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## **The Foundations of Social Theoretical Discourse.**

Review of Simon Susen: *The Foundations of the Social. Between Critical theory and Reflexive Sociology*, Oxford, Bardwell Press, 2007. European Studies in Social Theory. Series editors: Peter Hamilton and Bryan Turner. ISBN-13: 978-1-905622-12-2

In conversation with me Jean-Claude Passeron recently recollected that, for his *agrégation* in the late 1950s, he had been asked to imagine a conversation between Bergson and Plato in hell. It was this kind of exercise which caused Passeron and others to target the *agrégation* as the most manifest symbol of an education system which was devoted to the esoteric exclusion of common discourse and common people, seeing it as a *rite de passage* to a socially divisive academic professionalism. In the year of publication of *Les héritiers* (1964), four of the young researchers who had collaborated in the fieldwork leading to that text (Bourdieu, Passeron, Reynaud, and Tréanton), co-authored an article, under the pseudonym of Emile Boupareytre, entitled “L’université et son universitaire”, which appeared in *Esprit*. At the same time as they were analysing the social conditions of pedagogical communication between staff and students of Sociology and Philosophy in sample French universities, they were critical in this article of the procedure by which staff were legitimated or, to use their term, consecrated: “je suis consacré. Le succès n’est plus une sélection, c’est une ordination: tu sera agrégé *in aeternum* ...” [I am consecrated. Success is no more a selection, it is an ordination: you will be an agrégé *for eternity* ...] (Boupareytre, 1964, 843). Anticipating the problems of 1968, they argued that the old university system was intent on reproducing itself but was no longer fit for the purpose expected of it in modern, industrial society. It was not by chance, they claimed, that ‘le syndicalisme étudiant revendique un rapport pédagogique démocratique et direct au moment où il est devenu impossible de l’instaurer dans les faits’ [student unions lay claim to direct, democratic pedagogy at the moment when it has become impossible to realise it practically] (Boupareytre, 1964, 847). Subsequently, Bourdieu and Passeron both struggled with the problem of how the articulation and publication of their research findings could avoid being absorbed within the system of privilege which they were wanting to subvert. In *Le métier de sociologue* (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, & Passeron, 1968) they argued for the construction of an epistemic community of sociologists. In the 1970s the differences of opinion between them about the constitution of such a community became apparent. *Homo Academicus* (Bourdieu, 1984) analysed the *social* constitution of an academic community and ethos, whereas, in *Les mots de la sociologie* (Passeron, 1980), Passeron focussed on an analysis of the words and concepts which defined sociological discourse. Passeron early disputed Bourdieu’s interpretation of their jointly authored *La Reproduction* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970), arguing that Bourdieu was wrong to deny the autonomy of cultural reproduction and to ‘reduce’ it to social reproduction, but this difference was concealed within the text perhaps by a tension between its form and content, between its propositions and its elaborative discussions. The tension is, perhaps, between the philosophical universality of the propositions and the particularity of the discussions of sociological application.

Simon Susen’s first book sets itself the daunting task of trying to reconcile elements of the thinking of Bourdieu and Habermas and to construct a viable synthesis. In no sense does he imagine a conversation between Bourdieu and Habermas in hell, but, formally it does feel as if he is offering a surrogate conversation, or mediating an intellectual encounter in his own mind. The text clearly represents his PhD thesis. It appears to have been a thesis which was the product of a range of cultures of production. The brief biography on the inside cover highlights that he received his PhD from the University of Cambridge and ‘studied sociology, politics, and philosophy at various universities and research centres around the world, including the

