

## BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

**Simon Susen.** *'The 'Postmodern Turn' in the Social Sciences*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 510 pp. \$110.00 hardcover (9780230579293)

Simon Susen's new book on discourses of the postmodern and postmodernism aims to provide an original, systematic, exhaustive, critical and – most audaciously – definitive statement of their impact in the social sciences. Equally striking is that it revives a topic that has become very unpopular in academia today. Most readers will recall that the terms “postmodern” and “postmodernism” arose during the 1970s and 80s. These terms were meant to challenge what was perceived to be imperialism in European epistemologies. The latter purportedly involved mastering the world through a historically, culturally, and linguistically insensitive and obdurate process: the development of controls over what can be represented as positive knowledge of reality. For better or worse this process received the name of modernism. To its sympathizers, the term postmodern denoted what was often seen as a salutary focus on the *meta* in relation to scholarship: a self-critical analytical-ethical praxis of deconstruction that was to accompany and influence any new knowledge production. Its critics did not like being positioned as ideological modernists and believed they were witnessing a dismantling of ways to critique modernity and capitalism. The shrieking pitch of this battle eventually resulted in a moment, or non-moment, when self-censorship dictated the erasure of the term postmodern from the work of authors in the humanities and social sciences. So the fact that at this juncture of history someone has attempted to corral the proponents of “the postmodern turn” into one place under one definitive statement is indeed a dramatic event.

Susen's central claim is that today's social sciences are influenced to the core by a set of interrelated postmodern “turns” in social scientific theory and methods he labels epistemological, methodological, sociological, historiographical, and political. These turns add up to a transition between modernity and postmodernity that he argues is a transition from beliefs in the determinacy of the social and natural worlds towards beliefs in their *indeterminacy*. In this, he owes a considerable debt to the numerous analyses of “modernity” and “postmodernity” that came in the wake of postmodernism from coun-

tering modernist heavyweights such as Touraine, Giddens, Harvey, and Berman. Yet centering his study on the *beliefs* of social scientists and theorists marks a key shift from this uneasy “post-postmodernist modernity theory” consensus of the late 1990s. Susen seems to be re-occupying the sensitive ground of that which is meta in scholarship. Moreover, it seems as if to permit an ecumenical acceptance of this new text among scholars who do not identify as social theorists it is necessary to revoke the attempts of the modernity theorists to amalgamate social theory as a study of “modernity and postmodernity”. However, Susen deploys a methodology in the tradition of the modernist sociological methodology of Max Weber. His goal is not deconstruction but rather to sympathetically understand these turns toward belief in the indeterminacy of the world, and then to organize a set of non-reductive, historically contextualized, ideal typical descriptions of approaches in the social sciences.

Accessibly written, Susen’s book treats the topic of postmodernism by theme rather than by author – though one will find innumerable references to a wide range of authors associated with the postmodern. The usual French and American postmodern authors are present, but also numerous other European thinkers, including a sizeable representation of British authors. A truly hat-doffing final 223 pages of the book – almost half of it – is given over to incredibly exhaustive and thorough notes with follow-up comments and cross-references, indices of names as well as subjects, and a bibliography that is wonderfully comprehensive. In each chapter Susen identifies key antinomies and tensions, and suggests a central figure of transition from modernist to postmodernist tendencies in social scientific research. The first chapter explores the influence of postmodernism on epistemologies of the social sciences, particularly in terms of debates surrounding relativism and postpositivist epistemological agendas. The second chapter engages social scientific methodologies. It examines the profound influence of discourse analysis as a paradigm stemming from postmodernist self-reflexivity. Chapter three provides a special focus on postmodernism’s influence on sociology. The cultural turn of postmodernism provoked new debates and tensions in sociology revolving around such thematic poles as industrialism and postindustrialism, productivism and consumerism, and economism and culturalism. A new antinomy has arisen as a result, between materialist and postmaterialist conceptions of society, evincing a trend in which ‘the social’ is no longer taken for granted, and an emerging consensus that social realities are relationally constructed and radically indeterminate. In circumstances of the preponderance of the cultural over the so-

cial in the daily construction of human reality cultural sociology thus emerges in importance, as do sociologies of the self and of globalization, as key mediating terms of contemporary culture. Chapter four scrutinizes the influence of postmodernism on historiography, coaxing it away from the work of reconstruction of periods within a consensus on underlying narratives towards a deconstructionist agenda that questions narratives. The fifth chapter deals with how contemporary conceptions of politics have been affected by the postmodern turn, with an emphasis on examining a shift from traditional to post-traditional political agendas.

Susen follows up his analysis of the five postmodern turns with a final chapter of critical reflections on postmodern thought. Susen's claims here are in fact surprisingly banal, for example, where he asserts that the social sciences must be about "a genuine search for objective, normative, and subjective forms of existential authenticity" (245). Rather than problematizing and critically exploring the term authenticity, he briefly invokes the image of Auschwitz as contemporary authenticity's *sine qua non*. The irony of attempting to advocate for postmodern-informed modernist scientific methodologies by evoking an example that is so emotional as to make rational discourse nearly impossible is palpably present in this passage. But that is what terms like "authenticity" do. Similarly, Susen's recapitulation of the Marxian claim that postmodernists failed to critique the exploitative side of capitalism and are therefore conservatives is simply a throwback to the bad old days of recrimination.

Which brings us back to his central thesis: the purported rise of indeterminacy over determinacy in the guiding beliefs of social scientists. Is this truly a helpful organizing dichotomy? If determinacy is, in one's beliefs, ontologically the fundamental feature of the world, the job is only, like the illustrator of wildlife, to provide faithful descriptions and avoid ambiguity in scientific categorizations; but this would be surely a premodern mode of knowledge, of *undertheorized* knowledge. The fact is that the scientific revolution announces its method of doubt and scepticism based on observations of exceptions to the rule, differences from theories accepted dogmatically, and the need for the imperfect tools, albeit mathematically honed, to release a new knowledge of small, hard to detect distinctions in the universe. In other words, determinacy represents a relationally constructed social regime of experience of the world, but science comes along precisely to question the status of the notion of authenticity it generates as a legitimate regulative ideal. Authenticity in matters of experience-based knowledge, after the scientific revolution, has to take a back

seat to the controlled scepticism of the scientific method. Intellectualism in matters of conceptually based knowledge, similarly, has to take a back seat to theorization. Theory is, precisely, determinacy *with* indeterminacy, the problematic combination of the two.

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