

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Simon Susen**, *The Foundations of the Social: Between Critical Theory and Reflexive Sociology*. Oxford: Bardwell Press, 2007, 360 pp. £75.00 hardcover (978-1-905622-12-2)

The introduction announces: “The core assumption that underlies this study is that we can only identify solid grounds for social critique by identifying the grounds of the social itself” (p. 17). This said, the inquiry is governed by three overarching goals of locating the ontological foundations of the social, the normative foundations of social critique, and the foremost elements of a theoretical framework that grasps the relationship between the two (p. 19). In order to achieve these objectives, the book pits Habermas’s conception of the discursive foundation of society and rational acceptability that sustains validity against Bourdieu’s explication of the relational nature of society and equation of validity with social legitimacy. This painstaking comparative exegesis holds no pretension of providing an all-inclusive blueprint, but rather judiciously recognizes that “the very nature of critical thought seeks to accept the controversial character of any systematic effort to grasp the complexity of the social in terms of a comprehensive social theory” (p. 303). In this vein, it first learns from the discrepancy between the former’s notion of communicative action (optimistic derivative argument) and the latter’s model of homological action (pessimistic derivative argument). Then, moving beyond this seemingly insoluble opposition, it locates their convergence in uncovering the structural grounds of social domination and emancipation, and in emphasizing reflexivity and the possibility of a critical social science.

The first part tackles Habermas’s central epistemological assumptions (the relationship between knowledge, critique, and linguistically negotiated intersubjective meaning), the debate over critical theory (the confusion born of the concept’s interpretive openness and the attempt to overcome its fatalistic attachment to instrumental reason), and the paradigm shift within critical theory (the reconceptualization of the social in terms of lifeworld/system). It concludes with an assessment of this endeavour’s deficiencies. Noteworthy strengths here lie in challenging Habermas’s suspect interpretation of Marx’s materialism, vindicating the “ordinary immanence” of his critique (p. 224), and highlighting the fact that “if utopia is reduced to the liberation of human reason and human linguisticity, then we are confronted with an extremely impoverished notion of the social” (pp. 110–111).

The second part follows the same format as the first — assumptions, debate, paradigm shift, and shortcomings. Hence it addresses Bourdieu's vision of reflexive sociology, his critique of the confines occasioned by objectivism and subjectivism as embedded in scholastic reasoning, his ontology of the social, and the detrimental consequences of delegitimizing ordinary knowledge. The merit of this part of the book resides in an exceptionally detailed elucidation of the dialectical interpenetration and structural interrelationality of field and habitus delineated by Bourdieu, and its account of the troubles stemming from his "fieldism" (*champism*) and the congruent homologization of object and subject, which effectively reduces the latter to a "functional appendage of the overarching power of its social environment" (p. 210).

In the third part, a sound case is made for the cross-fertilization of critical and reflexive sociology by sketching a provisional five-dimensional approach to the social. Following an assiduous examination of ten substantial points of correspondence, an alternative model which foregrounds the empowering potential inherent in labour (socio-productive force), language (socio-contemplative force), culture (socio-constructive force), desire (socio-utopian force), and experience (immersive realization) is outlined. In this way, it lucidly pinpoints the universal features of human coexistence and the everyday grounds upon which it is based, so as to expose the intrinsic emancipatory promise of the social and the limitations of repressive societies.

This is an important book. Its insightful and systematic comparison of Habermas and Bourdieu fills a glaring lacuna in scholarship. In this connection, it demonstrates comprehensive — even exhaustive — knowledge of the writings of both thinkers and cogently refutes the predominant view that they are diametrically opposed and, ultimately, incompatible. And this, moreover, is done without in any way glossing over the substantive differences between the two. Some might find that the highly concise note point narrative style and relegation of important debates to footnotes hinders its readability. But others will appreciate the focus this engenders and the facility it affords in locating and cross-referencing topics. So while this is a meticulous piece of scholarship, it will be readily embraced by graduate students. The foreword by Bryan S. Turner justly pronounces that the book demands a careful reading which will, indeed, "endlessly repay the scrupulous reader who will find here a rich and rewarding text" (p. 15).

UNIVERSITY OF NEW BRUNSWICK

ISHER-PAUL SAHNI

Isher-Paul Sahni is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton. He has authored several articles on Max

Weber's substantive and legal sociology and is currently engaged in research on constitutional adjudication and topical issues in the sociology of literature. [isherpaul@hotmail.com](mailto:isherpaul@hotmail.com)