University of Edinburgh, the Colegio de Mexico, the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales in Mexico City, and the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris.’ The Acknowledgements make special mention of, amongst others, Bryan Turner and John Thompson in Cambridge and Luc Boltanski in Paris. Susen was for a while a lecturer at Goldsmiths’ College, University of London and he now teaches at the University of Newcastle where, in part, he replaces William Outhwaite. He has, therefore, come under the influence of academics who have worked closely with Bourdieu, are experts on Habermas, or have themselves found affinities between the two in their own work. He also expresses his gratitude to a multinational gathering of friends, reflecting the situations in which he has studied and researched. If, therefore, the text reflects the possibility of ‘a field of World Sociology’ as discussed by Bourdieu in his epilogue to *Social Theory for a Changing Society* (Bourdieu & Coleman, eds., 1989), does this development run the risk of de-particularising the social, of universalising a socially privileged academic gaze, as, I believe, Bourdieu came to fear in the 1990s, causing him to become sceptical about the international exchange of ideas and, instead, to immerse himself in social and political engagement in France? Peter Hamilton and Bryan Turner are to be congratulated on publishing this text in Bardwell Press in a series devoted to ‘European Studies in Social Theory’, but the question has to be asked how Susen’s book stands in relation to the ambivalence of the series title. Is this a study of European social theory, that is to say of two European theorists; is it a study which has been predominantly generated within European cultures – of social theory; or do questions of geographical situatedness have no place, either in respect of the author or of the subjects of his analysis? The problem is partly illustrated linguistically as well as socially. The book is written lucidly in good English and Susen obviously reads and thinks and expresses himself as happily in French and German. On occasions there seems to be a slightly indiscriminate linguistic inter-changeability. Sometimes, for instance, Bourdieu’s concepts are discussed in English by reference to a German ‘translation’ and it is not always clear whether the transferability between French and German is seeking to establish a linguistic homology between Bourdieu and Habermas or a differentiation, nor is it clear how the Franco-German expressions should be discussed in English<sup>1</sup>. To follow my discussion of the relationship between Bourdieu and Passeron, therefore, it is not clear where this text is rooted, either socially or linguistically.

This is an important issue because Susen’s text is a manifestation of the problem which it considers. Susen provides a brilliant exposition of the philosophical understanding of the social world in the work of, first, in Part I, Habermas, and then, in Part II, Bourdieu. Each part is divided into four chapters, the first of which expounds the theory; the second of which examines the debate over the theory; the third of which analyses the paradigm shifts in the theories made

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<sup>1</sup> To take one example from Susen’s exposition of the characteristics of the meaning given by Bourdieu to ‘doxa’. He states (pp. 140-1) that doxa ‘is a form of unrecognised recognition (*une reconnaissance méconnue*, or *eine unerkannte Anerkennung*).’ This is given a footnote (16) on page 146: “It should be noted that in English the word ‘recognition’ can have at least three different meanings: first, the ‘conscious identification of something or somebody as such’ (*Erkennung* or *Erkenntnis*); second, the ‘granting of a certain status to something or somebody as such’ (*Anerkennung*); and, third, the ‘repeated identification of something or somebody as such’ (*Wiedererkennung*) ...” There is no reference to Bourdieu’s use of ‘une reconnaissance méconnue’ and the exegesis is of German terminology rather than Bourdieusian. The more typical usage of Bourdieu was ‘méconnaissance’ about which Richard Nice commented in his translator’s introduction to *Reproduction* that ‘The term ‘misrecognition’ epitomizes the translator’s quandary; in French *méconnaissance* is a simple word though given a specific scientific sense’ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, xviii). This exegesis exemplifies Susen’s tendency to suppose that concepts are capable of being discussed universally independent of their linguistic formulation rather than to suppose that concepts are linguistically constituted and, therefore, have particular meanings in particular linguistic fields. As I argue further, this tendency is apparent in the *formal* presentation of competing philosophical positions throughout the book. In this respect Susen seems tacitly to work with an assumption which is shared by neither Bourdieu nor Habermas – that of ‘hermeneutic idealism’ or ‘pure’ linguistics (p.240).

