
The ‘Postmodern Turn’ in the Social Sciences is a book that offers more than one would assume merely on the basis of the title. Its main course is determined by the author’s intention to explore the modes through which the notion of what we call postmodernism is reflected in the social sciences and humanities. Nevertheless, the frameworks of the knowledge production analysis are occasionally abandoned in order to, in an appropriate and unobtrusive manner, portray the social environment (“novel – arguably postmodern – societal formations”) in which this production took place or is still ongoing. What’s even more noteworthy is that the extension of the scope of research comes as a result of the author’s decision to deal with the ‘postmodern’ theory through comparison with the ‘modern’ theory, in result giving us insight into the constitution of both paradigms and allowing us to discover their basic connection. Susen is aware that the goal he has set for himself is not an easy one – „this challenging, and, arguably, paradoxical – task consists in developing a systematic account of the eclectic nature of both modern and postmodern thought” (p. 38, italics in original). His approach is a compound of methodical observations and surgeon’s precision, and the analytical sieve he constructed in order to sift through all the postmodern influences in contemporary epistemology, methodology, sociology, historiography and politics, holds up right until the end, as it is visible by the uniformly structured chapters. Except for the opening chapter, the penultimate chapter devoted to critical reflections, and the conclusion, each of the remaining five chapters begins by exposing „fundamental tensions” through which the differences between modern and postmodern thought are exhibited, only to delve into a more thorough examination of the main features of the „new epistemology”, „new methodology”, „new sociology”, „new historiography” and „new politics”, with an additional reflection on some of the key topics (the question of the ‘the Self’ and of globalization within the story of postmodern sociology, or cosmopolitanism and trans-nationalization of the public sphere in the segment dedicated to new politics, etc).

In his book, Susen imposes „‘modern’ standards upon the ‘postmodern’„(p. 20) but, although the arsenal he uses in order to introduce us to the logic of the postmodern thought consists of definitions, classifications and generalizations, what is lacking in the author’s deeply ‘modern’ approach is that characteristic modernist odium for everything postmodern. All that precedes the ‘turn’ and everything resulting from it, is reconstructed from the inside, in a manner of the most dedicated admirers, much like the limitations and inconsistencies of the postmodern endeavor are illuminated from within, while anything normative is immobilized or muted.
The introductory chapter is dedicated to the etymological development and the establishment of the definitions for the terms modern/modernity and postmodern/postmodernity. Differentiation of concepts begins by questioning whether and to what extent social theory is a ‘modern’ project, and whether and to what extent it is reasonable to consider it ‘postmodern’. For Susen, the social theory is, without a doubt, a product, as it is the token of modernity, for its development had followed the construction of a modern society, while at the same time creating and questioning the concept of the society itself. In regard to the postmodern social theory, we are, as the author notes, far from reaching a consensus on its status. He himself opted to describe it as interdisciplinary, foundation-less, directionless, public, situational, pragmatic, ethnology-conscious and socio-conscious endeavor. Defining the terms ‘postmodern’ and ‘postmodernism’ is no less of a challenge, but it seems that for the most part it comes down to a certain deflection from the project of modernity and the Enlightenment tradition, namely, its contemporary intellectual and theoretical derivatives. Understanding the postmodern turn, on the other hand, is specific and downright – „the ‘postmodern turn’ in the social sciences reflects a paradigmatic shift from the Enlightenment belief in the relative determinacy of both the natural world and the social world to the – increasingly widespread – post-Enlightenment belief in the radical indeterminacy of all material and symbolic forms of existence” (39, italics in original). In succeeding chapters, the author depicts emergent postmodern paradigms in different fields of knowledge production – epistemology, methodology, sociology, historiography and politics – providing substance and articulation to the concept of ‘postmodern turn’.

The postmodern turn in epistemology can be observed through the trend of relativization of the three basic principles of modern epistemology – truth, certainty and universality. Thus, the postmodern epistemology adopts premises that all knowledge is anchored and preconditioned by the sociohistorical and cultural context, and that „every pretension of Truth is only a version of truth, as there is a whole multiplicity of relation ally constructed – and, hence, diverging – truths out there” (43); that there are no solid foundations and no guarantees of epistemic validity, and that the quest for knowledge is characterized by epistemic uncertainty; that instead of universalist pretensions of modern thought we should embrace contextual specificity and particularity. Susen develops the attributes of the new, post-positivist epistemology through contemplation on eight assumptions which are fundamental for the positivistic approach to epistemology – that scientific knowledge is derived from experience, that it is testable, realist, universalizable, predictive, cumulative and progressive, objective, and obtained by the virtue of reason.

