

# The Postmodern as a Presence

Philosophy of the Social Sciences

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Simon Susen

*The “Postmodern Turn” in the Social Sciences*, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. xi + 510 pp. ISBN 978-0-230-57929-3. £70.00 (hardcover).

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We may compare Simon Susen's *The “Postmodern Turn” in the Social Sciences* (2015) with *The Social Construction of Reality* by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966). Explaining the method of writing their book, Berger and Luckmann quoted Ibn Arabi, the Medieval Muslim mystic, who said, “Deliver us, oh Allah, from the sea of names.” Accordingly, Berger and Luckmann did not name a single classic or modern social theorist in their book when employing sociological concepts and theories. That means to say they used the term “social solidarity” without prefacing it with the phrasing such as “as Durkheim said . . .” or “Durkheim was misread by . . .” Justifying this writing method as a benefit for the audience, allowing audiences to judge the argument of the book in its own merits, not affected by the intellectual authority of, say, Durkheim (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 8). In similar fashion, Susen's comprehensive knowledge of social theory (in the general sense of the term) allows him to use a similar method to explain his thesis on the impact of the “postmodern turn” within social sciences. Susen commonly does not mention the name of the original author of what he defines as postmodern ideas.

There is a latent assumption behind Berger and Luckmann's approach. The underlying assumption asserts one can talk about a sort of unique “sociological insight.” That is to say, if clearly defined and pieced together the main concepts of Durkheim's consensus-centered approach, Marx's conflict-based point of view and Weber's historical methodology, constitute a more inclusive academic guide to *the social*; an image that illustrates how society's reality-construction-engine works. This is Berger and Luckmann's underlying conception of the history of social theory. Modern social theory for them could be seen as a European and American shared project of opening new windows to the same horizon. Otherwise, their project may not be

meaningful. Their presupposition is that we are looking at the more or less same thing, *aka* the social, but from different perspectives and through different windows, *aka* varieties of social theories. Berger and Luckmann sought to piece these theories together, ultimately resulting in a “mega-theory.” The “mega-theory” is not reductionist because it considers both “agent” and “structure,” “local” and “global,” “public” and “private,” and so on. If there is such a “mega-theory,” we may assume that after 100 years, that would be a unique sociological insight, explained consistently, coherently, and as Susen tends to call it, “systematically.”

Similarly, Susen’s project is focused on demonstrating “the ensemble of the paradigmatic shifts that have been taking place in the contemporary social sciences,” and those shifts constitute the “presuppositional basis of postmodern turn” (Susen 2015, 233). Accordingly, the structure of the book has been organized around the problematic and still puzzling dichotomies of social sciences. For instance, the first part covers three epistemological contrasts: truth versus perspective, certainty versus uncertainty, and universality versus particularity. At the end of each section, Susen asks whether we are moving toward a new intellectual era or whether it is just what Alan Sokal labeled as “fashionable nonsense” (Sokal and Bricmont 1999). Most of the book is dedicated to the descriptive, detailed, and long portrayal of these dichotomies. The author’s analysis comes at the end of the book as the final chapter. Thus, the reader should wait to the last chapter to see the author’s main argument based on the review of those shifts.

There are two main problems with Susen’s project; the first point is about defining postmodernism as a reactionary movement and a sort of absence. The second point is about his understanding of systematic explanation.

Susen (2015, 32) at some point in the introduction asks why the debates over the modern and the postmodern “were the hottest theoretical game in town” from the early 1980s into the 1990s. His brief answer, following Nico Wilterdink, is “the intellectual crisis of Western Marxism” after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the lack of any “viable alternative” for “liberal-capitalism” led many academics to postmodernism (Susen 2015, 32). From this perspective, postmodernism is a reaction to politico-intellectual frustration and a sort of nihilistic epistemological “relativism,” which, by the way, he believes is “the paradigmatic cornerstone of postmodern approaches” (Susen 2015, 29). The slogan of a post–Cold War intellectual sphere was “anything goes,” and this is what Susen also does not like about postmodernism (2015, 32). Postmodernism defined in this way is a reactionary movement and a sort of malaise of a chaotic age and the lack of alternatives. “[T]he only alternative to a premodern or modern *Weltanschauung* is to possess no *Weltanschauung* at all. The postmodern actor is, consequently, left in an ideological vacuum”

(Susen 2015, 235). This is the problematic aspect of Susen's thesis. He sees postmodernism as a sort of absence and vacuum, not a presence and continuity. Yes, the book tries to formulate the positive contribution of postmodern approaches, but it really does not accept the legitimacy of any of the postmodern approaches in the final chapter.

The book ends with rhetorical statements such as this quote from Richard Evans: "Auschwitz was not a discourse. It trivializes mass murder to see it as a text. The gas chambers were not a piece of rhetoric" (quoted in Susen 2015, 246). The author assumes discourses deny tragedies or reduce their realness. He invites readers to undertake "a genuine search for objective, normative, and subjective forms of existential authenticity . . . which is irreducible to a language game" (Susen 2015, 245). Richard Rorty, probably the most significant figure of the so-called postmodernism, categorized all these forms of invitations to objectivity as forms of "banging on the table." The point is not that postmodern intellectuals simply refrain from searching for objectivity. The problematic issue is the method of finding those scientific facts that let us to talk about objectivity. In brief, the world does not split itself up to "sentence-shaped chunks called facts"; we do (Rorty 1989, 5). Indeed, we are temporal and place-bounded beings. How can we attain a sort of objective knowledge detached from our cognitively restricted place and time? How can we claim to have a bird's-eye view on reality? An emphasis on the realness of the horrors and tragedies of the past century does not give us a functioning answer to this fundamental epistemological question.