by the authors; and the last of which considers the shortcomings of these shifts. Habermas's theory is characterised generally as 'critical theory' and Bourdieu's generally as 'reflexive sociology'. Systematically, and with meticulous scholarship, Susen breaks down these alternative theories into propositional categories and he subjects all to rigorous examination, discussing the pros and cons of the positions adopted by his subjects. Many of his localised expositions and commentaries are stunning. As Bryan Turner comments in his helpful foreword, "*The Foundations of the Social* is not a book for the faint-hearted. It requires careful and painstaking reading, but it will endlessly repay the scrupulous reader who will find here a rich and rewarding text." (p. 15). Susen's book is densely argued but it is clearly sign-posted and is presented through a series of short sub-sections in which the argument advances through exposition, criticism and recapitulation. I think it is possible to suggest that Susen is more sympathetic to the Bourdieusian project of reflexive sociology which, in his view, 'represents a systematic attempt to understand the nature of the social by comprehending itself as part of the social' (p.133). However, in spite of this apparent preference for the content of Bourdieu's theory, my reservation is that the formal structure of the book ensures that Bourdieu's position is appreciated on Habermas's terms. The pros and cons of social theoretical discourses, including Bourdieu's insistence on the primacy of the social, are evaluated philosophically or abstractly without reference to the social conditions of their production. It is as if Susen extrapolates two ideal-typical theoretical positions for evaluation. This has the effect, as Bourdieu would say, of de-contextualising, de-temporalising and de-spatialising the ideas of the two authors. (See Bourdieu's "Concluding Remarks: for a Sociogenetic Understanding of Intellectual Works" in Calhoun, LiPuma, & Postone, eds., 1993, 263-275). Susen's typical mode of presentation is to offer a summary of an author's position in his main text and to support this summary with footnotes which, firstly, refer to texts of the author in question and, secondly, refer to interpretations 'in the secondary literature'. The discussion of 'the paradigm shift within critical theory' in chapter 3, for instance, refers to 17 Habermas texts first published, either in German or English, between 1971 and 2001, and 65 secondary texts, ranging alphabetically from Alexander to White and with publication dates ranging from 1980 to 2005. In the interest of generating a debatable ideal type of critical theory, therefore, Susen denies the development of Habermas's theory in relation to changing social and political circumstances and absorbs the different perspectives contained within the secondary literature. In the section on 'Knowledge and Interest: Normative Discourses' in the chapter on 'The Concept of Critical Theory' (chapter 1), Susen does comment that "According to the early Habermasian account of the interpenetration between knowledge and human interests, three scientific spheres have emerged" (p.37) and this refers to a footnote (25) in which Susen states that "It should be noted that the 'late' Habermas self-critically distances himself from the schematic and evolutionist character of his 'early' tripartite conception of knowledge-constitutive interests ..." (p.43), but this is a rare gesture towards the historicising of theory production and the use of inverted commas in the footnote suggests that Susen is, at best, sceptical about historical differentiation. Equally rare are attempts to represent the thinking of his subjects by reference to that of any 'classical' sociologists or philosophers. It is symptomatic of the mode of argument that a book which seeks to synthesize different ways of conceptualising the 'life-world' in relation to the 'system-world' or primary experience in relation to objective knowledge has no references at all in the text to either Husserl or Heidegger.

Susen seems to find himself unavoidably situating his text in an academic system-world even though his purpose, finally, deploying in combination the terminology of Habermas and Bourdieu, is to energise the emancipatory potential of primary experience: "Any societal project that aims at the emancipation of the human condition but fails to address the variegated emancipatory potentials inherent in the human species is necessarily in vain" (p.316). This is a conclusion which is offered as a prescription for future endeavour. I applaud this, but my view

is that it is in part because Susen at times misrepresents Bourdieu that he does not seem to realise that this closely resembles Bourdieu's contention nor that his way of writing about Bourdieu and Habermas privileges Habermas in such a way as to make his desired ontologically-based project less attainable.

