communication," *Public Relations and Social Theory Key Figures Concepts and Developments*, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315271231>.

understanding involving the sociology of knowledge, digital anthropology, and theories of religious authority.⁴

The main issue that emerges in the fragmentation of digital religious authority is the disappearance of a single center of legitimacy. In the tradition of Indonesian Islam, for example, religious authority has long been held by ulama, pesantren, and major organizations such as NU or Muhammadiyah. However, the digital era has produced a new reality: anyone with access to technology, communication skills, and a large number of followers can appear as a religious authority without passing through traditional channels. This phenomenon not only shifts the distribution of authority, but also creates an epistemological crisis.⁵

Peter L. Berger's framework, particularly in *The Social Construction of Reality*, helps explain how religious authority is formed, legitimized, and internalized in society. The problem arises, however, when Berger's theory is applied to the digital context, where the externalization of religious teachings is no longer linear, the objectivation of religious reality takes place in an algorithmic space determined by machines, and internalization occurs not merely through tradition but through brief interactions on social media. In other words, digitalization has radicalized the process of social construction, so that religious authority is not only distributed but also fragmented in an extreme way.⁶

From the discussion above, this problematization becomes clearer when we observe how digital authority often collides with institutional authority. For example, an official MUI fatwa may be questioned or

⁴ B. Barnes, "On The Social Construction of Reality: Reflections on a Missed Opportunity," in *Human Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-016-9389-1>.

⁵ M. Endre, "On the Very Idea of Social Construction: Deconstructing Searle's and Hacking's Critical Reflections," *Human Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-016-9395-3>.

⁶ R. Bickel, "Peter Berger on Modernization and Modernity: An Unvarnished Overview," *Peter Berger on Modernization and Modernity an Unvarnished Overview*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315111391>.

even ignored by digital publics when a religious influencer with millions of followers offers a different interpretation. The authority of traditional ulama, which rests on chains of scholarly transmission and the legitimacy of pesantren communities, must confront instant authority formed by virality. As a result, the fragmentation of religious authority is not only a sociological issue, but also contains political, economic, and technological dimensions. From this point, rereading Berger's social construction demands a more critical approach. A classical theory of the stability of meaning must be expanded to address the context of digital disruption. The fragmentation of digital religious authority is not merely a shift in sources of legitimacy, but also touches on the fundamental question of how religion is constructed, disseminated, and lived in an increasingly plural, digitalized, and algorithmic society.

METHOD

This article uses an interpretive-critical method to examine texts related to Berger's works. The author's discussion focuses on two of Berger's works: *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, written with Thomas Luckmann in 1971, and, as an additional text, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, published in 1966. The interpretive method is used because the social reality of religious authority is understood as a construction born from symbolic interaction, in line with Peter L. Berger's framework of externalization, objectivation, and internalization.

The method is also critical because this article does not merely describe the fragmentation of authority, but also questions power relations, algorithmic domination, and the politics of legitimacy in digital spaces. This interpretive-critical method toward Berger's texts is used to understand the text not only literally, but also to uncover hidden

meanings, power relations, ideology, and the socio-historical context behind the text. A text contains a surplus of meaning that remains open to various interpretations.⁷ To simplify the method used by the author, the following presents its logical structure.