Interestingly enough, postmodernists in fact radicalized "social construction of reality" as one of the classic and core sociological doctrines. The fundamental argument in both classic social theory and postmodern approaches is simple: "Society is composed of structurally interrelated actors, who constantly construct and reconstruct reality by virtue of their everyday performances" (Susen 2015, 42). The consequences of the doctrine, nevertheless, could be quite challenging as Susen shows in the book. Berger and Luckmann did not take that challenge. They wanted to sketch a design for the social construction motor-engine of those everyday performances. The postmodernists, however, went one step backward and asked about our very knowledge of those everyday performances. "Knowledge is part of a reality created by human beings. The most abstract epistemic representations cannot escape their creators' embeddedness in history" (Susen 2015, 43). That is the Pandora's Box of postmodern epistemology, which does not let any theoretician make a systematic megatheory about how the society works.

Rorty (1979, 114), following Wilfrid Sellars, defined philosophy as "an attempt to see how 'things, in the largest sense of the term, hang together, in the largest sense of the term.'" If so, from a postmodern point of view,

philosophy (as well as social theory) is all about drawing an image of how society works. That, by definition, would be a temporary image. Rorty concludes we can say that the 17th-century image of the world is outworn and has lost its validity, but we cannot say that the image was one step forward and the 18th century image was yet another step based on the former. So we are not, Rorty would argue, standing on the shoulders of giants. We cannot link up our partial images of the horizon to reach a more complete and non-reductionist viewpoint. We do not and will never have access to the motor-engine of the society or history. Arguing for “the lack of absolute certainty” is one thing; saying that “we are living in an ideologically vacuum age” is quite another.

Knowing this, Rorty (along with many other postmodern philosophers) is not against narratives. Rorty’s point is narratives are not the results of your “inner truth-tracking faculty” (such as the Kantian reason) and they are not going to give you the ultimate truth. Narratives rather are stories we make about “how things hang together.” There are stories that work and those that do not work. There are new stories and old stories. We, nonetheless, will never get the final and fundamental story (Rorty 1979). Postmodernism is not a nihilistic vacuum, lacking any consistent story about the world. Rather, it is a hesitation about the epistemological status and universal validity of those stories. Otherwise, one would go through unnecessary difficulties to understand either Rorty’s works on social hope as a positive and political project (in the general sense of politics) or Michel Foucault’s works on power.

Second, the book seems to suggest that to *systematically* present the main impact of postmodernism on social sciences one should evaluate a series of dichotomies (Susen 2015, 38). “Systematic,” accordingly, is defined as “organised around some intellectual shifts.” In fact, these series of shifts constitute what Susen calls “a postmodern turn.” That is the difference between Berger and Luckmann’s project and that of Susen. Berger and Luckmann’s understanding of a systematic explanation of the sociological insight was more sophisticated. Their explanation included joining two sides of the false dichotomies in a bigger picture, for the sake of a sociological mega-theory. In comparison, Susen proposes we moved from one sort of conception of, say, industrialism to a more recent conception, which we can call “post-industrialism.” Emphasizing the shifts in numerous academic fields (such as epistemology, methodology of social sciences, sociology, historiography, and politics) is certainly a sort of “systematic” explanation. However, the point is that the changes are the simplest form of a larger system, *a binary system*, which merely shows that the concepts introduced 60 years ago are no longer valid. Thus, those concepts, unavoidably, have been replaced by the new concepts.

This type of dichotomist shift from one type of society to another is in fact the oldest form of theoretical enquiry in modern social theory. Tönnies and Durkheim, for instance, among many of the classic figures of the tradition, were suggesting that a major shift is happening in society. For Tönnies ([1887] 2001), that was a shift from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*. For Durkheim, the movement was from community with mechanical solidarity to society with organic solidarity (Chernilo 2013, chapter 6). This form of dichotomist approach has survived to our time in the works of another post-modern sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman. His suggestion is that the movement is from a solid modernity to liquid modernity, which I think is an appropriate alternative metaphor for postmodernism. Bauman argues that the postmodern era is not all about vacuum and absence but positive, however uncertain, presence; hence liquidity (Bauman 2000).

Finally, Susen (2015, 240) attempts to give credit to modernity for the radicality of the postmodern, claiming, “the alleged divide line between modernity and postmodernity obscures the radicality of the modern itself.” He believes that modernity is maturing and self-critical and thus there is no need to go beyond it. It is what Habermas called an “unfinished project.” This does not seem to be controversial because there actually is no clear-cut division between those two notions/phases. Overemphasis on this division is the result of relying on those dichotomies and considering them as maps that show the intellectual journey of the West in the past century. All in all, the book could be read as an encyclopedia of postmodernism, as it explains the majority of the relevant concepts and theories, but the theoretical framework of the book is not as ambitious as it might appear in the first pages.

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