It is a tribute to Susen's book that nearly every page necessitates a response. I found myself constantly checking whether I could accept the representations of the positions of Habermas and Bourdieu as accurate and, additionally, whether, regardless of the accuracy of the representations, I was convinced by the arguments. In relation to his representation of Bourdieu, in particular, there were occasions when I was convinced by the abstract arguments but doubtful whether they arose from an accurate interpretation of the author. I can only elaborate on this briefly in respect of a mis/representation of Bourdieu's position which becomes a cornerstone of Susen's overall thesis. Chapter 5 introduces the Bourdieusian project of reflexive sociology which, as Susen rightly states, 'represents a systematic attempt to understand the nature of the social by comprehending itself as part of the social' (p.133). Susen proceeds to expound this position lucidly in terms with which I have no argument: "Far from pretending to formulate a scholastic, disinterested, and incontestable account of the social, reflexive sociology seeks to acknowledge and problematise its own practical, interested, and contestable immersion in social reality" (p.133) and: "Hence, reflexive sociology is not only the study of the social in general, but also the study of sociology in particular, i.e. the 'sociology of sociology'" (p. 133-4). Susen argues that this means that reflexive sociology is distinguished from 'mainstream' sociology in several ways, the first of which is that it is 'a project of science', by which Susen means that "Social science, in the Bourdieusian sense, can be defined as the systematic attempt to uncover the underlying mechanisms which causally determine both the constitution and the evolution of the social world" (p.134). It now begins to become clear where Susen is taking this representation. He concludes this sub-section: "Rather than representing an intrinsic capacity of the subject, reflexivity is believed to be a capacity of science. In brief, the subject is enabled by the enabling power of science." (p.134). Susen is moving towards the contention that Bourdieu's emphasis of science is associated with a denial of the intrinsic capacities of subjects. He goes on to claim that 'it is assumed' (supposedly by Bourdieu?) 'that not only a distinction has to be drawn between ordinary knowledge and scientific knowledge, but that this distinction describes a qualitative *hierarchy*. Scientific knowledge is superior to ordinary knowledge insofar as the former possesses the distinctive quality of freeing itself from the praxis-embedded illusions of the latter.' (p.136). Constructing an exegesis of Bourdieu's position which pays attention to the social and intellectual conditions of its development does, I believe, demonstrate that to suppose that Bourdieu placed distinctive science at the pinnacle of a hierarchy of knowledge is to generate a misrepresentative extrapolation from Bourdieu's statements. There was certainly a Marxist undercurrent to the educational research of the 1960s, the sense that sociology could remove the *méconnaissance* of their situations of actors and this undercurrent persisted into *La Reproduction*, perhaps influenced by the work of Althusser in the same period and his work with the same title. There was certainly the sense that Bourdieu's Algerian fieldwork was conducted on the assumption that there was a colonial disjunction between the analysis of metropolitan anthropologists and the self-understandings of tribespeople – what Passeron subsequently called the assumption of 'pure alterity' which was wrongly transposed on Bourdieu's return to the 'mixed alterity' of mainland France (Grignon & Passeron, 1989) – and also the sense, derived from Durkheim and expressed in Bachelardian terms in *Le métier de sociologue* (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, & Passeron, 1968), that science has to be constructed against the 'pre-notions' current in society, but, in the early 1970s, Bourdieu was groping towards a methodological reformulation. He insisted that the three modes of theoretical knowledge which he articulated in *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* (Bourdieu, 1972) 'may be described as moments in a dialectical advance towards adequate knowledge ...' (Bourdieu,

1977, 3). The essence of Bourdieu's critique of Weber at this time was that the 'ideal-type' as an analytical tool was inadequate in seeking to represent the immanent meaning constructions of social agents. It could still be argued that the dialectical advance advocated by Bourdieu, while decidedly not being hierarchical, nevertheless still suggested an appropriation of primary experience in the interest of the construction of science rather than a recognition of the autonomous legitimacy of that experience itself, but I think that Bourdieu's reading of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty led him to seek to situate scientific objectification within the life-world in parity with other life-world activities. This orientation is confirmed by the procedure adopted in a text which Susen does not cite at all – *La misère du monde* (Bourdieu, ed., 1993 – where the 'research' team was made up of a group of social subjects who were not 'scientists' but who shared a common scientific discourse which was juxtaposed with the discourses of the people whom they interviewed and encountered socio-analytically.