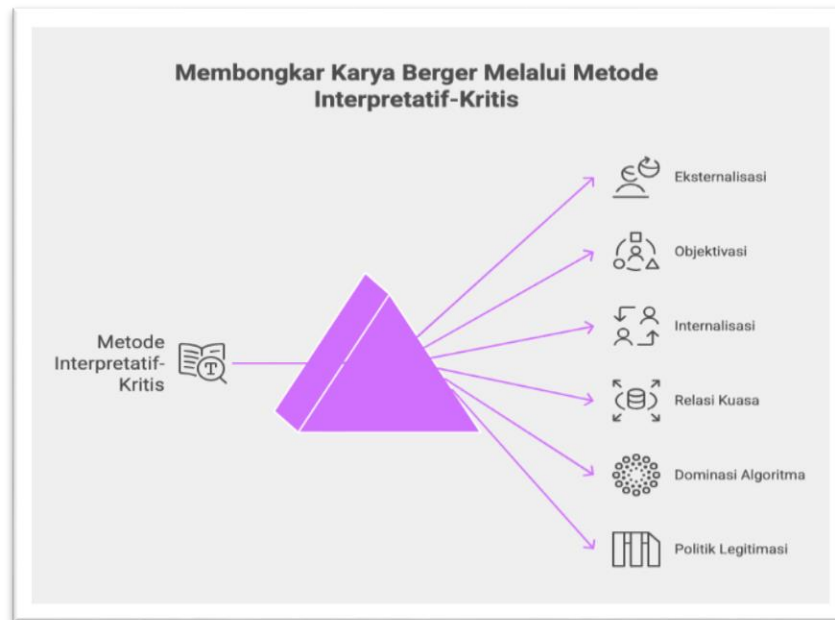


Figure 1: Interpretive-Critical Framework for Rereading Berger's Social Construction Theory

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Berger's Triadic Social Construction

Berger's social construction is essentially a critique that attempts to bridge the approaches offered by Durkheim⁸, Weber⁹, Marx¹⁰, and subsequently extends Karl Mannheim's way of thinking.¹¹ Berger seeks

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, Texas: Christian University Press, 1976, h. 70-80.

⁸ Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, New York: The Free Press, 1982.

⁹ Christopher Adair-Totef, *Marx Weber's Sociology of Religion*, Germany: Tußingen, 2016.

¹⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume II The Process of Circulation of Capital*, Translated by I. Lasker; Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1956.

¹¹ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1929.

to bridge Durkheim's emphasis on objective social facts, Weber's emphasis on subjective understanding (*verstehen*)¹² in social action, and Marx's emphasis on economic structure as the basis of social reality. To bridge these predecessors, Berger shows that social reality is neither entirely objective nor entirely subjective, but rather the result of a dialectic among them.

From this dialectic, Berger and Thomas Luckmann wrote *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. It is from this work that the author grounds the discussion of social construction, not merely by restating Berger's ideas, but by criticizing and testing them against contemporary realities. In his thesis, Berger states that social reality is created, institutionalized, and inherited through human interaction; that is, social reality is created, institutionalized, and transmitted through interaction among human beings. Because social reality is a human production, as Berger writes: reality and knowledge are products of social interaction, not absolute givens. Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product. In other words, reality does not simply appear by itself, but is formed through human interaction. What we regard as real is the result of a social agreement, or is socially constructed.¹³

In simple terms, Berger's thinking, which the author refers to as the triadic process of social construction, consists of the dialectical movement of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. At the stage of externalization, human beings express themselves and create

¹² Max Weber introduced the term *verstehen* as a method in the social sciences, especially sociology, for understanding human social action. Unlike the natural sciences, which explain phenomena through causal laws (*erklären*), the social sciences must understand the subjective meanings underlying human action. Human action is not understood only from the outside as objective behaviour, but also from the inner world, motives, and meanings that accompany it.

¹³ Peter L Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, London: Published in Penguin University Books 1971, h. 61.

a social world, such as law, custom, and religion. Objectivation then turns these creations into institutions that appear objective and coercive. At the stage of internalization, individuals receive, interpret, and make these social rules part of themselves. It is at this stage that repeated human actions form habitus. These habits are then institutionalized into institutions and passed down to the next generation as something regarded as natural.¹⁴