Susen recognizes the influence of postmodern thought on the methodology of social sciences in the interpretative turn, which takes its full form in the research method of
discourse analysis. The postmodern identity of discourse analysis emerges from a specific ontology. As the author notes, its commitment to meaning identification “falls in line with the postmodern study of human existence in terms of radical indeterminacy” (66). The author identifies characteristics of discourse analysis through the contrasting with the ‘modern’ research concepts and inspection of the following “tensions”: 1) explanation versus understanding, 2) mechanics versus dialectics, and 3) ideology versus discourse. The essence of this method would include: 1) study of the interpretative aspects of social interactions and detection of the internal logic of symbolic representations and symbolic communication, 2) insistence on dialectics of conceptual reflection and empirical research, dialectics of social structuration and textual representation, and dialectics of critical theory and everyday practice, and 3) the treatment of discourse as contingent configurations of meaning, as symbolic resources of diffusely and ephemerally distributed social power, and as conductors and instruments of complex power struggles.

In the final part, discourse analysis is observed from the perspective of the post-structuralist approaches to discourse and the historical circumstances in which they had taken shape, with the emphasis on the central intention of the latter to “understand the dialectics of social reality by studying constantly shifting horizons of discursive constellations” (73, italics in original). This is at the same time the sketch of a new, postmodern methodology, based on the acceptance of the ambiguous nature of modern society, contingency of modernity and indeterminacy of modern reality.

Susen scrutinizes the relationship of modern and postmodern sociology by analyzing three pairs of antagonizing topics: industrialism versus postindustrialism, productivism versus consumerism, and economism versus culturalism. The apparatus of classical sociology is too outdated and not fit for the challenges of the postmodern era, which created the “postmaterial, postproletarian, scientific, innovation-driven, and cybernetic societies” (85, italics in original). However, it seems that the postmodern declaration of the “death of society” sounds overly dramatic to Susen, since he chooses to interpret it as a provocation and an invitation to explore the complexity of the social world beyond the rationally designed and totalizing theoretical models. The new sociology is built around the understanding that all the dynamics of social life and daily re-composition of society take place in culture and through culture. Cultural turn in the social sciences has also brought increased interest for the study of the postmodern Self, while a special place in sociological research was reserved for another topic – globalization, for which most postmodern authors believe that it crucially determines the constitution of today’s social world. This stance is reviewed by the author in the final part of the section where he primarily criticizes widespread theses on globalization being a result of the intended operation of several macro-actors (such as transnational corporations), and a process that
has an exclusively economic base, and then he presents empirical data which provide a different angle on the course of globalization and offers arguments in support of the claim that the role of the nation states is unjustly underestimated.

The postmodern turn has additionally brought a new understanding of history, which is the subject of the fourth chapter in the book. Postmodern historiography has rejected the principle of regularity and continuity of history and dedicated itself to the study of historical miniatures and contingency. In the background of this change, Susen perceives postmodernists’ aversion towards the great modernist political projects that gave birth to various forms of totalitarianism. While dealing with the ‘tension’ of continuity-discontinuity, Susen also debates on the question which greatly divides today’s theorists – whether the modern era can be characterized as the age of modernity, of late modernity or as the postmodern era. His conclusion is that „postmodernity represents both a conceptual and empirical condition,” and that it is „characterized by the simultaneous continuation and transformation of modernity” (144–145, italics in original). The new historiography does not shy away from normativism, moreover, beyond the coherent scientific explanations of history, it sees through the construction, through fiction shrouded by the authority of science; it favors cultural rather than social history, followed by an increased interest in the text and the textual; it entangles reality which the macro-approaches fail to grasp and writes the „history from below”; it abandons the „centrist outlook”2 (Igers, 2014 [2007]), and grants a lot more space to the everyday, the practices and experiences. If the modern historiography was fully committed to the reconstruction and the search for the causes and mechanisms that have produced the past in the first place, the postmodern historiography has chosen deconstruction and put an emphasis on the ‘invention’ of the past, the historiography itself.