Susen builds a great deal on what I take to be a misrepresentation of Bourdieu's project. The construction of the argument develops particularly in chapter 8, devoted to 'reflection upon reflexive sociology', in which Susen considers three 'substantial problems that arise when analysing the Bourdieusian conception of society', the third of which is 'the problem of fatalism'. I find the account of Bourdieu offered here quite unrecognisable. Susen writes:

"The Bourdieusian notion of the social is based on socio-ontological pessimism. Bourdieu's pessimistic view of the social manifests itself most clearly in the harsh distinction between unprivileged ordinary people and privileged social scientists. The alleged insufficiency of ordinary people's common sense stands in direct contrast to the supposedly enlightening power of social scientist's reflexive knowledge." (p.222)

Susen continues in the same vein for a whole page without adducing any specific evidence in Bourdieu's statements in support of his assertions. Rather, he gives a summarising sentence to the effect that 'Bourdieu'sian 'critical' or 'reflexive' sociology denies the 'critical' and 'reflexive' nature of the social itself' (p.222), a summary which is reinforced by a quote from Boltanski and Thévenot which begins (with italics added by Susen):

"The main problem of critical sociology is its inability to understand the *critical operations undertaken by the actors*. A sociology which wants to study the critical operations performed *by actors* - a sociology of criticism taken as a specific object – must therefore give up (if only temporarily) the critical stance, in order to recognize the *normative principles* which *underlie the critical activity of ordinary persons*." (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, quoted in Susen, 222-3).

I can concede that, as a man, Bourdieu was beset by warring instincts, between laissez-faire libertarianism and totalising control. He was desperate to secure the rights of the disadvantaged to self-expression and self-realisation, but he found it difficult to envisage any self-expression that might be different in kind from his own. It is evidence, however, of a kind of Rousseauistic optimism that he supposed that everyone has the capacity to be critically reflexive in his fashion and, as a result, has the capacity to satisfy the requirements of the Kantian ethical agenda, with its consequential potential for republican political participation.

It is a big step from arguing that Bourdieu failed to recognise the critical autonomy of the social 'other' to making the claim that to renounce temporarily the authoritarian critical stance which imposes its own criticality on others must lead to the recognition of 'normative principles' underlying the activity of ordinary persons rather than simply to an adequate recognition of the pragmatic strategies adopted by social agents. A methodological shortcoming of Bourdieu in

practice which was at odds with his own prescription becomes the basis for a philosophical transformation of his intention. Arguably, Susen's attempt to cross-fertilize between the thinking of Habermas and Bourdieu is revealed as an attempt to use the contribution of Habermas to give substance to Boltanski's attempt to inject a normative orientation into the legacy of Bourdieu's thought. My view is that a more sympathetic – and accurate – appreciation of Bourdieu's phenomenological egalitarianism, acknowledging and exploring his indebtedness to Husserl's thinking after *Cartesian Meditations*, might show that we already have the elements necessary for the realisation of Susen's vision of an emancipatory societal project without needing to revive a quest for the normative. This is not only true in respect of the content of Susen's book, but also of its form. The book needs to participate in the actualisation of its project. The 'foundations of the social' need to be defined in social exchange which entails establishing socially inclusive institutional foundations of social theoretical discourse. This is where we revert to the vision of the pseudonymous Emile Boupareyre, but our universities seem now to be rather less fit for this purpose even than in 1964.

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