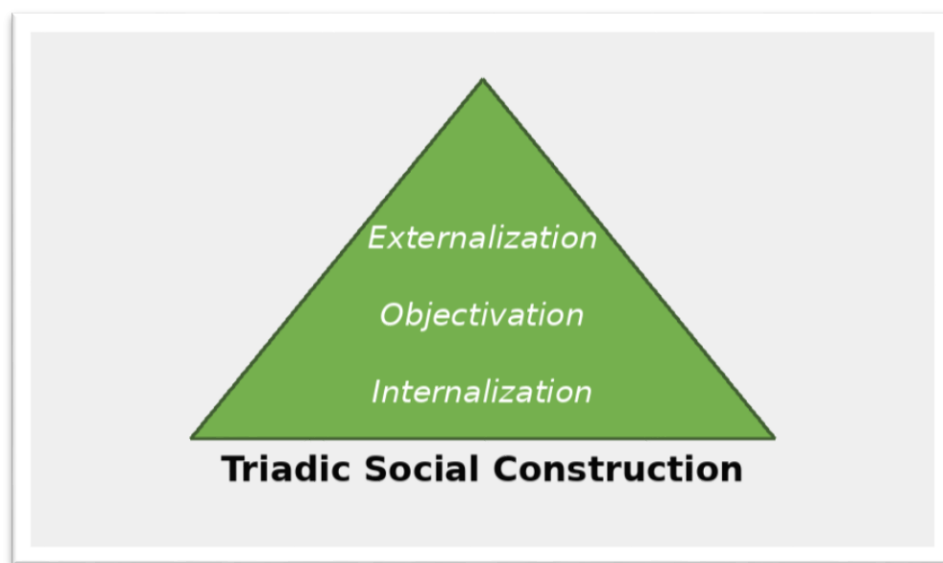


Figure 2: Triadic Social Construction

From this dialectical process, human beings ultimately require social legitimation so that institutions can endure.¹⁵ In this regard, religion is the highest form of legitimation because it provides transcendent meaning for the social order. Berger even refers to "Religion as a Sacred Canopy," meaning that religion provides a sacred canopy over society, giving ultimate meaning and order to human existence. To maintain such legitimacy, human beings also

¹⁴ Peter L Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality...*, h. 70–75.

¹⁵ Peter L Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality...*, h. 92–104.

need language as an important means of sustaining social construction because it enables the creation, dissemination, and maintenance of meaning. Therefore, social mechanisms such as ideology, religion, education, and media are needed to continuously affirm that reality is legitimate and true.¹⁶

2. Vis-à-Vis Fragmentation of Traditional and Digital Religious Authority

Religious authority has long served as a pillar for maintaining the continuity of tradition, legitimacy, and the religious practices of the community. In traditional societies, authority is usually centered on ulama, kiai, or formal religious institutions that are recognized socially and culturally. However, the arrival of the digital era has introduced the phenomenon of authority disruption, in which religious interpretations can now be produced, disseminated, and consumed through virtual spaces without passing through traditional mechanisms of legitimation. This vis-à-vis encounter between traditional and digital authority has produced complex dynamics of fragmentation: contestation over spaces of authority, changes in patterns of legitimation, and shifts in the way society practices religion.¹⁷

Traditional authority emphasizes sanad, scriptural interpretation, and institutionality, whereas digital authority emphasizes performativity, popular rhetoric, visualization, and closeness to audiences. The author views this vis-à-vis relation between traditional and digital authority as a tension in public debates on social media, for example over halal-haram fatwas, identity politics, and Islamic lifestyles. Here,

¹⁶ Peter L Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, New York: Openroad Integrated Media, 1966, h. 25–29.

¹⁷ J. Dreher, "Peter L. Berger's the Social Construction of Reality," in *Anthem Companion to Peter Berger*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.168327.12>.

fragmentation not only creates plurality, but also has the potential to generate polarization.¹⁸

Berger argues that modernity gives rise to pluralism, which leads to the delegitimation of single authority. This pluralism ultimately triggers the fragmentation of religious authority: authority is no longer centralized, but competes in a marketplace of meaning, or a religious marketplace. Traditional authority still claims legitimacy through continuity, namely tradition, sanad, and institutions. Digital authority appears through novelty, namely communicative style, popular narratives, and rapid accessibility.

Both stand in a vis-à-vis position, not merely facing each other, but also negating and sometimes making use of each other. For example, traditional kiai have begun to use digital platforms to maintain their authority, while religious influencers make use of traditional imagery to gain legitimacy. Within Berger's framework, this phenomenon shows that digital religious reality is a new social construction that shifts older mechanisms of authority. Consequently, the sacred canopy weakens because religious authority is now contested rather than monopolized. Religious authority turns into a competitive arena resembling a free market, where the faithful act as religious consumers. Authority becomes fragmented, but also more democratic because many voices become accessible. However, the risks of misinformation and banality also increase.