The chapter on postmodern understanding of politics is the largest chapter in the book. The postmodern developments in political theory Susen sees as the „autonomous turn”. Postmodern politics and theory tend to favor difference over equality, which is manifested through the politics of identity, politics of difference and the politics of recognition. The most important question Susen raises in relation to postmodern approaches to politics is whether the differentialist models of citizenship can provide the basis for emancipatory and empowering political practices. Although substantially opposed to all that equalizes, Susen believes that they are critical when it comes to social inequalities. Abandonment of plans and long-term strategies of social development within contemporary politics, as well as a consequent directionless status, had caused, according to the author, the transition to the concept of smaller-scale political projects which meet the demands for freedom, autonomy and plurality in a more appropriate manner. In accordance, we have

the postmodern highlighting of the fragility, impermanence, complexity and contradictions of both individual lives and social constructs.

Another aspect of the ‘new politics’ is that it is post ideological, although it is, noticeably, much more concerned with the trend of ‘hybridization’ of ideologies than with their disappearance. However, if one would have to name one ideology today which could be described as ‘the ruling one’, then it would certainly be neoliberalism, whose rise coincides with the rise of postmodern thought. Susen even describes the relationship between the postmodern and the neoliberal discourse as “the alliance of mutual protection and cross-fertilization” (195). In this sense, the rotation of postmodern politics towards culture, which is supported by a booming of cultural studies, is interpreted as complicity, which gave way to „depoliticization of the ‘social’“.

The section dedicated to critical reflections on the postmodern thought is also an exercise in radical reflexivity, since the author deals with the restrictions of that thought as much as with the limitations of his own approach. Analytical constraints arise from the fact that the author does not work with the preconceived definitions – he rather reconstructs, and also because of the decision to organize the content as thematic sections, some ideas are simplified and funneled into compartments that are perhaps too tight for them. Paradigmatic limitations are concerned with three issues, which, in fact, review the justification for using the term contained in the very title of the book – the term ‘turn’. These questions are: Is modernity over? Does it lack self-reflexivity and self-criticism? Is it obsolete, unsuitable to explain contemporary society? If the author’s attitude towards modern and postmodern thought had so far been fairly restrained and neutral, here it becomes much sharper because his answer to all three questions is negative.

This is even more evident when considering normative restrictions of the postmodern thought when the author questions the uncoupling of the symbolic and the material, of culture and economy, „textualism” in general, and the related a historicism, idealism, aestheticism. „To replace critical sociology with a form of ‘decorative sociology’ means to liquidate the reflexive spirit embedded in the social sciences” (248). Then follows the criticism of ‘postmodern’ conservatism, embodied in „the integrationist depoliticization of economy”, „the postutopian deideologization of society” and „the differentialist neotribalization of politics”; nihilism, as a reason for not being able „to provide meaningful criteria for the pursuit of morally defensible forms of agency” (252); relativism, which „constitutes a foundationalist position, whose ultimate presuppositional ground is located in its futile quest for ontological and methodological groundlessness” (254); indisputable support for identity politics; theorizing that does not require empirical verification; oxymoronism (of the postmodern rejection of rationality which takes place in a rational registry criticism of metanarrativity which is itself a metanarrative, undermining of universalism which is in essence its implicit confirmation); the politicality,
allied with skepticism in relation to the traditional notions of politics; the selective criticism and respect for only particular, analytically privileged forms of social inequality.

In the end, we can say that the Susen’s book is both postmodern and anti-postmodern; it is postmodern for it represents a comprehensive guide to postmodern thought and because its gentle criticism, when present, does not denounce but points out the cracks to be patched (here we highlight the author’s suggestion to the ‘postmodern folk’ that, instead of just preach about the complexity of the modern world, they should dive into it and look for an empirical evidence for their viewpoints); and it is antipostmodern due to its systematic approach and effort to bring order into something that is opposed to it in principle – which makes it completely blasphemous.

However, the greatest critical scope of this book is achieved through its concept, which is based on constant confrontation of modernism with postmodernism – as if it could not be any different – which creates or confirms the impression that it was nothing more than a reflection of the crisis and the deep contradictions within modernism, and that it is merely „a symptom, not a new solution”3 (Latur, 2010: 68). What we have before us is a book that pays tribute to the postmodern social theory through its meticulousness, while simultaneously, whether one likes it or not, denying it a special treatment, reducing it to only an episode, a single point in vast space of theoretical positioning.

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