3. Rereading Berger's Social Construction in the Digital Era

If used as it is, Berger's framework of thought no longer has sufficient space in the digital context because the context and the era

¹⁸ P. A. Mellor, "Modernity, Self-Identity and the Sequestration of Death," in *Sociology*, vol. 27, no. 3, 1993, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038593027003005>.

are different. Therefore, a critical rereading is needed to find its relevance in the digital world. This rereading is the author's construction and is presented as a point of discussion in this article, so that the discussion does not appear normative or merely repeat Berger's thought. For this reason, a rereading is needed so that the theory becomes fresher and its relevance can be found.

In the classical context, this idea affirms that society and individuals mutually create and influence each other, with institutions, symbols, and language serving as media for the consolidation of reality. However, upon entering the digital era, especially amid the flows of social media, artificial intelligence, and platform algorithms, Berger's framework needs to be reread. Digitalization presents new forms of reality construction that are more fluid, rapid, and even destabilizing for traditional authority.

The rereading intended by the author is to bring Berger's thought into the digital habitus. The following is Berger's triadic social construction in digital space. Externalization: the expression of authority is no longer limited to direct sermons, but also takes the form of digital content, such as videos, memes, short da'wah clips, and podcasts. Objectivation: authority is no longer institutionalized only through formal institutions, but also through digital metrics such as the number of likes, shares, and followers. Internalization: audiences internalize authority through fast, instant, and emotional patterns of digital content consumption, which differ from traditional internalization based on long-term education in pesantren.

For the author, Berger's theory of social construction did not anticipate how digital technology and algorithms could become dominant actors in shaping social reality. Berger speaks extensively about traditional social institutions, but today epistemic power has shifted toward global digital corporations. Google, Meta, or X function as authorities of reality, replacing some of the functions once performed by the state or religion. Berger emphasizes gradual processes, whereas the digital era demonstrates the massive and viral acceleration of reality construction. Facts can be formed and destroyed within hours.

As a result of this rereading, Berger's social construction needs to be expanded into the realm of digital social construction, in which externalization is no longer neutral but is mediated by technological infrastructure, big data, and algorithms. If in the classical framework social reality tends to be singular and stable, today we live in echo chambers that produce parallel realities. Thus, social construction in the digital era is a fragmented construction. Rereading Berger means recognizing that the authority of reality is held not only by religion, the state, or the family, but also by digital platforms that act as gatekeepers of knowledge and meaning.

CONCLUSION

Rereading Peter L. Berger's social construction in the context of the fragmentation of digital religious authority affirms that the classical theory of externalization, objectivation, and internalization requires a critical and in-depth reading because the regime of truth and habitus are different. If Berger emphasizes traditional social institutions such as religion, family, and the state as pillars of the legitimation of reality, the digital era instead reveals a fragmentation of authority in which religious meaning is no longer monopolized by ulama, formal institutions, or mass organizations, but is also produced by influencers, content creators, and platform algorithms.

This fragmentation produces two critical consequences. First, religious authority becomes increasingly fluid and distributed, so religious communities live amid a diversity of interpretations that are not always bound to traditional authority. Second, the mechanism for constructing religious reality in digital spaces is determined more by the logic of popularity and virality than by epistemic authenticity or scholarly authority. Within Berger's framework, this means that the objectivation of religious reality is now under the hegemony of platform technology and the attention economy, not merely under established social legitimation. Therefore, the critique of Berger's thought in this context does not stop at adaptation, but moves toward paradigmatic expansion. Social construction in the digital era is not only a relation

between human beings, but also a relation between humans and machines, algorithms, and global technological infrastructure. This is both a challenge and an opportunity: how social theory can continue to live when religious authority, meaning, and truth are now constructed within networks that are fragmented, instant, and no longer linear.

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